Where Do We Find Words for What We Cannot Say?: On Language and Experience in the Understanding of Life

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Let me begin my remarks by letting the philosopher speak first, in this case the philosopher is Immanuel Kant, the 18th century philosopher who never seemed to be at a loss for words. In a small essay concerning the existence of God, we find Kant criticizing the argument that moves from a reflection upon nature to knowledge of God. What is interesting here for us concerns a comment that Kant makes in a footnote about an experience related to this argument. Kant writes:

When, among other things, I consider the microscopic observations of Dr. Hill . . . ; when I see numerous animal species in a single drop of water, predatory kinds equipped with instruments of destruction, intent upon the pursuit of their prey, but in their turn annihilated by the still more powerful tyrants of this aquatic world; when I contemplate the intrigues, the violence, the scenes of commotion in a single particle of matter, and when from thence I direct my gaze upwards to the immeasurable spaces of the heavens teeming with worlds as with specks of dust—when I contemplate all this, no human language can express the feelings aroused by such a thought; and all subtle metaphysical analysis falls far short of the sublimity and dignity characteristic of such an intuition. ¹

Presumably, at one time or another, we have all had the kind of experience that Kant writes about—an experience that in his later writings he names explicitly an experience of the sublime. It is, somewhat paradoxically, an experience in which what is being presented is something unpresentable, in this case the intricacies of life and the immeasurable quality of the cosmos. As

Kant tells us, the thought of this exceeds the ability of thought to comprehend it, where even the feeling aroused by the thought of this cannot be captured in language. This kind of experience that exceeds thought and what can be said about it—an experience of the insufficiency of words—is not restricted, of course, to experiences of the sublime. Something similar can be found not only in deeply personal experiences that range from the traumatic to the blissful, but also in the awkward situation of speaking in the face of death. These deeply personal experiences present an additional difficulty when it comes to speaking. Unlike the overpowering thought of the intricate order of life and the cosmos, our deeply personal experiences are inseparable from memory—or better stated, from memories-in-transition, from the return of experience that is infected with loss. In this memory-in-transmission it is especially so that words face the prospect of not being able to say what has been experienced.

Leaving aside here the case of trauma where the feeling of pain further complicates the return of experience and with it the task of bringing to word, let us ask ourselves what is really taking place in such experiences. What, in other words, is the precise break that is responsible for language failing to achieve its function, which is to express and communicate, not just to others but even to ourselves? In looking more carefully at the unusual character of such experiences we see that they are often, if not always, accompanied by what the ancient Greeks named as the experience of wonder. Wonder is after all more than fascination, and certainly it is not the same as mere curiosity. It is what arises when understanding, with the use of concepts and the use of language, breaks down. Wonder is thus a wonder with respect to the strange and the challenging. The experience of wonder signals a certain placelessness with respect to what we are experiencing—a being out of place because we cannot go further in our thinking and

speaking with the categories of expectation that accompany our experiencing. As in the Kantian experience of the sublime or any one of those human experiences in which a gap opens between word and feeling, word and expression, we are, in a sense, left almost speechless in wonder. Almost speechless, not totally speechless, for while indeed speech may desert us when it comes to articulating a certain experience, such desertion is not necessarily evidence of the complete failure of speech, and thus the end of speech, but, one could argue, just the opposite. To be left almost speechless in wonder, one can say, is to be at the opening of thinking and thus speaking. Certainly one can well imagine that in the attempt to communicate a profound experience of joy, for example, one wants to say so much that one does not know where to begin.² Finding words for what we cannot say is but the beginning of speech. The question of the breakdown of speech thus becomes the question of where we are to find the words for what we cannot say. Now, the short answer to this question is that is it from language itself that we find the words for what we cannot say. But this answer depends considerably on a certain understanding of the nature of language, and along with it, a certain understanding of the intimate relation between language and experience. In my remarks that follow I want to present the hermeneutical account of language and experience that will allow us to see the full force of this answer to the question. I wish to divide my remarks into three parts.

First, I want to put aside a notion of language and of experience that is inadequate for what I want to say in this regard. Regarding language, then, let us begin at the beginning. Let us consider how we think language works in language acquisition, let us say in a child learning words from her mother. The mother says the word 'ball' and rolls the object in front of the child,

repeating the association so that the child comes to name the object with the word 'ball'. One can well imagine more sophisticated examples of the same phenomenon: a drug company having to invent a name for a chemical compound because the name of the compound by itself would not suffice for the demands of marketing the compound; or a computer scientist giving the name 'flash drive' to a newly created devise for media storage. But coining a term or simply giving names to objects is not language in its fullest sense. It is not even our basic linguistic relationship to words, as if the use of language was at the whim of the user of language, something in front of the speaker at his or her disposal.³ Certainly giving names to things is not yet even discourse where meaning unfolds in relation to the identity and difference of words in combination and play. More to the point, what is implied by these examples of naming is that the word functions merely as a sign, as the word 'ball' is a sign signifying the round object of play for the child. To regard language as a system of signs is to assign to language an instrumental character, for the nature of a sign is to refer to something beyond itself and thus has no meaning within itself. As signs, words are effectively detached from the reality that is being spoken about, and thus the problem arises as to how linguistic instruments can effectively express non-linguistic material. This is the problem that Nietzsche sees with language. A problem that he 'solves' by turning this broken connection into a radical theory of interpretation. A simple physical object such as a leaf (Nietzsche's example), with all its sensible particularity, will always be drained of its particularity and multiplicity when translated into words, which, ultimately, as the work of concepts, can only convey the general. In going from the thing to the word, the transference involves a dissimulation since the particular thing is not a general thing. For Nietzsche, then, words cannot say what we experience and accordingly cannot render

intelligible what we see.

But how is language to be understood otherwise? To say the least, as Gadamer presents his case in *Truth and Method* a word is not just a sign, but is more like an image.⁴ What he means is that, unlike the arbitrariness of a sign, the word bears a deeper connection to the appearance of what is named in the word. While a complete understanding of Gadamer's characterization of the word as image requires an account of how he overturns the conceptual relation of image and original that lies in the classical notion of *mimesis* (imitation), let it suffice to say here that Gadamer is claiming that language is not a second order level of presentation: first the reality, then its presentation, i.e., its representation, in language. According to Gadamer, when we think something, which is in effect to say it to ourselves, we mean by it the thing that we think so that "the starting point for the formation of the word is the substantive content that fills the mind." What comes to word, what is in our speaking words where there is no real consciousness of our speaking when we speak, is the intended thing,⁵ at least in principle. So, Gadamer maintains the view that not only are thinking and speaking intimately related, but so too are words and things. Whether there are factors than may hinder the understanding and the articulation of the intended thing in word, as we see in therapeutic conversations, or whether in our human speaking we ever completely say what we mean are developments within the enactment of speech that do not affect the principle of speech. To say this in yet another way, Gadamer does not think that human speaking must find a way to cross a bridge between a wordless world on one side, and a worldless word on the other. Our words are worlded from the start; the reality of language is that a world is presented in it. What happens then in the dynamics of speech where something comes to word is that this something can appear in its

understandableness, that is to say, in its meaning.⁶ The world presents itself in language. And this is to say that meaning and words belong together; our words are already meaningful, as we know from therapeutic conversations.

And what then of experience? As experience of the world, it too should be understood accordingly. "Experience," Gadamer insists, "is not wordless to begin with only to be made an object of reflection by being named by being subsumed under the universal of the word. Rather, experience of itself seeks and finds words that express it." To understand this idea of experience requires that we let go of the inadequate idea of experience that Gadamer is rejecting here, namely, that experience belongs to empiricism, as if all experience is empirical experience. This is the idea that experience is only a matter of data, sense data to be sure but data nonetheless. Considered this way experience is nothing more than a basic component of knowledge that completes itself only through an act of reason, that is, in the establishing of patterns, of generalizations, of what Gadamer calls the universal of the word. So understood experience is something to be made available to the power of knowing, it is something placed within the power of subjectivity and thus stands within the framework of calculation and repeatability. As data, experience stands in relation to the proposing subject who finds order in the world through reason.

Against this view, Gadamer holds that experience is actually a more encompassing phenomenon when we think of it in terms of human experiencing; that is to say, when we consider experience as that which experiences reality and is itself real. This is experience that is taking place in time, experience as something the individual is involved in, experience as something undergone. To ask then about how this experience of the world becomes intelligible,

how this experience of the world becomes understandable, is to turn to the experience of language, for it is precisely experience in this sense that seeks and finds words for itself.

Accordingly one can say that through language "the order and structure of our experience itself is originally formed and constantly changed." But this claim that language characterizes our human experience of the world is for some quite bold. One could immediately counter that the structure of experience is not formed by language but by physicality, if not simply by itself without words. To defend this claim, which brings us to the very core of what Gadamer calls hermeneutic experience, let me turn to my second set of remarks.

Up to this point I have only been concerned with setting aside certain notions that make it difficult to speak about the problem of finding words for our experiences. I wanted to set aside the idea that language is simply a system of signs because ultimately this notion robs language of its power, a power by which it can expand beyond what appears to be its limit. I also wanted to set aside the idea that experience is data because this notion removes experience from the sphere of life and language, removes it from the world we inhabit. Following the indications just given, let me now expand upon these more positive notions in an attempt to make clear the intimate unity of language and the experience of the world.

If we look back at the history of hermeneutic theory, we see that Gadamer was not the first to talk about the experience of understanding in relation to the experience of life. We find it already in Dilthey, one of the early pioneers of the human sciences who famously writes that "thinking cannot go back behind life," meaning that our thinking is already an expression of life such that the understanding of life is brought about by going through its expressions. For

Dilthey, this movement of understanding amounts to a re-experiencing which involves not so much a reconstruction as it does a relating of a part to a whole within the nexus of life-put simply, understanding develops through context and interconnections. When Gadamer follows the basic outline of this position in his reformulation of the hermeneutic circle, or better, the hermeneutic relation, he does so by emphasizing the way in which we are not just situated in historical life, thus interpreting life from life, but are affected by it whenever we attempt to understand it. He calls this the hermeneutical situation and concludes that understanding always occurs as an event. What this means is that understanding is always so conditioned by the effects of historical life, by historical life working on me behind my back, so to speak, providing me with a preliminary context for my efforts to understand the artifacts and events of historical cultural life that I can never understand these things in a completely free and neutral way. This also means that what is understood is never unveiled as some being-in-itself free of any context; that is to say, what is understood is an actualization in a process in which life and its ideal meaning can never come together. As with Dilthey, life is intelligible but it is also unfathomable.

Now, the way that Gadamer will present this unfathomable character of life in its understanding—what we can simply call our finite comprehension of the world—is through the claim that understanding has the structure of experience itself. Real experience (*Erfahrung*), Gadamer tells us, is not just something I am involved in, but is actually present only in individual perceptions. Accordingly, the knowing that takes place with respect to it will come out of the actual encounter with the experienced object. This manner of knowing is such that each experience is valid until it is refuted by a new experience. But the new experience changes everything, for it is not something that can be prescribed in advance—real experience presumes in

other words that life cannot be grasped before it is lived. The new experience amounts to the birth of experience as an event over which no one has control, and becomes valid until it is refuted by a new experience. With the occurrence of new experience not only does the experienced object change—what is experienced is now no longer what it initially was—but also the experiencing mind changes as well—I am now different as a result of being experienced. Since real experience can always involve new experience, the process of experience has its fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but, as Gadamer says, "in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself." Thus, Gadamer insists, in being experienced one not only recognizes the limits of one's knowledge but remains in a state of openness regarding what is other.

Hermeneutic experience, and with it the event of understanding, then, unfolds accordingly. In the attempt to understand—whether it be a historical text, a work of art, the words spoken by another or even that experience that is strange and challenging—we are not mastering an object, but placing ourselves in the open were we encounter the breakdown of our expectations. Being in the open is a condition of exposure that is required for letting the meaning that is beyond our expectations to emerge. It is here that Gadamer also insists on the linguisticality of understanding, for it is language that accomplishes this expansion of meaning and understanding of what is other. To state the matter succinctly: bringing something into the open is a function of the question, and the logic of question and answer, that is to say, conversation or dialogue, becomes the structure for understanding. But to say that Gadamer has a dialogical version of hermeneutics only tells us one half of the story; it tells us only that understanding is accomplished in the communication of meaning with respect to the address of

the other which is brought about by the question. By itself, this does not tell us enough about the very linguisticality of dialogue, the language element of dialogue. The interplay between conversational partners in dialogue is itself caught up in the interplay within language. This interplay is language of the move, so to speak; it is a movement that Gadamer describes as the speculative dimension of language. The term 'speculative' actually comes from 19th century German thought where it was used to convey the way concepts relate to one another, as one can begin to see from the root word *speculum*, to mirror. Language is speculative in the sense that the subject matter presented, "mirrored," in it always goes beyond our statements. Meaning unfolds not by simply making statements but in an ongoing coming to appearance by thinking further in words. In the speculative dimension of language "finite possibilities of the word are oriented to the sense intended as toward the infinite." This coming into word is nothing less than the raising into intelligibility our experience of the world. It is not the case, then, that something is first understood and then subsequently put into words, but rather, that we are always seeking and finding words to make oneself intelligible to the other and also to ourselves. In all knowing of the world the moment of understanding has to be worked out.

Let me conclude this section of my remarks by emphasizing from what has just been said the distinctive dynamic of hermeneutic experience. Two comments. First, to say that the moment of understanding has to be worked out means that at least in principle we may not succeed in finding words for what we want to say. Despite the overt optimism of Gadamer's position—an optimism that speaks to the fundamental humanism of Gadamer's position insofar as the building up of our communicative knowledge of the world constitutes a sharing that generates the sociality of our existence—there are indeed limits to the communication of meaning. Most

may make translation impossible. This limit situation, which we can also see in the case of psychoanalysis, is actually attached to language at the outset. Certainly there is the awareness of every speaker in seeking the correct word for what he or she wants to say that this word is never completely attained. What has been said in words is always less than what is meant, as those deeply personal experiences often attest to. And yet, can we not also say that "an unstilled desire for the appropriate word" constitutes the true life and essence of language. And then secondly, let us not forget just how language works. To rephrase Gadamer's characterization of language as speculative, "every word, as the event of a moment, carries with it the unsaid to which it is related by responding and summoning." As the (finite) event of the moment the word is not everything and yet "there is laid up within it an infinity of meaning to be explicated and laid out." Every word has an inner dimension of multiplication, so that the task of understanding is, to say it once again, to find the right word.

To turn then to my final set of remarks, I wish to pursue this notion of finding the right word. Let me begin here by rephrasing our initial question. The question is no longer where are we to find the words for what we cannot say, but where are we to find the right word for what we cannot at first say. This shift allows us to see the real problem for the experience of understanding. If I do not know fully what I want to say because the intention of meaning exceeds itself or if the experience I want to convey does not have an explicit identity already formed but is shadowy in my own mind, or I am in a dialogue where there is translation even when we are speaking the same language, then what constitutes the right word? What, in other

words, constitutes the success of articulation and understanding? This further question leads us into still more complexities in the experience of meaning in language. Let us say, for example, that one of my parents had recently died and I wanted to understand my relationship to my parent in a way that I could not considered before. With regard to its structure at least, this particular task of understanding would not be so different from the task of understanding other things, perhaps even a book that I had read. The success of understanding will depend on giving the matter, whether it be the relationship or the meaning in the book, the power to speak. In the attempt to understand my relationship with a parent I begin with an awareness that encompasses conscious and unconscious relations which have directions and meanings that I can only vaguely be in touch with. My thinking in relation to this awareness brings with it feelings and orientations, the latter because it is always situated in history. The point here may be obvious: the relation between awareness and a thinking that is directed at understanding is not at all similar to the awareness in simple act of perception or to the simple recall of memory that we call reminding. In this personal experience, but also in the understanding of life in general, the awareness and the thinking are inseparable from memory in a deeper sense. Here awareness and thinking are caught up in memory-in-transition where they are involved in an elemental forgetting and loss while coming to mind. Forgetting and loss are at work in the occurrence of memory in such a way that memory enacts not a re-presentation but a recreation as a present happening. Memory, in other words, is a transformative occurrence, and thus always a form of interpretation.

It should not be surprising in this context to learn that Gadamer will say at one point that "language signifies memory."¹⁴ But in saying this, the issue is more than transformative

occurrence since memory is after all a form of preserving. For Gadamer this preserving is not a matter of an unquestioning clinging to what is, as if one could not forget, as if one can hold oneself back from the forces of transformation. Rather, in the effort to continually renew what we hold to be true, and thus engage in preserving, memory becomes a way of confronting ourselves, and this is precisely what language accomplishes. If in our experiencing we are caught within the experience of time where all things escape us, living language can bring about a recovery from this loss. And what then of my attempt to understand an awareness in memory of my parent? To the extent that my awareness needs understanding, and thus brought into the play of language, this play is working at the fringes of identity, caught not just within the passing of time but also within an experience of strangeness at the edge of familiarity. The experience of understanding is to make this crossing in language from strangeness to familiarity. As a first approximation to the answer to our question, then, let us say that the right word is the word that has made this crossing and is a word that has found its time.

But this word is in some sense not my word; that is to say, it is not a word I possess that I fit into the matter to be understood. Rather, in the play of language the word that crosses into familiarity is the appropriate word that presents itself in the unfolding of the word's own naming power. And this word in coming forth brings with it not just meaning, but new meaning in a double sense. In one sense, the new meaning comes forth as an addition to my awareness and thus to my experiencing. What comes to understanding was not there in advance in some completed state only to be retrieved in recall, but was initially there in the shifting sensibilities of meaning were certain associations may interfere with one another. Perhaps what comes to understanding was at first glance something on the periphery, not unlike the peripheral meanings

that are in play in every word. What comes to understanding then amounts to a coming into presentation in which there is an increase in reality. Hermeneutic understanding, in other words, corresponds with an enlargement of my experience of the world. While indeed it may be for me in the particular example of understanding my relationship with my parent that I now see something new, what transpires in this play of language, in more general terms, is a "constant building up and bearing within itself the communality of world orientation." In letting my experience speak language is building up an aspect held in common. What is added, then, is not simply another opinion about the matter, one more opinion piled on top of others, but, to use Gadamer's words for what takes place in genuine dialogue, "a transformation into a communion in which we do not remain what we were." As a second approximation to the answer to our question, then, let us say that the right word is the word that comes as an addition to meaning.

As to the other sense of new meaning, if it is genuinely a new meaning then we should expect that it is a surprising meaning as well. This aspect of surprise goes hand in hand with the dynamics of language that cannot be reduced to logical implications and calculations.

Understanding in language does not unfold by moving from the general to the particular or from the particular to the general. It does not unfold in a thinking that moves from one thought to another in linear fashion. This does not mean that for hermeneutics thinking in language is regarded as something mystical, although Gadamer does speak about the mystery of language.

Rather, it is a matter of a movement of language in which thinking can also move backwards, rephrasing against the particular horizon that is in view, and thus carrying the matter forward into other words. When one finds the right word within this dynamic it is often a word unforseen.

And as unforseen, the experience of the world that is brought to language, then, is not about an

event that has happened but is happening. The experience retains its vitality—its life and liveliness—in coming to word. The richness of experience thus continues to be brought about by language and the experience of understanding. To the question where are we to find the words for what we cannot say, I would now answer, accordingly, in the evocative power of our words in living language—what I think can best be described quite simply as the future of our words.

Notes

- 1. Immanuel Kant, "The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God" in *Theoretical Philosophy 1755-1770*, trans. David Walford (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 159.
- 2. I am following here Hans-Georg Gadamer's essay "Language and Understanding." Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Language and Understanding" in *The Gadamer Reader*, ed. & trans. Richard E. Palmer (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), p. 92-107.
- 3. See "Language and Understanding," p. 105.
- 4. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Donald Marshall and Joel Weinsheimer (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1989), p. 416.
- 5. Truth and Method, p. 426.
- 6. See Günter Figal, "The Doing of the Thing Itself: Gadamer's Hermeneutic Ontology of Language" in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed Robert Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 115.
- 7. Truth and Method, p. 417.
- 8. Truth and Method, p. 457.
- 9. Truth and Method, p. 355.
- 10. Truth and Method, p. 469.
- 11. Gadamer "Boundaries of Language" in *Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, ed. Lawrence Schmidt (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2000), p. 17.
- 12. Truth and Method, p. 458.
- 13. *Ibid*.
- 14. Gadamer, *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, ed. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 90.
- 15. "Language and Understanding," p. 96.
- 16. Truth and Method, p. 379.