

ON THE (UN)STOPPING OF OUR EARS

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the problem of speaking past one another due to an asymmetry of the interlocutors' backgrounds. When individuals with different levels of relative privilege interact, the party with relative privilege may fail to engage with what is being communicated. I take up critical Gadamerian hermeneutics to ask how we, as individuals with relative privilege, can 'unstop' our ears so that the burden of explanation does not (unfairly) remain on those we hurt by our mishearing/non-hearing. I offer two methods to achieve this 'unstopping': 'critical self-knowledge' through Quassim Cassam's 'Vice Epistemology' framework and 'critical world-knowledge' through the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (Max Horkheimer and Jürgen Habermas, specifically). I then take up contemporary critical hermeneutics (Lorenzo Simpson) to show how, through the application of the critical methods, one might be able to achieve a useful, cross-cultural dialogue. This is imperative given our inexorably multi-cultural world today.

Keywords: Hans-Georg Gadamer, critical hermeneutics, vice epistemology, critical theory, praxis

Introduction: The Project at Hand

"Whoever has ears, let them hear."

Matthew 11:15¹

Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* is an expansive and ultimately fruitful exercise in exploring a reader's hermeneutical relation(ship) to their text at hand. A key takeaway from this exploration is the understanding that the reader and the text are and must remain in conversation with one another. We must also note that this activity is dialectical (Gadamer, 387-390). Such analysis is drawn from how individuals engage in conversations with each other. Conversations are

¹ The New International Version of the Bible is used in this paper (NIV 2011).

important to Gadamer's hermeneutics when they are not carried out merely towards information-seeking, but towards understanding the other's horizon. One might observe, as I did, that it crucially has to do with entities that are *willing* to engage with one another. This includes both cases of individuals entering into a conversation and of texts that are taken up hermeneutically into conversation with their readers.² This article is concerned with entities, specifically individuals, who are *denied* proper entry into conversation. Such denial, I will explain through Gadamer, occurs through the operation of horizon-limiting prejudices. This paper will first take up *Truth and Method's* conception of horizon, the role of prejudices in this conception, and the impacts that prejudices have on the same.

Gadamer's interlocutors and texts are *willing* to participate in the hermeneutical process. A contemporary problem of human-to-human relations is the problem of 'speaking past' one another, especially in cases where the individuals in question do not share the same background. Thus, the opening quote from Christ, exhorting those who have ears, is not merely an exercise in redundancy. When one does not share the same background, vocabulary, or translation schema as one's interlocutor, one is likely to mishear or miss out entirely on what is being said. There is a clear disparity between merely having the correct receiving apparatus – ears, in this case – and the means to recognize that something is being communicated. Further, simply having the same receiving equipment and a shared vocabulary is insufficient – one has to enter a vulnerable conversational space with one's interlocutor in a manner that does not reduce to mere fellow-feeling (empathy) or to imposition of one's own standards. A dissimilarity in background could occur over a variety of axes of power, including gender, age, race, caste, class, ethnicity, nationality, ability, and so on. In such interactions, individuals with relative 'privilege' unconsciously (and in malicious cases, consciously) fail to recognize those lacking corresponding privilege as possible participants in conversation. I shall attempt to describe the features of Gadamer's idea of a proper conversation as well. Examples of such interactions are easily available: from upper-caste individuals refusing to engage with lower-caste individuals in everyday life, to women's documented trouble in communicating their physically perceived pain to their

² Another observation, out of the scope of this particular discussion, is the problem of the entering into the status of *being a text*.

male doctors, to the ignoring of a socially lower-classed person in establishments of 'quality' (until they behave in ways that provoke suspicion or irritated attention). Such cases can and do escalate to material harm.

There are ongoing conversations in academic spaces and 'on the street' (so to speak) among socially conscious individuals (some of whom are involved in 'social justice') which are concerned with problems of individuals with 'privilege.' These conversations ask what persons with relative privilege can 'do better' when engaged with persons with corresponding lack of privilege in a manner that doesn't require the continued labor of this exhausted latter group. Often, the former party fails to understand the position of the latter and proper resolution of the charged situation means that the latter party has to go above and beyond to explain the harm being perpetuated upon them. This paper seeks to offer two routes towards such action for the former, relatively privileged party. It tries to show how we – from our respective places of relative privilege – can try to address the blind spots in our horizons, expand them fruitfully, and thus receive the communications we were previously blocking out. In more extreme cases, this could make all the difference between life and death. Take the case (Glance et al. 2007) of pregnant black women who request anesthesia during delivery and who are dissuaded from this decision by white doctors' prejudiced judgement of their 'actual' pain levels. The two proposed routes could be named 'critical self-knowledge' and 'critical world-knowledge.' I invoke Quassim Cassam's vice epistemology for the former and critical theory (specifically that of Max Horkheimer and Jürgen Habermas) for the latter. I will show that it is only through these reflective and educative processes that one could attempt the unstopping of one's ears and explore the situations *in which one fails to do so*. These routes aim to (a) open us up to recognizing that we share horizons in a way that reflects our interdependence upon one another in society, and (b) to show how fruitful solidarities can be built. These solidarities – more recently termed 'allyship' in online social justice discourse – emerge through the understanding of interdependence, a commitment to self-development, and through encountering one another in conversation. This paper attempts to work through critical hermeneutics and an understanding of prejudice to investigate the nature of privilege, in a deliberate move away from the analysis of the constructed 'Other.'

Setting the Scene: Gadamer, Our Horizons, and Prejudices

The fourth chapter of *Truth and Method* introduces readers to hermeneutics or, more specifically in this section of the book, to understanding as being inextricable from one's history and its effects. Classical hermeneutics is concerned with the reader's relationship to texts that are written and remain at a significant distance from said reader. This distance cannot be abstracted away, nor can the reader merely adopt what they assume to be the appropriate 'frame of mind' of the author in order to understand this historically situated text. This is usually what school students are instructed to do when conducting literary analysis: to imagine what the author might have been going through while or in order to write the way they wrote. Gadamer affirms that the intervening history does affect the reader's understanding process: it determines what the reader asks of the texts, as well as "what will appear as an object of investigation" (Gadamer 2004, 300). This is the case regardless of whether the reader recognizes the effect of this intervening history or not (Gadamer 2004, 300). Being aware of the effects of history upon the activity of understanding is "consciousness of (one's) hermeneutical *situation*" (Gadamer 2004, 301). 'Situation,' here, necessarily implies the reader's embeddedness within history and tradition. This is opposed to an objective view from the outside of such influence. As historical beings, such an enmeshed position entails that completing the process of understanding (this history of effects) is impossible (Gadamer 2004, 301). Gadamer asserts that "to be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete," (Gadamer 2004, 301) which is an assertion that is central to the project of this paper.

'Situation' includes the concept of horizon by definition. An individual's horizon is simply their finite, perspectival limitation given their historicity. This is analogous to the individual's limited visual field at any given moment. For example, my limited visual perspective at this moment only includes my laptop, hands, desk, and lamp. It does not include the windows behind me (which I am aware of) or my partner's stealthy movement to give me a surprising hug as I write. An individual who can see can look around, meaning that their field of vision is not static. Gadamer states that a horizon is not a "rigid boundary" but "something that moves" and "invites one to advance further" (Gadamer 2004, 238). The individual can move around their space to see more than they could have from their initial, stationary position. Such an individual also perhaps had a

biologically limited and narrow field of vision as an infant, and this probably expanded as they physically matured over time. These characteristics also apply to Gadamer's conception of one's horizon (Gadamer 2004, 301). As an individual matures, explores, and learns, their perspective grows to include things that were previously unavailable within their horizon. Gadamer notes that there are individuals who might have "no horizon," which implies perhaps a curious case of object impermanence. Such persons may only be able to grasp what is immediately at hand, or might continuously miss the woods for the trees, so to speak (Gadamer 2004, 301). All persons, as conscious individuals, are born into histories, and thus into specifically limited horizons. As we grow, we come to expand these horizons for ourselves. We also encounter other horizon-havers along the way. Through mutual interactions with our fellow horizon-havers, we are able to share horizons through transposition. Transposing oneself into other horizons is possible in other to 'see from where they see.' This is an intimate relationship where agreement is not sought necessarily, but shared vision is gained (Gadamer 2004, 302).

Horizons cannot be closed off. In the same way that an individual is not an island in society, the fact of our constant interaction with our situation means that there is always room for change in our horizons. Perhaps an individual might only *stop* seeing more if they were bolted permanently to an immovable floor or in a box and forced to look straight ahead for all their life. This pitiful case aside, Gadamer states that "horizons change for a person who is moving" (Gadamer 2004, 303). Individuals are always in relationship with their horizons since they define where they move and mutate as they perform this movement (Gadamer 2004, 303).³ Gadamer does not address the case of those persons who have no horizon. I speculate that such persons would not be aware of their historical situation at all and might exist entirely in the moment without the ability to learn or to recognize that they have learned at all. However, one must have a horizon in order to perform transpositions to other situations (Gadamer 2004, 304). These

³ An illustration of this might be from popular video game series 'Age of Empires' (specifically AoE III) where players are tasked with traversing uncharted territory with an Explorer character who reveals the terrain covered *as* they cross it. The revealed terrain *remains* visible for the player, in the same way that Gadamer's accumulative horizon does not forget its history. See video for a visual demonstration: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7zaXjaJVWM&t=89s> (The audio is entirely irrelevant to this illustration, there were no other videos to be found.)

hermeneutical situations are determined by a concept that was discussed in an earlier section of *Truth and Method*, namely, prejudice.

Prejudices and understanding go hand-in-hand for Gadamer (Gadamer 2004, 272). Prejudices are literally 'pre-judgements,' as the form of the word might betray. These pre-judgements are made before the particulars of a case are examined, and these can color a judicial process (Gadamer 2004, 273). Gadamer notes that the post-Enlightenment world has inherited the "prejudice against prejudice itself" (Gadamer 2004, 273). This is reflected in the negative value attached to the term 'prejudice' commonly today, and in the practice of seeking to 'eliminate' prejudices for the sake of being objective. This attitude is prevalent in popular scientific and secular politico-legal discourse, especially in the effort to set aside one's affective tendencies when engaged in such discourse. Prejudice must be rethought, for Gadamer, as essential to understanding (Gadamer 2004, 272). He states that it is one's prejudices that "constitute the historical reality" of one's being (Gadamer 2004, 278). No person is free from prejudices: the denial of their influence perhaps also betrays their latent activity more starkly (Gadamer 2004, 354). Thus, our situations are determined by our prejudices. These prejudices form part of our horizons, in the sense of being the limit beyond which we cannot see (Gadamer 2004, 304-05). Critical hermeneuticist Lorenzo Simpson refers to them as "knowledge-enabling pre-judgements" (Simpson 2021, 3). To go back to the analogous illustration of the literal seeing person, perhaps a tall object in the distance keeps whatever is behind it out of their view. This knowledge is out of reach until the object is moved or overcome. I suggest that one's relative privilege forms part of the contours of such obstacles – having a 'normally' functioning body often prevents us from empathizing with those who may be disabled, especially chronically or mentally disabled, since having such a body is ubiquitous to us. Another good example of a relative privilege constituting a prejudice is a casteist attitude – being born into an upper-caste Indian family means that one's perspective of those who are not from one's caste are treated in specific (sometimes utterly discriminatory) ways. Gadamer holds that one's dynamically forming horizons expand *through* the testing of one's prejudices, especially through encounters with one's history or past tradition. Crucially, he dismisses the idea of separate horizons (of the present and the past) by pointing out that understanding is the process of the fusion of horizons that seem to be separate but actually form part

of a continuous stream (Gadamer 2004, 305). Later, Gadamer announces that this is the "achievement of language" (Gadamer 2004, 370).

When the fusion of horizons occurs in one's conversation with a text, "something is expressed that is not only (one's) or the author's, but common" (Gadamer 2004, 390). There can be no horizon of interpretation without a fusion of horizons either (Gadamer 2004, 398). The reader already begins the process of fusion in reaching out to the past (Gadamer 2004, 578). Given this important connection, how should we go about testing our prejudices in order to maintain our horizons? How do we prepare ourselves adequately for transposition into other horizons? How do we challenge ourselves to go beyond *what we don't know we're limited by*? It is when this question is asked – the question that doubts the extent of one's prejudices – that the possibility of progressing fruitfully is opened up. I suggest that (a) entering into interrogative practices with ourselves through critical self-reflection and (b) opening oneself up to new encounters with the past and in the present form two responses to the problem of our stopped ears. I will discuss this 'critical self-knowledge' and 'critical world-knowledge' in the next section, tying them into the understanding of our collective interdependence.

Critical Self-Knowledge Through Vice Epistemology

I suggest that the first approach towards interrogating our prejudices is through the framework of vice epistemology. Vice epistemology is constructed in response to the popular 'virtue epistemology' that developed in the late 20th century. Virtue epistemology is not primarily concerned with the nature of truth or epistemic justification, as traditional epistemology has been. It is more concerned with the *cognitive character* of agents. Quassim Cassam, however, argues that it is better to focus on intellectual vices rather than on intellectual virtues in order to better understand the enterprise and activity of knowing (Cassam 2016, 159). Cassam wrote a paper in 2016 titled 'Vice Epistemology,' which argues that understanding human inquiry requires investigating the intellectual vices. Beginning with intellectual vices, says Cassam, is more revealing than beginning with intellectual virtues given that humans are imperfect beings whose daily cognitive operations are plagued by the former (Cassam 2016, 159). An incomplete list of intellectual vices includes intellectual laziness, intellectual arrogance, inattentiveness, and closed-mindedness. Cassam holds that intellectual character traits are invoked to explain the process of

thinking and reasoning since they are *how* we find and judge evidence or "assess the plausibility of explanatory hypotheses" (Cassam 2016, 164). The *vicious* character of intellectual vices arises from their capacity to impede effective and responsible enquiry (Cassam 2016, 160). For example, being close-minded about the value of other religions besides one's own Buddhist faith might make undergraduate student Alex less likely to pursue every reasonable avenue towards fulfilling their research goals for their Philosophy of Religion class. Cassam recommends understanding epistemology as 'inquiry epistemology,' which is concerned primarily with the *activity* of inquiry, rather than the value of its content (Cassam 2016, 161). The focus is thus on being responsible inquirers, rather than on acquiring a specific set of traits that are virtues.

In this attempt to improve processes of inquiry, inquiry epistemology must include vice epistemology (Cassam 2016, 161). Vice epistemology is not merely a component of inquiry epistemology – it becomes an exercise in self-knowledge. It does this when it takes up the problem of self-ignorance that prevents individuals from recognizing how their own intellectual vices impede their inquiry processes. It involves self-knowledge of what fundamentally limits their access to knowledge (Cassam 2016, 174). Cassam describes the case of the unwitting conspiracy theorist in his paper: of an individual who allows themselves to uncritically receive information and lets it reinforce their prejudices. I offer the similar case of members of one's extended family or social community who thrive on sketchily crafted but eagerly promoted WhatsApp forwarded messages touting snake oil as a panacea. I will take up the issue of online behavior later on in this paper as well. These cases illustrate how the operation of intellectual vices prevent individuals from pursuing impediment-free inquiry. Even being partially able to recognize one's own flaws would be enough of a step towards trying to overcome said flaws, says Cassam (Cassam 2016, 174-75). For example, realizing *that* I have a tendency towards gullibility and making sure to *remember this realization* means that I would be much more equipped to recognize an instance of my own gullible behavior. I would be afforded the opportunity to learn to do better and not immediately believe every single thing my aunt forwards to me on WhatsApp regarding, say, COVID-19 and its relation to newly installed 5G Towers in the neighborhood (this bit of fake news did spread rampantly in 2020 and has not completely died out yet, unfortunately!). Thus, learning to recognize one's own intellectual and other vices is a fundamental form of self-knowledge (Cassam 2016, 174). We must recognize both our imperfect

natures as limited individuals as well as the fact that there are a host of prejudices that are often hidden from our notice *by* their being ubiquitous to our situations. An illustration of the entrenched nature of these prejudices is the case of people who live around sugar-production areas. There is a particular and peculiar stench associated with the process of producing sugar, especially from sugarcane. People born around sugar-production sites could grow quite accustomed to this smell – the odor fades into the rest of their background. It is only once they move away from the sugar-production area that they might realize the difference in the scent of the air. Conversely, individuals who travel to or pass this sugar-production site would immediately be aware of the stench that they are unfamiliar with – it is foregrounded for them. Gadamer's hermeneutics takes up this process of foregrounding, of making the latent visible (Gadamer 2004, 304). I offer the suggestion of starting from vice, assuming one's deficiencies, and working towards repairing or supplementing them where necessary. Since one's self-knowledge will never be complete (refer back to Gadamer here), this reflective process must be an ongoing, lifelong activity. This too, however, would not be enough to completely unstop our ears – we must also become more aware of the various interests that shape the world in which we are currently embedded.

Critical World-Knowledge Through Critical Theory

The project of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory arose in the early 20th century in Germany at a particularly turbulent moment in global history. This project aimed to assess their own intellectual history (Marxism) with its progressive successes and failings. The pressing concern for the critical theorists remained the increasing influence of capitalism over the cultural world of the West. Their contribution to the analysis of culture revealed the manipulation of said culture and its technologies in order to maintain hegemonic control. What is relevant to this paper is the critique of ideology they offered. I focus specifically on that of Max Horkheimer and Jürgen Habermas. Horkheimer's essay titled 'Traditional and Critical Theory' describes the "traditional theorist who serves hegemonic capitalist interests while experiencing increasing alienation from society and from their work" (John 2021, 3). Horkheimer acknowledges that people are the product of their histories (Horkheimer 2002, 200), and that the relationship between the individual and society is a dialectical one. Critical theory is developed in response to this state of affairs. It has for its subject

specifically the "definite individual in (their) real relation to other individuals and groups... (and) the resultant web of relationships with the social totality (and) nature" (Horkheimer 2002, 210). The description of traditional theory foregrounds the fact that some questions that, for instance, the scientific community focusses on have (often literally) an army and a navy behind them. This backing affords them the opportunity to be asked at all – the enterprise of knowledge thus has particular interests that fuel it (John 2021, 4). A good example of this includes the fact that while the military-industrial complex funds many outer-space related projects that suit its own interests, the understanding of female sexuality and queer desire is still underfunded and in its nascent stages. It is such an analysis of ideology which underlies social activity that Habermas notes in his early work titled 'Knowledge and Human Interests.' My main takeaway from this work is an assertion from the summary of the chapter: only knowledge that acquires a proper attitude can properly orient action (Gutting & Habermas 2014, 310). Habermas' analysis lays out three varieties of activity: the empirical-analytic kind that describes the universe through theory; the historical-hermeneutic⁴ kind that attempts to force symbolic meaning onto the same plane; and the critical kind that works to uncover interests behind social activity. Paul Ricoeur summarizes such interests as being "opposed to all pretensions of the theoretical subject to situate itself outside the sphere of desire" (Ricoeur & Thompson 2016, 40), which lines up neatly with Gadamer's idea of prejudice discussed earlier in this paper. The three kinds of interest that Habermas proposes next in the chapter correspond to the three types of social activity, namely empirical-analytic activity with a technical, cognitive interest; historical-hermeneutic activity with a practical interest; and finally, critically oriented activity with an emancipatory cognitive interest (Gutting & Habermas 2014, 314). Critical theory is also joined with self-reflection, which is determined through this last emancipatory interest. For Habermas, self-reflection enables the escape from the objectivist concealment of the relation of one's responsibility and autonomy from one's activity.⁵ Thus, critical theory successfully offers what I call 'critical knowledge of the world,'

⁴ Hermeneutics, in Habermas' usage, refers to traditional hermeneutics. Gadamer discusses the history of hermeneutics through *Truth and Method*, and this paper seeks to take critical hermeneutics out from this second variety of activity into the third variety of Habermas' characterization.

⁵ Towards the close of the essay, he states in his final thesis that philosophy must dialectically move through moments of uncovering violence that aims to block dialogue and reconstruct what has been lost. (Gutting & Habermas 2014, 316)

or more aptly perhaps 'critical knowledge of how things work in our world.' It does this by offering perspective on how hegemonic systems (of capitalism, white supremacy, the patriarchy, casteism, and so on) manipulate language, art, technology, and perhaps even desire to suit their private interests. Examples abound, for instance the idea that women with smooth and hair-free skin are desirable (says the cosmetic industry and the patriarchy), or that green bean casserole is essential to the American Thanksgiving meal (an initiative by the Campbell Soup Company) (Erway 2021). Similar to what was said earlier, there is no way for a limited, human individual to achieve the totality of knowledge about the world since we are enmeshed in our present. Thus, critical world-knowledge too must remain an ongoing, lifelong activity in order to properly facilitate the unstopping of one's ears. Being wary of complacency (an intellectual vice) and keeping oneself appropriately informed about the evolving structures of power (political, social, and otherwise) is part of this endeavor, as is the responsibility to ensure that one's sources are updated similarly.

Critical Hermeneutics for Contemporary, Multicultural Societies & Online

These two varieties of critical knowledge, namely 'critical self-knowledge' and 'critical world-knowledge,' together peel back the illusion of our independence and our objective individuality. (Gadamer states that the individual is never simply and individual since one is always "in understanding with others" (Gadamer 2004, 303). These directly contribute to the unstopping of our ears. Some might refer to this activity as 're-orientation' or a retraining of one's faculties to be attuned to different things. This involves tuning *out* other things as well, for instance flashing advertisements on sketchy websites that promise a world of illicit delights upon being clicked. Both these critical approaches are introspective and reflective exercises. When undertaken, especially for the first time, one comes to recognize both one's place in tradition(s) and also one's limited (and therefore) interdependent embeddedness in society. Our societies today are not (and arguably rarely ever have been) comprised of homogenous people. We are inexorably surrounded by many different kinds of peoples, and we must learn to listen for those who are speaking and yet not being heard. I insist that there is room for progress within communities when its

members take it upon themselves to open up to new encounters and enter into meaningful conversations with those of different backgrounds. Lorenzo Simpson holds that hermeneutics could lend social justice a hand especially when it comes to dealing with these cultural differences (Simpson 2021, 13). His work, titled *Hermeneutics as Critique: Science, Politics, Race and Culture*, makes the case for how one might employ 'counterfactual dialogical critique' to offer members within communities a respectful way to interrogate their own cultural practices. This kind of critique is hermeneutically informed and does not force a foreign normative standard upon the members of the community in question (Simpson 2021, 17). An illustration for this situation might be as follows: take the case of young women from parts of rural or semi-urban (sometimes even urban) India who must submit to being barred from temples, cooking food in their own kitchens, or (in some cases) even leaving their rooms while menstruating. This is a common household practice in Hindu families in India, where there are both religious, superstitious, and social injunctions against a menstruating person's involvement in family life and religious rites. They are often treated as impure, and in extreme cases are designated an entirely different living space for the duration of their menses. If such a situation is interrogated from 'the outside,' we might run into the concern of cultural relativism and the exhortation (from local elders, especially) to 'leave our practices alone, *you* could not understand them.' In this case, even an urban-dwelling, English-language-educated Indian woman such as me would count as being from 'the outside,' and consequently be disallowed from commenting upon the discriminatory practice. How might we engage with the women of the community who have a relevant grievance with their own tradition and who fear being other-ed when interacting with an 'outsider'? In such a situation, Simpson offers the following course of action in three steps, which I will outline with the application.

One might begin by initiating conversation within an appropriately 'safe' space with women from the community. Bringing the interlocuter 'with us' is important to Gadamer's conception of a proper conversation, and this might involve arranging for a space that is accessible and comfortable for the women in question before beginning the interaction. Further, in respecting their needs and not alienating them, this would be an instance of (1) understanding the culture as a 'cluster concept,' meaning that it is not a "monolithic, homogenous (whole)" and that there can be changes made to the elements of one's social identity through "critical reflection without resulting in a loss of that identity" (Simpson 2021, 13-14). This would entail

understanding that in critically engaging with 'their tradition' (since I am 'on the outside' as mentioned before) on the women's part would only be a continuation of their tradition and not grounds for expulsion from it. Next, Simpson would suggest that we employ (2) what he calls a "second-order rationality" that has "culturally invariant purchase," and, finally (3) the exercise of 'counterfactual dialogical critique' (Simpson 2021, 14). These would allow the women in question to take up their tradition on their own terms. It would conversationally invite them to "consider social possibilities that, although currently unrealized, might be preferred by them if given the option" (Simpson 2021, 16).⁶ This interaction allows for any vested interests – as identified in the section on critical theory above – to be foregrounded and brought to the center of the conversation, and allows for the diversity of opinion *within* the cultural tradition in question. It also takes up the issue of the "*distribution* (of the) social options and choices" without being dismissive of the culture as a whole (Simpson 2021, 14). A sensitive interlocutor 'from the outside' in this situation would be keenly aware of their position, relative privilege, and relevant prejudices while engaging in such a conversation with these women. Thus, effective transposition of horizons also occurs for Gadamer in this situation, since transposition is neither merely empathizing nor the subordination of the other to one's standards (Gadamer 2004, 304). Such an interaction allows for both the development of a cultural tradition internally and for perceived 'outsiders' to respectfully provide solidarity on the terms of the party that needs such support.

When engaged in genuine conversation, in Gadamerian terms, both (or all) participating parties are invited to change through the experience of holding themselves open to transposition into (each)other('s) horizons (Gadamer 2004, 387). This hermeneutics involves bringing forward one's prejudices through the posing of a question that "opens up possibilities and holds them open" (Gadamer 2004, 298). Such a model, preceded by working through the exercises of self-reflection and self-education as outlined earlier, allows for effective solidarity building across different cultural (and privilege) lines. To turn towards a burgeoning field of research, I will briefly discuss the application to online interactions on social media websites and for a. In contemporary online social justice discourse, the practice of 'cancellation' or the wholesale and vocal condemnation of an individual for (a usually ignorant)

⁶ Simpson points out that these suppressed possibilities do not point towards the desecration of cultural identity, but perhaps towards the offending of particular vested interests if realized.

comment they made is rampant. Many social media influencers and users feel the pressure to be completely 'up to date' or aware of every pertinent issue to be able to comment on it, for fear of losing out on social credit. Such a pursuit of perfection is, as we have understood, futile, given our individual limitations, and leads to misguided comments from ignorance or misinformation. These individuals receive extreme social backlash, lose 'followers' and credibility, and this often leads to poor outcomes offline as well. Of course, there are individuals who deliberately make provocative statements on these internet fora as well: this paper is not concerned with them since they would require a different analysis of relative power, influencer culture, and socio-economic interests. However, in the case of the ignorant commenter, we must realize that the virtual world is structured through the activity of capitalist hegemony. There *are* real companies behind each click-to-post mechanism, and they profit from such flagrant engagement online – their interests are to maximize user time on their platforms, minimize distractions that would take users off their platforms, and to ease the process of engagement with other users. Understanding that the structure of virtual spaces such as social media websites is set up in order to encourage inflammatory impulsive behavior is crucial for those of us that seek to use them as sites for social activism. These virtual spaces are not necessarily conducive to proper conversations of the kind that will be educative, helpful, and not harmful in general. As to who bells the cat in having those laborious conversations with people who have expressed a(n ignorantly) harmful opinion? Ideally, it would be persons with relative privilege that engage in this work, since the burden on the hurt parties is already so high (see cases of racist, sexist, casteist, queerphobic, ableist, and other discriminatory or hurtful comments anywhere on the internet). Practically, this will require many of us to engage in the reflective work of unstopping our own ears in earnest.

Conclusion

I understand that I am a historically-thrown individual with a particular situation, relative privileges, and a dynamic horizon – I can also attest to the utility of reflective practices towards gaining 'critical self-knowledge' and 'critical world-knowledge' in the unstopping of my ears. Outside of these exercises, our prejudices are often *only* called into question when we encounter someone who does not share that prejudice any longer or who did not have it to begin with. Take the

case of white supremacist ideology, where some of us have had to reflect and become aware of our internalized white supremacy through interacting with others who have done the same critical work or with those who come from a context where white supremacy is not part of the cultural backdrop the way it is for us. Such individuals (of either kind) can point out the prejudice in us in ways that we cannot because of the prejudice's ubiquitous presence in our horizon. Holding ourselves open to people and experiences of different kinds allows for robust and regular interrogation of our horizon-limits as well as the associated mutation of the same. To use one last illustration to drive the point home, I recently discovered a prejudice against watching 'anime.' Anime refers to animation that is often serialized and originates in Japan. I had long associated it with children's entertainment and erroneously limited it to that without realizing that I had done so. An encounter with my partner's decision to watch (and thoroughly enjoy) an anime TV show titled *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* led me to engage in an introspective exercise about why I didn't feel like taking the show seriously. My understanding of the hegemony of English-only media in the West, combined with the understanding that I have a tendency to resist unfamiliar content led to the decision that, in the spirit of working on hermeneutics, I should hold myself open to the show and at least give the first few episodes of the series a shot. I am glad that I chose to do so since I discovered in the show a perspective that I had been interested in exploring, namely, Western culture viewed through an almost-fetishizing gaze (the way the ostensible West as historically looked towards the 'Orient'). I would not have discovered this perspective of anime had I not interrogated my potential prejudice – our desires, likes and dislikes, often mask prejudices and merit reflection. Thus, 'critical self-knowledge' and 'critical world-knowledge' are useful and effective in terms of opening us up to new encounters that then in turn shape our horizons. I must note that different cultures have had long-standing practices for self-reflection, including introspective meditation, prayer, confession, and so on. The same is true for educating oneself about the interests that shape our worlds: some cultures prioritize secular education, others have critical thinking exercises for children, while still others use myths to inculcate healthy skepticism. Introducing young children to the idea that the way that they perceive the world is not the only way to do so is one possible strategy. Such a foundation might also allow for more graceful acceptance of changes, say, to one's body as

one ages. I do not intend to propose that self-reflection and self-education be practiced only in the ways described in this paper, but that the principles of inquiry epistemology and critical theory be used to guide one's journey. The unstopping of our ears is thus a lifelong, utterly incomplete activity. It is a conversational relationship one has with oneself and one's ever-developing horizon.

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