


Hermenêutica e educação

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Resumo: Neste texto, proponho considerar a relação entre hermenêutica e educação a partir de várias perspectivas que, embora, em princípio, sejam independentes umas das outras, podem, no entanto, ser utilmente ligadas no marco da proposta de uma teoria da racionalidade finita.

Palavras chaves: Educação. Hermenêutica. Gadamer. Racionalidade finita.

Abstract: This essay endeavors to explore the intersection of hermeneutics and education from multiple perspectives, which we believe that, albeit initially distinct, can be synergistically connected within the cohesive framework of a finite rationality theory.

Keywords: Education. Hermeneutics. Gadamer. Finite rationality.

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Education as a realm of *Verstehen*. A Critique of Gadamer's Universal Hermeneutics I

One aspect of Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* ("Truth and Method") that warrants close scrutiny is his aspiration to establish a universal hermeneutics, i.e. a hermeneutic framework providing the fundamental grounds and concepts of all realms of *Verstehen* (Understanding) – spanning art, law, religion, history, literature, and philosophy (Gadamer, 1960 (2010); 1993, p. 110, 439.). However, the outcome of this hermeneutic program is subject to critique on three fronts:

- a. It does not encompass all realms of *Verstehen*, as it leaves out one or more of them, thereby not fulfilling its comprehensive promise.
- b. Its claims lack the generality required to be applicable across all considered realms of *Verstehen*.
- c. Its principles are not uniformly applied, but rather tailored and variable across different realms.

These three issues can obviously be interconnected, and in some cases, failure to fulfill one promise leads to the non-fulfillment of another.

While it is certainly commendable to aim for a holistic grasp of *Verstehen* in its entirety, one must not conflate this ideal objective with a viable methodological starting point. Even Gadamer's own rejection of hermeneutics as a "method", as one might argue, does not eliminate the need for systematic inquiry. The universal claim in Gadamer's approach leads to obscurities, inaccuracies, and conceptual leaps that can compromise his endeavor. Concepts initially developed with clear reference to a limited domain, such as "application" (*Anwendung*) from Law (Gadamer, 1960 (2010, p. 312), are soon generalized to art and philosophical texts, for instance, thus becoming progressively vague and inaccurate. Therefore, it is increasingly hard to discern how the initial intuition – which was both valuable and relevant, at first – is preserved through this expanded scope. Challenging Gadamer's notion of a universal hermeneutics, which, I insist, is evidently a desirable goal, I advocate for a rigorously methodical approach to its development. This involves adhering to the wise principle of the second rule of the Cartesian method, which recommends breaking down complex issues into as many parts as possible. This is why, in my "rational reconstruction of Gadamerian hermeneutics" (pardon the irony), I propose starting with the hermeneutics of

the philosophical text and gradually expand it in a controlled manner, ensuring clarity in delineating relationships, shifts in meaning, emphasis, etc.

The preceding critique forms merely one aspect of my broader dissent from Gadamer's endeavors, and will not be the primary focus here. In this essay, I contend that

- a. Gadamer's hermeneutics cannot be deemed genuinely universal, as it notably omits a crucial domain of *Verstehen*: education².
- b. His failure to contemplate education suggests that his proposed characteristics of *Verstehen*, while pertinent to the realms he does examine, do not apply to education;
- c. And, finally, if these characteristics are to be considered, we may have to revise Gadamer's assertions regarding other realms.

I advocate for a delineation of three distinct realms of *Verstehen*:

- a. The realm of everyday life, where *Verstehen* is posited as one of *Dasein*'s fundamental structures, as unveiled by Heidegger and preserved by Gadamer.
- b. The realm traditionally associated with the *Geisteswissenschaften*, which, following Gadamer's critique of scientism, can be termed the "Humanities".
- c. And the realm of education.

If the first two have been considered, even in their relationship, the third has been overlooked. While Gadamer's hermeneutics predominantly reflects the perspective of the Humanities, and by extension, that of the "interpreter", its claim to absolute universality is compromised by its disregard for the phenomenon of education. In fact, understanding and the challenges it involves is an intrinsic element in any educational activity, a fact well known to anyone who has taught or learned.

However, pointing out Gadamer's neglect of education in his intended universal hermeneutics is not simply to identify a missing piece towards totality; it is to stress that this absence introduces constraints and inaccuracies in his theory. In education, the dynamics of understanding feature nuances distinct from those in the hermeneutics of the Humanities. These nuances, which Gadamer appears to have overlooked, call for a reevaluation and possible reformulation of his hermeneutic theory if a truly universal application is to be achieved. To say it tangibly: What does it mean to understand a work of art or a philosophical text, and how does that differ from understanding the content of a class, a pedagogical text, or a teacher's explanation?

² Ironically, it appears that Gadamer either never taught or, at the very least, ignored his students experiences. How else could a professor claim to develop a universal hermeneutic without deeply engaging with the very phenomenon in which he is inherently involved?

At the core of Gadamer's universal hermeneutics lies the premise that understanding is invariably entwined with the history of *Überlieferung* (Gadamer, 1960 (2010, p. 280, 341, 363, 393)³. Central to this premise is the notion that interpreting a cultural work is not an external process conducted by a detached, transcendental subject that is oblivious to the cultural process; rather, it is deeply embedded within the cultural evolution to which the work itself contributes – an integral part of the same continuum from which the work originates. This perspective shows that, in Humanities, interpretation eschews the traditional subject-object dichotomy prevalent in scientific inquiry, advocating instead for a participatory role of interpretation within a phenomenon that also encompasses the work. Here, there is no notion of detachment, no objective “method”, in the interaction of a subject with an object that stands apart and unfamiliar. Rather, there is a singular cultural process in which both the work and its interpretation are inextricably intertwined.

Further to this core premise, Gadamer's hermeneutics is anchored by two additional theses that, in conjunction with the central idea above, form an inseparable unity: the thesis of application (*Anwendung*) (Gadamer, 1960 (2010, p. 312) and the concept of fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) (Gadamer, 1960 (2010, p. 307; 379), both deemed essential elements of *Verstehen*.

While the concept of *Anwendung* originates in legal hermeneutics and is fully coherent within that domain, its meaning is somewhat flexibilized when applied to the arts – consider, for instance, a musical or a theatrical performance – and even more so when extended to the engagement with philosophical texts. The obvious consequence is that, from one case to another, the notion of *Anwendung* takes on an increasingly generic and weakened sense. The implication is that Gadamer's *Verstehen* is not a static recitation of fixed meanings but a dynamic reinterpretation shaped by and assimilated into a certain context.

On the other hand, if every act of producing and receiving meaning originates from a particular horizon, then *Verstehen* is not encountered from an impartial viewpoint (from nowhere) but emerges from one's own particular horizon. Thus, comprehension is invariably a confluence of the individual's horizon with that of the work's producer. This interconnection suggests that both the work and the interpreter are components of a single

³ While the term “*Überlieferung*” can initially be translated as “tradition”, this translation fails to capture some of its nuanced connotations and relationships inherent in the German language, such as “that which is passed forward” (*über-lieferung*). In Gadamer's usage, it encompasses not only the idea of a certain product, as the word “tradition” implies, but also an ongoing process. The crux of the matter lies precisely in recognizing that the work and its interpretation are integral parts of the same continuous process, rather than being absolutely distinct dimensions.

process, leading to the concept that all *Verstehen* involves a fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*), integral to the act of *Verstehen*.

These concepts – *Verstehen* as an aspect of *Überlieferung*, *Anwendung*, or *Horizontverschmelzung* – are intrinsically related and have collectively, and not by accident, brought forth allegations of relativism against Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Gadamer obviously has countered such claims, advocating for a discernible normativity that delineates between arbitrary and reasoned interpretations. Yet, albeit his defense, it is notable that establishing the normativity of *Verstehen* is not Gadamer’s focal point, despite it being explicitly emphasized by other hermeneutic theories. Gadamer concedes to a normative aspect within understanding and acknowledges the existence of fundamentally erroneous interpretations, but does not explore the reconciliation of this normative element with the concepts of *Überlieferung*, *Anwendung*, and *Horizontverschmelzung*.

The question then revolves around the applicability and continued relevance of Gadamer’s overarching theses, particularly in contexts diverging from the phenomenon of Humanities to focus on education as a domain of specific praxis. Are Gadamer’s hermeneutic considerations regarding the Humanities applicable *mutatis mutandis* to education? Is it feasible to consider *Verstehen* within education as a part of the history of *Überlieferung*, or as an instance of *Anwendung*, or even as *Horizontverschmelzung*? While the answer might be affirmative in a way, the crux of our interest lies precisely in the nuances where this generalization does not hold true.

To elaborate, it is essential to explore how the Gadamerian concepts of *Überlieferung*, *Anwendung*, and *Horizontverschmelzung* translate into the educational context and comprehend the phenomenon of *Verstehen* inherent to it. Surely, the process of understanding for both students and teachers occurs within each one’s specific horizons. However, education itself manifests a distinctive form of *Überlieferung*, where a revitalized tradition entails a form of *Anwendung*.

While exploring the applicability of Gadamer’s triad of concepts to the phenomenon of education, a critical issue emerges: do these concepts translate identically from the Humanities to education? The answer is undoubtedly negative, and certain fundamental differences should be emphasized. An analysis of these differences reveals that while *Überlieferung*, *Anwendung*, and *Horizontverschmelzung* are constant, perpetual and inevitable phenomena, education is not. The phenomenon of *Verstehen* inherently unfolds within the historicity of culture autonomously, devoid of the necessity for formal structures or conscious acknowledgment of its process. Conversely, education embodies an institutional

essence⁴, where *Überlieferung* is systematically planned and controlled, decisively impacting the nature of *Anwendung*, rendering it intrinsically regulated. Furthermore, the concept of *Horizontverschmelzung* merits particular scrutiny, prompting a clear separation between the notion of a horizon from that of a “fusion of horizons”. Every understanding invariably occurs within a horizon, which includes a student’s own educational system. However, is it adequate to speak of a *Horizontverschmelzung* between the student’s and the teacher’s horizons? A distinctive element is introduced here: the teacher. This element is absent in the Humanities, thus transforming the discussion about horizons to encompass not just the student’s relationship with the “work” or the cultural artifact but also with the teacher’s interpretations thereof. Therefore, unlike the primarily dyadic interaction between interpreter and work typical in Humanities, education introduces a fundamentally triadic relationship. This is extremely significant.

The primary difference between the *Verstehen* of the Humanities and educational *Verstehen* is that the latter posits an essential normativity that cannot be subordinated to other aspects. Without distinguishing between a correct and an incorrect *Verstehen*, education would lose its sense. Education gains significance through the potential for a learner to grasp a content previously uncomprehended through a certain activity and in a manner deemed correct. This underlines that, within the educational context, correct understanding is analytically embedded in the idea of understanding specific contents and not others.

Let us retain this: although this analysis does not definitively resolve the challenges of objectivity in hermeneutics, it brings to light that certain phenomena of *Verstehen* intrinsically require a degree of normativity.

Considerations on the Normativity of *Verstehen* in Education

The fundamental divergence in the inherently normative nature of *Verstehen* within the realm of education, as opposed to the Humanities, is intertwined with several other distinctions, some of which have already been discussed. The phenomenon of understanding in education transcends a mere dyadic interaction between the interpreter and the work, as seen in the Humanities, evolving instead into a triadic relationship. Here, alongside the interpreter and the work, stands a pivotal figure: the teacher, who assumes a vital role in mediating the student’s engagement with the work. Assistance and external guidance provided by the teacher constitute indispensable components of the experience of

⁴ The institutional nature of education is intricately intertwined with the normative aspect of this *Verstehen*.

understanding. The student's understanding thus reflects the teacher's explanation. Conversely, in the case of an interpreter engaging with philosophical texts, the teacher and their elucidations are conspicuously absent; the interpreter grapples with the text autonomously, even if they engage in communal reading, devoid of a guiding teacher.

Correct understanding within the context of education is intricately tied to another phenomenon: that of essential asymmetry. For genuine education to occur (as opposed to mere collaborative learning), it is imperative to establish unequivocally what is to be understood and what constitutes a correct understanding thereof. This is inherently bound to the role of the teacher as a crucial secondary subject in the student's process of *Verstehen*. Moreover, this relationship is inherently intertwined with the institutional dimension of education: the institutional aspect of education arises due to the inherently normative element of *Verstehen* that permeates it.

In order to accurately delineate the concept of normative understanding in education, it is imperative to draw a clear distinction between understanding and knowing, a differentiation often obscured within common discourse under the generic term "to be familiar with". When it is said that A knows B, one could be thinking that A knows B positively, being that what is known is the truth or, alternatively, that A merely understands or is familiar with B, that A is familiar with someone's opinion, among other possibilities. This ambiguity is particularly prevalent in educational contexts, as we shall elucidate.

Every statement possesses a sense and a truth value, and it is possible to grasp the sense of a statement without necessarily ascertaining its truth value. Building upon this distinction, we further delineate between semantics and epistemology, and potentially between hermeneutics and epistemology. However, these distinctions warrant careful consideration within the phenomenon of education, where the boundary between understanding and knowing is often overlooked, with mere understanding frequently being equated with knowledge of the truth without further scrutiny⁵.

Indeed, it is commonplace within educational discourse to speak of the transmission or acquisition of "knowledge." However, in this transmission process, understanding assumes a pivotal role, for a student acquires "knowledge" only when they understand the content being imparted. Yet, this understanding is often conflated with a new

⁵ While the fundamental objective of every learning endeavor is understanding, this goal is not always realized. Often, the knowledge acquired through education amounts to mere rote memorization, which may be regurgitated correctly in appropriate contexts but lacks genuine comprehension. However, knowledge that remains uncomprehended can only serve as an impoverished endpoint in education, merely a halfway milestone. Considering this, we can assert that there are phenomena in real education that lie entirely beyond the realm of hermeneutics, encompassing all those facets associated with drilling and skill training.

form of knowledge in itself, predicated upon the assumption that the transmitted content is correct and therefore true. Consequently, understanding something anew is perceived simultaneously as acquiring new knowledge [becoming acquainted with something]. However, in this scenario, what transpires is merely the comprehension of a statement, as there has been no autonomous process of validating its truth; rather, the truth of the statement is conferred by authority. It is pertinent to acknowledge that from the student's perspective, learning is fundamentally viewed as the acquisition of new knowledge. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize that this knowledge acquisition primarily manifests as understanding – an understanding wherein the distinction between understanding the statement and verifying its truth value remains unaddressed. This implies that what is learned may indeed be false, for instance in disciplines such as sciences or history, even though the student understood it, i.e. acquired new knowledge in this sense.

Considering the aforementioned, it becomes evident that in the process of learning, what is primarily acquired is not new knowledge *per se*, but rather new understandings. Thus, the learning process is fundamentally a process of understanding. Consequently, if hermeneutics aspires to be a truly universal theory of understanding, it must accord special attention to the phenomenon of learning.

In the realm of education, learning is essentially a process of *Verstehen*, understanding, serving as the fundamental mechanism for acquiring new knowledge. Indeed, our capacity for *Verstehen* enables us to acquire knowledge beyond personal experience. If this is indeed the case, learning aligns more closely with the hermeneutic process than with the process of knowledge construction of the natural sciences. This distinction requires a more nuanced analysis.

However, it is worth noting that natural science also entails a mode of understanding, and its specific theories imply a horizon of comprehension. Thus, while discussing “understanding,” we implicitly confine the realm of understanding to the domain of the Humanities. While this restriction is undoubtedly debatable, it remains a fact that hermeneutics predominantly concerns itself with the phenomenon of understanding within the *Geisteswissenschaften* (Humanities or simply GW).

However, let us set aside the aforementioned considerations within this particular context. Nevertheless, the relationship of *Verstehen* to both GW and *Naturwissenschaften* (natural sciences, or simply NW) has only been examined from the perspective of knowledge construction in each respective scientific domain, rather than focusing on the dimension of knowledge acquisition within each domain. Hence, a crucial question arises: if it is accepted

that the modes of knowledge construction differ between the two domains, should it not follow that the modes of knowledge acquisition also diverge in each case? Here, an essential clarification is warranted: the mode of knowledge acquisition in each domain fundamentally remains the same, rooted primarily in *Verstehen*. New knowledge, of whatever type, NW or GW, is acquired through *Verstehen*. While the methodologies employed in constructing knowledge may differ between the GW and NW, the method of acquiring knowledge remains fundamentally unchanged in both cases.

Of course, this does not preclude the possibility that the acquisition of knowledge within the GW and NW in educational settings may exhibit particularities and require distinct pedagogical approaches. Nonetheless, there exist commonalities across both types of sciences that are inherent to *Verstehen* itself. For instance, the notion that all *Verstehen* is conducted based on presuppositions applies equally to the understanding of mathematics as it does to history.

To achieve comprehensive clarity in our analysis, we will have to delve into specific details and consider tangible cases, which may render our exposition somewhat boring or annoying. However, such complexity is unavoidable in our pursuit of thorough understanding.

The scope of understanding in education encompasses a diverse array of subjects, spanning from the traditional content of the Humanities to material derived from the natural sciences. This diversity immediately raises a critical concern. Let us first contemplate the understanding inherent in the study of the NW, such as physics – for instance, mechanics – or consider the understanding involved in mathematics. A student may either understand or fail to understand what the teacher imparts about physics or mathematics, and their understanding may be accurate or inadequate. Furthermore, the teacher has the capacity to rectify the student's understanding. In instances of correct understanding, the normative aspect of understanding assumes a particular significance. It is commonly assumed, albeit without the due epistemological analysis, that scientific communication imparts knowledge containing truths and is therefore fundamentally correct. However, this tacit assumption of correctness conceals the shift from the correction of the truth or correction of knowledge to the establishment of criteria for correct understanding of a content. Nevertheless, these are distinct entities: knowledge may be correct, yet its correctness does not inherently determine whether it has been understood accurately or not. In fact, the truth or correctness of knowledge remains a presupposition in the background, while attention shifts to how the teacher conveys it and how the student understands it. Since the teacher possesses this

knowledge, it is presumed that they also possess sufficient criteria to ascertain whether or not the student's understanding is correct. Thus, the criteria for assessing understanding or non-understanding are rooted in knowledge: as the teacher knows what is correct, they also, by extension, discern whether the student has understood correctly.

However, as we transition in educational discourse from the NW to the GW, the landscape becomes notably more intricate. Here, the notion of a well-established body of knowledge considered universally true appears to dissolve, giving way to a realm where opinion holds greater sway. What then becomes the criterion for determining understanding, the normative criterion? It becomes evident that the criteria for correct understanding are entirely independent of the truth or falsehood of the knowledge being understood. Consequently, it is conceivable for false knowledge to be correctly understood, and conversely, for true knowledge to be erroneously understood. In summary, there is a normativity of *Verstehen* that is markedly distinct from the normativity of knowing – a correct grasp of a content – which stands apart and remains independent of the truth value of said content. This normativity of *Verstehen* assumes a pivotal role in education.

Let us examine a tangible case. Consider a history class where a particular event from the past is examined. The teacher might revisit an interpretation of this event proposed by a historian. Here, we encounter the phenomenon of the historian's *Verstehen*, followed by the teacher's *Verstehen* based on their understanding of the historian's work being used to support his class. Subsequently, the students listening to the teacher may either understand or fail to understand, whether accurately or inaccurately, the interpretation being presented of the past event. The teacher can intervene to promote better understanding, correct misunderstandings, and so forth. Importantly, this entire process is independent of whether the historian's interpretation is objectively correct; rather, it highlights, beyond the correctness of the historian's interpretation, a normativity surrounding the interpretation itself and what constitutes a correct understanding of it. It is within this context, and only within this context, that the essential normativity of *Verstehen* in education becomes apparent. Education does not aim to transmit absolute truths or uphold the truthfulness of all its teachings; rather, it establishes norms for determining correct understanding.

Now, consider a scenario where the subject of study is not a textbook but a classic work. Would the teacher not normatively assert that certain interpretations are utterly implausible? Would they refrain from indicating when a particular understanding is erroneous? Would they not endeavor to guide the student towards a genuine understanding of the text's intended meaning?

Education as a Realm of *Verstehen*. A Critique of Gadamer's Universal Hermeneutics II

Having elucidated the appropriate sense in which to discuss the essential normative nature of *Verstehen* in education, the subsequent phase of our analysis entails explicitly questioning the extent to which Gadamer's triple thesis – that understanding is embedded within tradition (*Überlieferung*), entails application (*Anwendung*), and involves the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) – applies to education, or perhaps:

- a. In what manner does it evidently apply?
- b. In what manner does it apply in a characteristically modified fashion compared to Gadamer's conception within the Humanities? And
- c. In what manner does it not apply?

Obviously, the manner in which it does not apply involves revising their aspiration to be essential parts of a universal hermeneutic. Since we have previously addressed point a. and found it to possess limited relevance to our inquiry, we shall refrain from revisiting it here. Concerning the remaining two points, we offer the following considerations:

- a. If *Überlieferung*, *Anwendung*, and *Horizontverschmelzung* were to manifest in education precisely as Gadamer conceives them within the Humanities, and if they were deemed indispensable conditions for understanding, then education would become an impossibility.
- b. Even when acknowledging the existence of *Überlieferung*, *Anwendung*, and *Horizontverschmelzung* within the specific context of education, it becomes imperative to reassess Gadamer's conceptualization of these phenomena, i.e. as a kind of ultimate and insurmountable facticity. Actually, these phenomena exhibit a more dynamic and less mechanistic nature, amenable to reflection and even a degree of control.

It is pertinent to recognize that while every student indeed understands from their own presuppositions, the crucial distinction lies in the fact that this does not entail a deterministic process akin to that observed in natural science. It is ironic that Gadamer implicitly portrays *Verstehen* as an inexorable natural process when, in reality, it constitutes a cultural process subject to influence, intervention, and reflective action. Otherwise, education would make no sense. For instance, we possess the capacity to elucidate to students false assumptions that may hinder their correct understanding and, thereby, actively shape their comprehension.

Verstehen inherently entails an open dialogue, and within the realm of education, this dialogue aims not to merge the horizons of student and teacher (*Horizontverschmelzung*) but ultimately to effect a profound transformation in the student's horizon. This *Horizontverschmelzung* serves as a means to change the student's horizon by immersing oneself in it. Given the central role played by *Horizontverschmelzung* in every *Verstehen*, the phenomenon of *Horizontänderung* should be equally seen as pivotal to the educational *Verstehen*. This novel and essential aspect of *Verstehen* remains unaddressed in Gadamer's hermeneutics, as it does not encompass the phenomenon of education within its horizon. Education is not merely about imparting new content but also shaping the student's horizon⁶.

While the basic processes of understanding are undoubtedly present in the learning phenomenon within education, they manifest differently from Gadamer's depiction, which primarily pertains to the realm of the Humanities. In educational settings, the ability to normatively discern between correct and incorrect understanding is crucial for its efficacy and coherence. And, obviously, in this case, clear criteria exist to determine when understanding is accurate and when it is not. However, does the fusion of horizons apply to education? To some extent, yes, but the fusion of horizons is one more element to be taken into account in understanding, in getting the student to understand what is being taught, but it is not the final word, an ultimate untransposable phenomenon. If the theories of *Horizontverschmelzung* and *Anwendung* were absolute, education would be rendered impossible, as each understanding would be irreconcilable with all others. Priority must be given to achieving correct understanding within education, and while *Anwendung* and *Horizontverschmelzung* may be observed, they should be regarded as phenomena to be considered and potentially controlled to ensure accurate comprehension.

Considerations such as those aforementioned prompt a need to reassess the concepts of *Überlieferung*, *Anwendung*, and *Horizontverschmelzung* through the lens of education, thereby inviting a reconsideration of Gadamer's assertions regarding *Verstehen* that are formulated from a predominantly unilateral perspective rooted in the Humanities.

a. Gadamer appears to overlook completely the dimension of dialogue within *Verstehen*, assuming a solipsistic viewpoint that privileges exclusively the individual and the text, ignoring the crucial role of dialogue with other participants in comprehension. By acknowledging this intersubjective and social dimension of understanding, we uncover a potential bridge between understanding in the Humanities and educational contexts. While

⁶ It is worth mentioning briefly that this potential for reshaping horizons offers promising avenues for intercultural dialogue.

dialogue remains an essential intersubjective dimension in both realms, each exhibits distinct characteristics. In education, dialogue entails strict normativity, whereas in the Humanities it means the possibility of permanent revision with the ideal aim of consensus;

b. The possibility of a distinction between understanding correctly or not hinges upon a large series of underlying assumptions that merit explicit elucidation. One such assumption pertains to the intersubjective nature of understanding, that understanding can be subjected to intersubjective control. This intersubjective control of understanding differs from the intersubjective control of truth, as it is conceivable for a proposed interpretation to be false yet still shared intersubjectively, guided by clear criteria of what would be an accurate or an inaccurate comprehension⁷;

c. Ultimately, the aforementioned considerations lead us to entertain the notion of normativity in understanding as not inherently absurd, suggesting the possibility of establishing clear criteria for what constitutes correct understanding. Importantly, the possibility of setting normative criteria for understanding, in this case, remains independent of the truth of knowledge or even previous understanding, as exemplified in the case of historical facts.

Education as an Epistemological Issue: Education and a Theory of Finite Rationality

Hermeneutics offers crucial insights for the theory of finite rationality, including a critique of the Archimedean point, the concept of horizon, historicity, and more. With this in mind, our exploration of the interplay between hermeneutics and education naturally extends to a connection between education and the theory of finite rationality.

Perhaps we should review certain obvious points regarding the essential nature of education for human beings. It is well known that the systematic transmission of accumulated knowledge to succeeding generations is vital for the preservation and advancement of culture, a trait markedly distinct from the limited transmission of knowledge observed in other animals. However, merely acknowledging this fact fails to delve into its profound significance. What becomes evident is that the phenomenon of education is only meaningful within the context of finite rationality⁸.

⁷ *Überlieferung, Anwendung und Horizontverschmelzung*

⁸ It underscores a peculiar aspect of finite rationality's learning process, which not only evolves through experiential learning but also thrives on social interaction and its inherently dialogical nature. Education

A God not only remains impervious to learning but is also incapable of being taught anything. Learning and teaching are quintessential processes inherent to finite rationality. Yet, learning and teaching are precisely the processes we generally term “education.” Therefore, education emerges as a phenomenon that finds meaning solely within the realm of finite rationality, with its origin and purpose deeply rooted in the concept of finitude. It is not solely the prerogative of finite beings to learn, but also only finite beings teach and educate. Teaching fundamentally involves engaging with the finitude of others from the vantage point of one’s own finitude.

Education does not pertain “just to pedagogues”; rather, it warrants significant attention and reflection from the standpoint of finite rationality. While education is commonly associated with pedagogical discourse and primarily addressed by those directly involved in educational practice, it has also been contemplated by philosophers. However, philosophical inquiry into education has predominantly focused on philosophical anthropology, ethics, the philosophy of history, and even aesthetics, with limited exploration from an epistemological perspective⁹ and even less so as a core issue of epistemology. Epistemology has always focused on science, often regarded as the quintessential domain of knowledge. Yet, if we recognize that both science and education, albeit in distinct ways, exemplify the phenomenon of finite rationality, then education emerges as a topic deserving of profound reflection within an epistemological theory of finite rationality. Therefore, I advocate for the elevation of education to a fundamental epistemological concern. What does epistemology have to learn from addressing education?

If education is indeed a phenomenon that finds meaning solely within the context of finite rationality, the next logical inquiry is to what extent education can enrich our understanding within the framework of a theory of finite rationality. Are there specific manifestations of finite rationality that solely occur or are, at least, more prominently evident in education? I contend that there are. If the possibility for error is intrinsic to finite rationality, then the potential to rectify such errors with the aid of others becomes essential to education.

Understanding and Not Understanding. An Inquiry into Error

epitomizes a distinctive facet of the dialogical construction of rationality, characterized by an asymmetric relationship rather than symmetrical interaction among participants.

⁹ Perhaps in this context, pragmatism, notably Dewey’s, has exerted the most significant influence, albeit in the pursuit of applying epistemological concepts to teaching and didactics. Thus, it follows a trajectory from philosophy to education, rather than the other way around.

The normative dimension of *Verstehen* in education is intricately tied to the distinction between correct and erroneous *Verstehen*, which in turn, underscores the possibility of systematically reshaping *Verstehen*¹⁰.

The notion that error is incompatible with rationality is a manifestation of the concept of absolute rationality. However, within the framework of finite rationality, error assumes a vital role. While we acknowledge that God is immune to error, saying that it is an essential aspect of finite rationality may sound commonplace or a mere analytical consideration, lacking philosophical depth. Hence, it is imperative to clarify the significance of this thesis: for finite rationality, error is not merely an intrinsic element, but it is actually part of this rationality, an essential moment of its structure. It is more than mere accident negating or temporarily suspending finite rationality without much consequence. Although certain errors may arise from irrational influences, these instances do not encompass all potential errors nor do they exhaust the spectrum of factors leading to error. Finite rationality does not err solely due to irrational interventions, as proposed by Kant in the field of ethics; rather, it errs in a manner that retains a sense of rationality. Rational beings not only acquire knowledge in a rational manner but also engage in rational errors¹¹.

It is crucial to elucidate the significance of this thesis. However, to fully grasp its meaning, it is advisable to revisit concepts discussed previously or elsewhere:

- a. We have previously established the importance of distinguishing between understanding and knowing. Within this framework, we could equally distinguish two types of errors: errors in knowing and errors in understanding. Given our focus on hermeneutics, our analysis will naturally concentrate on the latter.
- b. Additionally, we have explored elsewhere how logic can offer valuable insights to hermeneutics by formalizing both subjective and objective aspects of understanding. In the subsequent discussion, we will prioritize the objective aspect before shifting our attention to the subjective dimension.

If there are objective relationships of meaning that are pertinent to understanding, it follows that non-understanding or error is to some extent associated with a failure to comply with these objective relationships of meaning. However, it also follows that they can be rectified to the extent that these relationships may be restored. In this regard, the application of hermeneutics aided by logic finds fertile ground in the realm of education.

¹⁰ One question that Gadamer neglects to address is the determinants of changes in *Verstehen*.

¹¹ If aiding understanding is possible, it is tied to the notion that a logic of error is possible, suggesting that error is not merely irrational.

At first glance, the processes of understanding and non-understanding may appear as subjective phenomena, seemingly uncontrollable, indivisible, and resistant to analysis – or a-methodical in nature. This might be true for its simplest and most original forms. But, even so, and insofar as there are objective relationships of meaning, like presupposition, the vast majority of understanding phenomena, rather than exhibiting this simplistic character, involves understandings that presuppose other understandings, since their meanings also presuppose other meanings. That is, there are relationships between meanings and correspondingly between their respective understandings. This interconnectedness of meanings and understandings is pivotal in comprehending the potential for error in understanding and, consequently, devising methods for its correction – an essential undertaking in education.

If certain meanings presuppose others, certain understandings also presuppose other understandings. If one begins from a false presupposition, misunderstandings inevitably ensue; conversely, correcting such false premise is imperative for achieving accurate understanding.

Not only does a logic of meaning exist, characterized by relationships such as presupposition, but this objective logic of meaning is also reflected – in its subjective aspect – in a logic of understanding. When one meaning presupposes another, complete and accurate understanding of the former can only be achieved through understanding of the latter. The possibility of observing the objective order of relationships between meanings and the subjective rational order of understanding are inherently interconnected. However, this correlation is not mysterious; rather, it underscores and results from our inherent rationality as human beings.

In essence, what can we learn from this discussion? Firstly, error in understanding does not solely stem from factors external to the understanding process – factors that could be deemed extra-hermeneutic or hermeneutically irrational – such as momentary lapses in attention and so on. While it is conceivable that distractions may hinder comprehension by diverting focus or interrupting one's train of thoughts, in this case such instances are hermeneutically neutral, completely unrelated to the meaning to be understood. However, in other scenarios, the decisive factor may be entirely hermeneutic and thus rational. For instance, starting from a false presupposition that renders the new content meaningless would require a distortion of the latter to make sense of it.

This example presents a compelling application of *Gestalt* principles to hermeneutics. If *Gestalt* theory can elucidate aspects of perception and memory, it likewise

extends to the processes of learning and *Verstehen*. Analogous to the *Gestalt* laws of “good form”, certain laws govern the facilitation of understanding. Aiming to render a certain content comprehensible, modifications or simplifications are often necessary to make it meaningful for a specific audience. This is particularly common when conveying intricate and sophisticated concepts to someone with a more basic level of understanding. They have a desire for understanding and cannot tolerate the lack thereof. However, understanding, or at least the subjective satisfaction stemming from understanding, may come at the cost of adapting and simplifying the content to fit within their own mental frameworks.

Understanding, whether approached from a hermeneutical or logical standpoint, involves integrating new information into pre-established structures¹². The presence of a novel idea does not equate to understanding unless it connects with prior knowledge or assumptions. This integration underscores that understanding is not a standalone process but one deeply rooted in the concept of horizon – because understanding always emerges from pre-existing assumptions, because it involves assimilating new insights into an existing system of contents. Understanding is always understanding based on presuppositions. It is thus clear that understanding not only should be distinguished from knowing but warrants a more nuanced exploration of its inherent dynamics. The concept of a horizon is not a contingent and expandable condition but a fundamental aspect of understanding.

A rational being’s failure to understand (non-understanding) is a rational failure. In rational non-understanding, it is crucial for the individual to be introspectively aware of their lack of understanding, even if this awareness is not always spontaneous but rather induced by external cues. Someone else may need to highlight their lack of understanding.

We can categorize non-understanding into three situations:

- a. Absolute non-understanding;
- b. Casual non-understanding;
- c. Necessary non-understanding;
- a. It is equally crucial to differentiate between non-rational and rational non-understanding.

In non-rational non-understanding, the question simply does not pertain to the context or environment (*as per von Uexküll*); it cannot be assimilated into a horizon of meaning.

It simply makes no sense at all.

¹² Piaget posits intelligence as assimilation into structures. Ultimately, the structures into which new knowledge is assimilated are logical frameworks governing our capacity for understanding. However, it is the interplay of assimilation and accommodation that impels changes in these structures. Herbart was the first to recognize that our contents are not isolated but interconnected, and that new content is integrated into an existing totality. His concept of apperception seeks to elucidate this phenomenon.

- b. On the other hand, a question may, in principle, be understood by an individual, but due to specific circumstantial factors that are fortuitous and unrelated to the inherent meaning, understanding may be hindered.
- c. In another scenario, the question is theoretically understandable, yet remains incomprehensible in a particular instance. Here, the barrier to understanding is not incidental but arises from necessary hermeneutical reasons, such as the absence of essential presuppositions or the presence of erroneous assumptions.

The hermeneutic assertion that all understanding occurs within a horizon and, consequently, presupposes assumptions, without the possibility of an Archimedean point, holds significant implications for education¹³. It compels us to reconsider a pervasive yet erroneous assumption in education: the notion that learning commences with a blank slate onto which knowledge is inscribed, as if gradually filling an absolute void. In reality, every learner's understanding is conditioned upon preexisting assumptions.

However, just as everything is comprehended based on presuppositions, a content cannot be understood in the absence of the necessary assumptions, or it may be misunderstood if the appropriate assumptions are lacking. Additionally, something might be inherently misunderstood if it originates from false assumptions, or it may not be duly and fully grasped if it stems from imprecise assumptions and so on. In essence, as previously stated and to simplify things, we have a fundamental triad of understanding, non-understanding, and misunderstanding. In every case, however, assumptions play a central role, whether in understanding, non-understanding, misunderstanding or partially understanding. Therefore, a critical task of education is to address these assumptions, potentially introducing or modifying them. The question is: How can understanding be corrected? This inquiry is synonymous with asking how one can alter someone's understanding horizon.

Even in instances of original understanding that may initially appear devoid of assumptions, understanding is underpinned by a certain logic, as it is rooted in objective relationships of meanings. The inherent interdependence of understanding – where grasping one concept relies on comprehending another – is notably pronounced in education, distinguishing it from other hermeneutic phenomena. In education, the process of understanding and non-understanding is inherently logical to some extent, rather than

¹³ The ideas of critique from an Archimedean point, presupposition, and horizon are intrinsically linked. Asserting that all understanding occurs within a horizon is tantamount to asserting that all understanding is rooted in presuppositions. Presupposition and horizon are different forms of expressing the same concept.

entirely divorced from logic, especially when the individual being taught is logical and rational.

If we turn our attention to the phenomenon of education, the ultimate goal of understanding, whether correct or incorrect, is clearly defined, entailing an indispensable and unequivocal role for normative criteria. In this normative context, the logical nature of learning emerges prominently, dictating the need to follow logically ordered steps wherein one concept is grasped before progressing to the next and so on¹⁴.

This highlights another intriguing intersection between hermeneutics and logic. Logic serves as a crucial tool for elucidating and delineating our understanding, as the derivation of logical consequences clarifies the true meaning of what is being said. Notably, while we may never question whether we employ the same logic in our thinking, we may question our difference in understanding. Alternatively, we could think that the other person is employing a different logic in their thinking and that, therefore, even though we share the same beliefs, they derive different consequences.

From non-understanding or misunderstanding, logical consequences ensue. Even in the absence of understanding, logic continues to operate. This observation aligns with the inferentialist theory of meaning, which posits an interesting correlated psychological issue. According to this theory, our deductions are contingent upon our understanding, and through deduction, our understanding is articulated explicitly. Oftentimes, it may seem as though we share a common understanding with other people, yet discrepancies arise when they begin to derive consequences that we do not deem logically sound, which prompts us to acknowledge that we are not, in fact, sharing the same opinion.

Thus, there exists a logic inherent to error, prompting the inquiry into whether universal principles can be extrapolated from it.

Insights from a Case Study: Understanding the Problem of Kant's CPR

Much of the abstract concepts we have discussed can be illuminated through the lens of a tangible example. Let us consider the understanding of the problem presented in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (CPR). This example serves multiple functions and objectives:

- a. It exemplifies the logic of the problem through Kant's inquiry.

¹⁴ A theory of finite rationality, particularly in the realms of presupposition and questioning, holds direct relevance in education, particularly in programmed instruction. Naturally, this intersects with artificial intelligence, machines, and related fields.

- b. It illustrates how understanding – and misunderstanding – is inherently grounded in presuppositions.
- c. It demonstrates that error is not arbitrary but follows a logical pattern, suggesting that error itself could be rational¹⁵.
- d. Correct understanding requires the correction of underlying presuppositions.
- e. Since understanding always relies on presuppositions, correct understanding can only arise from correct presuppositions, while erroneous assumptions inevitably lead to false understanding.
- f. The fixation of Kant's concept of science as classical is not up for debate or interpretation; it only renders meaningful the problem of establishing the synthetic necessity.
- g. It can also elucidate the normativity of correct understanding and the pivotal role of the teacher, etc.
- h. The phenomenon of fusion of horizons, while inevitable in understanding, is also surmountable, as the correct horizon for understanding can be developed¹⁶;
- i. Furthermore, it allows for the distinction between correct literal understandings and deeper, non-literal understandings.

The typical explanation of the problem in Kant's CPR tends to be purely literal, relying on a series of definitions and distinctions. This process involves initially separating analytic from synthetic judgments, then distinguishing between *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge, and finally combining these distinctions to classify judgments into three basic classes: analytic, synthetic *a posteriori*, and synthetic *a priori*. It then goes on to explain that the first type of judgments relies on the principle of identity and non-contradiction, the second type on experience, and the third type, unable to be grounded in either manner, raises the question of their basis.

However, this exposition often overlooks fundamental aspects, including (compare González Porta, 2023):

- a. Kant's presupposition of the classical concept of science, wherein science represents universal and necessary knowledge.
- b. The implication that science thus relies on *a priori* knowledge.
- c. That, consequently, science's *a priori* knowledge, being non-analytical, must be synthetic.
- d. The concept of synthetic *a priori* knowledge, which denotes knowledge that, while synthetic and therefore not logically necessary, is nevertheless *a priori* and thus necessary.

¹⁵ For instance, interpreting Kant through our contemporary concept of science would portray him as an empiricist.

¹⁶ It is feasible to reconstruct Kant's horizon accordingly.

e. Therefore, the true issue underlying the foundation of synthetic *a priori* judgments is actually the search for a source of necessity that transcends mere logical-formal necessity.

However, since these Kantian presuppositions are often left unexplained, students inadvertently interpret Kant's notion of "science" through the lens of their own cultural understanding, equaling it to contemporary science as a result of their own horizon and set of presuppositions. According to such interpretation science is equivalent to falsifiable knowledge, lacking absolute necessity and being rooted solely in empirical foundations.

In essence, as long as Kant's work is approached through the contemporary notion of science, the true crux of the CPR problem – namely, the quest for a form of necessity beyond mere logical formality – remains elusive. Achieving a comprehensive understanding under such circumstances becomes both logically and hermeneutically unattainable.

As a result, students will not only fail to truly understand but will inevitably take a second step: distorting the meaning of Kant's CPR to fit it into their own horizon and thus make it comprehensible. For instance, they may interpret the fundamental result of the CPR as demonstrating that metaphysics, lacking empirical foundations, cannot be regarded as a science. Implicitly, they may assume, even if this is not explicitly stated, that physics is regarded as a science because it is grounded in empirical evidence.

Given the aforementioned scenario, the teacher's task, whether to foster a correct understanding of the CPR or to counteract a misconstrued one, begins with elucidating Kant's presuppositions and, correspondingly, the presuppositions from which students approach their understanding. This involves elucidating both Kant's hermeneutic Horizon and the students' own horizons, consciously bringing them into contact and opposition, and adjusting or correcting them according to the specific objective pursued, namely, understanding the problem of Kant's CPR. Naturally, this entails a bidirectional task, as it requires raising the students' awareness of their own horizon, reconstructing and elucidating Kant's horizon, and finally, explicating both in opposition to make us aware of their fundamental difference.

In Kant's case, it is evident that the initial step toward understanding him involves reconstructing his horizon, a task that is not only necessary but also feasible. In this process of reconstructing Kant's horizon, our aim is not to merge it with our own; instead, we become aware of the singularity of each horizon.

Similarly, we do not attempt to merge Kant's horizon with the students' but strive, as much as possible, to convey Kant's horizon to the student, thereby making them aware of both its singularity and of their own singularity.

Throughout this entire process of explaining the problem of Kant's CPR, the goal is not to devise a didactic approach as a mere artificial means to a happy ending, but rather to base all didactics on sound hermeneutics, in which presuppositions are elucidated and organized in a manner that establishes a coherent path among them. It is upon this foundation of a strictly logical-hermeneutic procedure that we proceed to construct and guide students' understandings in a learning process that is itself rational and logical.

Of course, employing schemes, examples, and anecdotes can render this strictly rational process more engaging, captivating attention and mitigating any non-rational interferences that may hinder comprehension. However, the guided process of understanding, or *Verstehen*, is inherently a rational and logical one, even in its effort to control errors and in its mechanisms for overcoming them.

Conclusion

In this essay, we have argued that Gadamerian hermeneutics falls short of its aim to be truly universal because it overlooks the phenomenon of education. While one might initially object this critique by suggesting that *Verstehen* has different meanings in the Humanities and education, and thus our proposal constitutes a mere homonym, such an objection quickly crumbles upon closer examination. If we seek to confine *Verstehen* solely to the Humanities, what justifies extending the phenomenon universally from the original *Verstehen* of *Dasein*? Moreover, why posit *Verstehen* in natural science, even if it remains unexplored? Clearly, the phenomenon of *Verstehen* is sometimes restricted to the *Verstehen* of the Humanities and sometimes not. What then is the criterion?

Until a better answer is offered, I propose to conceive of *Verstehen* as encompassing all types and methods of grasping meaning. Those who disagree are welcome to provide a superior alternative. Is there one?

This does not imply that *Verstehen* in education and the Humanities is identical, nor that everything applicable to one applies to the other. Indeed, differences between *Verstehen* in education and the Humanities may and certainly exist. Nonetheless, it is possible to contemplate a more comprehensive concept of *Verstehen* that applies to both, recognizing them as distinct manifestations of a broader phenomenon. A general and universal theory must first be developed before the consideration of particular cases.

Upon considering education within the framework of a truly universal theory of *Verstehen*, two fundamental outcomes emerge, each intertwined and deserving of careful

consideration. Firstly, education particularly illustrates the phenomenon of normativity in *Verstehen*, accompanied by the correlated phenomenon of correction or controlled reshaping thereof. The question arises: to what extent is this dual phenomenon exclusive to education in its peculiarity, and to what degree does it have implications for other realms of *Verstehen*, particularly within the Humanities? What insights can a hermeneutics of education offer to a hermeneutics of the Humanities?

Education exhibits a form of normativity in *Verstehen* that differs diametrically from the normativity associated with knowing. This involves the accurate assimilation of content, which stands apart from the truth value of said content. Yet, could this be interpreted as *post facto* evidence that meaning can be collectively appropriated in an intersubjective manner, with clearly defined criteria for its “objectivity”? If such intersubjective understanding is attainable in education, why confine this phenomenon solely to that context? Why do we readily acknowledge this possibility in education, yet subject it to radical questioning and scrutiny in other domains? Why cast such profound doubt on the feasibility of intersubjective meaning? Can we truly take seriously those who, by escalating their skepticism, doubt even the possibility of intersubjective meaning in something as fundamental as language? It is not coincidental that language serves as a prerequisite for education.

For this reason, it is crucial to thoroughly elucidate the normativity of *Verstehen* within education, a phenomenon Gadamer utterly overlooked in his unilateral focus on *Verstehen* within the Humanities. Exploring the normativity of *Verstehen* through the lens of education compels us to reevaluate fundamental concepts Gadamer deems essential to *Verstehen*. In reality, phenomena such as *Horizontverschmelzung* are approached by Gadamer somewhat partially and, I dare say, even unrealistically.

Now, the pivotal question arises: Does the concept of normativity in understanding within education warrant extending this normativity to all forms of understanding, or should we assert that normativity is feasible in certain understanding phenomena and not in others? To achieve complete normativity in understanding, there must be a *definitive*, clearly discernible correct *interpretation*. Some may argue that, in works of art, there is no definitive interpretation. Well, what does this prove? It may merely indicate that understanding a work of art possesses a distinctive peculiarity, but it does not necessarily imply that this characteristic should be universally applicable to all forms and types of understanding. Perhaps, the absence of an ultimate interpretation in art is precisely what makes it unique. However, this uniqueness does not justify its transformation into a requisite characteristic for a universal hermeneutic framework.

There are significant distinctions between hermeneutic understanding and understanding within an educational context, and it is imperative to delineate and elucidate these differences. However, in pursuit of a genuinely universal theory of understanding, as explicitly advocated by Gadamer, we require a comprehensive framework that embraces both types of *Verstehen* while acknowledging their divergences. Although there might be numerous idiosyncrasies in understanding that could be labeled as pedagogical or educational, certain fundamental aspects of understanding might become more apparent in one context over another. It is precisely at this juncture that we must focus our attention.

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