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Ethical Hermeneutics
Engaging Individual-based Instrumental Reason: Lessons for Leaders in the Modern Social Imaginary

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Abstract

An ethical hermeneutics is both of practical benefit for institutional leaders and an important response to what Charles Taylor describes as the "modern social imaginary," or how people imagine their social existence and its underlying assumptions, which he argues is currently grounded in instrumental reason practiced by individuals, but without shared moral and evidentiary frameworks. Using Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics, supplemented by ethical philosophers including Charles Taylor, Jeffrey Stout, and Emmanuel Levinas, the article considers the political and social issues raised by the modern social imaginary, especially in the United States, and shows how the consequences of individual-based instrumental reason can be productively engaged by a broadly conceived ethical hermeneutics. This approach provides both (1) a way to think within and engage the historicity of the current moment and (2) practical hermeneutic solutions to problems of communication and understanding faced by leaders, with examples from the author's experience in academic leadership.

Keywords

Hermeneutics, higher education, leadership, instrumental reason, individualism

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Most of us assume that we are first and foremost individuals, and all other ways of defining us (family member, citizen, community member, mammal) are secondary to our status as free individuals; and that we make most of our decisions based on the tools of reason: evidence, analysis, logical deductions, and so on. This is particularly true in the United States, partly because the nation was founded on these Enlightenment principles. Even if we understand that the priority we give to individualism and reason is a relatively recent development in Western thought, stemming from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, an implicit faith in progress (another Enlightenment inheritance), can lead to the assumption that our faith in modern individualism, however we characterize it, is a point we have reached by clearing out all the philosophical and theological impediments to individualism. Charles Taylor describes this as "a kind of subtraction story: the old horizons were eroded, burned away, and what emerges is the underlying sense of ourselves as individuals" (Taylor, 2007, p. 157), which obscures the fact that individual autonomy is only one possible way of understanding ourselves.

This inescapable Enlightenment legacy can be illuminated through the lens of what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*, usually translated as "historically effected consciousness," which "must… think within its own historicity" (1960/1990, p. 361). This historicity defines our "horizon," or "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (Gadamer, 1960/1990, p. 302), but it is also that which makes knowledge possible. The legacy of individual-based instrumental reason is thus not something that can be simply accepted, corrected or rejected, but is rather, in Gadamer's terms, a tradition to which we must be open as to a Thou: "Openness to the other, then, involves recognizing that I must accept some things that are against me" (Gadamer, 1960/1990, p. 361). Your horizon does not expand until you engage that otherness and move to a new vantage point.

The assumption of a foundational individual-based instrumental reason is part of what Charles Taylor, following Benedict Anderson, calls the "modern social imaginary." This is not just a philosophy or ideology, but rather "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie those expectations" (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). This combination of perceptions, ideas, practices, and norms, which evolve in different ways at different times and in different cultures, provides a background that enables some practices and impedes others, and it can usefully be engaged by leaders trying to make an organization work if this modern social imaginary is brought to consciousness as the inescapable other of "tradition" in Gadamer's sense. The concept of the social imaginary as Taylor invokes it gives a shared historical content to the Gadamerian horizon. It is not something we can simply step out of and view from the outside, because, like Gadamer's horizon, it is by definition the boundary of our vision, within which we live. But as the other of our shared historicity, it is subject to our interrogation, and this process of questioning and openness to what both forms us and stands against us can lead to an expansion of the horizon and an evolution of the social imaginary.

In moving from a scholar of hermeneutics and literature to the very applied world of university administration, I learned the practical value of both specific hermeneutic concepts and an effective-historical approach to engaging the historicity of inherited concepts and practices. Hermeneutics had become an important part of my own horizon as a scholar, but that horizon looked

very different when I moved from conversations with dead authors, where the horizon was defined by my intellectual development, my dissemination of ideas, and my professional advancement in academia, to conversations with living colleagues, employees, board members, and students, where the horizon was defined by institutional, rather than individual factors. That experience gave me a new vantage point and perspective on the history of individualism that had hitherto been a scholarly topic rather than an important aspect of the historicity that informed my work as an administrator.

The Cult of the Individual

According to Taylor, the individualism that we take for granted started out, not simply as a principle of autonomy, but as a contractual relationship within an agreed-upon system. In *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Taylor notes that the "disembedding" of the self from earlier notions of providential order leads to the freedom of the individual, but also reinscribes the individual within engineered, self-regulating *systems* of exchange, including mutually beneficial contracts, competition, and economic structures controlled not by a relation to sacred order, but by "invisible hand' factors" (Taylor, 2004, p. 70), to invoke Adam Smith's famous metaphor from *The Wealth of Nations*. That is, the focus on the individual in Western thought and practice is not so much the liberation of autonomous individuals as it is the transition from one form of moral framework to another: the transition from a communal focus based on divine providence or Platonic Forms to a secular focus in which the individual is defined within systems of exchange that do not depend on an external, higher order for their legitimacy, specifically including "the economy, the public sphere, and the practices and outlooks of democratic self-rule" (Taylor, 2004, p. 69). According to Taylor, "Modern individualism, at least in Western societies, doesn't mean ceasing to belong at all—that's the individualism of anomie and breakdown—but imagining oneself as belonging to ever wider and more impersonal entities: the state, the movement, the community of humankind" (Taylor, 2004, p. 160).[1]

However, the emphasis has now moved from the self as embedded in something bigger and prior to the *autonomous* self; Taylor notes in *The Ethics of Authenticity* that "the dark side of individualism is a centring on the self; which both flattens and narrows our lives" (Taylor, 1992, p. 4). As individualism is taken to the extreme, it tends to be viewed not as establishing new social relations, but as existing outside of them. One way in which the individual has been disengaged from a larger moral framework is through what Taylor calls "Romantic expressivism," or "the idea that we find the truth within us, and in particular in our feelings (Taylor, 1989, pp. 368-369).[2] For example, the literature of "self-empowerment" often treats the self as a completely free individual, stressing the need to take control of one's own life, build confidence, and understand oneself.[3] As important as these activities may be, they depart from the history of individualism as establishing a *different* moral and social framework and instead present the individual in *opposition* to those frameworks.

Although the literature of self-empowerment may have positive effects for individuals, other examples of the liberation of the ego from a larger moral framework show the dangers of this late-stage individualism. For example, Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s approach to vaccination as a personal decision is an extreme example of individualism operating outside of the social framework instead of within a new social framework. His position

flies in the face of years of at least tacit agreement (and proven success in the prevention of polio, measles, and other diseases) that public health is one area in which individual preferences should be subordinated to the good of the whole, with carve-outs for religious beliefs, but not simply individual desires. As Jessica Winter points out in a *New Yorker* post, Kennedy's statement that Americans are "the sickest people on earth" is belied by the fact the "universal health care and comprehensive vaccination programs" of the healthiest nations "rely on community, as sense of shared beliefs and shared humanity, which does not comport with a cult of individual choice and personal accountability" (Winter, 2025). As these examples show, what Taylor calls the "individualism of anomie and breakdown" is all around us, particularly in the culture of self-advancement we see in corporate and political culture. Instead of being treated as an important part of a whole, the individual is now often treated as prior to and more important than the social whole.

Another result of this phenomenon is the privatization of what used to be public goals and institutions. Siddhartha Mukherjee points out that, after Covid, the public health infrastructure in the U.S. has moved from acceptance of public health as an important public investment to a view of health as individual choice supported by private industry, involving "the invention of vaccines by pharmaceutical companies; their delivery in significant measure through private hospitals and clinics; the ascendancy of private decision making by individuals, schools and businesses; and the surveillance of the pandemic by private institutions" (Mukherjee, 2025, n.p.). Since the Reagan era, higher education has moved from a public good—education would benefit society as a whole—to a private good: the purpose of higher education is to benefit individuals, especially in providing better career options and higher lifetime incomes.[4] In U.S. campaign finance law, the Supreme Court's ruling in Citizens United that corporations have the First Amendment rights of individual people when it comes to campaign contributions, gives a bizarre priority to the individual even when the entity at issue is not an individual: corporations are no longer vessels for collective agency, but are instead agents operating outside any order except self-interest.[5]

Instrumental Reason

The second main part of the modern social imaginary as described by Taylor is "the primacy of instrumental reason," whose success is measured by "maximum efficiency, the best cost-output ratio" (Taylor, 1992, p. 5). The most powerful effects of the modern social imaginary are felt in the combination of individuality unmoored from a larger framework and reason used as a tool, unmoored from common principles. What began in the eighteenth century as the use of reason by individuals within an agreed-upon set of principles has devolved into the use of reason as an often-weaponized tool to advance a particular agenda. The consequences of this individual-based instrumental rationality include what Jeffrey Stout describes in *Ethics After Babel*: "different "moral languages," with different "sets of candidates for truth and falsehood" (Stout, 1988, p. 68), resulting in various factions talking at cross purposes.

The point here is not that instrumental reason is a bad thing: the evolution of our ability to use the tools of reason independently of religious or cultural dogma helped produce the advances of modern science and create the technologies that we depend on to live and communicate within the world. In fact, instrumental reason has produced many advances that precisely *transcend* the individual, such as the proven efficacy of vaccines and other socially beneficial medical discov-

eries. The problems arise when both instrumental reason and individualism are divorced from that shared meaning: hence the incoherence of Kennedy's claim that he wants to follow science (but not the shared understanding of the scientific community) and that vaccination should be a purely individual decision, despite the very trans-individual dangers of contagion.

One of the clearest examples of both the efficacy and the dangers of individual-based instrumental rationality is the area of modern economics known as "rational choice theory," which argues that our decision-making is guided by self-interested rational calculations about the cost and benefit to us of various alternative courses of action. A more subtle version of this is "purposeful choice," which adds to the calculus a consideration of the biases that might lead us away from the ideal rational choice. Richard Robb, whose *Willful: How We Choose What We Do* argues that rational-choice and purposeful-choice theory can explain some, but not all our choices, states the problem as follows: "Economics students learn to think of themselves and others as agents that rationally optimize fixed preferences subject to constraints. …[T]hey come to view their opponents as agents seeking their own advantage and to understand that their opponents see them the same way. …[S]uch habits of thought are clearly conducive to a mechanistic understanding of life. Knowledge becomes nothing more than an instrument for maneuvering through the world." (Robb, 2019, p. 207) Robb worries, as Taylor does, that thinking of us purely as individual agents using the tools of reason to pursue self-interested agendas is an impoverishment of the human relationship to the world.

A purely instrumental use of reason in the service of self-interest can also lead to abuses of reason itself, as when arguments that the 2020 U.S. presidential election was stolen, that climate change is a hoax, or that vaccines cause autism, continue to be pursued despite their violation of the basic principles of logic and evidence. Such principles are far less important than the advantage sought by the agent, using arguments that may be marginally valid but not at all sound, given the loss of agreement on basic premises, including facts. The second Trump term appears to be institutionalizing this primacy of individual advantage over trans-individual principles, in part by removing government enforcement of such principles in everything from vaccinations to climate change, as well as removing government support for anything that does not support the current administration's immediate priorities.

Even when the rules of evidence and reason prevail, the dominance of science and technology can detach us from Taylor's often unarticulated "inescapable moral frameworks" that should ground even basic individualism in a functioning society.[6] Gadamer saw the dangers of instrumental reason to be embodied in the ascendance of science and technology. Writing in the mid-1960s, at the height of the cold war's specter of technological annihilation and with biological engineering as a new issue on the horizon, he argues that the scientific/technological domination of all fields, including social and political thought, has changed our approach to the order of things from one of discovery to one of construction and control: "The old problem of simply understanding the existing order of things is no longer the issue. It has given way to the difficulties of planning and creating an order not yet in being" (Gadamer, 1965/1992, p. 165).

One problem with the ascendance of technological control identified by Gadamer is that it focuses on *means* rather than *ends*. Gadamer writes, "I find it ominous that modern science should revolve only around itself, that it is concerned only with those methods and possibilities

which are necessary for the scientific control of things." What this does is "make superfluous the scrutiny of ends by successfully providing and 'controlling' the means at one and the same time" (Gadamer, 1965/1992, p. 169). Here and elsewhere Gadamer builds on Aristotle's distinction between *techne*—craft-knowledge that can be taught and learned, and whose "performance is manifestly independent of the moral and political qualities of human beings" and the deliberative moral knowledge of *phronesis:* "practical knowledge which recognizes the feasible in concrete situations in life" (Gadamer, 1965/1992, p. 171).[7] If we are in the business of making a world order instead of understanding an existing order, the balance automatically tips toward *techne* and away from *phronesis*, because we are busy crafting new systems rather than deliberating about the specifics of the givens with which we are faced. As Kant emphasized, ethics depends on treating humans as ends rather than means,[8] and a world of *techne*—a version of instrumental rationality—eschews ends in favor of ever-perfectible means.

We see this daily in twenty-first century American politics: the "end" of much political machination in Congress is (re)electability, which is not an end, in the way that the goal of a just society, elimination of racism, fairer distribution of wealth, or even the good life might be, but rather an ever-greater control of means (the means to pass or block legislation). Unquestioned economic expansion is another example: if the "end" of economic growth is simply more economic growth, then that is not an end but rather an expansion of means. The naivete of the early founders of social media provides another example of the failure to understand this distinction. Although the purported "end" of rapidly expanding social media was touted as a democratization of communication (and of course some of that has happened), the increasingly controversial hands-off approach of Facebook and Twitter, now X, were defended by Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg on the grounds of eschewing an end: not wanting to be "arbiters of truth" (McCarthy, 2020). In Gadamer's terms, the moral "ends" are not scrutinized because all we are concerned with is the provision and control of the technical "means" of social-media communication. If Zuckerberg's protests sound increasingly hollow, it is because he is pretending that a moral end is served by what is really just an endlessly proliferating technical means. The moral "end" here is not "democracy," because the hands-off ascendance of *techne* simply reproduces the means while ignoring moral ends, which are the province of the deliberative practice of *phronesis*. Later, Facebook and Twitter did make attempts to police mis- and disinformation, though Twitter's transformation into X by Elon Musk went in the other direction, with misinformation and even disinformation normalized if they were in the service of his political ends. In the latter case, we see the technical divorcing of means from ends allied with the perversion of rational choice theory described above.

Postmodern Critiques of the Individual Self

The ascendancy of the individual detached from the social fabric and the rise of instrumental reason, especially in the specific form of *techne*, are not simply unrelated parallel circumstances that happened to emerge at the same time. By their very natures, instrumental rationality and its specific manifestation in the *techne* of modern science demand a will that is actively using those tools; any tool is an inert object unless someone is wielding it. As Gadamer puts it, "under the signature of modern science there exists, to give it a name, an arrow-straight will, which thinks up possibilities, constructively investigates them, and in the end evokes them into being, constructs them, and realizes them—daring and precise at the same time" (Gadamer, 1985/1992, p.

227). This is to be contrasted with the lifeworld in which we live and which is not subject to the control of the ego: "a complex totality of institutions, morals, and customs, with which it has been familiar and at home" (Gadamer, 1985/1992, p. 227). That is a world more suited to the particular deliberations of *phronesis* than the "philosophical mastery of the knowledge of the world" pursued by scientific *techne* (Gadamer, 1985/1992, p. 225).

An individuality set adrift from a larger moral framework, combined with a rationality that serves either as a tool to promote individual and special interests or as a means that has forgotten about ends, is what I am attempting to capture in the phrase "individual-based instrumental rationality." It is important for leaders to understand that this is increasingly the world we are living in, and when someone across the executive conference table or at the next podium in a political debate appears to be manipulating facts and logic in order to advance their point, or touting a purely technical solution to moral problems, they are merely operating within the modern social imaginary that envelops us. Once we recognize that fact, we may be able to find a way to engage this inherited tradition productively.

Why we still believe in the primacy of the individual self is somewhat of a mystery, given that the integrity of the individual self has been attacked in so many ways. In the heyday of postmodernism we heard from Jacques Lacan that the ego is actually a "lack" founded in desire, which we spend our lives compensating for. For Jacques Derrida, the romantic or modernist notion of the self is an illusory "presence," a "signified" that a postmodern application of Saussurean linguistics reveals as a free play of sliding signifiers. For Roland Barthes, the "author" is dead, revealed as a fictional point of origin for literary traces. The problem with these analyses—and perhaps the reason they mostly stayed safely ensconced within English and Comparative Literature departments, despite many of their origins in the turbulent politics of the late Sixties in France—is that they do not provide any tools for living.

Because the postmodern critique of the self is primarily *critical*, it has been able to ground alternatives that run the gamut culturally and politically. For example, Teresa Brennan invokes the postmodern critique of the self to see, in *The Transmission of Affect,* the individual placed within the boundaries of the self not as a healthy goal, but as the result of repression and within a more originary field of socially transmitted affects with biological consequences. In dismissing earlier forms of thought in which agency was attributed to extra-individual forces such as "demons," she argues that we have thrown out the baby of an affective universe that permeates the boundaries of the self with the bathwater of pre-scientific thought. She makes a compelling argument that the post-enlightenment illusion of the ego's self-containment and sharp division between subject and object represses earlier knowledge of the "transmission of affect," or how "the emotions or affects of one person, and the enhancing or depressing energies these affects entail, can enter into another" (Brennan, 2004, p. 3). In a different but also communal vein, in *How to Live at the End of the World,* Travis Holloway invokes Derrida and other postmodern thinkers, against the background of catastrophic climate change, to argue for a new "Anthropocene" era of human and even non-human living together (Holloway, 2022).

At the other extreme, the postmodern critique of truth in general can leave the self fully unmoored from moral frameworks, contributing to the nihilistic alt-right social media mavens that mobilize Donald Trump's base. As documented by Andrew Marantz, the alt-right Twitter/X

superstar Mike Cernovich's favorite authors in college were Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan. As Marantz describes Cernovich's attitude in his analysis of the rise of the alt-right, "The postmoderns seemed to be arguing that there was no single, absolute truth—that everything was just a narrative, a socially contingent power struggle, which implied that even history and current events were subject to interpretation, the way novels and movies were" (Marantz, 2019, pp. 137-138). In his defense of male supremacy, rape, and an array of conspiracy theories, Cernovitch provides a textbook example of the individual ego unmoored from any trans-individual moral framework, and postmodern critique is at least partly to blame. True postmodernists rarely become leaders, though the most dangerous leader is perhaps one who combines a postmodernist assumption that reality is a fungible construct resistant to fact-checking with an absolute faith in one's own ego—the only thing that matters then is the reality constructed by *my* ego. Examples abound in strongman leaders past and present.

Far more beneficial are efforts not simply to deconstruct the self, but to place it into a context in which it can be engaged as the other of our tradition (which of course includes postmodernism) while also opening us up to hermeneutic positions that do not take the self as a starting point. If we see the self, unmoored from moral frameworks, as a part of our horizon but not an inevitability, as an inherited tradition rather than a truth toward which we have advanced, then we can consider the possibilities that arise when we think outside the box of the individual, especially the individual considered as a wielder of the power of instrumental rationality. We also need to see the decentering of the self not just as a deconstructive critique, but rather as a hermeneutic move that opens up new concrete possibilities for human interaction.[9]

Ethical Hermeneutics

An ethical hermeneutics provides an alternative to modernity's elevation of the independent individual ego as an agent of instrumental reason or subjective feeling. Hermeneutics views interpretation and understanding as essentially the same thing, because understanding is not simply the exercise of reason, but rather the engagement in an interpretive relationship to the world around us. As Gadamer says, "Interpretation is not an occasional, post facto supplement to understanding; rather, understanding is always interpretation, and hence interpretation is the explicit form of understanding" (Gadamer, 1960/1990, p. 307). I expand the field of reference to include the work of thinkers outside the traditional range of hermeneutics who share some of Gadamer's basic premises about the fundamental nature of our existence as interpreters of a shared world, but whose concerns are specifically ethical. These include Charles Taylor, who, in addition to identifying the modern social imaginary, stresses the inescapable moral frameworks that form a background to our moral life; Jeffrey Stout, who identifies the issues resulting from different moral languages; and Emmanuel Levinas, who sees the ethical relationship to the other person as the most fundamental relationship we have, prior even to conscious thought.

As noted above, Gadamer promotes a position, in opposition to the individual's manipulation of reason as a tool, in which the individual is subsumed within the dialogue of historical consciousness. Paul Ricoeur's dialectical definition of the self as caught between self and other contrasts "the indirect style of the hermeneutics of the self" with "the demand for immediacy belonging to the cogito" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 17), and for him instrumental reason is not the end of thought, but a phase in the process of understanding. The most extreme critique of individual-based instru-

mental rationality comes from Emmanuel Levinas, who associates self-justified freedom with violence: "Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent" (Levinas, 1961/1969, p. 84). His critique goes beyond mere instrumental reason to knowledge itself as violent when exercised by self-satisfied egos: from Hegel to Husserl, knowledge reflects "the freedom of the satisfied man," which "takes no interest in the other qua other" (Levinas, 1984/1996, p. 153). In "seizing the Other through comprehension" one is "assuming all the wars that this comprehension presupposes" (Levinas, 1962/1996, p. 17). Always in the background of Levinas' thought is the Holocaust that destroyed most of his family; National Socialism's violence is an extreme example of putting the other person—in this case all Jews—under a "rational" concept that defines them as being inferior to the self-satisfied egoism of the Nazis: to put someone in a conceptual box—as we all tend to do when we think we have figured someone out—is a potential or even actual act of violence.

For these authors, how we view the world is intimately and complexly tied to a conception of the good, which is a primary factor in the usefulness of ethical hermeneutics to organizations who want to do the right thing for their members and for society. But if one subscribes to the prevailing modern notion, which these authors critique in different ways, that we act as free individuals using the tools of reasoning to move along both our lives and our philosophy, then ethics, even if considered important, is not necessarily tied to how we interpret the world. If living ethically is a matter of duteously applying certain rules (deontological ethics) or calculating the consequences of our actions (consequentialist or teleological ethics), then it is not necessarily dependent on a particular way of interpreting the world—the application of rules or calculation of consequences can theoretically be done by anyone, regardless of their interpretive perspective. If aligning means and ends is a matter of abstract calculation, then we remain in the realm, discussed above, of Aristotle's *techne*—learnable techniques that are independent of the situation-specific deliberation of *phronesis*. Philosophers in those camps come up with different answers to ethical problems, but the differences are among arguments about how to analyze ethical situations; they are not necessarily dependent on different world views.

Conversely, if interpreting the world, including other people, is simply a matter of individuals making rational inferences about the world around them, then interpretation is not necessarily dependent on any particular ethical orientation. In these cases, ethical deliberation and interpretation are different versions of the same thought processes (applying rational principles to notions of right and wrong or to understanding the world), and thus they are not engaged in a substantive, special, or interesting interplay that engages moral ends in a significant way.

An ethical-hermeneutic approach presents a different situation, in which interpretation and ethics are complexly intertwined while remaining in tension, because the candidates for truth and falsehood are not subject to an overarching test of truth based on instrumental reason's faith in its own properties as exercised by individual agents. If we take interpreting the world as a fundamental human activity, then interpretation is not simply rational analysis exercised as a tool by an individual agent, but rather a process of understanding how we exist in the world with others, which has ethical implications from the start. Gadamer notes that, since the Romantics, understanding *is* interpretation: "[U]nderstanding is always interpretation and hence interpretation is the explicit form of understanding" (Gadamer, 1960/1990, p. 307). Conversely, if we see ethics as a matter of fundamental dispositions rather than rational judgments about consequences or

application of rules, we are already in hermeneutic territory, within which there is an important commonality (despite many differences) among Charles Taylor's notion of often unarticulated "inescapable moral frameworks" that ground our orientation to the world; Gadamer's notion that "ethical choice is no matter of theoretical knowledge, but rather the brightness, sharpness, and pressure of conscience" (Gadamer, 1963/1999, pp. 20-21); Ricoeur's implication of the self in "histories of others" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 161); and Levinas's radical notion of a pre-reflective ethical orientation toward the other, which grounds subjectivity and is "first philosophy," ontologically prior to reasoning. In ethics as well as interpretation, there is always in this way of thinking an important background, what Taylor calls the "social imaginary" or what Gadamer calls the "horizon": the necessary set of assumptions and prejudgments that conditions, limits, grounds, and engages dialogically the acting, deciding self. "Background" suggests a retrospective view of what lies behind our actions, and "horizon" suggests a prospective view of the changing limit to our perception, but the combination of these two terms can enrich the ethical and interpretive context: for example, if Taylor's inescapable but unacknowledged moral frameworks are brought to consciousness, they become horizons that we can expand and, in Gadamer's terms, ideally "fuse" (which is not to say agree) with the understanding of others.[10]

These backgrounds and horizons provide a common area in which to build a model of ethical hermeneutics that can suggest an alternative to individual-based instrumental rationality. This common area does not, however, eliminate some difficult questions. For example, despite hermeneutics' partial grounding in Aristotelian ethics, interpretation is not *necessarily* ethical: as Gadamer points out in the context of his mostly unsuccessful engagement with Jacques Derrida, "Even immoral beings try to understand one another" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 55). And ethical action does not always proceed from an interpretive process, as evidenced when one instinctively jumps into a river to save someone. Bernard Williams goes so far as to suggest that reflection can destroy "ethical knowledge" (a potential oxymoron worth exploring), "because thick ethical concepts that were used in a less reflective state might be driven from use by reflection" (Williams, 1985, p. 167). Gadamer asks the important question of how the abstraction of even hermeneutical reflection can "do justice to the concreteness with which conscience, sensitivity to equity, and loving reconciliation are answerable to the situation" (Gadamer, 1963/1999, p. 21).

Reducing this relationship between hermeneutics and ethics to the chicken-egg question of which comes first, asking whether one's ethical orientation determines one's interpretive horizon or one's interpretive horizon determines one's ethical orientation, is a limited way to organize the hermeneutic/ethical landscape. At one extreme is Levinas, for whom ethics is unquestionably prior as "first philosophy." At the other extreme might be placed the literary theorist Paul deMan, for whom interpretation clearly comes first: ethics is merely "a discursive mode among others" (deMan, 1982, p. 206). But the question of whether ethics or interpretation is primary is ultimately the wrong question, because the way they are intertwined cannot be captured in a simple relationship of priority. For thinkers like Taylor and Levinas, who in different ways prioritize ethical positions, it is often impossible to tell when interpretation enters the ethical sphere, because as soon as one begins to explore or even exercise an ethical disposition, one is already within the hermeneutic space. As Taylor puts it, "a moral reaction is an assent to, and affirmation of, a given ontology of the human." The shape of primary moral instincts is thus "inseparable from an account of what it is that commands our respect" (Taylor, 1989, p. 5).[11] Our fundamental ethical stance is thus linked at a very deep level to how we interpret the world, whether or not

that interpretation is fully brought to consciousness. What comes first is neither ethics nor hermeneutics considered separately, but rather the ethical-hermeneutic disposition that understands ethical action and interpretation as intertwined in a situation characterized by the human complexities of fore-understanding, implication in the lives of others, and our historicity.

Some would argue that the way to distinguish ethics from hermeneutics, even if they are joined at the source, is to remember that hermeneutics is basically descriptive, (how things are) and ethics is prescriptive or normative (how things should be). Gadamer is very insistent that hermeneutics is descriptive: "I am not proposing a method; I am describing what is the case" (Gadamer, 1960/1990, p. 512). However, I find that claim somewhat disingenuous, because *Truth and Method* is "describing" how interpretation works when it is working well, for example when the individual subject is effaced in the open-ended conversation: "To conduct a conversation means to allow oneself to be conducted by the subject matter to which the partners in the dialogue are oriented. …What emerges in its truth is the logos, which is neither mine nor yours and hence so far transcends the interlocutors' subjective opinions that even the person leading the conversation knows that he does not know" (Gadamer, 1960/1990, pp. 367-368). Hermeneutics provides plenty of very good advice for practical applications, and it is thus usefully "prescriptive." As Theodore George argues in *The Responsibility to Understand*, the hermeneutic mandate to understand is itself a matter of ethical responsibility: "[T]he responsibility to understand is a responsibility to enact and cultivate a capacity to put one's prejudices—and thus oneself—into question, to remain open to the new in the face of self-interrogation, and, in consequence, to come to understand things and oneself differently" (George, 2020, pp. 21-22).

Conversely, although ethics is all about right and wrong and thus appears to be in the prescription business, ethical philosophers are often less interested in telling us what to do than in describing how ethics actually works. For example, Levinas is in one sense prescriptive about how one should approach the Other, but he is also *describing* the ethically-constituted subject as he sees it, and he is explicitly rehabilitating the passivity of the "non-reflective consciousness" (Levinas, 1984/1989, p. 80), which is not subject to prescription. Thus, the distinction between a "descriptive" hermeneutics and a "prescriptive" ethics tends to collapse in the effort to develop an ethical-hermeneutic model that can have practical benefit for both describing and prescribing the living of one's life.

Hermeneutics in Practice: Lessons for Leaders

In a sense "applied hermeneutics" is redundant, because, as Gadamer points out, application is implicit in understanding: "[U]nderstanding always involves something like applying the text to be understood to the interpreter's present situation" (Gadamer, 1960/1990, p. 308). Law and theology, which are two of Gadamar's prime exemplars of the hermeneutic situation, exhibit "an essential tension between the fixed text—the law or the gospel—on the one hand and, on the other, the sense arrived at by applying it at the concrete moment of interpretation, either in judgment or in preaching" (Gadamer, 1960/1990, p. 309).

In leadership contexts, an ethical hermeneutics can provide insights that will help organizations become healthier by (1) bringing to the surface and engaging the constellations of ideas and practices within which people in organizations talk to each other, make decisions and act; (2)

showing how those frameworks enable some kinds of organizational activity and constrain others; and (3) demonstrating how an ethical hermeneutics can work within historically effected consciousness by engaging and challenging the modern social imaginary in authentic dialogue. That means helping organizations work more effectively within the constraints of our current way of looking at and acting in the world while at the same time expanding those horizons.

Here is an example of how hermeneutics can assist with the problem of incompatible moral languages within the modern social imaginary, a problem that is endemic in many modern organizations. As Stout argues, competing moral languages present no common area for discussion, because they have different sets of candidates for truth and falsehood. Especially now, an individuality that is unmoored from a larger moral framework, or even a consensus on what counts as truth and falsehood, can veer off into romantic expressivism, instrumental rationality, or other very different moral languages. Left to their own devices, interlocutors will often end at an impasse without understanding why they cannot talk to each other. However, a hermeneutic perspective that sees them instead as different horizons implicated in different traditions can open up possibilities for productive communication.

One often sees these different languages in conflict around any executive conference table. Here is a true example of how different moral languages conflicted at a faculty senate meeting in a large comprehensive state university in the U.S.: A faculty member from the humanities, where romantic expressivism is an often welcomed perspective (even for card-carrying postmodernists and Marxists), complained about the university's exploitation of faculty by failing to compensate them adequately for driving to a branch campus an hour away to teach there. The scientifically inclined provost, with a concomitant faith in clear definitions and instrumental reason (he was a clinical psychologist by training, and a diehard behaviorist), but without any strong belief in the ego, asked the faculty member, "How do you define exploitation?" hoping to establish a common moral language through agreed-upon definitions. The faculty member responded, with no trace of irony, "Exploitation is asking us to do what we don't want to do."

The conversation ended in a confused stalemate that could have been clarified by an assessment of how and why these two very different moral languages conflicted: the faculty member was instinctively speaking a language in which the primary candidates for truth derived from individual feelings, and from the horizon of an individualism disconnected from larger concerns even about students and the institution; the provost was speaking from a horizon in which the primary candidates for truth derived from a rational definition of "exploitation" and an economic situation in which travel funding was limited. The provost was looking for a technical solution, the faculty member was looking for support of their ego. Stout usefully distinguishes between goods "internal" to a practice, such as the practice of medical care for doctors, and goods "external" to such a practice, such as the administration of a hospital. But one person's internal good can be another's external good (Stout, 1988, pp. 266-272). In Stout's terms, the faculty member's internal good was "what I want to do," and the provost's concerns about equitable compensation within a limited budget was a distant external good. The provost's internal good was the budget they were responsible for, and whether the faculty member was happy was an external concern.

Bringing that distinction to the surface might have brought some clarity to the disagreement by recasting the conversation as a dialogue between different horizons rather than simply a conflict

of incommensurable languages. For Gadamer, we enter a conversation with a particular set of prejudices that constitute our finite horizon. However, the point of a true conversation is not to eliminate prejudice or the finitude of the horizon, because that finitude is simply part of our historical situation: "*To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete*" (Gadamer, 1960/1990, p. 302). (Leaders who feel compelled to present their self-knowledge as "complete" in order to appear strong and decisive need to keep this warning in mind.) Rather, our present horizon is "continually in the process of being formed because we are constantly having to test all our prejudices" (Gadamer, 1960/1990, p. 306). That testing includes transposing ourselves into the situation of the other person, which involves both becoming aware of the other person's position and individuality and rising above that particularity: "rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other" (Gadamer, 1960/1990, p. 305). The process of testing prejudices and thereby expanding a horizon works largely through the logic of the *question*: we must understand a statement "as an answer to a question. If we go back *behind* what is said, then we inevitably ask questions *beyond* what is said" (Gadamer, 1960/1990, p. 370).

In these terms, the provost's request for a definition of "exploitation" produced an answer that he found incoherent because it was really an answer to a different question that had more to do with the faculty member's horizon of individual feeling, detached from any larger moral concerns, than with the rational definitions sought by the provost. In fairness to the faculty member, a hermeneutic interrogation of their response would have revealed some legitimate reasons for not wanting to drive to the branch campus without more pay: they were an underpaid assistant professor living in an expensive area while struggling to achieve tenure and promotion, and to teach at the off-campus site required a significant time investment in travel and adapting pedagogy to the needs of the part-time adult students who attended the branch campus. As in many such meetings, both parties in the conversations were locked into *assertions* they felt obliged to defend, which prevented the authentic conversation that can efface the individual and lead to a conclusion "which is neither mine nor yours and hence so far transcends the interlocutors' subjective opinions that even the person leading the conversation knows that he does not know" (Gadamer, 1960/1990, pp. 367-368). Further questions that explored the difference between those horizons could have produced a mutual understanding of why their positions differed, what prejudices were behind each position, and perhaps how those prejudices could continue to be tested. In my experience as an administrator, I have found turning a situation like this into just such an authentic conversation is always healthy for an organization and does not require agreement: the point is not mutual agreement or consensus, but mutual understanding, in which we learn that there are other ways to create authentic dialogue than to pit what Levinas calls "warring egos" against one another, and to explore the premises behind opposing parties' arguments.

For example, totally lost in this non-conversation was the *end* of the university's enterprise: in this case providing the best education to the students on the branch campus. This was a classic example of *means* displacing *ends*: had one of the parties changed the conversation from an argument between faculty desires and administrative cost (both means to educational ends) to one about whether additional compensation would be worth the necessary budgetary tradeoffs to produce a better end—a better educational outcome—then a more authentic conversation that rose above the immediate horizons of the faculty member and the provost might have taken place.

That would not have been an easy conversation, since the "end" of a university education is a matter of dispute both inside and outside of institutions of higher education, as in the very basic question raised above of whether a college education is a public or private good. I once led a university-wide committee dedicated to improving student success, and while we agreed that student success was an essential end of our institution's education, we found it extremely difficult to define "student success." None of the available metrics, including good grades, post-graduation employment, student satisfaction, campus engagement, and others, seemed to capture it, which reminded us that we were truly in that hermeneutic space in which knowledge can never be complete, even though the end of student success constituted our horizon. If an end can be fully and easily defined, that can work against the openness to the finitude of our historicity demanded by the hermeneutic situation, but that is no reason to eschew an interrogation of ends in favor of the manipulation of means. This insight is often lost in strategic planning that commits to an easily-defined set of goals to be achieved rather than a recursive, flexible process of designing the future.[12]

The process of testing prejudices and thereby expanding a horizon through the logic of the question entails for Gadamer, as noted above, going *behind* the question. Gadamer's insight is valuable for almost any discussion around an executive team table. One exercise I have used as a college president, on the advice of a very hermeneutically aware consultant[13] named Hal Williams, is to count in a team discussion the number of questions versus the number of assertions. (And "I question that" is an assertion, not a question). In most cases the number of assertions far outweighs the number of questions (Williams, 2024, pp. 82-84).

One unquestioned assertion I inherited as the president of a private college with fewer than 800 students was, "We must have 1200 students to survive financially." By looking back from that assertion to the questions such an assertion might answer, we came up with "What do we need in order to survive financially?" which is a question about dollars, not headcount. That led to a further question about how to increase net tuition revenue per student, which involved an interrogation of the relationship between "funded" and "unfunded" financial aid. Despite the way they are usually discussed, these kinds of financial aid are not actually cash given to students, but rather cash given to the institution on behalf of students (funded aid from donor contributions) or tuition discounts that simply lower the cost of attendance for students (unfunded aid). As the CFO was quick to remind me, funded aid was not new income from an accounting standpoint since the money was already accounted for in the endowment, but it was money that was moved to institutional operations on behalf of the students to whom it was given, showing that even the definition of "income" looks different whether one is operating from the horizon of the balance sheet, where the operative question is "What is the ratio of income to expense?" or the horizon of how funds are put to use, where the operative question is in this case the more important "How do we best use the funds we have?"

That discussion led to a plan that continued to emphasize increasing enrollment, but only if we could also increase net tuition revenue per student from all sources, and we moved from a headcount goal to a much broader financial goal. And we moved from a policy of trying to limit the use of funded aid (the assertive argument had been "we need to keep growing the endowment at all costs") to a policy of spending every dollar in the endowment that was earmarked for financial aid, because those dollars fed directly into operations, which was a much greater need

than simply leaving them in the endowment to earn interest. Although I did not mention Gadamer (I rarely asked my team to share my enthusiasm for German philosophy), we essentially proved him right by going back *behind* what was said to generate questions beyond what was said, making for a better decision.

Institutions of higher education are particularly conscious of tradition, which only increases the need for such an institution to "think within its historicity." Any leader, but especially a university leader, spends most of their time in the process of interpretation, in this case attempting to understand students, faculty, administrative teams, and board members. Hermeneutics can help such leaders in specific practical ways, such as how to use questions to reach understanding and how to assess team members' participation in individual-based instrumental reason, as well as in how to engage the larger context of a modern social imaginary that is a given and a partner in dialogue from whom we "must accept some things that are against me" (Gadamer, 1960/1990, p. 361)—an especially difficult task if the operative prejudice is an individual-based instrumental that is antithetical to shared understanding.

It is worth remembering that Gadamer was Dean and then Rector of the University of Leipzig in the difficult aftermath of World War II in East Germany, with the Soviet Union promoting the "denazification" of universities in an often heavy-handed way, replacing Nazi ideology with Soviet ideology. The questions Gadamer raised in his 1947 rectoral address on the occasion of the university's reopening foreshadow his theorization of the question a little over a decade later in *Truth and Method*, providing lessons still valuable for leaders. Rather than calling for a simple restoration of "the good and noble tradition of culture and humanity" that was put into question by the Nazis, he asked "How was this perversion . . . into such chaos at all possible?" He goes on to emphasize the depth and breadth of this question: "[W]ith this question the whole manner of our people as developed in its long history is being put to the test," such that "the whole impression of our German history, which we have received, will be violently shaken by this question" (1947/1992, pp. 15-16).

The events of the recent and distant past become a tradition and historicity that ground the present's historically effected consciousness, shaping its horizons and demanding not a return to old cultural traditions or a simple rejection of the recent past, but a continued testing of prejudices, questioning, and expansion of the horizons given to the present by the past in all its varied givenness. As current universities, especially in the United States, are faced with increasing economic and political pressure to abandon their traditional missions and bow to whatever ideology is currently in charge, let us hope that their leaders respond with this kind of hermeneutic insight, treating the present moment as something that must be engaged and questioned in its full historicity, rather than responding to current challenges with simple rejection or acquiescence.

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Notes

[1] Taylor notes that whether the uniformity resulting from modern notions of equality "is the only way is the fateful issue at stake in much of today's struggles over multiculturalism" (p.160). For more on this see Taylor (1994).

[2] See also Taylor (1992), pp. 28-29. Taylor takes a very traditional, and in my view inaccurate view of Romanticism, at least in England, as the direct source of this individualistic inwardness. For example, poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge feared the Imagination as much as they embraced it, and they viewed imagination, feeling, and inspiration as powers that were far bigger than the individual, as I argue in *William Wordsworth and the Hermeneutics of Incarnation* (1993), pp. 207-209. However, my reading of Romanticism supports Taylor's point that individualism began as part of a larger moral context and only later became separated from that context.

[3] See, for example, Shah (2016): "The general meaning of Self-empowerment is taking control of our own life, setting goals, and making positive choices. Basically it means that we have to understand our strengths and weaknesses, and have belief in ourselves."

[4] For an account of this transition, see Berrett (2015).

[5] See Murphy (2025) for an analysis of the effects of privatization of government functions on democratic states.

[6] The notion of "inescapable moral frameworks" was developed in Taylor's *Sources of the Self,* and later expanded through Benedict Anderson's concept of the "social imaginary" in *Modern Social Imaginaries.*

[7] See Gadamer's extended discussion in *Truth and Method* of the complexities involved in these terms from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1960/1990, pp. 312-324), and my use of this opposition in *The Challenge of Coleridge* to interrogate the relationship between aesthetics and ethics in Romanticism (Haney, 2001, pp. 29-72).

[8] "The supreme principle of the doctrine of virtue is: act in accordance with a maxim of *ends*. . . .a human being is an end for himself as well as for others, and it is not enough that he is not authorized to use either himself or others merely as means (since he could still be indifferent to them); it is in itself his duty to make man as such his end" (Kant, 1797/1996, p. 157).

[9] I had the good fortune to sit across from Gadamer at a dinner at Boston College in the 1970s. When he asked about me (he practiced what he preached about the value of conversation), and I mentioned that I was in the PhD program in the English and Comparative Literature departments at SUNY Buffalo, which at the time were dominated by deconstruction and other postmodern critiques, he smiled and said, "they don't like me there."

[10] Taylor credits Gadamer with bringing "implicit understanding" to consciousness, showing that "the road to understanding passes through the patient identification and undoing of those facets of our implicit understanding that distort the reality of the other" (Taylor, 2002, p. 132). On the fusion of horizons, see *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 1960/1990, pp. 302-307).

[11] Thus is one answer to Bernard Williams' idea that reflection can impede ethical action: an immediate, non-reflective ethical response can still be an act of interpretation in Taylor's sense of an "affirmation of a given ontology of the human."

[12] I argue this point in "Thinking Like a Designer in Uncertain Times" (Haney, 2020).

[13] See my LinkedIn post, "How to Hire a Hermeneutically Aware Consultant" (Haney, 2025).