

6 Gadamer on the Human Sciences

I

The great challenge of the coming century, both for politics and for social science, is that of understanding the other. The days are long gone when Europeans and other “Westerners” could consider their experience and culture as the norm toward which the whole of humanity was headed, so that the other could be understood as an earlier stage on the same road that we had trodden. Now we sense the full presumption involved in the idea that we already possess the key to understanding other cultures and times.

But the recovery of the necessary modesty here seems always to threaten to veer into relativism, or a questioning of the very ideal of truth in human affairs. The very ideas of objectivity, which underpinned our social science, seemed hard to combine with that of fundamental conceptual differences between cultures, so that real cultural openness seemed to threaten the very norms of validity on which social science rested. What often does not occur to those working in these fields is the thought that their whole model of science is wrong and inappropriate. It is here where Gadamer has made a tremendous contribution to twentieth century thought, for he has proposed a new and different model, which is much more fruitful, and shows promise of carrying us beyond the dilemma of ethnocentrism and relativism.

In fact, in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer shows how understanding a text or event, which comes to us out of our history, has to be construed, not on the model of the “scientific” grasp of an object, but rather on that of speech-partners who come to an understanding (*Verständigung*). If we follow Gadamer’s argument here, we come to

see that this is probably true of human science as such. That is, it is not simply knowledge of our own past that needs to be understood on the “conversation” model, but knowledge of the other as such, including disciplines such as anthropology, where student and studied often belong to quite different civilizations.

This view has come to be widely accepted today, and it is one of the great contributions that Gadamer has made to the philosophy of this and succeeding centuries. I would like to try to lay out here why this is so.

First, I want to contrast the two kinds of operation: knowing an object, and coming to an understanding with an interlocutor. Some differences are obvious. The first is unilateral, the second bilateral. I know the rock, the solar system; I don’t have to deal with its view of me, or of my knowing activity.

But beyond this, the goal is different. I conceive the goal of knowledge as attaining some finally adequate explanatory language, which can make sense of the object, and will exclude all future surprises. However much this may elude us in practice, it is what we often seek in science; e.g., we look for the ultimate theory in microphysics, where we will finally have charted all the particles and forces, and don’t have to face future revisions.

But coming to an understanding can never have this finality. For one thing, we come to understandings with certain definite interlocutors. These will not necessarily serve when we come to deal with others. Understandings are party-dependent. And then, frequently more worrying, even our present partners may not remain the same. Their life situation or goals may change, and the understanding may be put in question. True, we try to control for this by binding agreements, contracts, but this is precisely because we see that what constitutes perfect and unconstrained mutual understanding at one time may no longer hold good later.

Third, the unilateral nature of knowing emerges in the fact that my goal is to attain a full intellectual control over the object, such that it can no longer “talk back” and surprise me. Now this may require that I make some quite considerable changes in my outlook. My whole conceptual scheme may be very inadequate when I begin my enquiry. I may have to undergo the destruction and remaking of my framework of understanding in order to attain the knowledge that I seek. But all this serves the aim of full intellectual control. What

does not alter in this process is my goal. I define my aims throughout in the same way.

By contrast, coming to an understanding may require that I give some ground in my objectives. The end of the operation is not control, or else I am engaging in a sham, designed to manipulate my partner while pretending to negotiate. The end is being able in some way to function together with the partner, and this means listening as well as talking, and hence may require that I redefine what I am aiming at.

So there are three features of understanding: they are bilateral, they are party-dependent, and they involve revising goals, which do not fit our classical model of knowing an object. To which our "normal" philosophical reaction is: quite so. These are features unsuited to knowledge, real "science." The content of knowledge shouldn't vary with the person who is seeking it; it can't be party-dependent. And the true seeker of knowledge never varies in her goal; there is no question of compromise here. Party-dependence and altered goals are appropriate to understandings precisely because they represent something quite different from knowledge; deal-cutting and learning the truth are quite distinct enterprises, and one should never mix the two, on pain of degrading the scientific enterprise.

How does Gadamer answer these "obvious" objections? In fact, his answer contains many rich and complex strands. I just want to mention two here, leaving aside others that are equally, perhaps even more important (such as the whole issue of "linguisticity," which is another of Gadamer's crucial contributions to the thought of our time).

The first is a negative point. Gadamer does not believe that the kind of knowledge that yields complete intellectual control over the object is attainable, even in principle, in human affairs. It may make sense to dream of this in particle physics, even to set this as one's goal, but not when it comes to understanding human beings.

He expresses this, for instance, in his discussion of experience. Following Hegel, he sees experience, in the full sense of the term, as the "experience of negation" (*Nichtigkeit*, TM 354). Experience is that wherein our previous sense of reality is undone, refuted, and shows itself as needing to be reconstituted. It occurs precisely in those moments where the object "talks back". The aim of science, following the model above, is thus to take us beyond experience.

This latter is merely the path to science, whose successful completion would take it beyond this vulnerability to further such refutation: "For experience itself can never be science. Experience stands in an ineluctable opposition to knowledge and to the kind of instruction that follows from general theoretical or technical knowledge" (TM 355).

Now Gadamer sees it as part of the finitude of the human condition that this kind of transcending of experience is in principle impossible in human affairs. To explain fully why would involve talking a great deal about linguisticity, for which I do not have the space here. But perhaps the main point can be made very tersely in terms of the place of culture in human life. Whatever we might identify as a fundamental common human nature, the possible object of an ultimate experience-transcending science, is always and everywhere mediated in human life through culture, self-understanding, and language. These not only show an extraordinary variety in human history, but they are clearly fields of potentially endless innovation.

Here we see a big watershed in our intellectual world. There are those who hope to anchor an account of human nature below the level of culture, such that cultural variation, where it is not trivial and negligible, can be explained from this more basic account. Various modes of sociobiology, and accounts of human motivation based on the (conjectured) conditions in which human beings evolved, share this ambition. They have the necessary consequence that most cultural variation is placed in the first category, and seen as merely epiphenomenal, a surface play of appearances. And then there are those who find this account of human life unconvincing, who see it as an evasion of the most important explananda in human life, which are to be found at this level of cultural difference.

Suffice it to say that Gadamer is one of the major theorists in the second camp, and that hence he sees the model of science, which I opposed above to understanding, as inapplicable to human affairs.

This may help explain why he refuses this model, but not the adoption of his alternative, based on interpersonal understanding. How does he justify party-dependence, and what analogue can he find to revising goals?

The first can be explained partly from the fact of irreducible cultural variation. From this, we can see how the language we might

devise to understand the people of one society and time would fail to carry over to another. Human science could never consist exclusively of species-wide laws. In that sense, it would always be at least in part "idiographic," as against "nomothetic." But for Gadamer, party-dependence is more radical than that. The terms of our best account will vary not only with the people studied, but also with the students. Our account of the decline of the Roman Empire will not and cannot be the same as that put forward in eighteenth century England, or those that will be offered in twenty-fifth century China, or twenty-second century Brazil.

It is this bit of Gadamer's argument that often strikes philosophers and social sciences as scandalous, and "relativist", abandoning all allegiance to truth. This interpretation is then supported by those among Gadamer's defenders who are in a "postmodern" frame of mind.

But this grievously misunderstands the argument. Gadamer is anything but a "relativist" in the usual sense of today's polemics. But to see this, we have to bring out another way in which Gadamer breaks with the ordinary understanding of "science."

As we often have been led to understand it in the past, scientific explanation deploys a language that is entirely clear and explicit. It is grounded in no unthought-out presuppositions, which may make those who speak it incapable of framing certain questions, and entertaining certain possibilities. This false view has been very largely dispelled in our time by the work of such thinkers as Kuhn and Bachelard. We now understand the fact that the practices of natural science have become universal in our world as the result of certain languages, with their associated practices and norms, having spread and being adopted by all societies in our time.

But what has been less remarked is that these languages became thus universally diffusible precisely because they were insulated from the languages of human understanding. The great achievement of the seventeenth century scientific revolution was to develop a language for nature that was purged of human meanings. This was a revolution, because the earlier scientific languages, largely influenced by Plato and Aristotle, were saturated with purpose- and value-terms. These could only have traveled along with a good part of the way of life of the civilizations that nourished them. But the new austere languages could be adopted elsewhere more easily.

We can see how different the situation is with the languages of “social science.” These too have traveled, but very much as a result of the cultural influence of and cultural alignment on the “West.” Moreover, they seem incapable of achieving the kind of universality we find with natural sciences. The study of human beings remains in a preparadigmatic condition, where a host of theories and approaches continue to compete, and there is no generally recognized “normal” science.

This difference in the fate of the two kinds of “science” is connected to the fact that the languages of human science always draw for their intelligibility on our ordinary understanding of what it is to be a human agent, live in society, have moral convictions, aspire to happiness, and so forth. No matter how much our ordinary everyday views on these issues may be questioned by a theory, we cannot but draw on certain very basic features of our understanding of human life, those that seem so obvious and fundamental as not to need formulation. But it is precisely these that may make it difficult to understand people of another time or place.

Thus, we can innocently speak of people in other ages holding opinions or subscribing to values, without noticing that in our society there is a generalized understanding that everyone has, or ought to have, their own personal opinion on certain subjects – say, politics or religion; or without being aware of how much the term *value* carries with it the sense of something chosen. But these background understandings may be completely absent in other societies. We stumble into ethnocentrism, not in virtue so much of the theses that we formulate, but of the whole context of understanding that we unwittingly carry over unchallenged.

Now this is not a danger that we can conjure once and for all by adopting a certain attitude. That is because the context that will give its sense to any theoretical account of human life we are entertaining will be the whole, tacit, background understanding of what it is to be a human being. But this is so wide and deep that there can be no question of simply suspending it, and operating outside of it. To suspend it altogether would be to understand nothing about human beings at all. Here is where the striking contrast with the languages of natural science emerges. There it was possible to develop languages for the objects of science that bracketed out human meanings, and still think effectively, indeed, more effectively, about the target domain.

But bracketing out human meanings from human science means understanding nothing at all; it would mean betting on a science that bypassed understanding altogether, and tried to grasp its domain in neutral terms, in the language of neurophysiology, for instance.

If our own tacit sense of the human condition can block our understanding of others, and yet we cannot just neutralize it at the outset, then how can we come to know others? Are we utterly imprisoned in our own unreflecting outlook? Gadamer thinks not. The road to understanding others passes through the patient identification and undoing of those facets of our implicit understanding that distort the reality of the other.

At a certain point, we may come to see that "opinions" have a different place in our life-form than in theirs, and we will then be able to grasp the place of beliefs in their life; we will be ready to allow this to be in its difference, undistorted by the assimilation to "opinions."

This will happen when we allow ourselves to be challenged, interpellated by what is different in their lives, and this challenge will bring about two connected changes: we will see our peculiarity for the first time, as a formulated fact about us, and not simply a taken-for-granted feature of the human condition as such; and at the same time, we will perceive the corresponding feature of their life-form undistorted. These two changes are indissolubly linked; you cannot have one without the other.

Our understanding of them will now be improved, through this correction of a previous distortion. But it is unlikely to be perfect. The possible ways in which we, our background, could enframe them distortively cannot be enumerated. We may still have a long way to go. But we will have made a step toward a true understanding, and further progress along this road will consist of such painfully achieved, particular steps. There is no leap to a disengaged standpoint which can spare us this long march.

If a prejudice becomes questionable in view of what another person or text says to us, this does not mean that it is simply set aside and the text of person accepted as valid in its place. Rather, historical objectivism shows its naivete in accepting this disregarding of ourselves as what actually happens. In fact our own prejudice is properly brought into play by being put at risk. Only by being given full play is it able to experience the other's claim to truth and make it possible for him to have full play himself. (TM 299)

We can now see how our grasp of the other, construed on the model of coming to an understanding, is doubly party-dependent, varying not only with the object studied but also with the student: with the object studied, because our grasp will have to be true to them in their particular culture, language, and way of being. But it will also vary with the student, because the particular language we hammer out in order to achieve our understanding of them will reflect our own march toward this goal. It will reflect the various distortions that we have had to climb out of, the kinds of questions and challenges that they, in their difference, pose to us. It will not be the same language in which members of that culture understand themselves; but it will also be different from the way members of a distinct third culture will understand them, coming as they will to this goal through a quite different route, through the identification and overcoming of a rather different background understanding.

That is why the historiography of the Roman Empire, carried out in twenty-fifth century China or twenty-second century Brazil is bound to be different from ours. They will have to overcome different blocks to understanding; they will find the people of that time puzzling in ways that we do not; they will need to make them comprehensible through a different set of terms.

The coming-to-an-understanding model fits here, with its corollary of party-dependence, because the language of an adequate science of the Ys for the Xs reflects both Xs and Ys. It is not, as with the knowledge-of-object model, a simple function of the object, the scientific theory that is perfectly adequate to this reality. It is a language that bridges those of both knower and known. That is why Gadamer speaks of it as a "fusion of horizons." The "horizons" here are at first distinct, they are the way that each has of understanding the human condition in their non-identity. The "fusion" comes about when one (or both) undergo a shift; the horizon is extended, so as to make room for the object that before did not fit within it.

For instance, we become aware that there are different ways of believing things, one of which is holding them as a "personal opinion." This was all that we allowed for before, but now we have space for other ways, and can therefore accommodate the beliefs of a quite different culture. Our horizon is extended to take in this possibility, which was beyond its limit before.

But this is better seen as a fusion, rather than just as an extension of horizons, because at the same time, we are introducing a language to talk about their beliefs, which represents an extension in relation to their language. Presumably, they had no idea of what we speak of a “personal opinions,” at least in such areas as religion, for instance. They would have had to see these as rejection, rebellion, or heresy. So the new language we’re using, which places “opinions” alongside other modes of believing, as possible alternative ways of holding things true, opens a broader horizon, extending beyond both the original ones, and in a sense combining them.

Here we see the full force of the Gadamerian image of the “conversation.” The kind of operation we are describing here can be carried out unilaterally, and must be when we are trying to write the history of the Roman Empire, for instance. But it borrows its force from comparison with another predicament, in which live interlocutors strive to come to an understanding, to overcome the obstacles to mutual comprehension, and to find a language in which both can agree to talk undistortively of each. The hermeneutical understanding of tradition limps after this paradigm operation; we have to maintain a kind of openness to the text, allow ourselves to be interpellated by it, take seriously the way its formulations differ from ours – all things that a live interlocutor in a situation of equal power would force us to do.

Horizons are thus often initially distinct. They divide us. But they are not unmovable; they can be changed, extended. I will discuss this notion of horizon below, but first a word about why this picture of a language for science, which varies with both knower and known, is quite different from the common idea of “relativism,” and why this picture has a clear place for the concepts of correctness and truth.

Relativism is usually the notion that affirmations can be judged valid not unconditionally, but only from different points of view or perspectives. Proposition *p* could be true from perspective *A*, false from perspective *B*, indeterminate from *C*, and so forth, but there would be no such thing as its being true or false unconditionally.

It does not seem to me that Gadamer is in this position at all. If the historiography of the Roman Empire in twenty-fifth century China is different from our own, this will not be because what we can identify as the same propositions will have different truth values.

The difference will be rather that different questions will be asked, different issues raised, different features will stand out as remarkable, and so forth.

Moreover, within each of these enterprises of studying Rome from these different vantage points, there will be such a thing as better or worse historiography. Some accounts will be more ethnocentric and distortive than others, still others will be more superficial. Accounts can be ranked for accuracy, comprehensiveness, nondistortion, and so on. In short, some will be more right than others and will approach closer to the truth.

But beyond this, we can also see a possible ranking between accounts from different starting points. Let us say that our twenty-fifth century Chinese historians take account of the work of Gibbon, Symes, Jones, Peter Brown, and so forth. They will be trying, in other words, not just to fuse horizons with the Romans, but also with us as we try to do the same thing. The fusion will not only be bipolar, but triangular, or if we see Gibbon as a distinct standpoint, quadrangular.

We can see now that there is another virtue here of accounts. They can be more or less comprehensive in a new sense; not depending on how much detail and coverage they offer of the object studied, but rather on their taking in and making mutually comprehensible a wider band of perspectives. In other words, the more comprehensive account in this sense fuses more horizons.

The ideal of the most comprehensive account possible ought in a sense to take the place of the old goal of a point-of-view-less nomothetical science, which grasps all humanity under one set of explanatory laws. Instead, we substitute the ideal of languages, which allows for the maximum mutual comprehension between different languages and cultures across history. Of course, this is a goal that can, in the nature of things, never be integrally realized. Even if, *per impossibile*, we might have achieved an understanding to which all cultures to date might sign on, this could not possibly preempt future cultural change, which would require the process of fusion to start over again.

But it is, nevertheless, an important ideal both epistemically and humanly: epistemically, because the more comprehensive account would tell us more about human beings and their possibilities; humanly, because the language would allow more human beings to understand each other, and to come to undistorted understandings.

II

And so, for human affairs, the model of scientific theory, which is adequate to an object, is replaced by that of understanding, seen as a fusion of horizons: "Understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves" (TM 306).

Gadamer's concept "horizon" has an inner complexity that is essential to it. On the one hand, horizons can be identified and distinguished; it is through such distinctions that we can come to grasp what is distorting understanding and impeding communication. But on the other hand, horizons evolve and change. There is no such thing as a fixed horizon. "The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and which moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving" (TM 304). A horizon with unchanging contours is an abstraction. Horizons identified by the agents whose worlds they circumscribe are always in movement. The horizons of A and B may thus be distinct at time t , and their mutual understanding very imperfect. But A and B by living together may come to have a single common horizon at $t + n$.

In this way, "horizon" functions somewhat like "language." We can talk about the "language of modern liberalism," or the "language of nationalism," and point out the things they cannot comprehend. But these are abstractions, freeze frames of a continuing film. If we talk about the language of Americans or the French, we can no longer draw their limits a priori; for the language is identified by the agents, who can evolve.

This way of understanding difference and its overcoming through the complex concept of an horizon is to be contrasted with two others. On one hand, we have the classic model that comes from the epistemological tradition, whereby our grasp of the world is mediated by the inner representations we make of it, or the conceptual grid through which we take it in. This way of construing knowledge easily generates the conjecture that there may be unbridgeable differences. What if our inner representations diverge, even as we stand before the same external objects? What if our conceptual grids are differently constructed, through which all the information we receive is filtered? How will we ever be able to convince each other, even understand each other? Any consideration that one may adduce in argument will already be represented or enframed by the other in

a systematically different way. All reasoning stops at the borders of conceptual schemes, which pose insurmountable limits to our understanding.

In reaction to this, there is the attempt to establish the possibility of universal communication through an outright rejection of the idea of a conceptual scheme, as famously proposed by Donald Davidson. Davidson means his argument to be taken as a repudiation of the whole representational epistemology. "In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but reestablish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true and false."¹

As a rejection of the old epistemology (or at least attempted rejection; I am not sure that Davidson really does shake off the shackles of the representational view), this is obviously welcome. Further, Davidson's argument against the idea that we could be imprisoned in utterly incongruent schemes, invoking the "principle of charity," is obviously a powerful one. Davidson's principle of charity requires that I, the observer/theorist, must make sense of him, the subject studied, in the sense of finding most of what he does, thinks, and says intelligible, or else I cannot be treating him as a rational agent, and there is nothing to understand, in the relevant sense, at all.

What this argument shows is that total unintelligibility of another culture is not an option. For to experience another group as unintelligible over some range of their practices, we have to find them quite understandable over other (very substantial) ranges. We have to be able to understand them as framing intentions, carrying out actions and trying to communicate orders, truths, and so forth. If we imagine even this away, then we no longer have the basis that allows us to recognize them as agents. But then there is nothing left to be puzzled about. Concerning nonagents, there is no question about what they are up to, and hence no possibility of being baffled on this score.

The problem with this argument is that it is in a sense too powerful. It slays the terrifying mythical beast of total and irremediable incomprehensibility. But what we suffer from in our real encounters between peoples are the jackals and vultures of partial and (we hope) surmountable noncommunication.

In this real-life situation, Davidson's theory is less useful, mainly because it seems to discredit the idea of "conceptual schemes" altogether – this in spite of the fact that the argument only rules

out our meeting a totally unintelligible one. But in dealing with the real, partial barriers to understanding, we need to be able to identify what is blocking us. And for this we need some way of picking out the systematic differences in construal between two different cultures, without either reifying them or branding them as ineradicable. This is what Gadamer does with his image of the horizon. Horizons can be different, but at the same time they can travel, change, extend – as you climb a mountain, for instance. It is what Davidson’s position as yet lacks.

Without this, Davidson’s principle of charity is vulnerable to being abused to ethnocentric ends. The principle tells me to make the best sense of the other’s words and deeds as I can. In translating his words into my language, I should render him so that as much as possible he speaks the truth, makes valid inferences, and so on. But the issue is to know what counts as “my language” here. It can mean the language I speak at the moment of encounter. Or it can mean the extended language, the one that emerges from my attempts to understand him, to fuse horizons with him. If we take it in the first way, it is almost certain that I will ethnocentrically distort him.

For the problem is that the standing ethnocentric temptation is to make too quick sense of the stranger, i.e., sense in one’s own terms. The lesser breeds are without the law, because they have nothing we recognize as law. The step to branding them as lawless and outlaw is as easy as it is invalid and fateful. So the Conquistadores had an easy way of understanding the strange and disturbing practices of the Aztecs, including human sacrifice. While we worship God, these people worship the Devil.

Of course, this totally violates Davidson’s intent. But the problem is that we need to understand how we move from our language at the time of encounter, which can only distort them, to a richer language that has place for them; from making the “best sense” in our initial terms, which will usually be an alien imposition, to making the best sense within a fused horizon. I cannot see how we can conceive of or carry out this process without allowing into our ontology something like alternative horizons or conceptual schemes. This I think marks the superiority of Gadamer’s view over Davidson’s.

But Davidson’s argument is nonetheless very valuable, in pointing out the dangers, even the paradoxes involved in using any such terms. We can see this when we ask the question, what does the concept

“scheme” contrast with? The term “content” is certainly very bad – as though there were stuff already lying there, to be framed in different schemes. There is certainly a deep problem here.

It belongs to the very idea of a scheme, in the sense that one is tempted to use it in intercultural studies, that it indicates some systematic way in which people interpret or understand their world. Different schemes are incombable ways of understanding the same things.

But “what things?” runs the objection. How can you point to the things in question? If you use the language of the target society to get at them, then all distinction between scheme and content disappears. But what else can you use? Well, let us say you can use our language, that of us, the observer/scientists, about this target area. But then we still would not have got at the “content” we share in common, which would have to be somehow identifiable independently of both schemes.

The point is well taken. It needs to be kept in mind in order to avoid certain easy pitfalls, such as thinking that one has a neutral, universal categorization of the structures or functions of all societies, e.g., political system, family, religion, which provide the ultimately correct description for what all the different fumbling, cultural languages are aiming at; as it were, the noumena to their phenomenal tongues. But the notion of two schemes, one target area, remains valid and indeed, indispensable.

Let’s go back to the case of the Conquistadores and the Aztecs. We might say that one thing the Conquistadores had right was that they recognized that all that ripping out of hearts in some way corresponded in Spanish society to the Church and the mass, and that sort of thing. That is, the right insight, yielding a good starting point for an eventual fusion of horizons, involves identifying what something in the puzzling life of an alien people can usefully be contrasted with in ours. In Gadamerian terms, what we are doing is identifying that facet of our lives that their strange customs interpellate, challenge, and offer a notional alternative to.

An example will show what is at stake here. A few years ago, a wildly reductivistic American social scientist produced a theory of Aztec sacrifice in which it was explained “materialistically” in terms of their need for protein. On this view, the right point of comparison in Spanish society would be their slaughterhouses rather than

their churches. Needless to say, from such a starting point, one gets nowhere.

The fruitful supposition is that what went on atop those pyramids reflected a very different construal of an X that overlaps with what Christian faith and practice is a construal of in Spain. This is where thinking, enquiry, can usefully start. It has one very powerful – and in principle challengeable – presupposition: that we share the same humanness, and that therefore we can ultimately find our feet in Aztec sacrifice, because it is a way of dealing with a human condition we share. Once this is accepted, then the notion of two schemes, same X becomes inescapable. Only we have to be careful what we put in the place of the X.

In a general proposition, we might say: “dimension, or aspect of the human condition.” In the particular case, it is much more dangerous to specify. “Religion” would be an obvious candidate word. But the danger is precisely that we happily take on board everything that this word means in our world, and slide back toward the ethnocentric reading of the Conquistadores. So we perhaps retreat to something more vague, such as “numinous.” But even this carries its dangers.

The point is to beware of labels here. This is the lesson to be learned from attacks on the scheme–content distinction. But that the Mass and Aztec sacrifice belong to rival construals of a dimension of the human condition for which we have no stable, culture-transcendent name, is a thought we cannot let go of, unless we want to relegate these people to the kind of unintelligibility that members of a different species would have for us. If rejecting the distinction means letting this go, it is hardly an innocent step.

III

The conception of horizons and their fusion shows how the “science” we have of other times and people is, like the understandings we come to, party-dependent. It will differ both with the object and the subject of knowledge.

But how about the analogue to the other property of understandings I mentioned above, that they may involve our changing our goals? The analogous point here is that in coming to see the other correctly, we inescapably alter our understanding of ourselves. Really

taking in the other will involve an identity shift in us. That is why it is so often resisted and rejected. We have a deep identity investment in the distorted images we cherish of others.

That this change must occur falls out from the account of the fusion of horizons. To return to our example: we come to see that attributing "opinions" to them is distortive. But we only ever did so originally, because it seemed to go without saying that this is what it meant to have beliefs in certain areas. In order to get over the distortion, we had to see that there were other possibilities, that our way of being is not the only or "natural" one, but that it represents one among other possible forms. We can no longer relate to our way of doing or construing things "naively," as just too obvious to mention.

If understanding the other is to be construed as fusion of horizons and not as possessing a science of the object, then the slogan might be: no understanding the other without a changed understanding of self. The kind of understanding that ruling groups have of the ruled, that conquerors have of the conquered – most notably in recent centuries in the far-flung European empires – has usually been based on a quiet confidence that the terms they need are already in their vocabulary. Much of the "social science" of the last century is in this sense just another avatar of an ancient human failing. And indeed, the satisfactions of ruling, beyond the booty, the unequal exchange, the exploitation of labor, very much includes the reaffirmation of one's identity that comes from being able to live this fiction without meeting brutal refutation. Real understanding always has an identity cost – something the ruled have often painfully experienced. It is a feature of tomorrow's world that this cost will now be less unequally distributed.

The cost appears as such from the standpoint of the antecedent identity, of course. It may be judged a gain once one has gone through the change. We are also enriched by knowing what other human possibilities there are in our world. It cannot be denied, however, that the path to acknowledging this is frequently painful.

The crucial moment is the one in which we allow ourselves to be interpellated by the other; in which the difference escapes from its categorization as an error, a fault, or a lesser, undeveloped version of what we are, and challenges us to see it as a viable human alternative. It is this that unavoidably calls our own self-understanding into question. This is the stance Gadamer calls "openness." As against

the way I stand to what I see as an object of science, where I try to reflect myself out of my "relation to the other . . . becoming unreachable by him" (TM 360). "Openness to the other, then, involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so" (TM 361).

Gadamer's argument in *Truth and Method* deals with our understanding of our own tradition, the history of our civilization, and the texts and works that belong to this. This means that what we study will be in one way or another internal to our identity. Even where we define ourselves against certain features of the past, as the modern Enlightenment does against the Middle Ages, this remains within our identity as the negative pole, that which we have overcome or escaped. We are part of the "effective history" (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of this past, and as such it has a claim on us.

My point in this essay has been that Gadamer's account of the challenge of the other and the fusion of horizons applies also to our attempts to understand quite alien societies and epochs. The claim here comes not from their place within our identity, but precisely from their challenge to it. They present us different and often disconcerting ways of being human. The challenge is to be able to acknowledge the humanity of their way, while still being able to live ours. That this may be difficult to achieve, that it will almost certainly involve a change in our self-understanding and hence in our way, has emerged from the above discussion.

Meeting this challenge is becoming ever more urgent in our intensely intercommunicating world. At the turn of the millennium, it is a pleasure to salute Hans-Georg Gadamer, who has helped us so immensely to conceive this challenge clearly and steadily.

NOTE

- 1 "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 198.