Discussion

On Dennis Schmidt: The Sensibility of Understanding as Practical Philosophy

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Dennis Schmidt has long been for me not just a friend in philosophy, but a true scholar of note. My own work has been informed by reading his work and hearing him speak on numerous occasions. I have indeed learned much from him, for which I am thankful. As to this friendship, it has been built up, in part, through sharing in common a philosophical sensibility originating in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. The work of this philosopher, oddly enough, one might say, is about the very idea of philosophical sensibility, where the word “sensibility” indicates, as we learn from its earliest use, a way of understanding things. It is clear to me that Schmidt has followed the impetus of his teacher’s work. He too is concerned with the way of understanding understanding, with the sensibility of understanding, and has done so in a singular way. He is indeed a scholar and thinker in his own right.

To speak then of his work as a scholar and thinker, I want to begin by indicating the way in which I think Dennis Schmidt marks out the sensibility of understanding in his work. He does so not by relegating the way of understanding things to experiences of meaning, as one might find in traditional hermeneutic theory concerned with the reading of history and texts in general; rather, he does so by linking it to the very way-making of life. In a more precise sense, I would say that his philosophical concern is with our concernful being...
in life – or, if you will, being worried about things – that opens upon the questions of human living. As I see it, the intent of such a project is not to write a new philosophy of existence that would simply follow the ground-breaking work of the early Heidegger who prominently describes existence in relation to concern. On the contrary, Schmidt’s concern is so pointed that it would have us call into question what we do as philosophers and even what counts as philosophy. In his more recent work, Schmidt explicitly raises the question about philosophy in relation to his concern. Notice his wording in the three different ways he asks his question: What is the capacity of philosophy to transform the situation out of which it arises? What is the significance and responsibility of philosophy? What is the ethos of a philosophical life? In raising these questions that effectively raise the fundamental question about what philosophy is for, Schmidt will situate himself in a somewhat ironic position. In doing philosophy he confesses at the same time that he does not belong in philosophy and does not know what philosophy is. This is of course an exaggerated remark intended to make an emphatic point about what it is to do philosophy in these times where it is most needed. His foil in this regard is traditional philosophy which primarily looks out at the world theoretically. It is philosophy oriented to concepts which by their very nature become abstractions in relation to our concernful being in life. It is philosophy aided by the autonomous use of reason, such that it is always taking a step back from the pathos of life that is both the source and the object of philosophizing. Against such philosophy Schmidt wants to make a place for a non-philosophy philosopher, so to speak, for after all he still belongs to philosophy no matter what he confesses. Such a philosopher will rely in part on those friends of philosophy, those who are outside of philosophy proper – such as Homer and Sophocles – who indeed have something to say about our concernful being in life. Of course, Schmidt is not alone in approaching philosophy in this way. Most notably, Hannah Arendt makes her own confession to proceed not as a traditional philosopher in her own work aimed at understanding the world in which we live. Schmidt is also joined by others on the contemporary scene in continental philosophy – such as John Sallis and Charles Scott among others – who are remaking philosophy against its traditional concerns.

What clearly distinguishes Schmidt’s work in this regard is the specific character of his philosophical concern. To name it here, it is a concern with philosophy as practical philosophy. In its modern formulation, as we see in Kant, practical philosophy concerns the rational foundation of the ethical, providing it with prescription for rules for acting. But Schmidt understands the ethical more broadly, if not existentially, and with less reliance on autonomous reason, as a matter of ethos. Schmidt employs this word in its original
meaning in Greek. More than an indication of character, *ethos* has the sense of the place where one is accustomed to being, which I understand to mean in relation to Schmidt’s work the comportment of the human to its sensibility. It is hard to ignore just how often Schmidt invokes the ethical in his writings. One has to look no further than a quick glance at the titles of two of his books. *On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life* and *Lyrical and Ethical Subjects: Essays on the Periphery of the Word, Freedom, and History*. A third book also concerns the ethical, if one looks beyond the title. *Between Word and Image: Heidegger, Klee, and Gadamer on Gesture and Genesis* is a book on art and aesthetics, a frequent topic in Schmidt’s writings. This concern for art and aesthetics, though, is inseparable from what Schmidt takes to be the concern of art, namely, to be that illuminated mirror of the world through which the ethical subject discovers its way-making in the world. Art displays what he calls “a quickened sense of the movement of life,” which changes what one understands, and in doing so it changes how one lives, i.e., it changes one’s ethos.

In what follows, I want to give a more exact account of this fundamental concern with practical philosophy. My remarks here fall under two headings.

1 **Doing Philosophy in a Different Way**

When Schmidt asks the question concerning philosophy he does so because the question arises from the crisis in which we live, not unlike the slightly different question that Heidegger asks in 1946 citing Hölderlin, “Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?” (What are poets for in a destitute time?). The destitute time is a needy time borne of disillusionment, even despair. As Schmidt points out, Heidegger appeals to poetry because it has a “power for life” and thus it is more than an inconsequential pleasure. One has to believe though that Heidegger’s question in this regard was never the right question. Certainly, one could say that behind the question there lies a hope for reconnecting the human to possibilities for the fulfillment of life, but it remains, nevertheless, a question that forgoes the possibility of a more direct engagement with the crisis in understanding affecting practical life. Schmidt’s similar question “Wozu Philosoph?” (What is philosophy for?) intends to do just that. Posed in relation to a different crisis – not that of the aftermath of war but of a time in life in which there is profound moral disorientation – this question has its own urgency.

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Interestingly, Schmidt will continue to draw from Heidegger — and do so in a way that I think wants to save Heidegger from himself — by pointing out how Heidegger is asking this same question about philosophy in the “Letter on Humanism.” As we know, the “Letter on Humanism” was written in response to Sartre’s *Existentialism is a Humanism* in which the question concerning philosophy is posed indirectly through the question of the relation of thinking to action. As Schmidt notes, Heidegger acknowledges the urgency of the question while at the same time refusing to embrace the direct connection between thinking and action made by Sartre. Instead, Heidegger is more circumspect and first wants to consider more deeply the very issue of thinking’s relation to action. What is really at issue here for Heidegger is not ethics in any traditional sense but what he calls an “originary ethics.” While Schmidt applauds Heidegger’s turn to this idea because it attends to the sensibility of understanding in life, he is not convinced that Heidegger gives a sufficient response to the issue. Schmidt’s claim is that thinking, and thus philosophy, in its orientation to the concerns of worldly living, cannot escape from a deep sense of responsibility. This is not the responsibility that issues from the demands of a practical will. It is rather a responsibility that is embedded in the very character of thinking. In his most recent work, Schmidt appeals to the example of Plato’s Socrates as well as to Hannah Arendt to help make this point. For both, thinking has the ability to interrupt not only itself but also all doing, for we do not act blindly or without thought. Arendt in particular will refuse to separate thinking and doing as if they were of two different realms, one pertaining to theory, the other to practice. Thinking’s ability to interrupt doing effectively opens a space for thinking to happen again. This break that opens a space for the appearance of something other is effectively what we call conscience, as a call of responsibility. As Schmidt describes it: “Conscience, this doublet of thinking, this self-generated child of itself, is what is able to be actualized in thinking.”

Conscience is thinking’s own response to itself, giving birth to itself as an other. For Schmidt, the concern with philosophy lies in this ability to hold fast to the openness of conscience. The subtlety in what Schmidt is saying here cannot be overlooked. He is not claiming the philosophy is simply ethics, no more than Hannah Arendt would in the way she links thinking and doing. For Schmidt, responsibility is not about ethics strictly speaking, at least not

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2 See Dennis J. Schmidt, “On Thinking and Moral Considerations — Once Again,” address to the Critical Antiquities Workshop, August 22, 2021: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1bqbV9qqdM.

for an ethics that simply demands accountability. As he cleverly points out, accountability is a juridical notion that looks backward to the past in order to ascribe guilt or innocence, whereas responsibility speaks to a future in relation to the open space of conscience. The question about thinking is borne of a deep sense of responsibility that belongs to the nature of thinking itself.

From this way of characterizing thinking, we can begin to better understand why Schmidt criticizes the theoretical approach in traditional philosophy. It uses the language of the concept that at best distorts the relation between thinking and action. It distorts it because the concept is the language of the universal that by its very nature remains once removed from the movement and concretion of the sensibility of life. The language of the concept wants to capture this movement by halting it. More than this, the language of the concept is wedded to the law of reason, to laying down the law of reason in every matter of truth. Without saying so, Schmidt would have to agree that this tribunal has trouble keeping itself safe from harm. When Schmidt references Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism” to underscore just how the concern with thinking becomes intensified in relation to the crisis of the time, he does not mention, but he well could have, the response that Gadamer gives to the crisis seven years after the end of the war. It is a different crisis now without the same urgency. The world is being rebuilt, and planning and calculation are becoming even more entrenched in everyday life. Now the crisis is in the reasonableness of everyday life in which a positivistic notion of reason fails to satisfy the needs of philosophizing human beings. What the war clearly demonstrated was the corruptibility of human reason. The gravity of that corruption has passed but the corruption of reason remains when reason is placed in service to calculation and the convictions of power. In response to this crisis Gadamer puts forth the need for another critique of reason. Without naming it so, Schmidt’s own work seems to be doing just that. Certainly, he would maintain that one needs more than arguments governed by the law of reason to change one’s life.

Because the language of concepts is insufficient for articulating the thinking necessary for the sensibility of life, we can also better understand why Schmidt devotes so much attention to literature and the arts in his writings. They are more adept than the theoretical approach at bringing forth the movement of life. Art accomplishes the quickening of life – Schmidt’s frequently used term borrowed from Kant to indicate the ability of art to animate, to bring something to life, such that there is an intensification of the sensibility of understanding. Art has the capacity to draw one into life, becoming disposed to life

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in a concernful manner. And if, following Gadamer, this experience with art enables recognition, this means for Schmidt that we “recognize something of ourselves and our place in the world.” Unlike the theoretical that does not have an effect on the individual and the individual’s doings, art can change the habits of mind that hold us hostage. But the arts are also more adept than the theoretical at displaying life in its concretion, i.e., life in the singular – what Schmidt calls the idiom. Art displays singular situations – examples, if not exemplars, of life – that are part of the unfathomable depths of life.

2 Understanding the Ethos of Life

So it is that Schmidt wants to do philosophy in a different way, a way that asks us to think of thinking in a different way, a way that is necessitated by the presumption that philosophy’s uppermost concern is with the way-making of life, what Schmidt would call the ethos of life. In an attempt now to describe the character of this ethos, there is one word that marks out in a decisive way that character, namely, finitude. The thought of finitude has informed Schmidt’s work from early on, certainly since the publication of The Ubiquity of the Finite. The title of the book is quite telling. In this book, Schmidt keeps pressing the question about the extent to which Heidegger, in relation to Hegel, succeeds in recovering the finite from its submersion in the history of philosophy’s obsession with the infinite. At the end of the book Schmidt points to what has been left unsaid about the finite as a way of signaling the future direction of his own work. He thinks that a more complete recovery of the finite in philosophy will do more than “renegotiate the possibilities of theoretical understanding;” it will fundamentally alter the “prejudices and temperament that have long guided philosophy.”

From what has been said already it is evident that Schmidt has held fast to this direction, and we can ask ourselves here what this more complete recovery of finitude looks like. It undoubtedly remains a hermeneutics of finitude in which Schmidt appeals not only to Heidegger but also and foremost to Gadamer who best captures the spirit of practical philosophy. It is a finitude in relation to the limits in experiences that both halt and yet sustain the movement in the life of understanding. The is not the limit of an incompleteness

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that is set against an infinite measure. Rather, it is the limit that both Heidegger and Gadamer refer to in the idea of the sheltering of being. This is the sheltering that holds being back from presence – a “not” that protects absence from presence. For Gadamer, in a paradoxical way, this “not” is what sustains a conversation aimed at understanding. The limit of the word does not signal the end of language but constitutes the force of the constant return to language for the sake of understanding. It signals the demand for the renewal of the work of language and with it the basis for the emergence of new meaning. Schmidt regards one of the great merits of Gadamer’s hermeneutics to be this emphasis on the limits of what can be understood whether in relation to the past, the other, or even ourselves. He sees that the attention to this limit issues in something like a call to remember, a call that Schmidt would like to describe as a call of life itself. He is hesitant to say that this call is the same as Heidegger’s call of conscience, but in any case, the call is such that it asks for a response – let us say, the responsibility of response – that opens the ethos of life. This hermeneutics of finitude is Heideggerian only in the sense that it belongs to what Heidegger call “original ethics,” to what attunes itself to the unpresentable and incalculable. But it is more Gadamerian precisely because of its an abiding awareness that the sensibility of understanding is fundamentally an ethical problem.

Let us see then exactly how Schmidt distinguishes this hermeneutics of finitude in his own work. He acknowledges that there are many forms of finitude corresponding to a variety of experiences, but for my purposes here I will simply group them together under two forms. For one, there is our experience with language. In life there is the inescapability of our belonging to language, and thus to texts. When Schmidt appeals to the poetic word over the language of the concept because of the way in which it can generate an intensification of the ethos of life, that is only half the story. It is also the case that the poetic word is defined by the way in which it attends to what we cannot see and do not see. “It is language responsive to that which remains hidden in the dark as well as to that which emerges into the clarity of the light.”\footnote{Schmidt, “Truth be Told: Homer, Plato, and Heidegger,” in Heidegger and Language, ed. Jeffrey Powell (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 173.} It is this capacity to be responsive to that which remains hidden that the finitude of the poetic word becomes most apparent. This finitude is not a shortcoming of language, and not even, in the case of the language of conversation, a word soliciting a counter-word for the sake of understanding. It is rather the finitude of the word as such that is unable to surpass itself – expressing thereby the word’s double character of both revealing and concealing. Especially so in the case of
the poetic word, the inability to surpass itself, to complete itself in the identity of meaningfulness, constitutes the density of the word that “serves as an intransitive residue that weds the word to the mystery of its own being.” The finitude of the poetic word is such that it “fulfills itself in the ideal of untranslatability.” When the finitude proper to the poetic word is experienced, then both poetry and translation come forth as questions.

A second form of finitude concerns the limit in the understanding of life as such. This is the finitude that we experience as singular beings when we press up against the unpresentable and the measureless whether it be in relation to animality, nature or even the heavenly sky. It is an experience of finitude that has a darker side in the attempt to understand “the monstrosity” that we “unleash upon ourselves, others, and the world,” as Schmidt so insightfully shows in relation to Greek tragedy. For Schmidt, this second form of finitude is most evident in the way in which death presents itself for understanding. Of course, Schmidt relies on Heidegger’s insight that death functions as a reminder of the “possibility of the measureless impossibility of existence,” but what Schmidt wants to say about death goes beyond this particular limit-experience with its concomitant anxiety. Schmidt wants to speak about the measureless-ness of death in relation to mourning and to corpses, both of which press more deeply into understanding the ethos of life. Mourning, unlike anxiety, is a liminal experience that “entails an acknowledgment that we belong to, and are constituted by, a world that is larger than that which we can either define or control.” More than this, Schmidt claims that “the truth of mourning is that it is impossible, that we cannot complete the task of mourning because the other, like me, is an idiom, a singular being, and no adjustment of reality can accommodate this loss.” As to corpses, they are not simply images of the dead but effigies of singular beings. In their material forms, they are an “emblem of how the passage between life and death challenges our comprehension of who we are.” The presence of the corpse awakens the consciousness of death and

8 Lyrical and Ethical Subjects, 88.
9 In “What We Owe the Dead,” Schmidt writes: “I want to suggest that the realm of consciousness of mortality is wider than that which Heidegger describes. While I believe that Heidegger is right to identify anxiety as a fundamental disposition, I also believe that to fully grasp the import of our consciousness of mortality, mourning needs to be recognized as a genuinely different yet original form of that consciousness.” “What We Owe the Dead,” in Heidegger and the Greeks, eds. Drew Hyland and John Manoussakis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 116.
10 Ibid., 117.
11 Ibid., 118.
12 Ibid., 112.
with it a question can be posed about what we owe the dead. But this question, he reminds us, is at once a question of how we are to be with the living.

3  By Way of a Conclusion and a Question

I began my remarks with the claim that Schmidt, this scholar who is a friend of philosophy, is concerned with the sensibility of understanding. I used the word sensibility purposefully because of its double sense. It pertains to a way of understanding things, but it also has the sense of being responsive to something, not unlike a concern. Schmidt’s concern is with life in its understanding that by its very nature directs us into life and tells us who we are. The conclusion to his recent article “Thank Goodness for the Atmosphere” says it best:

We meet our finitude in many ways. … [They are] experiences that change how we understand ourselves and how we understand what it means to be in the world. Finding such limits is … the point at which we begin to bind ourselves to something larger than ourselves and something that might orient us to the good. It is the point at which we look at the world and find that what looks back needs a response that we cannot define alone. This is the point at which something like a sense of responsibility is born.13

Undoubtedly, the sense of responsibility is a curious one, to say the least. It does not arise from an obligation to a law, nor does it present itself in Levinasian fashion as a “first,” announcing itself before every consideration about the world. Schmidt would have us invert the Levinasian order between response and responsibility. It is not a matter of the response (to) of responsibility, but the responsibility of (a) response. It is a responsibility inextricably bound to the sensibility of understanding. From this, one has to wonder if Schmidt’s main concern is with understanding or ethics or both. No need for a label here. It is clear to me that Schmidt thinks that understanding serves an ethical aim, and his recognition of the fact that understanding in life comes up short when confronting the secrets and resistance in life indicate that ethical life has little to show for itself. So, it is reasonable to say that Schmidt’s concern is with the appropriate philosophical approach to the sensibility of life – an orientation that continues to think the relation of thinking to action. What I struggle with

is how responsibility is generated from this concern. I think Schmidt’s answer to this question would be that the way-making in life generates responsibility, if indeed one has concern in the response to life.\footnote{Here one can also look to the work of Theodore George who in his own way follows the initiatives made by Schmidt. See Theodore George, \textit{The Responsibility to Understand} (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).} If so, this makes Schmidt’s reference to the call of conscience intriguing insofar as it is a call of responsibility.

Schmidt acknowledges that this call is not the same as Heidegger’s call of conscience but does not say why this is so. Perhaps it is so for the reason that Gadamer gives for his reservations concerning Heidegger’s conscience. He thinks it relates primarily to a self-finding rather than a response to the encounter with the other. Moreover, when Schmidt invokes the call of conscience in relation to thinking, one has the sense that he is referring more to Arendt than to Heidegger. Arendt wants to make much of Socrates’s characterization of thinking as a conversation of the soul with itself. For Arendt the conversation of the soul with itself amounts to a conscious awareness of difference and otherness, which is then actualized by thinking. Such thinking produces conscience, which Arendt relates to judging, as a by-product.\footnote{See Hannah Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” in \textit{Responsibility and Judgment}, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 159–189.} In relating consciousness and ultimately, thinking to conscience, Arendt is simply drawing sources in Greek philosophy and literature where this relation is first found. The Greek \textit{sunesis} has the general sense of a taking notice of something brought together, the gaining of intelligence that we call understanding. More explicitly, \textit{sunesis} carries the sense of a conscientious apprehension (\textit{suneidēsis}), a discerning intelligence in relation to one’s behavior. It is a self-consciousness regarding an ethical judgment and thus invokes the explicit sense of conscience. It is this knowing with oneself that Orestes, in Euripides’s play of the same name, affirms when asked what evil destroys him: “My conscience [\textit{sunesis}], I know [\textit{sunoida}] I am guilty of a terrible crime.”\footnote{Euripides, \textit{Orestes}, trans. David Kovacs, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 397.}

It is worth noting here that Orestes’s knowing with himself is not just an ethical statement, it is also a statement that is mute and silent. What he knows is felt as an impossibility of speaking. I would think that Schmidt, in a further remove from Heidegger, would want to embrace the character of this silence associated with the call of conscience. This is, after all, a silence caught up in the struggle with darkness. The tragic hero’s moment of silence represents a speechlessness that disconnects the tragic hero not so much from himself but from the world. And in this what is most remarkable about the call of
conscience in this context is its fundamental connection to the sensibility of understanding. Orestes’s conscience – this knowing within himself that occurs in relation to others – is the self-learning from the breakdown of understanding where one is answerable for one’s way-making in life.

Still, one can think of the call of conscience, this self-learning and understanding, in yet another way. Here we need to recall another figure, viz., that of Socrates, who not only invokes the notion of the conversation of the soul with itself – the doubling of thinking that Schmidt refers to – but sees himself as a partner in conversation explicitly with others. In this partnership, Socrates does not actually have an ethics, though he does talk about virtue and the concern for truth precisely because the bond between truth and the ethical is broken. At every turn he is a figure who seeks understanding in life with a view to the good. As we learn from the end of the Republic, he wants to make a good crossing over the carelessness and forgetfulness in life by thoughtfulness (phronesis) – a thoughtfulness that is inseparable from a critical understanding (sunesis).\(^\text{17}\) Is not Schmidt’s concern with the ethos of life to be carried out in this way, that is, in relation to the Socratic gesture for care in life? In any case, a certain lineage can be preserved here. Our friend Schmidt, whose work follows in the spirit of Gadamer who himself conceives of hermeneutics as practical philosophy, once described Gadamer as Socrates with a cane. What Schmidt presents us with in his work is further turn in this direction.

\(^{17}\) That practical wisdom involves the element of sunesis is a point explicitly mentioned by Aristotle. See Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 1143a.