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Human nature in a postmodern world: reflections on the work of Eugene Gendlin

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I met Gene Gendlin in 1986 at the 20th Annual Heidegger Conference. There he read a provocative paper entitled “Heidegger and Forty Years of Silence” (Gendlin, 1986). The unhappy reevaluation of Heidegger’s political views was in progress, but Gendlin’s essay went further to challenge the postmodern movement itself and an approach to human nature inherited from Heidegger, namely an embrace of particularism in response to the collapse of traditional models of universals in the human condition. Gendlin was troubled by the fact that American scholars were advocating diversity in the spirit of a Heideggerian historicism, while not mindful enough of the relation between that historical particularism and the horrors of the Nazi movement. When Americans renounce the common in favor of the particular, we tend to imagine a tolerant celebration of differences. Gendlin, a Jewish refugee from Vienna, is less optimistic. He sees in particularism the danger of what is sometimes called tribalism, namely the concentration on *one* people’s language and culture at the expense of, or to the exclusion of, other groups. For Gendlin, such a development is certainly no less problematic than traditional assumptions of rational universals. And I am sure that his concerns have only been heightened by recent events in Europe, where the collapse of communist centralism has unleashed a vicious tribal animosity, and talk of “ethnic cleansing” and “*Ausländer raus!*” When we grope for a vocabulary to speak against such things, we realize that something like Gendlin’s warning has great warrant: The abandonment of universalism is an extremely dangerous course. We realize that belief in something universal, whether in ancient Greek thought or in the European Enlightenment, did not arise in the vacuum of mere academic musings, but in response to real, violent, fractious strife between different allegiances, each affirming their differences with great resolve.

What makes Gendlin’s response so effective is that he does not ignore the legitimate critique of traditional universalism. He asks us to rethink what “universal” means or can mean. If we attend to human experience and lan-

guage, he suggests, we can find a universality different from the notions of commonness, sameness, constancy, and the like. Surrendering these latter notions is the proper legacy of Heidegger's thinking, but surrendering any sense of universality is the danger facing postmodern thought. Gendlin thinks it is possible, and necessary, to discover a nonrationalistic universality in the human condition. His work, in my view, is extremely important, and I want to engage it in regard to the specific question of human nature in a postmodern world.

Gendlin believes that Heidegger's thought had the potential to develop a cross-differential sense of human nature (primarily in the early writings), but that his historical particularism led him not only to miss this opportunity but to inevitably fall into the trap of the German catastrophe. I have not yet been convinced that such failings are endemic to Heidegger's thinking. In fact, I have tried at times to work with Heidegger's deconstruction of traditional frameworks and forge out of this "void" a notion of ontological "negativity" that can speak against the abuses we deplore without slipping back into a kind of substantive universality (Hatab, 1987; Hatab, 1990b).

It is true that Heidegger's repudiation of Enlightenment universalism, rationalism, and individualism nourished an attraction for a folkish particularism, rustic primitivism, and authoritarianism – all of which brought on disaster. We should not forget that the Enlightenment project had an emancipatory effect in response to many abusive and constraining tendencies. But we should also heed the critique of that project fostered by thinkers like Heidegger. The Enlightenment ideal of a common human nature was generally a blend of scientific rationalism and Christian universalism, where the necessity of rational principles joined the spiritual transcendence of nature to produce a picture of humanity beyond the contingencies and differences in the physical domain. Such an ideal has been rightly criticized for its suppression of differences and its promotion of the assault upon nature in the manner of technicity. In human affairs, its universalist ideal was in many ways bogus because it was a *disguised* ethnocentrism (in "we are all the same" read "be like us"). Such a translation can decode the sincere paternalism of colonialists – Our arrival will "free" the native population from its primitive confinement – to reveal the actual effect: cultural annihilation. But it is true that abandoning the Enlightenment project in favor of celebrating differences brings on the danger of tribalism – the movement from "we are not all the same" to "we have nothing in common" or, more subtly, to "you can not understand our world" – something no less dangerous than universalism because the dehumanization of the Other can become almost effortless.

Cultural differences are natural, inevitable, and an enhancement of life. The problem, in my view, is not particularism, but reductionism – the *grounding* of human nature in some definite condition or structure – whether par-

ticular or universal. Tribalism is no less reductive than traditional universals, it is simply a reduction to a particular group's characteristics. What we need is some general outlook on human nature that is based on openness, that is neither suppressive of differences nor limited to differences, and that can avoid the reductionism common to both tendencies.

I believe that the basis for such an outlook can be found in Heidegger's thought, especially in *Being and Time*. I am convinced that, for the most part, the Care configuration is universally valid. This is not to say that nothing needs to be added or modified, but I can think of no human culture that can not fit into its contours. However, being "transcendental," it does not prescribe the specific content of cultures. What is decisive for my thinking here is the "transcendence" of Dasein, which (as is made clear in "What is Metaphysics?") and in the notion of being-toward death) means being held out into the Nothing. At the heart of Dasein is not a definable essence, but Nothing. What we have in common, then, is an "abyssal" dimension. And this dimension is what makes disclosure possible, where the negation of beings illuminates the meaning of the Being of beings (that they are *not* nothing), a general notion that is given some concretion in the idea of disclosure as unconcealment. Disclosure out of the abyss lets our ontic differences be, because a common essence can not be presumed or discovered; but keeping the abyss in view *also* forbids reduction to those differences, and thus works against tribalism, which passes beyond cultural particularity to a myopic fixation that obscures or cancels out the dignity of the Other.¹

For me, a "tragic" model of human existence – where the self begins, dwells, and ends in an abyss – protects against closure and oppression of all kinds, by sensitizing us to our common finitude, by emphasizing the movements of life rather than fixed results, and by disrupting all the definitional references with which we promote ourselves and demote others. Since human beings can not be fixed by any designation, then all the categories of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and the like that fuel so much trouble can be intercepted by a negative correction. So the deconstruction of positive references that marks the postmodern condition need not mean the commission or permission of factional strife, as long as an abyssal limit is applied to any and all categories.

Gendlin is not really sold on all this. He wants to go beyond talk of negativity and formlessness to find what is positive and generative in thinking beyond forms and structures. The rejection of fixed form in the tradition need not mean the rejection of any notion of form or the surrender to notions or formlessness, both of which are still caught up in the assumption that fixed form is the only kind, that the choice is between fixed form and no form. Gendlin, in my reading, wants to accomplish two things: First, to show that form and nonform are not opposites or separate; and second, to draw

from the first point the notion that forms are not an arbitrary imposition on some primal formlessness or undecidable process (a common trend in postmodern thought).

I think that Gendlin wants to restore the meaning of “nature” (in the Greek sense of *physis*) without ignoring the insights of postmodernism concerning the mistakes of the tradition. So we could talk about the “nature” of something without fixing it; nature need not be equivalent to a metaphysical concept of “essence.” Consequently, we could say that a thing’s nature *is* open and dynamic, getting us beyond the false choice between fixed description and indescribability. This is a view that I share. Gendlin also wants to use such a notion to challenge the unbridgeable particularism and historicism discussed previously, to work toward some sense of universality in human “nature.” This is a view that gives me some pause.

Gendlin has found a way to work within a nonfoundationalist milieu without stumbling into a radical skepticism, anarchism, or nihilism. His work on implicit intricacy, situation, and embodiment is a very rich articulation of the positive fullness of a decentered condition, of what I mean by an ungrounded negativity in human experience. I have learned a great deal from this work, and I have to admit that my approach has been simplistic in over-emphasizing nonform or loss of form and underplaying the process of form in the making. What I call negativity Gendlin wants to call implication or potentiality, the not-yet-form, which indicates not the absence of form but the elusive yet palpable dynamics of form-ing.

In this way Gendlin takes issue with the polar opposition of experience and form that is common in modern (and postmodern) philosophy. Such opposition stems from the assumption that the only valid model of form or structure is the constancy of logico-mathematical patterns, which the fluidity and particularity of experience do not or can not match. For Gendlin, human experience has an order that is different from a rigid structure. Such an order can be read out by attending not only to what we experience, but to *how* we experience its unfolding. We can find, he suggests, that language and experience are not only not opposed to each other, they mutually inform each other in a single, reciprocal dynamic: “. . . feelings, situations, and language are inherently involved in each other” (Gendlin, 1973:291). Such a correlation shows itself to be neither disorderly nor rigidly ordered: it is “nonnumerical, multischematic, and interschematizable,” and the validity of such a scheme is not to be found in some theoretical justification but in its application to our practices (1973:299).

Experience and language are an open process of explication that is ever-fluid but not arbitrary, since situations and outcomes give us a sense of aptness, which forbids us just any description we want and which opens up the possibility of phenomenological truth (1973:302–303, 305, 319). What

emerges is what Gendlin calls an “intricate order” that works with forms both implicit and explicit, but that is always more than form alone when we consider the process of our experience (Gendlin, 1992:21–23).²

Gendlin has found a way around the so-called trap of circularity wherein the process of saying can not be said because in being said, the saying is lost in the confines of verbal forms. He does a great service in showing how saying can be described by attending to our experiences and by renouncing the fetish of verbal closure and univocity (1992:46ff.). A poet’s experience of pregnant suspension, waiting for the right word in relation to words already composed or words to come – this moment, which is represented on the page by a slot (_), is not nonverbal or even preverbal, since it is caught up with the rest of a text and can recognize the right word when it comes. Gendlin calls it an implying, a potential that is neither a pure form nor a nonform, but a not-yet-form that nicely illustrates his contention about a unified relation between form and nonform, language and experience.³

Such a dynamic of implying continues to function even within established forms and terms. We are given examples of words that can operate in surprisingly new ways beyond supposed root meanings, and yet with a kind of precision that works well.⁴ This provides relief from the tendency to see words as fixed meanings that can not capture the fluidity of experience, a view that collapses if we listen to the movements of word usage and relax an academic fixation on exactitude. Word usage can be seen as flexible, creative, interactive, and looser than philosophical models of precision (e.g., Plato’s) and yet quite workable and suitable for our experiences. In attending to actual occasions of language in *process* we are able to look beyond the products of language to a creative dynamic that is nevertheless not arbitrary, since it is guided by, and fitted to, situations. Words are implicitly connected to thousands of other words in an ever-fluctuating system of movements that works within the movements of experience.

Gendlin maintains that now we can discover a rich vocabulary to describe how language works beyond mere forms and conceptual distinctions. He offers some generalizations that express what he calls *ways* of thinking, and concepts such as implying, carrying forward, form change, and novelty that fit the way language works (Gendlin, 1992: 58–65). In this manner, I think, the Heideggerian notion of unconcealment is given a far richer and more tangible expression, a recognizable set of circumstances where what is concealed is almost yearning to open up, and does so in our verbal movements.

Gendlin (1992: 81–83) adds real punch to his treatment by bringing in the body and how embodiment figures in our situations and linguistic dynamics. Our bodies tell us much about the meaning of circumstances and about how language works. Provocative parallels can be drawn between bodily and verbal occurrences to show that words come to us in much the same way that

emotions, appetites, fatigue, and other bodily events come: in appropriate ways that can not be forced or fabricated (1992: 104–105). This is a significant move that corrects the all too common bypassing of embodiment in philosophy.⁵ Altogether Gendlin's work is a masterful survey of the concrete ways in which human experience and language operate in cocreating our sense of the world.

In sum, Gene argues for an intrinsic correlation of experience, language, situation, and embodiment, to counter the notion that form is separate from experience, an imposition on a chaos or unsayable formlessness, and the subsequent notion that forms are arbitrary or merely human constructions. Forms are not stable and separate from a fluid experience, and experience is not without its form-ing (see Gendlin, 1992: 95–96). Gendlin moves thought in the direction of the pre-reflective richness and movements of experience and embodiment. There we see that thought is not a departure from, nor an imposition upon, nor absent in, this embodied experience. Consequently nature, whether human or otherwise, is neither a fixed form nor without form.

Attention to pre-reflective experience has been one of the great contributions of existential and phenomenological thought. This opens the door to resolving many philosophical problems that can be traced to what I call a praxo-centrism: Since the *practice* of philosophy requires a reflective pause from world involvement, philosophers have been naturally prone to interpret knowledge as a form of reflection that is distinct from the world (e.g., “ideas” vs. “things”); such distinctions *create* perennial philosophical problems (e.g., How are ideas related to things in the world?). But here philosophers may have been guilty of imposing a model of knowing that simply follows from the way *philosophers* think, and that may miss or distort other forms of engagement (see Hatab, 1990a: 361).

Gendlin's analysis goes a long way toward overcoming the gap between philosophical reflection and human experience. Perhaps it is his working with real live human beings in psychotherapy that gives him an advantage over philosophers in such matters. (I don't think I mean to imply that philosophers are not real live human beings.) Such a milieu also gives him effective case data to illustrate the models he is proposing (see Gendlin, 1992: 66–77). One question I have is whether or not Gendlin's model might itself be praxocentrically limited in scope, that is, limited to the psychotherapeutic milieu. Does such a model ignore or distort more stable forms of speech and experience? Does it ignore other forms of speech and experience that are more open than therapy, that are not aiming to “get at” something, such as a solution to a life problem? Aside from these questions, I do think that his model applies quite well to creative activities of all sorts – effectively illustrated by a discussion of poetry (1992: 51–57) – and it could well

evolve into a general model of human conversation, in the sense of those dynamic, interactive, open processes that are nevertheless “guided” by something.

My remaining questions return to the issue of human nature. Gendlin is challenging the idea of a disconnected, arbitrary particularism with his notion of a dynamic, pluralistic, but situated and embodied human condition that can admit some sense of universality (see 1992: 24–26, 41, 98). I am very impressed by Gendlin’s category called “crossing,” an interactive, self-altering movement of reciprocal implications, and I was intrigued by his suggestion that this category can get at something cross-cultural in human nature that need not mean some kind of common form (see 1992: 144–145). But this was vaguely stated and I would like to know more. What is a cross-cultural, universal humanity? Can it be described in terms of any content or structure or what? How would it respond to the aforementioned problem of tribalism?

My suspicion is that Gendlin is some kind of postmetaphysical, Aristotelian realist. Aristotle’s notion of self-development is mentioned (1992: 85), as is the “ancient” notion that “nature and nurture are not separable in humans. Language and thought forms are not just added on; they reorganize the human animal” (1992: 41). The idea of living bodies as a “self-organizing process” (1992: 110) is reminiscent of Aristotle, and the configuration of “tripling” (1992: 129–131) suggests to me something like Aristotle’s three-fold structure of nutritive, sensitive, and rational soul. Aristotle’s contention that the soul and the world are a unity, a dual actualization of thought and nature,⁶ his belief in a *telos* to explain the forward driving dynamic of the life world that a merely material account could not explain, and his general scheme of potentiality and actuality – these Aristotelian notions suggest themselves when I read Gendlin’s work, especially the analysis of implication and carrying forward.⁷ In regard to Gendlin’s proposal of a universality in the human condition, is it anything like a modified Aristotelian realism?

I admit to being ambivalent about the whole question of the universal-particular distinction these days. Particularism has become an uncritical dogma in some circles (leading to significantly muddled and precipitous ideas about ethics, for one thing). But I also worry about the promotion of a discernable “human nature,” for three reasons. First, I am suspicious of what would constitute a human universal. To return to the therapeutic milieu as an example, I can imagine a psychological problem being resolved in any number of ways that seem substantially different and that need not even fit familiar techniques in Gendlin’s profession. I can imagine anxiety being resolved by uncovering early childhood traumas or relationships, by unmasking current oppressive regimes, by bootstrapping or coping skills, by the grace of Jesus, by Buddhist emptiness, by some success or a little good news . . . What is

universal here? What crosses? That humans know how to find solutions to their problems in different ways? That seems rather vacuous. Second, talk of universality is risky, because the less empty it is the greater the opportunity for exclusion or demotion (is a fundamentalist Christian solution to anxiety something less authentic than an existential therapeutic solution?). Third, there is, in my view, an inevitable tragic element in human existence in terms of death, loss, and limits, which from a phenomenological standpoint disrupts all “bases” and “attributes,” and which moreover constitutes the meaning of our lives. I mean this in the Heideggerian sense of being-toward-death. For me, it is the openness to our finitude that illuminates why the world is meaningful to us, and that helps clear the brush of encrusted and inherited meanings so that appropriate individual meanings might show more clearly. In addition, although I am open to the possibility of some kind of ethical universal, *being* ethical usually requires compassion, which comes from sensitivity to finitude and suffering; it also requires risk and sacrifice, which demand release from our attachments – these are things that “embracing the abyss” can help foster, in my view. I have learned from Gendlin that the more-than-form must be viewed in terms of potentiality and the movements of experience. But does this cover up radical finitude? Am I wrong to insist on such a tragic dimension in our lives?

Notes

1. Heidegger’s sincere commitment to fascism probably reflected his aims of “freeing” a Folk for their authentic culture. But the Nazis were tribalists whose aims were the domination and annihilation of *other* Folk. We should keep in mind that Heidegger did not accept the racial, biological, and supremacist categories of National Socialism. For a detailed and illuminating account of Heidegger’s thinking in the political context of his times, see Zimmerman (1990).
2. Gendlin (1992: 42–45) gives an effective summary of how the opposition of form and experience arose in modern philosophy and led to the notion of arbitrary imposition of form on experience. For an account of how Heidegger’s thought avoided this outcome but did not follow through in detailing the full range of an intricate order see Gendlin (1992: 30–32).
3. Such a scheme also produces a highly effective redescription of the “unconscious” as a yet-to-be-described intimation, rather than the problematic notion of a store of knowledge “behind” or “beyond” consciousness. See, for example, Gendlin (1973: 318–319).
4. See, for example, how the word “derive” can work in different ways, in Gendlin (1992: 54).
5. An excellent analysis of embodiment is Leder (1990).
6. See, for example, *Physics* III.3, and *De Anima* III.1–8.
7. “The (___) *implies* a carrying-forward step that has not yet been said” (78).

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