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Hermeneutic Encounters: Hans-Georg Gadamer in North America, 1968-1986

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Introduction

RECEIVING GADAMER

There are both good and bad reasons for American intellectual history's relative neglect of Hans-Georg Gadamer. On the one hand, Gadamer spent the vast majority of his scholarly career in Germany, writing for European readers, teaching European students, and lecturing before European audiences. His magnum opus*, Truth and Method*, did not appear in English until 1975, and an authoritative translation was not published until 1989. Even then, most Anglo-American philosophers reflexively consigned Gadamer's work to what they called, sometimes imprecisely and often derisively, the "continental" tradition of philosophy. When Gadamer did give lectures or hold visiting professorships in the United States and Canada, which he did every year between 1968 and 1986, he more often than not did so at the invitation of departments of literature or humanities.

Yet this sparse treatment of Gadamer's career in North America has obscured his significant contributions to its intellectual life. Gadamer traveled to the United States for the first time in 1968, the year before Richard Palmer, a professor of philosophy and religion at MacMurray College in Illinois, published a monograph-length book introducing philosophical hermeneutics to English-speaking audiences. For the following eighteen years, Gadamer traveled either to the United States or Canada to serve as a visiting professor at various colleges and universities, including Catholic University, Syracuse University, McMaster University, Vanderbilt University and, for nearly a decade, Boston College. When he grew too old to make the transatlantic journey, he continued to welcome American scholars and academics to his home in Heidelberg every summer for what came to be informally called "the Gadamer festival," a week of discussion about hermeneutics. These festivalgoers returned to the U.S. armed with

Gadamerian ideas and modes of thinking, which they incorporated into their own research projects and taught in their own seminars. As Jean Grondin writes in his biography of Gadamer, "The history of his ever-expanding circle of students has yet to be written."[1]

But Gadamer's importance to the intellectual history of North America extends beyond the small cadre of students that he mentored. The two decades that coincided with his visits marked a period of dramatic change in American intellectual life, especially in the areas of study that Gadamer called "the human sciences," or what in the Anglo-American tradition are known as "the humanities." In literary criticism, New Criticism and other styles of formalism were breathing their last breaths as proponents of literary theory, inspired by the work Jacques Derrida and French post-structuralism, introduced radically new ways of thinking about texts and ideas. In the social sciences, scholars were challenging the rosy positivism of the post-war period as they tried to make sense of unprecedented social and political upheaval in the United States and Western Europe. In Anglo-American philosophy, philosophers were pushing the so-called linguistic turn to its limits, redefining not only the content of Anglo-American philosophy but also the very purpose of philosophy itself. In the terminology of philosophical hermeneutics, the horizons of North American intellectual life were shifting—rapidly and decisively.

Gadamer made significant philosophical contributions to nearly all of these transformations. That said, his influence in North America should not be overstated. Gadamer achieved neither the name recognition nor the scholarly importance that some of his European peers—especially Derrida, and Foucault, but also Heidegger and Habermas—attained in the English-speaking world. Even today, Gadamer remains, at best, a marginal figure in American philosophical and literary circles.

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[1] Jean Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 267.

Yet the great irony of Gadamer's influence is that so many of his ideas have become philosophical commonplaces even as his name and work have faded from memory. Many of the really live philosophical questions in American intellectual history—What does it mean to study history as a discourse? How can historians make sense of these discourses across space, time, culture, and language? What is the nature and structure of intellectual change? —fall squarely within the scope of Gadamer's hermeneutics. What one of Gadamer's students once said of American philosophers is also true, in a broad sense, of American intellectual historians: "Everyone has now become a hermeneut."[2] In this respect, Gadamer's greatest contribution to American intellectual history is not to be found in the monographs that have been written about his work, but in the ability of his thinking to lend articulacy and clarity to ongoing debates in the field. Tracing his influence is an exercise in recovering the origin and development of the questions intellectual history still grapples with today.

With this in mind, this thesis attempts to accomplish three primary tasks. First, it offers an account of the major philosophical concepts of Gadamer's hermeneutics, especially those that proved most relevant to his reception in North America. I have approached this task in Chapter One through a close reading of the second section of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. Second, Chapters Two and Three document and evaluate the reception of Gadamer's work in the United States and Canada. Because of the breadth of Gadamer's influence and the scope of this project, it would be impossible to offer a comprehensive account of Gadamer's influence. Instead, I have chosen to focus on four discrete events of reception—what I am calling "encounters" between Gadamer and North American thinkers. I have chosen to call these events of reception

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[2] Hans-Georg Gadamer, interview in *Frankfurter Rundschau* (February 11, 1995); see Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography,* notes to pages 321-323, note 24, page 468.

"encounters" for a number of reasons which I explore in the following chapters, but there is one consideration that is worth stating here. In a literal sense, my narrative revolves around exchanges that Gadamer conducted with four specific North American thinkers—Richard Palmer, Paul de Mann, Charles Taylor, and Richard Rorty. In this story, I have used these figures almost synecdochally, as representatives of broader currents and tendencies in North American intellectual life. That said, it is necessary to recognize that no philosopher is an ideal representative of any philosophical movement, and conversely, that no movement can be reduced to the work of one of its representatives. Throughout, I have tried to balance the inescapable necessity of generalizing about intellectual movements with a sensitivity to the idiosyncrasies and specificities that characterize every philosopher's work. At points, no doubt, I have failed.

This approach entails some other definite limitations which are worth acknowledging. For one, my account prioritizes concentrated analysis of a handful philosophical questions over broad, archeological investigation into Gadamer's influence. For this reason, I have restricted my focus to the two decades that Gadamer was present in North America. A more comprehensive reception history would carry this narrative to the present, including the work of other of Gadamer's contemporaries, especially Robert Brandom and John McDowell, as well as of third generation Gadamerians like James Risser, Georgia Warnke, Kristin Gjesdal, and Theodore George. Secondly, in the interest of concision, my analysis sometimes collapses the divergent responses to Gadamer's work within a single movement. Geoffrey Hartman, for instance, conceptualized philosophical hermeneutics very differently than did de Man, though both nominally belonged to the same scholarly circle.[3] Finally, the complete story of Gadamer's reception in North America would engage some of his more strident American critics, including

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[3] See Geoffrey Hartman, *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

E.D. Hirsch and the followers of Leo Strauss, principally Stanley Rosen.[4] Each in their own way have broadened the ever-expanding horizon of Gadamer's hermeneutic project.

Nevertheless, I think that my general approach is justified by the third aim of this thesis, which is to model a way of doing intellectual history that is critically informed by Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Concretely, this attentiveness to the hermeneutical dimensions of reception translates into two methodological choices. First, it has led me to present the history of Gadamer's reception dialogically, meaning that my narrative accounts for Gadamer's reception by tracing the logic of question and answer—what questions interpreters asked of Gadamer's text, as well as what questions it raised—that produced a given encounter. Secondly, it has entailed focusing on *the event of reception itself* as an indispensable element of intellectual history, rather than as an auxiliary or accidental historical phenomenon. Taking seriously Gadamer's claim that the meaning of a text always "goes beyond" the meaning that its author held for it requires rethinking both the philosophical significance of reception for intellectual history and the narrative techniques that we devise to tell these histories. I address some of these questions in Chapters Two and Three, and I draw some tentative conclusion about a hermeneutic historiology in my final section.

Finally, any attempt to make sense a theory of understanding inevitably raises some self-reflective questions, and I have tried to grapple with these questions rather than shy away from them. As much as this project is an attempt to document the reception of Gadamer's work in the United States, it is also itself an event of reception, subject to the same hermeneutic dynamics that I identify in Gadamer's earlier encounters. It would be both a mistake and a missed

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[4] See, for example, a fascinating letter that Strauss wrote to Gadamer in 1961, later published as Leo Strauss and Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Correspondence concerning *Wahrheit und Methode*," in *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 2, (1978). Rosen offered his critique in his *Hermeneutics as Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

opportunity to pass over these dynamics as they manifest in this project. As Gadamer argued, understanding a text is always, in an important sense, an act of self-understanding. A genuine encounter between a text and an interpreter puts the self-understanding of the interpreter at risk; if successful, neither the interpreter nor the text emerges unchanged.

This is certainly true of Gadamer's encounter with North America, and it is true, too, of our encounter with Gadamer in 2020. If we always understand differently, how do we understand Gadamer today? What does our encounter with Gadamer today reveal—about Gadamer's texts and about us? How has our horizon moved, and how has Gadamer moved with it?

Chapter One

(RE)READING *TRUTH AND METHOD*

Before exploring the reception of Gadamer's work in America, I would like to establish some of the essential points of his philosophical hermeneutics through a close reading of the second section of *Truth and Method*. Gadamer's tome is really three books in one, with each of the book's three sections—the first on aesthetics, the second on the human sciences, and the third on language—able to stand on its own. It is the second section, however, in which Gadamer most fully develops his concept of philosophical hermeneutics and which, despite the evolution of his thought later in his life, remains the most systematic account of his philosophical project.

Yet as Gadamer's reflection on the nature of effective history makes clear, even a seemingly straightforward account of the internal economy of a text in fact constitutes an act of interpretation. It is important to bear in mind, then, that the following reading does not aspire to be a comprehensive explication of Gadamer's argument. It is, rather, *my* reading of Gadamer's text, conditioned by my interests and my position in the tradition to which both Gadamer's text and I belong. As any sensitive reader of Gadamer will recognize, I have omitted portions of his text that I deem nonessential to his argument, condensed sections that can be condensed, and supplied my own analyses of Gadamer's concepts where the text has "pulled me up short," as Gadamer would say. In particular, I have focused my analysis on elements of Gadamer's hermeneutics that figured prominently in his reception in North America. At critical junctures, I have supplied citations to Gadamer's text as signposts for the reader if they wish to turn to the text itself.

It has been my hope to supply the following analysis in the spirit of Gadamer's historically effected consciousness, which does its best to listen to the text in its claim to truth

while recognizing that complete analytic transparency remains a figment of the methodological imagination. A reception history must be aware of what is at stake in reception.

1.1 THE PREHISTORY OF HERMENEUTICS

Because Gadamer aimed to develop a genuinely historical hermeneutics, he grounded his own hermeneutics in the history of hermeneutic practice. In the opening chapter of the second section of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer identified two dominant historical traditions of textual interpretation: philological and theological hermeneutics. Philological hermeneutics, practiced by secular scholars and humanists, began from the premise that the texts of classical antiquity collectively formed the normative aesthetic and moral standard for all art and letters throughout history. The purpose of philological hermeneutics was to discern this standard by reconciling the diverse stylistic and philosophical tendencies of antiquity with one another. Theological hermeneutics, on the other hand, attempted to discover the unity of scripture by reconciling the text of the Old Testament with the text of the New and by squaring this synthetic interpretation with the ever-growing corpus of Church dogma.

Following the Reformation's decisive break with Catholic dogma, hermeneutics acquired a new urgency. Having rejected the Church's allegorical readings of scripture, the reformers declared scripture *sui ipsius interpres*: subject to no interpretive principle other than itself. To guide this new style of interpretive practice, the reformers appropriated a principle technique of philological hermeneutics: the hermeneutic circle. For the classical philologists, the hermeneutic circle was an interpretive method. It instructed readers to make sense of a text in a circular manner, by passing from an understanding of its individual parts to an understanding of the text as a whole, then to reinterpret the parts of the text in light of its whole meaning, and so

on in a continual cycle of interpretation and reinterpretation. By utilizing this principle, the reformers argued, theologians and laymen alike could make sense of the entirety of scripture without deferring to the Church's dogmatic teachings.

Gadamer identified the reformer's synthesis of theological and philological interpretation as the starting point of "prehistory" of his own hermeneutics.[1] Yet this prehistory was important to Gadamer only insofar as it established what his own hermeneutics is *not*—namely, a system of rules or techniques to guide the proper interpretation of a text. For Gadamer, the decisive *peripatetia* in the history of hermeneutics came at the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the work of the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. Unlike his predecessors, Schleiermacher fully drew out the implications of the Reformation's emphasis on the *sui ipsius interpres* nature of scripture. Although Schleiermacher still understood hermeneutics as the method for establishing the unity and coherence of scripture, he recognized that the reformer's rejection of Church dogma had thrown the basic structure of understanding itself into doubt. "The art of understanding came under fundamental theoretical examination and universal cultivation because neither scripturally nor rationally founded agreement could any longer constitute the dogmatic guidelines of textual interpretation," wrote Gadamer. "Thus it was necessary for Schleiermacher to provide a fundamental motivation for hermeneutical reflection and so place the problem of hermeneutics within a hitherto unknown horizon."[2] Before tackling the narrower question of textual and scriptural interpretation, Schleiermacher argued, hermeneutics had to investigate the nature of understanding more generally.

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[1] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Second, Revised Edition), trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 174.
[2] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 179.

Schleiermacher directed this inquiry in a particular direction. Deeply influenced by the Romantic concept of the creative genius, he conceptualized understanding as an act of artistic, divinatory subjectivity. To understand a text meant to transport oneself into the mind of its author through a creative, even clairvoyant act of imagination. This transposition was possible, Schleiermacher argued, because every individual participated in a universal *Weltgeist*, or world-Spirit, that served as a spiritual conduit for sympathetic identification. "Schleiermacher's particular contribution [to the history of hermeneutics] is psychological interpretation," Gadamer wrote. "[Interpretation] is ultimately a divinatory process, a placing of oneself within the whole framework of the author, an apprehension of the 'inner origin' of the composition of a work, a recreation of the creative act."[3] Understanding, like artistic creation itself, ultimately depended on an act of subjectivity—one mind coming to know another.

Although Gadamer identified Schleiermacher's work as the origin of a fundamental re-evaluation of hermeneutics, he rejected almost all of Schleiermacher's conclusions. He was particularly critical of Schleiermacher's contention that understanding required some mystical "communion of souls" that took place ahead of the work of actual interpretation. If an interpreter was able to arrive at some sort of shared understanding with an author, Gadamer argued, it was only because he had done the difficult work of interpreting the text.[4] By situating sympathetic understanding before interpretation, Schleiermacher had mixed up the sequence of understanding: sympathetic identification follows from interpretation, not the other way around. Moreover, Gadamer argued that this mistake betrayed Schleiermacher's incomplete commitment to the logic of the hermeneutic circle as a principle of understanding. Schleiermacher had

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[3] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 187.
[4] Following Weinsheimer and Marshall's translation of *Truth and Method*, I use the third-person singular masculine pronoun "he" throughout as a general or universal pronoun.

adopted this principle from his Protestant predecessors, but he had reinterpreted it as a psychological principle: an interpreter must understand a text as a part of an author's subjectivity and author's subjectivity as the totality of his art. Yet Schleiermacher's divinatory act of understanding defied the logic of the circle, according to which interpretation never fully resolves into static understanding. As an interpreter moves from part to whole and back to part, his understanding is always subject to reinterpretation. Yet Schleiermacher's divinatory act, which allowed the interpreter to gain unmediated access to the subjectivity of the author, promised an escape from the circle, the possibility of attaining a fixed and unmediated understanding of a text.

Gadamer also took aim at one of Schleiermacher's central hermeneutic creeds: that interpretation allowed an interpreter to understand a text better than the author understood it. Although this principle was as old as hermeneutics itself—indeed, Gadamer wrote that "in its changing interpretation the whole history of modern hermeneutics can be read"—Schleiermacher endowed it with a particular power. If all artistic creation issued forth from an act of individual genius, then various elements of those creations that remained opaque to the creator could become apparent to an interpreter who approached the text from a linguistic or historical distance.[5] This is obvious, for example, in the case of a non-native speaker who interprets a text in a foreign langue: for the non-native speaker, the grammar and syntax of the text become objects of conscious analysis in a way that they never were for the writer. According to Schleiermacher, insofar as the interpreter came to a more thorough understanding of the text *qua* text, it could be said that he had understood the text better than did the writer himself.

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[5] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 192.

But, as Gadamer pointed out, texts do not exist solely as linguistic artifacts. They are also media of communication, and as such, they also claim to say something true about their subject matter. In this respect, Schleiermacher's psychologized hermeneutics did not guarantee that an interpreter would understand the subject matter of a text better than its author. In fact, by construing texts as the products of a creative genius, Schleiermacher's hermeneutic practically guaranteed that the interpreter would fall short of understanding the substance of the text as well as its form. In this respect, Schleiermacher's hermeneutics manifested the tell-tale characteristic of what Gadamer identified as "method": it offered a universal procedure of understanding that was not sensitive to the nature of the object that is claimed to explain.

If Schleiermacher began the expansion of hermeneutics from a narrowly methodological practice of textual interpretation into a comprehensive theory of human understanding, Wilhelm Dilthey developed that project into a full-fledged philosophical system. Dilthey, who was born in 1883, the year before Schleiermacher died, became the heir and most clairvoyant interpreter of the so-called historical school, exemplified by the work of Leopold von Ranke and Johann Gustav Droysen.[6] Emerging from Giambattista Vico's and Johann Gottfried Herder's critique of Enlightenment ahistoricism, the historical school urged a complete rejection of historical teleology, either of the Hegelian variety, which understood history as the gradual manifestation of Mind in the world, or of the Enlightenment variety, which construed all of history as the gradual triumph of reason over superstition and irrationalism. So, too, did the historical school take aim at the reverse teleology of Weimar classicism, which located the zenith of human perfection in antiquity and charted all of history as the gradual decline and reemergence of classical perfection. The thinkers of the historical school argued that these superficially diverse

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[6] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 198.

set of historiographic approaches shared a common conception of historical understanding: they all judged the past by an *a priori* and ahistorical standard—the manifestation of Mind, or the triumph of Reason, or the aesthetic standards of classical antiquity. Against this aprioristic approach, the historical school proposed a program of careful documentary and linguistic research that would allow historians to understand the past on its own terms: "To think historically now means to acknowledge that each period has its own right to exist, its own perfection," Gadamer wrote of the historicist inclination.[7]

Yet the historical school's rejection of *a priori* historical standards raised a new interpretive problem: if historical events could not be evaluated by way of reference to some ahistorical principle, how could historians make sense of them? The historical school's solution was the same one that the Reformers had offered about scriptural interpretation and that Schleiermacher offered about textual interpretation: that historical events must be understood as parts of a complete historical whole, and that the historical whole must be understood as the unity of its parts. By applying the classical principle of the hermeneutic circle to the past itself, the anti-teleological polemic of the historical school suggests that all of history could be treated like text. "It is not just that sources are texts, but historical reality itself is a text that has to be understood," Gadamer wrote.[8] Like literary and religious texts, history, too, became *sui ipsus interpres*. No metaphysical principle or dogmatic interest could displace the inner logic of history itself.

But the historicists' textualization of history brought with it the same litany of problems and contradictions that had plagued Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. To that, it added the obvious contradictions that arose from treating the past itself as a text. First, it is not apparent that history

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[7] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 201.
[8] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 198.

forms a compressive whole in the way that a text does. The historical record is fragmentary, incomplete and, as Gadamer wrote, always "breaks off in the dark."[9] If the past is a text, it is a heavily redacted one with an indefinite beginning and an uncertain number of missing pages. Secondly, because the past is a whole only insofar as it includes an ever-accumulating series of presents, the historian does not stand outside the history he studies in the same way that a critic stands outside a text. Gadamer was quick to point out that the unity that allegedly undergirded the intelligibility of all history was not so much an empirical fact as a dogmatic presupposition. Who, after all, had stepped outside history so as to observe it as a whole?

Gadamer also accused the historical school of smuggling an implicit teleology into its avowedly anti-teleological hermeneutics. If discrete historical events could only be understood from the vantage point of universal history, then a historian could only determine the significance of a historical fact—indeed, whether that thing ought to be considered historical fact in the first place—from the vantage point of future events. "Whether or not something is successful not only determines the meaning of a single event and accounts for the fact that it produces a lasting effect or passes unnoticed," Gadamer wrote. "Success or failure causes the whole series of actions and events to be meaningful or meaningless."[10] Luther posting his ninety-five theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg, for example, became the start of the Reformation only in light of events that followed Luther's action; Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon was a success and not a failure only because he prevailed in the ensuing civil war. Although the standard by which historical events are to be judged cannot be deduced *a priori*, it remained teleological, insofar as past events seemed to aim at future events with which they were

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[9] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 199.
[10] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 203.

not intrinsically connected. "The ontological structure of history itself, then, is teleological, although without a telos," Gadamer wrote[11]

All this formed the background to Dilthey's project. Writing a generation after Droysen and Ranke, Dilthey recognized the shortcomings of the historical school and attempted to construct an epistemology of the *Geisteswissenschaften* that would overcome them. First and foremost, he understood that the historical school's rejection of the central tenets of Hegelian idealism raised a fundamental epistemological issue. According to Hegel, subjects could have knowledge of the world because the world was itself the manifestation of Mind; the metaphysical homogeneity of subject and object rendered knowledge of the world unproblematic. Rejecting this homogeneity, as Hegel's critics had done, rendered the mechanism by which mind comes to know the world uncertain.

Kant's transcendental idealism offered one strategy for solving this problem, and it was a solution that would prove particularly attractive to Dilthey. Born thirty years after Kant's death, Dilthey presented himself as the Kant of the human sciences, doing for the human sciences what Kant had done for the natural science by delineating the categories of understanding that would place knowledge of the historical world on firm epistemological footing. But Dilthey did not follow the neo-Kantians in trying uncritically to adapt Kant's philosophy to the human situation. Instead, he argued that the type of knowledge at work in the human sciences was essentially different from the type of knowledge at work in the *Naturwissenschaften*, or natural sciences. Whereas the natural sciences made judgments about the external world (Kant's *a priori* synthetic judgments), the human sciences took as their subject the historical world, which for Dilthey was a world that was always and everywhere a product of the human mind. (Dilthey would

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[11] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 203.

presumably be miffed by the idea of natural history.) In place of Hegel's absolute Mind, Dilthey adopted Vico's doctrine of *verus est ipsum factum*: that humans have privileged knowledge of the things that they themselves have made—civil society, art, history.

Dilthey's hermeneutics followed from this supposition. Because historical life and human life flowed from the same source, the structure of history mirrored the structure of an individual's own life—and for Dilthey, the experience of life was fundamentally the experience of continuity. Except in moments of acute psychological distress, Dilthey argued, humans do not experience their lives as discreet and fragmented experiences which they must then synthesize into a contiguous and unified whole. Rather, life always already comes in complete units of significance. "For [Dilthey] significance is not a logical concept, but is to be understood as an expression of *life,*" Gadamer wrote. "Life itself, flowing temporality, is ordered towards the formation of enduring units of significance. Life interprets itself. Life itself has a hermeneutical structure."[12] It was in this sense that Gadamer calls Dilthey's philosophy a "life philosophy": a philosophy based not on conceptual principles or dispassionate logical analyses but on the experience of life as humans live it. Philosophy was life thinking itself, as Gadamer liked to say.

But Dilthey's decision to model historical experience on the psychological experience of the individual raised problems, Gadamer argued, since the unity and coherence of history never becomes an object of experience for an individual in the same way that the unity of his life does. The finitude of any individual's life means that he only ever experiences a part of history. To resolve this contradiction, Dilthey had again appealed to Vico's principle of the primacy of maker's knowledge. According to Dilthey, the historical world that we find ourselves immersed in is not an alien world. It is, rather, a world formed by "objectification life itself," the same life

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[12] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 226.

that the subject is immersed in. As a result, Dilthey argued, the individual could experience the

continuity of all of history because history was of a kind with life. In this respect, Gadamer

rightly accused Dilthey of simply reverting to an amended form of Hegelianism, in which

historical consciousness replaced absolute Spirit as the concept of an objective Mind. Whereas

Hegel identified the self-encounter of the human mind with itself in the practice of metaphysics,

Dilthey identified it in the study of culture—history, literature, and art. Yet the structure of this

encounter remained fundamentally the same: Mind knows the world because Mind and world are

one.

Gadamer's criticism of this substitution foreshadows his more comprehensive critique of

Dilthey's hermeneutics, namely that behind his exultation of historical consciousness, Dilthey

attempted to arrive at a thoroughly ahistorical understanding of history— "the complete

dissolution of all alienness, of all difference," as Gadamer called it.[13] In this sense, Gadamer

argued, Dilthey's historical consciousness shared something not only with Hegel's idealism but

also with Enlightenment rationalism and empiricism. In the same way that the rationalist

believed that systematic doubt and rational reconstruction could deliver a subject to timeless, *a

priori* knowledge of the world, or the empiricist believed that experimentation allowed an

observer to transcend the accidental limitations of his own experience to gain objective

knowledge of his subject, Dilthey believed that historical consciousness allowed a subject to

transcend the limits of his finitude to gain a timeless understanding of the past.[14]

Yet this desire for an ahistorical grasp of history brought Dilthey's historical thinking

into conflict with his life philosophy. In the latter respect, Dilthey's great achievement was his

discovery that consciousness was itself a historical phenomenon, that it belonged to and was the

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[13] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 229.
[14] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 236.

product of the very historical reality that it endeavored to understand. At the same time, Dilthey tried to establish a methodology that would allow a historian to transcend his historical condition. These two warring tendencies gave rise to what Gadamer called the "aporias of historicism." If consciousness is a historical phenomenon, Gadamer argued, then our understanding of the past is crucially determined by our belonging to history. Any attempt to step outside that history to gain some timeless vantage-point would destroy the basis upon which we come to understand the past in the first place.

Dilthey had tried to overcome this contradiction by adopting a reflexive stance towards historical consciousness itself: once historical consciousness comes to understand itself historically—as conditioned by and part of an historical past—it can transcend its own historicity and continue with its task of deciphering the book of history. But Gadamer denied that such a reflexive posture could resolve the contradiction. Instead of drawing the logic of historical consciousness to its conclusion, Dilthey, under the spell of his "unresolved Cartesianism," had simply ignored the essential historicity of historical consciousness.[15] Like Descartes, he had failed to see that there existed a type of certainty inherent in life itself—an "immediate living certainty that all ends and values have when they appear in human consciousness with an absolute claim"—beyond the certainty of Cartesian rationalism.[16] Unlike scientific or rational certainty, the certainty that was native to life was not the product of methodological doubt, but way always already anterior to it.

Because of this aporia, Gadamer concluded that the hermeneutical project begun by Schleiermacher and continued by Dilthey had reached a philosophical dead end. Hermeneutics could not hope to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of texts merely by understanding the

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[15] Gadamer, *Truth and Method, 237.*
[16] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 238.

mind of an author or by reconstructing the historical conditions in which a text came to be. "Reconstructing the original circumstances, like all restoration, is a futile undertaking in view of the historicity of our being," Gadamer wrote. "What is reconstructed, a life brought back from the lost past, is not the original."[17] In place of "reconstruction," Gadamer proposed a new starting point for hermeneutics—what he called, following Hegel, the path of "integration."

Despite his ultimately ahistorical conclusions, Hegel had lucidly thought through the structure of historical consciousness—a consciousness that was always and everywhere part of history itself. In trying to discover the past, Hegel argued, historical consciousness was like a girl attempting to revive a piece of fruit that had been plucked from its tree. In its effort to allow the fruit of the historical past to live, historical consciousness supplies all the instruments of analysis that it has access to—linguistic, material, philological—but it cannot, like the girl, ultimately return that fruit to its tree. Although these efforts of historical reconstruction might teach us something about a historical phenomenon—Hegel compared it to wiping spots of rain or dust from the fruit—they did not, Hegel argued, represent our authentic relationship to the past. When we encounter the past, we always encounter it as something changed; it comes to us as something old, but also as something new. Our experience of the past is always tinged by this tension. Despite its obvious foreignness, the past still makes a claim on us—a claim to reveal something true about the world.

Gadamer took this insight as the starting point for his own philosophical hermeneutics. Unlike Romantic or historicist hermeneutics, Hegel presented the historicity of understanding as a fundamental fact of historical understanding, not as something to be overcome. As a result, the past, for Hegel, was not some foreign and inaccessible domain. It was, rather, a source of real

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[17] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 167.

truth and insight. "Hegel states a definite truth, inasmuch as the essential nature of the historical spirit consists not in the restoration of the past but in *thoughtful mediation with contemporary life,"* Gadamer wrote.[18] By contrast, Dilthey's historical consciousness was an aestheticizing consciousness: it reduced all of human culture to its expressive content, obscuring its claim to be a truthful and meaningful account of being. In so doing, historicism had reduced hermeneutics to a method which, while not completely inert, failed to account for the totality of our hermeneutic situation. For Gadamer, a comprehensive account of understanding had to take account of historical experience in its entirety—both the experience of foreignness and the experience of familiarity. In other words, hermeneutics had to take account not only of method—the attempt to make the past speak on its own terms—but also of truth—the past's stubborn and haunting ability to speak to us as contemporaries.

1.2 NEW HORIZONS: HUSSERL AND HEIDEGGER

In Germany during the first half of the twentieth century, to follow Hegel's path of integration meant to follow Husserl and Heidegger. For both Heidegger and Gadamer, Husserl's phenomenology provided the philosophical starting point for solving the fundamental problem facing post-Kantian philosophy, namely the apparent chasm between mind and the world in its various manifestations—scientific, historical, religious. How did mind, something within us, interact with the world, something out there?

Rather than offer a new solution to this old problem, Husserl had reframed the question altogether. For Husserl, the essential quality of consciousness was its intentionality, i.e., that consciousness is always consciousness *of something.* To speak of mind independently of world

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[18] Gadamer, *Truth and* Method, 168.

or of world independently of mind was pure abstraction, Husserl argued, since our experience is always of mind and the world as a unity—as Husserl put it, consciousness always assumes the form of a "coordination" between mind and world. The purpose of Husserl's phenomenology, therefore, was to explore the nature of this coordination—to "bracket[] all positing of being and investigate the subjective modes of giveness," as Gadamer described it.[19] From the phenomenological perspective, a comprehensive understanding of the world could only be arrived at through a comprehensive analysis of subjectivity.

Husserl's phenomenological turn opened up radical new philosophical possibilities. First, phenomenology made possible a fundamentally new way of characterizing experience. Husserl denied that discrete, intentional experiences of the sort championed by empiricist or rationalist epistemologies could ever serve as the basic experiential unit. We do, in fact, have discrete and intentional experiences of things—as when we consciously focus our attention on some object, be it a fork or a moment in life—but Husserl argued that this mode of experience is a derivative one, made possible by a more fundamental mode of engagement with the world, what Husserl calls "time-consciousness." Husserl developed his analysis of time-consciousness by way of analogy with spatial consciousness: just as we never perceive individual objects in space *in vacuo*—they always appear against some visual horizon—so, too, do discrete experiences exists against a temporal horizon. In the case of vision, it is the very presence this horizon that allows us to differentiate individual objects from each other; if the horizon disappeared, visual differentiation would become nigh impossible. The same was true, Husserl argued, of time-consciousness. Although we can direct our attention to discrete and immediate experiences, those experiences never stand alone; they only emerge against the unity of experience that unfolds in

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[19] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 244.

and across time. "Every such intentional experience always implies a twofold empty horizon of what is not actually meant in it, but towards which an actual meaning can, of its nature, be directed," Gadamer wrote.[20] These comprehensive horizons of meaning, not discrete experiences, represent the fundamental phenomenological unit.

But Husserl's re-description of experience didn't end there. For Husserl, these more comprehensive horizons of experience existed within another, even more comprehensive horizon, what Husserl called the "life-world": "the world in which we are immersed in the natural attitude that never becomes an object as such for us, but that represents the pregiven basis of all experience," as Gadamer defines it.[21] Importantly, the life-world as it emerged in phenomenological research was fundamentally different than the world that constituted the object of natural scientific research. Unlike the natural world, the life-world did not exist ontically: it was constituted entirely by subjectivity, meaning that it was also constituted historically. Moreover, a given life-world could not be situated in another, more comprehensive horizon. As the pregiven condition of all experience, it represented the phenomenological backstop. Life-worlds were therefore both historical and plural; they could not be reconciled in some "historical universe" that would encompass all life-worlds. As Gadamer recognized, Husserl had confronted the "specter of relativism" without shying away from it.[22]

Although Gadamer positioned Husserl's work as a significant step forward for the type of life philosophy that Dilthey originated, he argued that one of Dilthey's collaborators, Count Paul Yorck von Wartenburg, in fact had given the project its fullest expression. Yorck's philosophy began with life in a comprehensive sense: both biological life, the life of humans as

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[20] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 245.
[21] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 247.
[22] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 247.

living organism, and the life of consciousness, the life of humans as conscious beings. Influenced by Darwin's evolutionary theory, Yorck contended that these two modes of life were in fact structurally correlated. As in biological life, in which the constant assertion of the individual organism against every other organism results in a homeostatic and shared life form, so, too, in the life of consciousness does the constant assertion of self-consciousness against the alienness of objects and other consciousnesses result in a shared comportment between self and world. Although biological and conscious life begin with a primordial division (*Urteilung)* between self and other, both result in a unity in which self assimilates to itself what is other.

The fundamental act of consciousness, then, was assimilation. "What is alive preserves itself by drawing into itself everything that is outside it," Gadamer wrote of York's philosophy. "Everything that is alive nourishes itself on what is alien to it. The fundamental fact of being alive is assimilation."[23] Gadamer took this conclusion literally: every living organism sustains itself on something that is not itself—for example, food, water, and oxygen—which, by means of ingestion, becomes part of itself. Likewise, assimilation was the essential activity of self-consciousness. While constantly differentiating from the self everything that, as a potential object of knowledge, is not self—historical objects, literature, other people—self-consciousness simultaneously assimilates those things to its being; they become a part of self-consciousness itself. This process of assimilation and differentiation formed the basis of what Husserl would later call "comportment."

In this respect, both Husserl and York provided support for Hegel's project of integration: the task of hermeneutics was not to guide historical reconstruction but to explain the integration of past and present that everywhere characterizes historical experience. Gadamer argued that any

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[23] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 252.

effort by the human sciences to objectify the products of conscious life, or to elevate the subject to some supra-historical status, would destroy the possibility of understanding altogether. "What is alive is not such that a person could ever grasp it from the outside, in its living quality," Gadamer wrote. "The only way to grasp life is, rather, to become inwardly aware of it…life is experienced only in the awareness of oneself, the inner consciousness of one's own living."[24] Moreover, a true life philosophy of the sort developed by Husserl and Yorck could no longer abide by the naïve distinction between objectivism and subjectivism. Even to thus frame the debate conceded too much to the epistemological framework: it approached the subject on objectivist terms, as an entity that stands apart from, and in no necessary relationship with, the objects of intentionality.

Phenomenology after Husserl therefore provided philosophy with an entirely new task. Unlike rationalist epistemology, which offered a proscriptive method for arriving at universally valid representations of the world, phenomenological research attempted to describe the productivity of life, which always already had the form of a comportment between the subject and the world. "Only insofar as philosophical reflection corresponds to the structure of being alive does it acquire its own legitimacy," Gadamer wrote. "Its task is to understand the achievements of consciousness in terms of their origin, understanding them as results—i.e., as the projection of the original being-alive and its original division."[25] Life philosophy would serve to describe not what consciousness can do or what it ought to do, but what "happens to us over and above our wanting and doing," as Gadamer wrote in the preface to *Truth and Method.*[26]

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[24] Gadamer, *Truth and* Method, 253.
[25] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 253.
[26] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* xxviii.

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Yet Gadamer believed that it was Heidegger, not Husserl, who had most fully realized this philosophical project. Although Heidegger appropriated much of Husserl's phenomenology, he provided it with a much more radical starting point. To Heidegger, Husserl's phenomenology retained too much too much of Cartesianism, insofar as it sought to establish the nature of being as a whole on the basis of consciousness. Heidegger, by contrast, took the question of being in an entirely new direction. *Contra* the epistemological tradition, which began the question of being with a turn to the subject's self-presence, Heidegger began his inquiry into being with a turn outward. For Heidegger, Gadamer wrote, "[t]here is a quite different reason why the understanding of being is possible at all, namely that there is a 'there,' a clearing in being—i.e., a distinction between being and beings. Inquiry into the fundamental fact that this 'exists' is, in fact, inquiry into being."[27]

For Heidegger, an account of the being of human beings, what he called "Dasein," had to involve the reality of this "there." To capture the fact that the encounter between human beings and the world was not merely incidental to Dasein but is fact constituted its very nature, Heidegger referred to Dasein as "being-in-the-world": to be human meant to be in and among the world. Heidegger recognized that we are not merely "in" the world in the same way that we can be "in" a room or a building. (Heidegger called this type of being-in "being-at-hand.) We are in the world in the sense that without the world, there would be no such thing as Dasein. In this sense, Heidegger's concept of Dasein was itself a radicalization of Husserl's concept of comportment. For Heidegger, the comportment of human beings and the world was not merely a discovery of phenomenological research. It was the fundamental fact of ontology.

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[27] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 257.

Like Husserl's phenomenology, Heidegger's movement towards this existential ontology opened up a dramatic new way of characterizing experience. Because being fundamentally belonged in the world, Heidegger characterized Dasein's native condition in the world not as a relationship of objectivization—mind coming to know the world but objectifying it—but of what Heidegger called "understanding." Both he and Gadamer used this term "understanding" in a particular sense. In Heideggerian terms, understanding is not an achievement of consciousness so much as it was an existential condition. "Understanding is not a resigned ideal of human experience adopted in the old age of the spirit, as with Dilthey; nor is it, as with Husserl, a last methodological ideal of philosophy in contrast to the naïveté of unreflecting life," Gadamer wrote. "It is, on the contrary, the *original form of realization of Dasein*, which is being-in-the-world."[28]

Heidegger identified a number of key characteristics of this understanding. For one, understanding is projective, meaning it is concerned with Dasein's ability to act in the future. It captures our pre-articulate orientation in the world, not unlike the way our orientation in familiar locations allows us to successfully navigate those spaces without conscious thought. As a result, understanding is also fundamentally practical. Gadamer noted that despite their apparent differences, understanding in the natural sciences (understanding the structure of a molecule, for example), understanding in a practical sense (understanding how to ride a bicycle or draw a picture), and understanding a text (being able to interpret it) all share the basic characteristic of "knowing one's way around" a thing, of being able to successfully use a thing to achieve something else. Finally, insofar as all understanding involves knowing one's way around something, it also contains an element of self-knowledge: it entails the ability to project future

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[28] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 259.

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possibilities of one's own engagement with the world. As Gadamer concluded, "*all such understanding is ultimately self-understanding*."[29]

And for Heidegger, this self-understanding was characterized by an inescapable experience of one's own limitedness and finitude. Although Dasein projects itself towards future possibilities of being, it quickly learns that those possibilities are not infinite, since Dasein always already finds itself in a world that it did not itself create. This characteristic of Dasein is what Heidegger calls "thrownness," and its correlative ontological condition—that the world already precedes our being in it—he called "facticity." Facticity is evident not only in things-at-hand that present us with an inescapable claim to antiquity—ruins, rock formations, texts—but also in less tangible and more totalizing ways—by traditions, social orders, even language itself. From the standpoint of the epistemological tradition, facticity acted as a barrier to the complete realization of self-conscious being that rises above its temporality to gain a timeless perspective on the world. But for Heidegger and for Gadamer, facticity was neither good nor bad—it simply *was*. To describe the condition of Dasein limited being-in-the-world, Heidegger developed what he called the "hermeneutics of facticity."

Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity served as the final launching pad for Gadamer's own philosophical hermeneutics. "The main point of the hermeneutics of facticity…was that no freely chosen relation toward one's own being can get behind the facticity of this being," Gadamer wrote. "Everything that makes possible and limits Dasein's projection ineluctably precedes it."[30] For Heidegger, the hermeneutics of facticity had served as a stepping-stone to an entirely new account of being, but Gadamer recognized that Heidegger's analysis had also transformed the set of questions that the human sciences needed to ask about themselves. In fact,

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[29] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 260.
[30] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 246.

Gadamer recognized that the human sciences were in fact the perfect field in which to demonstrate the force of Heidegger's ontology. "That the structure of Dasein is thrown projection, that in realizing its own being Dasein is understanding, must also be true of the act of understanding in the human sciences," Gadamer wrote. "The general structure of understanding is concretized in historical understanding, in that the concrete bonds of custom and tradition and the corresponding possibilities of one's own future become effective in understanding itself."

In this respect, Heidegger's analysis opened up radical new possibilities for hermeneutics. If understanding was the basic mode of being-in-the-world and not the product of methodological reflection or transhistorical sympathetic identification, then the task of a hermeneutics was not to offer new techniques of interpretation but to describe the movement and productivity of understanding as it always occurs. Following Heidegger, Gadamer made hermeneutics a subspecies of life philosophy: its purpose was to explicate understanding in terms of life. And that meant explicating understanding in terms of Dasein's finite being. "That we study history only insofar as we are ourselves 'historical' means that the historicity of human Dasein in its expectancy and its forgetting is the condition of our being able to re-present the past," Gadamer wrote.[31] The promise of this new hermeneutics was to explain historical understanding as itself a historical phenomenon.

Thus for Gadamer, the history of hermeneutics did not culminate in a more clairvoyant method of textual interpretation but in a new philosophical orientation towards understanding itself. Just what this orientation entailed was the subject of Gadamer's own hermeneutic analysis.

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[31] Gadamer, *Truth and Method, 262.*

The Hermeneutic Circle

The basis of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics was his re-description of the condition understanding in light of Heidegger's analysis. To begin this description, Gadamer reinterpreted the classical interpretive principle of the hermeneutic circle as a descriptive ontological account of understanding—in other words, as a description of what happens when an interpreter confronts a text.

A complete account of understanding, Gadamer argued, had to begin before the interpretive act itself, with the "fore-conceptions" and "fore-meanings" that an interpreter brings to a text. The most fundamental of these fore-conceptions is the fore-conception of completeness: an interpreter always approaches a text with the expectation that it has something to say and that it will say it in a way that is intelligible. Without this fore-conception, Gadamer argued, an interpreter would lack any motivation for approaching the text in the first place. Aside from a fore-conception of completeness, an interpreter brings to a text any number of other expectations—that it is a timeless classic, or an uplifting romance, or a factual chronicle of a past era. Gadamer called these expectations "fore meanings."

The circle unfolds with the process of reading. Diving into a text, an interpreter at first gleans a limited meaning from only a portion of the text, which he projects forward as meaning onto the whole of the text in a process which Gadamer called "fore-projection." As the interpreter reads on, these fore-projections in turn become fore-conceptions that he brings to the remainder of the text. As he encounters new portions of the text, he revises his old fore-conceptions in light of the new meanings and devises new, more comprehensive fore-projections. Once he had encountered the text as a whole, he uses his grasp of the whole to reinterpret

specific parts, which in turn revise his understanding of the whole, and so on. "Interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones," Gadamer wrote. "This constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretation."[32]

But what happens when understanding breaks down, when we misunderstand or fail to understand at all? Gadamer argued that misunderstanding occurs when the text fails to substantiate the interpreter's fore-conceptions or fore-meanings, either in the realm of linguistic usage or of content. In the realm of linguistic usage, an interpreter might become aware that a text employs a term in a sense that is unfamiliar to him, and, as a consequence, he fails to make sense of a clause or sentence because he cannot grasp its terminology. In the realm of content, a text might employ a concept that is completely foreign to the reader. In either case, the meaning of a text frustrates the reader's fore-conception—Gadamer called this experience "being pulled up short by the text."[33]

It is at this point that a sensitive hermeneutic reader, having become aware of his fore-conceptions *as* fore-conceptions, faces a choice: either to proceed with his existing fore-conception or to revise them in light of the new meaning presented by the text. In the first case, he risks failing to understand the meaning of the text as a whole, since his unaltered fore-conceptions will continue to obscure individual parts of the text's meaning. Alternatively, he may revise his fore-conception to accommodate the expansive meaning of the text. But this act of revision requires the reader to recognize the distance between his own fore-meaning and the meaning of the text itself. Gadamer wrote, "[A] person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the

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[32] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 267.
[33] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 268.

start sensitive to the text's alterity. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither 'neutrality' with respect to content nor the extinction of one's self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices."[34] Foreshadowing one of Gadamer's other major concepts, it unfolds in the form of a dialogue. In this respect, Gadamer's conception of interpretation, like Heidegger's account of understanding more generally, is fundamentally practical. It entails self-knowledge and the possibility of projection as much as it entails static knowledge of the other.

But what of the circle itself? At first blush, Gadamer appears to have denigrated the process of understanding to the status of a vicious circle, since he includes pre-judgements (i.e., prejudices) as a necessary component of understanding. Is prejudice not, however, a barrier to understanding, something to be overcome in the process of grasping a text's meaning? For Gadamer, coming to see how prejudice is, in fact, productive of understanding required coming to terms with an a more complex prejudice: the prejudice against prejudice itself.

The Rehabilitation of Prejudice

Prejudice is an essential concept for Gadamer's hermeneutic analysis, but he employed the term in a narrowly etymological sense: prejudices are judgments that we arrive at before we have encountered all the relevant material. In this sense, every stage of the interpretive process—fore-meanings, fore-projections, fore-conceptions—involves prejudice, since they all precede a comprehensive understanding of the text. Insofar as Gadamer used the term to describe a necessary component of understanding, he used it as normatively neutral term: it simply describes what we do when we understand. Yet Gadamer was cognizant that, in the

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[34] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 269.

Enlightenment's epistemology, "prejudice" was a dirty word. In fact, Gadamer argued, a defining characteristic of Enlightenment epistemology was its "prejudice against prejudice itself."[35]

In Gadamer's reckoning, the Enlightenment's prejudice against prejudice was a consequence of its conception of knowledge as something arrived at through methodological investigation. If knowledge only attains the status of certainty when it has been subjected to reason (i.e. radical doubt or empirical investigation), then any knowledge which has yet to be subject to that method is, by definition, prejudicial. "The only thing that gives a judgment dignity is having a basis, a methodological justification (and not the fact that it may actually be correct)," Gadamer wrote. "For the Enlightenment, the absence of such a basis does not mean that there might be other kinds of certainty, but rather that the judgment has no foundation in the things themselves—i.e., that it is 'unfounded.'"[36] In Gadamer's parlance, the Enlightenment collapsed truth and method. Without method, truth disappeared.

This union between truth and method, Gadamer argued, held deep implications for post-Enlightenment historiography. Insofar as the dominant historiographical traditions of the nineteenth century—especially historicism—had adopted the Enlightenment's methodological epistemology, they, too, manifested its prejudice against prejudice. Although historicism emerged in large part as a subset of the Romantic reaction against Enlightenment rationalism, Gadamer argued that it had nevertheless adopted its primary historiographical scheme, defined by reason's progressive conquest of tradition and myth. Whereas the Enlightenment championed this steady march towards the hegemony of reason, Romanticism had reversed the Enlightenment's valuation, advocating instead for the preservation of mythical tradition in the

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[35] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 270.
[36] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 271.

face of cold and unfeeling reason. Yet it had done so without challenging the Enlightenment's underlying premise that myth and tradition, on the one hand, and reason on the other were somehow at odds. Romanticism, Gadamer argued, simply rejected the Enlightenment's preference for reason in favor of a preference for myth.

Thus historicism, which emerged from Romanticism's preservationist impulse, had unwittingly inherited the Enlightenment's preference for methodological knowledge. For this reason, despite being superficially in conflict, historicism and Enlightenment rationalism were able to develop symbiotically: historical explanation became the detour that reason could take when reason alone failed to explain a phenomenon or text in purely rational terms. "If the Enlightenment considers it an established fact that all tradition that reason shows to be impossible (i.e., nonsense) can only be understood historically—i.e., by going back to the past's way of looking at things—then the historical consciousness that emerges in Romanticism involves a radicalization of the Enlightenment," Gadamer wrote.[37] As the case of Dilthey had showed, historicism had culminated in the paradoxical effort to find a universal and ahistorical method for understanding that which was manifestly particular and historical—namely, the past and its tradition.

But was such a method possible? Not, Gadamer recognized, according to Heidegger's analysis. If understanding is Dasein's native condition in the world, then prejudice is always a component of understanding. Historicism promised too much when it offered a method to achieve a completely unprejudiced understanding of the past. A historical hermeneutics that was sensitive to Heidegger's claims would have to surrender this claim to offer an ahistorical, unprejudiced vantage point onto the past and come to terms with the reality of prejudice in

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[37] Gadamer, *Truth and Method, 275.*

understanding. In other words, it would have to recognize the reality of facticity, that an interpreter belongs to a work that he did not create, yet which did create him. "In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it," Gadamer wrote. "The focus on subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life… *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being*."[38]

Authority and Tradition

The question facing hermeneutics, then, was not how to eliminate prejudice from understanding altogether but how to discriminate between legitimate prejudices and illegitimate ones—a question that appeared meaningless within the logic of Enlightenment epistemology. Legitimate prejudices, Gadamer argued, were prejudices that we accept on the basis of legitimate authority. But the concept of authority, like the concept of prejudice, required philosophical rehabilitation. By the Enlightenment's epistemological standards, a judgment that one accepts on the basis of authority—the authority of the Church, or an intellectual—was always a prejudice, since it had not been subjected to an individual's rational judgement. But Gadamer denied such a hard antithesis between authority and reason. Instead, he argued that recognizing an authority was itself an act of judgement. "[Authority] rests on acknowledgment and hence on an act of reason itself which, aware of its own limitations, trusts to the better insight of others," he wrote. "Authority in this sense, properly understood, has nothing to do with blind obedience to commands."[39] One could grant authority to an individual, for example, on the basis of a judgment that that person had arrived at a more perspicacious understanding than one's own, or

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[38] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 277.
[39] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 279.

to an institution on the basis of its trustworthiness. Of course, it remains the true that much authority persists through sheer intellectual inertia, coercion, or suppression, but Gadamer denied that these so-called authorities were authorities in a true sense. In fact, this had been precisely the Enlightenment's error: to discredit the concept of authority as a whole on the basis of illegitimate authorities.

Aside from institutions or individuals, Gadamer argued that tradition itself could serve as a source of legitimate prejudices. "That which has been sanctioned by tradition and custom has an authority that is nameless, and our finite historical being is marked by the fact that the authority of what has been handed down to us—and not just what is clearly grounded—always has power over our attitudes and behaviors," he wrote.[40] Nor was judgement totally absent from tradition: "Preservation," Gadamer wrote, "is as much a freely chosen action as are revolution and renewal."[41] It is important to note, however, that Gadamer has adopted the term "tradition" only to drastically revise its meaning, much like he did with "prejudice." For Gadamer, tradition was more than a canon of texts or a set of tried-and-true interpretive practices; it was the whole force of past ideas and texts, something approaching the all-encompassing nature of Heidegger's facticity. For Gadamer, the force of tradition made certain subjects and texts appear as inherently meaningful while others did not. The effect of tradition was evident, for example, in a historian's choice of a subject of inquiry. As Gadamer wrote, "The real fulfillment of the historical task is to determine the significance of what is examined. But the significance exists at the beginning of any such research as well as at the end: in choosing the theme to be investigated, awakening the desire to investigate, gaining a new problematic."[42] In this respect, Gadamer argued that no

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[40] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 280.
[41] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 282.
[42] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 282.

historian or interpreter could entirely escape the effect of tradition. To do so would mean living in a world where nothing appeared innately significant or meaningful.

Aside from individual or institutional authority, Gadamer argued, tradition itself could serve as a source of legitimate prejudices. "That which has been sanctioned by tradition and custom has an authority that is nameless, and our finite historical being is marked by the fact that the authority of what has been handed down to us—and not just what is clearly grounded—always has power over our attitudes and behaviors," he wrote.[43] In the case of tradition, the antithesis between reason and authority falls apart: "Preservation is as much a freely chosen action as are revolution and renewal."[44] Here, again, Gadamer appropriated a familiar term—"tradition"—only to drastically revise its meaning. For Gadamer, tradition: it directs our care. As finite beings, we do not encounter a limitless field of questions and subjects towards which we can direct our care and attention. Certain things present themselves as immediately significant to us independent of our choice to direct our attention towards them. Gadamer wrote, "The real fulfillment of the historical task is to determine the significance of what is examined. But the significance exists at the beginning of any such research as well as at the end: in choosing the theme to be investigated, awakening the desire to investigate, gaining a new problematic."[45] Tradition determines what appears as significant to us, what presents itself to us as worthy of and in need of our attention. Understood in this sense, it makes as little sense to speak of escaping the effects of tradition as it does to speak about living in the world in a completely disinterested and dispassionate way. Tradition determines our basic orientation of care towards the world.

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[43] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 280.
[44] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 282.
[45] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 282.

And no species of understanding—the human sciences included—escape its effects. But what exactly does it mean for the human sciences to manifest the effect of tradition? Gadamer used a comparison between the logic of the human sciences and the logic of the natural sciences to demonstrate this point. In the natural sciences, the history of past discoveries within a given field of research—the history of pre-Pasteurian germ theory, for example—has no necessary epistemological bearing on new discoveries in that field; the epistemic value of a discovery is independent of what came before it. But this is not the case in the human sciences. Although historians have to adapt their analyses to new evidence, the character of a new analysis remains crucially connected to the work that came before it. Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, for example, remains an indispensable part of the study of antiquity, even though contemporary historians have falsified much of its evidence and rejected nearly all of its substantive conclusions. Yet as a part of the tradition that shaped past and present inquiry, it still offers insights that contemporary historians care about and have to contend with. "Our historical consciousness is always filled with a variety of voices in which the echo of the past is heard," Gadamer wrote. "Only in the multifariousness of such voices does it exist: this constitutes the nature of the tradition in which we want to share and have a part."[46]

This contrast gets to the heart of the difference that Gadamer identified between the natural and human sciences, and it provides a clue to why the human sciences in particular must embrace the reality of tradition. Unlike in the natural sciences, Gadamer argued, the human science's objects of inquiry—i.e. the past and past events—do not exist ontically independent of inquiries into them; they are not objects-in-themelves in the same way that molecules or planets are. Gadamer wrote, "Whereas the object of the natural sciences can be described idealiter as

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[46] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 284.

what would be known in the perfect knowledge of nature, it is senseless to speak of perfect

knowledge of history, and for this reason it is not possible to speak of an 'object in itself'

towards which its research is directed."[47] The historical object exists only in mediation, in the

way it presents itself via tradition as an object of contemporary interest: "[I]n the human sciences

the particular research questions concerning tradition that we are interested in pursuing are

motivated in a special way by the present and its interest," Gadamer wrote. "The theme and

object of research are actually constituted by the motivation of the inquiry."[48] Only when the

human sciences cease to chase the phantom of the historical object does their true nature as the

mediation of tradition become clear.

Understanding as an Event

What effect, then, does belonging to a tradition have on understanding? Gadamer found

an answer to this question in Heidegger's reinterpretation of the hermeneutic circle as an

ontological description of all understanding. Recall that Gadamer, following Heidegger,

described understanding as the projection and revision of anticipatory fore-conceptions and fore-

understandings. As a reader interprets, he foregrounds his own prejudices while remaining open

to the text in its alterity. This might seem like a purely psychological description of what takes

place in all understanding, but Gadamer took his analysis one step further, forcing understanding

out of the head of the interpreter by re-describing it as an act of participation in what he called

"an event of tradition."

Here, the metaphor of an interpreter existing *within* a tradition proved particularly apt.

Gadamer argued that we do not come to care for historical objects through self-sustained acts of

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[47] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 285.
[48] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 284.

mental willpower; we know and care about the past because its effect manifests in tradition. Stated negatively, the lacunae of tradition do not appear to us lacunae because they do not appear to us at all. We have no care for them. Conversely, every object that does appear as a potential object of historical interest already belongs to the tradition to which we also belong. Before we even select an object as the theme of a historical inquiry, Gadamer argued, we already exist in a relationship with it that exceeds idle curiosity. "Hermeneutics must start from the position that a person seeking to understand something has a bond to the subject matter that comes into language through the traditional text and has, or acquires, a connection with the tradition from which the text speaks," he wrote.[49] Tradition bestows prejudices upon us that make certain objects appear to be more meaningful and significant than others.

This does not mean, however, that we have some prophetic, intuitive understanding of traditionary texts. Despite the fact that both the interpreter and traditionary texts belong to the same tradition, the distance between an interpreter's fore-meaning and the meaning of the text might be, and often is, great. As Gadamer wrote, "Hermeneutical consciousness is aware that its bond to this subject matter does not consist in some self-evident, unquestioned unanimity, as is the case with the unbroken stream of tradition."[50] To the contrary, the fundamental hermeneutical experience is the experience of tension in a text between the familiar and the foreign: "It is the play between the traditionary text's strangeness and familiar to us, between being a historically intended, distances object and belonging to a tradition," Gadamer wrote. "*The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between.*"[51]

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[49] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 295.
[50] Gadamer, Truth and Method, 295.
[51] Gadamer, Truth and Method, 295.

Yet making sense of this in-between requires going beyond the subjectivity of the interpreter. In this respect, Gadamer's re-description of the hermeneutic situation added another valence to the hermeneutical circle as an ontological description of understanding: the circle now not only describes the process of projecting and adapting fore-meanings and fore-conceptions, but also the movement of understanding between familiarity and foreignness. It follows that hermeneutics, as the description of the process of understanding, must take account both of the historical situation of the interpreter himself, which determines what appears as familiar to him, and of the historical situation of the text, which is the source of its foreignness. Fundamentally, hermeneutics is concerned not with one of the one situation or the other but with the relationship between the two, what Gadamer called the "temporal distance" between them. "[Hermeneutics] must foreground what has remained entirely peripheral in previous hermeneutics: temporal distance and its significance for understanding," wrote Gadamer.[52]

For Gadamer, temporal distance was a boon to understanding rather than a barrier. This was not an entirely new idea. Historicist hermeneutics, for example, had long maintained that temporal distance played an essential role in understanding, insofar as it served to strip away all the local prejudices and preconceptions that might stand in the way of an interpreter coming to an objective understanding a text. Yet Gadamer denied that this was its real productivity, arguing instead that temporal distance was itself *productive* of meaning, insofar as the passage of time allowed subsequent interpreters to ask new questions of a text and discover new meanings in it. As Gadamer put it, meaning of a text "not just occasionally but always…goes beyond its author."[53] In this respect, Gadamer argued, an author could not claim a privileged understanding of the meaning of his text. To the contrary, he had only a single, limited grasp of its meaning.

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[52] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 296.
[53] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 296.

Subsequent interpreters, approaching a text with their own sets of questions and interests, do not merely fail to discover its original meaning; they in fact discover and generate new meanings from the text. "Every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text belongs to the whole tradition whose content interests the age and in which it seeks to understand itself," wrote Gadamer.[54] "…It is enough to say that we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all.*"[55]

In Gadamer's final analysis, understanding, like meaning itself, appeared a historical phenomenon. Rather than "mysterious communion of souls" or the translocation of minds across time, understanding was an historical event, embedded in time just like the Battle of Marathon or the fall of the Berlin Wall. This fact served as the crux of Gadamer's new philosophical hermeneutics. "Real historical thinking must take account of its own historicity," Gadamer wrote. "A hermeneutics adequate to the subject matter would have to demonstrate the reality and efficacy of history within understanding itself."[56] Gadamer called this type of historically-sensitive history *Wirkungsgeschichte,* or the history of effect.

Historically Effected Consciousness and the Fusion of Horizons

It was clear to Gadamer that his thematization of understanding as an historical event challenged historicism's claim to offer a timeless and objective understanding of the past. Yet it fell to philosophical hermeneutics to offer a better description of historical consciousness that took systematic account of the efficacy of history within understanding itself—what he called "the history of effect." Gadamer made clear that he neither expected nor desired for the history

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[54] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 296.
[55] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 297.
[56] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300.

of effect to become a scholarly discipline in its own right. The particular power of history over our understanding, he argued, was that it remained operative whether or not we are conscious of it. To try to sequester it in a separate discipline would only prove futile. From the standpoint of philosophical hermeneutics, the important thing was that the human sciences incorporate the history of effect into their own methodological self-consciousness, so as to avoid either actively denying historicity altogether (as the methodological sciences had done) or believing that, having become aware of its power, they could transcend it through an act of self-consciousness (as Dilthey's historicism had tried to do).

Gadamer called this new historical consciousness "historically effected consciousness," or, more literally, "consciousness that has been effected by history." (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein).* He argued that this consciousness had a three-fold structure: first, it was, like all consciousness, affected by history; second, it was aware of being thus affected; and, most importantly, it was aware that being thus affected created inescapable limits for its own self-understanding. Unlike historicism's historical consciousness, which sought to transcend its historical situation to achieve a timeless perspective on the past, Gadamer's historically effected consciousness was a radically finite consciousness. "*To be historically means that knowledge of oneself cannot be complete,*" Gadamer wrote. "All self-knowledge arises from what is historically pregiven…and hence both prescribes and limits every possibility for understanding any tradition whatsoever in its historical alterity."[57] When Gadamer said that self awareness is only ever a flicker in the closed circuits of historical life, he meant it literally. The historically effected consciousness had come to terms with the fact that the sum total of historical self awareness illuminated only a very small patch of historical being.

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[57] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 302.

But what did it mean for such a consciousness to understand at all? Faced with this question, Gadamer returned to Husserl's concept of the horizon. Husserl had used the spatial metaphor of the horizon to illustrate the nature of time-consciousness, in which discreet intentional experiences appeared against an implicit background of past and future experience. While retaining Husserl's sense of the horizon as a limited yet ever-present backdrop to being, Gadamer adapted Husserl's concept to describe the nature of finite, historical understanding. Like experience itself, Gadamer argued, understanding takes place within a horizon of meaning: "The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point," wrote Gadamer. "A person who has a horizon knows the relative significance of everything within this horizon, whether it is near or far, great or small."[58] Historicism had correctly recognized that historical texts and event occupied their own distinct horizons, and that interpreters made a mistake when they naively approached a text as though it existed within their more immediate horizon. And yet, Gadamer charged, historicism had erred in arguing that the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter were completely separate, such that an interpreter could transport himself from his own horizon behind into the horizon of the text. As the very concept of the horizon implies, an individual never fully gets beyond his horizon; when we move, the horizon moves with us. Like attempting to escape the effect of tradition, attempting to abandon one's horizon of meaning would require surrendering the possibility of understanding a text at all. "We think we understand when we see the past from a historical standpoint—i.e., transpose ourselves into the historical situation and try to reconstruct the historical horizon, Gadamer wrote. "In fact, however, we have given up the claim to find in the past any truth that is valid and intelligible for ourselves."[59]

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[58] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 302.
[59] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 303.

But if historical understanding does not require adopting an entirely new horizon, then what does it entail? Gadamer described the movement of understanding with the powerful metaphor of the "fusion of horizons."[60] Yet this central concept of Gadamer's hermeneutics remains somewhat misleading. For Gadamer, a historical horizon was, by necessity, single and unified. "Everything contained in historical consciousness is in fact embraced by a single historical horizon," he wrote. "Our own past and that other past towards which our historical consciousness is directed help to shape this moving horizon out of which human life always lives and which determines its heritage and tradition."[61] Yet if the horizon is singular, how can horizons fuse? Gadamer argued that despite the ultimate unity of our historical horizon, a sensitive interpreter projects a distinct historical horizon around a text in order to prevent him from allowing his fore-understandings to obscure the foreign or unfamiliar elements of a text, thereby mistakenly assimilating them to his own fore-meanings. But the projection of this distinct horizon, like Husserl's act of intentional consciousness, represented only an intermediate step on the way to genuine understanding: "As the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded," wrote Gadamer. "To bring about this fusion in a regulated way is the task for what we called historically effected consciousness."[62]

Genuine understanding occurs, Gadamer argued, when the projected horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter fused into a single, broader, and more comprehensive horizon. "[Understanding] always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularly but also that of the other," wrote Gadamer.[63] The horizon that results from this fusion does not offer a static or limitless perspective, but it does represent a more

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[60] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305.
[61] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 304.
[62] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 307.
[63] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305.

comprehensive, and therefore improved, vantage point. "To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truest proportions," Gadamer wrote.[64]

Application

Gadamer's explication of the structure of understanding as the fusion of horizons retrieved a fundamental hermeneutical problem that Romantic and historicist hermeneutics had obscured: the problem of application. Application had been of central importance to traditional hermeneutics, which understood interpretation as a guide to the proper application either of the gospel (in the case of scriptural hermeneutics), the normative standards of antiquity (in the case of classical philology), or the law, (in the case of legal hermeneutics). By contrast, historicist hermeneutics had divorced interpretation from application by limiting the hermeneutic task to making sense of a text as a purely historical artifact. But this distinction between understanding, interpretation, and application, Gadamer argued, became untenable for the historically effected consciousness. "Our thesis is that historical hermeneutics too has a task of application to perform, because it too serves applicable meaning, in that it explicitly and consciously bridges the temporal distance that separates the interpreter from the text and overcomes the alienation of meaning that the text has undergone," Gadamer wrote.[65] Like the performing of a symphony, handing down a judicial verdict, or preaching of the gospel, understanding a text requires making it speak in a new context. It fundamentally involves application.

Gadamer provided two models of application that illustrated its role in hermeneutic activity. The first was Aristotle's conception of moral knowledge, or *phronesis*, from the

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[64] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305.
[65] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 311.

Nicomachean Ethics. In the *Ethics*, Aristotle distinguished moral knowledge from two other types of knowledge—theoretical knowledge (*episteme*) and practical knowledge (*teche)*—on the basis of the internal relationship within each type of knowledge between the universal and the particular. For Artistotle, *episteme*, was knowledge of timeless universals—the prime example being mathematics. Insofar as *episteme* concerned particulars, it concerned them only as instantiations of universal principles. Moreover, as the study of universals, *episteme* was the product of pure contemplation, not of experience, which was always the experience of particulars. By contrast, Aristotle identified *techne*, or technical knowledge, as the type of knowledge concerned with the proper application of universal principles to particular situations—the paradigmatic example for Aristotle was the craftsman, whose knowledge of some universal, i.e., the concept of a chair in the abstract, guides his action in a particular situation, i.e., his process of constructing a singular chair. Unlike *episteme, techne* resulted from both contemplation and experience, since contemplation contributes to the knowledge of the universal, while experience guides its application in practice.

What type of knowledge, then, was *phronesis,* or moral knowledge? Clearly it was not *episteme*, because its object was the changing world of human affairs, not the unchanging realm of the eternal. But neither was it *techne.* Although moral knowledge, like technical knowledge, concerned the application of a universal principles to particular situations, in could not be described on the model of the craftsman comparing his finished product to his blueprint. In moral knowledge, the universal that one aims to arrive at (moral goodness in Aristotle's case) does not exist as an object of knowledge prior to the task of applying it in the same way that a blueprint exists before the chair itself. Rather, the universal becomes manifest only through the experience

of trying to determine how it arises in a particular circumstance. The existence of the universal depends on its application in practice.

It was this quality of Aristotle's moral knowledge that Gadamer found most compelling as a description of the hermeneutic project. Just as a moral actor does not first grasp what morality demands of him and then applies that demand to his situation, an interpreter of a text does not first understand the meaning of the text and then apply its meaning to his particular historical situation. In both cases, the knowledge of the universal is revealed through the act of application. Although moral agents generally hold some conception of what goodness in the abstract demands of them—just as an interpreter might have a general conception of the significance of a text—that knowledge is always vulnerable to revision. Certainly, a craftsman can compare a blueprint for a chair to the chair itself after the fact of production, determine how they differ, and adapt future blueprints on that basis. But it makes no sense to speak of moral knowledge or interpretation in this way, because the mechanism of adaptation is a constitutive part of the knowledge itself. Every act of application is an act of revision.

Gadamer's second example was legal hermeneutics. From the vantage point of historicism, the task of a legal interpreter, say, a judge or a jury member, differs fundamentally from the task of the legal historian. The judge attempts to understand the meaning of a law so as to apply it to the facts of the case before him. He must have a sense of the historical development of the law, but his historical knowledge only serves as a guide to proper application. By contrast, the legal historian attempts to understand a law's significance both in its original situation and in the changing circumstances in which it has been applied across time. His concern is with the law's historical value, not its applicability for the present. But Gadamer argued that this sharp division between the task of the judge and the task of the historian falls apart under scrutiny. In

attempting to understand a text, be it a law or an historical document, historians always do what judges do: they understand the significance by applying it within their horizon of meaning. Gadamer wrote, "Historical knowledge can be gained only by seeing the past in its continuity with the present—which is exactly what the jurist does in his practical, normative work of 'ensuring the unbroken continuance of law and preserving the traditions of the legal idea.'"[66] Although the task of the judge might seem like a specialized case of understanding, since the laws that he interprets are still in force, whereas the laws that historians attempt to understand are no longer binding, Gadamer argued that the opposite was in fact true: the example of the legal historian serves as the rule, while the task of the historian serves as the exception. "Trying to understand the law in terms of its historical origin, the historian can not disregard its continuing effect," Gadamer writes. "It presents him with the questions that he has to ask of historical tradition."[67]

Following these examples, Gadamer concluded that consciousness did not discriminate between judges, historians, philologists, or scriptural exegetes. All varieties of hermeneutical practice found their inner unity in the task of application.

Experience and Dialogue

Gadamer was not content merely to demonstrate the effect of history in every act of understanding. In addition, he attempted to demonstrate and analyze its productivity—that is, to show how historicity is actually generative of understanding. Here, it is useful to remember the three-fold nature of historically effected consciousness as consciousness that is affected by history, and aware of being thus affected, and aware of the limitations that this places on

[66] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 327.
[67] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 328.

understanding. Gadamer's account of the fusion of horizons served as an account of historically effected consciousness in its first and third elements, but it failed as an account of the second.

Gadamer took care to distinguish the type of reflexivity that characterized historically effected consciousness from the self-reflexive stance of speculative idealism. For idealists such as Hegel, all historical knowledge was self-knowledge, insofar as the encounter with history represented the encounter of mind with itself. Against Hegel, Gadamer maintained that historical knowledge was a kind of experience, the encounter of mind with something other than itself. "[W]e are concerned to conceive a reality that limits and exceeds the omnipotence of reflection," Gadamer wrote. "[T]he historical activity of the mind is neither self-reflection nor the merely formal dialectical supersession of the self-alienation that is has undergone, but an *experience* [*Erfahrung*] that experiences reality and is itself real."[68] For Gadamer, historical knowledge was not merely speculative; the mind could not simply think itself into historical knowledge.

Instead, Gadamer argued that there is an element of genuine experience in every instance of historical knowledge. But what is the nature of this experience, and how does it become an experience of limitation rather than of self-knowledge? The methodological natural sciences offer one model of experience, developed by analogy with inductive reasoning. In the natural sciences, singular experiences stand as individual data points that can be confirmed or refuted by subsequent experiences. Experience in this sense is teleological, since it aims at the formation of true concepts: the accumulation of individual experiences represents the progression from accidental experiences of particulars to true conceptual knowledge a phenomenon as a whole. Empirical experiments represent the ideal distillation of experience, insofar as they allow for the regulated accumulation of experiences directed towards the formation of true concepts. Most

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[68] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 342-6.

importantly, experience is only experience insofar as it leads to knowledge. Gadamer writes, "Experience is valid only if it is confirmed; hence its dignity depends on its being in principle repeatable. But this means that by its very nature, experience abolishes its history and thus itself."[69] In theory, once one has reached true knowledge of a universal concept, experience in this specific sense can end.

Gadamer argued that this teleological construal of experience truncated its true nature and misconstrued its real purpose. "If we regard experience in terms of its results, we have ignored the fact that experience is a process…It cannot be described simply as the unbroken generation of typical universals," he wrote. "Rather, this generation takes place as false generalizations are continually refuted by experience and what was regarded as typical is shown not to be so."[70] For Gadamer, the experience was not teleological but dialectical; its essential movement was reversal, not progression. Although the confirmation of previous experiences certainly remained a component of experience in general, of more fundamental importance was its negation, or the reversal of consciousness that one experiences when he changes his mind. Thus experience in general, Gadamer argued, leads not to knowledge but to more experience. "[The experienced person] proves to be… someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them," Gadamer wrote. "The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself."[71] Like the process of fore-meaning, fore-conception and fore-

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[69] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 347.
[70] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 353.
[71] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 355.

projection that characterizes our understanding of texts, experience progresses by way of the

continual disappointment and re-adaptation of our expectations.

In this respect, Gadamer inverted the relationship between experience and knowledge that

the theory of induction implied: experience does not lead to knowledge so much as knowledge

always leads back to experience. For Gadamer, the real productivity of experience was not that it

dissolved into knowledge of some universal concept (as was true on the inductive model) or that

it culminated in absolute self-knowledge (as Hegel argued), but that it manifested the reality of

consciousness's limitedness. "Real experience is that whereby man becomes aware of his

finiteness," Gadamer wrote. "In it are discovered the limits of the power and the self-knowledge

of his planning reason."[72] To discover in experience itself the effects of human finitude was, for

Gadamer, to experience concretely the reality of history. "The idea that everything can be

reversed, that there is always time for everything and that everything somehow returns, proves to

be an illusion," Gadamer wrote. "Rather, the person who is situated and acts in history

continually experiences the fact that nothing returns."[73]

Gadamer found in this model of experience more generally a model for hermeneutical

experience in particular, or experience that concerned tradition and texts. Like experience in

general, hermeneutic experience involves a fundamental openness to new experiences, not a

search for fixed knowledge. In the case of textual interpretation, Gadamer argued, this means

that an interpreter approaches a text not as an object of inquiry but as a "Thou," an entity that,

like a person, stands in relationship of exchange with the interpreter. "In human relations the

important thing is… to experience the Thou truly as a Thou—i.e., not to overlook his claim but

to let him really say something to us," Gadamer wrote. "[Historically effected consciousness]

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[72] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 357.
[73] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 357.

allow[s] tradition's claim to validity, not in the sense of simply acknowledging the past in its otherness, but in such a way that it has something to say to me."[74] The historically effected consciousness, in other words, is prepared for a text to tell him something new—something that shifts his horizon of meaning.

Because hermeneutic consciousness maintains the legitimacy of tradition as a Thou rather than as an object, Gadamer argued that the whole hermeneutic enterprise was best understood as a dialogue or conversation. This was not merely a useful metaphor for Gadamer: he actually argued that hermeneutics and dialogue share a common logic, which he called the logic of question and answer. Gadamer's model for this logic of question and answer was Plato's dialogues. Like Socrates' encounters with his interlocutor, Gadamer argued, a reader's encounter with tradition begins with the raising of a question. The defining feature of that question is that it introduced uncertainty where there had previous been only certainty. "The significance of questioning consists in revealing the questionability of what is questioned," Gadamer wrote. "It has to be brought into this state of indeterminacy, in which there is an equilibrium between pro and contra."[75] Like Socrates' bewildering lines of questioning, the purpose of hermeneutic exchange was to deliver interlocutors to common meanings and concepts, not to resolve into definite stalemates. "As the art of asking a question, dialectic proves its value because only the person who knows how to ask a question is able to persist in this questioning, which involves being able to preserve his orientation towards openness," wrote Gadamer. "The art of questioning is the art of questioning even further—i.e., the art of thinking."[76] Like experience itself, dialogue leads not to answers but to more questions.

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[74] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 361.
[75] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 363.
[76] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 367.

In this respect, Gadamer argued, all hermeneutics was dialogue. An interpreter's engagement with a text begins when it poses a question; to understand a text requires first understanding this question. But the hermeneutic task does not end there. Aside from posing a question, every text also represents an answer to an historical question.[77] It is the job of the interpreter, in a limited sense, to recover this question, but it is also his task to remain open to the question that the text poses to him. In this process, the question to which a text is an answer and the question that the text posed to a reader ultimately merge in the reader's attempt to grasp them both. "A reconstructed question can never stand within its original horizon: for the historical horizon that circumscribed the reconstruction is…included within the horizon that embraces us as the questioners who have been encountered by the traditionary word," Gadamer wrote. "Only in an inauthentic sense can we talk about understanding questions that one does not pose oneself…To understanding a question is to ask it."[78] In discovering the question that lies latent in the text, the reader cannot help but ask it of himself.

Here, at last, the productivity of history in understanding comes into full relief. The knowledge that belongs to the historically effected consciousness is the type of knowledge that arises from dialogue. It is the knowledge of a being who belongs to a tradition, who moves within a horizon that moves with him. It is knowledge that always breaks off into indeterminacy and anticipates change. As Gadamer wrote, "It is part of the historical finitude of our being that we are aware that others after us will understand in a different way…This is the truth of

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[77] Gadamer cites R.G. Collingwood as the progenitor of the thesis. About Collingwood's logic of question and answer, he wrote, "We can understand a text only when we have understood the question to which it is an answer. But since the question can be derived solely from the text and accordingly the appropriateness of the reply is the methodological presupposition for the reconstruction of the question, any criticism of this reply from some other quarter is pure shadow boxing." See *Truth and Method*, note 315 on page 370.

[78] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 374-5.

historically effected consciousness. By renouncing the chimera of perfect enlightenment, it is

open to the experience of history."[79]

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[79] Gadamer, Truth and Method, 373, 377.

Chapter Two

GADAMER'S ENCOUNTERS: PART ONE

Transitioning from an account of Gadamer's ideas to an account of Gadamer's life inevitability raises some hermeneutical difficulties. As Gadamer's biographer Jean Grondin has argued, Gadamer almost certainly would have objected on philosophical grounds to any analysis of his philosophy that gave significant explanatory power to his biography. Gadamer's hermeneutics, Grondin points out, challenge this tendency to read a philosopher's work as a product of his life experiences. To do so, Gadamer would argue, is to deny the autonomy of a text or a work of art, depriving it of the ability to stand forth in its claim to truth. "[H]ermeneutics might well view biography as a purely historical undertaking, confining itself to the interplay of historical contexts and influences, and thereby ignoring the truth content that these historical forces have brought to the fore," Grondin writes. "The interplay of influences, tacitly modeled on the interplay of forces in the nomoethical physical sciences, [Gadamer] alleged, is alien to truth and to the thing itself."[1]

Faced with these objections, can an intellectual biographer proceed in his task without flagrantly violating Gadamer's philosophical imperatives? Grondin thinks he can. The key, he argues, lies in documenting a philosopher's life in a way that preserves the dialectical and historical character of experience, as Gadamer conceived of it. Grondin writes:

> The main idea of hermeneutics is just this: every statement must be understood as an answer to a question. And every philosophy is a statement. What question is it driven by? It would [be] mistaken to think that this amounts to a historical relativization of truth. The opposite is the case, and this can be viewed as a fundamental hermeneutical insight: no statement can be understood without regard to its truth, if one does not begin with the need that is endeavoring to come to expression.[2]

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[1] Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography,* 9.
[2] Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography,* 10.

The dialectical nature of experience takes on another, more complex dimension when applied to the problem of reception. Unlike intellectual biography, which is concerned principally with retrieving the original question to which a philosopher's work offers an answer, reception history explores the encounter between two sets of questions and answers: those of a text and those of an agent of reception. In this respect, Gadamer's analysis of understanding as the fusion of horizons serves as an instructive interpretive guide. For Gadamer, one's horizon of meaning is always a thing in flux, "something into which we move and that moves with us."[3] Despite the appearance of plural horizons of meaning, Gadamer insisted, a horizon is never "closed": "Just as the individual is never simply an individual because he is always understanding with others, so too the closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction," wrote Gadamer in *Truth and Method*. "The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon."[4] A horizon is constantly running up against other horizons; it is defined by its reception.

With this in mind, Gadamer's analysis suggests two methodological principles for reception history more generally. First, a history of reception must take account of both the horizon of meaning of the text that is being received and the horizon of the agent who is receiving it. In this respect, the structure of reception is essentially dialogical: it involves an exchange between two parties, each occupying their own, partially distinct horizon. Yet the distance between these two horizons is not the real focus of reception. It is, rather, understanding itself, the fusion of horizon that takes place when dialogue "ris[es] to a higher universality that

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[3] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 304

[4] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 304.

overcomes not only [one's] own particularly but also that of the other."[5] In this respect, a genuinely hermeneutical history of reception must resist the tendency to displace the real object of inquiry with the personalities and idiosyncrasies of the inquirers. As Grondin notes, this was Gadamer's true fear: that an overweening interest in biography would obscure the truth that emerges in dialogue.

Seen in this light, the history of the reception of Gadamerian hermeneutics in North America is best understood not as the story of a man but as the story of a conversation, a dialogue about the nature of meaning, understanding, and interpretation. I have chosen to structure the narrative of this conversation around a series of four events of reception, which I would like to call, as a term of art, "encounters." As I use it, an encounter is the locus of reception, a moment when two horizons of meaning converge and fuse. Some of the encounters I discuss were meetings in a literal sense: discrete moments in time when Gadamer engaged directly in philosophical dialogue with an interlocutor. Others are encounters in a looser sense: written or verbal exchanges that took place over an extended period of time, as Gadamer and other philosophers directed their thinking toward common questions and attempted to arrive at a shared understanding and answers. In either case, my purpose in exploring these encounters has not been to declare a victor or to show how one participant emerged with the upper hand. Rather, it has been to reconstruct what Gadamer identified as the "event of understanding" that takes place in genuine dialogue, an event that reveals a previously unrealized meaning of a text. It is this dynamic—of adaptation and agreement, dialectic and disclosure—that I have tried to emphasize with my focus on Gadamer's encounters.

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[5] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305.

Ultimately, my account seeks to open up the possibilities for dialogue that Gadamer's reception in America created, not to reach definitive conclusions about Gadamer's influence. The history of reception, more so perhaps than traditional diachronic history, constantly manifests the reality of what Gadamer called the history of effect: that historical understanding is inextricable from an agent's involvement in the very history that he attempts to understand. Because every act of reception is an act of re-reception, a definitive history of reception inevitably eludes an historian's attempt to pin it down. As Gadamer wrote at the end of *Truth and Method*, "The ongoing dialogue permits no final conclusion. It would be a poor hermeneuticist who thought he could have, or had to have, the last word."[6]

2.1 FROM HEIDELBERG TO AMERICA

Gadamer's presence in America spanned approximately eighteen years, from 1968, when he first set foot on American soil, to 1986, when, plagued by poor health, he retired to Heidelberg. To everyone except Gadamer, his initial trip to the United States was supposed to serve as his scholarly swan song. In February of 1968, after nearly fifty years of continuous teaching and scholarship, Gadamer formally stepped down from his post as chair of the philosophy department at the University of Heidelberg. At the time, the university was unable to find a suitable replacement for Gadamer—apparently scholars equally well versed in Plato and contemporary phenomenology were few and far between—so Gadamer, then sixty-eight years old, agreed to retain all of his teaching duties until the winter of 1969-70. Yet without the responsibilities of his chair, Gadamer suddenly found himself with an abundance of free time. At the urging of his wife Käthe, he accepted an invitation to deliver a paper at a conference on Schleiermacher at Vanderbilt University.

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[6] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 579.

In early February, he wrote to Heidegger:

> In order to bridge the hiatus of becoming emeritus, I have accepted an invitation to the USA and will be in transit from the middle of February to Easter. Over there it is not my philosophy, of course, that makes them interested in me—for them I am not even an old-timer worth seeing. But precisely this fact about philosophy over there has given my book an unexpected relevance among theologians and students of the *Geisteswissenschaften* (especially the criticists). In it they see a justification of their own needs that are left unsatisfied by philosophy of science.[7]

Gadamer was correct in thinking that American audiences had developed an interest in his work. After *Truth and Method* had appeared in 1960, he had received a number of invitations to lecture in the United States, but his demanding teaching and administrative duties, as well as his limited proficiency in English, had prevented him from making the trans-Atlantic trip.[8] By 1969, Gadamer's English had improved enough, thanks to an informal conversation group organized by Ernst Tugendhat, that he judged a trip to be worthwhile, and in mid-February, the airplane-averse Gadamer set sail for Tennessee aboard the *Queen Elizabeth*.

Upon his arrival, however, Gadamer's participation in the conference proved limited. In reality, his English remained quite poor, and he requested that the text of his address, entitled "The Problem of Language in Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics," be translated into English—an unusual request for him, given that he almost never prepared lecture notes when teaching in German. Yet Gadamer struggled even with the prepared English text, and he decided midway through his address to attempt to speak extemporaneously.[9] He fared little better without notes. "The only thing that reassured him was that in his eyes, or rather ears, Gerard Ebeling's English was even worse than his own," Grondin wrote of the conference.[10]

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[7] Hans-Georg Gadamer, letter to Martin Heidegger, February 3, 1968. (See Grondin, *Hans Georg Gadamer: A Biogrpahy,* 466.)

[8] Hans-George Gadamer, "Reflections on My Philosophical Journey," trans. Richard E. Palmer, in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Library of Living Philosophers* 24 (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 1-31, here 18.

[9] Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography,* 320.

[10] Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography,* 320.

The experience of running up against the language barrier troubled Gadamer. Attuned as he was to the difficulties and distortions of translation, he knew that reading from a pre-prepared script was a poor substitute for spontaneous philosophical dialogue. "I attempted to give my lectures in English and without manuscript, for, in my view, lecturing and especially teaching in the U.S. and Canada would be meaningless if I could not somehow give expression to my own style of thinking in English," he later wrote.[11] If he was to continue to teach in the United States, Gadamer would have to find a way to express his ideas in a way that remained true to his concepts while being sensitive to the linguistic and philosophical distance between himself and his audience—that is, in a genuinely hermeneutical way.

Despite his shaky beginnings in Tennessee, Gadamer continued his inaugural tour of the States, re-delivering his paper on Schleiermacher, as well as papers titled "Image and Word" and "The Concept of the Divine in Pre-Socratic Philosophy" at a number of universities around the country, including the University of Texas, Johns Hopkins, Yale, Harvard, and the University of Chicago.[12] His extended stay improved his language skills, and by the end of the trip, he had grown comfortable delivering lectures in English. Along the way, he encountered much more enthusiasm for his and Heidegger's philosophy than he had anticipated, especially among the younger generation of students. After returning to Heidelberg in April, he wrote to Heidegger:

> For some time I have been wanting to send you a more detailed report of my impression in America, but at the same time I was hoping that you might want to spend a summer break in Heidelberg…At least this much: in America you have long been and still are enrolled in the series of uncontested classics of philosophy. Especially the young people in many places are spiritually far beyond the technological wave…In Yale I was asked everywhere whether there was any prospect of bringing you in for a semester—of course without any obligation…It always looked this way: the prospect of being permitted to

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[11] Gadamer, "Reflections on a Philosophical Journey," 18.

[12] Hans-Georg Gadamer, letter to Heidegger, February 3 1968. (See Grondin, *Hans Georg Gadamer: A Biography,* 467.)

speak with you on occasion would be something quite important to many of the younger colleagues there.[13]

Unlike Gadamer, Heidegger had neither the interest nor the health to travel to the United States, and he never accepted any of the numerous invitations that he received to teach at American universities. Denied Heidegger, phenomenologically-inclined Americans would have to settle for Gadamer.

Yet the initial enthusiasm that Gadamer encountered in the United States was tempered by a degree of indifference toward the actual landscape of German philosophical thought and Gadamer's place within it. Despite Gadamer's very real philosophical differences from Husserl and, to a lesser extent, Heidegger, early American observers initially subsumed the philosophies of all three men—as well as the work of philosophers as eclectic as Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty—under the rough rubric of "phenomenology."[14] The term offered less a positive definition of a philosophical movement than a definition-by-negation: phenomenology was any mode of thought, especially a German one, that did not fall neatly within the tradition of Anglo-American analytic philosophy descended from Russell and Frege. Reflecting on his early encounters in America, Gadamer wrote, "It was no surprise to me, of course, that analytic philosophy occupied the greatest share of the philosophical space there and what was labeled 'continental philosophy' was basically eclipsed by it; nor did it surprise me that for this audience the German philosophy of our times was identified with Husserlian phenomenology and Heidegger, and hermeneutics were little known."[15]

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[13] Hans-Georg Gadamer, Letter to Martin Heidegger, May 22, 1968. (See Grondin, *Hans Georg Gadamer: A Life,* 467.)

[14] For a more detailed discussion of the development of phenomenology and its reception in the United States, see James M. Edie, "Phenomenology in America, 1984," in *Research in Phenomenology* 14 (1984), 233-246; and Hugh J. Silverman, "Phenomenology," in *Social Research* 47, no. 4 (January 1980)*,* 704-720.

[15] Gadamer, "Reflections on a Philosophical Journey," 19.

Amid the conceptual fuzziness of the United States, Gadamer assumed the task of forging a distinct identity for philosophical hermeneutics within phenomenology as a whole. In the spring of 1969, he accepted an invitation to become a visiting professor at Catholic University's School of Philosophy in Washington, D.C., where he arrived in March of that year. The two courses that taught during the spring term—an undergraduate lecture course called "The Phenomenological Movement" and a graduate seminar called "Hermeneutics and Methodology"—reflected the precarious position that he had assumed as both a representative of Husserlian phenomenology and a distinctively post-Husserlian phenomenologist. While surveying the development of Husserl's phenomenology as a whole, he focused especially on the instabilities implicit in Husserl's thought, which he took as a starting point for his own hermeneutical inquiry in *Truth and Method*.[16] In April, he wrote to Heidegger: "My renewed Husserl studies make the tragic side of his though increasingly clear, this continual self-complication from which he can never quite free himself, without falling back on the simplest, oldest motifs of his thought."[17] In Gadamer's history of phenomenology, hermeneutics represented the logical successor to the Husserlian tradition. Any effort to get beyond Husserl's shortcomings would have to pass through hermeneutics.

2.2 PALMER'S REDIRECTION: HERMENEUTICS AND LITERARY INTERPRETATION

Gadamer was initially aided in his effort to familiarize American audiences with philosophical hermeneutics by Richard Palmer, a professor of philosophy and literature at MacMurray College in Illinois. In 1969, concurrent with Gadamer's second visit to America, Palmer published *Hermeneutics: Theories of Interpretation in Schleiermacher, Dilthey,*

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[16] See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 242-252.
[17] Letter to Heidegger, April 4 1969 (See Grondin, *Hans Georg Gadamer: A Biography,* 468).

Heidegger, and Gadamer, the first monograph on philosophical hermeneutics to appear in English. Published six years before the first English translation of *Truth and Method*, Palmer's book both reflected a growing American interest in German hermeneutics and set the terms on which its reception would take place. Palmer himself had first met Gadamer in 1964 as a newly minted Ph.D. studying existentialist theology with the German theologian Gerard Ebeling in Zurich. At the time, Palmer's interests were purely literary. Having written his dissertation at Redlands University on existentialism in Baudelaire, Rilke, and Eliot, Palmer had grown dissatisfied with the reigning modes of literary criticism that were available stateside, especially the varieties of New Criticism on offer in American literature departments. Palmer especially objected to what he saw as the positivistic assumptions that undergirded American critical practice. "[Contemporary criticism] presuppose[s]…that the literary work is simply 'out there' in the world, essentially independent of its perceivers," wrote Palmer in the introduction to his book. "One's perception of the work is considered to be separate from the work itself, and the task of literary interpretation is to speak about the 'work itself.'"[18] By adopting this fundamental differentiation between literary object and interpretive subject, Palmer charged, American literary criticism had uncritically embraced the epistemology of the natural sciences: "With all its humanistic pretensions and flamboyant defenses of poetry in the 'age of technology,' modern literary criticism has itself become increasingly technological," he wrote. "More and more, it has imitated the approach of the scientist."[19]

Palmer hoped to find in the German tradition of existentialist theological hermeneutics a philosophical alternative to the American realist tradition that could revitalize American critical

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[18] Richard Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 6.
[19] Palmer, *Hermeneutics,* 6.

practice. Palmer arrived in Zurich, however, unaware that Gadamer had completely upended the very tradition that he aimed to draw from. Upon reading Palmer's research proposal, Ebeling handed his new student a copy of *Truth and Method* and directions north to Heidelberg. "[Ebeling] suggested that my topic of hermeneutics and literary interpretation would be better pursued starting from philosophy, with Gadamer," Palmer wrote.[20] When he arrived in Heidelberg in the late spring of 1965 with a letter of introduction from Ebeling, Gadamer received him warmly. The two men quickly organized an informal discussion group with a number of Gadamer's students which ran throughout the summer session.

Although taken by Gadamer's geniality and erudition, Palmer was at first frustrated in his attempt to draw substantive connections between Gadamer's hermeneutics and a new approach to literary criticism. Rüdinger Bubner, one of Gadamer's students and his future successor as the chair of philosophy at Heidelberg, went so far as to discourage Palmer's attempt in the first place, suggesting that because philosophical hermeneutics shared New Criticism's insistence on the autonomy of the work of art, it failed to offer a meaningful vantage point from which to criticize American criticism's shortcomings.[21] Yet Palmer remained unconvinced. "I felt that Rüdinger did not perceive the profound significance for literature that lay in the shift in the deeper philosophical premises about reading and interpretation that comes from a study of philosophical hermeneutics," wrote Palmer.[22] His exposure to Heidegger—the two men met a number of times over the course of the summer semester—only heightened his sense that philosophical hermeneutics offered a fundamentally new path for literary analysis. Although philosophical hermeneutics did insist on the autonomy of the work of art, it put that autonomy to

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[20] Richard Palmer, "How Gadamer Changed My Life: A Tribute," *Symposium* 6, no. 2 (2002), 219-230, here 219.
[21] Palmer, "How Gadamer Changed My Life: A Tribute," 220.
[22] Palmer, "How Gadamer Changed My Life: A Tribute," 221.

a fundamentally different use than did the New Critics. Whereas for the New Critics, a work's autonomy allowed an interpreter to adopt a dispassionate, quasi-scientific stance toward it, for Gadamer and Heidegger, it allowed the work to stand on its own as a disclosure of truth. By the end of the summer, Palmer had found what he came looking for: "The summer semester of 1965 with Professor Gadamer had ushered me into a new world that exceeded my wildest anticipations," he wrote.[23]

Palmer returned to the States in the fall of 1965 and began working on the manuscript of what would become *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*. Palmer intended for the work to serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, he hoped to offer English-language readers an introduction to the historical development of philosophical hermeneutics and an overview of contemporary debates within the field, which, because of the absence of quality English translations of the relevant authors' work, was otherwise unavailable. On the other hand, he intended for the book to raise fundamental theoretical questions about the nature of literary interpretation as preparation for a planned second volume on hermeneutic literary practice. The structure of the book, when it appeared in 1969, conformed to these aims. Part I, "On the Definition, Scope, and Significance of Hermeneutics," surveyed historical and contemporary meanings of hermeneutics and glossed ongoing debates within the field. Part II, "Four Major Theorists," surveyed the development of philosophical hermeneutics from Schleiermacher, through Dilthey and Heidegger, to Gadamer. The book culminated with Part III, "A Hermeneutical Manifesto to American Literary Interpretation," in which Palmer drew some tentative conclusions about the significance of philosophical hermeneutics for literary criticism.

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[23] Palmer, "How Gadamer Changed My Life," 221.

Yet the tripartite structure of the book had the effect of blurring the lines between Palmer's own philosophical interests and the broader concerns of the hermeneutical tradition that he was nominally expounding. In a section on contemporary debates in hermeneutics, Palmer argued that the primary fault line in contemporary hermeneutics ran between proponents of "New Hermeneutics," represented by Heidegger and Gadamer, and defenders of traditional methodological hermeneutics, embodied by the Italian legal theorist Emilio Betti and taken up in North America by the American critic E.D. Hirsch. The debate, Palmer argued, was fundamentally one over competing definitions of hermeneutics: was hermeneutics the methodological discipline devoted to discovering and applying rules of correct interpretation, or was it a philosophical discipline committed to expounding the scientific structure of understanding? For Palmer, more was at stake in this argument than simple definitions. In fact, Palmer implied, the debate over the proper purview of hermeneutics was in reality a sort of proxy war over the desirability of maintaining standards of interpretive objectivity, and he presented this conflict in starkly adversarial, even militant terms: "On the one side are the defenders of objectivity and validation, who look to hermeneutics as the theoretical source of norms of validation; on the other side are the phenomenologists of the event of understanding, who stress the historical character of this 'event' and consequently the limitations of all claims to 'objective knowledge' and 'objective validity,'" wrote Palmer.[24] Objectivity versus historicity: the battles lines were drawn.

Palmer aligned himself unapologetically on the side New Hermeneutics, over and against Betti and Hirsch. Following Gadamer, he saw the attempt to limit the scope of hermeneutical inquiry to the narrow technical task of devising rules for proper interpretation as an abdication of

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[24] Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 65.

the real hermeneutical task of explaining what all acts of understanding had in common. The old hermeneuticists' focus on rules and principles of validation, Palmer thought, obscured the fact that any such set of rules or principles would itself be subject to hermeneutical scrutiny. As Wittgenstein famously observed, there is no rule to guide the application of rules.

Yet it is questionable whether Palmer's adversarial stance toward traditional hermeneutics was justified by the logic of philosophical hermeneutics itself. As evidenced by the title of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer went to great interpretive lengths to show that a philosophical distinction between hermeneutic and methodological inquiry did not create an intractable conflict between the types of truth revealed in each. For Gadamer, there was not a genuine choice between the truth revealed by hermeneutics and the truth revealed by methodological inquiry; truth and method had to co-exist. The major philosophical issue for Gadamer arose not from this mere fact of separation but from the tendency of method to monopolize all claims to truth. In *Truth and Method,* Gadamer in fact affirmed the limited legitimacy of methodological approaches to literary hermeneutics, writing, "Reconstructing the conditions in which a work passed down to us from the past was originally constituted is undoubtedly an important aid to understanding it," though he affirmed, with Hegel, that such an activity was "external" (i.e. non-essential) to the authentic act of understanding.[25]

On this basis, Gadamer was able to distinguish his own hermeneutics from Betti's without impugning the value or intellectual coherence of either. In the foreword to the second edition of *Truth and Method,* Gadamer explicitly differentiated the purposes of these two approaches to hermeneutics, writing "[T]he purpose of my investigation is not to offer methods (which Emilio Betti has done so well) but to discover what is common to all modes of

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[25] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 167.

understanding and to show that understanding is never a subjective relation to a given 'object'

but to the history of its effect."[26] When Gadamer did raise substantive disagreements with Betti,

his objections were exclusively over the possibility of distinguishing normative, philological, and

historical hermeneutics based on the degree of application operative in each.[27] Nor could Hirsch

substitute as a more productive debate partner. In *Truth and Interpretation*, published six years

after *Truth and Method* in 1967, Hirsch did respond directly to Gadamer by arguing that

Gadamer's hermeneutics opened the door to interpretive subjectivism. But because of the timing

of its publication, Gadamer himself had not had an opportunity to respond to *Truth and*

Interpretation when Palmer's book appeared. If there was a genuine debate between Gadamer

and Hirsch over the standard of interpretive objectivity, it was not one that Gadamer himself had

seriously engaged in.

Yet Palmer's book suffered from a more fundamental flaw. By presenting the debate

between new and old hermeneutics as a showdown between the defenders and critics of

interpretive objectivity, Palmer implicitly conceded the terms of the debate to Betti and Hirsch.

For Gadamer, hermeneutics critically involved the effort to move beyond the simple distinction

between objectivism and subjectivism, to show that all acts of understanding involve a

coordination between text and reader that could not faithfully be described with the vocabulary

of the empirical or rationalist sciences. Yet by positioning himself and Gadamer as the opponents

of objectivism, Palmer unwittingly fell back on the distinction that Gadamer had tried to blow

open. In Palmer's presentation, hermeneutics was never allowed to fight on its own turf.

Nevertheless, reviewers of Palmer's book adopted his battle lines and, more often than

not, positioned themselves on the opposing side. Critics were particularly quick to criticize

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[26] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxxi.
[27] See Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 354.

Gadamer's alleged failure to delineate a principle of interpretive verification, arguing, with

Palmer's imagined opponents, that Gadamer's explication of the historicity of understanding

opened the path to willy-nilly interpretive laxity. "The question…is whether Gadamer's mode of

philosophical inquiry leaves room for any logic of validation at all," wrote Rudolf Makkreel in

the *Journal of the History of Philosophy.* "Having adopted Gadamer's theory, [Palmer] should

not ignore the fact that *Warheit und Methode* was aimed at exposing method as the corrupter of

understanding, and that this entails the *rejection* of method both as a means of discovering

meaning and as a means of validating discovered meaning."[28] Critics also replicated Palmer's

contention that Gadamer stood against Betti and Hirsch as the opponent of interpretive

objectivism. Daniel Noel, writing in *The Western Humanities Review*, wrote:

> Both Betti and Hirsch reach back to Dilthey in reaffirming a methodological orientation, and Hirsch is especially anxious to find a hermeneutics which will provide objective norms for distinguishing false from correct interpretation. Palmer denies the possibility of such validation, citing Rudolf Bultmann, one of Gadamer's theological allies, to the effect that 'objective meaning in history cannot be spoken of, for history cannot be known except through the subjectivity of the historical himself.'[29]

Reviewing Palmer's book for *Foundations of Language*, the American poet Leonard Nathan cast

aspersion on the entire hermeneutic project, writing, "Heideggerian interpretation would dig out

the 'hidden' meaning [of texts]. But that sort of practice seems to lead, if not to bad philosophy,

[to] gross misreadings of poetry as a sort of expression of the higher mystery to which only

certain philosophers are entitled to minister. The word for that, I'm afraid, is romanticism."[30]

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[28] Rudolf Makkreel, "Richard E. Palmer, 'Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer' (Book Review), in *The Journal of the History of Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (1971), 114-116, here 115.

[29] Daniel Noel, "'Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer' by Richard E. Palmer," in *The Western Humanities Review* 24, no. 2 (Spring 1970), 193-4, here 194.

[30] Leonard Nathan, "Palmer, Richard E., *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and* Gadamer (Book Review)," in *Foundations of Language* 9 (1972), 262-267, here 266.

It is revealing of the early trajectory of the debate over hermeneutics in America that the only critic of Palmer's book to notice divergences between Palmer's presentation of Gadamer's work and Gadamer's work itself was a British philosopher, A.G. Pleydell-Pearce. In his review of the book for the *Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology*, Pleydell-Pearce wrote, "According to the author, Betti's emphasis on the autonomy of the object puts him squarely into the realist camp and hence in opposition to the phenomenological…Although the author insists that the two positions are not totally antithetical, we are increasingly asked to choose between them."[31] Unlike his American counterparts, Pleydell-Pearce recognized that Palmer presented a false choice: "Even if we admit, as I think we must and as the author does, that understanding is an historical event, that ultimately we understand any work as it appears to us in our historical present, it is not clear that Betti's claim that we should attempt to 'discover what is embodied in the work' should be rejected."[32]

Palmer affected a second re-direction in the burgeoning American debate over philosophical hermeneutics by linking Gadamer's ideas directly to debates about literary criticism. As Palmer wrote in the introduction to his book, the aim of his volume was fundamentally practical: to re-open the philosophical question of interpretation in the service of a more adequate and philosophically astute method of literary interpretation. It was toward this goal that Palmer devoted the entire third section of his book, "A Hermeneutical Manifesto to American Literary Interpretation," which included both a philosophical reflection on the nature of interpretation and a list of thirty short "theses" on literary interpretation. The purpose of this final section, Palmer wrote, was "[t]o clarify the critique of prevailing conceptions of literary

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[31] A.G. Pleydell-Pearce, "Hermeneutics: Richard E. Palmer (Book Review)," in *The Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology* 1, no. 3 (1970), 84-5, here 84.
[32] Pleydell-Pearce, 84.

interpretation which is implicit in phenomenological hermeneutics, and to set forth in a

preliminary way the character of a theory of literary interpretation based on it."[33]

Yet here, too, Palmer directed Gadamer's philosophy toward a different goal than the one

that Gadamer himself set for it. Certainly Gadamer's hermeneutics provided a novel way of

thematizing the philosophical problems at stake in literary interpretation, but Palmer attempted to

deduce from this new approach an original form of interpretive praxis. Gadamer, by contrast, had

explicitly declined to take this step. "The hermeneutics developed here is not…a methodology of

the human sciences, but an attempt to understand what the human sciences truly are, beyond

their methodological self-consciousness, and what connects them with that totality of our

experience of the world," wrote Gadamer in the preface to *Truth and Method*.[34] "If there is any

practical consequence of the present investigation, it certainly has nothing to do with an

unscientific 'commitment'; instead, it is concerned with the 'scientific' integrity of

acknowledging the commitment involved in all understanding."[35] Philosophical completeness,

not practical benefit, was the standard by which Gadamer hoped his project would be judged.

Indeed, the very concept of "hermeneutical literary criticism," would likely have struck Gadamer

as redundant, if not completely dissonant. What literary criticism was not always already

hermeneutical?

Yet critics did not fail to judge philosophical hermeneutics by the standard that Palmer,

rather than Gadamer, had set for it. "The book ends before it begins if it proposes to show us

how *concretely* to interpret, how to read and hear right," Nathan wrote. "Professor Palmer, like

Heidegger, proffers no evidence that hermeneutics offers an effective new approach to

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[33] Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 222.
[34] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* xxiii.
[35] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* xxviii.

interpretation. His book which is part exposition, part polemic, does not fulfill the promise to provide American critics with some significant revelation."[36] Noel echoed Nathan's criticism, writing, "Although the third part of the present work comprises 'A Hermeneutical Manifesto to American Literary Interpretation,' which contains thirty theses designed to prod literary scholars beyond New Criticism and out of their hermeneutical naïveté, for a detailed theory of literary interpretation based on phenomenological hermeneutics we must await a promised second book."[37] Even a sympathetic reviewer like Pleydell-Pearce found Palmer's book wanting in practical import: "There are mystical and instinctivist overtones in [Palmer's] claim; a claim which, in addition to rendering any discussion of a particular work impossible, tends toward the uncritical acceptance of whatever the literary text 'discloses' to the particular reader," Pleydell-Pearce wrote. "If this is a consequence of the thesis it is unlikely to commend itself to those concerned with literary interpretation, whether American or of any other nationality."[38]

Despite these apparent divergences between Palmer's presentation of Gadamer's hermeneutics and Gadamer's own aims in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer did not directly join the debate about Palmer's book. Almost twenty years later, in 1991, Gadamer belatedly thanked Palmer for the book at a dinner in Heidelberg: "[My] book made it possible, he said, for him to convey to Americans on his visit something of what his philosophy was about," said Palmer, recounting the exchange.[39] Nevertheless, Palmer's book gave philosophical hermeneutics an inauspicious introduction to American readers, who were not aided by Palmer's failure to produce his promised second volume on hermeneutic interpretive practice. It would be a mistake, however, to label Palmer's project a complete failure. By providing a rejoinder to Hirsch's

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[36] Nathan, 266.
[37] Noel, 194.
[38] Pleydell-Pearce, 85.
[39] Palmer, "How Gadamer Changed My Life," 224.

rejection of hermeneutics, Palmer ensured that Gadamer's ideas would remain a live subject of debate in American literary, preparing the ground, as it were, for Gadamer's own involvement in these debates across the next two decades. More importantly, Palmer's presentation of Gadamer's work raised important questions about the nature of reception itself. It is true that Palmer brought Gadamer's ideas to bear on debates that Gadamer himself had not considered, but did that fact render his application of these ideas invalid? If, as Gadamer himself argued, the meaning of a text always "goes beyond" the meaning that its offer held for it, in what respect can Palmer be said to have misinterpreted Gadamer's work, rather than merely realized a new potential of its application? Can we speak about a genuine interpretive dead end, or only an interpretive redirection? Insofar as Palmer's work served as a touchstone for this debate, it was not a failure at all.

That said, Palmer did fail in his more immediate task of producing a second volume on hermeneutics critical practice. He later wrote that his work on this follow-up volume stalled not because such a practice was impossible but because a new and unexpected force had overtaken New Criticism as the major force in American literary criticism: the curious blend of French structuralism and Anglo-American Romanticism that became known as "literary theory."[40] By the time Palmer returned to Heidelberg for a second visit in 1971, he had recognized that philosophical hermeneutics would have to address itself to this new force, not New Criticism, if it wanted to carve out space in American literary circles. "I spent my grant in Heidelberg listening to Gadamer's lectures…but I also spend time probing the writings of Nietzsche, Foucault, and Derrida," he wrote. "Exploring this French connection became a prerequisite for that second book, but it was never written."[41] In this latter respect at least, Palmer was

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[40] Palmer, "How Gadamer Changed My Life," 222.
[41] Palmer, "How Gadamer Changed My Life," 222.

completely correct. Although he had failed to affect a serious hermeneutical reevaluation within New Criticism, he had succeeded in establishing hermeneutics as a live subject in American literary criticism more broadly. And this meant that, sooner or later, hermeneutics would have to meet the challenge of literary theory.

2.3 PUTTING TRUTH TO WORK: HERMENEUTICS AND LITERARY THEORY

Gadamer returned to Heidelberg in the summer of 1969 to continue work on his book on Plato, which consumed his time for the remainder of that year and through the next. Back in the States, "literary theory," as observers increasingly called it, was roiling American departments of comparative literature. The wave of criticism, which had been gathering speed through the 1960s, broke suddenly at the end of the decade. In 1970, Derrida's address from the famous 1966 conference at Johns Hopkins appeared in English under the title, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." By 1971, the so-called "Hermeneutical Mafia" of Paul de Man, Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, and J. Hallis Miller had assembled at Yale, which quickly became the indisputable epicenter of American theory. The rapid ascendency of literary theory created a sense of crisis and disorientation within the American academy. "No set of arguments, no enumeration of symptoms will ever prove the present effervescence surrounding literary criticism is in fact a crisis that, for better or worse, is reshaping the critical consciousness of a generation," wrote de Man in *Blindness and Insight,* his first major published work, which appeared in 1971. "It remains relevant, however, that these people are experiencing it as a crisis and that they are constantly using the language of crisis in referring to what is taking place."[42]

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[42] Paul de Man, "Criticism and Crisis," in *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 3-19, here 6.

It was, perhaps, a crisis in miniature, taking place as it did mostly within Yale's fortified

campus and in the minds of scholars who paid attention to the happenings in New Haven.

Moreover, the extent to which the "Yale quartet" can accurately be grouped together as a

cohesive school of thought remains a subject of debate. Each of the four scholars at various

points affirmed his affinity with the others and caustically registered their disagreements, both

personal and intellectual.[43] Despite these real differences—and an admittedly insular focus—

literary theory represented an undeniably enticing development in American literary thought. de

Man, Bloom, Hartman, and Miller all shared a broad interest in the philosophical status of

language and literary speech, especially with the ways that literary language, as a system of

signs, could conceal, distort, or disguise meaning. "The trend in Continental criticism, whether it

derives its language from sociology, psychoanalysis, ethnology, linguistics, or even from certain

forms of philosophy, can be quickly summarized," de Man wrote in *Blindness and Insight*. "[I]t

represents a methodologically motivated attack on the notion that a literary or poetic

consciousness is in any way a privileged consciousness, whose use of language can pretend to

escape, to some degree, the duplicity, the confusion, the untruth that we take for granted in

everyday uses of language."[44]

This linguistic insight cut to the core of literature's self-identity. If literature could no

longer take for granted its cherished mimetic function—its ability, through the convergence of

sign and signifier, to represent linguistically some non-linguistic reality—then what ground did it

stand on? For the literary theorists, this critical reevaluation opened up an entirely new range of

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[43] For a good gloss of this debate, see *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America,* ed. Jonathan Arac, Wlad
Godzich, Wallace Martin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); and Marc Redfield, *Theory at Yale:
The Strange Case of Deconstruction in America* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), especially chapter 1,
"Theory, Deconstruction, and the Yale Critics."
[44] de Man, "Criticism and Crisis," 8.

possibilities for literature. Unlike ordinary, everyday speech, literary speech could do more than represent the world; it could construct a totally new one. "All literatures…have always designated themselves as existing in the mode of fiction," de Mann wrote. "The self-reflective mirror-effect by means of which a work of fiction asserts, by its very existence, its separation from empirical reality, its divergence, as a sign, from a meaning that depends for its existence on the constituting activity of this sign, characterizes literature in its essence."[45] In this respect, literary speech stood forth as the paradigmatic use of speech, the construction of a system of signs that could hold forth a claim to be real despite its foundationlessness in reality. It was language liberated from its merely representation function, a type of pure, unencumbered discourse.

For de Man, this linguistic fact concealed a humanistic insight: that the human subject, like literature, required construction. Literature became an expression of the fictiveness that characterized the "ontological status of the self." "[In fiction] the human self has experienced the void within itself and the invented fiction, far from filling the void, asserts itself as pure nothingness, *our* nothingness stated and restated by a subject that is the agent of its own instability," de Man wrote.[46] In this respect, literature represented the purest form of philosophy: "From this point on, philosophical anthropology would be inconceivable without the consideration of literature as a primary source of knowledge," de Man concluded.[47] In the final reckoning, all was fiction, or else it was nothing.

It was into this crisis of literary consciousnesses that Gadamer returned to the United States in the spring of 1971 to fill a one-semester appointment at Syracuse University. At this

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[45] de Man, "Criticism and Crisis," 17.
[46] De Man, "Criticism and Crisis," 18.
[47] De Man, "Criticism and Crisis," 18.

point, an encounter between hermeneutics and American literary theory was all but inevitable. But that this encounter would take place on de Man's turf—both geographical and philosophical—was hardly predetermined. de Man had referred to Gadamer's work in *Truth and Method* at three other points in *Blindness and Insight*: once to Gadamer's discussion of symbol and allegory in his section on aesthetics, and twice to Gadamer's analysis of the historicity of understanding and the structure of the hermeneutic circle. Yet in March of that year, when Gadamer traveled to Canada for the first time to deliver a series of lectures at the University of Toronto, he chose to speak about poetics, de Man's area of expertise.

Of course, Gadamer was himself no lightweight in the field of philosophical poetics, having devoted the entire third section of *Truth and Method* to developing a hermeneutical theory of language. And it didn't take him long to position his remarks, which he provocatively titled "On the Truth of the Word," vis-à-vis de Man's position. "One hears such expressions today as 'deception by language' and the suspicion of ideology and metaphysics, so when I now propose to speak about 'the truth of the word' it amounts to a provocation!" said Gadamer in the very first line of his remarks.[48] Despite this initial jab, Gadamer agreed with de Man on a number of critical points. Like de Man and the Yale critics, Gadamer recognized that the toppling of the representational paradigm of language marked a seismic event in the history of poetics. Yet whereas the Yale critics explored the possibilities that the negation of language's representation ability had opened up, it was language's ability to perform functions *beyond* simple representation that interested Gadamer. Citing J.L. Austin's theory that words "do things," Gadamer asked what it meant for language to be "true" in its non-representational sense. In this respect, the basic unit of language, Gadamer argued, was not the single word or even the

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[48] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On the Truth of the Word, trans. Richard Palmer, in *Symposium* 6, no. 2 (2002), 115-134, here 155.

sentenced combined into a discourse, but rather what Gadamer called the "statement" (*Aussage*), understood as any sort of expressive phenomenon—a text, a painting, a poem—in its entirety.

When expanded to include the entire statement of a work of art, the truth of the word could obviously no longer be determined by its representational validity. "It seems evident from the outset that the word that is able to address us cannot be characterized just in terms of the content to which it refers," Gadamer wrote. "The same is true of the visual arts and for the same reason. Someone who looks at the objective content of a painting often looks right past what makes it a work of art."[49] Rather, Gadamer argued, the word is true when it captures being in its movement and discloses it to other beings. "The universal 'there' of being in the word is the miracle of language, and the highest possibility of saying consists in binding its passing away and escape and in making firm the nearness to being," Gadamer wrote. "It fulfills itself within itself, because it is a 'holding of the near,' and it becomes an empty word when it is reduced to its signifying function."[50] For Gadamer, the true word temporarily arrested being in its flux and drew the observer in to it: "The truth of the artwork is not the speaking forth of the *logos*, but is rather a 'that it is' and a 'there' at the same time, that stand in the strife of disclosure and sheltering concealment."[51] The word provided a window onto being in all its movement, fullness and historicity. It did not represent so much as it revealed.

Gadamer drew two conclusions about literary criticism from his analysis of word as *Aussage*. First, if the truth of language arose from its ability to disclose being, then poetic speech—the type of speech that "founds meaning," as Gadamer put it—could displace "normal speech"—the type of speech that represents states of affairs—as the paradigmatic use of

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[49] Gadamer, "On the Truth of the Word," 124.
[50] Gadamer, "On the Truth of the Word," 131.
[51] Gadamer, "On the Truth of the Word," 132.

language. "What language as language is, and what we here seek as the 'truth of the word,' cannot be grasped by taking the so-called 'normal' forms of linguistic communication as the starting point; on the contrary, the possibilities of such forms of communication are better grasped by starting from the poetical manner of speaking," wrote Gadamer. "The self-fulfillment of the poetic word makes it clear why language can be merely a means of conveying information, but a mere means of conveying information cannot become a language."[52] Second, by uncoupling the truth of an assertion from its representational value, Gadamer simultaneously uncoupled the truth of an interpretation from its correspondence with the psychological state of its author. "One hopelessly mistakes what literature is when one tries to go from the literary construction back to the psychological act of intending it, to which the author gave 'expression,'" Gadamer wrote. "Every construing of a text is preceded by an understanding of it, and whoever fears for the objectivity of interpretation because of this had better ask whether tracking the meaning of a literary text back to an opinion of its original created expressed in a text does not destroy the artistic meaning of literature as such."[53] Here, Gadamer's engagement with the new poetics had allowed him to deepen the critique of Romantic hermeneutics that he had begun in *Truth and Method*. The attempt to discover the meaning of a text by recovering the psychological state of its author is misguided not only because an interpreter stands at an unbridgeable historical distance from the author, but also because it misconstrues the essential function of language. If language's most basic function is to disclose being, rather than to represent some non-linguistic reality, then discovering the psychological condition of an author—what he intended his words to represent—is completely incidental to grasping the truth of a text.

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[52] Gadamer, "On the Truth of the Word," 130-1.
[53] Gadamer, "On the Truth of the Word," 124.

The contrasts between de Man's and Gadamer's understandings of poetic language were made all the more striking by the pair's numerous and very real points of agreements. Both took the separation of the sign from the signifier as the starting point of their investigations; both deduced from this separation the exemplary nature of literary-poetic language; both criticized Romanticism's emphasis on mimetic representation. Yet in their final evaluations, de Man and Gadamer diverged drastically. For de Man, the enduring power of literature lay in its ability to reveal the fictiveness and nothingness that the self conceals. For Gadamer, literature "put truth to work" when it captured being and disclosed it across space and time. Where de Mann saw instability, Gadamer found stability; deMan, nothingness; Gadamer, being.

Gadamer's initial foray into American poetics marked the opening salvo of the exchange between hermeneutics and literary theory that would culminate, almost exactly ten years later, with the much-anticipated encounter between Gadamer and Derrida at the Goethe Institute in Paris in April of 1981. As Palmer has argued in his useful collection on the encounter, this so-called "exchange" between the two men was in fact a prime example of the failure of the Gadamerian ideal of dialogue, as Derrida refused to engage Gadamer's questions and Gadamer struggled to make sense of the Frenchman's oblique conversation style.[54]

In the American context, however, the important outcome of Gadamer's early encounter with theory was that it positioned philosophical hermeneutics as a less radical alternative to deconstruction. In his essay "Reading and History," published in 1982, de Man praised the work of Hans Robert Jauss, one of Gadamer's most prolific students, while simultaneously suggesting that hermeneutics remained a subspecies of the very same metaphysics of presence that literary

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[54] For a full gloss of the debate and its repercussions, see *Dialogue & Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane P. Michelfelder, Richard E. Palmer (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989).

theory tried to deconstruct.[55] "Hermeneutics is, by definition, a process directed toward the determination of meaning; it postulates a transcendental functioning of understanding, no matter how complex, deferred, or tenuous it might be, and will, in however mediated a way, have to raise questions about the extralinguistic truth value of literary texts," wrote de Man. "In a hermeneutic enterprise, reading necessarily intervenes but, like computation in algebraic proof, it is a means toward an end, a means that should finally become transparent and superfluous."[56] Hermeneutics' transcendental orientation, in de Man's account, made it a useful though essentially conservative force in American literary criticism. "The question remains to be considered," wrote de Man, "whether Jauss's [and Gadamer's] own historical procedure can indeed claim to free itself from the coercion of a model"—i.e., metaphysics— "that is perhaps more powerful, and for less controllable reasons, that its assumed opponents believe."[57]

Yet de Man's *Resistance to Theory* also manifested a decidedly hermeneutic turn. Despite his criticisms, de Man found significant common ground with Jauss's aesthetics of reception. In particular, de Man saw in post-Heideggerian hermeneutics the possibility of acknowledging the solidity of meaning that readers discover in literary texts without slipping into naïve metaphysicalizing about language and meaning. "In the final analysis, [hermeneutics] provides a model for the articulation between structure and interpretation…Attributes of difference and similarity can be exchanged thanks to the intervention of temporal categories," wrote de Man. "By allowing the work to exist in time without complete loss of identity, the

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[55] Jauss broke into the American literary debate in 1970 with the publication of his essay "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," trans. Elizabeth Benzinger, in *New Literary History* 2, no. 1 (Autumn 1970), 7-37. His first major book, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics,* appeared in German in 1977 and was translated into English in 1982 by Michael Shaw.
[56] Paul de Man, "Reading and History" in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 54-72, here 55. "Reading and History" originally appeared in 1982 as the introduction of Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Ethics of Reception,* trans. Timothy Bahti, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982).
[57] de Man, "Reading and History," 58.

alienation of its formal structure is suspended by the history of it its understanding."[58] In other words, hermeneutics allowed a critic to trace the emergence of meaning in a text without reifying meaning itself into a timeless or transcendent entity. Gadamer's being and de Man's nothingness could co-exist within works of literature, mediated by the history of their reception and interpretation.

Gadamer, too, found the encounter with American literary theory instructive, and he later recalled being received warmly by American departments of literature. "Certainly it is everywhere evident that the great inheritance of Greek and Christian thinking in our age of science is not to be found only in departments of philosophy…Thus, in my visits to America I could connect not only with theology but also with departments related to language and literature, especially comparative literature, departments which in the German language we sometimes refer to as the 'philological disciplines,'" wrote Gadamer. [59] Philosophically, his encounter with literary theory directed his thinking about the Platonic dialogues, the subject of his ongoing research at the time, back to the question of textuality. For Gadamer, the dialogic structure of Plato's texts had long served as his model of ideal philosophical discourse; that they were also texts was only of secondary interest. But after his encounter with literary theory, Gadamer could not evade the fact that the dialogues that he so championed were essentially and inescapably texts:

> [The Platonic dialogues], of course, immediately confront us with the fundamental hermeneutic problem of writtenness [*Schriftlichkeit*]. Plato's dialogues are conversations *written down* by a great philosophical and poetic master, and yet we know from Plato himself…that [Socrates] did not leave behind a written presentation of his true teaching and did not want to. This means he has unequivocally confronted us with the necessity of a mimetic doubling, that is to say, by means of the written conversation to go back to the

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[58] de Man, "Reading and History," 65.
[59] Gadamer, "Reflections on my Philosophical Journey," 20.

originally spoken conversation in which the thought found words—a task that can never be fully accomplished. [60]

As literary texts, the dialogues manifested all the semiotic distortions and obfuscations that theory had identified in all uses of language. Faced with this fact, Gadamer acknowledged the legitimacy of the deconstructionist enterprise, if only in a limited sense. "The word '*Destruktion*' in Heidegger traverses all the layers of [a text's] heritage, and it does so not in order to destroy something but to set something free," Gadamer wrote.[61] Even the most dialogical of philosophers had to reckon with the fact that all philosophy eventually ossifies into text, or else slowly slips into the void of historical oblivion.

Thus three years after Gadamer's arrived in the United States, philosophical hermeneutics remained in a precarious position. On the one hand, hermeneutics appeared to some literary critics as a radical intellectual force, bent on undermining standards of interpretive objectivity and destroying the firm ground of interpretive praxis. To others, it seemed to be a reactionary philosophical movement, determined to preserve the integrity of tradition and defend a metaphysics of meaning in the face of more radical challenges from post-structuralist linguistics and literary theory. Underlying this debate about literary criticism, however, was a thinly disguised argument about the broader political implications of philosophical hermeneutics. Did Gadamer's hermeneutics, with its emphasis on the determining role of tradition, legitimize existing modes of intellectual and social discourse, or did its insistence on the open-endedness of philosophical discourse create possibilities for radical re-imaginings of these discourses and the institutions that generated them? At the center of this debate was the difficult relationship

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[60] Gadamer, "Reflections on my Philosophical Journey," 24.
[61] Gadamer, "Reflections on my Philosophical Journey," 24.

between hermeneutics and the social sciences: what, if anything, did philosophical hermeneutics

have to say about existing political and social realities? What were the politics of hermeneutics?

Chapter Three

GADAMER'S ENCOUNTERS: PART TWO

After another spring in Heidelberg, Gadamer returned to North America in the winter of
1971 to serve as a visiting professor at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. A mid-tier
public research university known for its science and engineering programs, McMaster had
become a hotbed of philosophical research after the university secured the much-coveted archive
and personal library of Bertrand Russel in 1968. By all accounts, Gadamer enjoyed a leisurely if
somewhat unproductive stay at McMaster, where he would return to teach for the next two fall
semesters. In 1973, he developed a serious circulatory illness and, believing he was about to die,
sold his entire personal library to the university.[1] Yet his health soon returned, and he was able to
resume his teaching and research duties that fall. Writing after Gadamer's death, Gary Madison,
a professor of philosophy at McMaster, remembered long afternoon walks with Gadamer in
Hamilton's Royal Botanic Gardens and extended discussions over beers in the faculty club.
"This, of course, is precisely the way Gadamer intended it, devoted as he was to the spirit of
dialogue and to being of assistance, through dialogue, to young professors like me," Madison
wrote. "It was in these conversations that I truly learned what Gadamer's 'philosophy' was all
about."[2]

3.1 TOWARD A HERMENEUTIC SOCIAL SCIENCE

Yet Gadamer's tenure in Canada was not all strolls and beer. While teaching at
McMaster, he increasingly turned his thinking to the relationship between philosophy and social
life, and more specifically, to the nexus of philosophical hermeneutics and the social sciences.

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[1] Grondin, "Hans-George-Gadamer: A Biography," 303.
[2] Gary B. Madison, "In Memoriam Hans-Georg Gadamer," in *Symposium* 6, no. 1, 5-10, here 7.

The impetus for this new focus had been a series of exchanges that Gadamer had had with the German critical theorist Jürgen Habermas. Gadamer and Habermas were good friends and, for three years, colleagues at Heidelberg, where Habermas joined the philosophy faculty in 1962 at Gadamer's request.[3] Habermas had arrived at Heidelberg under somewhat tumultuous circumstances, having been forced to complete his *Habilitation* thesis at the University of Marburg after Max Horkheimer, Habermas's advisor at Frankfurt, blocked his thesis work, over the objection of Theodore Adorno. After reading a late draft of Habermas's still-unfinished *Habilitation*, Gadamer invited the 33-year-old scholar to join the philosophy faculty at Heidelberg—a highly irregular appointment, given that Habermas had yet to complete his *Habilitation*.

Almost thirty years Habermas's senior, Gadamer became a scholarly mentor for Habermas after his unceremonious departure from Frankfurt. According to Grondin, the two men developed an unusually close professional relationship at Heidelberg, often sharing ideas and recommending each other's work and courses to their students.[4] Yet despite their close personal and intellectual partnership, Habermas retained a robust set of independent interests. By training, Habermas was a sociologist in the tradition of Weber and Marx, a stark contrast to Gadamer's training as a classical philologist. Politically, he was an outspoken supporter of the German left, which had rallied around the failure of the older generation—Gadamer's generation—to combat the rise of Nazism. Intellectually, he had adopted Marx's and the Frankfurt School's antipathy to German idealism, the remnants of which he detected in neo-Kantianism and, to a degree, in Heidegger's existential ontology.

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[3] Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Life,"* 305.
[4] Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Life,"* 305.

As the heir to Heidegger's ontology, Gadamer would soon find himself in Habermas's intellectual crosshairs. In 1967, having returned to Frankfurt at Adorno's urging, Habermas published his first extended critique of philosophical hermeneutics in his second major published work, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*. The purpose of the book, Habermas wrote in the introduction, was to reopen the philosophical debate between the natural and historical sciences in order to overcome the philosophical dualism that continued to bedevil the discipline. Unlike the natural sciences or the tradition *Geisteswissenchaften,* the social sciences, Habermas argued, could not simply choose between a positivist and hermeneutic theory of social action; a comprehensive account of social life required some sort of synthesis of the two. "Whereas the natural and the cultural or hermeneutic sciences are capable of living in a mutually indifferent, albeit more hostile than peaceful, coexistence, the social science must bear the tension of divergent approaches under one roof, for in them the very practice of research compels reflection on the relationship between analytic and hermeneutic methodologies," Habermas wrote.[5]

In some respects, Habermas' book marked a significant advance for hermeneutics within the philosophy of the social sciences as a whole. At the time of Habermas's writing, hermeneutics remained the insurgent philosophical force within the field, which was otherwise dominated by the influence of Popperian positivism. That a rising star of critical sociology had made a serious attempt to integrate the logic of the historical-hermeneutic sciences alongside the logic of positivism into a unified logic of the social sciences showed that the philosophical winds within the discipline were shifting. Yet Habermas remained critical of the more totalizing elements of Gadamer's hermeneutics. He was especially suspicious of what he saw as the one-sidedness of Gadamer's thematization of the efficacy of tradition and the comparatively modest

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[5] Jürgen Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, trans. Sherry Weber Nicholsen, Jerry A. Stark (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), 3.

role that Gadamer assigned to historical reflection. For Habermas, historical reflection was fundamentally an emancipatory activity: in the process of uncovering the historical character of contemporary ways of thinking and being, he argued, individuals and societies could free themselves from the coercive and repressive elements of these discourses and begin to construct freer, less coercive systems. Gadamer, by contrast, was less sanguine about the emancipatory possibilities of historical reflection. In his reckoning, the actual effects of being in history always outstripped historical reflection's ability to come to terms with that same historicality. Reflection might lead to a limited self-awareness, but it could never get beyond the horizon of prejudices that everywhere circumscribed finite human life. The social sciences were not immune from the hermeneutic conditions that defined all interpretive activities.

Yet in Habermas's view, Gadamer had misunderstood the function of the social sciences by ignoring the emancipatory effect of historical reflection. In his chapter on Gadamer in *The Logic of the Social Sciences*, entitled "The Hermeneutic Approach," Habermas wrote, "Gadamer fails to recognize the power of reflection that unfolds in *Versehen* [understanding]. There reflection is no longer blinded by the illusion of an absolute, self-grounded autonomy, and it does not detach itself from the ground of the contingent on which it finds itself. But when reflection understands the genesis of the tradition from which it proceeds and to which it turns, the dogmatism of life-praxis is shaken."[6] To live naively within a tradition with no awareness of the tradition *qua* tradition, he argued, represented a phenomenologically different experience than living in a tradition that historical reflection has revealed as a tradition. Gadamer's insistence that historical reflection affected little to no meaningful change in the phenomenological condition of a historical agent seemed to foreclose on the possibility that an

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[6] Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences,* 168.

agent could, by identifying the historical origins and development of a coercive or illegitimate authority, begin to liberate himself from its control. In Habermas's view, Gadamer's hermeneutics absolutized the power and authority of tradition, turning it into an ontological prison that, no matter how coercive or repressive, offered no possibility of escape.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Habermas's philosophical critique of hermeneutics involved a dimension of political disagreement. For Habermas, Gadamer's failure to recognize the emancipatory potential of historical reflection made his hermeneutics a conservative, even reactionary political force. "In his conviction that true authority need not be authoritarian, Gadamer is motivated by the conservatism of the first generation, by the impulse of Burke not yet directed against the rationalism of the eighteenth century," Habermas wrote. "True authority, according to Gadamer, distinguishes itself from false authority through being acknowledged: 'indeed, authority has nothing to do with obedience, but rather with knowledge.' This very harsh sentence expresses a fundamental philosophical conviction that coincides not so much with hermeneutics as with its absolutization."[7] In Gadamer's insistence that the hermeneutic situation remained a universal condition of language, Habermas detected a rigid, even authoritarian inclination; in his argument that all understanding was fore-shaped by tradition, Habermas saw an attempt to legitimize existing social conditions. Whereas Gadamer wanted to model hermeneutics on the relationship between the dutiful student and the beloved mentor, Habermas thought hermeneutics behaved like the ideal Nietzschean student, who knows that the only way to honor a teacher is to move beyond him.

By the early 1970s, the reverberations of the Gadamer-Habermas debate were beginning to cause tremors in North America. In 1971, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor published

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[7] Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences,* 169.

an essay in the *Review of Metaphysics* advocating for a more hermeneutical approach to social scientific research, citing Gadamer as his chief influence. Taylor, who was deeply engaged with both Marxism and post-Heideggerian phenomenology, was particularly well-positioned to inaugurate this debate in North America. While earning his DPhil at Oxford University under Isaiah Berlin in the late-1950s, Taylor had become an active member of the New Left at the very moment when the movement was trying to forge a "third way" for Marxism between Stalinist authoritarianism and western-style liberalism. Sympathetic to Marx's project yet deeply influenced by the English Romantics, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, Taylor had worked to advance a more humane and humanistic interpretation of Marxist social science that avoided the cruder elements of Marx's naturalism and reductionism without slipping into unrestrained idealism.[8] After completing his thesis at Oxford—a critique of psychological behaviorism—Taylor returned to North America to teach at McGill University in Ontario, where he began work on a colossal, 600-page volume on Gadamer's other philosophical lodestar, Hegel.

Like de Man's critique of literary interpretation, Taylor's turn toward a more hermeneutic social science was critically informed by a sense of impending crisis—in Taylor's case, his intuition that the actual developments of social reality were outstripping the methodological framework that the social sciences had adopted to explain them. As an active member of the New Left, Taylor was particularly concerned with explaining how a period of rising material affluence and political stability in the West had given rise to the widespread social discontent and political alienation of the late 1960s. "The strains in contemporary society, the breakdown of civility, the rise of deep alienation, which is translated into even more destructive action, tend to

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[8] For an in-depth account of Taylor's relationship to the New Left, see Jason Blakey, *Alastair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and the Demise of Naturalism: Reunifying Political Theory and Social Science* (South Bend: University of Norte Dame Press, 2016).

shake the basic categories of our social science," wrote Taylor in his 1971 essay. "It is not just that such a development was quite unpredicted by this science…It is rather that this mainstream science hasn't the categories to explain this breakdown."[9] For Taylor, the social and political crises of the 1960s and '70s were inextricably bound up with crises of social meaning. If the social sciences hoped to explain the former, they had to be able to take account of the later.

But, Taylor argued, the self-understanding of the positivist social sciences prevented them from taking serious account of human meaning. Committed to investigating only those areas of human life that could be verified empirically or logically, the social sciences had sidestepped any and all questions that involved problems of interpretation—first and foremost questions about meaningful human action. "Any description of reality in terms of meaning which is open to interpretive question is only allowed into this scientific discourse if it is placed, as it were, in quotes and attributed to individuals as their opinions, belief, attitude," Taylor wrote. "…But what it in fact cannot allow for are intersubjective meanings, that is, it cannot allow for the validity of descriptions of social reality in terms of meanings, hence not as brutal data, which are not in quotation marks and attributed as opinion, attitudes, etc., to individual(s)."[10] The social sciences could determine, for example, that subjects who hold a certain political belief—say, that political equality is of more fundamental importance to American democracy than political freedom—were more likely to perform a given political action—say, registering as a member of the Democratic Party—but they refused to investigate the intersubjective web of significance that made sense of this political action as a meaningful expression of that individual's political belief.

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[9] Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," in *The Review of Metaphysics* 25, no. 1 (September 1971), pp. 3-51, here 41.
[10] Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," 21-22.

Such a determination, Taylor argued, would require a set of interpretive principles that did not fit neatly into positivism's model of verification and induction, and therefore seemed suspect.

Taylor recognized that this search for a truly interpretive "science of man" would require certain concessions from the social sciences which, from within their native epistemology, would appear impermissible. On the one hand, the social sciences would have to surrender their principle of verification based on an appeal to brute empirical data in favor of a principle of verification based on hermeneutical insight, i.e. on readings of social discourses that make better sense of their meaning from within a hermeneutic circle of other, related readings. This would mean that some disputes about social life would ultimately be non-arbitrable except by appeal to broader and deeper insights, which in turn would always be open to interpretive dispute. The social sciences, in other words, would have to make their peace with operating within the hermeneutic circle.

Moreover, the social sciences would have to surrender their claim to any predictive power. Unlike the value-neutral vocabulary of the natural sciences, the conceptual framework of the human sciences could not claim to offer undistorted accounts of human meaning across time and space. "Really to be able to predict the future would be to have [explicated] so clearly the human condition that one would already have pre-empted all cultural innovation and transformation," wrote Taylor. "This is hardly in the bounds of the possible."[11] Thus the purview of a genuinely hermeneutical social science, as Taylor conceived of it, would be restricted to *ex post facto* explanation of cultural change. A hermeneutic social science could lead to greater degrees of self-knowledge and self-clarity, but it would have little to contribute in the way revolutionary or prophetic visions of social development.

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[11] Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," 50.

At the same time as Taylor was inaugurating these debates in North America, Gadamer was beginning to formulate his own hermeneutical diagnosis of the social and political ills that he was witnessing in Europe and the United States. In 1973, Gadamer published an essay, "On Man's Natural Inclination Towards Philosophy," in which he expressed special concern with the ever-creeping influence of technological methods of social control and the concomitant marginalization of non-scientific modes of thought. More than ever before, Gadamer argued, scientific rationality claimed to hold the solutions to all of humankind's problem—social, political, economic, biological, psychological, and historical. "[There is] a growing expectation as to the ability of science ultimately to banish all unpredictable factors from the inner moral life of society by subjecting all spheres of life to scientific control," wrote Gadamer. "…And this again leads to the demand for scientific planning and for a science whose subject matter is the future."[12] Faced with the self-professed explanatory prowess of the social sciences, the humanistic disciples—philosophy especially—had begun to seem less scientific than ever.

This expansion of the authority of the social sciences had political consequences as well. As scientific rationality promised better solutions to social ills, Gadamer argued, political communities had delegated more responsibility to technocratic experts, depriving the citizenry of political initiative by denigrating the value of basic deliberation about the means, ends, and goods of political and social life. What Gadamer believed he was experiencing was the philosophical conflict between truth and method playing out in social and political life—with method gaining the upper hand. The pressing question for Gadamer became what philosophical hermeneutics could illuminate about this shift—in other words, whether hermeneutics could offer anything in the way of social scientific insight.

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[12] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On Man's Inclination towards Philosophy," in *Universitas* 15, no. 1 (1973), 31-40, here 37-8.

After the fall of 1974, McMaster declined to renew Gadamer's contract, forcing him to

relocate south of the border, where he accepted an invitation from Fred Lawrence, a professor of

theology at Boston College, to become a visiting professor of philosophy at B.C. In April of

1974, soon after assuming his new post, Gadamer participated in a symposium at B.C. hosted by

the department of philosophy on the conflict between hermeneutics and critical theory. For his

keynote address at the conference, Gadamer was joined on stage by three familiar faces—

Lawrence, Richard Palmer, and Rudiger Bubner (who, almost a decade earlier in Heidelberg, had

cautioned Palmer against a hermeneutic revision of New Criticism). In his own address, which

he titled "Hermeneutics and Social Science," Gadamer answered the challenge of critical theory

head-on, citing Taylor's work as the starting point for a thorough-going hermeneutic revision of

the self-understanding of the social sciences.[13] "It is the objection of critical theory that by

hermeneutical effort alone we cannot restore authentic communication in a way that common

sense (in the deeper moral and political meaning of the term) would be able to re-establish the

lost equilibrium of our technological civilization," said Gadamer. "This theory concludes that

there is only one way to change and to reinstate authentic communication, and that is by

emancipatory reflection: a critical process of self-illumination which is supposed to bring about a

social discourse free from force."[14]

In fact, Gadamer agreed with much of the critical theorists' diagnosis of the state of

twentieth-century democratic societies. Both Gadamer and the critical theorists argued the

ongoing crisis was the result of from a fundamental change in the nature of political life. Modern

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[13] Gadamer said, "The social sciences realize that the facts which they thematize are mediated to a large extend by speech. Hence, the very basis of many investigatory works is ongoing communication. (In this connection, I refer you to a very convincing article by Charles Taylor in the *Review of Hermeneutics* describing the inclusion of the hermeneutical dimension in the foundations of social science.)" See page 311.

[14] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Social Science," in *Cultural Hermeneutics* 2 (1975), 307-316, here 314. The second volume of *Cultural Hermeneutics* reprinted the transcript of Boston College's symposium on Hermeneutics and Critical Theory, which took place in April of 1974.

technological society had interposed so many degrees of separation between citizens and the actual structures of political power—byzantine state bureaucracies, convoluted electoral procedures—that the average citizen's only direct contact with political power came through their participation in elections. As a result, the primary project of technocratic politics had become shaping public opinion, through the mass media, to align with the interests of the most powerful political and economic powers. "In modern technological society public opinion itself has in a new and really decisive way become the object of very complicated techniques—and this, I think, is the main problem facing our civilization," said Gadamer. "Even the opinions which form the patterns of social life and constitute the normative conditions for solidarity are today dominated to a great extent by the technical and economic organizations within our civilization." The consequence of these relentless efforts to mold public opinion, Gadamer argued, was a catastrophic breakdown in political communication: political language no longer expressed the authentic convictions and desires of citizens, and political discussion no longer aimed to build consensus among citizens about collective social and political goods. The alienation of modern political life, Gadamer suggested, was the alienation of having to play by the rules of a language game that one did not understand and felt powerless to change.

About this diagnosis, at least, Gadamer and critical theorists were in agreement. But Gadamer thought that the critical theorists had overstated both the severity of the communicative breakdown and the potential of emancipatory reflection. Emancipatory reflection, Gadamer charged, promised an impossible position outside the hermeneutic conditions of normal communication from which to critique those conditions and identify coercive distortion and discourses of force: "My objection is that the critique of ideology overestimates the competence of reflection and reason," Gadamer said. "Inasmuch as it seeks to penetrate the masked interests

which infect public opinion, it implies its own freedom from any ideology; and that means in turn that it enthrones its own norms and ideal as self-evident and absolute."[15] For the critical theorist, citizens could return to the difficult task of reaching agreement over political aims only after they had used emancipatory reflection to purge political discourse of its coercive elements. But for Gadamer, such a position outside the hermeneutic conditions of language was an illusion; the hermeneutic conditions of communication were universal. Any solution to the quite-real distortions of modern political communication had to be worked out from within them, not from a privileged vantage point that transcended them: "That is precisely the noble task of hermeneutics: to make expressly conscious what separates us as well as what brings us together," Gadamer said.[16] Failing to recognize the universality of the hermeneutic situation doomed the critical theorists to substituting one ideological system for another.

Instead of emancipatory reflection, Gadamer suggested a return to the classical Aristotelian concept of *praktike episteme* as a solution to the crisis of modern political life. Unlike modern technocratic knowledge, Aristotle's practical knowledge made no hard distinction between deliberations about means and deliberations about ends. Practical knowledge, which included political and moral deliberation, was the type of knowledge where deliberation about means and ends depended on each other. "In my own eyes, the great merit of Aristotle was that he anticipated the impasse of our scientific culture by his description of the structure of practical reason as distinct from theoretical knowledge and technical skill," Gadamer said. In this respect, the Aristotelian concept of prudence served as a necessary corrective to the modern understanding of technocratic intelligence, which was concerned only with determining and applying the proper means to some pre-determined end. "As relevant as the application of

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[15] Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Social Science," 315.
[16] Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Social Science," 315.

science is in many fields of the social life, the properly 'practical' function of prudence is a very different one," said Gadamer. "It concerns the making of responsible political and practical decisions about happiness, health, peace, freedom and other stable factors of human-being-as-nature."[17]

Most importantly, Aristotle's thematization of practical wisdom presupposed that only those people who were completely immersed in the social and political life of a community—i.e., an active citizen—could reason well about its development. "Aristotle's description and formulation of the method of practical philosophy acknowledges that morality and politics are not susceptible to a detached theoretical interest," Gadamer wrote. "[T]heorizing about practical and political obligations demands a stabilized moral habituation or orientation which would prevent us from forgetting the interconnection between generalities and the concrete and binding situations of practical and political life."[18] From the Aristotelian perspective, the technocratic expert, studying the conditions of society from a principled intellectual distance, was less well-positioned to reason intelligently about the proper means and ends of political life than the average citizen was. Yet so, too, was the allegedly emancipated critical theorist.

For this reason, Gadamer positioned Aristotelian prudence as a more clairvoyant account of political life than the models offered by scientific rationalists and critical theorists. Political life, no less than literary interpretation, was a thoroughly hermeneutic task: just as literary understanding emerges from the slow and deliberate work of hermeneutic reflection, so, too, is the good of political life only realized through the difficult negotiation of democratic politics. Any attempt to transcend those conditions—to find an escape from the hermeneutic circle—invariably created a less self-aware political world, not necessarily a freer or more rational one.

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[17] Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Social Science," 313.
[18] Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Social Science," 312.

Gadamer closed his remarks at the conference with a remarkable statement of the *rasion d'etre* of philosophy:

> "I think, then, that the chief task of philosophy is to justify this way of reason and to defend practical and political reason against the domination of technology based on science. This is the point of philosophical hermeneutics. It corrects the peculiar falsehood of modern consciousness: the idolatry of scientific method and of the anonymous authority of the sciences and it vindicates again the noblest task of the citizen—decision making according to one's own responsibility—instead of conceding that task to the expert. In this respect, hermeneutic philosophy is the heir of the older tradition of practical philosophy.[19]

This affirmation of the practical aim of philosophical hermeneutics marked a genuine shift in Gadamer's presentation of the hermeneutical task. When *Truth and Method* first appeared, Gadamer insisted that his philosophical project, though grounded in the concrete work of textual interpretation, was first and foremost concerned with establishing the scientific integrity of humanistic knowledge, over and against the creeping epistemological claims of the natural sciences. Any practical import of his inquiry was secondary to this goal. To an extent, Gadamer continued to resist attempts—like Palmer's—to adduce from philosophical hermeneutics a new interpretive *praxis* for the human sciences. Yet it is clear that by 1974, Gadamer's attempt to address hermeneutics to the social sciences had opened up a new and decidedly practical horizon in his thought. Whether this new horizon entailed any specific partisan commitments exceeds the scope of the present inquiry, and remains a topic of debate among scholars of Gadamer's life and work.[20] But more fundamentally than any partisan commitment, this shift in Gadamer's thought involved a basic affirmation of democratic political life as a whole, a philosophical vindication of the quotidian work of citizens: dialogue, deliberation, disagreement. It was precisely these

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[19] Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Social Science," 316.
[20] See, for example, Grondin, *"The Rectorship amid Class Struggle,"* in *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography*, 231-260.

practices, in Gadamer's view, which the fervor for the technological organization of society had

devalued, and which were most in need of rehabilitation.

Yet Gadamer's fellow participants were not so keen to return to Aristotelian problematics

in search of answers to twentieth-century problems. Although Gadamer acknowledged the

limitations of Aristotle's usefulness, his interlocutors pushed him further. "I am not convinced

that [Aristotle] is really adequate if one wishes to find a better or less-distorting substitute for lost

orientations," said Bubner. "The thought of Aristotle does not constitute an original tradition.

Returning to Aristotle is a digging-out of something which belongs to the history of philosophy,

but which is no longer part of our actual tradition."[21] Lawrence leveled a deeper critique,

arguing that Gadamer's phenomenological account of understanding made it difficult, if not

impossible, to competently navigate the contemporary political world. For Lawrence, the task of

the twentieth-century citizen, living in what he called the era of "post-Hobbesian, post-

Machiavellian" politics, was not only to understand a plurality of competing definitions of

political goods but, more importantly, to distinguish between authentic political conviction—

convictions that embodied good-faith efforts to advance common political ends—and inauthentic

political convictions—convictions designed to mislead, coerce or confuse.[22] Yet Gadamer's

phenomenological perspective seemed to offer no basis upon which to disentangle the two;

hermeneutics inevitably collapsed both authentic and inauthentic discourses into the monolithic

authority of tradition. "[Gadamer's] formulation seems to suggest, against his own deepest

convictions and his own day-to-day performance of philosophy, that it is not of the utmost

philosophical importance to discriminate between the limits of human finitude on the one hand,

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[21] Rudiger Bubner, "Responses to 'Hermeneutics and Social Science,'" in *Cultural Hermeneutics* 2 (1975), 327.
[22] Fred Lawrence, "Responses to 'Hermeneutics and Social Science,'" in *Cultural Hermeneutics* 2 (1975), 321-325, here 323.

and downright human evil and irrationality on the other," said Lawrence. "If this is not what Gadamer means, and I am confident that it is not….then one wonders whether his phenomenological ontology in the Heideggerian vein…is differentiated enough to thematize in outline the grounds that are dialectically relevant to the ongoing discrimination between good and evil on the individual, the social, and the political level."[23] In other words, modern citizenship required a more critical perspective than Aristotle was ill-suited to provide.

The debate between critical theory and hermeneutics fizzled in the mid-1970s, as Habermas began work on what would become *A Theory of Communicative Action*, published in 1981, and away from his more overtly political writings. Meanwhile, the publication of the first English translation of *Truth and Method* in the United States in 1975 opened up new horizons of inquiry and conversation for Gadamer. In the aftermath, Gadamer reluctantly accepted his position as the conservative alternative to Habermas and ideology critique. In the afterword to the English edition of *Truth and Method*, he wrote:

> The weightiest objection against my outline of a philosophical hermeneutics is that I have allegedly derived the fundamental significance of agreement from the language dependence of all understanding and all coming to an understanding, and thereby have legitimated a prejudice in favor of existing social relations. Now, this is in fact right, and in my view it remains a real insight: namely that coming to an understanding can only succeed on the basis of an original agreement, and that the task of understanding and interpretation cannot be described as if hermeneutics has to overcome the opaque unintelligibility of the transmitted text or even preliminarily the errors of misunderstanding…My insistence on this point is taken to demonstrate a conservative tendency and to deter hermeneutic from its proper—critical and emancipatory—task.[24]

In the main, however, Gadamer simply resisted the tendency to subordinate his philosophical insight to its quasi-partisan implications. For Gadamer, the impossibility of complete self-clarity and the universal scope of the hermeneutic condition were phenomenological facts of life;

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[23] Lawrence, "Responses to 'Hermeneutics and Social Science,'" 323.
[24] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 567.

whether they were politically popular was largely secondary to their philosophical rigor. In any

event, Gadamer was disinclined to step into the role of the philosopher-moralist. "It may be that

under revolutionary conditions the emergence of the Robespierre, the abstract moralist who

wants to remake the world according to their own reason, will win applause," Gadamer warned.

"But it is just as certain that their hour is appointed."[25]

Partially for these reasons, Gadamer's influence on the North American social sciences

was not immediate, but it was ultimately decisive. In the decades after Gadamer's intervention,

an array of English-language philosophers and social scientists incorporated elements of

Gadamer's hermeneutics into their studies of the social world—including Taylor, Alasdair

MacIntyre, Richard Bernstein, Robert Bellah, and Hubert Dreyfus.[26] Writing in 2002—nearly

three decades after publishing his first essay on Gadamer—Taylor identified Gadamer not only

as one of the most influential social scientific thinkers of the twentieth century but also as one of

the most relevant and important voices for the twenty-first century. In particular, Taylor

identified Gadamer as one of the philosophical forerunners to the multicultural turn in the social

sciences—the effort to offer undistorted and non-ethnocentric accounts of different cultures.

"The great challenge of the coming century, both for politics and for social sciences, is that of

understanding the other," Taylor wrote. "It is here where Gadamer has made a tremendous

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[25] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 571.
[26] See Alasdair MacIntyre, "Contexts of Interpretation: Reflections on Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*," in *Boston University Joural* 29, no. 1 (1967), 41-46; Alasdair MacIntyre, "On Not Having the Last Word: Thoughts on Our Debts to Gadamer," in *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Jeff Malpas et. al (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 2002), 157-172; Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983); Robert Bellah, "The History of Habit" and "Sociology and Theology," in *The Robert Bellah Reader,* ed. Steven M. Tipton (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 203-220 and 451-455; Herbert L. Dreyfus, "Holism and Hermeneutics," in *The Review of Metaphysics* 34, no. 1 (Sept., 1980), 2-23. For a more comprehensive overview of the "interpretive turn" in the social sciences, see Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (eds.), *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

contribution to twentieth-century thought, for he has proposed a new and different model [of social scientific understanding] which is much more fruitful, and showed promise of carrying us beyond the dilemma of ethnocentrism and relativism."[27] For Taylor, Gadamer's description of understanding as the fusion of horizons offered the most faithful account of the type of knowledge that emerges from cross-cultural understanding: "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," Taylor wrote. "…Meeting this challenge is becoming ever more urgent in our increasingly intercommunicating world."[28]

This striking evolution in Taylor's thought suggests not only the staying power of Gadamer's hermeneutics but also its continued metacritical relevance. In 1971, Taylor offered an account of Gadamer's thought that wrestled with the unprecedented social breakdown and political crisis of the 1960s and early 1970s. In 2002, Taylor returned to Gadamer's thought to make sense of a novel set of social scientific problems associated with the expansion of global networks of communication and the rise of multicultural societies. The two events of interpretation, each arising from different interpretive conditions and motivated by different questions, revealed hitherto-undiscovered potentials in Gadamer's texts. In the Gadamerian parlance, the evolution of Taylor's interpretations manifested the reality of the history of effect.

In an even broader sense, Gadamer's hermeneutic provides a critical vocabulary to make sense of the evolution of the social sciences throughout the twentieth century. As the example of Taylor's development suggests, the twentieth-century social sciences never escaped the interpretive flux that, in Gadamer's exposition, always characterizes hermeneutical

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[27] Charles Taylor, "Gadamer on the Human Sciences," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer,* ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 126-143, here 126.
[28] Taylor, "Gadamer on the Human Sciences," 142.

understanding. Insofar as this remains true today, Gadamer's contribution to the North American social sciences runs deeper than the ways that individual social scientists have incorporated his thought into their research. After Gadamer, interpretation could never be of merely secondary interest to the social sciences; it had become, in an inescapable way, part of its identity.

3.2 TRANSLATING GADAMER: RORTY AND THE ANALYTIC TRADITION

Gadamer's final decade in the United States began with a major development in the history of philosophical hermeneutics: the publication of the first English-language translation of *Truth and Method* in 1975 by the British publishing house Sheed & Ward. The translation, from the second German edition, had been a collaborative effort, overseen by the Irish philosopher Garrett Barden and British translator John Cumming. In the United States, reviewers greeted the translation with enthusiasm. "[I]t is impossible to praise this work too highly," wrote Robert E. Innis, reviewing the books for *The Thomist*. "The sensitivity and seriousness of the author, the breadth and depth of his learning, manifested in the copious and rich notes, the allusive power of his presentation, and the centrality of his problem make the reading of the book an example of what it is about…All those laboring in the humaniora…will neglect this volume at their own risk."[29] In the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion,* Merold Westphal wrote, "Because of the major importance of [the hermeneutical] tradition and Gadamer's own impact, not only in philosophy but also in theology and literary criticism, it is the more unfortunate that untoward circumstances have delayed its translation until now…It is to be hoped that in this case [the translators] will have the further reward of seeing an enlarged interest in Gadamer's work,

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[29] Robert E. Inis "Hans-George Gadamer's *Truth and Method*: A Review Article," in *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 40, no. 2 (April, 1976), 311-321, here 320-1.

now that so much of it is available to the English speaking world."[30] Reviewing the work for *Theological Studies*, John T. Ford noted the book's potentially wide appeal: "A variety of disciplines should find [Gadamer's] work a source of interest and insight," Ford wrote. [P]hilosophers, e.g., may be most attracted by the critique of German philosophy and its re-evaluation of classical Greek and medieval thought; literary critics and historians might profit from its aesthetic approach to interpretation; moralist presumably could find suggestions for analyzing the formation of conscience and application of law; systematic theological may well probe both its methodological implications and specific facets such as the exploration of the category of 'experience' in theologizing about revaluation."[31]

Despite their admiration for Gadamer's work, reviewers noted a number of flaws in the new translation. The translators sometimes rendered "Geisteswissenschaften" as "human sciences" and other times as "modern sciences"; "Wirkungsgeschichte" appeared as "effective history," which obscured the fact that it was the work, not the history, that had a primary effect; "Mitte," a central concept in Gadamer's discussion of language, had been translated as "center," a European term for a geographical region of a city that lost its resonance with North American audiences. The text was also riddled with typos and omissions: entire lines of the German texts were missing; John Stuart Mill became "John Stewart Mill"; Gadamer's italicizations were either ignored or shoddily reproduced. As Westphal charitably put it, "Such quibbles are the normal gratitude publically [*sic*] showered upon translators and publishers. They have the inner

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[30] Merold Westphal, "Reviewed Work(s): Truth and Method by Hans-Georg Gadamer, Garrett Barden and John Cummings: Philosophical Hermeneutics by Hans-Georg Gadamer and David E. Linge; Hegel's Dialectic: Five Hermeneutical Studies by Hans-Georg Gadamer and P. Christopher Smith," in *The International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 8, no. 1 (1977): 67-72, here 67, 72.
[31] John T. Ford, "Book Review: Truth and Method," in *Theological Studies* 37, no. 3 (September 1976): 490–92, here 492.

satisfaction of having done the impossible, for as Gadamer never tires of reminding us, thought cannot really be translated from one language to another."[32]

The concentration of interest in Gadamer's work among American theologians and philosophers of religion was due in part to Gadamer's presence at Boston College, a Jesuit institution with a rich tradition of Catholic theological scholarship. Gadamer's pattern of appointments at Catholic universities might have seemed odd in light of his deep philosophical roots in Protestant scriptural hermeneutics, but Gadamer found himself genuinely at home in the intellectual climate of both Boston College and Catholic University. With the analytic cast of mind dominating most secular departments of philosophy, Catholic institutions like B.C. provided havens for philosophers like Gadamer who were ill at ease in analytic departments. Writing to Heidegger in 1976, Gadamer explained, "On the whole I see very clearly that it is the predominantly *Catholic* (Irish) element in the country that one can appeal to…For this reason, smart and talented non-Catholics prefer philosophy at Catholic universities to the 'analytical' sterility typical in the country."[33]

Gadamer also discovered real intellectual affinities between his own work and Catholic theology, based in their shared grounding in Greek metaphysics. "Of course, I myself certainly claim no special competence as a theologian. But since Greek metaphysics has had such a profound influence of Christian dogmatics, especially through the adoption of Aristotle in such an encompassing way, the tension resident in the Roman Catholic metaphysical conception of God as the highest being were long familiar to me," wrote Gadamer later in his life.[34] Gadamer also discovered a sense of compatibility with Protestant departments of theology, whose focus on

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[32] Westphal, 72.
[33] Letter to Heidegger, February 25, 1976. See Grondin, 468.
[34] Gadamer, "Reflections on my Philosophical Journey," 19.

exegetical work in Greek texts aligned closely with his ongoing work on Plato. "[S]ince the question, 'How is it possible to speak about God?' was central to dialectical theology in Protestantism, their interest was philosophically concentrated above all on the nature of the divine instead of on Greek religious cults, and much more on Plato than on Aristotle," Gadamer wrote.[35] His real affinities, however, lay with the Catholics: "Indeed, it is my expectation that the Catholic tradition in America is closer to my country than the Protestant one," Gadamer said in 1976.[36]

Despite his residency at Catholic University, it was in the field of analytic philosophy that Gadamer's influence began to exert itself most forcefully following the appearance of the English translation of *Truth and Method*. Since the time of Gadamer's arrival in the United States in 1968, American philosophers had understood philosophical hermeneutics as part of the broad phenomenological project of "continental philosophy," which presented not so much a real challenge to Anglo-American analytic philosophy as a curious and opaque alternative. An article in Catholic University's student newspaper announcing Gadamer's appointment in 1969 noted this particular opposition, reading, "Among the topics considered in 'Warheit und Methode' are the ontological status of the world of the art, the logic of the 'Geisteswissenschaften' and the obscurity of the theme of language in these analyses gives [Gadamer's] work an important role in the discussion between the so-called 'continental' and 'Anglo-Saxon' tradition."[37] Gadamer, too, was aware of the mutual unintelligibility of the two traditions. "The German philosophical tradition does not seem to fit in well with the predominant philosophical standards of this continent," Gadamer wrote in the Boston College student newspaper in 1974. "A very strong

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[35] Gadamer, "Reflections on my Philosophical Journey," 19.
[36] Mary MacVean, "Hans-Georg Gadamer: Philosopher Extraordinaire," *The Heights*, January 26, 1976, 4.
[37] "Heidelberg prof joins faculty as philosophy dept. member," *The Tower*, March 7, 1969, 3.

concentration on logic, analysis of ways of speaking, and on the theory of science makes a

German philosopher and one who is interested in phenomenology and especially Heidegger,

appear in the suspicious role of an unscientific witch doctor caught up in his own unfounded

world view. These philosophers would like to inculcate in him a bit of their own sobriety and

clarity."[38]

Philosophical clarity, after all, was what Gadamer had been after all along. Since his

early trips to the United States, Gadamer had attempted to translate hermeneutics into a

philosophical language that would allow for fruitful exchange with analytic philosophers. "As I

learned to speak English a little better, albeit slowly, and got better acquainted with American

philosophers, it became quite apparent to me that there was [*sic*] also quite viable bridges from

analytic philosophy to hermeneutics," Gadamer wrote. "As a matter of fact, already very shortly

after I had completed *Truth and Method* in 1960, I had myself begin to read the later

Wittgenstein and found there much that had long been familiar to me."[39]

Yet, as always, the process of translation presented difficulties. In his early encounters

with analytic philosophers, Gadamer realized that he could not merely take on a new

philosophical vocabulary. Initiating real dialogue between hermeneutics and analytic philosophy

would require that Gadamer adopt an entirely new way of being in language. "Language and

words have a completely different place in the tradition of philosophy familiar to us than they do

in the Anglo-Saxon tradition of philosophy," Gadamer wrote. "Certainly it is true that within

Anglo-Saxon philosophy, too, the heritage of humanistic tradition lives on and is perceivable in

their reigning concepts, but these concepts have no different function than they do in the

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[38] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "A German Philosopher Looks at American Education," *The Heights* 54, no. 29 (April 29, 1974), 8.
[39] Gadamer, "Reflections on my Philosophical Journey," 19.

linguistic formulations customary in the empirical sciences."[40] From Gadamer's vantage-point, analytic philosophy, like the empirical sciences, understood words and concepts as instruments, used to designate and name objects and entities. On this view, translation was in theory unproblematic: all one has to do to move from one language to another was to find suitable words to designate the same concepts and objects. From Husserl and Heidegger, though, Gadamer had absorbed an entirely different understanding of language. For the phenomenologists, language was the medium of being, the existential edifice in which human beings dwelled. "The 'use' of words in language is not a 'using' at all. Rather, language is a medium, an element," Gadamer wrote of his early reaction to analytic philosophy. "Language is the element in which we live, as fish live in water."[41] On this construal of language, translation required much more than finding suitable substitutes for linguistic signs. A translator had to linger in the life world of a foreign language, learning its topology and breathing its air before successfully moving between languages. "Our terms are not like signs that point to something, but rather themselves tell something of their own origin and from this they form a horizon of meaning which is supposed to lead speaking and thinking beyond themselves to the thing meant," Gadamer wrote.[42] To successfully translate meant to expand one's horizon of meaning to encompass the entire matrix of significance and saying power of a foreign language.

For philosophical hermeneutics to gain traction in the Anglo-American context, Gadamer recognized, he would also have to challenge analytic philosophy's dominant understanding of language and linguisticality. A number of Gadamer's early lectures in the United States, including his very first address at Vanderbilt University, "The Problem of Language in

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[40] Gadamer, "Reflections on my Philosophical Journey," 20.
[41] Gadamer, "Reflections on my Philosophical Journey," 22.
[42] Gadamer, "Reflections on my Philosophical Journey," 22.

Schleiermacher's Philosophy," must be understood as part of this. Yet as these early examples made clear, Gadamer the English-language lecturer was poorly suited for this task. His tenuous grasp of the English language notwithstanding, Gadamer lacked the basic fluency in analytic methods and concepts to affect such a rapprochement. His understanding of instrumental uses of language came from the Marburg Neo-Kantians, not Frege or Russell, and as a trained classicist, he had never read deeply in the analytic tradition.

Luckily for Gadamer, a critical re-evaluation of the language and presuppositions of analytic philosophy was already underway in North America when the translation of *Truth and Method* appeared in 1975. In 1967, the American philosopher Richard Rorty, borrowing a term from Gustav Bergman, had labeled this dramatic surge of interest in the philosophy of language "the linguistic turn," calling it "the most recent philosophical revolution" in Anglo-American thought. In the preface to *The Linguistic Turn,* his celebrated anthology of language philosophy published in 1967, Rorty wrote: "By 'linguistic philosophy,' [I mean] the view that philosophical problems are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use."[43] Though offering heterogeneous and often incompatible solutions, the drivers of the linguistic turn, Rorty argued, were united by their critique of the prevailing self-identity of Anglo-American philosophy. "The linguistic turn in philosophy is a reaction against the notion of philosophy as a discipline which attempts to find the solution of certain traditional problems—problems (apparently) generated by certain commonsense beliefs," Rorty wrote. "The critical thrust of the linguistic movement in contemporary philosophy is against philosophy as a pseudo-science; it has no animus against the

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[43] Richard Rorty, "Introduction: Metaphilosophical Difficulties of Linguistic Philosophy," in *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, ed. Richard Rorty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 1-40, here 3.

creation of a new art form within which, consciously rejecting the goal of 'solving problems,' we may carry on in the open an activity previously conducted behind a façade of pseudo-scientific argumentation."[44]

Given the chronology of Gadamer's reception in North America, it would be pure anachronism to position him as an initiator of the linguistic turn. That title must be reserved for two other authors or, more specifically, for two particular texts: Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, published in English in 1953, and Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, published in 1962.[45] Yet while Gadamer was not responsible for launching the linguistic turn, his influence shaped the trajectory of post-turn Anglo-American philosophy. In this respect, the publication of the English-language translation of *Truth and Method* helped his cause immensely. For the first time, English-language philosophers trying to forge a path beyond the linguistic turn had access to Gadamer's systematic treatment of philosophical hermeneutics, rather than having to rely on his partial and occasionally convoluted explications of his philosophy in talks and lectures. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics would become a touchstone of this effort.

And it would be Rorty himself who would become the most influential translator of Gadamer's hermeneutics for the audience of analytic philosophers. In terms of his formal academic training, Rorty was an analytical philosopher *par excellence*. Educated at the University of Chicago and Yale—both home to philosophy departments that maintained somewhat ambivalent attitudes toward logical positivism—he gained a deep fluency in the

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[44] Rorty, "Introduction," 23.

[45] The origins of the "linguistic turn" are, of course, debated, and could be traced to much earlier writers than Wittgenstein and Kuhn, most notably to Rudolf Carnap and and Gilbert Ryle. I am deferring here to Rorty's own paradigm, in which he positions the late Wittgenstein and Kuhn at the origin of the radical turn in linguistic philosophy that took place in the early 1960s. See Richard Rorty, "Being That Can Be Understood Is Language," in *Gadamer's Repercussions: Reconsidering Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. Bruce Krajewski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 21-29, here 21.

language and style of analytic philosophy, especially while studying with Rudolf Carnap at Chicago. [46] At Yale, Rorty studied with the respected analytic philosopher Wilfrid Sellars, and many of Rorty's notable early essays, especially "Mind-Body Identity, Privacy, and Categories," published in 1965, fell squarely within analytic debates.

Yet Rorty was never fully at home in the world of analytic philosophy. At Chicago, he identified strongly with the anti-positivism of the department's metaphysicians, especially Richard McKeon and Charles Hartshorne. [47] As a Ph.D. candidate at Yale, he completed a 600-page doctoral thesis on the metaphysics of potentiality—a decidedly anti-positivism subject—under the speculative metaphysical Paul Weiss. As his professional career progressed, it became increasingly clear that his real philosophical allegiances lay not with logical positivism but with the tradition of American pragmatism. In 1961, well before he published "Mind-Body Identity, Privacy, and Categories," Rorty published an essay titled "Pragmatism, Categories, and Language," in which he offered an extensive exposition of Charles S. Peirce's pragmatism and argued for pragmatism's continued relevance to American philosophy. While teaching at Princeton University in the 1960s and '70s, he returned with vigor to the work of the other fathers of American pragmatism, John Dewey and William James, both of whom he came to favor over Peirce. His interest in pragmatism led him deeper into the work of other non-analytic philosophers, most notably Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Foucault, and, in time, Gadamer.

Rorty's groundbreaking book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* published in 1979, was the fruit of this study. The book was a work of gleeful analytic iconoclasm, taking as its targets the most sacred presuppositions of analytic philosophy: that knowledge is equivalent to

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[46] Richard J. Bernstein, "Richard Rorty's Deep Humanism," in *New Literary History* 39, no. 1 (2008): 13-27, here 14.
Bernstein, "Richard Rorty's Deep Humanism," 15.

accurate representations in the mind of the external world; that philosophy is the discipline

responsible for determining foolproof methods of mental representation and for adjudicating

claims to representational validity. The iconoclastic tone of the work was intentional:

"'Philosophy' became, for intellectuals, a substitute for religion," he wrote in his introduction.

"It was the area of culture where one touched bottom, where one found the vocabulary and the

convictions which permitted one to explain and justify one's activity *as* an intellectual, and thus

to discover the significance of one's life."[48]

Against an exclusively epistemological philosophy, Rorty positioned the work of "the

three most important philosophers of [the twentieth] century:" Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and

Dewey. In Rorty's reckoning, all three had in their own way transcended philosophy as a search

for the foundations of knowledge. Yet rather than adopting the strategies of analytic philosophy

to critique it from within, these "revolutionary" philosophers exposed the limitations of analytic

philosophy by formulating comprehensive philosophical systems that completely excluded

conventional concepts like "mind," "representation," and "foundation." "Wittgenstein,

Heidegger, and Dewey have brought us into a period of 'revolutionary' philosophy….by

introducing new maps of the terrain (viz., of the whole panorama of human activities) which

simply do not include those features which previously seemed to dominate," he wrote.[49]

Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature was Rorty's attempt to create an atlas of this new,

revolutionary world.

Rorty's own critique of analytic philosophy—which comprised two-thirds of the book—

was formidable. Unlike his philosophical models, he opted to attack analytic philosophy from

within, using its styles of argumentation and analysis to expose the inherent limitations and

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[48] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979), 4.
[49] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* 6.

contradictions of its systems. Yet it was his proposal for a new, post-epistemological mode of philosophy that proved most controversial, and in which Gadamer and philosophical hermeneutics played a central role. Recognizing that the demise of traditional epistemology created a philosophical "vacuum which need[ed] to be filled," he reached for the term "hermeneutics" to describe the philosophical situation that he hoped to inaugurate. Yet it was not so simple, he argued, as substituting hermeneutics for epistemology: "I want to make clear at the outset that I am *not* putting philosophical hermeneutics forward as a 'successor subject' to epistemology, as an activity which fills the cultural vacancy once filled by epistemologically centered philosophy," he wrote. "…On the contrary, hermeneutics is an expression of hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled—that our culture should become one in which the demand for constraint and confrontation is no longer felt."[50]

In this sense, Rorty presented hermeneutics not as an alternative philosophical system to analytic philosophy but as an entirely new mode of discourse—both a way of speaking and a way of thinking about speaking. Adapting Kuhn's distinction between "normal" and "revolutionary" science, Rorty termed hermeneutics an "abnormal discourse," opposed to the "normal discourse" of epistemology:

> [N]ormal discourse is that which is conducted within an agreed-upon set off conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as answering a question, what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it. Abnormal discourse is what happens when someone joins in the discourse who is ignorant of these conventions of who sets them aside…But hermeneutics is the study of an abnormal discourse from the view of some normal discourse—an attempt to make sense of what is going on at a stage where we are still too unsure about it to describe it, and thereby to begin an epistemological account of it.[51]

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[50] *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* 315
[51] *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* 320.

Drawing directly from Gadamer, he argued that hermeneutics, at its most basic level, conceptualized philosophy as conversation over declamation: "Hermeneutics sees the reaction between various discourses as those of strands in a possible conversation, a conversation which presupposes no disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers, but where the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts," he wrote. "This hope is not a hope for the discovery of an antecedently exciting common ground, but simply hope for agreement, or, at least, exciting and fruitful disagreement."[52]

From Rorty's vantage point, Gadamer's positive contribution to a post-epistemological philosophy lay in his concept of *Bildung*, developed in the first chapters of *Truth and Method*. "For my present purposes, the importance of Gadamer's book is that he manages to separate off one of the three strands—the Romantic notion of man as self-creative—in the philosophical notion of 'spirit' from the other two strands with which it becomes entangled," he wrote. "…He does this by substituting the notion of *Bildung* (education, self-formation), for that of 'knowledge' as the goal of thinking."[53] Rorty chose to translate *Bildung* as "edification" rather than the more conventional "education" to emphasize its divergence from normal discourses: "For edifying discourse is *supposed* to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings," he wrote. Following Gadamer, he positioned *Bildung* was the proper work of Gadamer's historically effected consciences: "Gadamer develops his notion of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstein* (the sort of consciousness of the past which changes us) to characterize an attitude interested not so much in what is out there in the world, or in what happened in history, as in what we can get out of nature and history for our own uses," he wrote. "In this attitude, getting the facts right (about atoms and the void, or about

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[52] *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* 318.
[53] *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* 358.

the history of Europe) is merely propaedeutic to finding a new and more interesting way of expressing ourselves, and thus coping with the world. From the educational, as opposed to the epistemological or the technical, point of view, the way things are said is more important than the possession of truths."[54]

As the above passages suggest, Rorty's effort to reposition *Bildung* as the central philosophical task required adopting an entirely new attitude toward knowledge and its acquisition. "Hermeneutics is not 'another way of knowing'— 'understanding' as opposed to (predictive) 'explanation,'" Rorty wrote. "It is better seen as another way of coping…The word *knowledge* would not seem worth fighting over were it not for the Kantian tradition that to be a philosopher is to have a 'theory of knowledge.'"[55] In a later essay on Gadamer's influence, he offered a picture of what a genuinely hermeneutic philosophical practice might look like: "In a culture that took Gadamer's slogan to heart, [philosophical] rivalries would not be thought of as controversies about who is in touch with reality and who is still behind the veil of appearances. They would be struggles to capture the imagination, to get other people to use one's vocabulary."[56] A thoroughly hermeneutic world, according to Rorty, would recast the task of the historian of philosophy as well as the task of the philosopher: "In this philosophical utopia, the historian of philosophy will not choose her descriptive vocabulary with an eye to distinguishing the real and permanent problems of philosophy from the transient pseudo-problems. Rather, she will choose the vocabulary that enables her to describe as many past figures as possible as taking part in a single, coherent conversation."[57] In a striking image in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, he personified hermeneutic philosophy as an "informed dilettante," who, in contrast to

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[54] *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* 359.
[55] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* 256.
[56] Rorty, "Being That Can Be Understood Is Language," 28.
[57] Rorty, "Being That Can Be Understood Is Language," 28-9.

the "cultural overseer" of the Platonic philosopher-king, "[is] charmed out of their self-enclosed practices," knowing that "[d]isagreements between disciplines and discourses are compromised or transcended in the course of the conversation."[58]

In an important respect, Rorty succeeded in accomplishing what Gadamer had failed to do: to translate hermeneutics into a philosophical language that allowed it to enter into conversation with Anglo-American philosophy. Admittedly, Rorty's aim was not to synthesize analytic philosophy and hermeneutics into a new form of inquiry so much as it was to position hermeneutics as a radical anti-philosophy that wholly transcended the philosophical project of analytic philosophy. Yet Rorty's transmutation of hermeneutics into a new *mode of discourse* as opposed to a new *philosophical system* allowed analytic philosophy to coexist with hermeneutics, and, in limited cases, even absorb some hermeneutic insights. Most notably, Rorty brought into the American philosophical mainstream Gadamer's insight that language, beyond a mere instrument of communication, constituted a world of inquiry, and that some philosophical questions only appear when philosophers become wanderers in strange and foreign linguistic worlds. If, as Rorty suggests in *The Linguistic Turn,* the goal of the new linguistic philosophy had been to reform or clarify existing uses of language in order to dissolve philosophical problems, the goal of post-linguistic turn hermeneutics was to invent new uses of language that allowed philosophers to ask hitherto unrealized questions.

In an interview he gave in 1995, Gadamer shared an anecdote that illustrated (while perhaps also overstating) the extent of the philosophical intermixing between hermeneutic and analytic philosophy. In 1981, Gadamer visited Queens College in Ontario, which was them home to "a purely analytic department" where he delivered a lecture on hermeneutics and engaged in a

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[58] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* 317.

debate with one of his former students, a Kantian teaching in the department. Five years later, in

1986, that same student invited Gadamer back to Queens, but this time Gadamer declined. "I was

no longer keen on traveling because of my age and said: 'You know, I am familiar with how

things are," Gadamer recalled. "But he responded: 'No, you are not, because everyone has now

become a hermeneut."[59]

Despite their continuity, Rorty's adaptation of Gadamer's hermeneutics involved notable

reinterpretations of Gadamer's project. As Steve Bouma-Prediger has argued, despite

overlapping in significant ways, Rorty's and Gadamer's hermeneutics diverge at critical points.[60]

For Gadamer, hermeneutics involved an event of truth and a revelation of being, while for Rorty,

the only sense of "truth" that emerged in hermeneutical discourse was truth as "what-it-is-good-

to-believe."[61] While Gadamer was concerned to carve out an area of truth as philosophically

distinct from scientific truth, Rorty aimed to redefine the entire notion of truth altogether,

whether of the scientific or humanistic variety. As a result, Rorty proved much more open to the

implications of radical relativism, whereas Gadamer tried to "negotiate[] his way between the

Scylla of objectivism and the Charybdis of relativism."[62] Most glaringly, Rorty departed

dramatically from Gadamer's conception of hermeneutics as dialogical conversation. As Bouma-

Prediger puts it, "For Gadamer, one converses in order that truth might manifest itself in the to

and fro of question and answer. For Rorty, one converses in order to engage in exciting and

stimulating conversation."[63] His assertion that "hermeneutics views [interlocutors] as united

by…civility rather than by a common goal, much less by a common ground," could not be less

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[59] Interview with Gadamer in *Frankfurter Rundschau* (February 11, 1995); see Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography,* notes to pages 321-323, note 24, page 468.
[60] See Steve Bouma-Prediger, "Rorty's Pragmatism and Gadamer's Hermeneutics," in *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 57, no. 2 (Summer, 1989), 313-324.
[61] Bouma-Prediger, 321.
[62] Bouma-Prediger, 322.
[63] Bouma-Prediger, 322.

Gadamerian.[64] For Gadamer, the entire purpose of hermeneutics, its defining *telos*, was the working out of common ground through dialogue.

Later in his life, Gadamer resisted some of Rorty's more radical uses of hermeneutics while acknowledging their limited legitimacy. In 1999, in a conversation with the Italian philosopher Riccardo Dottori, Gadamer responded to Rorty's contention that the good that philosophy sought after was never more than the useful. While conceding that, in practice, philosophy must be satisfied with discerning something less than the good in itself, Gadamer maintained that the search for the good in itself remained a constitutive ideal of philosophical practice. "I would perhaps agree with [Rorty] that in our search for the good we will, at best, hit upon the better, never the good in itself. And yet…it's also true that we will never search for or find what is better for us without seeking the good in itself or at least having it in mind," Gadamer said.[65] The same relation held, Gadamer argued, for the search for truth:

> [T]he difficulty lies not in our knowing the truth, or the politician not knowing the truth, or his not needing to know the truth. Here Rorty is correct—anyone who engages in politics can't simply desire the true or the good exactly—[and] it's undoubtedly correct to say that he orients his own action and conduct with a view to the pragmatic…We see well that [Rorty] pleads well for this practical or pragmatic reasonableness. If in doing this, however, he limits himself to just this—without referring it back to the good—he won't be able to recognize what the better is in relation to the good, that is, what the better actually is. One really must recognize that the better is actually only the better in relation to a final end.[66]

Despite these areas of agreement, Gadamer chaffed at the unchecked proliferation of philosophical projects that called themselves "hermeneutics." Although not singling out Rorty by name, Gadamer lamented in 1996 the tendency to equate hermeneutics with a total rejection of

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[64] Rorty, *Philsophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 218.
[65] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy: A Conversation with Riccardo Dottori*, trans. Rod Coltman, Sigrid Koepke (New York: Continuum, 2004), 42-3.
[66] Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy*, 43.

methodological rationality. "Regrettably it is not a superfluous task to go into these questions [about the origin of philosophical hermeneutics], because many people have seen and so see in their hermeneutical philosophy a rejection of methodical rationality," Gadamer wrote. "Many others, especially after hermeneutics became a stylish slogan, and any and every kind of 'interpretation' [that] called itself 'hermeneutical' misused the world and the issue because of which I took hold of this term."[67]

The divergences between Gadamer's conception of hermeneutics and Rorty's reinterpretation can be explained in part by the differences in their philosophical interlocutors. Gadamer formulated his hermeneutics as a response to the traditions of German idealism, stretching from Kant to Hegel, and of German Romanticism, descended from Schleiermacher. Against the idealist and Romantic celebration of an infinite self-consciousness, Gadamer sought to revive the limited, historical consciousness that he found in the work of Plato and Heidegger.[68] Rorty, by contrast, addressed his own reinterpretation of hermeneutics to the whole tradition of rationalist epistemology, which owed as much as Kant as it did to Descartes and Locke. His more immediate polemical target was all of logical positivism and analytic philosophy descended from Russel and Frege who, in Rorty's view, had uncritically adopted the rationalist concept of mind. For Rorty, Plato was as much an adversary as he was an ally, and American pragmatism, much more than Heidegger, supplied him with his philosophical ammunition.

Yet this divergence between Gadamer's and Rorty's formulations of hermeneutics is precisely what the logic of question and answer would predict. Replacing a monologic conception of philosophy as argumentation with a dialogic conception of philosophy as conversation requires acknowledging that a philosophical system can only be understood as an

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[67] Gadamer, "Reflections on My Philosophical Journey," 26.
[68] Gadamer, "Reflections on My Philosophical Journey," 27.

answer to a given question; when the question changes, so, too, does the answer. Rorty reached

for Gadamer's hermeneutics to provide an answer to a set of questions that Gadamer himself had

not asked. That he was nevertheless able to discover suitable answers to these questions in

Gadamer's texts is not evidence of Rorty's interpretive laxity but proof of Gadamer's insight that

"we understand differently, if we understand at all."

Conclusion

INTELLECTUAL HISTORY AFTER GADAMER

On November 12, 1981, a group of scholars gathered at McMaster University, Gadamer's temporary academic home, to honor the 81-year-old and his contributions to the university. With Gadamer in attendance, four scholars delivered addresses: Albert Shalom, Ben F. Meyer, and Gary Madison, all professors at McMaster, and David Linge, a professor of religious studies at the University of Tennessee. Following an introduction by Shalom, Meyer spoke on Gadamer's contribution to biblical interpretation, Linge surveyed his interventions in contemporary philosophy, and Madison offered some autobiographical remarks about Gadamer's influence on his own development as a scholar.

The conference offered a window onto the deep and manifold ways that Gadamer—both the philosopher and the man—had influenced its participants. A number of the presenters praised the ecumenical tendency of Gadamer's philosophy, citing its ability to bring scholars from different disciplines together around a set of shared problems. "Quite apart from the customary seminars held by Visiting Professors, Dr. Gadamer's presence [at McMaster] acted as something of a catalyst," said Shalom in his introductory remarks. "The occasional tendency to torpor, in this or that department, was frequently transformed into a higher and nobler state of activity."[1] At the University of Tennessee, said Linge, he had been surprised—"though not deeply surprised"—to come across students at the Graduate School of Planning reading Gadamer's essays. "They explained that they work in a field in which both research and decisions of public agencies that use such research are dominated increasingly by computers," Linge said. "Gadamer

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[1] Albert Shalom, "Introduction," in *In Celebration of Gadamer* (McMaster University, November 12, 1981), 1-4, here 1.

helped them to break the mesmerizing power that computer information has come to exercise; in effect, he helped them to 'demythologize' its excessive claims by locating it within the broader context of human questions, human interpretation, and human decisions."[2]

The expansive appeal of Gadamer's philosophy, though certainly enhanced by Gadamer's skill as a master conversationalist, had philosophical roots. Although subsequent interpreters have taken Gadamer's work as a kind of *apologia* for the humanities, the scope of his philosophical project, as Linge correctly pointed out, was in fact much broader. Unlike Dilthey, Gadamer had little interest in thematizing understanding in a way that separated understanding in the *Geisteswissenschaften* from understanding in the *Naturwissenschaften*. If philosophical hermeneutics served to legitimatize humanistic inquiry, Gadamer would have protested, it was only because they had exposed something about the nature of understanding as a whole. "Gadamer has shown us that no genuine rehabilitation of the humanities—the Geisteswissenschaften—is possible that does not illuminate the fundamental conditions that underlie the phenomenon of understanding in all its modes, scientific and non-scientific alike, conditions that are therefore ontological rather than merely methodological," Linge wrote.[3] This universalist tendency in Gadamer's thought had found its natural corollary in the broad interest that his work had aroused. "Gadamer's influence, like that of all truly seminal thinkers, has thus refused to be confined to any narrow field of specialization," Linge said. "It is this connective or integrative power of his philosophical hermeneutics, I believe, that is his greatest contribution to our time—a time in which a host of fragmented, disconnected and thus often demonic claims to

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[2] David Linge, "Gadamer's Contribution to Contemporary Philosophy," in *In Celebration of Gadamer* (McMaster University, November 12, 1981), 14-25, here 14.
[3] Linge, 16.

knowledge and authority obscure any clear vision of our presence in the world and threaten the very survival of our civilization."[4]

Gadamer himself might have offered a more modest appraisal of his philosophical success. In his final years in the United States and throughout the final two decades of life, Gadamer frequently suggested that both he and his thinking were out of touch with the contemporary zeitgeist. "I am an old geezer, and I stopped saying anything that made sense about, oh, ten or fifteen years ago," said Gadamer in an interview with the B.C. student newspaper in 1980. "But because I am so distinguished looking, everyone still talks to me as if I were still the brilliant man I once was."[5] The foreign norms of the American university only heightened Gadamer's sense of alienation, though he looked upon its idiosyncrasies with his characteristic sense of humor. "One is often amazed by the nonchalance with which a student visits a professor in his office—out of pure curiosity," Gadamer wrote in *The Heights* in 1974. "But then [he] forgives the student because one is glad to note that the student seldom extends his visit too long and always ends with thanks for 'having spent some of your time.'"[6] Gadamer also noted that his American students proved more technically skilled than their German counterparts, though the quality of their bibliographies made him wonder whether "the student devotes more of his time to the study of secondary literary research, even the mastery of bibliography as such, than to his real object, the text."[7]

Yet these lighthearted asides obscured Gadamer's graver suspicion that he had delivered philosophical hermeneutics to the world too late. Living into his ninth decade, he feared that he had survived only to see his ideas become historical marginalia, a sort of philosophical atavism

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[4] Linge, 15.
[5] Jim Duffy, "Hans-Georg Gadamer: Reflections," *The Heights*, November 10, 1980, 10, cont. 23-4, here 24.
[6] Gadamer, "A German Philosopher," 8.
[7] Gadamer, "A German Philosopher," 8.

from a bygone era rather than a live philosophical option. "'My influence,' in the world'" Gadamer wrote in 1993, "is minimal. In all cultural circles I am considered someone who pointed the way down a particular path. Will anyone take it? Apparently not."[8] His sense of philosophical failure commingled with the more personal pains of feeling that he had lived past his appointed hour. "In the next century I will be treated simply as one of the philosophical thinkers of the past. So much is clear to me. And for now? I am a living anachronism—because I do not belong to present any longer but am still here."[9]

And yet, as Gadamer's hermeneutics teaches, an author is never the most authoritative interpreter of his own works—nor the best judge of his influence. In fact, the period between 1986, when worsening health forced Gadamer to leave the United States for Heidelberg, and his death in 2002, witnessed the widespread dissemination and adaptation of his ideas, reaching fields as disparate as medical ethics, feminist theory, and dramaturgy.[10] His death prompted an outpouring of scholarly work on hermeneutics and was marked by a number of obituaries in prominent national newspapers, including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post.* In the *Times*, Gadamer's obituary appeared under the headline, "Hans-Georg Gadamer, 102, Who Questioned Fixed Truths," a description that would have almost certainly rankled Gadamer had he been alive to read it.[11]

As the *Times*' headline suggests, Gadamer's philosophy never entirely escaped the uneasy position that Palmer had assigned to it as the antagonist of interpretive objectivism. As

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[8] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Im Alter wacht die Kindheit auf," in *Die Zeit* (March 26, 1993). See Grondin, notes to pages 310-317, epigraph, 465.
[9] Gadamer, "Im Alter wacht die Kindheit auf."
[10] See, respectively, Fredrik Svenaeus, "Hermeneutics of medicine in the wake of Gadamer: the issue of phronesis," in *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 24 (2003), 407-431; *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lorraine Code (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); Alison Forsyth, *Gadamer, History, and the Classics: Fugard, Marowitz, Berkoff and Harrison Rewrite the Theater* (New York: P. Lang, 2002).
[11] Stuart Lavietes, "Hans-Georg Gadamer, 102, Who Questioned Fixed Truths," *The New York Times*, March 25, 2002, B7.

Linge noted in his remarks at MacMaster, Gadamer often assumed the unenviable position of arguing against deeply engrained ways of making sense of the world. "One of the persistent difficulties Gadamer has faced, especially in the English-speaking world, is that the central thesis of his philosophy…swims against the stream of the deeply held, common-sense view of thing," Linge said. "But conventional wisdom has the annoying habit of reasserting itself against Gadamer and, for many readers, this reassertion of the more conventional framework supplied by the consciousness-oriented ontology of recent centuries has the effect of waking them up from a kind of temporary spell which Gadamer has cast over them."[12]

The task facing proponents of Gadamer's hermeneutic today is to make this spell last. Gadamer's influence has been broad, but it has hardly been uniform. In contrast to literary interpretation, theology and the social sciences, the theory-averse historical disciplines, including intellectual history, have not been quick to take up philosophical hermeneutics as a source of theoretical insight. Some theoreticians, nevertheless, have tried. In 1982, the influential UC Berkeley historian Martin Jay published an essay advocating for a hermeneutic turn in intellectual history, noting the obvious value that Gadamer's study of textual interpretation might offer to a discipline whose chief aim is to make sense of complex historical texts. For Jay, hermeneutics offered a workable middle way between the pitfalls of historical positivism and the complete dissolution of historical meaning proposed by the more radical post-structuralist theorists. "Gadamerian hermeneutics, while avoiding what the New Critics…called the 'intentional fallacy,' also resists what might be termed the 'anti-intentional fallacy' of the structuralist and post-structuralist," wrote Jay. "At the same time as it resists the naturalization of historical consciousness produced by a naively objectivist view of the past, it also avoids

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[12] Linge, 21.

reducing history to an arbitrarily constructed vision of the present."[13] Jay also suggested that a

genuinely hermeneutic approach to intellectual history would include an investigation of the

reception of a text as well as into the historical conditions of its creation. "The history of a text's

effect," Jay wrote, "may well be more a chronicle of successive misunderstandings than perfect

reproduction…but the potential for the specific distortions that do occur can be understood as

latent in the original text."[14] Finally, Jay argued that Gadamer's hermeneutics, if supplemented

by elements of Habermas's critical perspective, could gesture toward a new definition of

historical method as a whole, a definition that would balance the recognition of the linguistically-

and historically-mediate nature of understanding with the need for a more critical rationality.

"Just as the alternative between seeing language as either perfectly transparent or totally opaque

is too rigidly posed, so too the opposition between a linguistically informed intellectual history

and one indebted to traditional (or, in Habermas's case, nontraditional) concepts of rationality is

incessantly extreme," wrote Jay. "[W]ithout some dialogical play between them, our reading of

the past will remain either anachronistic, in the sense of being indifferent to the liveliest

philosophical currents of our day, or, what is worse, incapable of providing a critical perspective

on the past and present in the name of a more attractive future."[15]

The preceding two chapters have, in a limited way, tried to explore some of the

narratological possibilities that such a hermeneutic approach to the past opens up for intellectual

history. We can now say with greater precision what these are. The first and less novel insight is

that intellectual history must be essentially dialogical in character. As Gadamer argued, the task

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[13] Martin Jay, "Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn? Reflections on the Gadamer-Habermas Debate," in *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 86-110, here 106.
[14] Jay, 107.
[15] Jay, 110.

of an interpreter is to understand a philosophical statement, and, by extension, a philosophical system, as an answer to a question. Any historical account of the genesis of an idea that fails to account for the question to which that idea is a response proves incomplete. And yet while intellectual historians of a variety of methodological persuasions have accepted this point, it is clear that its acceptance entails very little else in the way of methodological mandates. It is just as compatible, for example, with a staunchly historicist and contextualist approach as it is with a hermeneutic one, though it raises different problems with each. Gadamer's particular insight, however, is that a text can serve as a meaningful answer to more than one question, and that our understanding of texts will change as we ask different questions of it. For this reason, some hypothesized original question—the question that an author had in mind, for example, or the question that a contemporary audience asked—does not hold any sort of epistemological priority over subsequent questions. *Contra* strong contextualist approaches, the meaning of a text is coextensive with the questions that interpreters ask of it.

This suggests Gadamer's second major historiological insight, which is that the reception or "effect" of a text constitutes an integral element of its historical meaning. In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, Gadamer's student Hans-Robert Jauss developed the consequences of this insight for literary interpretation under the heading of "reception aesthetics," and his conclusions hold substantially true for intellectual history as well.[16] This particular fusion of reception and meaning in intellectual history is what I have tried to explore with my concept of the encounter. On this reading, an encounter marks a moment of disclosure, a point in time when a possible meaning of a text becomes manifest in dialogue between two (or more) interlocutors. To use Gadamer's terminology, an encounter is a fusion of horizons, or, put somewhat differently, the

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[16] See Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," and Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception.*

moment when a potentiality of meaning becomes an actuality, understood on the model of

Aristotelian *phronesis* that Gadamer proposed. There is a tendency among the more avowedly

historicists styles of intellectual history to chart the history of successive interpretations of a text

as a gradual falling away or distancing from an original meaning. In Gadamer's Aristotelian

terms, this style of intellectual history mistakenly construes interpretation as *teche* rather than as

phronesis. It assumes that the interpreter, like the carpenter, possesses some sort of blueprint that

can serve to distinguish correct from incorrect interpretation. As Charles Taylor has persuasively

argued, abandoning this model does not entail embracing complete interpretive relativism, but it

does require revising what we understand as a successful or faithful interpretation.[17]

To be clear, the point of this reflection is not to delineate a new historical methodology in

the conventional sense of the word, i.e. a way of doing history that fixes the past in place as a

stable, unmediated object of inquiry. The basis of Gadamer's criticism of method was that the

past does not strictly speaking exist in this sense; it is not an "object-in-itself," any more than is

the meaning of a text. The past is available to us only insofar as it manifests in tradition—which

is to say that it exists always in mediation. The purpose of hermeneutic reflection is not to escape

this mediation but to make its effects conscious and explicit. My contention is that the same

insight can be applied to historical narrative—that it is both possible and useful to construct

narratives that capture, almost mimetically, the movement of historical understanding. Historians

cannot escape history, but they can at least attempt to craft narrative structures that make

explicit, if not wholly transparent, their involvement in it.

This raises a final hermeneutic question: what does it mean to encounter Gadamer today?

An answer to this question must begin with the questions that contemporary readers ask of his

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[17] Charles Taylor, "Philosophy and its history," in *Philosophy in History*, ed. Richard Rorty, Jerome D. Scheenwind,
Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 17-30.

texts. For my part, I first read *Truth and Method* as part of a broad survey of historical and contemporary debates in the philosophy of history. I had turned to these debates to try to answer a question that continued to arise in my readings of pre-modern historical texts: what is the philosophical consequence of recognizing that the very concept of history is *itself* historical, that what constitutes historical evidence, historical explanation, and even historical truth has changed over time and will continue to change? Could historians abandon the presupposition that history as we practice it now will prove to be any more durable than the models it supplanted, and instead practice history in a way that accounts for the inevitable flux of historical concepts?

I found few answers to these questions in the English-language debates in the philosophy of history, which include contributions from very talented historians and philosophers alike. In general, these debates take the form of debates about the epistemology of history: how can we, as historical beings, know the past and produce truthful representations of the it? In the main, I found that contributors to these debates have generally adopted one of two approaches: either they unsuccessfully attempt to delineate a new historical methodology that would secure an objective, quasi-scientific understanding of the past, or, having concluded for a variety of reasons that such a methodology is unattainable, they maintain, with an air of resignation, that historians can still responsibly proceed with historical research despite the absence of a uniform methodology.[18] (Hayden White and Dominic LaCapra are the two major American theorists who have offered radical and sustained alternatives to the theoretical norm, but the reaction to their work among intellectual historians has been fraught with ambivalence.[19])

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[18] For an example of the former, see Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages," in *Speculum* 65, no. 1 (Jan., 1990), 59-86; for an example of the latter, see Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacobs, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995).

[19] On White's and LaCapra's reception in contemporary intellectual history, see Russell Jacoby, "A New Intellectual History," in *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 2 (April, 1992), 405-424.

By contrast, Gadamer offers something new. Like Heidegger, he approaches history as a question of ontology, not of epistemology. *Truth and Method* is Gadamer's attempt to explicate the structure historical being, to explore what it means most fundamentally to be a historical being. It explores the philosophical possibilities that open up when we cease to view the past only as a potential object of knowledge and begin to understand it as a sort of existential edifice, a thing that can be experienced and used as well as known. In short, Gadamer offers to a twenty-first-century reader the possibility of history after epistemology. Just what this history will look like is the question that he leaves us with.

In another important respect, Gadamer's hermeneutics goes a long way to alleviating some of the anxiety that pervades English-language debates about the supposedly non-scientific nature of historical knowledge. As Gadamer himself wrote in the preface to *Truth and Method*, "the one-sidedness of hermeneutic universalism has the truth of a corrective."[20] Against historicism's preoccupation with method, Gadamer defended the reality of a type of knowledge that precedes, and thus constrains, the achievements of a methodological consciousness. He demonstrated that a subject's involvement in history is a necessary precondition to understanding, rather than a barrier to it. Most fundamentally, his phenomenological account of understanding suggested that the quest for some ideal of historical knowledge is always in an important sense subordinate to the reality of history itself. As Gadamer wrote in the preface to *Truth and Method*, "The hermeneutic consciousness seeks to confront [the modern] will with something of the truth of remembrance: with what is still and ever again real." If there is a conservative or reactionary flavor to Gadamer's hermeneutics, it arises from this impulse to grasp what is real and, having grasped it, to make peace with it.

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[20] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxxiv.

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