

AH ANALECTA HERMENEUTICA  
INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR HERMENEUTICS / INSTITUT INTERNACIONAL D'HERMÈNEUTIQUE

For a Hermeneutics Yet to Come:  
Gadamer and Ricoeur's Legacy to 21-st Century Thought

Richard Kearney *My Way to Hermeneutics with Ricoeur and Friends*

Jens Zimmermann *Guarding Our Humanity*

Paul Fairfield *Ricoeur, Imagination, and Historiography*

Daivd Utsler & Cynthia Nielsen *(Environmental) Hermeneutics at the  
Heart of the Anthropocene*

Patrick J. Casey *At the Cost of Solidarity*

Sofía Alcaine *Gadamer on Friendship and Solidarity*

Facundo Bey *The Courage of Thinking in Utopias*

Blake D. Scott *Ideology, Utopia, and Phronetic Judgment in Paul Ricoeur*

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GADAMER AND RICOEUR'S LEGACY TO 21-ST CENTURY THOUGHT  
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## For a Hermeneutics Yet to Come

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Associate Editor

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The hermeneutics of suspicion by itself is too one-sided, too limited, too restricted. . . . It reacts against the techniques by means of which false consciousness, the heard morality of the good and bad conscience, and the repressive facades of the super-ego cover-up the operations of power. This, of course, is all to the good. But one needs to graft on to this reactive hermeneutics a proactive hermeneutics, that is, an interpretive stance that sorts out the requirements for a more positive and more edifying dynamics of discourse and action.  
—Calvin O. Schrag<sup>1</sup>

Being invited to take on the significant responsibilities of editing *Analecta Hermeneutica* is an honor that calls for a few words to mark the occasion, but it is an occasion for which words will never quite capture what this task means to us. As the journal of the International Institute of Hermeneutics (IIH), it is the mission of *Analecta Hermeneutica* to provide a space for the most current and sophisticated thinking about all matters concerned with human being together initiated by the claims of philosophical hermeneutics. We inherit twelve years of exemplary work from Sean McGrath who edited *Analecta Hermeneutica* since co-founding the journal in 2009. We are grateful to have such a promising trajectory for the journal's future and a rich archive of issues curated by his studious hand. With this special issue devoted to the future of hermeneutics, which we have titled *For a Hermeneutics yet to Come*, we begin our tenure. This volume, which honors both Gadamer and Ricoeur's the inaugural support of the

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<sup>1</sup> Ramsey Eric Ramsey and David James Miller, eds., *Experiences between Philosophy and Communication: Engaging the Philosophical Contributions of Calvin O. Schrag* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 8.

IIIH, collects essays showing us the way forward by engaging with the ontological claims of philosophical hermeneutics and the claims made on us by the hermeneutic tradition.

We find this issue a fecund point of departure for the type of thinking we mean to encourage during our time as editors. For a hermeneutics yet to come, the question is and will remain not if we are hermeneutical at heart but rather how accomplished will our hermeneutics be in the 21st century and beyond? This pressing question, one attendant to every other question addressing us, arises from the very structure of our being-in-the-world; indeed, as Gadamer reminds us, “interpretation does not *occur* as an activity in the course of life, but is the *form* of human life.”<sup>2</sup> It is necessary then, as suggested by our teacher Calvin O. Schrag in the epigraph atop this essay, both to critique and edify this form of life that stands as the impetus to practice hermeneutic philosophy.

In soliciting and selecting submissions for inclusion in this volume, we recognized certain core themes that continued to resonate in our discussions of the journal’s future. First, and perhaps most obvious, is the personal demand that hermeneutics places on us to be readers who recognize in the very freedom that enables our reading also a profound responsibility to ourselves, to the text, and to each other. It is fitting, then, that we commence this volume with reflections of a more personal nature. Richard Kearny supplies us with a piece of intellectual history cum biography, recollecting his experiences growing with and helping to grow the hermeneutic tradition, notably alongside Ricoeur. Together with articles on Ricoeur, imagination, and historiography by Paul Fairfield, and on hermeneutical approaches to environmental concerns emerging from an epoch wherein human beings are a determining force in global ecologies by David Utser and Cynthia Nielsen, these essays ask us to return perpetually to the question of humanity’s place in the world and the relationship between the personal, which is to say the individual, and the world in which they find themselves. We will continue to explore this dialectic between self and society—a major theme of hermeneutics central to all questions of justice wherein we recognize oneself in another.

Immediately, from the encounter between oneself and the world, we must recognize those others who populate the world and who succeed in every gesture at disclosing the world for us. It is for them that we communicate those insights gained from reflection on the human experience and the world of our experience. Friendship, solidarity, justice—these core concepts are explored in contributions by Jens Zimmermann, Patrick Casey, and Sophia Alcaine. These contributions attest to an ethical seam that runs deep and wide throughout the hermeneutic tradition and affirm our editorial commitment to exploring the relationship between ontology and ethics, between our solitude and our solidarity.

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<sup>2</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, “The Conflict of Interpretations,” in *Phenomenology: Dialogues and Bridges*, ed. Ronald Bruzina and Bruce Wilshire (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 302.

Beyond the immediate relations between individuals—friendship and family—there emerges yet another level of analysis, that of the social. Though we are all a part of the collective, society itself is more than the sum of the individuals that constitute it. Facundo Bey and Blake Scott each approach this terrain through the concept of “utopia,” both in its desirability and its impossibility. We continue to think of utopias with them, both as a model of another possible world and as a regulating principle that helps us to aim our ethical projects toward something like the Good. Hermeneutics will never let us forget that understanding society is a practice of interpretation and that we must learn and relearn the ways society presents itself for reading, what avenues it opens and which it closes, and how the material conditions of our lives constrain or enable our freedom and our ability to imagine a more just society.

Throughout these contributions, but most expressly in work by David Liakos and Jens Zimmermann, the question of the future of hermeneutics is opened. We invite thinkers to return without remorse to the question of foundations—what is hermeneutics, what is philosophy, what is theology, etc.? To our understanding, these are not questions of the past, of how hermeneutics or the others have been defined. Rather, these are questions for a future wherein the past must be continually reconstituted if it is still to speak to us and our times, to serve our understandings of this moment, of each other, and of our places here together.

We are hopeful this volume is keen evidence of our commitment to seeking a broad range of themes in upcoming issues, as we take to heart Gadamer’s claim: “philosophical hermeneutics is not restricted to exercising philological skill in interpreting texts. Consequently, by textual interpretation is implied the totality of our orientation to the world, together with the assumption that deciphering and understanding a text is very much like encountering reality.”<sup>3</sup> We much look forward the challenges and pleasures of editing future issues (indeed, work on Volume 14, *You Must Change Your Life: Hermeneutics as Living Demand*, is already underway).<sup>4</sup>

Anyone familiar with all that is required to publish a peer-reviewed journal understands the amount of work undertaken by all those who give their time and expertise to the endeavor. We understand our work would not be possible without those of you who read the journal, who submit original manuscripts, who peer-review submissions, and who undertake the task of being guest editors. Our sincere gratitude to all those who have done these things for this and past issues.

In light of this, a special acknowledgment is in order. The labor necessary to publish this issue (and future volumes) owes an unrepayable debt to the incredible efforts of Sohinee Roy, managing editor of *Analecta Hermeneutica*, and the daily diligence of Elise Poll, assistant to the editors. Our undying gratitude for all they do to make *Analecta Hermeneutica* an outlet for the thinking essential for attempting to understand all that is entailed in a hermeneutics yet to come.

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<sup>3</sup> Gadamer and Ricoeur, “The Conflict of Interpretations,” 302.

<sup>4</sup> We welcome queries from those seeking to explore a theme of their choosing by being a special issue editor. Email: [AnalectaHermeneutica@asu.edu](mailto:AnalectaHermeneutica@asu.edu).

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## My Way to Hermeneutics with Ricoeur and Friends: A Personal Testimony

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Much have humans experienced  
Since we are a dialogue  
And can listen to one another  
—Hölderlin

### Opening

These lines by Hölderlin were taken by Heidegger as emblematic of the hermeneutic project. In his *Commentaries on Hölderlin's Poetry*, he makes the point that all human meaning presupposes a “saying” (*sprechen*), which involves one in a historical community of speakers. Our being-in-the-world qua *Dasein* is revealed through language as a dialogical being in the world with others (*Mitsein*). “The being of man” he writes, “is grounded in language; but this really happens only in dialogue (in speaking and hearing). . . . We have been a dialogue since the time that ‘time is.’ Since time has arisen and has been brought to standing, since then we have been historical. Both—being-in-dialogue and being-historical—are equally old, belong together and are the same.”<sup>1</sup>

Inheriting the hermeneutic model of dialogue, Gadamer and Ricoeur showed how human consciousness never knows itself in terms of some intuitive immediacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1971), 38–40.

Consciousness must undergo a “hermeneutic detour” in which it comes to know itself through the historical mediations of others. The human self understands itself via the signs, symbols, and texts embedded in its culture. It does not intuit meaning in and from itself—as the Cartesian *cogito* suggests—but must interpret (*hermeneuein*) itself by entering into dialogue with the languages of the historical communities, traditions, and projects to which it belongs. As Ricoeur aptly put it: “the shortest route from self to self is through the other.”<sup>2</sup>

In what follows I wish to shift and tighten the focus of hermeneutic dialogue from large historical communities to a more personal community of conversations. Moving from upper to lower case, I offer here a short biographical memoir of some formative encounters with philosophical mentors I was fortunate enough to experience during my own “hermeneutic apprenticeship” in Paris in the late 1970s. I intend this personal testimony as a debt to these great hermeneutic teachers—thinkers who deeply influenced the second half of twentieth-century continental philosophers and left a legacy lasting well into the twenty-first, and perhaps beyond.

### Testimony

I arrived in Paris in September 1977 to work with Paul Ricoeur. I had been awarded a National Traveling Studentship from the National University of Ireland and Ricoeur kindly agreed to serve as my doctoral dissertation advisor at the University of Paris X (Nanterre). I will never forget my first encounter with Ricoeur. I walked into a packed seminar room at the Centre Herméneutique et Phénoménologique at Avenue Parmentier where a number of Ricoeur’s close colleagues sat around a table—including Emmanuel Levinas, Stanislas Breton, Jean Greisch, and Françoise Dastur. In a second outer circle sat a dozen or so doctoral students. I joined them and waited for Ricoeur to arrive. When he did, he was wearing a bright, multicolored jacket that he had just bought in Chicago, where he was then teaching for a semester each year with Mircea Eliade. I was expecting a sober Protestant intellectual dressed in black. Ricoeur warmly welcomed everyone present and proceeded to ask each student the trademark hermeneutic question: *D’où parlez-vous?* (Where do you speak from?) When it came to me, I explained that I came from Southern Ireland and had been educated in philosophy at University College Dublin—at which Ricoeur happily observed: “Very

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<sup>2</sup> For a more extended discussion of this point, see Richard Kearney, “Appendix: A Note on the Hermeneutics of Dialogue,” in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 127–33.

good, I will call on you whenever we need commentaries on Aquinas!” Little did Ricoeur know I was a rebellious refugee from orthodox scholasticism.<sup>3</sup>

From then on it was plain delightful sailing through multiple theories of narrative in hermeneutic phenomenology and the philosophy of history and religion. Each Wednesday seminar was a treat and Ricoeur always honored his commitment to “intellectual hospitality” by inviting visiting scholars and friends to offer presentations. The title of one of his volumes, *Le conflit des interprétations*, took on real meaning in the seminar room as different voices chimed and clashed in what Ricoeur liked to call *un combat amoureux* (a phrase he learnt from Jaspers). When it came to religious questions, Ricoeur was invariably open to “interconfessional translation” between Christian, Jewish, and Muslim perspectives.<sup>4</sup> The model of traversing multiple “hermeneutic detours,” where one exposed oneself to a “polysemantics” of diverse readings, was central to Ricoeur’s method of teaching and writing. He embodied his own guiding maxim that the shortest route from self to self was through the other. Looking back, I can now see the seeds of my own interest in the Guestbook Project, with its central themes of “hosting the Stranger” and “exchanging narratives.”<sup>5</sup> In keeping with the same hermeneutics of hospitality, I published a number of philosophical proposals for a peace agreement in Northern Ireland in the 1990s.<sup>6</sup>

I became a good friend of Ricoeur over the years, hosting him twice on visits to Ireland once I returned to University College Dublin in the early 1980s to take up my first job as a lecturer in philosophy. I completed my doctoral studies under his direction—with Levinas and Breton as my other examiners—at the University of Paris in 1980 and went on to publish several books on Ricoeur’s work and organize international conferences on his thought (including co-directing the Cérisy Colloque on Ricoeur with Jean Greisch in 1987). Without a doubt, Ricoeur has been the most formative influence on my thinking about narrative imagination and the hermeneutics of culture and religion. Indeed, I think it is true to say that without Ricoeur I would never have been able to write my books on the hermeneutics of religion, *The God Who May Be* (2001), *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2003), or *Anatheism* (2011).

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<sup>3</sup> Although as Joyce wrote of Stephen Dedalus—he had “the cursed Jesuit strain in (him), only injected the wrong way.” Metaphysics was in the blood whether I liked it or not.

<sup>4</sup> In the 1970s, the turn towards Eastern religions had not yet much of a mark on the continental hermeneutics of religion—though Mircea Eliade was a close friend of Ricoeur’s at Chicago and the first to introduce him in a serious way to Buddhism and other Eastern wisdom traditions.

<sup>5</sup> Inspired by Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of linguistic hospitality, especially in his volume *On Translation*, I founded the Guestbook Project of “Exchanging Stories, Changing History” in 2009 in Boston. For details see [guestbookproject.org](http://guestbookproject.org).

<sup>6</sup> See Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998).

But there were other colleagues of Ricoeur in Paris—in particular, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Stanislas Breton—who generously guided me on my hermeneutic path.

I first met Levinas when he invited me to attend his last lectures at the Sorbonne in 1979 on “Kant and Ethics” (co-taught with his ex-Dominican friend, Jacques Colette). Levinas spoke in stuttered whispers that Colette translated for the seminar—about ten of us—in a cold, bare room with no handle on the door. This was just before Levinas’s fame spread widely in the 1980s when the French embargo on philosophy conversing with theology was finally lifted. Levinas challenged Heidegger’s absolute separation of phenomenology and religion (pronounced in the latter’s “Phenomenology and Theology” lecture of 1927) and dared invoke the word “God” in his first classic work, *Totality and Infinity*, published in French in 1961. But Levinas, like his Sorbonne colleague and lifelong friend Ricoeur, was still sensitive to the *séparation universitaire* between philosophy and the study of religion: the latter was not permitted in any public academies of the French Republic but only in denominational establishments like the Instituts Catholiques or Facultés Protestantes. Levinas published his major phenomenological works as “ethical philosophy” and his more religious writings as “Talmudic lectures” (although the border was sometimes porous). I think it was in some sense thanks to his Judaism—which commanded general intellectual tolerance in post-Holocaust Europe—that Levinas was allowed more latitude than other religious thinkers in France at the time (e.g., the Protestant Ricoeur or the Catholic Breton) in blending secular and religious thinking. And one cannot underestimate the importance of Levinas’s young protégé, Jacques Derrida, in making the God question respectable again in public discourse in France, with the publication of his groundbreaking essay on Levinas.<sup>7</sup> The fact that Derrida was both Jewish and the celebrated pioneer of deconstruction was not irrelevant. The God who was cautiously re-entering French intellectual discourse during my time in Paris was in many respects a deconstructed messianic God, a factor that surely informed my own hermeneutic thinking about God—up to a point—in *La Poétique du Possible* (1984) and *The God Who May Be* (2001).

But before leaving Levinas, let me say a word about a very special meeting I had with him in his home on Rue Michel-Ange in 1980. He invited me for tea shortly before my doctoral defense—of which he was a jury member along with Ricoeur and Breton—and kindly gave me the questions he would ask me the next day. As we talked,

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79–153.

his son, Michaël, a concert pianist, rehearsed his scales in the next room to the evident delight of his father. The main topic of our conversation—and of my dissertation—was the relationship between a poetics of the possible and an ethics of justice. When I confessed to Levinas that I found his ethics of asymmetrical responsibility to the other—I am always more responsible for the other than the other is for me—impossible to actually *live*, he gave me two simple examples of such a hyperbolic ethics at work in everyday practice. First, he spoke of how one says *après toi* when going through a doorway with someone. That is ethics, he noted: standing back to let the other go first (without the other being expected to do likewise). And secondly, he cited his recent experience of a group of young scholars who travelled all the way from Latin America to ask him how his ethics was practicable—to which he replied: “Your travelling thousands of miles to ask me the question—*that* is ethics.” The concern to do justice is the first act of doing it. Several weeks after my defense, Levinas made another gesture of generosity in agreeing to participate in a colloquium I was organizing with my compatriot, Joseph O’Leary, in the Collège des Irlandais in Paris. It was the first time Levinas had agreed to meet with France’s leading Heideggerians (Beaufret, Fédier, Vézin) since he had lost relatives in the Holocaust. Ricoeur and Marion also agreed to join the conference, which we published a year later as *Heidegger et la Question de Dieu* (1980). (A new edition with an introduction by Yves Lacoste was republished as a *Libre de Poche* in 2016). I never forgot Levinas’s act of intellectual trust and forgiveness. Ethics in action.

And then there was Stanislas Breton, the third member of my doctoral dissertation (June 1980) and another close friend of Paul Ricoeur. A professor at the Ecole normale supérieure in the 1960s—where he taught with Derrida and Althusser—and a priest of the Passionist Order (who officiated at my marriage in Normandy), Breton had a unique hermeneutic ability to combine mysticism, Marxism, and metaphysics. He remained a lifelong friend and confidant and was what I would call a “holy” man. He loved to play with children (including our daughters Simone and Sarah), getting down on all fours and becoming a child himself as he did so. He gave credence to the idea that children are first in the Kingdom; and like other genuinely holy people I have encountered in my life—the Dalai Lama, Chogyi Nyima, my mother—he knew how to laugh from the core of his being as best response to the contradictions of existence. It was Breton who introduced me to the illuminating trope of *perichoresis*—the Greek orthodox figure of three divine persons moving in a circle—by drawing a picture on a white table napkin in my Paris apartment the night before my dissertation defense. This great hermeneutic guide still returns to me again and again in both my academic and spiritual life. Breton was also the person who helped



me find the title for my first single-author book, *La Poétique du Possible*, subtitled *Vers une herméneutique de la Figuration*. And it was also he who introduced me to Duns Scotus's notion of *haecceitas* (thisness) as the particularity of each person created by God. I always think of Breton when I read these lines by Gerard Manley Hopkins from "When Kingfishes Catch Fire":

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves – goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,  
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.  
[ . . . ] for Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

This poetic image has remained central to my hermeneutics of hospitality ever since—namely, the call to host the quintessential inimitable strangeness of each human person. Responding to the other's singular "thisness" co-responding to one's own. So that each one is saying, in their bodies and souls, "Behold (*ecce!*) this (*haec!*)!" The Latin term, spelled variously *haecceitas* or *ecceitas*, plays on this double sense of annunciatory wonder and singular address. Or as Joyce puts it in *Finnegans Wake*, "here comes everybody" (HCE—*Haec-Ecce*). Each person, Breton taught me, is everyone. The particular is the universal. The concrete is the cosmic. The infinitesimal the infinite. Epiphanies are ordinary, everyday things. God is a god of little things—the last and the least of these (*elachistos*). The strangeness of every stranger (Mt 25). It is a lesson I never forgot.

Finally, there is one other person Ricoeur introduced me to during my Paris apprenticeship who I would like to mention here: Jacques Derrida. My first encounter with Derrida was in 1980, when I invited him to participate in my forthcoming book, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (1984).<sup>8</sup> I think he agreed largely because I was kindly recommended by our common mentor, Ricœur; and during the course of our discussions he proceeded to share his intellectual confidences and convictions (later published in our exchange, "Deconstruction and the Other,"<sup>9</sup>). This somewhat surprised me, as Derrida had taken robust critical exception, around that time, to

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<sup>8</sup> The book also featured conversations with Levinas, Ricœur, Marcuse, and Breton. See Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Kearney, "Deconstruction and the Other," in *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 139–56.

Ricoeur's hermeneutics of dialogue, reciprocity, and metaphor (see Derrida's *Le Retrait de la métaphore* in response to Ricoeur's *La métaphore vive*). But it became quickly clear to me that Derrida had a profound generosity that went beyond philosophical differences to welcome a fellow student of his former master.<sup>10</sup> My 1980 exchange with Derrida was to be the first of several published conversations between us over the years, the last two appearing as "Desire of God: An Exchange" and "Terror, Religion, and the New Politics."<sup>11</sup>

In each of our exchanges over two decades, Derrida was invariably charming, modest, and humane—belying the common caricature of him as a difficult, narcissistic, intellectual rock star. For many who did not read Derrida closely, deconstruction spelled nihilism and relativism. Indeed, I recall when I invited him to give a talk in Dublin in 1998—his notoriety preceding him due to a British media campaign berating Cambridge University for awarding him an honorary degree—thousands turned up to hear him at University College Dublin. He arrived with a massive wad of pages that he had every intention of delivering. But as we walked down the aisle of the packed amphitheater, I swept it from his arms and said: "You are not reading *that*?" Derrida clung to his papers like a mother to a baby the social services were threatening to take into custody; but he soon let go and faced the public, paperless and disarmed. He spoke from the heart about the "lie" (the topic of his talk) for a brisk 50 minutes rather than the 3 hours his paper would have otherwise taken to deliver. (A month previously he had spoken for 6 hours at the Freud Museum in London). The audience, both academic and popular, were utterly entranced. Derrida could charm birds off trees when he was not hiding behind a 200-page paper. And in Dublin he did the former. The question-answer session afterwards was a lesson in careful listening and responding. No question, no matter how naive (e.g., "Mr. Derrida, what does it mean to be human?"), was considered unworthy of response. Indeed, the final questioner of the evening added this remark, delivered in a broad Dublin accent:

Monsieur Derrida, I am delighted you came all the way from Paris to talk to us today. Reading the British gutter press this week I was expecting to see a

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<sup>10</sup> Derrida had been a *maître assistant* for Ricoeur at the Sorbonne in the 1960's—presenting the material for his first breakthrough *Introduction to the Origin of Geometry* (1962) in one of Ricoeur's doctoral seminars.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, John D. Caputo, and Richard Kearney, "Desire of God: An Exchange," in *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, ed. John Panteleimon Manoussakis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 301–308; and conducted in New York City in the shadow of the fallen Twin Towers in October 2001, Kearney, "Terror, Religion, and the New Politics," in *Debates in Continental Philosophy*, 3–14.

vampire here this afternoon. But you are a grand good man. I always thought the Marquis de Sade was the most maligned man in history, but now I realize it is you, Jacques Derrida! If I was the Lord Mayor of Dublin, I would offer you the keys to our city.

The audience broke into applause and Derrida was deeply moved, bowing deep, his two hands clasped in gratitude.

Another incident I would like to share concerns a conference Derrida and I contributed to in the 1990s. It was the second Villanova University meeting on postmodernism and religion, and at one point my close friend and colleague, John D. Caputo (author of *Radical Hermeneutics*) objected to my challenging Derrida with the question: “How can deconstruction’s maxim that ‘every other is every other’ (*tout autre est tout autre*) be reconciled with a hermeneutics of discernment: namely the need to differentiate between different kinds of others—e.g., a madman or a messiah?” In spite of Caputo’s protectionist zeal, Derrida took my question on the chin and graciously responded: “Richard’s problems with my thought are my own problems with my thought.” I was spared a lynching on the spot and all three of us went on to discuss the issue in perfectly cordial fashion.

One last story I wish to mention here, but which, for reasons of discretion, I have not done so before, concerns Derrida’s final reconciliation with Ricoeur. After Derrida had delivered his Dublin lecture “On the Lie,” we retired to my house for dinner. During the course of the conversation, the question of depression came up—we had both experienced “dark nights” in our lives—and Derrida happened to mention how one of his worst bouts followed his Paris doctoral defense when Ricoeur (his director) never showed up for the post-dissertation toast. Derrida confided that this withholding of the ceremonial blessing (as he read it) had devastated him, because Ricoeur had been for him a surrogate intellectual father since he had left his own family in Algeria to come to France as an émigré student. When I told him that Ricoeur had not come to my doctoral toast either, Derrida was speechless. “You too?!” he exclaimed. “Were you not shocked?” I said not at all. I had simply picked up the phone and asked Ricoeur why he had not shown up—and had received the following frank response:

I am sorry Richard, but I never attend any of my students’ dissertation toasts. I have so many students and I must also look after my own family. I am a bad father to both my intellectual and actual children. I never give either enough time. Such is my life. I do two jobs badly, but it is all I can do.

Derrida was deeply affected by this, and as soon as he returned to Paris, he phoned Ricoeur next day. They agreed to meet that same afternoon in the Jardin du Luxembourg (it was early May) and stayed talking nonstop until the *gardiens* sent them both home when the gates closed at 2100. What Derrida and Ricoeur realized during the exchange was that for thirty years, their respective philosophical positions (deconstructive and hermeneutic) had often been speaking past each other—mishearing, misreading, miswriting—in part because of a *dialogue manqué* at a pivotal moment in their lives: Derrida seeking a surrogate father, Ricoeur neglecting a surrogate son.

Ricoeur confessed to me subsequently that after this reunion, they continued to talk on a weekly basis right up to Derrida’s untimely death from pancreatic cancer in 2002. Ricoeur wept at Derrida’s passing, confiding to me: “It was not fair. He should not have died before me.” Ricoeur joined his adopted spiritual son two years later in 2004. In one of the last conversations I had with Ricoeur, he told me that when he and Derrida had read my book, *The God Who May Be*, Derrida confessed he thought it too hermeneutic while Ricoeur thought it too deconstructionist! I shared with Ricoeur this line from Seamus Heaney: “Two buckets are easier carried than one, I grew up in between.” He smiled.

### Concluding Remarks

It was in large part thanks to my conversations with my Paris mentors—recorded above—that I came to hermeneutics at both a personal and philosophical level. For hermeneutics is, I have been suggesting, quintessentially dialogue. What may seem like ‘hermeneutic detours’ or even “distractions” (Pascalian *divertissements*), in our ordinary common shared experiences, can actually perform the basic hermeneutic principle that “the shortest route from self to self is through the other.” And the Other is always others. In hermeneutics the singular is always plural. In what remains, I would like to extend my brief biographical history to include testimonial mention of some additional colleagues and friends who amplified and deepened my “hermeneutic circle” of interlocutors during my formative years as a student of philosophy.

In addition to the philosophical mentorships cited above, I also had the good fortune during my Parisian sojourn (1977–1981) to enjoy vibrant intellectual contact with some other inspirational thinkers who I would like to mention here. This good fortune included learning from the great existentialists, Sartre and de Beauvoir (whose

funerals I attended in the late 1970s), as well as from structuralists and poststructuralists like Barthes, Foucault, Deleuze, Lacan, and Lévi-Strauss, whose extraordinary lectures I attended in the late 1970s. It was indeed a golden age. Every thinker brought an arresting and original intellectual challenge to the table. Indeed, I can recall in vivid detail the specific lecturing style and generosity of each philosopher, who without exception (apart from Lacan) was more than willing to engage their questioners in robust and honest dialogue. And these dialogues included several memorable younger thinkers of the time—like Jean-Luc Marion, Julia Kristeva, and René Girard—who challenged the prevailing *modes intellectuels* and opened up new engagements with events “outside of the text.” For example, the gift as saturated phenomenon (Marion), the strange call of unconscious desire (Kristeva), and the hidden anthropological realities of violence and disclosure (Girard). My wife, Anne, and I enjoyed many a memorable evening in discussion with these thinkers over good food and wine. Even though we were still young students at the time, these intellectuals displayed a remarkable humility and readiness to engage in conversation with us, breaching academic barriers between *professeurs et étudiants*. Perhaps the legacy of 1968 was still in the air, extending the life of the mind in a generous hermeneutic circle. There was no question too basic, no enigma too ineligible, for congenial consideration.

And there is one final hermeneutic interlocuter I would like to recall here. It was also during my Paris apprenticeship that I first developed a creative and lasting relationship with my intellectual compatriot, Joseph Stephen O’Leary, who was studying theology at the time and went on to become a regular collaborator on numerous hermeneutic projects (beginning with our co-chairing the *Heidegger et Dieu* conference at the Collège des Irlandais in Paris in June 1979). Joe went on to teach for three decades at Sophia University, Tokyo, where I had the pleasure of visiting the Buddhist temples of Yanaka and Kamakura in his company. He has become a leading international scholar of East–West philosophical relations (especially Christian–Buddhist) and remains one of my closest colleagues in the hermeneutics of interreligious dialogue. As his most recent books attest, *Conventional and Ultimate Truth* (2015), *Buddhist Nonduality*, *Pascal Paradox* (2018), and *Reality Itself* (2019). As it happens, we were both born in the same city of Cork, Ireland, in the 1950s and will probably die there too, in good time, God willing.

And so—as with everything to do with hermeneutics—we come full circle. Our end is our beginning. If hermeneutics was founded in the 19th century by Schleiermacher and Dilthey, and developed in the 20th century by the likes of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricœur, then the 21st century seems set fair to shepherd the legacy of critical interpretation into new conversations—between phenomenology and

theology, epistemology and ecology, sociology and science, metaphysics and physics, not to mention the crucial contemporary dialogue between what I call “carnal hermeneutics” and digital cybernetics. This last topic seems to me of paramount importance in the coming age of post-pandemic communications; and, to remain at the personal level, it is one I try to engage with in my most recent volume, *Touch*.<sup>12</sup> For hermeneutics—as interpersonal relations always remind us—is as much about the tactile as the verbal. The future of 21st century hermeneutics lies, I believe, in the development of a new understanding of the vital conversation between word and touch. Between the personal digital fingerprint and the global digital network.

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Kearney, *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

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## **Guarding Our Humanity: Gadamer, Ricoeur, and the Future of Philosophical Hermeneutics**

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### **What Is Philosophical Hermeneutics?**

Philosophical hermeneutics is not merely an academic trend but a true description of how human understanding works. Therefore, to ask about the future of hermeneutics is akin to asking about the future of gravity. The question is not whether hermeneutics will have a future or remain relevant, but rather in what way we should pay attention to it. This is not to say, of course, that hermeneutics is some kind of physical law; indeed, as we shall argue, hermeneutics is a first-line defense against naturalism, or any other reductive anthropology. Nor does hermeneutics constitute a final or complete grasp of human understanding. To make such essentialist claims would contradict hermeneutics' own insistence on human finitude and the open-endedness of truth. Hermeneutics does, however, shed genuine light on the "ontological structure of understanding," revealing fundamental and universal aspects of what it means to be human.<sup>1</sup>

Hence, the legacy and abiding significance of hermeneutic philosophy consist in having established vital characteristics of human identity. In focusing on human understanding, hermeneutic philosophers like Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur have clarified our nature as persons: we are interpretive, linguistic, and social beings,

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<sup>1</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd, rev. ed., ed. and trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 394.

gifted with self-understanding, a gift that in its transcendence of mere natural instinct also makes us accountable for our actions toward others, our fellow living creatures, and our planet.

Gadamer developed hermeneutic philosophy to counter the impoverishment of human knowledge through the hegemony of the scientific method. In no way did he deny the importance of methodology in either the human or natural sciences. He did, however, reject the reduction of truth to the paradigm of the natural sciences and sought to legitimate modes of experiencing truths (*Erfahrungsweisen*) through art, philosophy, and history—sources of knowledge crucial for human self-knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

In his classic work *Truth and Method*, Gadamer gathers insights from ancient Greek philosophy, Judeo-Christian theologies, and the phenomenologies of Husserl and Heidegger to defend the particular way human beings perceive reality against the dominance of scientific objectivism. In doing so, Gadamer did not downplay the natural sciences, nor did he mean to establish the humanities as a separate domain of moral knowledge in contrast to empirical or factual certainties. Rather, he was interested in describing “what is common to all modes of understanding.”<sup>3</sup> Given the lingering misreading of hermeneutics as focusing on the subjective pole of human experience, it is worth reiterating that Gadamer’s philosophy—in line with Husserl’s and Heidegger’s efforts—is directed at *overcoming* subjectivism. He rejected the dualistic division of knowledge into subjective, emotionally involved value judgments on the one hand, and disinterested facts based on the neutral givenness of things on the other. Gadamer followed his teacher Heidegger in tracing this false opposition back to the separation of mind from being inaugurated by Descartes’s foundationalism and established firmly by Galileo’s mathematization of reality. This hermeneutic critique of modern scientism thus indicates the fundamental historicity of human consciousness, and verifies what Gadamer called *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* (historically effected consciousness). Meaning making, while always based on a commonly shared, biologically rooted life world, nevertheless depends on historically contingent ways of seeing, ways that are sedimented in our language and cultural practices.

Thus, the illegitimate expansion of natural scientific methodology from the laboratory to all areas of life, where it became a universal gold standard of truth by which everything should be measured, is not at all inevitable but rather based on a historically developed worldview with reductive assumptions about human perception

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<sup>2</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxx.



that are open to revision. As Gadamer explains, his analysis of human understanding is not about defending some “unscientific ‘commitment’ but instead, it is concerned with the ‘scientific’ integrity of acknowledging the commitment involved in all understanding.”<sup>4</sup> Much like the philosopher of science Michael Polanyi, therefore, Gadamer demonstrates the centrality of personal commitment through our dependence on tradition, language, and emotional investment for all human knowing. All our interpretations in the natural and human sciences are rooted in an objective, shared life world. Even the natural sciences rely on interpretation in their approach to this common reality: “What, then is the so-called ‘given,’ as the certain foundation from which natural scientific research proceeds? Is there something simply immediately presented to the eye? Or is what we perceive as the movement of the pointer on a gauge or what appears to us under the microscope not always already the result of the kind of mediation we call understanding?”<sup>5</sup>

With the claim that human knowledge acquisition is essentially interpretive, a “seeing as” based on trained habits and personal engagement, philosophical hermeneutics opens up a path beyond the conflictual view that natural science provides objective facts while all other disciplines trade in subjective opinion. According to hermeneutics, knowledge disciplines as varied as philosophy, sociology, theology, and biology all provide viable and accurate information about human reality. By outlining the conditions of all human understanding, and by showing that the universality of human reason operates only through historical, social, and linguistic particularities, philosophical hermeneutics has allowed pioneering work for a nuanced account of human rationality. Opposing hard-nosed impartial scientific discoveries to impractical literary accounts of human nature turns out to be as false as contrasting scientific to religious accounts of reality. In short, hermeneutics remains an indispensable resource for all who currently work on a sophisticated account of the “territories of human reason.”<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, hermeneutics reminds us that natural science constitutes only a very limited, albeit powerful, way in which human reason operates in accessing reality. Gadamer has repeatedly shown that the reductive reifying and quantifying gaze of natural science by its very nature cannot provide the greater evaluative frameworks

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<sup>4</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxviii.

<sup>5</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer and Carsten Dutt, *Hermeneutik, Ästhetik, Praktische Philosophie: Hans-Georg Gadamer im Gespräch* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1993), 17.

<sup>6</sup> For those familiar with hermeneutic theory, the absence of references to Gadamer’s or Ricoeur’s work in recent attempts by Peter Harris and Alister McGrath to move beyond conflictual models of science and religion is rather puzzling.

humans require for practical life decisions. The art of human living requires above all the practical knowledge called *wisdom*, something natural science cannot deliver.

In a sense, Gadamer's entire life work is an attempt to demonstrate how moderns can draw on practical life knowledge sedimented in tradition for shaping a modern answer to the ever-present question about what constitutes a good life, or, to use the more trendy phrase, "human flourishing." The pursuit of the good, Gadamer argues, requires above all practical wisdom aiming at a balanced, integrated view of life. He points out that the instrumental reasoning promoted by natural science and technology, by contrast, is fixated on the "rational organization of its civilizational apparatus," that is, the bureaucratic and efficient administration of society.<sup>7</sup> Technology and organization, however, cannot be their own end but should serve "a life to which I can say, 'yes.'"<sup>8</sup> Yet, in its addiction to scientific-technological solutions for human progress, modern culture remains stubbornly blind to accumulated human wisdom and the need for articulating the good life. As Gadamer repeatedly asserts in his writings, reliance on science alone for running society humanely will produce disastrous results: "Whoever believes that science, thanks to its indisputable competence, can serve as a substitute for practical reason and political reason, misunderstands the real conditions under which human beings have to organize and design human life. Only practical wisdom is capable of employing science, like all human capacities, in a responsible way."<sup>9</sup>

The truth of Gadamer's warning has been demonstrated by the political misappropriation of science during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, compelled by the mantra "follow the science," politicians have followed abstract computer models for predicting casualties. These models, devised by physicists and mathematicians, did not, however, take into consideration virus behavior as known from immunology or epidemiology. Consequently, these models lead to wildly exaggerated casualty predictions to justify the near total lockdown of society. Against the warning of many experts, most politicians were thus misled in following a single branch of science and they failed to integrate their countermeasures within the total demands of practical life that are necessary for human flourishing. Educators, ethicists, sociologists, or psychologists were not consulted for understanding what Gadamer called "the real conditions" for organizing human life. Practical wisdom was

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<sup>7</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Lob der Theorie," in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 4: *Neuere Philosophie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1975), 51.

<sup>8</sup> Gadamer, "Lob der Theorie," 51.

<sup>9</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Reflections on My Philosophical Journey," in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 57.

abandoned, and we are still coping with the disastrous social and economic fallout from this irresponsible application of science.

### The Contribution of Paul Ricoeur

The work of Paul Ricoeur builds on, and complements, Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology and Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy. Ricoeur considered his own main contribution to hermeneutics to be the correction of Heidegger's "subordination of epistemology to ontology."<sup>10</sup> With this term, Ricoeur identifies Heidegger's ontological shortcut to describing the existential structures underlying human understanding without providing the explanatory justifications for his claims. Heidegger claims that the natural sciences have reduced human knowledge to explanation of functional details without paying attention to the larger ontological preconditions for how we see and understand things. Yet, Ricoeur claims, in doing so, Heidegger wrongly sidelines the necessary role of propositions that are verifiable through explanation. Ricoeur suggests instead a dialectic of understanding and explanation.

Ricoeur agrees with Heidegger's project of analyzing the ontological structures, like "care" (*Sorge*) or "being towards death," within which meaning arises for human beings whose unique mode of being in the world is understanding. Ricoeur believes Heidegger uncovers fundamental ontological conditions for human perception that underly all "ontic" human sciences. Ricoeur realizes that "hermeneutic philosophy is not anti-epistemological, but a reflection on the non-epistemological conditions of epistemology."<sup>11</sup> Yet how are these foundational ontological categories themselves verified? "Hermeneutic philosophy," Ricoeur contends, "makes a truth claim that has to be measured against. . . the propositional truth claim."<sup>12</sup> He asks how pointing to the deep ontological roots of all human knowledge actually conveys verifiable knowledge about ourselves and things.

Ricoeur takes the example of the *hermeneutical circle* to illustrate his concern with Heidegger's ontological shortcut and Gadamer's similar emphasis on understanding to the neglect of propositional truth. Classical hermeneutic methods had pointed out that words, sentences, and passages require context for their proper interpretation. For

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutical Logic?" in *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures*, vol. 2, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 68.

<sup>11</sup> Ricoeur, "Hermeneutical Logic?" 75.

<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur, "Hermeneutical Logic?" 69.

instance, understanding the meaning of a certain word or sentence in a novel, philosophical, or religious text necessitates a circular movement between text and greater context to establish and deepen meaning with each reading. Heidegger's radicalization of hermeneutics consists in his showing that a more originary, existential circle underlies the traditional, methodological one. This primordial circle derives from human beings' peculiar curiosity, their characteristic urge for self-understanding as a form of self-assertion. This "movement of Dasein itself,"<sup>13</sup> toward self-knowledge, expresses and seeks meaning not only in texts but in all life situations. This movement is circular insofar our historical-linguistic-cultural formation shapes our preunderstandings of the world, which are then confirmed or transformed in our interpretive encounters. This circular movement is mostly tacit: thus, we can only ever partially make transparent the influences that form our outlook.

As Ricoeur points out, Gadamer appropriates this Heideggerian existential hermeneutic circle for his claim that every methodical analysis of communicated truth that assumes the stance of objective observation relies in fact on a deeper, tacit, ontological common ground of history (i.e., a cultural or conceptual tradition) that connects past and present horizons, or, indeed, bridges the distance between an author and her reader. This common ground thus makes possible the "fusion of horizons." With this term, Gadamer describes the moment of understanding, when one integrates another's viewpoint into one's own framework of meaning. Gadamer also referred to this moment as "participation in an event of tradition" (*Einrücken in ein Überlieferungsgeschehen*), i.e., the event of critically appropriating another's insight in light of one's own situation.<sup>14</sup> Gadamer insisted on the *critical* dimension of horizon fusion. "One understands always differently, if one understands at all," he wrote, so that understanding mediates between the alien and the familiar, "opening a new horizon into the unknown," which changes or expands one's own position.<sup>15</sup> This critical aspect of appropriating tradition was often overlooked by ideology critics like Habermas, or Derrideans like Caputo, who accused hermeneutics of, respectively, encouraging assimilation either to or of tradition, and thus disallowing for difference.

Ricoeur concedes the critical moment of appropriation that is necessary for understanding. Only when something speaks to me, and seems to address me personally, will it lead to transformative self-understanding. Ricoeur criticizes

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, trans. John van Buren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 51.

<sup>14</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 291. See also Gadamer and Dutt, *Hermeneutik, Ästhetik, Praktische Philosophie*, 24–25.

<sup>15</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 27.

Gadamer, however, for failing to show *how* self-understanding generated by a text actually works through the mediation of signs and symbols. As a remedy, he proposes the supplement of “reflective philosophy,” which supplies an explanatory moment through critical analysis of the “cultural signs in which the self documents and forms itself.”<sup>16</sup> Ricoeur thus seeks to unite the hermeneutical and analytical traditions in arguing that Gadamer’s self-understanding requires the mediation or “detour” through explanatory reflection on concrete cultural signs and symbols.

Ricoeur brilliantly demonstrates how this detour works. For example, he shows how discourse about evil originates with, and therefore remains inseparable from, the symbolic expressions of lived human experience in ancient cultures.<sup>17</sup> His point is that the notion of evil and similar essential human sentiments like justice, repentance, or forgiveness are accessible only through the symbols that first encoded lived experience. There is no other neutral, or non-symbolic naked “scientific” perspective *behind* or *beneath* this medium. Here the bedrock of the given exists only *as* symbols, because the symbol itself conveys the reality<sup>18</sup> so that “the symbol gives rise to thought.”<sup>19</sup>

Ricoeur’s critical supplement of philosophical hermeneutics accomplishes two things. First, he demonstrates the importance of detailed and sympathetic analysis of cultural traditions in their historical particularities for acquiring knowledge. Understanding another and deepening one’s self-understanding through encountering the other are hard work, often requiring linguistic skill and painstaking historical reconstruction. Second, he demonstrates the indispensable role of metaphors, symbols, poetry, and mythology for understanding essential human experiences. Symbolic language is not the remnant of a formerly religious, irrational stage of human development that a more scientific age can leave behind. Leaving behind such language would mean leaving behind the deepest expressions of human experience and therefore, in a sense, our humanity.

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “What Is a Text? Explanation and Understanding,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 158.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics and Symbolism,” in *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures*, vol. 2, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 7.

<sup>19</sup> Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 299.

## Hermeneutics and the Body

So far I have argued that hermeneutics establishes and elucidates fundamental structures of human knowing. In outlining universal ontological structures of human understanding, hermeneutics makes an essential anthropological claim, namely our fundamental belonging to a meaningful world: “the beauty of the work of art has already hold of me before I judge it, tradition already carries me before I place it at a distance, language has already instructed me, before I master it as a system of available signs.”<sup>20</sup> Hermeneutic anthropology starts from the immersion in meaning and practical coping with life within meaningful structures that become objects of theoretical reflection only when understanding is interrupted or made difficult.<sup>21</sup>

This hermeneutic belonging to a meaningful world is rooted in bodily life but also includes all embodied social relations that determine human perception and self-understanding. Already in Heidegger, the shape and position of the body, its immersion in seasonal rhythms, and its corporeal attunement through emotions are intrinsic to the uniquely human interpretive mode of being in the world. Yet, as Gadamer admits, neither Husserl nor Heidegger paid sufficient attention to the interpretive role of the body in our self-understanding.<sup>22</sup> Gadamer himself compensates for this neglect in his essays on health. He argues, for example, that health defines the whole of a person’s well-being within the total context of biological and social life. “Health,” he writes, “is a being-there, being-in-the-world, being-with-other human beings; health is to be busy with, or joyously fulfilled in one’s own life tasks.”<sup>23</sup> Health, he concludes, is “the rhythm of life,” rooted in the biological activities of our metabolism, including breathing, sleeping, and our dependence on the environment.

Gadamer holds human health also entails the vital aspects of human sociality which we live out in “familial, societal, and professional life.” This cultural life derives from the particular spirituality or “intelligence” that defines human beings as persons. Deeply steeped in ancient Greek thought, Gadamer rejects the reductive modern understanding of intelligence as rational self-reflection or logical thought. Intelligence,

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<sup>20</sup> Ricoeur, “‘Hermeneutical Logic?’” 103.

<sup>21</sup> Analytic philosophy, by contrast, proceeds from skepticism inherited long ago from the Cartesian separation of mind from being. Consequently, analytic philosophers seek to establish *a priori* criteria of meaning prior to any consideration of content. Propositions or beliefs about reality are then judged and verified on the basis of logical rules or criteria.

<sup>22</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Leiberfahrung und Objektivierbarkeit,” in *Die Verborgenheit der Gesundheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2018), 95.

<sup>23</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Über die Verborgenheit der Gesundheit,” in *Die Verborgenheit der Gesundheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2018), 144.

he argues, is not really a capacity or instrumental ability but rather refers to a person's being-at-homeness in a meaningful world. The word "person" is of special importance to Gadamer, because he reserves being-at-home in the world for the unique "body-soul" unity (*Einheit von Leib und Seele*) that makes human beings "persons." As persons, we experience life only as the inseparable, unified duality of living body and spirit or mind (*Geist*): "the body is also spirit, and spirit is also living matter (*das Lebendige*); together both are the spirituality of our vitality (*Lebendigkeit*) that is constitutive of who we ourselves are."<sup>24</sup> We experience the body as inseparably connected with the "enigmatic phenomenon of reflective consciousness," that is, enmeshed with the self-awareness peculiar to humans. Gadamer insists that the kind of intelligence unique to humans, the ability to take a step back from oneself and to express oneself through the totality of one's embodied existence, is not simply an act of detached reasoning. Rather, "insight and the ability for self-distancing remain, in a way that is difficult to describe, tied to the person within the whole context of her life-situation."<sup>25</sup>

The intelligence of a person is thus tied into the holistic, embodied life balance Gadamer defines as health. To be healthy is therefore not something objectifiable or measurable. Indeed, when we draw strength and energy from the harmonious balance of the biological, social, and spiritual dimensions of life, this well-being is tacit or, as Gadamer put it, "concealed from consciousness" (*verborgen*).<sup>26</sup> Conversely, disease, a word connoting lack, therefore, sets in when a component of a well-balanced life goes missing, when something is "amiss." Sickness is not merely the malfunction of a particular body part, but rather entails the disruption of the psycho-corporeal equilibrium we call health. According to Gadamer, it is the task of medical science to restore, to heal (*heilen*), literally "to make whole," as best as possible, the lost balance. For Gadamer, health and disease rest on the integrative notion of the entire human person in a total life context, and are not objectifiable as a particular function or ability. Therefore, even mental disability should not be equated with a lack of intelligence, and least of all lead to Peter Singer's infamous claim that lack of self-reflection entails the loss of personhood in dementia patients. Gadamer rejects this instrumental view of "intelligence," and insists "even the complete loss of self-distancing which is common

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<sup>24</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Philosophy and Practical Medicine," in *Die Verborgenheit der Gesundheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2018), 128.

<sup>25</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Zum Problem der Intelligenz," in *Die Verborgenheit der Gesundheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2018), 75.

<sup>26</sup> This main point of health as tacit dimension is reflected in Gadamer's title for this essay collection, *The Concealedness or Hiddenness of Health* (*Die Verborgenheit der Gesundheit*); the English translation of this title as *The Enigma of Health*, implying a riddle to be solved, is therefore unfortunate because thoroughly misleading.

to some form of dementia still has to be thought of as a human loss of balance. . . . thus mental illness still confirms even in its haunting unwholesomeness that a human being is not an intelligent animal, but precisely a human being.”<sup>27</sup>

The hermeneutic importance of the body has become front and center in Richard Kearney’s *carnal hermeneutics*. More than any other hermeneutic philosopher, Kearney thematizes “the inextricable relationship between *sensation* and *interpretation*.”<sup>28</sup> Like Gadamer, he criticizes that hermeneutic phenomenology championed language and historicity at the expense of the body.<sup>29</sup> Kearney credits Ricoeur’s work on the hermeneutics of the self with expanding the mediation of understanding through language to the language of the body, to move from “intellectual understanding” to “the tangible “orientation,” that is to a hermeneutics of the flesh.”<sup>30</sup> Kearney’s own work contributes much and invites others to explore the flesh as the most primordial medium of meaning. This extension of the hermeneutic tradition is of particular importance for the future. For, as the French Philosopher Michel Henry already indicated, human awareness is rooted in biological life itself. In fact, true life, for Henry, does not connote biological life, but biological life that is self-reflexively aware. Life in its fullest manifestation, for Henry, really means human subjectivity.<sup>31</sup> Carnal hermeneutics affirms that our full humanity depends on enfleshed, sensing, socializing consciousness, and any future that distorts or diminishes this reality will not be a human future.<sup>32</sup>

### The Importance of the Person in Hermeneutics

Gadamer’s writings on health indicate the centrality of personhood for hermeneutics. Indeed, he believed that just as a definition of individual health entails the life balance of persons, so too a well-balanced society requires for its health the fundamental recognition of personhood. Modern civilizations, he believes, are sick to the extent that they allow the “dissolution of the person.” As he explains, “the being of the person is apparently what is denied everywhere and yet it is what is needed always

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<sup>27</sup> Gadamer, “Zum Problem der Intelligenz,” 83.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Kearney, “The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics,” in *Carnal Hermeneutics*, ed. Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor (New York: Fordham University, Press, 2015), 17.

<sup>29</sup> Kearney, “The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics” 16–17.

<sup>30</sup> Kearney, “The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics,” 55.

<sup>31</sup> Michel Henry, *La Barbarie* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1987), 15.

<sup>32</sup> See also Richard Kearney, *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).



again and everywhere for the recovery of the balance that human beings require for themselves and for their home and for being-at-home.”<sup>33</sup> Modern civilizations, he notes, become dehumanized to the extent that they undermine the importance of the person. The dissolution of the person, for example, occurs through objectification in modern science, whereby the person becomes fragmented and dissolved into medical data.<sup>34</sup>

Gadamer realizes that this objectifying tendency in medicine extends to the bureaucratization of society as a whole. For him, the automatization and instrumentalization of human communication have significant negative consequences for the fundamental hermeneutical nature of human beings. We recall that our fundamentally interpretive mode of being is one of essential belonging to a meaningful world. One of Gadamer’s favorite summarizing phrases for this belonging is “the conversation that we are.” Human self-understanding occurs mainly through interpersonal dialogue between individuals and across generations. Human knowledge and self-understanding rely on the give and take of genuine dialogue. Only through genuine dialogue, where each conversation partner wants to learn from the other, does human reasoning escape “the blindness nourished in us by our solipsism [*Einzelheit*].”<sup>35</sup> Whether in reading texts, conducting scientific research, or speaking with another person, truth emerges through the transformative power of open exchange: “What emerges in its truth is the logos, which is neither mine nor yours and hence so far transcends the interlocutors’ subjective opinions that even the person leading the conversation knows that he does not know.”<sup>36</sup>

In contrast to his teacher Heidegger, Gadamer stresses the personalist dimension of obtaining truth through dialogue. Gadamer noted that Heidegger “never gave any thought to the other.” And yet for Gadamer, “the conversation with fellow human beings is equally primordial” with Heidegger’s ontological structures of understanding.<sup>37</sup> It is well known that Gadamer makes the dynamic of question and answer the “primordial hermeneutical phenomenon” that structures human knowing.<sup>38</sup> Gadamer’s insistence on the *personalist* nature of the conversational structure of hermeneutics, however, is often overlooked. He repeatedly emphasizes

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<sup>33</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Zwischen Natur und Kunst,” in *Die Verborgenheit der Gesundheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2018), 108.

<sup>34</sup> Gadamer, “Zwischen Natur und Kunst,” 108.

<sup>35</sup> Gadamer and Dutt, *Hermeneutik, Ästhetik, Praktische Philosophie*, 41.

<sup>36</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 361.

<sup>37</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer and Silvio Vietta, *Im Gespräch* (München: W. Fink, 2002), 34–35.

<sup>38</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 11.

his concern for the personal other, the baby Heidegger had thrown out with the bathwater of Cartesian subjectivity. Heidegger's anemic *Mitsein* is no substitute for Gadamer's fundamentally personalist, dialogical conception of hermeneutics. The ontologically constitutive being-with others (*Mitsein*) is hardly the same, Gadamer argues, as a concrete other *person*, whose view I have to recognize as potentially challenging my own. Yet precisely acknowledging that another may be right, says Gadamer, "first opens up for me the genuine possibility of understanding," and "from this position all my hermeneutic works slowly developed."<sup>39</sup>

The essentially personalist nature of hermeneutics is also evident in Ricoeur's work. Perhaps no other hermeneutic thinker has dedicated so much time to analyzing and establishing the unity and identity of the human person. Ricoeur retained the Christian personalism of figures like Emmanuel Mounier or Maurice Nédoncelle that inspired his philosophy because he recognized that this Christian impulse aimed at the universal feature of "the ethical human being" that defines human nature and transcends religious or cultural boundaries.<sup>40</sup> Even while Ricoeur distances himself from the term *personalism*, he nonetheless pursues in his work the notion of the person. Ricoeur describes the basic ethos of his personalist orientation with the motto "Personalism dies, the person returns." By the "death of personalism," Ricoeur does at all move beyond personhood. He makes clear that he wants to let personalism as a movement die in order that this movement's aim, to guard and proclaim the mystery of the person, may be pursued in a philosophically more convincing way.<sup>41</sup> Ricoeur wants to leave the label *personalism* behind because of its historical and philosophical limitations. Historically, the term is too bound up with other "isms," like existentialism and Marxism.<sup>42</sup> Philosophically, personalist reliance on categories like "consciousness, subject, and the self" for defining the person has been discredited along with the securely fixed hierarchy of values they share, by Freud, the Frankfurt school, and Emmanuel Levinas's emphasis on the other respectively. We no longer live under "a sky with fixed stars," i.e., of reliable concepts or values.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Subjektivität und Intersubjektivität, Subjekt und Person," in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 10: *Hermeneutik im Rückblick* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1975), 97.

<sup>40</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Emmanuel Mounier: A Personalist Philosopher," in *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 142–43.

<sup>41</sup> As Ricoeur put it, "I could also say: let personalism die, implying: let it die, even if . . . perhaps it is better that it dies, so that [something preferable may take its place]." See Paul Ricoeur, "Meurt le Personnalisme, Revient La Personne," *Esprit* 73, no. 1 (1983): 113.

<sup>42</sup> Ricoeur, "Meurt le Personnalisme, Revient La Personne," 114.

<sup>43</sup> Ricoeur, "Meurt le Personnalisme, Revient La Personne," 116.

Therefore, Ricoeur wants a more open, less conceptually rigid, approach to personhood,<sup>44</sup> namely a hermeneutical anthropology that risks itself in the form of a philosophical wager centered on the importance of the person. Instead of committing to a clearly defined concept of *Personalism*, he embraces Eric Weil's epistemological approach of adopting an "attitude." According to Weil, philosophical concepts should arise from attitudes one adopts within one's concrete life situation. Philosophy tries to find the proper categories that help to articulate and understand this concrete experience. For Ricoeur, the person is such a concept, and so he commits to researching the "attitude of person" (*l'attitude personne*).<sup>45</sup> For Ricoeur, this commitment arises from a sense of crisis triggered by the displacement of the person in our current postmodern, technocratic, bureaucratized culture. This crisis requires a response, namely either the acquiescence to this erasure or the affirmation of the person. According to Ricoeur, the only way to respond to this crisis as a philosopher is to affirm, *as a person*, the unique place of the human, yet not dogmatically but hermeneutically—the way human knowledge is always obtained, namely as faith seeking understanding. In short, the crisis demands a response, and truth is fidelity to a chosen conviction, testing it for the long run. Only with this "virtue of the duration" is a conviction proven without recourse to the illusion of scientific certainty, and only in duration will a personal identity emerge. As he puts it, "conviction is the answer to the crisis: my place is assigned, the hierarchy of preferences obliges me, the intolerable transforms me from a runaway or disinterested spectator into a man of conviction who discovers by creating and creates by discovering."<sup>46</sup>

Those familiar with Ricoeur's thought will detect in these sentiments voiced in 1983 a summary of his earlier work and a précis of his analyses of memory and narrative identity, culminating in his justly famous lectures on hermeneutical anthropology entitled *Oneself as Another*. From his early analysis of human consciousness as mediating between transcendent freedom and biological nature, to his final observations on human identity presented as the dialectic of *idem* and *ipse*, rooted in the ethical dimension of "being enjoined by another," Ricoeur has tried, not to demonstrate but, in line with his personalist hermeneutic convictions, to attest "in the long run" to the personalist nature of human identity. This is not the place to review in detail Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self; nor do we have time to delineate his mediation between Heidegger's existential analysis of *Dasein*, and Levinas's infinite ethical demand by another; we are also not at leisure to outline Ricoeur's sensitivity

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<sup>44</sup> Ricoeur, "Meurt le Personnalisme, Revient La Personne," 115.

<sup>45</sup> Ricoeur, "Meurt de Personnalisme, Revient La Personne," 116.

<sup>46</sup> Ricoeur, "Meurt de Personnalisme, Revient La Personne," 117.

for the concrete, historical, and institutionally enstructured communities required for humane life, which he summarized with this astute observation that truly human existence depends not only on the personalist sociality of “face to face relations,” but also on “living together in just institutions.”<sup>47</sup> Suffice it to say that Ricoeur’s hermeneutic philosophy, like Gadamer’s, albeit with greater sensitivity to the detour of human reflection through language and institutions, provides a nuanced phenomenological account of human existence as persons.

For both thinkers, persons are fundamentally at home in the world, and their interpretive existence is ineluctably tied to the interdependent mediations of human experience through the body, sociality, and language. Moreover, precisely because human beings are *essentially* persons, human identity is not *essentialist* but one of open-ended capability and therefore also of responsibility. “A hermeneutics of selfhood,” as Ricoeur puts it, “encounters the idea of capacity on every level of its investigation.”<sup>48</sup> Persons, Ricoeur insists, are fundamentally “capable” of shaping the course of things through physical and spoken intervention, capable of defining their life’s purpose through narrative, and therefore also vulnerable to being interpreted.<sup>49</sup>

### **The Future of Hermeneutics: Defending Humanity**

Philosophical hermeneutics presents human beings as persons and outlines the ontological conditions for the personal quality of our interpretive being in the world. Hence, the future of hermeneutics is intrinsically tied to our need to guard the person as the fullest descriptor of human identity. Unfortunately, our present cultural moment not only confirms Gadamer’s and Ricoeur’s diagnosis that this identity is under threat, but also indicates a genuine crisis of humanity. I use the term crisis in its original meaning of “turning point,” a term used in medicine, for example, when a sickness reaches the point where a change must come for better or for worse, turning to life or death. We have arrived at the point where humanity either succumbs to its diminishment (perhaps even dissolution) by assimilating to a techno-scientific vision of reality or musters the strength to recover our identity as persons.

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<sup>47</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 194.

<sup>48</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “The Addressee of Religion: The Capable Human Being,” in *Philosophical Anthropology: Writings and Lectures*, vol. 3, ed. Johann Michel and Jérôme Porée, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 270.

<sup>49</sup> Ricoeur, “The Addressee of Religion,” 271.

Henry has clearly identified the techno-scientific vision that increasingly governs Western social and economic engineering. Rooted in Descartes's separation of being from mind, and shaped by Galileo's mathematization of reality, this techno-scientific vision mechanizes life, reducing even organic, biological life to functional dynamics that are now routinely expressed in computational terms. This, according to Henry, is the *a priori* of modernity. When reality and truth are reduced to underlying universal geometric forms or physical laws, then with one fell swoop, our sensibilities, our intelligible sense impressions, our emotions, desires, and passions, even our thoughts, in short our entire subjectivity determinative of the substance of our lives are taken away.<sup>50</sup> In modernity, he concludes, the universe is reduced to this kind of knowledge as an "objective ensemble of material phenomena," and the world is to be re-organized according to this view of reality.<sup>51</sup>

This quantification of human experience developed gradually into an entire worldview that has taken a firm hold on our imaginations across the globe. Especially in the twenty-first century, we are witnessing its completion. We no longer assess reality on the basis of lived life but on scientific abstractions that reduce everything to quantifiable, measurable, and predictable functions. This functionalist view of life, in which every human experience is boiled down to some kind of code, program, or mechanism, became firmly entrenched with the rise of modern computational technology. With the advent of cybernetics, computers, and robotics, everything from biological evolution to the function of the human mind—indeed life itself—is explained in terms of coded programs and information exchange. Biologist Richard Dawkins, for example, boldly proclaims that "Life is just bytes and bytes and bytes of digital information," insisting that this assessment "is not a metaphor, it is the plain truth."<sup>52</sup> The merger of the scientific worldview with modern technology constitutes the experiential lens of modern culture. We have arrived at a techno-scientific vision of human life. To be sure, there is a strong philosophical countercurrent to this technovision of life. Called variously "embodied cognition" or "enactive evolution," this approach roots human consciousness and perception firmly in the complex dynamics of organic life and therefore rejects the reigning functionalism of cognitive science.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Henry, *La Barbarie*, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Henry, *La Barbarie*, 2.

<sup>52</sup> Richard Dawkins, qtd. in Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of the Mind* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 180.

<sup>53</sup> See Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosc, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016); Thompson, *Mind in Life*.

Embodied cognition, however, makes no perceivable impact on the trend to define and solve socioeconomic issues in terms of the ruling techno-vision.

Transhumanism, a growing cultural movement with massive capital investment from Silicon Valley tech giants, is the most pervasive current articulation of this functionalist vision of life. For transhumanists, material body parts become the hardware of life, and genetic or neurological functions the software whose codes humans can increasingly decipher and rewrite in order to maximize human capacities. This vision is fully backed by state power. The global technology race for developing Artificial Intelligence to optimize administrative work in every social arena from healthcare to law and education is only the tip of the iceberg. What is really at stake is a reconfiguration of reality, including human nature, in the name of “biodigital convergence.” As one government policy webpage announces, “Biodigital convergence involves a rethinking of biology as providing both the raw materials and a mechanism for developing innovative processes to create new products, services, and ways of being,”<sup>54</sup> including the re-invention of the human beings in biodigital terms.

Needless to say, rethinking human nature in terms of “raw materials and a mechanism” is diametrically opposed to the view of human identity that sustains hermeneutic philosophy. The difference is best summarized in a series of reductions. The entire hermeneutical process of gaining understanding through embodied, sensory-spiritual encounter with others becomes reduced to an input-output model. Conversation becomes information exchange. What Ricoeur had called capability becomes mere mental capacity, and what Gadamer had called personal intelligence is reduced to computational pattern recognition. Consequently, the irreducible uniqueness of human personality is no longer desirable, and human freedom and its corollary of responsible action are reduced to programmed stimulus-response, controlled through digital surveillance. The real-life indications of these anthropological reductions are already in sight. The proliferation of online education is one, the soft totalitarianism of citizen control through digital observation in China is another. The advocacy of similar totalitarian surveillance societies by economists like Claus Schwab of the World Economic Forum, or the banker Mark Carney indicate how seriously this techno-vision is being pursued by current policy makers. Social engineers like Schwab freely admit that his “fourth-industrial revolution” or “Great Reset” champions transhumanism.

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<sup>54</sup> “Exploring Biodigital Experience,” Policy Horizons Canada, 11 February 2020, accessed 8 June 2021, <https://horizons.gc.ca/en/2020/02/11/exploring-biodigital-convergence/>.

Certainly, one noticeable effect of conceiving human nature along computational lines is the increasing loss of genuine dialogue not only in the public realm of Twitter culture, but also in the academy. For Gadamer, truth arises from interpersonal conversation based on respect for another, premised on the assumption that I may be wrong. Risking one's own viewpoint, he holds, is the essence of true, responsible freedom that founds genuine authority. "In truth," he explains, "there is no opposition between authority and critical freedom, but a profound, inner interconnection. Critical freedom is freedom to criticize, and the most difficult criticism is surely self-criticism. . . . Whoever brings into play the institutional weight of his superiority instead of using arguments is always in danger to speak with an authoritarian rather than an authoritative voice. The greatest proof for the genuine use of one's authority, it seems to me, is therefore the critical freedom to being wrong and to acknowledge it."<sup>55</sup> What we are witnessing instead—for example, in discussing the COVID-19 pandemic and in academic "conversations" about racism—reflects the binary computational pattern of social media cancel culture. Reasoned dialogue of interpersonal respect and self-critical modesty is replaced by authoritarian group think and the ruthless elimination of contrarian views. What we need, however, is the kind of wisdom Gadamer advocated, wisdom derived from genuine exchange in which interlocutors reach beyond their own perspectives to the common ground defined by the subject matter, "the logos that is neither mine nor yours," even if no final personal agreement can be reached.

To recast the future of hermeneutics in political terms: in outlining a personalist hermeneutic philosophy, Gadamer and Ricoeur remind us of the foundations necessary for a humanistic, democratic, liberal society in which persons of irreducible dignity and worth strive for the articulation of the common good. In this common search for wisdom, a plurality of opinions is as crucial as a commitment for the common logos that lifts our quest for truth above self-interest. If the "conversation that we are" perishes, a humane society perishes along with it. In short, the future of hermeneutics lies with the future of our humanity, and hermeneutic philosophy is one of the best resources to help us remember and guard the personal qualities that make us human.

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<sup>55</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Autorität und kritische Freiheit," in *Die Verborgenheit der Gesundheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2018), 157.

## **Ricoeur, Imagination, and Historiography**

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The vocabulary of narrative, imagination, and social imaginaries has made the rounds in recent decades in various disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. In philosophy it was brought about by the linguistic turn and by a variety of phenomenological, hermeneutical, and postmodern writers, the most noted of whom within historiography has perhaps been Hayden White. The constructivist turn of which White became the principal representative in this field was a reaction against empiricist and realist notions of history, which hermeneutical thinkers have also sought to get past without initiating the kind of pendulum swing that often finds a course being overcorrected. Swinging pendulums are often a recipe for error when the better move is to reject what Friedrich Nietzsche called “the faith in opposite values” for a neither-nor position.<sup>1</sup> Neither historical objectivism nor idealism (constructivism, subjectivism) is the better route provided such a viewpoint can be articulated, and this is always a tall order when a dichotomy is as old and deeply rooted as this one. One philosopher known for renouncing this faith is Paul Ricoeur, and it is his legacy, or an aspect of it, that I wish to take up in outlining a historiography that is centered around the concepts of imagination and imaginative schemas.

As John W. M. Krummel has aptly stated, “We are imagining beings. We imagine the past as well as the future to make sense of the present,” and our doing so

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), 10.



is one with the art of storytelling.<sup>2</sup> “There is,” as Richard Kearney puts it, “a whole set of collective stories and histories which need not bear the signature of any individual author, and which exercise a formative influence on our modes of action and behavior in society.”<sup>3</sup> What Kearney elsewhere calls “the narrative imperative” comes in many forms: “myth, epic, sacred history, legend, saga, folktale, romance, allegory, confession, chronicle, satire, novel. And within each genre there are multiple sub-genres: oral and written, poetic and prosaic, historical and fictional. But no matter how distinct in style, voice or plot, every story shares the common function of *someone telling something to someone about something*.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, “about something”; historical narratives are not about themselves but what happened, and we are not altogether free in the telling. Central to a conception of the historical imagination is the role played by narrative, as philosophers of history have pointed out for a few decades now. Historians, among the various other things that they do, are storytellers, as a great many scholars (e.g., Collingwood, Danto, Mink, Gallie, Ricoeur, White, Ankersmit) have brought to our attention. The basic hypothesis is that when reporting upon the past historians configure what they see in a way roughly analogous with the novelist, and that it is in narrative form that the history of any period or event is understood and communicated.

In the art of what Ricoeur called “emplotment,” the historian “integrates into a meaningful unity components as heterogeneous as circumstances, calculations, actions, aids and obstacles, and, lastly, results”<sup>5</sup> of human action both intended and unintended. Ricoeur’s analysis in *Time and Narrative* employs a vocabulary of representation and Aristotelian mimesis, and of particular importance for us is where he parts company with White in maintaining that the human past is not chronicle-like but has a “prenarrative quality” that readily lends itself to narrative form. Whether we are speaking of history or fiction, the storytelling art is intermediate between imposition and discovery; the order or structure that every narrative contains is neither wholly invented and projected onto experience nor strictly found within it. Instead, we must speak of narrative as a reinterpretation of what has already been understood or preunderstood, a creative redescription that can modify and enrich an understanding that was inchoate. In analyzing mimesis, Ricoeur introduces a triad of

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<sup>2</sup> John W. M. Krummel, “Rethinking the History of the Productive Imagination in Relation to Common Sense,” in *Social Imaginaries: Critical Interventions*, ed. Suzi Adams and Jeremy C. A. Smith (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 45.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: From Husserl to Lyotard* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), 157.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2001), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 178–79.

prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration, and it is a triad that carries a good deal of importance for historiography. Human action and experience are temporally structured and symbolically mediated from the outset. The historian's task is not to create these out of nothing but to raise them to a higher order of interpretive clarity. In speaking of the "prenarrative quality of experience," Ricoeur held that "there is no human experience that is not already mediated by symbolic systems and, among them, by narratives."<sup>6</sup> Historians, like other storytellers, configure material that is not raw data but a bearer of meaning to which the configurative act strives to remain faithful and which the reader will later refigure in the act of reading.

Ricoeur builds upon Clifford Geertz's anthropological insights according to which, as the former put it, "we might speak of an implicit or immanent symbolism, in opposition to an explicit or autonomous one," a symbolism that is public and "not in the mind, not a psychological operation destined to guide action, but a meaning incorporated into action and decipherable from it by other actors in the social interplay."<sup>7</sup> This order of meaning is culturally operative, prereflective, and symbolically mediated: "Geertz speaks in this sense of 'systems of interacting symbols,' of 'patterns of interworking meanings.' Before being a text, symbolic mediation has a texture. To understand a ritual act is to situate it within a ritual, set within a cultic system, and by degrees within the whole set of conventions, beliefs, and institutions that make up the symbolic framework of a culture."<sup>8</sup> The imagination works on material that is preunderstood by virtue of the culture in which the storyteller stands, and if it can be said "plot is an imitation of action," it must be kept in mind that actions themselves are always already both temporal and intelligible, albeit in a preliminary way. The poetic act of "emplotment" is no pure invention but "is grounded in a preunderstanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character. These features are described rather than deduced."<sup>9</sup> Imaginative descriptions of the past are not pure constructions but reconstructions that supplement or transform meaning, thus neither creating nor representing in the traditional empiricist sense of copying it. The "semantic innovation" that imaginative activity introduces

lies in the inventing of another work of synthesis—a plot. By means of the plot, goals, causes, and chance are brought together within the temporal unity

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<sup>6</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 74.

<sup>7</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 57.

<sup>8</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 58.

<sup>9</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 54.

of a whole and complete action. It is this synthesis of the heterogeneous that brings together narrative close to metaphor. . . . In both cases the semantic innovation can be carried back to the productive imagination and, more precisely, to the schematism that is its signifying matrix. In new metaphors the birth of a new semantic pertinence marvellously demonstrates what an imagination can be that produces things according to rules: 'being good at making metaphors,' said Aristotle, 'is equivalent to being perceptive of resemblances.' But what is it to be perceptive of resemblance if not to inaugurate the similarity by bringing together terms that at first seem 'distant,' then suddenly 'close'?<sup>10</sup>

Any such "change of distance in logical space," as Ricoeur put it, "is the work of the productive imagination."<sup>11</sup>

The imagination "sees as," "grasps together," and reinterprets what it sees, by means of metaphor and narrative in particular but also within a larger schema that is at once conceptual and preconceptual, cultural and linguistic. While mindful that "[h]istorians do argue in a formal, explicit, discursive way," Ricoeur held "that their field of argumentation is considerably vaster than that of general laws" while "their own modes of arguing. . . belong to the narrative domain."<sup>12</sup> Kearney has provided further elucidation of this theme, arguing that no chasm separates the imaginary from the real and that, echoing Ricoeur, "Every society participates in a socio-political *imaginaire*. This represents the ensemble of mythic or symbolic discourses which serve to motivate and guide its citizens. The 'social imaginary' can function as an *ideology* to the extent that it reaffirms a society in its identity by recollecting its 'foundational symbols.'"<sup>13</sup> Cultural self-understanding is largely a function of the stories that the members of a historical community tell themselves about a shared past. Thus, in the ancient world, "[m]yths were stories people told themselves in order to explain themselves to themselves and to others. But it was Aristotle who first developed this insight into a philosophical position when he argued, in his *Poetics*, that the art of storytelling—defined as the dramatic imitating and plotting of human action—is what gives us a *shareable world*."<sup>14</sup> History and life itself are "always *on the way* to narrative," neither existing at any moment in a pre-storied condition nor culminating in an unrevizable account, while all storytelling is "a kind of creative retelling" of an

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<sup>10</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, ix–x.

<sup>11</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, x.

<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 164–65.

<sup>13</sup> Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 158.

<sup>14</sup> Kearney, *On Stories*, 3.

existence that is inherently storied, “a nascent plot in search of a midwife,” as Kearney puts it.<sup>15</sup>

I shall speak of historical imagination as comprehending at once what historians bring to given lines of inquiry as well as everything that falls on the object side of the division between subjectivity and objectivity. Let us begin with what we might call the subject side of historical imagination, or what the historian brings to bear upon evidentiary material in fashioning accounts that are at once well-grounded in the sources and richly imaginative. A central theme in the debate between empiricist and postmodern accounts are the conditions in which historians wittingly or unwittingly arrange material into narrative form within an interpretive and imaginative schema of one kind or another. A conception of historical imagination that is hermeneutical and somewhat more encompassing than what we find in the current literature may help us to avoid the pitfalls of idealism and to advance a few steps beyond an empiricism/postmodernism opposition which may be getting old.

By imagination I intend an activity of mind that far transcends the production of quasi-visual images to one that is verbal, as Ricoeur has shown, but that is also more than this. Historical imagination is nothing separate and apart from historical reality but a capacity and activity that brings us into working touch with the past, that opens onto lifeworlds that are distant in time and place but not wholly other to our times or fully beyond reach, and that strives for comprehensiveness and what Wilhelm Dilthey called “a sense of the whole.”<sup>16</sup> That thinker, as one scholar notes, “saw that our lived experience of the human world gives us a sense of being a part of it,” a sense that is unquestionably vague but fundamental to our experience of history: “Given this pre-given relatedness to the world, the task of the imagination is not to produce connections where none were visible, but to specify an indeterminately felt connectedness and deepen it to bring it into focus.”<sup>17</sup> Let us think of imagination as a term encompassing at once the “images” with which it has been associated since Plato along with stories and story fragments, various kinds of metaphors and ciphers, rhetorical tropes, and affectively charged interpretations, none of which clashes either necessarily or in the usual course of inquiry with truth, argument, or evidence. Imagination incorporates them all and aims for a synoptic view of the past that is less

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<sup>15</sup> Kearney, *On Stories*, 133, 130.

<sup>16</sup> Eric S. Nelson, “Wilhelm Dilthey and the Formative-Generative Imagination,” in *Stretching the Limits of Productive Imagination: Studies in Kantianism, Phenomenology, and Hermeneutics*, ed. Saulius Genusas (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 30.

<sup>17</sup> Rudolf A. Makkreel, “Dilthey’s Typifying Imagination,” in *Productive Imagination: Its History, Meaning, and Significance*, ed. Saulius Genusas and Dmitri Nikulin (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 87.

a construction than an elucidation, an allowing something that was hidden to be seen with some relative clarity and verisimilitude. I shall suggest we conceive of imagination not narrowly as a subjective inventing of something that stands at some remove from reality but as a mental activity that underlies a good many specific cognitive acts from questioning to remembering, selecting, abbreviating, evaluating, hypothesizing, doubting, and some others. When historians imagine particular episodes from the past, they are doing nothing that is less cognitively sophisticated than what empiricists will speak of—“fictionalizing” or otherwise dressing up into aesthetically pleasing form a truth that has already been grasped. They are grasping it for the first time, not cooking raw data for the data as they always already are for us are already cooked, preunderstood, or prefigured as phenomenologists, hermeneuticists, pragmatists, and postmodernists have variously brought to our attention for some time now. It is not only the artistic imagination that gives rise to meaning, transforms, glimpses possibilities, configures and reconfigures, notices connections and tendencies, sees-as and synthesizes, and subsumes particulars under universals. Historians work in the space between objective discovery and subjective creation, neither unearthing then representing wholly determinate happenings from the past nor conjuring them out of thin air but engaging in an activity akin to conversing or participating in a dialectic in which subjectivity and objectivity are mutually constituted and past and present are understood together. They bring a system of prejudices, an imaginative schema, and a disciplinary perspective to bear on the past, not to speak for it but to make it possible for it to speak at all. Imagination is there from the beginning, taking in what is there to be seen and going to work on it in a single gesture.

If what we might call historical objectivism or realism no longer seems like a tenable option, we need not regard postmodern constructivism or idealism as the only alternative, as many are currently quick to do. White concisely expressed the constructivist conception of history this way: “The historical past is a theoretically motivated construction, existing only in the books and articles published by professional histories.”<sup>18</sup> Willie Thompson makes the same point still more succinctly: “the past *is* essentially nothing other than what historians write.”<sup>19</sup> The past is constituted, not found, and an ontological Rubicon separates the two. This is of course an extension to historiography of the same constructivist thesis that postmodernists and many others apply generally to the world of human experience, and the issues it

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<sup>18</sup> Hayden White, qtd. in Robert Doran, ed., “Editor’s Introduction: Choosing the Past: Hayden White and the Philosophy of History,” in *Philosophy of History after Hayden White* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 15.

<sup>19</sup> Willie Thompson, *Postmodernism and History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 1.

raises echo those in cognate fields. Postmodernists typically prefer the strong version of this thesis, that “historical interpretations,” as White put it, “are little more than projections,” although his choice of “little” rather than “nothing” in this passage is curious.<sup>20</sup> What is this little? It would appear to be events as recorded in a chronicle: now this, now that, leading nowhere, coming from nowhere, bearing no relation to other events, and more or less empty of significance. All of that comes later and is created by the pen of the historian in no way that admits of what one might call grounds. Talk of grounds or justification embroils us in pointless epistemological and metaphysical debates, although White qualifies this by asserting that “the best [only?] grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic and moral rather than epistemological.”<sup>21</sup> Historians, on this view, are poet-moralists if not complete relativists.

Let us turn more directly to the notions of imagination and imaginative schemas (*imaginaires*), both of which have received a good deal of attention in the recent literature. Both concepts have received varying interpretations and at the heart of all of them is a basic hypothesis which applied to the philosophy of history might be formulated this way: any knowledge of the human past is conditioned by a finite and historically specific point of view that can be understood as a broad framework of language, beliefs, values, practical knowledge, stories, symbols, and other cultural artifacts, all of which afford a perspective from which the past becomes accessible for us and in such a way that any distinction between real and imagined is difficult and perhaps impossible to sustain. Thus formulated, I am prepared to endorse this hypothesis as well, but the details will be important. A little more specifically, I shall speak of an imaginative schema as a framework of interpretation that is historically emergent, largely presupposed and prereflective, encompassing and sometimes totalizing, highly variable, cerebral but also embodied, self-justifying and self-serving, and that includes a conception of the good along with stories, metaphors, and characters that illustrate this conception. Like Hegel’s *Sittlichkeit*, a schema of this kind emerges from the soil of a given culture or it is the soil, and it is highly valued by those who see and navigate their way through the world from within it. Examples include the different forms of monotheism, polytheism, modern science-technology, nationalism, democracy, capitalism, individualism, Marxism, socialism, feminism, progressivism, and romanticism. Every society has one and often more than one.

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<sup>20</sup> Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” in *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*, ed. Brian Fay, Philip Pomper, and Richard T. Vann (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 28.

<sup>21</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), xii.

Indeed, it is little exaggeration to say that social reality itself is constituted by a social imaginary and that reasoning itself is conditioned by it.

Let us say broadly that from the side of the subject the historian imports into any inquiry not only a personal point of view but an imaginative schema that fundamentally orients interpretation, and that the schema itself is nothing apart from or prior to the activity of narrative interpretation itself. To craft and to tell a story, historical and fictional as well, is not to make it up—or not exactly, and not in any way one likes. Something pushes back, as historians themselves are well aware. One does not jump into a river from the dry land of a standpoint, language, or social imaginary but finds oneself always already in the midst of it, and the swimming one does is not the deploying of a strategy worked out in advance but a participating in the same schema. The rational persuasiveness of an interpretation is bound up with the historian's hermeneutic skill in building narratives as well as in setting out context and establishing a fit between universals and particulars. A particular battle is “seen-as” a turning point in a war, a decisive episode in a relationship between states, the end of this or a prelude to that, or otherwise in relational terms and in light of a larger universality in terms of which that battle can be understood. It is not a bare particular; indeed, the bare particular, in being unspoken, remains unknown, existing in no relation to a knower. Approaching it involves placing it in relation to a concept, viewing it as a possible instance of X or Y, seeing-as, discerning, and emplotting.

Kearney articulates the point this way: “History-telling is never literal. . . . It is always at least in part *figurative* to the extent that it involves telling according to a certain selection, sequencing, emplotment and perspective.” He immediately adds, “But it does try to be *truthful*.”<sup>22</sup> There are several points here to unpack. First, no matter how long a book becomes, no historian could or would attempt to include everything that is in any way germane to their subject. There is simply too much to encompass, even when the topic one is investigating is relatively specific. One must be selective, and the criteria governing the selection are a matter for the historian's judgment. One selects what is relevant to the topic, but the judgment of relevance itself is not self-evident. Something is relevant if it bears a nontrivial relation to a significant theme or episode in the narrative, but relations themselves are far too numerous to incorporate indiscriminately. One opts for what matters, what carries a level of importance to the account one is offering, and judges which aspects warrant emphasis, which carry secondary importance, and which may be alluded to or left out entirely, and no rule governs how this is done. This is true of interpretation in general and goes some way

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<sup>22</sup> Kearney, *On Stories*, 136.

toward explaining the inevitable diversity of historical accounts. Judgments of importance, relevance, and significance are not subjective in the sense of arbitrary or a reflection of a scholar's idiosyncrasies alone, but they are underdetermined by the evidence and are part of the art of historical narration. So is what Kearney calls "sequencing"—arranging or weaving together events to form episodes in a larger temporal configuration. Events lead toward, foreshadow, motivate, and respond to other events, and this is a large part of their historical significance. The sequence is not always linear, but there is an organic quality in the organization of events that the historian attempts to track and exhibit. An action is regarded not in isolation but as part of a larger configuration, as an organ of the body is known in terms of its relation to other organs and its larger functioning within the body. How it contributes to a sequence and fits into the whole must come into view, where again we are grasping the particular by relating it to a larger universality.

We understand a historical event in seeing how it came to pass, what led to it, who did what and for what reasons, what followed from it and what it meant—in short, by knowing the story. A good part of the labor and the artistry lies in "emplotting" a great many particulars—persons, actions, conflicts, motivations, consequences, circumstances, difficulties, chance—or showing how each of these relates to the others and leads in a certain direction. A narrative contains a plot which is capable of being followed by the reader and which exhibits a kind of progression that is more akin to musical progression than linear progress. We are not marching in a straight line but seeing how one thing led to another in the way that human actions typically unfold. Complexity abounds, but the historian's task is to follow along and compose a narrative that does justice to the details without getting lost in them. No little creativity goes into the synthesizing or weaving together of story elements, and it is in this respect that the historian's art most resembles the novelist's. Both involve weighing relative importance, a value that is contingent simultaneously on an element's contribution in advancing the narrative, its significance to the people and time period of which we are speaking and to a contemporary audience no less, and on the historian's own perspective and values, none of which can be encapsulated in a rule. All such factors comprise what Ricoeur called "the configurational dimension" of narrative composition, in which "the plot transforms the events into a story. This configurational act consists of 'grasping together' the detailed actions or what I have called the story's incidents. It draws from this manifold of events the unity of one temporal whole" in a manner that he likened to Kant's notion of reflective judgment: "The act of emplotment has a similar function inasmuch as it extracts a configuration



from a succession.”<sup>23</sup> The “manifold” to be configured includes the who, what, why, and when of the story, everything that is capable of being taken into account and none of which arranges itself.

Kearney’s point that historical interpretation “does try to be *truthful*” is surely accurate, although introducing the little word “truth”—even the less epistemological “truthful”—into this discussion is fraught with issues. Truth as correspondence does need to go; no historical account corresponds to a fully objective state of affairs in the human past, or demonstrating that it does would be an impossible task. Not correspondence but truth in a different connotation—truthful, faithful to the phenomena, evidentially rigorous, coherent, illuminating—does have a place here, and it is a concept that we should not understand in categorical opposition with falsehood. Here I am inclined toward Nietzsche’s view that knowing invariably requires a certain act of “falsifying,” in a sense of both a simplifying of our object and an appropriation which grasps not the thing in itself but the aspect that serves us. Knowledge is an arrangement that is artificial, interested, and rigorous at the same time that it involves a sizeable element of “forcing, adjusting, abbreviating, omitting, padding, investing, falsifying, and whatever else is of the *essence* of interpreting.”<sup>24</sup> We are not simply taking in and representing what is there but compressing the manifold into an expedient classification. Nietzsche’s general account of interpretation emphasized a distortion and falsification that is not a failure to correspond but a perspectival and aspectual revealing of our object.

Let us think of historical knowledge as an imaginative engagement with the past which from the side of the subject involves the following cognitive acts (among others no doubt), many of which overlap and all of which involve the move from chronology to history. The historian, first of all, must judge what is worth preserving in our shared memory of the human past. One selects a topic of inquiry and a beginning and end point, and goes to work sifting among the myriad events, persons, and details that may factor into one’s account. The storytelling art involves arranging particulars into a sequence, finding the story that fits the evidence, following a trail, questioning and interpreting, evaluating sources, looking beneath surfaces, and identifying meanings in light of a narrative configuration, whether it be heroic, tragic, comedic, romantic, or something else. These acts, which are distinct in principle and overlapping in practice, contribute to the more comprehensive account that historical texts typically provide and which make possible an authentic encounter with the past.

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<sup>23</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 66.

<sup>24</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1969), 151.

When it is successful, a Gadamerian “fusion of horizons” occurs between the inquirer, the reader, and the time period of which we are speaking. We are not transported into the past but placed on speaking terms with it, not “in” but “with” it in a deep sense of this word. The past is known in relation to the present—also the reverse—as the process of inquiry strives for a larger universality that comprehends not only what happened but what significance it held at the time and for our time no less. The historical imagination looks up from the particulars for larger patterns and tendencies, themes and lessons from the past that are capable of speaking to the present. It makes possible what we may call a sense of history—some more comprehensive understanding, a familiarity with the larger landscape and a sensibility, a sense of how things stood and what was possible for them, who they were and how they lived and thought, what they achieved and what they were up against, and who we are by the reflected light that all of this sheds.

Historical narratives are artful but not fictional, but exactly how so? Any distinction between fictional and historical narrative will crucially bear upon notions of evidence, sources, and empirical or quasi-empirical justification for the kinds of descriptive and analytical claims that scholars in this field routinely make— notions that postmodernists are quick to trace back to epistemological theories that have fallen on hard times and to replace with some formulation of constructivism. Kearney has suggested that “we can acknowledge that history is invariably mediated through narrative and *at the same time* affirm that there is something irreducible which, willy-nilly, we ‘still call reality.’ Without some referential claim to ‘reality,’ however indirect, it would seem that we would have no justification at all for distinguishing between history and fiction.”<sup>25</sup> I would second Kearney’s suggestion here, but the difficult part will be to demonstrate how we can maintain these two claims simultaneously. Otherwise stated, how might the classical divide between *mythos* and *logos* be bridged in the specific case of historiography, for it is difficult to deny that this branch of humanistic investigation partakes in some manner of both and that while different schools of thought have accentuated one side or the other any satisfactory account will need to do justice to both.

Let us now approach the historical imagination from the object side: something pushes back when historians proffer descriptions or analyses that fail, as rather often they do, but what is this “something” which historians themselves are so well acquainted with yet find so difficult to describe? “Evidence” is the one-word answer we often hear, although I suspect there is more to it than this and that the word

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<sup>25</sup> Kearney, *On Stories*, 149.

itself is far more ambiguous than many believe. The historian is on a trail, and is like a detective in this way, but what trail is this? Is it a construction? It does not appear that way, for if it were then it should be subject to the will, and clearly it is not. There are things that historians not only do not say but cannot. There is a trail there that they need to discern and follow, and that trail has every appearance of being real, to have being in one sense or another.

What is this object side of historical imagination? Historical consciousness does not stand at a radical remove from its object of investigation, including when the latter is distant in time and place, but bears a relation that has often gone by the name of constitution: such awareness, as with consciousness in general, is always already situated within a network of historical and cultural relations and indeed has been constituted by them, largely behind our back, or so many maintain. An imaginative schema makes possible, forms, and also limits the art of historical configuration in general, although the schema itself is nothing frozen in time but is the sedimented product of countless activities of illuminating and mystifying our world. To speak of these activities as imaginative is not to say that they are private acts of subjectivity occurring at some distance from reality, for these activities and we ourselves are already out there in the midst of historical reality. What has long been called rationality here is nothing as theoretically elaborate as an epistemology but more like a general way of thinking that we might loosely call common-sense empiricism. We are speaking of a set of presuppositions, conventions, and disciplinary standards that is used in adjudicating disagreements among professional historians. Words like truth and justification, facts and data, sources and evidence, reality and objectivity feature prominently here, even if their meanings typically remain opaque. Rationality encompasses all of this and is sharply distinguished from a few things: relativism, subjectivism, myth-making, propaganda, ideological activism, and a few others. The fundamental idea is that historical inquiry is research; it is methodologically rigorous, painstaking, and beholden to sources which exercise a kind of authority over everything that historians write.

Empiricists and representationalists work with some dubiously tidy distinctions: discovery versus construction; interpretation versus representation; meaningful versus meaningless; real versus imaginary; subject versus object. It is better to conceive of these as rough and ready distinctions which in some circumstances accomplish some intellectual labor without opening up a chasm. Some dialectical nuance is needed here, and it is largely phenomenological and hermeneutical thinkers who have taken us beyond the tired old dichotomies that still beset a great deal of contemporary philosophy of history. Is the business of historical inquiry to unearth an

objective and fully constituted meaning or does the historian construct meaning in the activity of representation? This is a badly formulated question. Constructivism and realism are about equally prone to excess, and from opposite directions. The former readily becomes a kind of subjective idealism in which any serious talk of sources and evidence is thought tainted by association with some kind of objectivism or foundationalism. This move is often made hastily and without due appreciation of the role that evidence clearly plays in historical research. Sources and evidence are in every case relational: a document is a source of information about X, evidence for Y, as interpreted by Z, from the point of view of A, and so on. Sources may be primary or secondary, reliable or suspect, but they do need to be reckoned with in one way or another, and in a way that is not true of fictional narratives. They have an authority about them of which historians are well aware, even while some creative artistry is necessary in making them speak to us.

The two sets of positions that we might broadly call empiricist and postmodern both have a point that once suitably qualified enjoys considerable validity. The empiricist's emphasis on the centrality and authority of evidence must surely be retained, but without inflating this into an untenable epistemology. Historical investigation is as fully rational as any other field of knowledge, and its claim to rationality comes down to the traceability of its interpretations to sources and evidence of a kind that fictional narratives might employ but typically do not. On the face of it this view does not conflict with the narrative hypothesis at the heart of postmodern historiography. The validity in the latter position centers around the idea that historical knowledge crucially involves interpretation in the specific form of narrative and that such narratives involve some imaginative work on the part of the historian. The postmodern and empiricist positions both become dubiously one-sided when they commit the common error of becoming so enamored with their own insights that they lose sight of the truth on the other side and fall into an oppositional stance that is needless.

Let us return to what Ricoeur called the pre-narrative quality of experience. It seems clear that life as it plays does not transpire in anything like the manner of a novel; the latter exhibits a plot, it has a coherence that has been artfully fashioned even if it is complex, and is without extraneous elements while our experience of life is shot through with incoherence, the extraneous, dead ends, and many an unrelated episode which may at some later time be retrospectively configured as a story while lacking at the time we are undergoing it the aesthetic elegance of a novel. This much is true, however, our lived experience is commonly not of random or range of the moment happenings but of sequences, relations, directionality, partial continuity,

purposiveness, and habitual actions, all of which hang together, however loosely, in an organic way. Actions form sequences; they arise from somewhere, lead toward a goal or purpose, and hold significance for the agent and likely others as well. These sequences are pre- or nascent narratives, and our experience is replete with them. As Kearney expresses it, “existence is inherently storied. Life is pregnant with stories. It is a nascent plot in search of a midwife. For inside every human being there are lots of little narratives trying to get out.”<sup>26</sup> The midwifery metaphor is apt, for the stories of which we are speaking are characterized by potentiality. They become actual narratives in being configured or transformed in a way that Ricoeur likened to imitation or mimesis. A narrative, on his view, is an imitation of an action or sequence of actions, an actualization of what already belongs to it, where what belongs to it is a “symbolism” and “an initial *readability*”<sup>27</sup> which is capable of, one may say calls for, a certain form of rendering. The storyteller’s art renders explicit—actualizes, makes intelligible, or otherwise brings to life (which is not to say constructs)—a configuration that is nascent within a sequence of actions and experiences. The latter are symbolically mediated from the beginning, as Geertz has shown, and their symbolic value amounts to what Ricoeur called a prefiguration that makes the imaginative activity of storytelling or configuration possible and necessary. As with metaphor construction, narrating involves a seeing-as and a “grasping together” of various matters which become understood as story elements. As he expressed it, “every narrative presupposes a familiarity with terms such as agent, goal, means, circumstance, help, hostility, cooperation, conflict, success, failure, etc., on the part of its narrator and any listener. In this sense, the minimal narrative sentence is an action of the form ‘X did A in such and such circumstances, taking into account the fact that Y does B in identical or different circumstances.’ In the final analysis, narratives have acting and suffering as their theme.”<sup>28</sup> A story is comprised of what characters do and what happens to them, as can be said of the self itself. One lives a story which is told retrospectively but which is also enacted in the present, and indeed one is that story. Lived experience does not have the structure of a chronicle. Indeed, the latter is an abstraction, a selective and ordered configuration of events according to the chronicler’s estimation of importance and relevance. Now this, now that, and so on is not our experience of life. Experiences and actions lend themselves to the storyteller’s art because they are already in motion, directional, fluid, purposive, meaningful, understood or preunderstood, and

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<sup>26</sup> Kearney, *On Stories*, 130.

<sup>27</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 58.

<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 55–56.

interrelated with a myriad of elements in a larger configuration that itself is always on the way.

As Ricoeur wrote, “between the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience there exists a correlation that is not merely accidental but that presents a transcultural form of necessity. To put it another way, *time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence.*”<sup>29</sup> The bare present does not exist, nor do absolute beginnings or endings. A moment that bears no relation to a before and after, like any bare particular, is unintelligible and foreign to our experience. This moment is dynamic; it is going somewhere and it is from somewhere, it is on the move, fluid, constantly changing into another, and is understood precisely in its dynamism or its tending this way or that. Maurice Merleau-Ponty made the point this way:

Instant C and instant D—as close together as one wishes to make them—are never indiscernible, for then there would be no time at all; rather, they pass into each other, and C becomes D because it was never anything but the anticipation of D as present, and of its own passage into the past. This amounts to saying that each present reaffirms the presence of the entire past that it drives away, and anticipates the presence of the entire future or the ‘to-come’ [*l’à-venir*], and that, by definition, the present is not locked within itself but transcends itself toward a future and toward a past.<sup>30</sup>

Human time is “a network of intentionalities,” not a linear “series of nows”<sup>31</sup> strung together like photographs in an album but a network within which we are located and within which the three dimensions of past, present, and future lead into one another and are not discrete. The present is constantly before us even as the future “‘is there,’ just like the back of the house whose front I am looking at,” and the past no less. Neither the future nor the past is a representation; again they “are there” in the sense that they “[weigh] upon me.”<sup>32</sup> The future weighs upon the present as a promise or a threat, while the past is a prelude and a source of pride or guilt. The here and now is a myriad of preparations, means, responses, leadings, foreshadowings, consequences, repetitions, continuities, departures, and transactions with a before and after.

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<sup>29</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 52.

<sup>30</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2013), 444.

<sup>31</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 440.

<sup>32</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 439.

The constructivist's view of narrative as an imaginative imposition on a past that is chronicle-like and devoid of meaning is phenomenologically inadequate because of the way human time is experienced. The past is capable of being narrated because it is already a nascent story of which the historian is a midwife rather than a Yahweh-like creator. The art of midwifery involves a large amount of gathering, sifting, selecting, sorting, judging, analyzing, and synthesizing bits of evidence into a larger configuration that relates a version of what transpired and how we may understand it. Historians do not conjure something from nothing but tell a story that is based upon evidence, even as the evidence does not speak for itself, or not exactly. Exactly what, then? Here matters become more than a little ambiguous, for historians—like detectives, lawyers, scientists, or anyone else who works with evidence—commonly say that the sources and evidence “indicate,” “suggest,” or “prove” that this or that was the case, but what is the meaning of this? A document, coin, or other artifact, duly vetted for historical authenticity, “indicates” that event X occasioned, prompted, or afforded a reason for Y. In a court of law, evidence does not dictate a verdict but must be interpreted, weighed, and judged, and the same happens among historians. There is a story there, or the makings of one; there is something there that the historian is less constructing than detecting, listening to, and following, or their constructing is itself a mode of following.

Novelists often report that a good story in a sense “tells itself.” The story is the novelist's creation, yet their freedom in creating it is not unlimited. What happens next in the story is again “indicated” by what happened before and the larger trajectory of the narrative. One follows the course of the narrative in the same gesture in which one composes it, or so many novelists and other artists often claim. What could this mean? The landscape does not cause the painting; this much is clear, but the artist's activity is guided by something that is authoritative, and where this is not a cause. Jeff Mitscherling has spoken in this connection of intentionality, and in a connotation of the term that is neither idealist nor materialist. By this term Mitscherling is speaking not of a mental state or anything that is controlled by a sovereign consciousness but of a relating and a “tending towards”: “all *intentionality*,” as he puts it, “consists in such a ‘tending towards,’ or a *directed movement* that one undergoes prior to the activity of conscious deliberation. . . . Our ‘tending towards’ or ‘directed movement’ occurs not as the result of our consciously creating and fully controlling the goal or target of our consciousness, but rather as the result of allowing ourselves to be moved or *guided* in

a certain direction.”<sup>33</sup> We are still operating here within the world of the “pre-”: prior to conscious thinking, which includes configuring a narrative, something is already going on which is not a projection of consciousness but something that gives rise to consciousness itself. There is, as he describes it, a “compelling ‘internal logic’ of the story that’s dragging us all along, writers and readers alike. And this logos is more than merely conceptual (but it’s also that): if it were, we could anticipate it, get ahead of it, direct it—but we can’t. . . we’re at *its* mercy. It’s guiding us—author and reader alike, each of us necessarily remaining ‘passionate,’ because we’re not ‘mentally’ in charge.”<sup>34</sup> What, then, is?

Mitscherling calls it an intention, where this is to be understood neither as an intended meaning nor any other mental state nor a construction of consciousness but as something that lies before us in our experience, something we encounter and that has being but in neither a material nor an ideal sense but rather intentionally, as a relation:

What a thing is, it is *in relation* to something else. Everything tends this way or that: it is proximal, changing, in motion, on the way, becoming, passing away, opposing, betwixt and between, in process, transacting, interacting, interrelating, in negotiation, intimating, symbolizing, leading somewhere or other. *A is A*, but it *points to B*. . . . Any *A* that we encounter. . . is dynamic, pushed around by forces, suspended in webs, or otherwise part of a larger phenomenon. It’s no bare particular, raw datum, or thing in itself. The world we live in is permeated with intentionality, not in the sense of an external imposition or projection of the mind but where the intention itself exists dialectically, *between* subject and object, and binds them together.<sup>35</sup>

This is the human world—a lifeworld in which we are suspended and from which we are inseparable, and the historical world is no exception. This is a radical revision of Husserl’s hypothesis regarding the intentionality of consciousness in that intentions are not a projection of the mind but something real that consciousness becomes aware of and actively follows. Tracking intentionality is done in many forms and by all of us;

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<sup>33</sup> Jeff Mitscherling, Tanya DiTommaso, and Aref Nayed, *The Author’s Intention* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2004), 106.

<sup>34</sup> Mitscherling, DiTommaso, and Nayed, *The Author’s Intention*, 114. The same theme is discussed further in Jeff Mitscherling, *Aesthetic Genesis: The Origin of Consciousness in the Intentional Being of Nature* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009); Jeff Mitscherling and Paul Fairfield, *Artistic Creation: A Phenomenological Account* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2019). See also Jeff Mitscherling, *Roman Ingarden’s Ontology and Aesthetics* (Ottawa, ON: University of Ottawa Press, 1997).

<sup>35</sup> Mitscherling and Fairfield, *Artistic Creation*, 139–40.



it happens when one gets swept up in a conversation or is grabbed by a story, when an athlete gets carried along in the momentum of a game, a musician improvises as the song itself seems to require, a detective follows the trail of evidence, a physician tracks the symptoms to a diagnosis, and a historian follows where the evidence leads, or in general in any experience in which, as we say, “one thing leads to another.” This mode of following is imaginative, not servile; it is active and receptive at the same time, rather as a judge formulates a verdict that is indicated while also underdetermined by the evidence. In all these cases, we do not make it up but allow ourselves to be guided by something in our experience that is beyond our command.

We find ourselves in the midst of a historical world and suspended in webs of intentionality—participating in a tradition, appropriating a culture, and belonging to a particular time and place. Each of these verbs—participating, appropriating, belonging—points to an experience that is simultaneously an activity and a passivity or that is, in a word, imaginative. It is a creative responding to what is already going on in the world, finding our way through strands of a web that is encompassing and more or less infinite, trying to see the relatedness of things, to grasp connections, and to understand what is happening, how we got here, and where things may be going. The active gathering, synthesizing, and narrating of historical elements which belong to the subject side of imagination is one pole of a dialectic, the other side of which is both the sources and evidence of which historians have long spoken and the intentionality that is implicit to them. The evidence indicates that X led to Y, not in a sense of cause and effect but X foreshadowed, set the stage, or afforded a rationale for Y. Whether a narrative be fictional or historical, one episode sets up the next and the whole is followable because of the organic relatedness of the various situations, characters, and actions that move things along and that the storyteller brings to light. What has happened when a story “tells itself,” as with anything in our experience that takes on a momentum and a life of its own, is that the teller has picked up on an intentionality that belongs to the phenomena from the outset as a potentiality and rendered it actual, in a way closer to midwifery than construction. The fundamental difference, then, between the fictional and the historical narrative is not that the latter is “constrained by the real” while the former is made up but that “the real” that guides novelist and historian alike does not in the former case include material evidence (although it might).<sup>36</sup> Both are beholden, not sovereign.

Anything that is a part of the human world is understood only in its dynamic relatedness, whether this be a temporal before and after, a location in a culture, place,

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<sup>36</sup> Alun Munslow, *The New History* (London: Routledge, 2018), 18.

or time period, its being a means or an end, a continuation or departure, a purpose and a destined, or otherwise in its tending this way and that. The only “relativism” here would be better spoken of as “on-the-way-ism,” were the expression not so artless: “The president was on his way to being a one-term president”; “The emperor was a pale reflection of his predecessor”; “This artistic movement anticipated a later movement”; “This architectural style was an appropriation of a neighboring contemporary or predecessor”; “This philosophical text was a development in a long-standing tradition”—these are the kinds of claims historians make in their more “analytical” moments, when they are ostensibly no longer telling stories but engaged in the serious work of historical analysis. Analyzing, synthesizing, informing, narrating, or any cognition we care to speak of, as Mitscherling has persuasively shown, is an activity in which what we are doing is tracing connections, tracking down leads, seeing X in light of Y, reconciling a particular with a universal, regarding in context, and grasping relations that are organic and not static.

The larger picture is of a tensional circularity of subjectivity and objectivity, no longer regarded as separate orders of being but as a unified system. To cite Mitscherling once more, “human consciousness consists in the *mutual creation* of subject and object, these two poles of awareness. To speak of the ‘priority’ of one over the other, either of ‘ideal’ mind (idealism) or of the ‘material,’ external world (materialism), is mistaken. . . . Both mind and world exist, and they exist independently of each other. What they don’t exist independently of is the relation that gives rise to and dialectically maintains them both. This relation is intentionality at work, and we find intentionality at work everywhere.”<sup>37</sup> Our experience is replete with an operative intentionality in which we and everything we encounter are suspended, a meshwork of associations that are neither objectively given nor subjectively constituted but pre- or intersubjective, and historical consciousness is no exception.

Historical imagination encompasses not only the overtly poetic dimension of inquiry into the human past—reckoning with visual and quasi-visual images, filling in gaps, constructing metaphors—but a broader capacity of synthesizing the myriad elements that comprise a narrative in a way that makes it possible to render us conversant with a time and place remote from our own. Kearney speaks of a “power . . . of *vicarious* imagination”<sup>38</sup> and “empathic imagination,” “a power capable of intending the unreal *as if* it were real, the absent *as if* it were present, the possible *as if* it were actual.”<sup>39</sup> We are not transported into the past, but it is as if we were, for by

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<sup>37</sup> Mitscherling and Fairfield, *Artistic Creation*, 27.

<sup>38</sup> Kearney, *On Stories*, 137.

<sup>39</sup> Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 38, 17.

virtue of the historian's labor the reader is able to make vicarious contact with the occupants of a world that is ultimately both theirs and ours. The schema within which the historian works is no closed system but opens onto a past that is extant. Whether we speak of empathy, transcendence, understanding meanings, or what have you, historical imagining is a mode of engagement and a meeting of minds. We are following and unravelling threads of intentionality that reveal to us not only "what happened" but "what it must have been like," letting it speak to us by creating openings in which we can experience something of the flavor of the times.

Let us speak of the imagination in an expansive way as an art of gathering, composing, revealing, making contact, seeing the connectedness of things, and narrating—and not in any way but in the way that the story needs to be told and indeed in a non-fanciful sense tells itself. The historian's freedom is neither unconditioned nor unlimited, and if we may speak of truth here then it is not the whole truth but the dimension of it that a particular mode of access makes visible. When successful, an imaginative account makes it possible for the reader to "get it," to see how events came to pass and might have been otherwise, how they played out and resonated, how one thing led to another, what it meant to them and what it may entail for us, what they thought they were doing and what we may have to say about it. Imagining involves no little hypothesizing and analyzing, following trails, seeing-as, and creatively synthesizing bits of evidence that never speak for themselves. We are trying to bridge the distance, to understand how things stood, what it was like, who these people were, what things meant to them and might yet mean.

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## (Environmental) Hermeneutics at the Heart of the Anthropocene: Ricoeurian and Gadamerian Perspectives

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### Introduction

Environmental hermeneutics is less concerned with the *fact* of the Anthropocene and more with the *interpretation* or *understanding* of the Anthropocene. It is one thing to designate this particular epoch with the term and quite another to explore what it *means* and, by extension, how we should *act*. If we do indeed reside in the Anthropocene, what will the world become? Both Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer emphasize that the task of hermeneutics is to speak to our present situation rather than to engage in some sort of recovery of the past. Ricoeur says, “to interpret is to explicate the type of being-in-the-world unfolded *in front of* the text.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Gadamer explains: “Every interpretation has to adapt itself to the hermeneutical situation to which it belongs.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 86. Italics original.

<sup>2</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 398.

In this article we argue that the Anthropocene is a hermeneutical term. Indeed, designating a geological epoch with the term is already an interpretation. Since there is no static, single interpretation of anything that determines the course of thought or action, we have to ask ourselves, adapting to the hermeneutical situation to which we belong: What sorts of worlds might unfold in front of the Anthropocene, and in what sort of world might we imagine ourselves dwelling? The task of hermeneutics here (and in this case environmental hermeneutics in particular) is two-fold: 1) To demonstrate that the Anthropocene is not a term merely corresponding to a scientific set of facts but that those supposed neutral facts are understood and given meaning; and 2) to reflect upon how the Anthropocene, as a hermeneutical term, invites us to consider worlds that may unfold in front of the Anthropocene and our being-in-the-world that unfolds in front of it. What potential worlds do we wish to avoid, and which would we like to fashion?

The course of our analysis shall be as follows: First, we will make the case that the language of the Anthropocene is interpretive as it reveals a way of understanding and reflecting upon the current geologic epoch. Having shown the hermeneutical nature of the Anthropocene, we ask the question as to what this means for the future. Where shall we go now? What shall we do? It is with Ricoeur's philosophy of imagination and action that we first reply to these questions. Imagination, like fiction, has the capacity to redescribe reality and to suggest a course of action. The interpretation of our present epoch has inscribed within it a sense of expectation for the world that follows. Such expectation is itself a hermeneutical task. The guide to mediate this interpretive task can be found in Ricoeur's ethical intention, which he defines as living with and for others in just institutions. It is here that we rely on Gadamer's reflections on friendship and solidarity. We consider how these extend beyond merely human friendship and solidarity to the earth and nonhuman others. Avowed solidarity, in particular, as a response to the shared environmental crisis represented by the Anthropocene, offers a means of comportment toward fellow humans and the nonhuman world.

## The Hermeneutical Characteristics of the Anthropocene

The conflicts surrounding the Anthropocene indicate that it is, in fact, a hermeneutical concept.<sup>3</sup> The term itself was first proposed by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer in 2000.<sup>4</sup> The authors proposed the term to designate the current “geological epoch” following the Holocene on the basis of unprecedented human impact on the planet and the atmosphere. Crutzen and Stoermer proposed the latter part of the 18th century as the beginning of this epoch, but they did so modestly, noting that “alternative proposals” might be made and the arbitrariness of assigning a date with specificity. Other dates, based on how significant human impact is understood, have been proposed.<sup>5</sup>

One should not mistake the various proposals designating the beginning of the Anthropocene merely as different takes or disagreements over the hard facts of science and history. It is not as if the timing of the Anthropocene and the phenomena that “make” it the Anthropocene are determined by some objective static correspondence whereby dating and naming it is simply a matter of rightly recognizing a set of facts that are entirely external to human thinking. Crutzen and Stoermer are correct to acknowledge the arbitrary character of such an exercise. Among the various proposals for dating the beginning of the Anthropocene, there is not one that is right and the others wrong. But neither are we saying that the Anthropocene and when it is determined to have started is merely a human construction, entirely subjectively created, and that all interpretations are right because none of them can be wrong.

To the contrary, there is something hermeneutical in character occurring in the space between the material phenomena of this geological epoch and the particularly human action of naming and dating it. First, the impulse to name a new geological epoch suggests the observation of phenomena that is significantly different enough to claim one geological epoch (in this case the Holocene) has come, or is coming, to an end. Then, if there is something that should be given a new name based on new phenomena, when should we recognize that shift? Although there are differences of

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<sup>3</sup> For work addressing the hermeneutical aspects of the Anthropocene, see Forrest Clingerman, “Place and the Hermeneutics of the Anthropocene,” *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 20, no. 3 (2016): 225–37; “Imagining Place and Politics in the Anthropocene,” in *Ethics and Politics of Space for the Anthropocene*, ed., Anu Valtonen, Outi Rantala, and Paolo Davide Farah (Camberly, UK: Edward Elgar, 2020), 17–34; Patryk Szaj, “Hermeneutics at the Time of the Anthropocene: The Case of Hans-Georg Gadamer,” *Environmental Values*, 30, no. 2 (2021): 235–54.

<sup>4</sup> Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The ‘Anthropocene,’” *Global Change Newsletter* 41 (2000): 17–18.

<sup>5</sup> For a summary of different datings of the Anthropocene, see Clingerman, “Place and the Hermeneutics of the Anthropocene,” 227.

interpretations as to the timing wherein a new geological epoch should be understood to have begun, that a new geological epoch has begun is clearly a matter of agreement among those who would designate its beginning at different times. The real question is *when* this unprecedented human impact began, not *that* it has begun.

What is hermeneutical about these differences is the obvious aspect that these conflicting interpretations of what constitutes the beginning of the Anthropocene are just that—interpretations. But even more, a hermeneutical assessment of these differences, rather than being a matter of asking which dating is correct, would be to recognize that each potentially has its own validity in its own way.<sup>6</sup> The conflict of interpretations does not imply the irreconcilability of interpretations, nor does it exclude the recognition that different understandings shed some light on the issue at hand. Each variance in interpretation has something to say.

A further hermeneutical response to the conflict of interpretations concerning dating the Anthropocene is the understanding that there is no decisive break between one epoch and another. Varying interpretations concerning the dating of the Anthropocene reveal that as one epoch is passing, another has already begun to arise. There is an overlap between them. Recognizing and naming geological epochs, being to some degree an arbitrary exercise subject to multiple interpretations, demonstrates that elements of the passing epoch pass over into those of the emerging epoch and elements of the emerging epoch first begin to germinate and grow in the passing epoch.

Another conflict of interpretations surrounding the Anthropocene is the name itself. As we stated in the introduction, naming an epoch is itself an interpretation. Presumably, Crutzen Stoemer looked at the degree of human impact on the planet and that the impact was such as to call for a new name. To name something is a use of language that presupposes an interpretation in some form or another. A name of any kind (of a person or any entity) seeks to describe what we understand something to be. “The Anthropocene” seeks to describe with a name the planetary phenomena that recognizes the degree of human impact on the planet. But a name also works to shape the way we understand phenomena. As Gadamer says, “Being that can be understood is language.”<sup>7</sup> Conversely, language shapes the understanding of Being. The use of the term “Anthropocene” has the power to direct the understanding of that which is named.

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<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that any interpretation must be considered as valid. The possibility of understanding also means there is the possibility of misunderstanding—i.e., wrong interpretations.

<sup>7</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 470.

Such a language-directed understanding is not to be received uncritically or unreflectively. This is evident in the conflict of interpretations that can be seen in some of the objections to the term “Anthropocene” and in the offerings of alternate terms. For example, Anthropocene is derived, of course, from *anthropos*, focusing on the human impact on the planet. But this is problematic, because not all members of humanity can be held equally culpable for the destruction of the planet and the crisis of climate change. Rather, it is argued, that the environmental challenges we are facing today are more a consequence of the capitalist economy, so the epoch might be more accurately termed “Capitalocene.”<sup>8</sup> Adrian Parr, for example, has offered a powerful and convincing case demonstrating the damaging environmental consequences of neoliberal capitalism in *The Wrath of Capital*.<sup>9</sup> “Capitalocene” is a reasonable designation to consider as well.

So which should it be? Are we in the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene? Like a hermeneutic approach to dating the Anthropocene, hermeneutics would not see the naming of this geological epoch as if we just need to use the right term that corresponds to the facts. Language has a way of revealing without encompassing the totality of what words refer to. Sometimes a debate over two different terms is a debate precisely due to this limitation of language. In his assessment of the Gadamer–Habermas debate over hermeneutics and the critique of ideology, Ricoeur says he did not intend to select one over the other or seek to syncretize them. He writes: “I readily admit, along with Gadamer, that each of the two theories speaks from a different place; but I hope to show that each can recognize the other’s claim to universality in a way that marks the place of one in the structure of the other,” and that “each may be asked to recognize the other, not as a position that is foreign and purely hostile, but as one that raises in its own way a legitimate claim.”<sup>10</sup>

A hermeneutic approach to this conflict of interpretations (represented by a conflict of naming) would be to recognize the truth contained in each term. Certainly, the human impact on the planet has become unprecedented and the term Anthropocene speaks to this reality. Yet it can do so with the recognition that the term does not refer to each individual human equally. The critical-interpretive discourse of the Anthropocene also must not only ask “which humans” are impacting the planet but identify human activities that are causing harm and each to what degree. At the

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<sup>8</sup> Jason W. Moore, ed., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Adrian Parr, *The Wrath of Capital: Neoliberalism and Climate Change Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 271, 294–95.



very least, this sort of discourse would have to include the reality of neoliberal capitalism in human activities affecting the planet. Likewise, one could use the term “Capitalocene” while recognizing that capital and capitalism are uniquely human constructions and, in this respect, a Capitalocene is an Anthropocene. And is it only capitalism? What other factors drive the crisis we face? Obviously, productive discourse demands a mutual understanding of the use of terms or even final agreement on which one to use. But it need not be at the expense of the insights or truths that different terms contain.

Recognizing these limitations of language, we will use, for the purposes of this essay, the term “Anthropocene” as it seems to be more commonly used and accepted and is more encompassing.

Accepting that the Anthropocene is a hermeneutic term, there is an additional characteristic of hermeneutical thinking that we wish to address to the discourse of the Anthropocene. Interpretation is not a matter of uncovering the “right” interpretation of a set of facts. Interpretation is a recognition that interpretation is a process of understanding, which must account for the presence of multiple meanings. Ricoeur writes, “there is interpretation wherever there is multiple meaning, and it is in interpretation that plurality of meaning is made manifest.”<sup>11</sup> Hence, when we ask what the Anthropocene “means,” the answer is not necessarily univocal. In fact, it likely is not. Forrest Clingerman draws upon Ricoeur’s characterization of discourse as a dialectic of event and meaning. Clingerman explains, “As a discourse, the Anthropocene is not merely a brute state of affairs, but the name of a crossroads of different levels of interpretation that already have materialized in the midst of contemporary human engagement with the global environment.”<sup>12</sup>

Accepting that the hermeneutic character of the Anthropocene as a discourse of event and meaning, and that interpretation can legitimately account for multiple meanings, it would be a mistake to reduce it to any single meaning or any overarching meaning. The discourse of the Anthropocene is a discourse of valid possible meanings as well as those meanings that we would critique as “bad” interpretations. In an excellent and thought-provoking book, Frédéric Neyrat refers to the Anthropocene as a grand narrative to be avoided. He writes that “it is necessary to not get caught up in the official discourse of the Anthropocene, this new grand narrative that is presumed

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 13.

<sup>12</sup> Clingerman, “Place and the Hermeneutics of the Anthropocene,” 229.

to provide some kind of meaning for the future fates of humanity.”<sup>13</sup> Later, Neyrat notes that grand narratives (or metanarratives), as Lyotard has described, seek to legitimize institutions and social practices that arise from them and seek to “establish their legitimacy with a *future* that must be brought into emergence.”<sup>14</sup>

Neyrat seems to accept only a particular interpretation of the Anthropocene—that of the geo-constructivists, who presume that whatever is happening to the planet we can engineer it in ways that we wish. Neyrat is correct to reject the grand narrative of the geo-constructivist interpretation of the Anthropocene, especially on the grounds that it is presented as a grand narrative (not to mention what the plot of that narrative happens to be). Still another reason to reject the geo-constructivist interpretation is to the extent it is presented as *the* meaning of the events designated as the Anthropocene. Neyrat warns us not to get caught up in the “official discourse of the Anthropocene.” We question to what extent geo-constructivism is an “official discourse” rather than just one discourse (and a very troubling one at that) among many. From a hermeneutical standpoint, contrary to Neyrat, we can not only question and critique the geo-constructivist discourse, but propose other levels of meaning, ones that are argued as better interpretations for the future of the planet and all its members, including humanity.

It is especially to the question of any future that would emerge from the Anthropocene—the historical situation to which we belong—that we now turn. Interpretation encompasses understanding our current historical situation, both in a dialogue with the past *and* a dialogue *about* the future. This hermeneutical perspective is particularly crucial as we consider not only the *now* of the Anthropocene, but the future(s) that potentially emerge from it. Hermeneutics proposes no metanarrative that must necessarily emerge that it would seek to legitimate. Philosophical hermeneutics proposes, to refer again to Ricoeur, possible ways of being-in-the-world that *might* unfold in front of the present interpretation and asks the question, what kind of world do we wish to emerge and within which to dwell. The remainder of this article, in the

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<sup>13</sup> Frédéric Neyrat, *The Unconstructable Earth: An Ecology of Separation*, trans. Drew S. Burk (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 19. Neyrat’s book is a good example of the issues that make up the ecomodernist vs. degrowth debate, which he references throughout. From a hermeneutical standpoint, both the ecomodernist and the degrowth agendas represent what we argue in the next section of this paper: namely, the hermeneutic task is to envision what world will unfold in front of the Anthropocene. Both ecomodernism and degrowth represent approaches to action that will bring forth the world that unfolds next. The critical hermeneutic task is to differentiate whether each represents an interpretation that is desirable or if one or both are less than desirable interpretations.

<sup>14</sup> Neyrat, *The Unconstructable Earth*, 35. Italics original.

next two sections respectively, will address the hermeneutics of Ricoeur and Gadamer to the discourse of the Anthropocene.

### Paul Ricoeur: Imagination and Action

A rudimentary principle of philosophical hermeneutics (especially since Gadamer and Ricoeur) is that the practice of interpretation exists in the now. Rather than uncovering a hidden meaning that exists in a static “lifeless rigidity,”<sup>15</sup> interpretation constantly brings the past into the present, into the horizon of the interpreter’s world. Regarding tradition, for example, Gadamer says, “The historical life of a tradition depends on being constantly assimilated and interpreted.”<sup>16</sup> This is true for anything that is interpreted (understood), not just a tradition. Understanding the discourse of the Anthropocene this way, we would say that there is no static, lifeless meaning that this term simply references. As we noted, the naming of a geological historical epoch is already an interpretation; it is a linguistic effort to adapt to the historical situation to which we belong. Moreover, the naming of the Anthropocene is a dialogue with the previous geological epoch that suggests the present horizon of understanding has unfolded in front of the last. The present, after all, was once the future. The next hermeneutical task, therefore, is to propose what will unfold in front of the Anthropocene.

The past is assimilated, or appropriated, into the present, which in turn opens up to proposed worlds. This is why Ricoeur says, “I shall say: to interpret is to explicate the type of being-in-the-world unfolded *in front of* the text.” Ricoeur further explains:

Above all, the vis-à-vis of appropriation is what Gadamer calls the “matter of the text” and what I call here “the world of the work.” Ultimately, what I appropriated is a proposed world. The latter is not *behind* the text, as a hidden intention would be, but *in front of* it, as that which the work unfolds, discovers, reveals. Henceforth, to understand is *to understand oneself in front of the text*. It is not a question of imposing upon the text our finite capacity for understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self, which would be the proposed existence corresponding in the most suitable way to the world proposed. So understanding [interpretation]

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<sup>15</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 57.

<sup>16</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 398.

is quite different from a constitution of which the subject would possess the key. In this respect, it would more correct to say that the *self* is constituted by the “matter” of the text.<sup>17</sup>

This last part also speaks to something found in both Gadamer and Ricoeur: all interpretation entails self-interpretation. So to look at the present world of the Anthropocene and to propose a world that would unfold in front of it, we are also saying something about ourselves. Ultimately, a hermeneutical adaptation to the present in which we belong is also a “where do we go from here?” orientation.

In light of the foregoing, if we are to address the question of the Anthropocene, we must ask not only what it means in the present but where we are to go from here. When we look at the condition of the planet now (and understand what produced the contemporary situation), we must ask what we want that condition to be tomorrow. Ricoeur observes that “the expectation of the future is inscribed in the present; it is the *future-become-present*, turned toward the not yet.”<sup>18</sup> Without an idea or a vision of what tomorrow is to look like or could look like, taking action to call that potential future forth is aimless. In one sense, it can be said that the future is not yet “real” since it does not yet exist. Any ideas of the future have only the status of fiction. Employing the thought of Ricoeur, we propose imagination as the hermeneutical mediator between the “real” of the present and the “fiction” of the future. As Ricoeur demonstrated in his work, there is no fiction that can be imagined without reference to the real. Therefore, it is in imagination (the image) that we can project potential futures of a world in which we wish to live and, we argue, imagination is the condition of action that will produce what the real will become.

Ricoeur places his theory of the imagination under what he refers to the *poetics of the will*. Some might dismiss the idea of a poetics on the claim that we are dealing with profoundly serious and *real* issues in the Anthropocene and do not have time for poetics. Ricoeur thinks otherwise. He asserts that “the best test of its claim to universality lay in determining its capacity for extension to the sphere of practice.”<sup>19</sup> If the fiction of imagination can lay claim to universality, it will demonstrate such by its capacity to be put into practice. Ricoeur then rehearses several obstacles that arise from the imagination in philosophy that would set it at odds from the real.

The image (the stuff of imagination) is looked at in two different ways we will explain here. In a Humean sense, an image is the product of a sense experience, a

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<sup>17</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 87–88. Italics original.

<sup>18</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 218. Italics original.

<sup>19</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 168.

perception, and is thought of in a weakened form; what Hume referred to as a decay of sense, and what Ricoeur calls a “trace” or “weakened presence.” For example, if you take a trip to the beach your senses take in the smell of the brine and salt water, the warmth of the climate, and the sound of the waves. When you return from your trip, your mind can refer to these sensations to where you can recall them, yet it is still not the same as the actual sense experience. The perception in the mind, the image, is a weakened presence. Further still, in a Sartrean sense, the image is otherwise than presence. The presence of the image is the absence of the real. This would seem to apply to the idea of the use of imagination concerning things yet to be. Whatever we imagine the future to be, it is still the absence of any reality it represents.

Ricoeur proposes another way to consider the imagination: the critical consciousness. On one end of this axis, we have “zero critical consciousness,” whereby the image is mistaken for the real. This, Ricoeur says, is the realm of lies and errors, where what we imagine to be true is not. However, the further one moves down the axis toward critical consciousness, “imagination is the very instrument of the critique of the real.”<sup>20</sup> To distinguish between what is real and what is imagination is to permit imagination to assert what might be or even ought to be in opposition to the real as it is at present. The imaginative critical consciousness of the Anthropocene taken this way would be to understand the very real situation we are faced with in the Anthropocene and to critique it by imagining it otherwise. Further still, we argue that imagination that is aware of its critical consciousness can also critique competing fictions.

Referring back to *The Unconstructable Earth*, Neyrat outlines the geo-constructivist and geo-engineering imagination of the future where it does not seem to matter if humanity is a major geological force.<sup>21</sup> Human activity causes climate change? No problem! We can simply engineer the climate and fix any problems we do not anticipate from our actions. The geo-constructivist future is no less fiction than one that imagines a world where such action is necessary to fix what previous actions have done, especially as the former fiction creates a cycle of repetition. The critical-hermeneutic imagination would offer a fiction that breaks the cycle of planetary destruction.

Ricoeur’s hermeneutical imagination reverses the direction of the image. Instead of looking at the image as an “appendix” to or a “shadow” of perception, where the perception is primary and then is weakened into an image, Ricoeur sets forth

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<sup>20</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 171.

<sup>21</sup> Neyrat, *The Unconstructable Earth*.

the language of metaphor, whereby we begin in the imagination in order to bring the image into sense perception—i.e., material reality. The process, rather than deriving an image from a perception, is to derive it from language and then, by inference, to ultimately derive the perception (material reality) from the image. This suggests, clearly, that imagining a world that would unfold in front of the Anthropocene begins in discourse.

What we have just described is what Ricoeur calls the “semantic innovation” or a “semantic theory of imagination.” The question is how a theory of imagination rooted in language and discourse can get outside of itself toward action. How can imagination, expressed by language and metaphor, become reality? How does it create a new world? Before proceeding along these lines, let us interject that the future is coming, and the world-to-be will be the world-that-is as the future becomes the present. So the real question is, who will conceive of this world and what will they conceive? But, inevitably, it will come. What follows the Anthropocene or what the Anthropocene will evolve into will come to pass whatever it may be. Of course, there are issues of political and economic power and who wields it that has much to do with what is to come. Regardless, what is to come will first be an idea, an image.

On first glance, Ricoeur notes, “language is concerned only with itself and so lacks reference.”<sup>22</sup> What Ricoeur means by reference is whether language posits something outside itself. Can the poetic-linguistic utterance of the image have reference? That is, can it posit something outside itself? On one hand, fiction is directed, Ricoeur says, nowhere (in terms of material reality), “but because it designates the nonplace in relation to all reality, it can indirectly sight this reality, following what I should like to call a new ‘reference-effect’. . . . This new reference-effect is nothing but the power of fiction to *redescribe reality*.”<sup>23</sup>

Ricoeur at this point turns to non-poetic discourses that underscore the power of fiction to redescribe reality—scientific discourse. In scientific discourse, models are used to imagine new potential realities. Ricoeur draws a comparison between scientific models and fictions. He writes: “The trait common to models and to fictions is their *heuristic force*, that is to say, their capacity to open and unfold new dimensions of reality by means of our suspension of belief in an earlier description.”<sup>24</sup> What Ricoeur does not point out in this passage is that even models have no function or meaning outside of imagination. Who works with models? Human beings. Whatever new dimensions of reality a model has the power to suggest or unveil, it is still going to be interpreted.

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<sup>22</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 174.

<sup>23</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 175. Italics original.

<sup>24</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 175. Italics original.

It is still going to have an associative meaning. It is still going to be imagined in its application according to sets of prejudices (in Gadamer's use of the term). As in anything that can be a subject of hermeneutics (which is pretty much everything), there are going to be levels of meaning to unfold and which will, as Richard Kearney explains, require adjudication.<sup>25</sup> There are no uninterpreted models.

But how do we adjudicate? How do we make the move from imagination to action? Ricoeur offers the following:

The first transition from the theoretical to the practical is within our reach to the extent that what certain fictions redescribe is, precisely, human action itself. Or, to say the same thing the other way around, the first way human beings attempt to understand and to master the "manifold" of the practical field is to give themselves a fictive representation of it.<sup>26</sup>

The move from imagination to action, Ricoeur seems to be suggesting, is to imagine how we will do it! Specifically, he goes on to discuss the power of narrative. To tell a story, to create a narrative, redescribes action and then joined to *mimesis* (imitation), maps out a course of action. Ricoeur says that the one who constructs a narrative "produces the same reference-effect of the poet" who "imitates reality by reinventing it mythically. Or to employ the vocabulary of models. . . one could say that narrative is a procedure of redescription, in which the heuristic function proceeds from the narrative structure and redescription has action itself as its referent."<sup>27</sup>

Ricoeur insists that action is predicated on imagination. Imagination projects itself onto the field of action. "It is imagination that provides the milieu, the luminous clearing in which we can compare and evaluate motives as diverse as desires and ethical obligations, themselves as disparate as professional rules, social customs, or intensely personal values."<sup>28</sup> Imagination is presented as a mediating force between these diversities. It is the place where all the different variables that arise from multiple interpretations can be tested. From imagination arises the discourse that will produce actions aimed at a projected world in which we wish to dwell.

The Anthropocene is no doubt a discourse that attempts to describe the current state of the human condition in relation to the geologic condition of the earth. As a discourse, the Anthropocene is hermeneutical. That is to say, our encounter with

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<sup>25</sup> See Richard M. Kearney, "What Is Diacritical Hermeneutics?" *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* 2011, Article 2 (2011): 1–14, doi: <https://doi.org/10.11575/jah.v0i0.53187>.

<sup>26</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 176.

<sup>27</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 177.

<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 177.

the condition of the planet seeks to make sense of it, to understand it, and to uncover meaning. Furthermore, the discourse of the Anthropocene calls for determinations of human action in plotting a map for the future. Ricoeur's hermeneutics of imagination and human action accurately describes what takes place among interlocutors of the Anthropocene. The fundamental question of the Anthropocene is what we must do now, because what we do now, or do not do now, will determine where the Anthropocene will lead us. Action is the fruit of imagination. We must, therefore, imagine both how and in what sort of world we wish to dwell.

Of course, what we imagine and how we act on it is a collective effort. Here, Ricoeur's definition of what he calls the "ethical intention" is instructive. Ricoeur defines the ethical intention as "*aiming at the 'good life' with and for others, in just institutions.*"<sup>29</sup> Yes, we aim at a life that is good, but not as isolated, autonomous individuals. First, we recognize that we must aim at the good life with one another. One might say that we have been cast into the existential situation of sharing this planetary space with one another. As I seek the good life for me, I am also seeking it with *you*. I am not merely seeking the good life *with you* in the sense of merely being alongside you, however. I am also seeking the good life for you;<sup>30</sup> to say *self*, Ricoeur says, is never just to say *myself* (which is the whole point of his work *Oneself as Another*). I must, in solicitude, recognize each Other's *nonsubstitutibility* and *irreplaceability*, anchored in my place and placing "myself in the place of the other in imagination and sympathy."<sup>31</sup> Finally, the good life that we seek with and for each other must be embodied in "just institutions." This speaks to the political and collective nature of the pursuit of the good life. Attainment of the good life cannot effectively be realized outside of social institutions that are just.

In the context of the Anthropocene, there must be a recognition that the good life we seek together with and for each other is necessarily joined to the health of the planet. There are two reciprocal ways to understand this. As embodied and emplaced beings, our ethical solicitude for one another must take into account the place wherein we are embodied. Our survival and our flourishing happen somewhere—i.e., the planet—so seeking the good life with and for each other in just institutions must

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<sup>29</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 172. Italics original.

<sup>30</sup> Seeking the good life *with* others indicates the good life is not a matter of individualistic good but that the good is reciprocal and communal. Seeking the good life *for* others is the logical consequence of this reciprocal and communal character of the ethical intention. If I am seeking the good life for me, I recognize that I must also seek it with you, and if I am seeking it with you, then I am obliged to seek it for you. There is no good life for me that is not a good life with you and for you.

<sup>31</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 180, 193.



account for this somewhere in our imagination and action. But can we also consider the planet itself in our solicitude? Can nonsubstitutibility and irreplaceability be imputed to the planet in Ricoeur's framework? How can we make Ricoeur's ethical intention become "seeking the good life with and for both human and nonhuman others in environmentally just institutions"?<sup>32</sup> Our next section will explore how this might be imagined.<sup>33</sup>

### **Thinking with and beyond Gadamer: Solidarity and Friendship beyond the *Anthropos***

In the previous sections, we focused on the hermeneutical dimensions of the discourse of the Anthropocene and then drew upon Ricoeur's work on imagination as a way to conceive a new course of action. In this section, we turn to Gadamer in order to explore how his post-*Truth and Method* reflections on solidarity and friendship might be fruitfully deployed in the service of environmental hermeneutics. In particular, we want to consider how we might think about our solidaristic bonds with and obligations to the environment and natural others beyond the *anthropos*. In his 1999 essay, "Friendship and Solidarity," Gadamer focuses primarily on natural and avowed solidarities; however, he also speaks of genuine, real, and authentic solidarity.<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, he is not consistent with his terminology. For example, at times he

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<sup>32</sup> For a more indepth analysis of Ricoeur's ethical intention in relationship to the environment, see Nathan M. Bell, "Environmental Hermeneutics with and for Others: Ricoeur's Ethics and the Ecological Self," in *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics*, ed. Forrest Clingerman, Brian Treanor, Martin Drenthen, and David Utsler (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 141–59.

<sup>33</sup> The foregoing section of our essay is primarily intended to demonstrate the hermeneutical task of imagining worlds that might unfold in front of the Anthropocene, not to examine what those might be. We would be remiss not to mention a term coined by Glenn A. Albrecht in 2011 that does imagine a world beyond the current epoch. Albrecht calls us to exit the Anthropocene and to enter the "Symbiocene." See Glen A. Albrecht, "Exiting the Anthropocene and Entering the Symbiocene," *Psychoterratica* (blog), 17 December 2015, <https://glennaalbrecht.wordpress.com/2015/12/17/exiting-the-anthropocene-and-entering-the-symbiocene/>. "Symbiocene" also can be construed as a term that joins the preceding section with the one that follows on Gadamer on friendship and solidarity. In this vein, see the works of Richard Louv, especially *Our Wild Calling: How Connecting with Animals Can Transform our Lives—and Save Theirs* (Chapel Hill, NC: Alonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2019) in which he also gives some treatment to the concept of the Symbiocene.

<sup>34</sup> See, especially, Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Friendship and Solidarity," *Research in Phenomenology* 39 (2009): 3–12 ["Freundschaft und Solidarität [1999]," in *Hermeneutische Entwürfe: Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 56].

seems to conflate genuine solidarity with natural solidarity. Other times, he implies that genuine or real [*echte*] solidarity is what results from the respective recognition and achievement of natural and avowed solidarities. We attempt to disambiguate the terms as much as possible; consequently, we use genuine, real, and authentic solidarity as synonyms and in the conjunctive sense described above.

With the above caveats in mind, we begin with the following questions: What does Gadamer mean by natural and avowed solidarity, and how does each relate to one another? Natural solidarity describes our social ontology as socially and relationally interdependent beings; it is what we *are* whether we recognize it or not. For instance, in his 1994 essay, “From Word to Concept,” he asserts that “human [natural] solidarity must be the basic presupposition under which we can work together to develop, even if only slowly, a set of common convictions [*gemeinsame Überzeugungen*]” in order to address global problems such as the environmental crisis.<sup>35</sup> Natural or genuine solidarity speaks of our fundamental relational belonging to one another; it is a basic, shared ontological “background” that we must assume so that we can work toward the achievement of common convictions that will then give rise to collective actions. Natural solidarity, thus, affirms our relational dependence and interdependence and thus our obligations and duties to one another and rejects the view of humans as atomistic individuals.

Natural solidarity serves as the condition for the possibility of avowed solidarity. We must, according to Gadamer, “ask ourselves what solidarity requires of us and what a so-called ‘avowed’ solidarity [*erklärte Solidarität*] should be.”<sup>36</sup> Avowed solidarity involves both a recognition of our natural solidaristic bonds and a commitment to act in order to strengthen, protect, and respect those bonds. As Gadamer explains, “[w]e must recognize how in life our groupings of association lead to solidarity and, in the process, to obligations to one another.”<sup>37</sup> Such associations include both those into which we are born, such as one’s family and homeland, and those that we choose, such as religious, cultural, or political associations. Family and homeland ties constitute natural solidarities, yet they do not necessitate that “one first avow one’s solidarity.”<sup>38</sup> By “natural” Gadamer has in mind neither a strict biological

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<sup>35</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “From Word to Concept: The Task of Hermeneutics as Philosophy,” in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, ed. by Richard E. Palmer (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 119.

<sup>36</sup> Gadamer, “Friendship and Solidarity,” 3, 4 [“Freundschaft und Solidarität,” 56, 57].

<sup>37</sup> Gadamer, “Friendship and Solidarity,” 5 [“Freundschaft und Solidarität,” 57].

<sup>38</sup> Gadamer, “Friendship and Solidarity,” 7 [“Freundschaft und Solidarität,” 60]. The full German text reads: “Aber daß Heimat und Herkunft eine Bindung darstellt, eine Art Gemeinsamkeit, eine Art Solidarität echter Art ist, da braucht es das nicht erst, daß man sich solidarisch erklärt.”

paradigm, nor that one's association with one's homeland forever and always determines one's identity. An adopted child, for example, is shaped by and implicated in natural solidaristic family ties just as much as a biological child, and both are free to dissociate themselves from their familial or homeland ties; however, such ties, given the formative roles that they typically involve, nonetheless impact individuals even when they are rejected.

Natural solidarity must be realized or actualized through actions that arise from and are constitutive of a solidarity of avowal. Opportunities to realize and strengthen our solidaristic ties often surface in periods of crises. To illustrate, Gadamer refers to a situation that he experienced during the war. As he explains, "the bombing in the war created solidarity. Suddenly your neighbors, those who in the circumstances of the city were unknown strangers, were awoken to life. So need works, and in particular a need felt by all so that undreamed of possibilities of feelings of solidarity and acts of solidarity come about."<sup>39</sup> Here the crisis that discloses our natural solidarity also gives rise to the enactment of an avowed solidarity. Such communal crises manifest an event-like quality that can serve as the occasion for bringing people together and even radically transforming social relationships. In Gadamer's example, those who were strangers and unknown to each other, in a time of communal crisis, began to work together for a common set of objectives. Crises such as war, pandemics, and our current ecological calamity, when recognized and properly attended to, disclose what was there already—namely, our interdependence, belongingness, and responsibility to one another. When we, as social and ethical beings, are awakened to our natural solidaristic ties, we are called to act both for ourselves and our own integrity as well as for the sake of and in concert with others. Events of communal crisis have the potential to disclose the "I" that is a "we"; they create the possibility for the achievement of avowed solidarities so that a community awakened to their natural solidaristic ties might work toward common beliefs, goals, or objectives. Avowed solidarity, then, must issue forth in some kind of action for and with others for the sake of a shared goal.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Gadamer, "Friendship and Solidarity," 10 ["Freundschaft und Solidarität," 63].

<sup>40</sup> In order to elucidate various connotations of the word, "solidarity," Gadamer discusses its etymology. The term "solidarity" is derived the Latin word *solidum*, meaning "whole," as in the expression "*in solidum*," that is, "for the whole." He then traces the Latin term to the German expression "*der Sold*" (payment), which connotes genuineness rather than being a counterfeit as well as reliability and a firm commitment to fulfill what one has pledged. The term "solidarity" carries within it these various meanings of reliability, inseparability, genuineness, and commitment to the well-being of others (Gadamer, "Friendship and Solidarity," 11 ["Freundschaft und Solidarität," 63]).

Gadamer acknowledges that solidarities involve benefits and losses as well as sacrifices or freely chosen acts of self-renunciation for the sake of others. With the latter in view, he writes “[w]hen one declares oneself as in solidarity, whether freely or under duress, in every case there lies a renunciation of one’s own interests and preferences.”<sup>41</sup> The self-renunciation and sacrifice of authentic solidarity should be distinguished from that of inauthentic and forced solidarity that compels self-renunciation to the detriment of both the individual and the community. However, the dividing lines are not so easily drawn in actual concrete situations. There may be situations in which the well-being or survival of a community will require laws that compel individuals to act in certain ways. For example, as our current crisis with COVID-19 has made clear, laws may be required that limit large gatherings, mandate wearing facemasks in public settings, and institute sheltering in place for specified periods of time. Such measures are taken, many would argue, for the common good and for the sake not only of one’s own health, but also for the sake of others, especially the elderly, immunocompromised, healthcare workers, and those who do not have the option to work from home. Of course, as the present situation in the United States testifies, there are significant differences among government leaders and citizens as to how we ought to respond individually and collectively to the pandemic.<sup>42</sup> Gadamer recognizes the ambiguities and tensions of solidaristic ties and comments on how forced political solidarities can be and have been harmful. For example, he writes: “One thinks perhaps of the discipline of the party that is difficult to keep in some instances of political life, such as if one is of a completely different opinion from the majority of one’s party.”<sup>43</sup> Even so, and again with the pandemic in mind, our shared physical spaces and mutual, physical vulnerability to spread or be infected by the virus discloses solidaristic ties that in “normal times” often remain hidden. To ignore these shared realities is, in the present situation, literally a matter of life and death.

As we have seen, avowed solidarities are frequently occasioned when a significant event—here a communal crisis—discloses our natural solidaristic bonds and awakens us to our interdependence and ethical obligations to others. The recognition and enactment of our solidaristic bonds share certain structural similarities with Gadamer’s understanding of the festival in his discussion of our experience of art. In contrast with our mundane work lives, in which we experience one another as

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<sup>41</sup> Gadamer, “Friendship and Solidarity,” 11 [“Freundschaft und Solidarität,” 63–64].

<sup>42</sup> See Cynthia R. Nielsen and David Liakos, “Dialogical Breakdown and Covid-19: Solidarity and Disagreement in a Shared World,” *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* 2020, Article 11 (2020): 1–12, doi: <https://doi.org/10.11575/jah.vi0.71551>.

<sup>43</sup> Gadamer, “Friendship and Solidarity,” 11 [“Freundschaft und Solidarität,” 64].

separate individuals performing tasks related to our specific function or role in an organization or institution, in a festive celebration we experience ourselves as united.<sup>44</sup> The festival as a public, intersubjective event, gathers us together and discloses the reality of our natural solidarity.

Somewhat like the mysterious disclosive-gathering power of a festival-event, our solidaristic ties likewise have an enigmatic quality about them that resists precise delineation into fixed conceptual categories. Like art, solidarities involve our emotions, bodily presence, materiality, and that which exceeds conceptual capture. For solidarity to be authentic rather than compelled, individuals must choose to enact it. “It is necessary to make clear that real solidarity [*echte Solidarität*] depends on the individuals who have avowed themselves to it and stood up for it.”<sup>45</sup> Again, Gadamer’s account here of avowed solidarity exhibits similarities with his description of the dynamic, performative, and participatory ontology of artworks. That is, just as the artwork requires active participatory engagement for its presentation and enactment, so too, avowed solidarity that is authentic requires active, intentional engagement. Consequently, in order to remain vibrant, solidarities must be continually enacted and cultivated anew. But if this is the case, then just as artworks are in some significant sense co-created when performed, so too are solidarities continually co-created anew over time.

Here we turn to briefly discuss aspects of Gadamer’s account of friendship and how one might think of our relationships not only with humans but with natural and earth others as bonds of solidarity and perhaps even something like friendship. Following Aristotle, Gadamer highlights different types of friendships from those of pleasure, to those of use, and then finally a friendship of *arête* or virtue, which he describes as a “true” (*wahre*), “complete” (*vollkommene*), and “actual friendship” (*wirkliche Freundschaft*).<sup>46</sup> A true friendship is characterized by an at-homeness not found in other types of friendship and associations. In addition, a true or complete friendship involves a mutual embrace of the otherness of the other and a giving “to one another our being as Other.”<sup>47</sup> Friends of the highest sort will, no doubt, have similar interests and pursuits. In this sense, “one recognizes oneself in others and the other recognizes

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<sup>44</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 40 [“Die Aktualität des Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 8: *Ästhetik und Poetik I: Kunst als Aussage* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 130].

<sup>45</sup> Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 11 [“Die Aktualität des Schönen,” 64].

<sup>46</sup> Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 7 [“Die Aktualität des Schönen,” 60].

<sup>47</sup> Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 9 [“Die Aktualität des Schönen,” 62].

itself in us.”<sup>48</sup> Yet, Gadamer underscores that such friends are not simply mirror images of one another. Neither solidarity nor friendship is based on unanimity and the erasure of all difference. True friends recognize that their flourishing requires an Other, who both pursues a life of excellence and is willing to offer criticism when one falls short. Given their knowledge—albeit limited and imperfect—of their own shortcomings, they recognize that they will repeatedly fail themselves and their friend: “And so the true, deep meaning of such self-knowledge is precisely that one never [*fully*] recognizes the biases of one’s own self-love even when one believes oneself to be a correct friend of the Other.”<sup>49</sup> Gadamer acknowledges that the “at-homeness” characteristic of true friendship is imperfect and always in process of being worked out with others. Toward the end of his essay, he describes avowed solidarity as “a promise of a payment of friendship [*eine Zusage im Rate der Freundschaft*], which is limited, like everything, as it calls on the complete dedication of our good will.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, avowed solidarity “as a promise of a payment of friendship” demands a commitment to and for others that presupposes and is maintained by an ongoing self-questioning and openness to learn from and be challenged by others. Those familiar with Gadamer’s work know that self-questioning and openness are central to his account of philosophical hermeneutics and any Gadamerian-inspired hermeneutical ethic.

In light of this emphasis on self-questioning and openness to the other, we pose the following questions: What are earth and natural others saying to humans in this moment of the Anthropocene? Given our collective actions that have resulted in such harm to the natural world, do we not have an obligation to listen to what it is saying and respond accordingly? Can we fruitfully apply Gadamer’s insights on friendship and solidarity to earth and natural others? While recognizing that friendship among humans can only be applied analogously with friendship among earth and natural others, we, nonetheless, want to begin to imagine possible ways of thinking about friendship that extends beyond the *anthropos*. Solidaristic ties with earth and natural others are less controversial and more easily envisaged. Our very existence depends upon having access, for example, to clean air and water. As studies and reporting on factory-farming reveal, our collective choices regarding the treatment of animals raised for food show that “efficiency” and monetary profit as the primary guides for action harm not only the animals but likewise the environment and

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<sup>48</sup> Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 9 [“Die Aktualität des Schönen,” 62].

<sup>49</sup> Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 9 [“Die Aktualität des Schönen,” 62]. We have slightly altered David Vessey’s translation by inserting the word “*fully*” to reflect the German text.

<sup>50</sup> Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 12 [“Die Aktualität des Schönen,” 64].

humans.<sup>51</sup> We, undoubtedly, depend on and live in relations of interdependence with the natural world and nonhuman animals. However, our solidaristic ties have been denied through our exploitative practices and relationships with earth and natural others, which see both as mere resources for us to use and manipulate as we please. Rather than seeing ourselves as masters of the earth in relations of domination, we must recognize our dependence and interdependence on one another. Such recognition will require a new respect for and appreciation of the alterity of ecosystems, nonhuman animals, forests, mountain ranges, and natural water sources. We must learn to dwell in harmony with the natural order, engaging it as a work of art whose beauty and singularity, when lingered with, can facilitate a transformation in how we see and relate to natural others. In light of language's role in shaping how we see and live in the world, we encourage the adoption and employment of new metaphors such as "living or dwelling in harmony" with the natural world or seeing ourselves as "cultivators" rather than "masters" of the earth.

What about friendship? Is there a sense in which we can speak of our friendship with the earth and natural others? Riffing on Gadamer's description of avowed solidarity as "a promise of a payment of friendship," perhaps a comportment toward earth and natural others as a kind of friendship would prove both mutually beneficial and world-altering for humans, other animals, and the earth.<sup>52</sup> A friendship of this sort would approach the environment and other animals as genuine others worthy of respect. It would seek to listen and respond to what the earth and nonhuman animals are saying to us in light of our present harmful, collective actions. Lastly, it would seek to change those actions and ways of being that disrespect, destroy, and have no regard for the integrity and intrinsic value of ecosystems, nonhuman animals, forests, oceans, nature preserves, and myriad natural others whose beauty and being impact and shape our own being—and, moreover, whose being makes our being possible and sustains it.

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<sup>51</sup> See Andrew Chignell, Terrence Cuneo, and Matthew C. Halteman, eds., *Philosophy Comes to Dinner: Arguments about the Ethics of Eating* (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>52</sup> Edward O. Wilson's "biophilia hypothesis" would lend further credence to an understanding of friendship and solidarity in Gadamer applying to our relationship with the more-than-human world. See *Biophilia: The Human Bond with Other Species* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

## Conclusion

All human thought on historical or geological epochs is interpretation. The task of hermeneutics, as Gadamer wrote, “is not to develop a procedure of understanding, but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place.”<sup>53</sup> In light of the contemporary environmental crises we face, hermeneutics has a formidable task as well as a pressing responsibility to clarify those conditions in which environmental understanding occurs. Hermeneutics offers perspectives for moving forward so that we might imagine and create a more sustainable and ecologically harmonious world. We have proposed Ricoeur’s work on imagination and action and Gadamer’s work on friendship and solidarity as one way of gesturing toward a post-Anthropocene existence that encompasses the interests and well-being of human and nonhuman others, being with and for all others in just institutions.

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<sup>53</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 295.



## At the Cost of Solidarity—Or, Why Social Justice Needs Hermeneutics

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My concern in this essay is with a recent development in social justice activism which I believe to be counterproductive to attaining the goals of social justice itself. Some forms of social justice activism appear to draw from a particular version of standpoint theory, which asserts that those who are marginalized in society have privileged knowledge about the nature of social reality. This knowledge is grounded in the “lived experience” of oppression—only those who have experienced oppression firsthand “know what it’s like.” The experience of social reality from a marginalized position in society therefore reveals something true about the social world which is inaccessible to “dominantly situated” knowers who do not know what it is like to experience such oppression.

I will argue that this line of thinking has a tendency towards (but, importantly, does not necessarily entail) what I will call *epistemic isolationism*.<sup>2</sup> Epistemic isolationism is the idea that only members of marginalized groups can understand “what it’s like” to be a member of that group and therefore, those members have privileged access to certain kinds of knowledge that outsiders—especially those who are dominantly situated—are ill-equipped to understand, much less critique. I believe epistemic

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<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to the editors of *Analecta Hermeneutica* and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on this essay.

<sup>2</sup> I employ this term as an homage to Mary Midgley, who coined the term “moral isolationism” (“Trying Out One’s New Sword,” in *Heart and Mind: The Varieties of Moral Experiences*, rev. ed. [London: Routledge, 2003], 80–87).

isolationism rests, not simply on the claim that some in our society have privileged knowledge because of their lived experience, but also on the claim that the knowledge embedded in the lived experience of oppression is *not communicable* to those who do not have direct experience of it. It is often thought that because privileged knowledge of social reality comes from lived experience, it must be incommunicable; this is because lived experience itself is incommunicable.<sup>3</sup> I call this the *incommunicability thesis*. If the incommunicability thesis is true, then those who have such lived experiences have not only epistemic privilege, but also epistemic *authority* over members of other groups insofar as those experiences are concerned. That is, if lived experience is both privileged and incommunicable, then those who do not have such experiences must simply accept claims about the social world from members of marginalized communities as authoritative.

While I am deeply sympathetic to the goals of social justice—including the recognition of the reality of different lived experiences—I believe that epistemic isolationism is inimical to the goals of social justice. Arguing for epistemic isolationism may well be a way to grant marginalized communities a kind of epistemic authority. But this epistemic authority is purchased at the cost of meaningful solidarity, which must rest on mutual recognition and respect. Indeed, maintaining that lived experience is incommunicable undermines the impetus for members of other groups to even try to understand the experiences of members of marginalized communities. As such, it risks reinforcing current social dynamics rather than transforming them. Simultaneously, it runs the risk of encouraging members of marginalized communities to see those who are dominantly situated as being incapable of understanding—in extreme cases, of being epistemically or morally inferior. When the incommunicability thesis is accepted and epistemic isolationism is embraced, I worry it will become increasingly acceptable to pursue political goods through expressions of power and dominance by some groups over others. I believe this to be fundamentally at odds with what I take to be the goals of social justice—namely, goods like human emancipation, dignity, mutual recognition, and respect. In short, insofar as standpoint theory encourages people, especially activists, to accept the incommunicability thesis, it feeds into epistemic isolationism and becomes harmful to the very causes of social justice that it is invoked to promote. Therefore, standpoint theorists should explicitly reject the incommunicability thesis and distance themselves from epistemic isolationism.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Francis Fukuyama remarks that lived experience is thought to be inaccessible to others (*Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018], 109).

Yet, at the same time, it is plausible that members of various communities have privileged insights into the nature of social reality. Assuming this is true, then how can we recognize this fact without falling into the trap of epistemic isolationism? Imitating Paul Ricoeur's method of seeking out a middle path, I will try to chart a path between the extremes of saying everyone has access to the same body of knowledge, on the one hand, and saying that the knowledge which some have privileged access to can never be shared, on the other. That is, I accept that some individuals, because of their lived experience, have unique insights into the nature of social reality. But I will also argue that the incommunicability thesis (upon which epistemic isolationism rests) is false.

The trick, of course, is to show how such communication is possible while not erasing the "otherness," the difference, of the lived experience of marginalized communities. Following Hans-Georg Gadamer, I suggest that philosophical hermeneutics lives in the "in-between"—in the tension between recognition of common humanity and the recognition of differences in lived experience. In short, I will argue that while knowledge grounded in lived experience may be privileged in the sense that some have initial access to it while others do not, it does not follow that this knowledge is incommunicable, because lived experience *itself* is communicable. Consequently, the tension between the recognition of shared universal humanity and of different lived experiences can be reconciled in the communication of contingent human experiences. In this way, hermeneutics can accommodate the main thrust of standpoint theory while simultaneously providing the grounds for a robust form of solidarity built on mutual recognition and mutual respect. This solidarity can then serve as a solid foundation for social justice advocacy.

In what follows, I will try to identify what precisely is behind the idea that those who are not a member of a relevant group cannot understand "what it's like" to be a member of that group. I will focus on one contemporary form of standpoint theory—feminist standpoint epistemology—as one important source of the idea that marginalized people have privileged knowledge of the world because of their "lived experience." I focus on feminist standpoint epistemology as opposed to other standpoint theories since feminist standpoint epistemology is especially well-developed as an explicitly *epistemological* theory and my concern is with privileged (and potentially incommunicable) knowledge claims. Second, I will try to tease out a set of features characteristic of lived experience as it was originally developed by Wilhelm Dilthey and suggest that, contrary to popular parlance, there is nothing in the notion of lived experience itself that entails it is necessarily incommunicable. On the contrary, Dilthey's focus on lived experience came from his conviction that lived experience

could be transmuted into a communicable public form through art, especially literature. Third, and finally, I will argue that the philosophical hermeneutics of Dilthey, Gadamer, and Ricoeur show us how lived experience can be communicated to others. If this argument is right, then the incommunicability thesis is false and epistemic isolationism is undermined. At the same time, in showing how lived experience can be communicated, philosophical hermeneutics points to a robust form of solidarity which is founded upon mutual recognition and respect, a better foundation for social justice activism than authority.

### Standpoint Epistemology and Epistemic Isolationism

So, what is feminist standpoint epistemology? In a recent essay, Briana Toole suggests “[f]eminist standpoint epistemologies are comprised of three core theses: situated knowledge, epistemic privilege, and achievement.”<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Kukla expresses the “situated knowledge” and “epistemic privilege” theses when she writes that standpoint epistemologies argue “that some inquirers have contingent properties that give them access to kinds of knowledge that are not available to others.”<sup>5</sup> More specifically, many versions of standpoint epistemology maintain that these properties include “social positions of marginalization and structural disadvantage” and that they yield not only knowledge but “*better, more objective* knowledge than others have.”<sup>6</sup> The first two theses are closely linked with the third—the achievement thesis. Indeed, those who would characterize contemporary standpoint epistemology as a simple matter of having a perspective from a particular social location misunderstand standpoint epistemology.<sup>7</sup> A standpoint cannot be reduced to a simple perspective. For one thing, a perspective is something that one might have simply by virtue of being a member of a group or having a particular identity. So, we might say that a woman occupies a certain perspective simply by virtue of being a woman. By contrast, a standpoint is something that one *does* or *achieves*; it is not granted solely by having a certain identity.<sup>8</sup> One must take up a certain way of attending to the world and understanding one’s life

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<sup>4</sup> Briana Toole, “From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression,” *Hyphatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 34, no. 4 (2019): 599.

<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Kukla, “Objectivity and Perspective in Empirical Knowledge,” *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* 3, nos. 1–2 (2006): 81.

<sup>6</sup> Kukla, “Objectivity and Perspective in Empirical Knowledge,” 81, emphasis in original.

<sup>7</sup> Toole, “From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression,” 600.

<sup>8</sup> See Sandra Harding, *Whose Science/Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women’s Lives* (Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press, 1991), 127.

experiences. This “taking up” requires “consciousness-raising” or developing a “critical consciousness” or “oppositional consciousness”<sup>10</sup> or “the education which can only grow from struggle to change [social] relations.”<sup>11</sup> It is only by doing this kind of work that one can achieve a standpoint which allows for a position of epistemic privilege.

Toole suggests that feminist standpoint theory has gone through two major iterations: first, there were the earlier “materialist” manifestations of standpoint theory, and then there was a progressive shift to “social” manifestations, which increasingly have focused on the lived experience of marginalized people.<sup>12</sup> With this in mind, perhaps it is worth offering some brief highlights of the genealogy of standpoint epistemology leading to its contemporary form.

Sandra Harding tells us that feminist standpoint epistemology is “conventionally traced” to the master–slave dialectic in Hegel.<sup>13</sup> The idea that the dynamic between master and slave can be understood from the standpoint of each—yet better from the perspective of the slave’s activities—was then developed by Marx into the standpoint of the proletariat. In the 1970s, this dynamic was “transformed to explain how the structural relationship between women and men had consequences for the production of knowledge.”<sup>14</sup> According to Susan Heckman, Nancy C. M. Hartsock’s influential work of the early 1980s borrowed heavily from Marx, arguing that “it is women’s unique standpoint in society that provides the justification for the truth claims of feminism while also providing it with a method with which to analyze reality.”<sup>15</sup> For Hartsock, the feminist standpoint is related to the gendered material working conditions of society that allow for a privileged insight into the nature of

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<sup>9</sup> Toole, “From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression,” 600. On consciousness raising, see Johanna Oksala, “In Defense of Experience,” *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 29, no. 2 (2014): 398.

<sup>10</sup> Nancy C. M. Hartsock attributes the notion of “oppositional consciousness” to Chela Sandoval (“Comment on Hekman’s ‘Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited’: Truth or Justice?” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 22, no. 2 [1997]: 732).

<sup>11</sup> Nancy C. M. Hartsock, “The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism,” in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and the Philosophy of Science*, ed. Sandra G. Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Dordrecht, Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1983), 285.

<sup>12</sup> Toole, “From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression,” 601, 604.

<sup>13</sup> Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is ‘Strong Objectivity?’” *The Centennial Review* 36, no. 3 (1992): 442.

<sup>14</sup> Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology,” 442.

<sup>15</sup> Susan Hekman, “Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 22, no. 2 (1997): 341.

society itself. Reflecting the Marxist form of the “hermeneutics of suspicion,”<sup>16</sup> the feminist standpoint allows one “to go beneath the surface of appearances to reveal the real but concealed social relations.”<sup>17</sup> And, true to the achievement thesis, this insight “requires both theoretical and political activity.”<sup>18</sup>

In the late 1980s, sociologist Dorothy E. Smith argued that the male standpoint has been blind to certain important questions about women. For example, women’s role as caregivers was, historically, conceived by men as “natural,” and so whether such roles *were* natural or socially constructed was never considered.<sup>19</sup> For Smith, correcting this imbalance requires “foregrounding [the] actual lived experiences”<sup>20</sup> of women by starting from “where we are actually located, embodied, in the local historicity and particularities of our lived worlds.”<sup>21</sup>

By the early 1990s, Harding had brought standpoint theory explicitly into conversation with philosophy of science, arguing that the generation of knowledge is not standpoint neutral, but rather contingent upon the standpoint that the knower has. This position involves a suspicion of the objectivity of the sciences as traditionally conceived.<sup>22</sup> For Harding, knowledge is irreducibly situated—one cannot simply shed one’s perspective and take up a “God’s-eye view.” But standpoint epistemology does not rest with, say, reprising Kuhnian arguments about the theory-ladenness of experience. Rather, the argument is that historically disadvantaged groups, by virtue of their marginalized position in society, have unique access to truths about the world that would be hidden from those in dominant positions. One’s social situation serves as a starting point for what one can know or fail to know. But, far from throwing out objectivity, standpoint epistemologists like Harding recast it in a new way, arguing that rejecting aperspectivalism opens the door to a plausible form of perspectival objectivity.<sup>23</sup>

Feminist standpoint epistemology, like other forms of feminism, has developed in conversation with a number of internal criticisms. Important for our purposes here is the criticism that feminism was insufficiently attentive to the way that

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<sup>16</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 32–36.

<sup>17</sup> Hartsock, “The Feminist Standpoint,” 304.

<sup>18</sup> Hartsock, “The Feminist Standpoint,” 304.

<sup>19</sup> Dorothy E. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987).

<sup>20</sup> Hekman, “Truth and Method,” 347.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> See Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology.”

<sup>23</sup> Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology.” See also Kukla, “Objectivity and Perspective in Empirical Knowledge.”

lived experience is “discursively constituted” (i.e., shaped by the language and concepts that we bring to experience as a result of being raised in a certain culture). A powerful version of this poststructuralist criticism is made by Joan W. Scott in her 1991 essay, “The Evidence of Experience.”<sup>24</sup> For Scott, the reliance of earlier feminism on experience reflected an uncritical foundationalism. She claims that some formulations relied on “a prediscursive reality directly felt, seen, and known,” which functioned to grant “an indisputable authenticity to women’s experience.”<sup>25</sup> The unfortunate result, Scott argues, is that feminism has been blind to the fact that relying on women’s lived experience essentially reifies (i.e., treats as objective and real) and reinforces the identity categories (e.g., “woman”) that it sought to challenge, thus undermining its own ability to criticize the dominant order.

While recognizing the importance of Scott’s work, other feminists have pushed back. For example, Johanna Oksala has argued that Scott seems to think that if identities are socially constructed, then lived experiences are as well. Yet, to claim that experiences are reducible to discourse runs the risk of saying that various experiences of oppression did not even exist prior to the language to describe them. At the extreme, this might be taken to imply that marginalized people are simply fabricating their experiences of oppression. On the contrary, Oksala argues, while women’s experiences may be inflected or shaped by prevailing discourses, they are “never wholly derivative of or reducible to them.”<sup>26</sup> What is needed, according to Oksala, is a rehabilitation of experience without returning to pre-discursive phenomenological accounts of the embodied experience of females: “First-person accounts of experience are indispensable. . . for a politics of solidarity based on recognition and sympathy.”<sup>27</sup>

I want to suggest that some theorists have been incorporating both Scott’s poststructuralist criticism and the responses to it into standpoint epistemology, resulting in a new form of feminist standpoint epistemology. Importantly, following Oksala’s lead, this has meant an attempt to rehabilitate lived experience in new ways. Yet, while Oksala thinks we should listen to marginalized people “not because they are in possession of some authentic truth about reality revealed only through suffering or oppression, but simply because their perspective is different from ours,”<sup>28</sup> many contemporary standpoint epistemologists really do want to assert epistemic privilege—the viewpoint of marginalized people is not just different, but better.

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<sup>24</sup> Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 773–97.

<sup>25</sup> Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” 786–87.

<sup>26</sup> Oksala, “In Defense of Experience,” 396.

<sup>27</sup> Oksala, “In Defense of Experience,” 397.

<sup>28</sup> Oksala, “In Defense of Experience,” 401.

One way to rehabilitate lived experience in the wake of the poststructuralist criticism while still holding on to epistemic privilege has been to make use of Miranda Fricker's notion of *hermeneutic injustice*. Toole explains: "A hermeneutic injustice is one in which a marginalized knower's 'social experience remains obscure and confusing, even for them' because those experiences are excluded from collective understanding."<sup>29</sup> In other words, marginalized people have lived experiences of oppression, but they cannot articulate or even make adequate sense of their own experiences. This is because the epistemic tools they have acquired from culture for understanding social reality come from dominantly situated knowers. Since dominantly situated knowers have not experienced the relevant kinds of oppression, those experiences have never been properly conceptualized. Consequently, marginalized people lack the resources to understand their own experiences. In fact, some theorists have argued that the epistemic deficiency in culture may mean that in some cases marginalized people may not even recognize their experiences as oppressive.

The way to remedy this situation, Toole argues, is through the sharing of experiences within marginalized communities. This amounts to "consciousness-raising"—the bringing to collective consciousness of a shared experience. Once the experience is recognized within the community, it can be named. The proper naming or conceptualization of an experience can "[throw] into sharp relief an experience that had been somewhat vague" before.<sup>30</sup> The development or acquisition of these concepts might be regarded as a culminating achievement of developing an oppositional consciousness.

As I understand it, part of the point of feminist standpoint epistemology is to raise up those who have been marginalized by offsetting a lack of social or political privilege with epistemic privilege. Creating new epistemic tools as means of social change coincides with Audre Lorde's oft-quoted line that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."<sup>31</sup> The claim is that the epistemic tools of the dominant standpoint will invariably support those who are already dominant in power. Therefore, one needs new epistemic tools to facilitate human emancipation.

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<sup>29</sup> Toole, "From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression," 608. Toole is citing Miranda Fricker, "Epistemic Oppression and Epistemic Privilege," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 25 (1999): 208.

<sup>30</sup> Toole, "From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression," 605. Toole relates how learning the term "colorism" played this role in making sense of her own lived experience.

<sup>31</sup> See Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 110–13.



The result of this process of concept creation is that marginalized knowers have conceptual resources that dominantly situated knowers lack and therefore have a better understanding of reality than dominantly situated knowers. Toole acknowledges that communication of conceptual resources is theoretically possible, but worries there will still be a problem of “uptake.”<sup>32</sup> If dominantly situated knowers refuse the concepts, then they will simply not understand the experiences of marginalized people as marginalized people themselves do. The conceptual resources of dominantly situated knowers simply “will not make salient those features of the world that the marginalized knower’s conceptual resources attend to. As a result, the dominant knower can use this fact to preemptively dismiss the knowledge claims of a marginalized knower, as well as to dismiss the conceptual resources required to understand those knowledge claims.”<sup>33</sup>

It seems apparent to me that when this rejection happens, it would be the result of lacking the relevant lived experience, of experiencing the world as a marginalized person who has attained the relevant achievement does. Yet, it is reasonable to ask why dominantly situated knowers should adopt the conceptual resources of marginalized people without first understanding the need for them. As currently conceived, contemporary feminist standpoint epistemology implies that accepting the conceptual resources must precede seeing the world as a marginalized person would. But this puts dominantly situated knowers in the position of adoption of those conceptual resources and the resulting understanding of social reality simply on authority. As far as I can tell, the standpoint epistemologists’ position seems to rely on an unstated assumption: namely, that lived experience itself is incommunicable. After all, if lived experience were communicable, if dominantly situated knowers could experience the world *as* a marginalized person would without adopting conceptual resources, then they could make an informed judgment about whether new concepts were indeed necessary. As it is, contemporary standpoint epistemology appears to underwrite the incommunicability thesis and epistemic isolationism.

What is needed, I believe, is an account of how it is possible to share marginalized people’s lived experience along with the kind of consciousness that allows those experiences to stand out from the stream of lived experience as a meaningful unity—to see experiences *as* marginalized people who have the relevant consciousness see them. That would enable dominantly situated knowers to accept the conceptual resources of others based on recognition and understanding rather than

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<sup>32</sup> Toole, “From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression,” 606.

<sup>33</sup> Toole, “From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression,” 610.

authority. In what follows, I hope to show that Dilthey's original understanding of "lived experience" bears a striking resemblance to what contemporary standpoint epistemologists have been discussing. Yet, as I will show later in this essay, there is one important difference: Dilthey rejects the incommunicability thesis.

### Lived Experience

Recently, Ian McIntosh and Sharon Wright have pointed out that "there is a strong tendency for the term 'lived experience' to be used with little or no clarification about what it might mean or imply."<sup>34</sup> So, it is important to pin down where the notion of "lived experience" comes from and what it amounts to. Here I want to suggest that the notion of lived experience was originally developed into a form readily recognizable to us today by the German hermeneutic philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey.

German has two words for experience—*Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*—and in the 19th century, there were substantial discussions about the nature of these two forms of experience. *Erfahrung* suggests a kind of experience which is taken as a source of information about the world, as when we learn "by experience" not to touch the hot stove.<sup>35</sup> Thus, *Erfahrung* implies a kind experience which is in principle universally accessible and therefore communicable.

But it is *Erlebnis*—practically a neologism in Dilthey's time—that is translated into, and therefore underwrites, our current understanding of "lived experience." Gadamer suggests that the notion of *Erlebnis* has its roots in the romantic reaction to the Enlightenment and modern, industrial society—especially as found in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.<sup>36</sup> More recently, Francis Fukuyama has also traced the lineage of "lived experience" to Rousseau, suggesting that his *sentiment de l'existence*, the primordial or original consciousness of the first humans before the distorting effect of dominating societies, lies at the heart of what would later "morph" into the contemporary "lived experience."<sup>37</sup> And there can be no doubt that in contemporary parlance, "lived experience" carries with it this romantic overtone of an authentic

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<sup>34</sup> Ian McIntosh and Sharon Wright, "Exploring What the Notion of 'Lived Experience' Offers for Social Policy Analysis," *Journal of Social Policy* 48, no. 3 (2019): 450.

<sup>35</sup> H. P. Rickman, ed. and trans., "Introduction," in *Dilthey: Selected Writings*, by Wilhelm Dilthey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 29.

<sup>36</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), 62–63.

<sup>37</sup> Fukuyama, *Identity*, 31–32.

experience of the self which is clouded by dominant and dominating structures of society and therefore serves as the basis of political resistance.

*Erlebnis* suggests an experience as subjectively perceived or undergone (note the inclusion of *Leben*, “life,” in *Erlebnis*). *Erlebnis* therefore does not, as experienced, admit of universality or reproducibility, but has what we might call an indexical character—it is an experience as undergone from a unique, lived perspective. As such, *Erlebnis* implies the *immediacy* of direct experience; it has the quality of something raw and pre-reflective.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, as Dilthey writes, “A lived experience is a distinctive and characteristic mode in which reality is there-for-me. A lived experience does not confront me as something perceived or represented; it is not given to me, but the reality of lived experience is there-for-me because I have a reflexive awareness of it, because I possess it immediately as belonging to me in some sense. Only in thought does it become objective.”<sup>39</sup> Consequently, an *Erlebnis* is originally not objectified in one’s consciousness: “the experience is not an object which confronts the person who has it, its existence for me cannot be distinguished from *what* is presented to me.”<sup>40</sup> This might be taken to imply that *Erlebnis* is only our inner, subjective experience of an outer world. Yet, this would be misleading because “[l]ived experience is not restricted to a consciousness of our state of mind, but also involves our attitude to, and thus awareness of, external reality.”<sup>41</sup>

Crucially, *Erlebnis* suggests experience which is emotionally valenced and value-laden. For Dilthey, we do not confront the world as lacking meaning and value—a set of neutral facts, say—and then subsequently *add* meaning or value to it because of our subjective reactions to or feelings about it. Rather, objects in the world show up in our experience already charged with significance because of their relationship to our own purposes and goals. For example, when I am rummaging in my garage for a ladder to change a lightbulb, I do not simply “observe” in a detached way the desk that is blocking my access to the ladder—I perceive it *as* an obstacle because the object shows up in my experience as being related to my goals and purposes. Thus, *Erlebnis*

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<sup>38</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 61.

<sup>39</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, “Fragments for a Poetics (1907–1908),” trans. Rudolph A. Makkreel, in *Poetry and Experience*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 223.

<sup>40</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, “The Construction of the Historical World in the Human Studies,” in *Dilthey: Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. H. P. Rickman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 184, emphasis in original.

<sup>41</sup> Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 148.

carries with it the connotation that “lived experience” is personally affecting—that it is significant, that it matters.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, while *Erlebnis* represents the most basic level of conscious experience, it is also a coherent whole. So, while *Erlebnis* is a fundamental experience, it stands in contrast to “raw feels” or “qualia” or “sensation”—the “one great blooming, buzzing confusion” of un-organized, unconceptualized experience, in William James’s memorable words.<sup>43</sup> *Erlebnis* is not a construct built out of constituent parts to which it could subsequently be reduced.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, *Erlebnis* occupies a middle position between the false dichotomy of an inert and meaning-less external world on the one hand and mere subjective inner feeling on the other. Indeed, for Dilthey, the very distinctions between subject and object, self and world, are analytic distinctions which only arise through reflection on lived experience.<sup>45</sup>

Further, Dilthey also talks about *an Erlebnis*. So, *Erlebnis*, a “lived experience,” is not simply the stream of consciousness itself for Dilthey, but is also a nexus of meaning, a unity that “stands out” from the flow of life *as* an experience.<sup>46</sup> Dilthey writes that “[a] lived experience is a unit whose parts are connected by a common meaning.”<sup>47</sup> Offering us as an example the death of a loved one, Dilthey points out that this experience confronts us as a “separable immanent teleological whole” which “possesses a unity in itself.”<sup>48</sup> As Dilthey puts it, “That which forms a unity of presence in the flow of time because it has a unitary meaning is the smallest unit definable as a lived experience.”<sup>49</sup> In fact, English allows for a similar use of the word “experience” when we say of a road trip or a wedding, “it was an experience.” Such experiences “erupt from or disrupt routinized, repetitive behavior” and call for us to find meaning in what has disoriented us with pain or pleasure.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, as Gadamer points out, there is an inherent ambiguity in the notion of *Erlebnis* which Dilthey built into it from the start—it means “both the immediacy, which precedes all interpretation, reworking, and communication, and merely offers a starting point for interpretation—material to be shaped—and its discovered yield, its

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<sup>42</sup> Rickman, “Introduction,” 29.

<sup>43</sup> William James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York: Dover, 1950), 488.

<sup>44</sup> Dilthey, “Fragments for a Poetics (1907–1908),” 224.

<sup>45</sup> See Makkreel, *Dilthey*, 217.

<sup>46</sup> Victor W. Turner, “Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama: An Essay in the Anthropology of Experience,” in *The Anthropology of Experience*, ed. Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 35.

<sup>47</sup> Dilthey, qtd. in Lawrence K. Schmidt, *Understanding Hermeneutics* (London: Routledge, 2006), 38.

<sup>48</sup> Dilthey, “Fragments for a Poetics (1907–1908),” 224, 225.

<sup>49</sup> Dilthey, qtd. in Schmidt, *Understanding Hermeneutics*, 38.

<sup>50</sup> Turner, “Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama,” 35.

lasting result.”<sup>51</sup> The trick, Gadamer tells us, lies in “seeing these meanings as a productive union: something becomes an ‘experience’ not only insofar as it is experienced, but insofar as its being experienced makes a special impression that gives it lasting importance.”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Gadamer suggests, “[i]f something is called or considered an *Erlebnis*, that means it is rounded into the unity of a significant whole.”<sup>53</sup> These lived experiences, understood as significant wholes, can then be related to similar units of experience in one’s own life, in others’ lives, or those preserved in culture, further amplifying their meaning and significance.

Interestingly, Gadamer suggests that it is this feature of *Erlebnis*—that its proper form requires being “rounded into the unity of a significant whole” which stands out from the flow of consciousness—gives grounds for thinking of it as “an achievement.”<sup>54</sup> In the hermeneutic tradition, this achievement is usually linked up with language—the correct word or description discloses or reveals the truth of an experience. Max van Manen comments that “[t]he essence or nature of an experience has been adequately described in language if the description reawakens or shows us the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper manner.”<sup>55</sup>

Dilthey claims the true nature of an *Erlebnis* is most easily seen when one reflects back on an experience in memory and distills the “essence” of the experience as singularly meaningful and important.<sup>56</sup> When one does this, one can then take the further step of bringing it forth as an expression. Expressions of lived experience “can range from emotional exclamations and gestures to personal self-descriptions and reflections to works of art.”<sup>57</sup> For Dilthey, the richness of lived experience means that one cannot simply understand one’s life or experiences fully through introspection—rather, self-understanding requires the mediating steps of externalization. Ultimately, Dilthey believed that our lives are now so complex that only literature is able to properly give expression to it.<sup>58</sup> Such externalization is necessary for self-understanding because “[a]n expression of lived experience can contain more of the nexus of psychic life than any introspection can catch sight of. It draws from depths

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<sup>51</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 61.

<sup>52</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 61.

<sup>53</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 66.

<sup>54</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 66.

<sup>55</sup> Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 10.

<sup>56</sup> Dilthey, “The Construction of the Historical World in the Human Studies,” 185.

<sup>57</sup> Rudolf Makkreel, “Wilhelm Dilthey,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2021 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/dilthey/>.

<sup>58</sup> Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi, eds., “Introduction,” in *Poetry and Experience*, by Wilhelm Dilthey (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 3.

not illuminated by consciousness.”<sup>59</sup> However, this also means that because the meaning of lived experience cannot be exhaustively understood through self-reflection, we have to approach our own experiences like we approach the understanding of others or of a text—from the outside in.

Finally, *Erlebnis* is intrinsically temporal because our very conscious life is temporal.<sup>60</sup> All lived experience is inextricably linked to our past and our future, and its meaning bears this imprint.<sup>61</sup> Thus, while itself a coherent whole of meaning, an *Erlebnis* is also part of a broader whole—that of one’s life. In other words, understanding one’s own life involves a hermeneutic circle relating various important experiences to one another across the entirety of one’s whole life. In this respect, the meaning of any particular lived experience is unavoidably open-ended, because the meaning of the part shifts in its relation to the other parts and to the whole.

By way of illustration, consider a melody. In a melody, there is a string of individual notes, but the “meaning” of each of the notes is inextricably linked to the notes that come before and after it. In a piece of music, the significance of each note is inflected by all of the other notes. Or, to move one step closer to human life, we can think of a story or narrative. In a story, the meaning of any event is shaped by the events that come before and, especially, the events that come after.<sup>62</sup> The meaning of a man and a woman meeting at the beginning of a story is shaped retroactively by the ending of the story. The significance of that first event will be very different if the story ends with the couple being wed as opposed to the woman being killed in a car accident. Similarly, lived experiences are also part of “one’s story” and are therefore shaped by what came before and will be recast by what happens later. Therefore, the meaning of a lived experience is always open-ended because it is bound up with the larger whole of one’s total life. As Gadamer puts it, “[e]verything that is experienced is experienced by oneself, and part of its meaning is that it belongs to the unity of this self and thus contains an unmistakable and irreplaceable relation to the whole of this one life. Thus, essential to an experience is that it cannot be exhausted in what can be said of it or grasped as its meaning.”<sup>63</sup>

Here there is a strong resemblance between lived experience and a text. Much like a text, while we can distinguish between better and worse interpretations and some

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<sup>59</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 227.

<sup>60</sup> Dilthey, “The Construction of the Historical World in the Human Studies,” 184–86.

<sup>61</sup> Dilthey, “Fragments for a Poetics (1907–1908),” 225.

<sup>62</sup> See Stewart Goetz and Joshua W. Seachris, *What Is This Thing Called the Meaning of Life?* (London: Routledge, 2020), 153–58.

<sup>63</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 67.

interpretations might be ruled out flatly as insufficient, it is never possible to claim that any particular interpretation is final and authoritative for all time. It is always possible to bring new questions and new assumptions to a text and to tease out new meanings. Likewise, it is always possible to tease new meanings out of lived experiences.<sup>64</sup> Consequently, while an *Erlebnis* is a coherent unity of meaning, it is never closed to further interpretation, even by the person undergoing the experience: “*To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete.*”<sup>65</sup> Importantly, all of this amounts to saying that, while lived experience is immediately available and has an initial interpretive intelligibility, it cannot serve as the basis for an uncritical form of experiential foundationalism.<sup>66</sup> Thus, Scott is quite right that “[e]xperience is at once always already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted.”<sup>67</sup>

To sum up: lived experience is (a) an indexical and value-laden experience, which is (b) formed into a significant whole of meaning, that (c) reaches its proper form in expression, and which (d) is temporal and therefore always open to further interpretation.

### Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Incommunicability Thesis

As we have seen above, contemporary feminist standpoint epistemology implies that the achievement of obtaining a standpoint involves finding the hidden meaning of one’s lived experiences, which is, as van Manen puts it, “usually hidden or veiled.”<sup>68</sup> The *true* meaning of an experience may not be obvious—even to those who experience it. This is why even marginalized or oppressed people are sometimes not aware of their own oppression. Lived experience may be necessary for insight into the nature of social reality, but it is certainly not sufficient. Rather, it requires understanding one’s experiences in a certain way—it requires a particular kind of “critical consciousness” or “oppositional consciousness” or what might be called, true to the hermeneutic tradition, a form of “seeing-as.” This consciousness could perhaps be facilitated by

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. Makkreel, *Dilthey*, 254.

<sup>65</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 302, emphasis in original.

<sup>66</sup> It is worth pointing out that if lived experience were exclusively something private or ineffable like qualia, it could not serve as the basis for political resistance because one would be utterly unable to recognize when others have had similar experiences. On the contrary, since individuals *can* recognize structurally similar experiences—even in the absence of a word which distinctively names a phenomenon—we can infer that these experiences are in fact not completely ineffable or private.

<sup>67</sup> Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” 797, emphasis in original.

<sup>68</sup> van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, 27.

language, which attempts to distill the nexus of meaning in the lived experience. But, as discussed earlier, dominantly situated knowers will likely resist the interpretation embedded in the word; they will not think that it reveals the true nature of social reality. They will not see it “as” someone who has achieved the relevant kind of consciousness does. If they had the right kind of consciousness, then they could see the legitimacy of the word. But since they lack the appropriate consciousness, they reject the word. Therefore, one cannot simply convey the truth of one’s experiences to someone, especially someone from another identity group, who has not already taken up the relevant kind of consciousness.

So, the question becomes: Can we communicate lived experience in a way that can at least temporarily grant someone the kind of consciousness necessary to see lived experience *as* those in marginalized communities with the relevant achievement do? And if so, how? If lived experience, along with the proper kinds of “seeing-as” can be communicated, then the incommunicability thesis is false, and both it and the epistemic isolationism which rests on it, should be abandoned.

In this section, I will argue that philosophical hermeneutics—especially the work of Dilthey, Gadamer, and Ricoeur—provides a framework for communicating and learning from the lived experience of members of marginalized communities. Philosophical hermeneutics recognizes the distinctive experiences of marginalized communities without falling into the trap of treating them as utterly alien to those from other groups. Difference need not lead to incomprehension; rather, it creates the positive possibility of seeing and understanding the world otherwise than one currently does. That is, the differences in our lived experiences open the possibility of learning from the lived experience of others. How is this possible?

Dilthey believed that individuals are, to a significant extent, the products of their culture and time. This means that, for Dilthey, people in different eras would have had quite different mental lives. Accordingly, properly understanding cultural artifacts (i.e., expressions of lived experience) across historical distance requires distinctive but rigorous methods. What is interesting, however, and important for my purposes here, is that Dilthey maintained that this was possible. He believed that there was enough in common, by way of shared humanity, for people to understand one another across the barriers of time and culture through their expressions. In fact, Dilthey maintained that one could “re-experience” (*Nacherleben*) what it would have been like to live in another culture or in another era through extensive research and, through an exercise of imagination, come to recreate in oneself experiences similar to what a person of that time and/or culture would have had. While Dilthey reminds us that such a process is never complete—one cannot simply put oneself completely into



the inner life of another—he also believed that “[o]n the basis of lived experience and self-understanding and their constant interaction, there emerges the understanding of other persons and their manifestations in life.”<sup>69</sup> In other words, for Dilthey, different lived experiences do not mean that we cannot understand one another, but rather can serve as a way of augmenting one’s understanding of the world across the barriers of time, culture, language, and the like.

Similarly, Gadamer believed that the fact that we are historically constituted and always already part of a tradition with its own horizon of meaning did not mean that learning from others’ experiences was an impossibility. Rather, it was the necessary condition of the possibility of learning from others. I believe this feature of Gadamer’s thought can be seen clearly from his own use of the word “standpoint”<sup>70</sup> and the closely related “horizon”<sup>71</sup> which our standpoint gives rise to. According to Gadamer, the culture and language that one is raised with is both the limitation, and the condition of the possibility, of any kind of understanding. Gadamer called the set of cultural beliefs embodied in languages “prejudices” (*Vorurteile*). For Gadamer, “*the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being*” precisely because we are often not aware of the prejudices that we have.<sup>72</sup> These prejudices make possible, but also limit, our understanding of the world. That is, as historical and linguistic beings, we have standpoints which serve as the vantage points from which we view the world. There is no such thing as a “view from nowhere”—there are only views from particular standpoints.

The metaphors of standpoint and horizon suggest that without a standpoint, one would have no horizon of understanding—one could not see at all. That is, having a standpoint is what makes understanding possible in the first place. But they also suggest that our horizon of understanding is bounded. However, this boundedness is not by any means static and so does not close us off from others, from other standpoints. On the contrary, it is more accurate to say that the horizon, by its very nature, calls us to transcend or supersede our parochial view. Indeed, part of the point of realizing that our understanding is limited is to push us to realize that we need to dialogue with others, that we need others to get beyond our own limited understanding of the world. After all, our own prejudices are not only parochial, they may in fact be wrong. Thus, the realization of our limited horizon serves as the driving force to engage with others who are different from ourselves as a means of being able to correct

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<sup>69</sup> Dilthey, qtd. in Schmidt, *Understanding Hermeneutics*, 38.

<sup>70</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 303.

<sup>71</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 302.

<sup>72</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 276–77, emphasis in original.

or expand our horizon. As Gadamer puts it, “[t]he possibility that the other person may be right is the soul of hermeneutics.”<sup>73</sup> When we encounter others who are different from ourselves and come to an understanding with one another, we learn; we experience a “fusion of horizons” and find our understanding of the world simultaneously broadened and transformed.<sup>74</sup>

Gadamer’s key insight is that this fusion of horizons is made possible by relating what is unfamiliar to what is familiar (e.g., our pre-existing beliefs, knowledge, etc.). Therefore, understanding, indeed human life itself, is a constant mediation between what is familiar and what is unfamiliar. It is by recognizing similarity in difference that we can understand others, even if we do not have the same culture or life experiences. Of course, the process of mediation between sameness and difference is, for Gadamer, never complete. We never simply assimilate what is different, but rather are involved in something like an ongoing conversation or dialogue with difference, which results in a constantly shifting and adapting horizon. In short, our standpoint is by no means fixed or immutable. Philosophical hermeneutics lives in the “in-between” space of sameness and difference, of relating what is new and different to what is old and familiar without *reducing* it to what is old and familiar. The impetus behind philosophical hermeneutics is precisely the conviction that we must engage with those who have different lived experiences and different standpoints in order to learn.

While Gadamer argues for the possibility of learning from others with different lived experiences, I think it is Ricoeur who best demonstrates how to turn this into an actuality. Ricoeur accepts Gadamer’s criticism of the romantic idea that one could simply shed one’s own standpoint and step into the mental life of another. On the other hand, Ricoeur maintains that certain uses of language enable writers to open up a possible world to readers—a world into which the reader may step, orient herself, and then return to the “real” world with a new way of seeing it.

Of special relevance for my purposes here are Ricoeur’s writings on poetic discourse. For Ricoeur, poetic discourse is an umbrella term for language whose referential function differs from the descriptive referential function of ordinary and scientific language.<sup>75</sup> The use of “poetic” in “poetic discourse” or “poetic language,”

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<sup>73</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, qtd. in Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 124.

<sup>74</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 306.

<sup>75</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980), 100. See also Paul Ricoeur, “Naming God,” in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 232.

Ricoeur tells us, is not meant to pick out a particular genre, but to point to the function of a certain kind of writing “as the seat of semantic innovation, as the proposition of a world, and as the instigation of a new understanding of oneself.”<sup>76</sup> For Ricoeur, discourse is essentially about a world. In descriptive or scientific discourse, this reference is to the empirical world of objects. What is distinctive about poetic discourse is that it “suspends” the ordinary referential function which is proper to descriptive or scientific discourse<sup>77</sup>; there is what might be called an “impertinence of reference.” Ricoeur believes that the disruption of first-order reference to the empirical world creates the possibility of a second-order reference. Ricoeur writes that it is his “deepest conviction” that “poetic language alone restores to us that participation-in or belonging-to an order of things which precedes our capacity to oppose ourselves to things taken as objects opposed to a subject.”<sup>78</sup> Thus, “the abolition of first-order reference, an abolition accomplished by fiction and poetry, is the condition of possibility for the liberation of a second order of reference that reaches the world not only at the level of manipulable objects but at the level Husserl designated by the expression of *Lebenswelt*, and which Heidegger calls being-in-the-world.”<sup>79</sup>

It is integral to Ricoeur’s notion of poetic discourse that it can “intend being, but not through the modality of givenness, but rather through the modality of possibility.”<sup>80</sup> In Ricoeur’s words, “[t]exts speak of possible worlds and of possible ways of orientating oneself in those worlds.”<sup>81</sup> In poetic discourse, the “world of the text is what incites the reader, or the listener, to understand himself or herself in the face of the text and to develop, in imagination and sympathy, the *self* capable of inhabiting this world by deploying his or her ownmost possibilities there.”<sup>82</sup> In being freed from the limitations of purely descriptive language, poetic discourse gains the power to *re-describe* the world.

Crucially, in conveying possible ways of “being-in-the-world,” one communicates not a simple description of objects, but lived experience itself—including its indexical quality, its emotional valence, value-ladenness, significance, and so on. The temporal structure of narrative allows for one to encode not just objects

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<sup>76</sup> Ricoeur, “Naming God,” 232.

<sup>77</sup> Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” 100.

<sup>78</sup> Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” 101.

<sup>79</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Philosophy and Religious Language,” in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 42.

<sup>80</sup> Ricoeur, “Philosophy and Religious Language,” 43.

<sup>81</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics,” in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, ed. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon, 1978), 144.

<sup>82</sup> Ricoeur, “Naming God,” 232, emphasis in original.

and events but their *significance* or *meaning*—that is, it enables one to communicate how they show up in lived experience. In short, the narrative structure of some poetic discourse enables the reader to obtain a kind of “seeing-as”<sup>83</sup> or take on a particular kind of consciousness and therefore enables the reader to see the world as another sees it. In Ricoeur’s words, poetic discourse like fiction “is not an instance of reproductive imagination, but of *productive imagination*. As such, it refers to reality not in order to copy it, but in order to prescribe a new reading.”<sup>84</sup> Poetic discourse “makes reality appear in such and such a way.”<sup>85</sup> In saying that poetic discourse has the power to create possible worlds which thereby redescribe reality, Ricoeur is claiming genres like narrative have the ability to tell us something new and essential about the real world. Art—especially temporal art like literature and film—offers us a way of communicating lived experience by opening a possible world which others may enter and imaginatively experience the world as we experience it.

In short, literature enables a fusion of horizons, where the reader finds her own horizon of understanding expanded through an encounter with the lived experience of another. The literary critic C. S. Lewis, though not a hermeneutic thinker himself, writes movingly of the experience of reading literature which “heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality. There are mass emotions which heal the wound; but they destroy the privilege. In them our separate selves are pooled and we sink back into sub-individuality. But in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself.”<sup>86</sup> Lewis makes clear that he believes that part of the point of reading literature is to “become these other selves,” to know them through imaginative lived experience, we might say.<sup>87</sup> Likewise, Simone de Beauvoir claims that literature enables the reader to enter another “world” where “another truth becomes mine without ceasing to be other. I resign my own ‘I’ in favor of the speaker’s; and yet I remain myself.”<sup>88</sup> Good literature, as well as narrative, story-telling, films, and

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<sup>83</sup> For example, see Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello (Toronto, ONT: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 245.

<sup>84</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “The Narrative Function,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 292–93.

<sup>85</sup> Ricoeur, “The Narrative Function,” 293.

<sup>86</sup> C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 140–41.

<sup>87</sup> Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 139.

<sup>88</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, qtd. in Sonia Kruks, “Women’s ‘Lived Experience’: Feminism and Phenomenology from Simone de Beauvoir to the Present,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Feminist Theory*, ed. Mary Evans et al. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage), 83, 84.

so on, are all ways of bringing someone to understand and to feel “what it’s like” to be someone else.

### Conclusion

So, is lived experience communicable? Yes, it is communicable through artistic expressions like literature. Communicating an event as a marginalized person experiences it requires bringing others along a narrative in such a way as to encounter the lived experience in the relevant way—through adopting a particular kind of consciousness or “seeing-as.” That is, one must communicate the lived experience *as* a nexus of meaning which stands forth but is connected with a greater whole—the narrative of one’s life. Bringing someone into the stream of one’s consciousness and unfolding the narrative of one’s life enables the reader to take on the relevant kind of consciousness such that the particular lived experience is able to stand forth *from* that stream of consciousness as a coherent and significant whole. Therefore, literature’s temporal structure enables one to properly contextualize a lived experience so as to communicate it to someone who has not had the experience themselves. This communication allows dominantly situated knowers to make informed judgments about, and ultimately recognize the legitimacy of, certain conceptual constructs rather than accepting them by authority.

Moreover, entering into another’s lived experience compels the reader to “see” those who have experienced marginalization and oppression—to make them visible and to dignify them. Put another way, reading literature which expresses the suffering (and joys) of others, compels the reader to recognize the humanity of marginalized members of their community in and through the sharing of lived experience. Simultaneously, the attempt to communicate one’s experiences is itself an act of recognition of the humanity of dominantly situated knowers and, importantly, calls that humanity forth. The mutual recognition and mutual respect that is the consequence of sharing experience, I suggest, can serve as the basis of a robust form of solidarity.

By contrast, in implying that lived experience is incommunicable, activists and theorists move towards the idea that understanding entails agreement and any disagreement simply signals an inability to understand—that is, to epistemic isolationism. Once this move is made, lived experience grants not only epistemic privilege—in the sense of enabling specific insights into the nature of social reality—but epistemic authority, where dominantly situated knowers must simply accept what

marginalized people say about and how they conceptualize their lived experience. This final move is, I believe, politically toxic. It implies that solidarity built on mutual recognition and respect is impossible and that political gains towards social justice can only be made by breaking citizens into groups whose only relationship is one of power. To accept epistemic isolationism is to trade solidarity for authority, mutual recognition for power.

Yet, I suspect any apparent inversion of power dynamics between dominantly situated knowers and marginalized communities granted by epistemic isolationism will turn out to be illusory. And here I echo a point made by Charles Taylor in “The Politics of Recognition.” In the context of responding to multiculturalists’ insistence on the expansion of the canon, Taylor suggests that perhaps what respect requires of us is a *presumption* that the works of, say, “non-Western” cultures have value. Similarly, I believe very strongly that there should be a presumption that members of marginalized communities have something important to say because of their lived experience of social reality. However, Taylor goes on to suggest that to offer favorable judgments of the works of other cultures “on demand” requires an act of “breathtaking condescension.”<sup>89</sup> In the same way, when activists encourage dominantly situated knowers to adopt conceptual resources without critique, they are inadvertently encouraging dominantly situated knowers to patronize marginalized people, ultimately preventing them from recognizing marginalized people as fully equal to themselves. Because epistemic isolationism does not permit mutual recognition, equality, and respect between people of different communities, it cannot serve as the basis of a meaningful and lasting form of solidarity and political power. If activists attempt to trade mutual recognition and respect for power and authority, they will likely end up with neither.

Lived experience *can* serve as the basis of important knowledge about our social reality and as the basis of meaningful solidarity between people of different communities. But only if we reject the incommunicability thesis. The presumption I am advocating here does not mean the uncritical acceptance of another’s authority, but rather the eagerness to listen to stories, narratives, and the like in the posture of wanting to expand one’s horizon and better understand the sufferings and joys of fellow citizens. As Kwame Anthony Appiah has recently written, “[t]alk of lived experience should be used not to end conversation[s] but to begin them.”<sup>90</sup> Therefore,

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<sup>89</sup> Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 70.

<sup>90</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Why Are Politicians Suddenly Talking about Their ‘Lived Experience?’” *The Guardian*, 14 November 2020,

while I believe the original three theses of standpoint epistemology are plausible, the incommunicability thesis is false and harmful and should be explicitly rejected. When this is done, standpoint epistemologists and the activists who draw from their work will be in a better position to foster political solidarity and bring about meaningful social justice reforms.

## Gadamer on Friendship and Solidarity: A Hermeneutical Appropriation of the Greek Notion of *φιλία*

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Although Gadamer is primarily renowned for his contribution to the hermeneutic tradition, he also consistently expressed a strong interest in practical philosophy throughout his long career. From his youth, Gadamer was convinced that practical philosophy and hermeneutics were deeply interrelated: his professorial thesis (*Habilitation*), entitled *Platos dialektische Ethik*, attempts to elucidate dialogue's ethical dimension and its relation with the characteristic finitude of human beings.<sup>1</sup> Gadamer's writings concerning practical philosophy are heavily focused on Greek philosophy, especially that of Plato and Aristotle. Among the various ideas he borrows from these thinkers, Gadamer devotes particular attention to two: 1) *φρόνησις* (often translated as “wisdom,” “prudence,” or “sagacity”), which is an ethical concept corresponding to practical wisdom;<sup>2</sup> and 2) *φιλία* (highly difficult to translate into a single English term), which broadly corresponds to notions of friendship or esteem. While most commentators on the ethical facets of Gadamer's philosophy focus almost exclusively on the notion of *φρόνησις*, very few studies have been specifically dedicated to the

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<sup>1</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Die Lektion des Jahrhunderts* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2002), 31–33.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 1139a–1141b. All citations of this work are guided by the following translations: Arisote, *Éthique à Nicomaque*, trans. Richard Bodéüs (Paris: Flammarion, 2004); Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2014).



notion of *φιλία*.<sup>3</sup> This is rather astonishing considering *φιλία* is a recurrent topic—or, rather, a major through line—in Gadamer’s mature writings (from the 1960s onwards). It is therefore essential that more studies specifically address this crucial yet often neglected notion.

Before diving into our analysis of Gadamer’s appropriation of *φιλία*, we should review the main hermeneutical elements in light of which his conception of *φιλία* must be understood: namely, the notions of “genuine experience” and “proper dialogue” (or “true conversation”). According to Gadamer, a “genuine experience” (*eigentliche Erfahrung*) is always negative, an experience of nullity in which we realize that a reality is not what we believed it to be.<sup>4</sup> In other words, in a “genuine experience,” the expectations of meaning (*Sinnerwartungen*) that shape our interpretation of a phenomenon turn out to be inadequate to the reality of the thing, the object of our understanding. Our fore-conceptions, which Gadamer equates to prejudices (*Vorurteile*), are then replaced by a more convincing interpretation. This new interpretation is nevertheless liable to revision and substitution if, when measured against the thing-itself, it also proves to be inadequate to reality. In light of this, it is clear why Gadamer asserts that an “experienced person” (*der Erfahrene*) is someone who is constantly open to new experiences, someone with the humility to acknowledge that her understanding of reality may be inadequate to reality itself—and who therefore is willing to allow unexpected expressions of reality to alter her interpretations of it. This means that the “experienced person” is always aware of her finitude, of the impossibility of knowing everything, and of possessing absolutely exhaustive interpretations of phenomena.<sup>5</sup> According to Gadamer, human beings never cease to

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<sup>3</sup> Among the most rigorous studies on the role of *φιλία* in Gadamer’s thought, David Vessey’s are especially noteworthy: “Dialogue, Goodwill, and Community,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Niall Keane and Chris Lawn (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 312–19; “Gadamer’s Account of Friendship as an Alternative to an Account of Intersubjectivity,” *Philosophy Today* 49 Supplement, no. 7 (2005): 61–67. See also Carla Danani, *L’amicizia degli antichi: Gadamer in dialogo con Platone e Aristotele* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2003); Alexandra Makurova, “Gadamer on Friendship and Solidarity: The Increase of Being in Communal Human Life,” *Russian Sociological Review* 15, no. 4 (2016): 146–61; James Risser, “Hearing the Other: Communication as Shared Life,” *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* (2019): 1–17; “Shared Life,” *Symposium. Gadamer’s Philosophical Legacy* 6, no. 2 (2002): 167–80; Luis Eduardo Gama, “Amitié et solidarité. La politique de Hans-Georg Gadamer,” *Archives de Philosophie* 2, no. 83 (2020): 177–94. This list is not exhaustive.

<sup>4</sup> Unless explicitly stated, all citations of Gadamer’s works can be found in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke (GW)*, 10 tomes (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1985–1995). Subsequent references will use the following formula: *Title of the Book or Article*, *GW* volume (original publication date), pp. In this case, Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, *GW* 1 (1960), 358–60.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Grondin, “Gadamer’s Basic Understanding of Understanding,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 44.

learn and change, and therefore there is no such thing as a fixed human essence; if there *is* a human nature, it corresponds to our finitude, and “the only way not to succumb to [it] is to open ourselves to the other, to listen to the ‘thou’ who stands before us.”<sup>6</sup>

This idea—this openness to others that should save us from our characteristic finitude—is closely related to the second hermeneutic element essential to analyzing Gadamer’s understanding of *φιλία*: namely, the notion of “true dialogue” (*das wahre Gespräch*). Gadamer suggests that the purpose of true or proper dialogue is “agreement” (*Verständigung*) in the sense that, through the dialogue that unites them, interlocutors reach a certain agreement regarding the thing that needs/wants to be understood.<sup>7</sup> “True dialogue” requires that each participant put himself in the other’s place, which does not mean that each must efface or forget himself,<sup>8</sup> but rather necessarily entails that the interpreter introduce himself in the act of interpretation: that is, the interpreter must always mobilize his prejudices—his anticipations of meaning—whenever he wishes/needs to understand something.<sup>9</sup> These prejudices (pre-judgments) that inform the interpreter’s understanding of reality constitute his horizon, “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from [his] particular vantage point.”<sup>10</sup> This horizon of expectations (of meaning) is perpetually mobile, for it is always challenged by things-themselves and by other interpreters’ horizons—their perspectives on the same reality. The encounter between horizons of different interpreters is exactly what takes place in “true dialogue”; it does not entail an “overhasty assimilation” of otherness to our own meaning anticipations nor our own self-effacement or self-extinction (*Selbstausslöschung*) in favor of our interlocutor’s otherness (*Andersheit*),<sup>11</sup> but rather what Gadamer calls a “fusion of horizons” (*Horizontverschmelzung*). This fusion affords each of the interlocutors a “superior breadth of vision” than they previously had,<sup>12</sup> allowing each to reach an elevation “to

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<sup>6</sup> Gadamer, *Die Lektion des Jahrhunderts*, 31–33. My citations are partially based on, if not directly extracted from, Rod Coltman and Sigrid Koepe’s translation of Hans-Georg Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, *GW* 1, 308. The passive voice is significant here because, in Gadamer’s conception of interpretation, the thing being understood does not play a passive role (as the modern scientific method implies); rather, the observers are captivated by the thing whose reality speaks to them. Gadamer introduces this idea in the first part of *Wahrheit und Methode*, through the analysis of the truth that emerges in the experience of art.

<sup>8</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, *GW* 1, 274, 308–10.

<sup>9</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, *GW* 1, 310.

<sup>10</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, *GW* 1, 307.

<sup>11</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, *GW* 1, 310.

<sup>12</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, *GW* 1, 310.

a higher universality (*Erhebung zu einer höheren Allgemeinheit*) that overcomes not only [his] own particularity but also that of the other.”<sup>13</sup> This elevation to generality (or, more commonly, “universality”) allies the purpose of “true dialogue” with Gadamer’s understanding of the “guiding concepts of humanism,” which similarly aspire to the elevation to generality toward which *Bildung* (formation) orients us.<sup>14</sup> Along with “genuine experience,” this notion of “true dialogue”—and the access to a wider generality that it affords each of the participants in a conversation—is one of the keys to a proper understanding of Gadamer’s appropriation of *φιλία*.

Let us now move on to the true object of this article: the Greek notion of *φιλία*, generally translated as esteem, friendship, or solidarity—although none of these terms adequately encompasses the complex meaning of *φιλία*. Among modern scholars, Spanish philosopher Emilio Lledó provides a thorough historical examination of the term: *φιλία* originally denoted the link uniting family members, often associated to consanguinity, but quickly acquired the sense of a correspondence between persons who, in spite of lacking a consanguineous relation, were nonetheless united by “affective ‘reasons’ making up for the innate tendencies that sustain and protect the familial clan.”<sup>15</sup> Lledó consequently asserts that *φιλία* emerges from “the necessity of filling deficiencies, of overcoming each individual’s solitude in the company of a fellow being.”<sup>16</sup> This relation is not motivated by a will to possess the other; on the contrary, it is defined by a generosity in which “the subject-object relation is broken. . . in order to give rise to a new perspective, where the object of the friend objectifies us as well, and, in doing so, makes us recognize ourselves as objects in the reflection that the target of our affection is to us, [in the mirror that the other represents]. Thus, the subject surrenders to the object and, in his acquiescence, his own individuality is enhanced by the otherness to which the he has surrendered.”<sup>17</sup> This image of the mirror of friendship has an Aristotelian origin and, as we will see, plays an important role in Gadamer’s practical philosophy. Cognizant of the semantic and historical richness of the term “*φιλία*,” Gadamer deliberately avoids reducing its significance to

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<sup>13</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, *GW* 1, 310. Although most commentators tend to privilege the term “universality” as a translation of “*Allgemeinheit*,” I prefer the term “generality,” or even “community,” which makes it possible to underscore the difference between the usage of “*Allgemeinheit*” and “*Universalität*” in Gadamer’s writings.

<sup>14</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, *GW* 1, 15–47. See also Jean Grondin, *Sources of Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1995), 118–22.

<sup>15</sup> Emilio Lledó, *El surco del tiempo* (Madrid: Austral, 2015), 166. All the included passages from this work are my own translations.

<sup>16</sup> Lledó, *El surco del tiempo*, 166.

<sup>17</sup> Lledó, *El surco del tiempo*, 169.

a single modern notion and instead claims that it manifests in two fundamental dimensions of human life: friendship (*Freundschaft*) and solidarity (*Solidarität*).

Gadamer's interest in *φιλία* is particularly visible in his middle and later writings, especially those after *Truth and Method*. However, Gadamer's inaugural lecture at the University of Marburg in 1928, entitled “*Die Rolle der Freundschaft in der griechischen Ethik*” (*The Role of Friendship in Greek Ethics*), attests to the fact that the younger Gadamer already acknowledged the significance of *φιλία* in Greek thought. In 1985, fifty-seven years after the aforementioned lecture, Gadamer published a revised version titled “*Freundschaft und Selbsterkenntnis: Zur Rolle der Freundschaft in der griechischen Ethik*” (*Friendship and Self-Knowledge: The Role of Friendship in Greek Ethics*).<sup>18</sup> In this text, Gadamer explicitly states being interested not in the typologies of friendship proposed by Plato and Aristotle, but rather in the notion of “complete” or “accomplished” friendship (*die vollkommene Freundschaft*) as conceived by Aristotle.<sup>19</sup> The other types of friendship that Aristotle identifies, friendship based on pleasure (*Annehmlichkeit*) and friendship based on utility or profit (*Nützlichkeit*), are incomplete versions of “true friendship,” and relate to it only in analogical terms.<sup>20</sup> Gadamer's analysis of the accomplished kind of friendship, the only “true” kind, identifies three necessary conditions for its existence: 1) reciprocity between friends, 2) each friend's self-esteem, and 3) their life together.<sup>21</sup>

1) Reciprocity (*Gegenseitigkeit*) in friendship involves the goodwill of each of the participants: they must concern themselves with each other's wellbeing (*Einander-Gutsein*). This benevolence must be overtly expressed and recognized by both participants because it is precisely such an openness that distinguishes friendship from plain friendliness.<sup>22</sup> Gadamer's idea of an overt reciprocity among true friends corresponds exactly to what Aristotle names *ἀντιφίλησις* (reciprocated goodwill).<sup>23</sup> According to Gadamer, the reciprocity of overt benevolence consists in

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<sup>18</sup> Gadamer, “Freundschaft und Selbsterkenntnis. Zur Rolle der Freundschaft in der griechischen Ethik,” *GW* 7 (1985), 396–406. All the included passages from this work are my own translations, although an English translation of this text already exists: Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Friendship and Self-Knowledge: Reflections on the Role of Friendship in Greek Ethics,” in *Hermeneutics, Ethics, and Religion*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 128–41.

<sup>19</sup> Gadamer, “Freundschaft und Selbsterkenntnis,” *GW* 7, 400.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, VII, 1235b–1238b. All citations of this work are guided by the following translations: Arisote, *Éthique à Eudème*, trans. Vianney Décarie (Paris: J. Vrin, 1987); Aristotle, *The Eudemian Ethics*, trans. Peter L. P. Simpson (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> Gadamer, “Freundschaft und Selbsterkenntnis,” *GW* 7, 400–402.

<sup>22</sup> Gadamer, “Freundschaft und Selbsterkenntnis,” *GW* 7, 401.

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII, 1155b26–1156a4.

“acknowledging that I must integrate inside me something that opposes me”<sup>24</sup>; “it requires that one not try to argue the other person down but that one really consider the actual weight of the other’s opinion.”<sup>25</sup> In brief, friendship’s reciprocal openness entails a willingness to recognize that one could be wrong while the other person could be right.<sup>26</sup> This is exactly what Gadamer means when he exhorts us to acknowledge the “truth claim” in the words of others—their *Anspruch an Wahrheit*.<sup>27</sup>

2) The second necessary condition of friendship identified by Gadamer is each participant’s self-esteem, their *φιλαυτία*. Both Plato and Aristotle suggest that *φιλαυτία*, self-esteem, often translated as “self-love,” is vital to friendship with others. For the Greeks, a *φιλαυτός* is a person who is in perfect harmony with himself, possessing perfect coherence among the different parts of his soul<sup>28</sup>: all the parts of the *φιλαυτός*’ soul are oriented toward his own good, which consists of a desire to “live and be preserved” as well as to “remain himself” (rather than become someone else). The *φιλαυτός*, states Aristotle, “wishes to have everything provided that he remains what he is.”<sup>29</sup> This idea seems quite obscure at first sight, but it may be elucidated through an analysis of Aristotle’s conception of the “good life” toward which the *φιλαυτός* orients his actions, a life referred to as *εὐδαιμονία*.<sup>30</sup> According to Aristotle, the happiness or fulfillment of a human being is only possible insofar as she is self-sufficient or *autarkic*<sup>31</sup>: “self-sufficiency means having a supply of everything and lacking nothing.”<sup>32</sup> However, Aristotle repeatedly insists in his three works on ethics that “the self-sufficient man still has one need: friendship.”<sup>33</sup> This assertion illuminates the central

<sup>24</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, *GW* 1, 367.

<sup>25</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, *GW* 1, 373.

<sup>26</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Die Vielfalt Europas—Erbe und Zukunft,” in *Das Erbe Europas* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1990), 30. All citations of this work are guided by the following translations: Hans-Georg Gadamer, “La diversité de l’Europe—Héritage et avenir,” in *L’héritage de l’Europe*, trans. Philippe Ivernel (Paris: Éditions Payot et Rivages, 2003), 137–56; Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Diversity of Europe,” in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History*, trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 221–36.

<sup>27</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, *GW* 1, 367.

<sup>28</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX, 1166a13.

<sup>29</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX, 1166a22.

<sup>30</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX, 1908a13–18.

<sup>31</sup> Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, VII, 1244b7.

<sup>32</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, VII, 1326b29–30. My citations of this work are guided by the following translations: Arisote, *Politiques*, trans. Pierre Pellegrin (Paris: Flammarion, 2015); Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackman (London: William Heinemann, 1959).

<sup>33</sup> Aristotle, *Magna Moralia*, XV, 1212b33–34; *Eudemian Ethics*, VII, 1244b20; *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 1155a 4–6. All citations of *Magna Moralia* are guided by the following translations: Arisote, *La grande morale*, trans. Catherine Dalimer (Paris: Arléa, 1992); Aristotle, *Magna Moralia*, trans. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1915).

importance of *φιλία* in each of Aristotle’s three ethical works.<sup>34</sup> Gadamer too ascribes friendship a fundamental role in human life, and adheres to Aristotle’s justification for this: a person who has esteem for herself, and therefore actively seeks fulfillment (wishes to live a *eudemonic* life), must be cognizant of the fact that she cannot live a fulfilling life without the company of genuine friends. According to both Aristotle and Gadamer, human beings must actively want to know themselves as well as possible, so as to become the best version of themselves—or, in Greek terms, to attain their *ἀρετή*, which Gadamer translates as “*Bestheit*” (literally “bestness” or, in proper English, “excellence”)—in order to be happy. Aristotle believes all human beings must be aware of the limited access that they have to their own being:

Since then it is both a most difficult thing, as some of the sages have said, to attain a knowledge of oneself, and also a most pleasant (for to know oneself is pleasant)—now we are not able to see what we are from ourselves (and that we cannot do so is plain from the way in which we blame others without being aware that we do the same things ourselves; and this is the effect of favour or passion, and there are many of us who are blinded by these things so that we judge not aright); as then when we wish to see our own face, we do so by looking into the mirror, in the same way when we wish to know ourselves we can obtain that knowledge by looking at our friend. For the friend is, as we assert, a second I. If, then, it is pleasant to know oneself, and it is not possible to know this without having someone else for a friend, the self-sufficing man will require friendship in order to know himself.<sup>35</sup>

Gadamer appreciates and utilizes this Aristotelian image of the mirror of the other: it is echoed in the Gadamerian notion that whoever has esteem for herself must recognize her own finitude and the fact that “the only way not to succumb to [it] is to open [herself] to the other, to listen to the ‘thou’ who stands before [her].”<sup>36</sup> For Gadamer as well as Aristotle, *it is easier to understand a friend than it is to understand ourselves*<sup>37</sup>—as evidenced by the fact that we often scold others for actions that we unknowingly perform ourselves.<sup>38</sup> In this context, however, it must be noted that what

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<sup>34</sup> Aristotle devotes considerable portions of his ethical writings to the topic of *φιλία* (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII and IX; *Eudemian Ethics*, VII; and *Magna Moralia*, II, 11–17), which Gadamer explicitly acknowledges in “Wertethik un praktische Philosophie,” *GW* 4 (1982), 203–15: “Dem Problem der Freundschaft ist ein gutes Viertel der aristotelischen Ethik gewidmet. . .”

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle, *Magna Moralia*, XV, 1213a13–27.

<sup>36</sup> Gadamer, *Die Lektion des Jahrhunderts*, 33.

<sup>37</sup> Gadamer, “Freundschaft und Selbsterkenntnis,” *GW* 7, 402–403.

<sup>38</sup> The same idea is expressed in Luke 6:41 and Matthew 7:3: “Why do you see the speck in your

distinguishes our friends from any other person whose activities we condemn is the avowed benevolence we hold towards the former, which is reciprocated by them. In essence, Gadamer, following Aristotle, maintains that our true friends help us to become aware of our most hidden determining qualities, the prejudices that, were it not for our true friends, we would be incapable of recognizing on our own.<sup>39</sup> In that sense, we seek to establish “true friendships” because we know we are finite beings; and, according to Gadamer, the awareness of our own limitations that our friends allow us to acquire consequently provides us with “an increase of being, self-feeling, and richness of life” (*ein Zuwachs an Sein, Selbstgefühl und Lebensreichtum*).<sup>40</sup> It is along his path to the other that a human being becomes increasingly self-aware, and is thereby capable of approaching the best version of himself (his *ἀρετή*, his *Bestheit*).

3) All this leads us to the third precondition for a “true friendship”: life together (*das Zusammenleben*). Following ideas articulated in Plato’s *Lysis*,<sup>41</sup> Gadamer maintains that “true friendship” emerges from the sentiment of *οἰκεῖον*: the character of what is familiar, “house-like/domestic” or “home-like/native.”<sup>42</sup> This means that “true friendship” is characterised by that *je ne sais quoi* that makes us feel at home (*das Zuhause*, *das, wovon man nicht sagen kann, was es ist*),<sup>43</sup> and, to Gadamer, this secret ingredient of the accomplished kind of friendship cannot emerge except within *das Zusammenleben* (literally, “the living-together”). In order to adequately understand what Gadamer means by *das Zusammenleben*, it is useful to momentarily adopt a Spanish-language worldview. In Spanish, *das Zusammenleben*—the act of living together—is expressed by the notion of *convivencia*, a term composed by the words *con* (with, *mit*) and *vivencia* (lived experience, *Erfahrung*). The union of these two terms, *con* and *vivencia*, hence signifies something like a “co-lived-experience” in English. And retranslating the Spanish expression of *convivencia* back into German illustrates more precisely what Gadamer expresses with *das Zusammenleben*: rather than a shared life under the same roof, *das Zusammenleben* corresponds to *la con-vivencia*, “the co-experience of life” or, in German, *die Zusammen-Lebenserfahrung* or *die Miterfahrung-des-Lebens*.

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neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?”

<sup>39</sup> Gadamer, “Freundschaft und Selbsterkenntnis,” *GW* 7, 403.

<sup>40</sup> Gadamer, “Freundschaft und Selbsterkenntnis,” *GW* 7, 403.

<sup>41</sup> Plato, *Lysis*, 222b.

<sup>42</sup> David Vessey’s periphrastic translation of the *οἰκεῖον* as that which is home-like/domestic/native is as close to the Greek meaning as translations get. Jean Grondin translates the *οἰκεῖον* as that which is “domestic or familiar.” See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Friendship and Solidarity,” trans. David Vessey, *Research in Phenomenology* 39, no. 1 (2009): 3–12; Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Amitié et Solidarité,” in *Esquisses herménéutiques*, trans. Jean Grondin (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2004), 79–89.

<sup>43</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Freundschaft und Solidarität,” in *Hermeneutische Entwürfe* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 60.

This “life-together” with our friends refers to the frequent interactions that allow us to perceive our friends’ habits, interests, vulnerabilities, etc., of which they are not completely aware. This life-together does not require our friends’ beliefs, interests, and overall tendencies to completely coincide with ours: rather, life-together is realized through a deep mutual understanding between us and our friends, in which we “allow one another our difference in such a way that we are almost lead to say. . . ‘So must you be, for so I love you.’”<sup>44</sup> The sensation of familiarity (the *οἰκείον*) that predominates in a “true friendship” permits more honest engagement with one’s own self; in our “true” friend’s presence, “we feel at home, and are liberated from the disguises we wear in other social spheres. Before our friend, we can appear as we truly are.”<sup>45</sup>

The necessity of preserving the particularities of each of the friends, as well as the reciprocal familiarity and openness that unite them, attest to the fact that a “true friendship” is one that facilitates the existence of “true dialogues.” The first part of this article defined “true dialogues” as those that give rise to genuine hermeneutical experiences: in “true dialogues,” which result in an agreement between the interlocutors, things are able to speak for themselves without fear that the rigid judgments of observers/speakers will ossify them. Just like true dialogue, “true friendship” does not allow one interlocutor to impose herself onto the other, for this would lead to the destruction of the true, egalitarian friendship—in which all participants acknowledge and respect each other’s alterity. Although friends must always respect one another in their difference, this does not imply they should efface themselves in favor of their friend’s otherness.<sup>46</sup> Respecting our friend in her difference involves accepting that she might be right while we could be mistaken: we must always uphold the truth claim in her words. And it is through this characteristic openness, this humility, of true friendship that our friend’s gaze gently reveals to us those aspects of our being that we would otherwise not perceive. Thus, Gadamer (inspired by Aristotle) demonstrates that *φιλία*, as it manifests in the sphere of friendship, is an essential element of the accomplished human life, *εὐδαιμονία*. Friendship makes it possible for us to know ourselves better than we would if we were individually self-sufficient; human beings are able to attain their *Bestheit*, the best version of themselves, on the condition that they have at least one true friend.

Having analyzed the role of *φιλία* understood as friendship, we may now examine the second crucial manifestation of *φιλία* in human life: *φιλία* as solidarity.

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<sup>44</sup> Gadamer, “Freundschaft und Solidarität,” 62.

<sup>45</sup> Luis Eduardo Gama, “Amitié et solidarité. La politique de Hans-Georg Gadamer,” *Archives de Philosophie* 2, no. 83 (2020): 183.

<sup>46</sup> Gadamer, “Die Vielfalt Europas—Erbe und Zukunft,” 30.



Inspired by Giambattista Vico's and Lord Shaftesbury's conceptions of *sensus communis*,<sup>47</sup> Gadamer suggests that "everyone has enough 'common sense' (*gemeinen Sinn*)—i.e., judgment—that we may demand that they show a 'sense of the community' (*Gemeinsinn*), a genuine civic and moral solidarity, that is, judgment of right and wrong, and concern for the 'common good.'"<sup>48</sup> According to Gadamer, all human beings possess enough common sense to evaluate their own actions in light of what is good for their community and to orient their behavior toward the collective good.<sup>49</sup> But despite this optimistic understanding of common sense, Gadamer laments that modern societies are facing a critical lack of solidarity among their individual members.<sup>50</sup> Though he acknowledges that all states—the modern state as much as the ancient city-state—"are based on the same unchanging fundamental presupposition," which he calls "the presupposition of solidarity,"<sup>51</sup> modern societies seem to lack that essential feature of all communities. The reason for this, he suggests, is twofold: on one hand, in our extremely bureaucratized and specialized modern societies, the "natural/authentic solidarity" (*die echte Solidarität*) upon which all communities are founded is concealed by an inauthentic kind of solidarity that he calls "avowed solidarity" (*erklärte Solidarität*)<sup>52</sup>; on the other hand modern societies suffer from a dangerous misunderstanding of the role of experts, which has led to a generalized lack of decisional accountability from the individual toward her community.<sup>53</sup>

Let us begin by examining the problem of "avowed solidarities" concealing "natural/authentic solidarities." According to Gadamer, natural or "authentic

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<sup>47</sup> Giambattista Vico, *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione*, trad. Andrea Suggi (Firenze: Edizioni ETS, 2010); Lord Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (London: J. Purser, 1737–1738).

<sup>48</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, *GW* 1, 37.

<sup>49</sup> This resonates significantly with John Dewey's understanding of common sense, the collectively shared habits that form the basis of any community. See John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899–1924*, vol. 14 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1922), 45–47.

<sup>50</sup> Gadamer, "Freundschaft und Solidarität," 63–64.

<sup>51</sup> Gadamer, "Bürger zweier Welten," in *Das Erbe Europas* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1990), 123. My citations of this work are guided by the following translations: Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Citoyens de deux mondes," in *L'héritage de l'Europe*, trans. Philippe Ivernel (Paris: Éditions Payot et Rivages, 2003), 109–26; Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Citizens of Two Worlds," in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History*, trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 209–20.

<sup>52</sup> Gadamer, "Bürger zweier Welten," 64.

<sup>53</sup> Gadamer, "Die Grenzen des Experten," in *Das Erbe Europas* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1990), 148–49. All citations of this work are guided by the following translations: Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Les limites de l'expert," in *L'héritage de l'Europe*, trans. Philippe Ivernel (Paris: Éditions Payot et Rivages, 2003), 137–56; Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Limitations of the Expert," in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History*, trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 181–92.

solidarity” is characterized by an element as mysterious and defining as the *ἀρετή* of true friendship. Natural solidarities can be neither deliberately created nor forcefully imposed upon the masses: they do not depend on the declared preferences or interests of the public. Rather, an authentically solidary sentiment emerges when, in spite of “the differences in the interests and the life situations [that] may tempt us to go our own way and to set back the wellbeing of the Other,” a deep “solid and reliable inseparability” motivates us to orient our action toward the common good.<sup>54</sup> Gadamer illustrates this natural development of solidarity by referencing how, in extreme situations like bombings, “our neighbours, those who remain strangers in normal urban circumstances, [are] suddenly awoken to life,” and gain a new significance to us. This, Gadamer says, “is how distress works, and particularly distress that concerns us all, contributing to the emergence of unimagined possibilities of solidary feeling and solidary action.”<sup>55</sup> That such naturally developed solidarities perpetually unite us—regardless of whether or not we perceive or acknowledge them—is evidenced by the present global situation. The current pandemic has precipitated new and unforeseen manifestations of natural solidarity among individuals despite the increased physical distance among us and despite the fact that, at certain moments, we have had to remain literally isolated from one another.<sup>56</sup> Though it is the pandemic that has made these expressions of “natural solidarity” more visible, individual human beings consistently show a clear concern for the wellbeing of their communities. However, the “authentic solidarities” that underlie all communities are often obscured by “avowed solidarities”—citizenship, political partisanship, racialization, gender, socioeconomic categorizations, etc.—because the latter are more explicitly and deliberately articulated. While the mechanisms of “authentic solidarities” often go unspoken—are presumed rather than clearly stated—, “avowed solidarities” are reified by verbal declarations (of categorization, identity, and even loyalty) and overt recognition. These declared or

<sup>54</sup> Gadamer, “Freundschaft und Solidarität,” 63.

<sup>55</sup> Gadamer, “Freundschaft und Solidarität,” 63.

<sup>56</sup> Although electronic exchanges often seem deficient compared to in-person communication, countless strong virtual communities have been created since the beginning of the pandemic, making us all more aware of the various elements that naturally unite us with human beings from all over the world. Similarly, despite sporadic manifestations of selfishness, strong expressions of natural solidarity can be perceived in the generalized use of masks, increased activism, generous blood donations, etc. See, for example: Marina Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, eds., *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis* (London: Pluto Press, 2020); Margaret Weir, “The Pandemic and the Production of Solidarity,” *Items: Insights from the Social Sciences*, 28 May 2020, <https://items.ssrc.org/covid-19-and-the-social-sciences/democracy-and-pandemics/the-pandemic-and-the-production-of-solidarity/>; “Solidarity in the Time of COVID-19: Civil Society Responses to the Pandemic,” CIVICUS, 5 November 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/solidarity-time-covid-19-civil-society-responses-pandemic>.

avowed solidarities tend to overemphasize differences among human beings; consequently, Gadamer says, in putting “too much emphasis upon the different and disputed, upon that which is contested or in doubt[,] what we truly have in common and what unites us remains, so to speak, without a voice.”<sup>57</sup> Gadamer traces this problem back to a “long training in the perception of differences,” which instills in the individual an ability to identify what makes others different from him rather than encouraging him to recognize elements shared by all human beings—those common traits that unite him with the rest of humanity.<sup>58</sup>

The second major issue that Gadamer identifies at the root of the lack of genuine solidarity in modern societies is the misunderstanding of the role that experts play in civilization. Gadamer laments that modern societies are plagued by a generalized belief that experts should have the last word in all decision-making. Modernity’s characteristic idealization of science overestimates the role of experts in decision-making: by idealizing experts, individual human beings refuse to acknowledge that all human action ultimately depends on individual decisions that cannot be foisted onto others, regardless of whether they are experts or ordinary people.<sup>59</sup> Gadamer explains that “the more an institutionalized form of competence is constructed, which proffers the expert, the specialist, as an escape from our own not knowing, the more one covers up the limitations of such information and the necessity of one’s own decisions.”<sup>60</sup> In criticizing the overestimation of the role of experts, Gadamer does not deny the importance of experts in our societies; rather, he explicitly asserts that “it is a duty for human beings to incorporate as much knowledge as is possible in any of their decisions,” which means that each human being must seriously consider the information made available by experts in order to make enlightened individual decisions.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, the problem is not that there *are* experts; the problem is that individuals believe they are allowed to relinquish their obligation to make collective decisions by pretending that these decisions always ultimately depend on the knowledge of specialists. For this reason, while Gadamer encourages people to attentively consider the specialized knowledge that experts can provide them, and to mobilize this knowledge when making their decisions, he ultimately insists that decision-making—whether personal or collective—unavoidably depends on individual choices: *praxis*, human action, requires that “everyone share in the

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<sup>57</sup> Gadamer, “Freundschaft und Solidarität,” 156–57.

<sup>58</sup> Gadamer, “Freundschaft und Solidarität,” 156–57.

<sup>59</sup> Gadamer, “Freundschaft und Solidarität,” 122.

<sup>60</sup> Gadamer, “Freundschaft und Solidarität,” 149.

<sup>61</sup> Gadamer, “Freundschaft und Solidarität,” 150.

responsibility for his society, for his nation and ultimately for humanity.”<sup>62</sup> This resonates with the idea that Gadamer borrows from Vico and Shaftesbury: namely, that we can and must demand that every human being constantly display solidarity in her behavior by orienting her actions toward the collective good. In other words, despite the extreme specialization and bureaucratization of our modern societies, the individual human being must constantly remind herself that “the knowledge of another will never discharge [her from her decision-making]. That exactly defines the concept of responsibility and, in a certain sense, also the concept of [moral] conscience.”<sup>63</sup>

Gadamer does propose preliminary solutions to these problems underlying the lack of solidarity in our societies; he expresses being “convinced that even in a highly bureaucratized, thoroughly organized and thoroughly specialized society, it is possible to strengthen existing [natural] solidarities.”<sup>64</sup> In order to do this, he proposes an ethics of *φιλία*—an ethics of *con-vivencia* through which, in our constant interactions with others (our *Zusammenleben*), we become increasingly aware of the elements that unite us despite our overemphasized differences. An ethics of *φιλία* should help us identify the “avowed solidarities” that constantly conceal our more fundamental “authentic solidarities” and make the latter easier to perceive and cultivate. On the one hand, Gadamer’s ethics exhorts politicians to “not always present us with the drama of their conflicts with one another and of their expected success in the next elections, but rather to present those common elements which unite us in being responsible for our own future and the future of our children and that of our children’s children.”<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, Gadamer’s ethics also encourages individuals to listen carefully to the “ancient sonorities of a lived and practiced community, which reverberate in the family, the home, the market, the life of the village and the city, the commune, the church and the native land.”<sup>66</sup> In other words, Gadamer motivates us to “con-vivir,” to share our lives as much as possible, to co-experience the world by occupying and sharing public spaces, and, thus, to appreciate the subtle elements that unite us to one another and to all in our common finite human destination.<sup>67</sup> However, it is important

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<sup>62</sup> Gadamer, “Die Vielfalt Europas—Erbe und Zukunft,” 26.

<sup>63</sup> Gadamer, “Die Grenzen des Experten,” 151.

<sup>64</sup> Gadamer, “Die Grenzen des Experten,” 156.

<sup>65</sup> Gadamer, “Die Grenzen des Experten,” 157.

<sup>66</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Die Anthropologischen Grundlagen der Freiheit des Menschen,” in *Das Erbe Europas* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1990), 134. Here, again, and in what follows, the similarities between Gadamer and Dewey are remarkable. See John Dewey, *Ethics*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953*, vol. 7 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1932), 348–49.

<sup>67</sup> Gadamer, “Die Anthropologischen Grundlagen der Freiheit des Menschen,” 135.

that—as in “authentic dialogue” and “true friendship”—we do not resort to self-effacement in favor of otherness in our collective life together. Gadamer’s ethics does not involve “abandoning and extinguishing the self for the sake of universal acceptance, but rather mobilizing one’s own being for the understanding and recognition of the other,” and affirms that the “authentic task of the human future, which has truly gained global significance, lies in the area of human coexistence [*convivencia*] on this planet.”<sup>68</sup> More specifically, Gadamer suggests that “the best and highest objective that we could strive for and accomplish is to participate with the other and to be a part of the other. . . [experiencing] the other and the others, as the others of our self, in order that each of us participate with and in one another.”<sup>69</sup> In such a solidary coexistence with the rest of humanity, each individual is able to incorporate and practice one of Aristotle’s greatest lessons: that the common good toward which *paideia*/*Bildung* orients us is not only to the benefit of our communities, but also—as the welfare of our community has direct positive implications for our own wellbeing—to our individual benefit.<sup>70</sup> The common good is also, ultimately, the individual good. And the essence of this Aristotelian lesson corresponds precisely to the *Erhebung zu einer höheren Allgemeinheit* (the elevation to a higher generality) that Gadamer’s “true dialogue,” “accomplished friendship,” and “authentic solidarity” aspire to and make possible.

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<sup>68</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Die Zukunft der Europäischen Geisteswissenschaften,” in *Das Erbe Europas* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1990), 60. My citations of this work are guided by the following translation: Hans-Georg Gadamer, “L’avenir Récès ‘sciences de l’esprit’ européennes,” in *L’héritage de l’Europe*, trans. Philippe Ivernel (Paris: Éditions Payot et Rivages, 2003), 43–68.

<sup>69</sup> Gadamer, “Die Vielfalt Europas—Erbe und Zukunft,” 34.

<sup>70</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, VII, 1324a5–35.

## The Courage of Thinking in Utopias: Gadamer's "Political Plato"

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### Introduction

Hans-Georg Gadamer's engagement with Platonic philosophy started early in his life, at the beginning of his Marburg period, between 1919 and 1922, and took shape for the first time in his doctoral dissertation, *Das Wesen der Lust nach den platonischen Dialogen*, supervised by two renowned professors who were revising their own theoretical developments in light of phenomenology: Paul Natorp and Nicolai Hartmann. This decisive decade in Gadamer's life and works brought his first original contributions: the essays *Der aristotelische Protreptikos und die entwicklungsgeschichtliche Betrachtung der*

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*aristotelischen Ethik* (1928), *Praktisches Wissen* (1930),<sup>2</sup> and his first book, *Platos dialektische Ethik: phänomenologische Interpretationen zum 'Philebos'* (1931).<sup>3</sup> Thus, Gadamer started to build his own interpretation of Plato (and Aristotle) by means of a vivid confrontation not only with Marburg's Neo-Kantianism but also with Scheler's phenomenological reflections on anthropology and ethics, Heidegger's *Dasein*-analytics, *Altertumswissenschaft*'s philology, Werner Jaeger's Third Humanism, and finally the artistic and mystical Plato as interpreted by the *George-Kreis* circle.

The aim of this article is to explore Gadamer's early reflections on Plato's utopian thought and its potential topicality. In the following section, I will show how *areté*, understood as a hermeneutical and existential virtue, is dialectically related to ethics and politics in Gadamer's phenomenological reception of Plato's philosophy. I argue that, in Gadamer's eyes, Socratic-Platonic self-understanding enables human beings to be aware of their political responsibilities, to recognize how they are existentially and mutually related to the other, and to clarify dialectically their own existential possibilities in order to transcend their inherited world of values. In the third section, I aim to show how these are the grounds on which Gadamer's initial thoughts on the utopian dimension of Platonic political philosophy developed, mainly through his further critical account of the works on the German "political Plato" published in Germany between 1927 and 1933, i.e., Kurt Singer's *Platon, der Gründer* (1927), Julius Stenzel's *Platon. Der Erzieher* (1928), and Kurt von Hildendrandt's *Platon, Der Kampf des Geistes um die Macht* (1933). Then, in the fourth section, I will express my own views on the relevance of reconsidering how the notions of *areté*, *phronesis*, and *andreía* are already related in Plato's dialogues, complementing the insights on Gadamer's interpretation of *areté* in section two. My purpose is to go beyond Gadamer's reading and provide us with a more solid ground to address his late reflections on political courage and its relations with his dialectical understanding of Platonic utopia as a myth. Therefore, I will explore the problem of civil disobedience, a topic that was actually not at the centre of Gadamer's concerns, as a genuine mode of utopian political action which can enact a true deviation from the sophistic *pólis* and its understanding of power. Finally, in the conclusion, I will characterize Gadamer's portrait of Platonic utopia as a dialectical myth which enables human beings to recognize when politics are being reduced to mere power abuse by the State and also suggest why Gadamer's approach to utopias is still relevant today.

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<sup>2</sup> This essay remained unpublished until its further inclusion in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 5: *Griechische Philosophie I* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985). Henceforth cited as Gadamer, *GW* 5.

<sup>3</sup> A reworking of his 1928 *Habilitationschrift*—jointly supervised by two of his most important mentors, Paul Friedländer and Martin Heidegger—entitled *Interpretation des Platonischen Philebos*.

### *Areté* as Existential-hermeneutical Virtue

The first time Gadamer alluded the utopian character of *kallipolis* was in his *Platos dialektische Ethik*. The first pages of this book read: “*Republic* is not a program of constitutional reforms among others, aimed to having a direct political effect, but, instead, an educational State [*Staat der Erziehung*].”<sup>4</sup> As it will be shown, this statement is not a brief aside but an important starting point in Gadamer’s interpretative framework of Plato’s political philosophy.

In his essay on the Aristotelian *Protrepticus* some previous ideas can be found that may illuminate Gadamer’s insight on the relationship between education, politics, and philosophy. In this text, the figure of the statesman, i.e., the one who acts in view of an ethico-political science (*ethisch-politische Wissenschaft*), is compared with the *tékton* or constructor. This is not because Gadamer aimed to suggest that politics are as accurate as a *téchne* could be, but to underline a sharp contrast. The politician, unlike the constructor, has the urgent need to know on what grounds the social world is based. Hence, in Gadamer’s view, the ultimate ethico-political intention of the *Protrepticus* would have been to clarify the relation between human beings and things themselves, and not to external imitations or comparisons: the politician, unlike the sophist, must look at the living and dynamic nature (of life), rather than blindly imitate existing laws, constitutions, and social conventions.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, when Gadamer states that “the intuition of *phýsis* is demanded by the authentic philosophical politics,”<sup>6</sup> he is taking into account the fragment 55.3–6 of the *Protrepticus*, to which in fact he explicitly refers.

Gadamer’s early image of the Socratic-Aristotelian statesman is critical for understanding his later essays on Plato’s ethico-political ideas.<sup>7</sup> Rather than being a philosopher, the statesman should act like one. He must not proceed and judge according to a philosophical school, nor he must develop a special kind of politics that may be considered as suitable to philosophy: it is his action that must be philosophical, i.e., directed on each different occasion to *phýsis*, to the concrete experience of the *pólis*

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<sup>4</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 6. Translation is my own.

<sup>5</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 174–75.

<sup>6</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 175.

<sup>7</sup> Not only *Platos dialektische Ethik* (1931), but also *Die neue Platoforschung* (1933); *Plato und die Dichter* (1934); *Platos Staat der Erziehung* (1942); *Die Idee des Guten zwischen Plato und Aristoteles* (1978); and *Platos Denken in Utopien* (1983).



(and the *psychê*), which (obviously) has no correspondence to any historical *pólis* in particular, nor to the knowledge regarding the variety of existing institutional arrangements. Actual reflexive political action is shown as the kind of experience in which both the factual existence and the task of achieving a just mixture between *phronesis* and *hedoné* take place in view of the good life.<sup>8</sup>

This praise of philosophy, this exhortation to “awaken,” aims, precisely, to challenge the whole of the citizenry as a community. Consequently, its scope is to raise the status of the issues that mutually bind human beings by means of a general, direct, and popular invitation to think. However, it must be stated that this exhortation does not seek at any stage to impose a specific doctrine, but rather to affirm the not-always obvious—yet intimate—relationships between philosophy and politics<sup>9</sup> and, therefore, between the figures of the philosopher and the citizen-statesman.

Bearing this in mind, the statement on the political status of the philosophers can be more easily understood as the other side of the possibility of action and reflection of any citizen. In *Platos dialektische Ethik*, Gadamer decides to start from the *Seventh Letter* to point out that the philosopher’s existential ideal, that of leading a life devoted to pure theory, should be understood by no means as “extra-political” (*ausserstaatliches*). It does not imply any renunciation of *práxis*, understood (though not exclusively) as a concern for the whole of the things related to the *pólis*.<sup>10</sup> This clarification seems necessary since philosophy is a protreptic experience (unlike “monologic” sophistry) that has politico-educational effects on society, although it is not exercised in an obvious direct way—and this would especially be the case of *Republic* as a philosophical dialogue.

According to Gadamer, the tragical defection of Athens regarding Socrates would have reinforced Plato’s view on philosophy as a *detour* or *Ummweg* from the paths of the city. Nonetheless, this deviation did not entail a political withdrawal, but a change of direction that would have made the (most) “authentic political task” (*echten politischen Aufgabe*)<sup>11</sup> possible, an educational task, that it is inseparable from ethics insofar as, for Gadamer, ethics constitutes a concrete public understanding of the existence where human action takes place.

The notion of *areté* is understood by Gadamer at the same time as “existential and specifically human potentiality and intelligibility.”<sup>12</sup> Gadamer’s theoretical gesture,

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<sup>8</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 176.

<sup>9</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 170.

<sup>10</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 5–6.

<sup>11</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 6.

although implicitly, snatches *areté* from its traditional Latin appropriation as *virtus* and its subsequent Christian-scholastic and humanist determination. It arose from Gadamer's rupture with the Hartmannian reading of Aristotle (and Hartmann's phenomenology of values).<sup>13</sup> For Gadamer, Socratic-Platonic philosophy did not treat human existence in its facticity, neither the concepts of *areté* and *agathón eo ipso* but, instead, these latter two notions were determined by and defined in relation to something else which is neither its opposite nor its mere absence:

Therefore, the Socratic question about what *areté* would be (or a specific *areté*) is guided by a preliminary concept of *areté*, shared both by the questioner and the respondent. Every *Dasein* lives constantly in an understanding of *areté*. What and how the good citizen should be is already expressed in an interpretation that rules the entire public understanding of existence. It is the so-called morality. Hence, the concept of *areté* is a "public" one. Human existence, through it, is understood as being with-others-in-a-community [*das Sein des Menschen als ein Mit-Anderen-in-einer-Gemeinschaft*] (the *pólis*).<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, in Gadamer's account of Plato's philosophy, *areté* is always present as a public and original mode of self-understanding and existence. In fact, for Gadamer's Plato, there is no way of being human outside *areté*, neither freedom exists for those who do not consider themselves as citizens.<sup>15</sup> That is what Gadamer meant when, the previous year, he had stated in his *Praktisches Wissen* that "[o]ne can choose its own profession. It is not possible, however, to choose to be a human, one must always be such. . . . One cannot withdraw from his existence as a human," a statement

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<sup>13</sup> This led Gadamer to a theoretical reworking that he summarized in his mature years as follows: "ethics is only the elaboration of a moral conscience, which as such is already normative. Aristotle does say this. . . : the *arché* is the *bóti*, that is, the beginning is the 'that' (*Das*), the *quod*. In ethics one does not begin with a deduction of a supreme ultimate foundation, but, conversely, with that which seems valid to everybody, with 'the fact that. . .' (*Das*). This *Das* or *quod* is not, of course, a mere fact, but a recognized normativity, the one that is possible to find in the *legomena*; the one on which a society already agrees. His ethics. . . elaborates the normative concepts on which the Greek citizens of his time agreed. . . . This elaboration is a theoretical clarification, yet it is based on the validity of *ethos*. It is not, therefore, the foundation of an *ethos*, but only its clarification" (Hans-Georg Gadamer, "La ética es una aclaración teórica del *ethos* vigente. Una conversación de Ricardo Maliandi y Hans-Georg Gadamer," in *Valores blasfemos. Diálogos con Heidegger y Gadamer*, ed. Graciela Fernández and Ricardo Maliandi [Buenos Aires: Las cuarenta, 2009], 82). Gadamer essentially moves away not only from theories of the value of values such as those of Lotze, but also from maintaining a strict (Aristotelian) separation between ethical and dianoetic virtues.

<sup>14</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 39, original emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 39.

with ethical consequences that is strongly present in his 1931 book.<sup>16</sup> Thus, *areté* is not something someone can or cannot have in a possessive and individual sense. When Gadamer stated that “along with the claim of being a citizen there is necessarily given the even broader claim of possessing *areté*, which makes oneself a citizen, that is, a man,”<sup>17</sup> he understood that the possibility of “appropriating” *areté* is not that of directing or manipulating it but, rather, that of accessing it by means of *lógos*: the claim of owning *areté* refers unequivocally to this participation in a shared understanding and its ethico-political consequences.

It seems Gadamer bore in mind the famous Socratic *dictum*: “Virtue has no master; whether it is honoured or despised, each one will have a greater or lesser part of it. The responsibility belongs to him who chooses, god is not responsible” (*Rep.* 617e; my trans.). For he who chooses must deal with the consequences of his actions and give response to them. Accordingly, anyone who presumes to be rational cannot escape from determining by itself what is right in view of different concrete situations, without resorting neither to the historically available *exempla* (in sharp opposition, for example, to what the National Socialist philologist Hans Drexler suggests in 1944 through his concept of *parádeigma*<sup>18</sup>) nor to the gods. *Areté*, as a hermeneutical virtue, emerges here as constitutive of existence, it is what defines humanity as such, that is, it is its supreme possibility and end.

Furthermore, according to Gadamer, Platonic ethics are dialectical because the hermeneutical dimension of *areté* grounds on a conception of men as entities “on the road” (*Unterwegs*) and “in between” (*zwischen*),<sup>19</sup> as well as on a characterization of philosophy as men’s more excellent potentiality and proper task. It is a dialogical activity that belongs both to the temporal and plural domain, and which, in turn, reveals the finitude of the “I” in facing the “Thou” and the limits of the own lifetime.<sup>20</sup> “In conceiving,” philosophy “remains on the road to the concept [*unterwegs zum Begriff*].”<sup>21</sup> This road of mutual understanding about the subject matter in common is

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<sup>16</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 242. See also *GW* 5, 110. As Francisco J. González appropriately remarked, for Gadamer there is no actual alternative between the life of pure pleasure or pure *nous* and the life of the good since the former entails a life that refuses dialectic and dialogue while the latter embraces both of them and, as a consequence, presents itself as the only actual choice of a genuine life (“Plato’s Dialectical Ethics, or Taking Gadamer at His Word,” in *Hermeneutic Philosophy and Plato: Gadamer’s Response to the Philebus*, ed. Christopher Gill and François Renaud [Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2010], 182).

<sup>17</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 40.

<sup>18</sup> Hans Drexler, “Zur Humanismusfrage. Versuch einer positiven Antwort,” *Kant-Studien* 44 (1944): 79–80.

<sup>19</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 73.

a path marked by “a demand for accountability [*Rechenschaftsgabe*],”<sup>22</sup> a practical dialectical and dialogical clarification of the existential possibilities of the human being, “of that which man claims to be.”<sup>23</sup>

As stated at the beginning of this section, for Gadamer, *Republic* remains an exercise of an alternative and transhistorical educational State aimed to having an indirect political effect in the historical *pólis*. Through this dialogue as well as the Aristotelian *Protrepticus* it is possible to understand the “true” politician as someone who acts “philosophically,” i.e., someone who recognizes the need of knowing the grounds of the social world in which he lives as a personal responsibility. Nevertheless, this knowledge cannot be obtained by studying exclusively the positive laws and the social conventions that shape the *poleis* nor by trying to resort to an ideal and unconditional model in order to execute it as a program of institutional reforms. The authentic politician and citizen must be aware of the changing relations and mutual intertwining between the individual soul or character and the customs and positive laws while he is making his decisions in view of an absent and unitarian good. As Francisco J. González accurately summarizes:

This relation to a good that can never be made fully present, this constant struggle with indeterminacy and multiplicity in the ever-renewed effort to impose measure on life, this ceaseless mediation between the process that is pleasure and the stable being sought by the understanding: it is all this that makes ethics inherently and inescapably dialectical.<sup>24</sup>

By acting in this way, citizens can achieve an understanding of the deep and not-so-obvious socio-educational causes and consequences of their actions, deeds, and words. However, understanding one own’s place within a political community means not only that human beings can become aware of their political responsibilities and shared values, nor even to recognize their own humanity as such, i.e., to unveil how they are existentially and mutually related to their other fellowmen, but also it renders real for them the possibility of “denying their own *tópos*” as the only possible world. This means that human beings are able to recognize a socio-political ethically

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<sup>22</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 40.

<sup>23</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 73.

<sup>24</sup> González, “Plato’s Dialectical Ethics, or Taking Gadamer at His Word,” 183. As early as in 1924, Gadamer already stated that “the essence of the philosophical position” lies in “bearing the problem in its undecidability and its patent lack of certainty” (Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Zur Systemidee in der Philosophie,” in *Festschrift für Paul Natorp zum 70. Geburtstage von Schülern und Freunden gewidmet* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 1924], 57).

conditioned order and, at the same time, to clarify dialectically their own existential possibilities in order to transcend it, making possible what seemed not to be such, “unforgetting” what the inherited world has concealed. As a consequence, it could be said that, in Gadamer’s eyes, it seems possible for politicians and citizens to go “beyond” a particular shared understanding of a culturally located common world by means of the unconditional transformative (and confrontationist) potential of philosophical action, opening the road in which human existence transiently dwells. In the following section I aim to show how these are the grounds on which Gadamer’s early utopian interpretation of Plato developed later.

### **Gadamer’s Early Reading of Platonic Utopian Thinking and the *Platoforschung*: In Search of “a State in Words”**

As Stenzel acknowledged in his 1932 review of Gadamer’s first book, Gadamer’s reference to the Socratic accountability would have allowed him to present in detail “the connection between, on the one hand, dialogue, conversation, and language in general with, on the other hand, a dialectic founded on action.”<sup>25</sup> In Plato’s theoretical investigation of the good, dialectics would have the strength to destroy the peace of the symmetries that is set by normative dogmas through habituation. Thus, dialectics would provide an understanding of human beings as entities that do not dispose definitively of themselves and whose highest possibility lies in experiencing finitude: the limit that does not entail an obstacle, but the possibility of, on the one hand, the emergence of oneself as another, and, on the other hand, a deviation that denies the very idea of place by means of its unrealizability and that demands the overcoming of current injustice and ignorance. As stated at the end of the previous section, it is possible to find here the first features of how Gadamer’s utopian interpretation of Plato’s political thought was initially conceived. As we will see next, these views will be ultimately shaped by Gadamer’s explicit and implicit later theoretico-political rejections and endorsements of other authors’ interpretations.

This utopian reading of Plato’s political thinking was harshly rejected in Weimar Germany and afterwards. After the First World War, Ulrich Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, the main reference of *Altertumswissenschaft*, dismissed the utopian character of Plato’s thought, which, from his perspective, would have brought him

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<sup>25</sup> Julius Stenzel, “Hans-Georg Gadamer [Priv.-Doz. Philos. an d. Univ. Marburg], Platos dialektische Ethik. Phänomenologische Interpretationen zum ‘Philebos’.” Leipzig, Felix Meiner, 1931,” *Deutsche Literaturzeitung: Wochenschrift für Kritik der internationalen Wissenschaften* 53, no. 49 (1932): coll. 2311.

unsustainably closer to the (Christian) impotence of Thomas More's "superfluous fantasies."<sup>26</sup> Instead, for Wilamowitz, "Plato was sacredly serious about his reform; he was well disposed to lend a hand in implementing it. . . . The fact that this was denied to him was the tragedy of his life."<sup>27</sup>

Although Wilamowitz's Plato, as Arnaldo Momigliano notes, "anticipates that of the followers of Stefan George. . . in the fact of being a *Führer*," the influential *Georgereis* members found it "too bourgeois."<sup>28</sup> In fact, Kurt von Hildebrandt published the critical article "*Hellas und Wilamowitz: zum Ethos der Tragödie*" in 1910. Hildebrandt's publication was a real milestone, highlighting the rupture, mediated by the influence of Nietzsche's philosophy, between the new generation of philologists around George (some of them Wilamowitz's early pupils) and the school of Wilamowitz.<sup>29</sup>

In 1933, Hildebrandt joined the Nazi Party and published *Platon, Der Kampf des Geistes um die Macht*, a book that presented an irrationalist, heroic, and caudillesque Plato. He even added a famous note to the 1935 edition in which he stated, in a corporatist fashion, that the "principle of *Politeia*" was the "clarification of men in the estates within the State" as well as an obvious eulogy of the National Socialist regime: "For what today we call 'the total State' there is no more perfect figuration than Plato's *Politeia*."<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, it was from a very different point of view that Hildebrandt, like Wilamowitz before, also engaged in an open battle with the utopian understanding of Plato's *Republic*. In his own words, "Plato's kingdom [*Das platonische Reich*] is of this world!"<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Ulrich Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Der griechische und der platonische Staatsgedanke* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1919), 4.

<sup>27</sup> Wilamowitz, *Der griechische und der platonische Staatsgedanke*, 4. Basically, Wilamowitz's conception of Utopia was the inverted image of the Cohenian idealistic reading. See Hermann Cohen, *Werke. Band 17. Kleinere Schriften VI 1916–1918*, ed. Hartwig Wiedebach (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2002), 320, 328.

<sup>28</sup> Arnaldo Momigliano, "Premesse per una discussione su Wilamowitz," *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. Classe di Lettere e Filosofia* serie III, vol. 3, no. 1 (1973): 116.

<sup>29</sup> Therefore, a new movement of philologists was born, represented by Karl Reinhardt, Wolfgang Schadewaldt, Hermann Friedemann, and Paul Friedländer. Furthermore, from 1927 onwards, Werner Jaeger, Julius Stenzel, and other followers of the Third Humanism were seduced by a similar plastic, creative, artistic, and political-pedagogical vision of Plato. Also, the members of the *Georgereis* published vast numbers of books and articles on Plato from the point of view of his historical figure and on the political role of *eros* in his philosophy, all within the framework of a very strong Nietzscheanism. Among them stood out—along with the text of Kurt von Hildebrandt—Edgar Salin's *Platon und die griechische Utopie* (1921), Hans Leisegang's *Die Platondichtung der Gegenwart* (1929), and Kurt Singer's *Platon, der Gründer* (1927).

<sup>30</sup> Kurt von Hildebrandt, *Platon. Der Kampf des Geistes um die Macht* (Berlin: Bondi, 1935), 364.

<sup>31</sup> Hildebrandt, *Platon*, 131.

Gadamer retorted to Hildebrandt's remarks on the relevance of Plato's philosophy as an exhortation to direct and programmatic action in the frame of an exercise of intellectual legitimization of National Socialism, by defining Platonic *kallípolis*—as he would say in 1934 in his *Plato und die Dichter*—as a “State in words,”<sup>32</sup>

[a] State in thought, not a State on earth. That is, its purpose is to illuminate something and not to provide a plan of action for an improved order in real political life. Plato's State is an original image in the heavens for anyone who wishes to ordain himself and his internal constitution. Its only scope is to allow the recognition of oneself in an original image. Whoever recognizes himself in this does not, however, do so as an isolated and Stateless entity. It recognizes in itself the ground on which the reality of the State is built despite how degenerate and deformed the actual State in which it lives may be.<sup>33</sup>

Far from being reform proposals for the implementation of sovereign projects, as Aristotle (*Pol.* II 1260b36–1261a22; 1261b9–32; 1262b36; IV 1291a11) or Karl Popper<sup>34</sup> acknowledged, the way Platonic dialogues operate would be that of the ironic—and even grotesque—criticism of the present.

In fact, this Gadamerian understanding of Plato was first developed in 1933 in an article called “*Die neue Platoforschung*.” This essay, published in *Logos*, was devoted to reviewing the last German publications on Plato written by Third Humanism proponents and renowned *Georgekreis* classicists.<sup>35</sup> By means of his comments, debates, and criticisms, it is possible to reconstruct Gadamer's initial reflections on the utopian character of Plato's philosophy.

One of the main books Gadamer analyzed in his review was Stenzel's *Platon, der Erzieher* (1928). Gadamer shows himself concerned about Stenzel's rejection of the utopian character of *Republic*. Stenzel's arguments resorted not only to Plato's Syracusan experience, but also to the literal contents of *Republic* and the political undertakings of the members of the Academy. On the other hand, Stenzel assumed, like many of his colleagues, an internal analogy of destiny manifested in the persistence and triumph of sophistry in modern times.<sup>36</sup> Gadamer's review explicitly rejected

<sup>32</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 196. See also *Rep.* 472d–e, 592b; *Leg.* 702d.

<sup>33</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 194.

<sup>34</sup> Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1945).

<sup>35</sup> The works Gadamer critically addressed were authored by Julius Stenzel, Kurt Singer, Karl Reinhardt, Paul Friedländer, and Werner Jaeger.

<sup>36</sup> Stenzel, *Platon, der Erzieher* (Leipzig: Meiner, 1928), 110.

Stenzel's "apologetic attitude"<sup>37</sup> towards some specific *Republic* passages, considering it a theoretically and politically insufficient interpretative exercise. In Gadamer's view:

The expulsion of poets from the State, for example, is not a serious reform proposal for the political body—as neither is the community of women—but a reactive provocation whose meaning consists in showing that what exists is already corrupted. Positively, such ideas only mean an enhancement of the image of man in his own true possibility. The more radical the reform ideas are, the more effectively they show what is properly relevant—and not *in concreto*: how it should be.<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, for Gadamer, philosophy enables friendship, politics, community, and the State because "the being of the genuine man makes possible a genuine State."<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, a State is not "genuine" for the sake of its own activity and productivity, but because it flourishes from politics, that is, from the coexistence of friends "in the common thing that philosophy is."<sup>40</sup> Thus, Platonic education means, in Gadamer's eyes, "education for philosophy, and it is only education for the State to the extent that the project of a State foundation projects a being proper to man, to whom all education ultimately points to."<sup>41</sup> In contrast, Stenzel's interpretation of Plato as an educator does not renounce an image of the personified State. In fact, for Stenzel, *Republic's* citizens receive their own personal dignity and freedom through self-chosen subordination to the authority of the demiurgic leaders—creators of free human beings—, or more exactly, "from the idea of the State-personality which lives" in those pedagogue-leaders.<sup>42</sup> In this sense, for Stenzel, the philosophical leaders are the only creators of the correct and non-degenerated human type (*Menschentypus*).<sup>43</sup> It is possible to observe how Stenzel's interpretation, as Jaeger's,<sup>44</sup> worryingly empowers a State-based determination of *humanitas* that could institute and realize the highest human type, determining a differential ontological rank to the citizens holders of such *humanitas*.

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<sup>37</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 218.

<sup>38</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 218.

<sup>39</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 219.

<sup>40</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 219.

<sup>41</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 219.

<sup>42</sup> Stenzel, *Platon, der Erzieher*, 116.

<sup>43</sup> Stenzel, *Platon, der Erzieher*, 116.

<sup>44</sup> Werner Jaeger, *Paideia. Die Formung des griechischen Menschen*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1946), 12–14; *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. 1, trans. Gilbert Highet (Oxford: Blackwell, 1946), xxiii.



Gadamer explicitly rejects that Platonic thought could be understood as a “philosophy of education”<sup>45</sup> when he writes, “if one wishes to grasp the core of the Platonic work, it is forbidden wanting to reach something immediately from it for the idea of education.”<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, Gadamer, cannot accept Stenzel’s “Nietzschean” passage on the notion of *paideía*: “the ‘generation’ [*erzeugen*] of human beings out of the community that integrates them underlies this idea of pedagogy. Yet, Plato reaches the idea of education from the idea of human being.”<sup>47</sup> The irreparable rupture between Gadamer’s reading of Plato and Stenzel’s would materialize in the latter’s effort to extract from Greece the powers that Weimar’s Germany lacked, to “annex the strength of antiquity, the *δύναμις* and the *οικεία ἀρετή*, by means of a complete submission to its concrete reality” and his exhortation and will to “grasp immaterial Ideas, *α σώματα εἶδε* in the embodiments, *εἶδωλα*, of antiquity,”<sup>48</sup> as he mentioned in in a 1930 speech entitled “What is Alive and What is Dead in the Philosophy of Classical Antiquity?” at the Seventh International Congress for Philosophy held in Oxford.

Even more interesting are Gadamer’s reflections on Kurt Singer’s *Platon, der Gründer*.<sup>49</sup> Gadamer takes the occasion of his review to clarify some points that will have programmatic importance in his further interpretation of Plato, i.e., the refusal to understand Plato as a State thinker, the operational power of ambiguity and enigma derived from the mimetic dimension of language (and the subsequent problem of literality), the mythical status of the *kallipolis*, and the complexity of the relation between philosophy and political power. To begin with, Gadamer, as indicated, agreed with Singer’s rejection of Plato as a State thinker. Thus, Singer’s Plato offered Gadamer an interesting alternative starting point to reconsider Plato’s political philosophy disregarding any “will to State” that is, an alleged “unequivocal-positive attitude towards the ‘State’” on the part of Plato.<sup>50</sup> Singer’s main contribution, which Gadamer

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<sup>45</sup> This was the title of Ernst Krieck’s first book, *Philosophie der Erziehung*. In this book and in his later works, Krieck, who eventually became a keen National Socialist, developed, through his reading of Plato, a theory of political education aimed to “breed” a “higher racial human type” by means of a unitary State-based national community. I defined this metaphysical and political framework, which also encompasses key features of Jaeger’s and Stenzel’s reception of Plato’s thought, as “State Typohumanism” (Facundo Norberto Bey, “State Typohumanism and Its Role in the Rise of *völkisch*-racism: *Paideía* and *Humanitas* at Issue in Jaeger’s and Krieck’s ‘Political Plato,’” in *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 53, no. 12 (2020): 1272–82.

<sup>46</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 219.

<sup>47</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 219.

<sup>48</sup> Julius Stenzel, *Kleine Schriften zur griechischen Philosophie* (Bad Homburg: Hermann Gentner, 1966), 301.

<sup>49</sup> Kurt Singer, *Platon, der Gründer* (München: Beck, 1927).

<sup>50</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 214.

did not hesitate to call “a truly hermeneutic approach,”<sup>51</sup> was to show that it is possible to rescue the political dimension of Platonic thought without reducing his life and work to anachronistic praise of “government institutions.” But, if not a State, what does it mean that Plato “the founder” founds? What is this enigma of sovereignty about? The main strength of Singer’s text would lie, in Gadamer’s words, in the fact that it “captures the sense of the indissoluble ambiguity of this founding will, whose ‘foundation’ is a State and yet it is not. If it were a state, this would mean: a utopia.”<sup>52</sup>

Gadamer reclaims the operational power of ambiguity and enigma, which emerges in the mimetic dimension of language, and enshrines it as the founding principle of all Platonic politics (without neglecting the radical risk of written language and its claim towards autonomy). Thus, Singer provides Gadamer with the framework for his own further reflections on the impossible ground of the only possible Platonic State: an absent terrain for a State that is not and that will never be as literal mimesis of *kallípolis*.

Although Gadamer did not quote them in his review, he could have not but agreed with Singer’s words: “as a myth. . . *Politeia* is beyond the question of the possibility and impossibility of its realization.”<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, for Gadamer, if Plato’s “founding will” were understood “as an educational system it would be an aplatonic dogmatism.” On the other hand, if it were considered as “the foundation of a cult for a community,” there is a risk of “overlooking that this community is not there yet.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, the utopian character of *Republic* (and *Laws*) acquired an original meaning for Gadamer insofar as it reveals “the political” as a potentiality inscribed in the being of man, unintelligible outside the paths of the “laborious game” (*Parm.* 137b) of dialectical interrogation, rendering the possibility to rethink the relationship between philosophy and politics. Unlike Jaeger’s reading of Plato’s *paideía*, the community to which the Platonic founding force is directed is not a homogeneous and harmonious product of an external “formative will” that embodies a program, of a *Bildung* that reveals itself to be a *téchne* at the service of a *makros paidagógos*. In Gadamer’s words:

What it is founded here does not matter by itself, but rather [what actually matters is] the foundation, the very act of a philosophizing of a royal nature [*königlichen Philosophentums*], which has no kingdom or subjects and,

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<sup>51</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 214.

<sup>52</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 214.

<sup>53</sup> Singer, *Platon, der Gründer*, 119.

<sup>54</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 214.

nevertheless, is sovereign; a founding that does not found that which gives itself to found and yet establishes a real foundation [*wirklichen Grund*].<sup>55</sup>

Gadamer's retrieval of Singer's Plato also entails an ambiguous message on ambiguity with enormous philosophico-political resonances for its contemporaneity.

Accordingly, we find such an actual remarkable and controversial reflection in the only textual quotation from Singer that appears in Gadamer's review. The statement in question asserts that Plato, the sovereign founder, would be such precisely by being a "master in letting-being-not-deciding [*im Dabingestellt-Sein-Lassen*], in not-being-himself—yet-resolved [*Noch-Nicht-Entscheiden*]." Thus, Plato becomes visible as a sovereign "in hesitating and in persevering [in his hesitation] with virile resistance."<sup>56</sup> Read this way, Plato is a tricky philosopher who publicly exposes himself behind a warrior's disguise, but whose manliness is not visible to the naked eye.<sup>57</sup>

On the same page from which Gadamer draws Singer's quotation, the latter characterizes Plato as someone who is neither "resolved" nor solves problems or discussions, since "accepting and rejecting a solution to problems is not something that occurs linearly with a living thinker."<sup>58</sup> Singer compares thereupon in this passage Plato to Dante Alighieri. It is interesting to note that, on this last comparison, Singer refers in his text to Dante's famous *Epistle XIII*, addressed to the Veronese *condottiero* and patron Cangrande della Scala. In this letter, Dante refers to the meaning of his *Commedia* as "*polysemos*, that is, of many senses" (*Ep. XIII*, [20] 7; my trans.), and declares the double meaning, literal and allegorical (*lato sensu*), of his own work. For Alighieri, these allegorical meanings, also called "mystical" (*sensus mystici*), are such because they are beyond any "literal or historical" sense, "for allegory comes from Greek '*alleon*,' which in Latin is '*alienium*' or '*diversum*'" (*Ep. XIII*, [22] 7).

As a consequence, for Singer, the "logic" of Platonic dialectics could not be reduced to what it fits in *lógos*, since *lógos* itself exceeds its own limits in its movement towards what it results from the interruption or suspension of a cognitive relationship, i.e., *álogon*: "A hint [*Wink*] and a return [*Wendung*] of a spirit who loves to hide in the light and to reveal itself in the mask."<sup>59</sup> What Singer calls *Alogisches* is not exactly the irrational or the non-rational, neither the absurd nor the insane. *Alogisches* is the ineffable, the unspeakable; it would be a moment of *lógos* in which its aspect recognizes

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<sup>55</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 214.

<sup>56</sup> Singer, *Platon, der Gründer*, 34.

<sup>57</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 214.

<sup>58</sup> Singer, *Platon, der Gründer*, 34.

<sup>59</sup> Singer, *Platon, der Gründer*, 34.

an insurmountable limit; it is what we may call an “al-archic” and “an-archic” moment of an essentially multiple, dia-logical, reasonableness. Accordingly, the existential encounter with this limit would be the experience of language and reason itself, an experience that can be said only metaphorically.<sup>60</sup>

Up to now, Gadamer’s utopian interpretation of Plato’s political thought can be summarized through three axes: firstly, the role played by the individual, the community, and the State in determining human beings’ existential possibilities. As suggested previously, for Gadamer the individual-singular dimension is never annulled by community life, nor does the latter appear personified or incorporated in a State-based form. We cannot find in Gadamer’s account of Plato’s political philosophy the idea that neither the State nor the leaders would be the “creators” of the community nor of its individual members in a corporeal or territorial (in short, “topical”) sense.

Secondly, Gadamer’s view on the necessity and task of a philosophical *paideía* is that instead of being a tool for the “production” or “breeding” of a higher human type by the State, *paideía* is rooted on what could be called the “archeomithical” ground of the soul, the *arkhé* of *kinesis*. Gadamer, as we can read in *Plato und die Dichter*, implicitly accepted Karl Reinhardt’s view for which the true Platonic myth is the myth of the soul, a soul that is originally split by two dissonant principles: meekness (*praieia*) and spiritedness (*thymós*)<sup>61</sup> (*Rep.* 375c6–7). Thus, *paideía*’s mission, humans’ own supreme task, would be to philosophically combine these principles in order to give rise to the true political and philosophical human being. For on this interpretation the State is not the end of political man, nor is it the cause of his being human, any more than is the just State, which only exists in the words of philosophy, i.e., in eloquent negatives of the worst features of the historical *pólis*. In short, Platonic *paideía* can never be exhausted in the modern frame of State education. As Gadamer will state one year later in his conference *Plato und die Dichter*, Plato aims to bring the possible (the education of the political man by minding his own care) closer by granting us a metaphorical image of the impossible (a *paideia* whose unlimited capacity derives from itself and not from an already existing *éthos*).<sup>62</sup> Therefore, the philosophical education is able and should be looking askance at the objectified *pólis*.

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<sup>60</sup> As Dante stated in another letter: “For there are many things that we behold with the intellect for which we lack vocal symbols: Plato insinuated this sufficiently in his books by the use of metaphors [*per assumptionem metaphorismorum*]; for he beheld many things by an intellectual light which he could not express with his own exhortative speech [*sermone proprio*]” (*Ep.* XIII, [29] 84).

<sup>61</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 198–200.

<sup>62</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 197.

Thirdly, the empowered image of Plato as the philosopher of dialogue who is aware of the unavoidable risks of (written) language ambiguities.<sup>63</sup> In this regard, the passage on Plato by Dante is also quite interesting because it highlights an additional issue that is of interest both to Singer's book and to Gadamer's review: the parenetic and homiletical character of Platonic saying (*eíro*), that is, on the one hand, its protreptic purpose—in contrast to the aprotreptic force of the monological discourse of sophistry—and, on the other hand, its dialogical discursive modality, contained in the Latin term chosen by Dante, *sermone*, which reminds the reader the importance of conversation partners for any education, as can be read in Plato's warning in *Republic*, when he points out that achieving moderation in the soul is always endangered by the combination of certain *homilías* together with bad tutoring (*trophēs kakēs*) (*Rep.* 431a).<sup>64</sup>

In the next two sections, the first two aforementioned critical issues will be addressed. In the following section, I will express my own views on the relevance of reconsidering *areté*, but now from the point of view of its mutual relation with *andreía* and *phronesis*, I shall address some possible “subversive” features of a utopian reading of Plato's *kallípolis*. My proposal aims to explore a compatible framework to Gadamer's latest reflections on political courage and his account of the problem of political power abuse in Plato's thought (which will be exposed in the conclusion) but going beyond Gadamer's assessments of these questions. In order to do this, I will show how political courage and civil disobedience relate in Platonic dialogues with the intention of reading under a new light what we may consider a philosophical departure point to reflect on a topic that was actually not at the center of Gadamer's theoretico-political concerns. Finally, in the conclusion, I will resort to Gadamer's approach to the Platonic utopia as a dialectical myth which enables human beings to recognize when politics were or are being reduced to mere power abuse by the State.

### ***Areté* as Political Courage and the Question of Civil Disobedience**

Although in an implicit way, Gadamer's early phenomenological analysis of *areté* as hermeneutical and existential virtue will be later integrated, on the one hand, with

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<sup>63</sup> Claude Theriën summarizes with clarity how, in Gadamer's phenomenological analysis of the dialectic speech in *Platos dialektische Ethik*, dialogue exposes the power of language and critically addresses the dangerous, continuous, and inevitable pretension of sophistry of dominating speech (“Gadamer et la phénoménologie du dialogue,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 53, no. 1 [1997]: 175).

<sup>64</sup> Something similar could also be said in the opposite sense; for instance, when looking at the question that Socrates asks Adeimantus later: “do you suppose there is any way of keeping someone from imitating that which he admires and therefore keeps company with [*homilei*]?” (*Rep.* 500c; trans. Bloom).

virtue's traditional, martial and masculine connotations (which migrated to the stem *vir* in the Latin term *virtus*), as well as with the Socratic notion of accountability as being brave enough to conflict with oneself. However, before continuing with Gadamer's theoretical developments, I consider it appropriate to go beyond them and briefly review how the notions of *areté*, *phrónesis*, and *andreía* are already related in Plato's dialogues. My purpose is to enrich our initial insight on Gadamer's interpretation of *areté* in section two and to provide us with a more solid ground to address Gadamer's late reflections on political courage and its relations with his dialectical understanding of Platonic utopia as a myth intended both metaphorically and dialectically to reveal the political possibilities of what is assumed to be impossible as well as expose the actual existing injustices in the *pólis*, whose fundamental features were presented in the previous section. Lastly, I will address the problem of civil disobedience as a possible genuine mode of utopian political action which can enact a true deviation from the sophistic *pólis* and its understanding of power.

As it is widely known, the term *areté* is etymologically linked to the god of war, Ares, and, consequently, to being skilled on the battlefield and overcoming the enemy and the obstacles it may pose. In this light, virtue is related to confrontation and survival. Accordingly, for this traditional understanding of *areté*, what would make a human being excellent is the unfolding of his warrior potential. Consequently, the fact of being brave would be the maximum expression of human excellence. Nonetheless, it should be remembered that, as Gadamer stated in 1931, “the Socratic question on *areté* is a demand for accountability.”<sup>65</sup> For Plato, the utter mode of participation of human beings in *areté* would be linked to a knowledge (*Meno*. 89a), which is neither exclusively technical nor theoretical: it entails a practical and shared reasonableness, which is neither a tool nor a faculty aimed at providing “solutions” but an existential disposition—which already supposes courage—led by the idea of the good.<sup>66</sup>

The Platonic Socrates found the recklessness of Homeric-traditional heroism insufficient as a paradigm of excellent courage. From *Laches* and *Protagoras* to *Laws*, Platonic *andreía* is always deeply related to *phrónesis* (*Lach.* 197bc). As Nicias acknowledges in *Laches*, only the right-minded (*phrónimos*) deserve to be called brave and courageous. It is possible to observe something similar when looking at a late dialogue such as *Laws* (630b–635b), where it is clearly stated that if there is any human intention of consolidating mutual trust between men, friendship, and peace,—i.e., *sympáses aretés* (*Leg.* 630b; 631c), *aretés páses* (632e), or integral virtue—the only solid

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<sup>65</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 40.

<sup>66</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 246.

basis for a justice directed towards its own proper end (630c), *andreía* cannot be conceived as separated from *dikaíosyne*, *sophrosyne*, and *phrónesis*. Those who are willing to fight and die only for the sake of war, like the citizen-warriors that Tyrtaeus praises in his poetry, are reckless (*thraseís*), unjust (*ádikoi*), arrogant (*hybristaí*), and completely devoid of *phrónesis* (630b). These individuals are unreliable and unable to trust others. Their actions exacerbate violence and conflict, especially when the most terrible and fearsome phenomenon (*tó deinón*) lurks and spreads over the *pólis* (630c).

However, although incredibly significant, these are not the only Socratic-Platonic statements that challenge the traditional conception of courage, previously understood as recklessness and pure superior physical strength—an interpretation fostered and updated by the sophists, as Thrasymachus intended in *Republic* (338c) and Megillos, the spartan citizen, in *Laws* (638a).<sup>67</sup> As it is stated in *Republic*, courage is not only knowing what is fearsome but also being able to preserve (*sotería*) one's own opinion about what is to be feared even in circumstances where pleasure, pain, fear itself, and desire indicate something other (*Rep.* 429a–430c; 442b11–c3; *Leg.* 633d). This kind of courage is called by Plato *andreían politikén* (*Rep.* 430c2–3), “political courage.”

That is the reason why we read in *Laws* that whoever acts virtuously needs reflection (*phrónesis*) no less than courage (*andreía*) when a judgment regarding a particular situation is to be made (*kríno*) (659a3–4). When judging an issue, the virtuous citizen, warrior, and politician must give in neither to the threat of the pedagogical claim of fevered mobs (659b) nor to his own arrogance as individual. An aphronetic *andreía* does not allow to fully participate in common life, i.e., to take care of oneself as well as the others. It retreats man into an isolated realm characterized by “boldness, daring and fearless recklessness” (*Lach.* 197b; trans. Waterfield). As a matter of fact, in *Platos Staat der Erziehung*, when Gadamer referred to *andreía* as the specific virtue of the warriors, he stated that this is not the “bestial” [courage] of the combatants,” but “of the man who uses weapons for everyone and never for himself alone.”<sup>68</sup> Gadamer's need to make this clear distinction cannot but to point to the coercive nature of State power and not only to the weapons issue itself. This means that, although the extreme case of weapons should not be excluded, Gadamer's reference points globally towards any type of differential advantage or benefit for the rulers over the ruled, which in turn would reinforce the coercive aspect of the State. As we will seek to show, it is the aforementioned boldness of the arrogant men that, from an ethico-political point of

<sup>67</sup> Although Thrasymachus refers to justice, as can be read in *Rep.* 441c–d, this is inseparable from wisdom and courage.

<sup>68</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 257.

view, ultimately turns them into slaves of the pleasant seduction of State power and the paths of abuse and flattering corruption.

At the cost of Laches's stupefaction, courage, in turn, is described in the homonymous dialogue not only as a part of *areté* but also as a certain kind of *sophía*. Yet, what kind of knowledge could it be? And, in what way now would courage participate of virtue? To answer these questions, it will be necessary to go through the characterization that appears at the end of *Protagoras*, where *andreía* is also called *sophía* (*Prot.* 360d)—as happens later in *Republic* (441cd)—and even *episteme* (*Prot.* 361b). In this dialogue, courage is defined as a kind of wisdom consistent in knowing “about what is to be feared and what isn't” (360d4; trans. Taylor). However, as Gadamer remarked in *Die Idee des Guten zwischen Plato und Aristoteles*, this last definition poses for Plato the further problem of establishing what is to be understood within *tó deinón*. Thus, in this context, courage remains still within the dialectic (and controversial) Socratic appropriation of the traditional *aretai* by means of a mediation between the different kinds of virtue and its unity.

*Areté's* etymology could also largely reinforce the Gadamerian interpretation. Although Gadamer never mentions it, the Greek word *areté* derives, on the one hand, from the Proto-Indo-European root *\*h<sub>2</sub>reb* (*\*h<sub>2</sub>rb<sub>1</sub>-téh<sub>2</sub>*). On the other hand, the root *\*h<sub>2</sub>reb* belongs to the Proto-Germanic *raþjō*, from which, in turn, not only the modern German verb *Reden* comes, i.e., to speak, to have a conversation (cognate with the Latin term *ratio*), but also the term *Rechenschaft*, i.e., to render accounts, to give an explanation, or to estimate. Thus, *areté* was already for the ancients, and not exclusively for the Gadamerian interpretation of the Socratic reformulation of virtue, a quality able to be seen in actions that entailed self-understanding through dialogical reasoning, carried out with courage and reasonableness. Then, it does not seem inadequate to suppose that, for Plato, the danger that must be recognized as such is that which threatens the possibility of accountability through authentic dialogue.

Now, the enigma of *tó deinón* begins to be clarified. Courage can no longer be, for sure, *mimesis*, an imitation of traditional heroism. The virtuous and brave judge and warrior are called equally to determine what is to be feared. On the other hand, the fearsome is not always obvious and, therefore, requires a phronetic knowledge that may render it recognizable. For in the polis the visible laws are not the only ones that need to be subjected to criticism, but also the *ágrapha nómina*.<sup>69</sup> In fact, these “hidden” and “hegemonic” unwritten political laws, archaic communitarian customs, and

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<sup>69</sup> On the question of written and unwritten laws, see Jacqueline de Romilly, *La loi dans la pensée grecque: des origines à Aristote* (Paris: Les belles lettres, 1971), 25–49.



ancestral opinions that hold the political order together as a whole and shape citizens' characters and their common understanding of justice, secretly warp the actual written laws, as Gadamer remarks in *Plato und die Dichter*.<sup>70</sup>

Yet, what happens with the unjust laws, those which tend to consolidate the advantages of one single man over the others and that lead to an unjust community order, as it is implied in *Republic* when the sophistic apology of power and strength is discussed (338c)? Could it be legitimate to subvert these laws by means of a practical and dialectic mediation between unity and multiplicity (in epistemological and political terms) that is neither exclusively a technical knowledge, nor even the kind of programmatic solution that a monarchical socio-productive order could promise as the one referred in *Statesman* through the model of the government of the bees (*Plt.* 300a ss.)?<sup>71</sup> In fact, the discussion on the problem of the need of obedience to the positive law that happens in that very dialogue, *Statesman* (300b–e), can give us a hint for answering these questions.

However, we should deviate from the common stress on the statements regarding the fact that ignorant crowds must always observe the law and that they are not fit enough to rule or contest it because of their lack of “political *tekhne*” as well as the remark on their ethical inclination to replace law by blind mimetic models. In emphasizing the relevance of these considerations, it is very easy to draw an excessively aristocratic and technocratic insight of the figure of the “philosopher-king”—several times rejected by Gadamer in his writings—and to neglect another significant issue that may be raised from this same passage: the inconvenience resulting from obeying when the rules are truly ignorant, be these the rules of either tyrants or assemblies. In this regard, wise citizens (and rulers) have no need of being unconditionally bound either to the authority of written laws or to ancient customs, not even to the pressures of the crowds.

Thus, Socratic-Platonic philosophy, as Gadamer acknowledges, paved the path to an “authentic political task”<sup>72</sup> grounded on a deviation from the sophistic *pólis*—whose center are the margins of the city itself—and its hegemonic understanding of justice. After Gadamer's account of Plato's political philosophy, for example, we are able to avoid using the already mentioned *Statesman* passage to reduce Platonic dialogues to a mere *laudate dominium*. Rather, we may inquire if a deducible kind of genuine disobedience may illuminate Socrates's insubordinate compliance with the

<sup>70</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 194–95; see also *Leg.* 793a–d.

<sup>71</sup> Gadamer undoubtedly rejects in *Platos Staat der Erziehung* any corporatist reading of Plato's *Republic*. See Gadamer, *GW* 5, 257.

<sup>72</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 6.

Athenian laws that ultimately led to his death sentence. The ec-centric Socrates takes philosophy out of place, challenges its limits, redefines the contours of thought itself, and addresses them in every corner of the *pólis*, even to the very edge of the *agora* where minors and convicts circulate without permission to trespass (for instance, at the house of Simon, the shoemaker-philosopher, perhaps a pioneer of philosophical dialogue as Diogenes Laertius recalls in DL, II, 122–24). “Socrates,”—comments Jacques Derrida in *Khôra*—“thus pretends to belong to the genus of those who pretend to belong to the genus of those who have (a) place, a place and an economy that are their own. But in saying this, Socrates denounces this *genos* to which he pretends to belong.”<sup>73</sup> Since then, the philosopher, this atopic–phronetic creature—that reminds us of the characterization of Eros in Diotima’s speech in *Symposium*—accused of impiety, corruption of the young, and cowardice (*Gorg.* 485d), is “*ápolis*, the displaced *par excellence*, expatriated in his homeland, homeless at home, outsider and outlaw, the dissident, dissentient, who diverges, deviates, and transgresses,” as Donatella Ester Di Cesare eloquently summarizes.<sup>74</sup> Thus, the *átupon* philosopher, the placeless, frees thought by exposing it to a suspicion of mind that ultimately leads it to the experience of wonder.<sup>75</sup>

It would be enough to remember that Socrates himself refused to arrest Leon of Salamis, disobeying the order of the Thirty Tyrants, in the same fashion in which some years before he had rejected the majority decision of the assembly during the trial of the Arginusae generals (*Ap.* 32b–d), even though he knew that he was possibly facing jail or death (*Ap.* 32c). As we can read from Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates, in his defence, argued that his concern in both acts of disobedience was to not commit unjust and impious acts (*Ap.* 32d), as the orders he had received and the decisions that tried to collectively engage him were contrary to an already existing law. Nonetheless, it seems an exaggeration to claim Socrates disobeyed those orders merely in defence of existing written laws. What was really at stake in each of these cases? Which was that threat even more fearsome than death that a frightened Socrates bravely faced? The answer seems quite clear: the destruction of any future *bios philosophikos*, the ultimate closure of political life in the hands of power, be that legally constituted or not.

<sup>73</sup> Jacques Derrida, “*Khôra*,” in *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey Jr., and Ian McLeod (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 108, original emphasis.

<sup>74</sup> Donatella Ester Di Cesare, *Utopia of Understanding: Between Babel and Auschwitz*, trans. Niall Keane (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 211. See also Antoine Pageau-St-Hilaire, “Philosophy and Politics in Gadamer’s Interpretation of Plato’s *Republic*,” in *Etica & Politica / Ethics & Politics* 21, no. 3 (2019): 169–200.

<sup>75</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Language and Understanding,” trans. Richard E. Palmer, *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 1 (2006): 13–27.

### Conclusion: Utopia as Dialectical Myth

In the previous sections I proposed to briefly reconstruct the relation between the problem of political power and the utopian structure of Plato's thought through the notions of *areté* and *andreía*. On the one hand, the aim of this article is to enable a new potential for the current critical reception of the Gadamerian reading of Platonic political philosophy. On the other hand, I considered it necessary to go beyond Gadamer to theoretically complement his reflections and to provide us with a broader framework to explore the notion of "political courage" and how it relates to the problem of power in Plato's thought, especially by exploring the role of civil disobedience. My intention is to conciliate Gadamer's early interpretation of Plato's political thought with an additional reading that may contribute to avoid reducing the place of Plato's reflections on politics and education exclusively to the realm of the State in our contemporary reception.

In 1942, Gadamer's *Platos Staat der Erziehung* was published. In this essay, in which Gadamer specifically addressed the political meaning of education from a point of view not exclusively grounded on the State and its alleged pedagogical functions or tasks, he emphasized that the question of utopia in Plato's dialogues would be inseparable from the question of power abuse, an idea he would develop throughout his work, well beyond 1942. Although with a certain ironic (and understandable political) prudence, this text readdressed the question of the utopian character of *kallípolis* in opposition to the scholars who saw in *Republic's* and *Laws's* institutions a model for the best organization of the modern State. As expected, in this essay Plato's figure is by no means treated as a Nietzschean human-breeding master nor as a plastic creator of a new superior human type, something that cannot be assumed as unintentional or politically neutral taking into account the context of the publication of this piece.<sup>76</sup> In this text, it is once again possible to find Gadamer's assertion that *Republic* must be read neither as a reform program to be fulfilled nor as an absolute unreality that exposes and stresses an originary irreconcilability between philosophy and politics.

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<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, when referring to the *Platoforschung*, Gadamer not only did not mention in his text the enormous amount of the existing Platonic studies at that time—which ranged from Third Humanism's Plato to the National Socialist readings of *Republic* and *Laws*—but also exclusively referred to two authors and his main works on the Athenian philosopher: Wilamowitz and Hildebrandt (see Gadamer, *GW* 5, 249). In Gadamer's eyes, these texts clearly synthesized positions that "still" had to be considered and, we can also assume, contested.

As suggested before, in Gadamer's opinion, the Platonic dialogues would not constitute a resignation from public affairs at all, but a rejection to politics as mere political careerism and power abuse.<sup>77</sup> In his eyes, this relationship between power and utopia becomes clearer in Plato's proposal of a State in which the political authorities should be educated on the ruling by philosophers, that is, by the less manipulable and self-interested in power members of the *pólis*. For tyrannical abuse becomes possible when rulers lose the criteria that would provide them the measure of their limitations, the discernment to determine what they know and what they do not know, and prompt a growing attachment towards the conformist perpetuation of the factual situation of advantage that they would hold over the ruled. In other words, power abuse would be the result of the assimilation of politics to a kind of violence, i.e., a superficial, external, patrimonial, and mercantile understanding of justice and law. According to Gadamer, the true aim of the education of the guardians in the ideal State is that they may become aware:

that the power which they have is not theirs, not power at their disposal. They must resist public adulation and the hidden seductiveness of power which tempts the one who has it to seek his own advantage by any means of persuasion and to call such action "just." They must be unaffected by all these appearances and keep the true well-being of the whole in mind.<sup>78</sup>

Thus, for Gadamer, Platonic utopian thought, which is part of a pre-existing literary genre of criticism of the present, raises, in a new fashion, an answer to the problem of abuse of power, a question utterly neglected by the *Platoforschung*. Conversely, the utopian (but not eutopian) character of *kallípolis*, this "allusion from afar" (*Anzüglichkeit aus der Ferne*),<sup>79</sup> enables the configuration of alternative ways of thinking and acting which cannot be adequately understood except from a dialectical and operational point of view that never loses its subversive connection with the present.<sup>80</sup> In this regard it should be remembered that Gadamer had previously stated in his *Plato und die Dichter* that Platonic dialogues "are nothing more than slight allusions which say something only to those who receive from them more than their literal contents and allow these allusions to take effect within them."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 250.

<sup>78</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Plato's Educational State," in *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 91.

<sup>79</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 251.

<sup>80</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 251.

<sup>81</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 5, 210.

Hence, for Gadamer, the distance between the existent *pólis* and the Platonic allegorical city is not a historical one, for the political destiny of communities are neither the temporal future, nor the State-based political planning of society, not even the Heideggerian “new beginning,” but rather *anamnesis*, i.e., the enactment of a timelessness transhistorical dialectic.<sup>82</sup> From the Gadamerian perspective, Socrates gave birth to an “atopic” philosophy that questions the existing order displacing its borders, and, later, Plato’s utopian thought opened the path to render the current time and place one among other non-places yet to think as well of times yet to come.<sup>83</sup>

As Gadamer indicates, *Republic’s* utopian force consists in being a “great dialectical myth”<sup>84</sup> that allows one to provocatively confront the political frustration of abuses criticizing the present *e contrario*. The anti-conformist *éthos* of Socratic-Platonic philosophy demands human beings break into the new in order to avoid remaining locked up in the suffocating trap of an irreconcilable separation between thought and action. That is what Gadamer meant when he stated that the institutions and structures of the ideal *pólis* are “dialectical metaphors”<sup>85</sup> as well as when he adds decades after that *Republic* and *Laws* are works “that truly drive us to think again, to reflect on our circumstances; it is enough that we understand how to read. They do not act as invocations to do here and now this or that.”<sup>86</sup>

Although with less theoretical emphasis than in the 1930s and 1940s, Plato’s utopian thought continued to be a subject of reflection for Gadamer in his further production. It became a much more explicit reference point to interrogate such modern phenomena of his (and also our) own time, i.e., social alienation, contemporary injustices, and the reduction of politics to pure economic and military State power, planning policy, and technical administration. As we can read in a later work,<sup>87</sup> utopias are projections that still have the possibility of rendering human beings capable of breaking their isolation and revealing the already existing—although overshadowed—solidarities within their political communities, whose borders are not limited to national frontiers. In fact, Gadamer’s late reception of Platonic utopia aimed at the realization of an unrealizable desire for unconditional ethical friendship and

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<sup>82</sup> Gadamer’s position in this regard seems to be close to that of Cohen.

<sup>83</sup> Cesare, *Utopia of Understanding*, 211–12; see also *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*, trans. Niall Keane (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 119–20.

<sup>84</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Plato im Dialog*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 7: *Griechische Philosophie III* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991), 167. Henceforth cited as Gadamer, *GW* 7.

<sup>85</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 7, 167.

<sup>86</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hans-Georg Gadamer im Gespräch. Hermeneutik, Ästhetik, praktische Philosophie*, ed. Carsten Dutt (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1995), 74.

<sup>87</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Vernunft im Zeitalter der Wissenschaft. Aufsätze* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976).

freedom. What is unfeasible for Gadamer is that these solidarities may be the effect of a sovereign philosophical and political will (embodied in the State or/in the *mores*). Utopias' unrealizability infuses into, from, and against the existing communities a weak but inexhaustible force that aspires to challenge the oppressive comfort that "feasible" programmatic solutions may offer under the assumption that politics are reducible to the right application of prescriptions or recipes. In his own words, "Plato remains correct. . . . Self-knowledge alone is capable of saving a freedom threatened not only by all rulers but much more by the domination and dependence that issue from everything we think we control."<sup>88</sup>

Utopias bring the present to another temporality, celebrate distance, interrupt and trespass its limits, broaden the historical horizons of their reasonableness, and reveal the inner plurality of human experience. As *Umwegen*, they render possible that *zwischen* or "in-between" that constitute "*the real place of hermeneutics*,"<sup>89</sup> that permanent passage that may become the truly *tà eautoû práttein* for philosophy and politics.

The *detour* that utopias entail is a permanent subversion of the obvious that demands of us responsibility and courage to find out on what it is worth to reflect. Rather than being martial Spartan physical toughness or harsh asceticism, courage enables human beings to struggle against the danger of conformity and self-condescension and, I may add, to disobey the written and unwritten laws of the city, literally or metaphorically. For (Platonic) courage always is, in Gadamer's words, "civic courage" (*Zivilcourage*).<sup>90</sup> Gadamer's confrontation with Plato is the "act of reason" through which his philosophy ultimately embraces and aims to preserve the utopian tradition. This is also the ambiguous hermeneutical play between strangeness and familiarity in which his "political Plato" circularly moved from the beginning and that we cannot exhaust by only accepting it or rejecting it as a whole, whether we are contemporary readers of Plato or Gadamer. It is up to us to decide to what extent it takes courage to think again (and again) in utopias.

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<sup>88</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 150.

<sup>89</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1: *Hermeneutik 1* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986), 300.

<sup>90</sup> Gadamer, *GW* 7, 163.

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## Ideology, Utopia, and Phronetic Judgment in Paul Ricoeur

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### Introduction

In 2005, then United States Senator from Illinois Barack Obama made the following remark to the members of the American Library Association:

at a time when truth and science are constantly being challenged by *political agendas* and *ideologies*; a time where so many refuse to teach evolution in our schools, where fake science is used to beat back attempts to curb global warming or fund life-saving research; libraries remind us that truth isn't about who yells the loudest, but who has the right information.<sup>2</sup>

In this otherwise agreeable remark, the sharp opposition drawn by Obama between truth and science, on the one hand, and political agendas and ideologies, on the other, is indicative of the way that ideology is often used in public discourse. Thus understood, notions such as truth, knowledge, science, and objectivity stand in strong

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of what began as a Research Master's thesis defended at KU Leuven's Institute of Philosophy in 2018. Accordingly, I am grateful for the support of my supervisor, Ernst Wolff, as well as for the friendship of Wouter Vijfhuizen, Onur Kökerer, and Gilles Smolders which helped to carry me to the finish line of that difficult year.

<sup>2</sup> Barack Obama, "Literacy and Education in a 21st-Century Economy," [obamaspeeches.com](http://obamaspeeches.com), 25 June 2005, <http://obamaspeeches.com/024-Literacy-and-Education-in-a-21st-Century-Economy-Obama-Speech.htm>, emphasis mine.

opposition to all that expresses the interests, desires, and ends of particular political actors.

Although too much credence should not be given to the way that politicians use concepts, Obama's use of "ideology" here exemplifies a certain kind of "post-ideological" politics whereby the speaker assumes a place from which the ideological and the non-ideological can be distinguished that is not itself inscribed within the former.<sup>3</sup> To accept this maneuver, however, is to accept the burden of explaining how it is possible to assume such a position—no easy task. Yet, if we reject this possibility entirely, it is difficult to imagine how we could do anything but endlessly perpetuate ideological interests. In what follows I will think through this dilemma from within the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur.

To do so I will trace Ricoeur's reflections on ideology and utopia from his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (hereafter *Lectures*), first delivered in 1975, to his later writings on selfhood and the just from the 1990s. The thread that I will follow begins from the closing lines of Ricoeur's *Lectures*, wherein he suggests that "practical wisdom" (or *phronesis*)<sup>4</sup> may provide an answer to the abovementioned dilemma by helping us to understand how this seemingly vicious circle may become a "spiral."<sup>5</sup> Taking this suggestion as my point of departure, I reread Ricoeur's earlier solution to this problem back from the vantage point of his later writings, where his conception of *phronesis* is further developed. Although these later writings are not immediately concerned with ideology, Ricoeur's idea of "phronetic judgment" can still be understood within the earlier problematic. As I will argue, Ricoeur's concept of phronetic judgment helps to consolidate his earlier solution to the problem of ideology within his later, more systematic reflections on ethics, politics, and practical philosophy. Although Ricoeur's reflections on ideology and utopia have been subject to considerable scrutiny, commentators typically discuss them within the context of his writings from the same period.<sup>6</sup> The longer view that I adopt here therefore not

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<sup>3</sup> Nestor Capdevila, for example, argues that the aporias of the journalistic and political usage of the concept of ideology reveal difficulties in its more technical, social scientific use. For this reason the former can teach us something about the latter ("Idéologie?: usages ordinaires et usages savants," *Actuel Marx* 43, no. 1 [2008]: 50–61).

<sup>4</sup> For consistency, I will use "phronesis" wherever possible in place of other translations such as "practical wisdom" or "prudence."

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 314.

<sup>6</sup> For example, see Bernard P. Dauenhauer, *Paul Ricoeur: The Promise and Risk of Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); Johann Michel, "Le paradoxe de l'idéologie revisité par Paul Ricoeur," *Raisons politiques* 11, no. 3 (2003): 149–72; David M. Kaplan, *Ricoeur's Critical Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); María Avelina Cecilia Lafuente, "Social Imagination and History



only sheds light on questions of continuity in Ricoeur's political thought, but may also stimulate further interest in his contribution to ideology critique and contemporary critical theory more broadly.<sup>7</sup>

### The Problem of Ideology

In *Lectures*, Ricoeur develops two essentially related lines of thought. First, following Karl Mannheim, Ricoeur attempts to situate the ideological and the utopian within a common framework—as two poles of the *social imaginary*, or what he calls here the “social and cultural imagination.”<sup>8</sup> Second, he attempts to show how thinking ideology and utopia together can allow us to work through the problem posed by “Mannheim's paradox.” Although Ricoeur offers a compelling case for the first, in my view he has not yet worked out a satisfying answer to the second. I will discuss each of these lines of thought in turn.

### The Constitutive Ideology of Political Life

Ricoeur's basic methodology in *Lectures* is that of a “genetic phenomenology” or “regressive analysis.”<sup>9</sup> What his analysis brings to light is that the pathological

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in Paul Ricoeur,” in *Analecta Husserliana: The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research: Volume XC: Logos of Phenomenology and Phenomenology of the Logos: Book Three*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2006), 195–222; Darren Langdrige, “Ideology and Utopia: Social Psychology and the Social Imaginary of Paul Ricoeur,” *Theory & Psychology* 16, no. 5 (2006): 641–59; Lyman Tower Sargent, “Ideology and Utopia: Karl Mannheim and Paul Ricoeur,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13, no. 3 (2008): 263–73; Pierre-Olivier Monteil, *Ricoeur politique* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2013); John Arthos, *Hermeneutics after Ricoeur* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Johann Michel, *Homo Interpretans: Towards a Transformation of Hermeneutics*, trans. David Pellauer (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> John Arthos, for example, has recently argued that Ricoeur's political thought underwent a “significant shift of emphasis” in his later work (*Hermeneutics after Ricoeur*, 202), while Marc Crépon emphasizes its greater consistency (“‘Du paradox politique’: à la question des appartenances,” in *L'Herne: Ricoeur* [Paris: Éditions de l'Herne, 2004], 307).

<sup>8</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ricoeur also practices genetic phenomenology in other works, most notably in *Time and Narrative*. As he explains in Volume 1, the task of genetic phenomenology is “to discover in the phenomenon of the we-relation [*l'être-en-commun*] the origin of the connection between individuals and particular societies” (*Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984], 198). See also Paul Ricoeur, “Le ‘questionnement à rebours’ (Die Rückfrage) et la réduction des idéalités dans la *Krisis* de Husserl et *L'idéologie allemande* de Marx,” *Alter: Revue de phénoménologie* 5 (1997): 315–30.

functions of both ideology and utopia presuppose more neutral functions that need to be mutually clarified. Against a certain interpretation of Marx according to which ideology is contrasted with simple praxis, i.e., meaningless human behavior, Ricoeur argues that social reality should be understood as symbolically structured all the way down. By understanding the constitutive symbolism of social life, Ricoeur thinks that we can preserve the critical value of Marx's notion of ideology by showing how it is possible for reality to appear distorted in the first place.<sup>10</sup> As Ricoeur frames this elsewhere: the pathological sense of ideology diagnosed by Marx and Engels can only be preserved if the starting point for an analysis of how social reality is symbolically represented begins not with the transition from some pre-symbolic stage of "real praxis," but from the passage of one symbolism to another.<sup>11</sup>

In defending this claim, Ricoeur's analysis attempts to maneuver between two problematic oppositions that have emerged in the history of ideology theory. First, as we have just said, there is the opposition between ideology and praxis exemplified by the early Marx. Second, we have the opposition of the ideological and the scientific, exemplified by figures as different as Mannheim and Louis Althusser (and, implicitly, perhaps, Obama). Although we will return to the second opposition in more detail later, for Ricoeur both of these strategies make the same mistake: they both fail to appreciate the way the "social imagination" is *constitutive* of social reality rather than a superstructural illusion produced by a society's economic base.<sup>12</sup> By distinguishing between the "constitutive symbolism" of meaningful social action and the "representative symbolism" which, rooted in the former, finds expression in the social imagination, Ricoeur argues that new lines can be drawn in our understanding of ideology.

Ricoeur thus begins his regressive analysis of ideology with its surface level appearance—the pathological phenomenon of "false consciousness" described by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*.<sup>13</sup> This first level, which Ricoeur calls "ideology-distortion," is the basic *explanandum*, we might say, of Ricoeur's analysis. In a first approach, Ricoeur understands ideology-distortion as an interested representation of

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<sup>10</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Philosophical Anthropology: Writings and Lectures*, vol. 3, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 188.

<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Although Marx and Engels do not actually use the term "false consciousness" here, Ricoeur suggests that Mannheim probably borrowed it from György Lukács (Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 164). Engels does however use the term in a 1883 letter to Franz Mehring ("Engels to Franz Mehring," trans. Donna Torr, Marx-Engels Correspondence 1893, [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93\\_07\\_14.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93_07_14.htm)).

a society's symbolic structure within the social imagination which functions to justify the domination of that society's system of authority. We will unpack this definition as we proceed. The *explanans* of Ricoeur's analysis, then, is what he identifies as the integrative function of ideology, or "ideology-integration." This more basic function of ideology, for Ricoeur, "is an unsurpassable phenomenon of social existence, insofar as social reality always has a symbolic constitution and incorporates an interpretation, in images and representations, of the social bond itself."<sup>14</sup> This depth layer of ideology accounts for the possibility of ideology-distortion in the sense that it is this integrative symbolic representation of the social bond that becomes distorted under certain conditions. Without this constitutive symbolism and the positive role that it plays in meaningfully organizing social relations, the idea that ideology has a distorting function would be incoherent, as there would be nothing for it to distort.

"How is it possible," Ricoeur then asks, "that ideology plays these two roles, the very primitive role of integration of a community and the role of distortion of thought by interests?"<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur's answer to this question is the fact that in the political life of human beings, systems of authority are obliged to present themselves as legitimate. This notion is central because the function of ideology, whether integrative or distortive, hinges on the felicity of an authority's efforts to secure credibility in the eyes of its addressees. Following Max Weber, what Ricoeur emphasizes is the idea that—apart from the direct use of force or violence—subjects are never merely passive recipients of power.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, legitimation is a meaningful process in which subjects are, to some extent, active participants; there is always some degree of consent and cooperation established between the ruling and the ruled. Ricoeur thus defines "legitimation" as the "meaningful procedures" through which a system of authority establishes this cooperation beyond the naked use of force.<sup>17</sup>

If we have followed Ricoeur's analysis thus far, under what circumstances can we say that this legitimation process has crossed over from integration to distortion? Although this question is difficult to answer in general—for reasons that we will discuss later—Ricoeur's short answer is that ideology-distortion is the result of a failure, the failure of a system of authority to attain *credibility* in the eyes of those whose consent it requires. It is here that Weber's motivational model proves more attractive

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<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 255.

<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 12.

<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of several domains in which Ricoeur redeploys insights drawn from Weber's work, see Ernst Wolff, "The Place of Max Weber in Ricoeur's Philosophy: Power, Ideology, Explanation," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy—Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française* 28, no. 2 (2020): 70–93.

<sup>17</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 154.

to Ricoeur than the causal model of Althusser. In contrast to Althusser's more functionalist vocabulary,<sup>18</sup> Ricoeur's Weberian-inspired account emphasizes the *meaningful content* of the legitimation process. By adopting a motivational vocabulary, it is possible, and indeed necessary, to consider the specific social meanings that motivate individuals and groups to take political authority as legitimate (or not). Were we to rely solely on Althusser's causal language, these meanings would only be relevant to the extent that they serve different functions.<sup>19</sup> For Ricoeur, by contrast, it is a mistake to exclude this data from the analysis, as an adequate theory of ideology must be able to interpret and evaluate the specific motivational content through which we take our relationship to authority to be legitimate or illegitimate, however tacit or coercive it may ultimately prove to be. This is central to Ricoeur's account because it is here—at the level of its meaningful content rather than its function alone—that ideology either succeeds or fails to attain credibility in the hearts and minds of its subjects. Yet, because the meaningful content of ideology is specific to concrete historical situations, there are limits to how far one can theorize what is credible without dealing with concrete examples.

Acknowledging this limit, what does it mean to say that an authority's claim to legitimacy is credible? In a first approach, credibility implies that there is some degree of overlap or coincidence between a claim to authority and the corresponding belief of the addressee. In this sense we can understand an authority's claim to legitimacy in rhetorical terms, as Ricoeur himself suggests, following Clifford Geertz.<sup>20</sup> It is when a system of authority's claim to legitimacy can no longer be *persuasively articulated* to its intended audience that a "credibility gap" emerges.<sup>21</sup> As Ricoeur explains elsewhere, this gap finds its possibility in the "prospective direction" of historical life between the constitutive and representative levels of symbolism.<sup>22</sup> It is thus when an authority's legitimizing representation of the social order diverges too strongly from the

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<sup>18</sup> It is worth pointing out that Ricoeur's reading of Louis Althusser is based exclusively on *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Verso, 2005) and "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 85–126. For this reason, Ricoeur's criticism is perhaps unfair to the more complete picture of Althusser's position that has emerged since the posthumous publication of his many later writings. For Althusser's own response to the charge of "functionalism," see "Note on the ISAs," in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (New York: Verso, 2014), 218–31.

<sup>19</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 134.

<sup>20</sup> For example, see Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 257; *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 251, 317; *Philosophical Anthropology*, 194.

<sup>21</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 183.

<sup>22</sup> Ricoeur, *Philosophical Anthropology*, 188–89.

constitutive symbolism of everyday social action that ideology passes from its integrative to its distortive function.<sup>23</sup> In such a case, it is in search of some kind of intelligibility that ideology steps in to “fill in the gap,” as it were.<sup>24</sup> In this way, we can understand why Ricoeur suggests we think of ideology as a kind of “surplus” or supplemental belief in the legitimacy of an authority.

What Ricoeur’s analysis ultimately shows us is that at its most basic level ideology plays a conservative role—conservative in the sense that it tries to hold together the meaningful fabric of a given society. For Ricoeur, all the pathologies associated with ideology proceed from this conservative function.<sup>25</sup> What ultimately defines the passage from ideology-integration to ideology-distortion is therefore when ideology tries to preserve oppressive and violent social relations for the sake of order.

### **Mannheim’s Paradox**

With this sketch of Ricoeur’s basic analysis of ideology and how he distinguishes between the two functions of ideology, we can now turn to the second line of thought in *Lectures*, namely the problem that Mannheim’s paradox poses for any theory of ideology.

What Ricoeur finds novel about Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia*<sup>26</sup> is its attempt to think the concepts of ideology and utopia together within a common framework. In Mannheim’s study, however, he came up against a problem that Ricoeur himself must also confront. Put simply, the problem is this: if ideology refers to a false or distorted representation of the symbolic structure of society, and if this distortion affects all members of a social group, how can any theory of ideology claim to escape the very thing it aims to describe? In more epistemological terms: what sort of criteria can allow us to distinguish between ideological and non-ideological representations if the very criteria by which we could make this judgment are themselves ideological?

Mannheim’s own solution to this problem takes the form of what he calls a “relationism.”<sup>27</sup> As Ricoeur summarizes, Mannheim’s point “is that if we can create a

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<sup>23</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 183.

<sup>24</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 183. See also “Discussion” of “La Raison Pratique,” in *Rationality To-day / La rationalité aujourd’hui*, ed. Theodore F. Geraets (Ottawa, ONT: University of Ottawa Press, 1979), 243, translation mine.

<sup>25</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 318.

<sup>26</sup> Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954).

<sup>27</sup> Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 70–71.

survey and exact description of all the forces in society, then we will be able to locate every ideology in its right place.”<sup>28</sup> Although Ricoeur is sympathetic to the honesty of this approach, he claims that Mannheim ultimately fails to resolve the paradox. If he can be said to resolve it all, it is only in an abstract, “pseudo-Hegelian” way that purports to have an absolute perspective on social reality.<sup>29</sup> The reason for this is that Mannheim’s concepts of ideology and utopia are *theoretical* rather than *practical*.<sup>30</sup> Ricoeur’s dissatisfaction with Mannheim stems from the fact that Mannheim poses and attempts to resolve the paradox scientifically, at the level of theoretical reason, as though ideology was only a problem in and for theory. For Ricoeur, by contrast, ideology and utopia constitute a “practical circle.”<sup>31</sup> Ricoeur thus reproaches Mannheim for making something of a category mistake: like Althusser, Mannheim attempts to carve out a place from which the philosopher or the social scientist can overlook the whole field of ideology. In both cases, ideology is understood by means of its opposition with science—science here being understood as a method of accessing social reality in a pre-symbolic way such that the observer is not subject to any ideological motivation.

By rejecting the opposition between ideology and science, Ricoeur’s approach finds itself closer to that of the early Marx, in the sense that the concept of ideology retains its polemical edge.<sup>32</sup> As Ricoeur explains, if we are to be able to perform any kind of critique, we must first “assume at least part of the discourse of ideology in order to speak of ideology.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, Ricoeur’s counterargument to both Mannheim and Althusser is that the “scientific” strategy of trying to step outside of ideology assumes that there is a position from which we can relate directly to our conditions of existence in a pre-symbolic way. Yet, for Ricoeur, the problem with this gesture is that these conditions simply:

must be represented in one way or another; they must have their imprint in the motivational field, in our system of images, and so in our representation of the world. The so-called real causes never appear as such in human existence but always under a symbolic mode. It is this symbolic mode which

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<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 165.

<sup>29</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 314.

<sup>30</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 178.

<sup>31</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 178.

<sup>32</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 179.

<sup>33</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 140.

is secondarily distorted. . . . If everything were distorted, that is the same as if nothing were distorted.<sup>34</sup>

Assuming part of the discourse of ideology then, for Ricoeur, means that in order to resolve the paradox we have to work from *within* the “circle of ideology,” that is, from within the social imagination itself.

### Utopian Lessons

We now turn briefly to the other side of the social imagination—utopia. Like ideology, Ricoeur’s regressive analysis reveals that utopia too admits of both positive and negative functions.<sup>35</sup> Ricoeur’s understanding of the pathological function of utopia is similar to its common meaning in political discourse. Here, utopia means something like a naïve fiction that allows people to imaginatively escape from the constraints of their material circumstances. As for its positive function, which is closely related, utopia is the use of that remarkable power of the imagination to put oneself beyond what is actual, to explore new possibilities that may not be materially possible. For Ricoeur, this imaginative power is essential for critique as it can help us discern differences between the conceivable and the actual. Utopia in this sense therefore has an important role to play in reflection, accomplishing what Ricoeur calls the “dissolution of obstacles.”<sup>36</sup> It is by reflecting on these utopian differences that the ideological lines of what is both necessary and contingent in political life momentarily slacken. Thus understood, utopia is an essential resource for any attempt to break free of the closed circle of ideology. At its best, utopia can allow us to imaginatively distance ourselves from the immediacy of ideology. Borrowing a metaphor from Mannheim, Ricoeur talks about the way that utopia can “shatter” the obviousness of a given order.<sup>37</sup> Methodologically speaking, it is therefore essential for Ricoeur that we preserve these imaginative resources rather than exclude them from our critical toolkit.

<sup>34</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 145.

<sup>35</sup> For more a more extensive treatment of Ricoeur’s conception of utopia than I can offer here, see Vicky Iakovou, “To Think Utopia with and beyond Paul Ricoeur,” in *From Ricoeur to Action: The Socio-Political Significance of Ricoeur’s Thinking*, ed. Todd S. Mei and David Lewin (New York: Continuum, 2012), 113–35; George H. Taylor, “Delineating Ricoeur’s Concept of Utopia,” *Social Imaginaries* 3, no. 1 (2017): 41–60.

<sup>36</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 296.

<sup>37</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 300. For a discussion of this metaphor in the context of Ricoeur’s *The Rule of Metaphor* and his unpublished *Lectures on Imagination*, see Taylor, “Delineating Ricoeur’s Concept of Utopia.”

As the social imagination is constitutive of our social existence, utopias are part and parcel of our interpretive self-understanding of what is and is not politically legitimate.

It is with this understanding of the utopian imagination that we reach Ricoeur's first solution to Mannheim's paradox. As Ricoeur explains: "There is no answer to Mannheim's paradox except to say that we must try to cure the illness of utopia by what is wholesome in ideology. . . and to try to cure the rigidity, the petrification, of ideologies by the utopian element."<sup>38</sup> Ricoeur's suggestion is that the positive functions of ideology and utopia can serve as a corrective to their respective pathological functions. Utopia can draw our attention to the difference between what is conceivable and what is actual. This momentary glimpse of the line between the necessary and the contingent allows us to imaginatively modify the limits of our otherwise closed ideological horizon. When utopias become pathological, on the other hand, that is, when the conceivable forgets the actual, the gravitational pull of ideology-integration can be used to bring people together around matters of common concern.

Insightful as Ricoeur's analysis is here, I take it to be more promissory than definitive. Although that would be typical of Ricoeur, I mean this here in a stronger sense. I take this solution as especially tentative for textual reasons. Rather than end on this note, Ricoeur goes further, concluding *Lectures* with a series of remarks that point in the direction of future work, which, in hindsight, he would indeed undertake. In the final paragraph he mentions "a judgment of appropriateness," or a "concrete judgment of taste," and the "capacity to appreciate what is fitting in a given situation"—each of which revolve around the notion of "practical wisdom."<sup>39</sup> I will argue that by tracing these threads into Ricoeur's later work, the profile of a more systematic solution to the problem of ideology begins to emerge.

### **Ideology and Practical Reason**

By invoking "practical wisdom" at the end of *Lectures*, Ricoeur signals his broadly Aristotelian approach to politics, and practical philosophy more generally. Thus, before turning to Ricoeur's later work, we first need to examine Ricoeur's conception of practical reason, how it differs from theoretical reason, and why the problem of ideology is of a "practical nature."<sup>40</sup>

Consider the following passage from Ricoeur's "Science and Ideology":

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<sup>38</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 312.

<sup>39</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 314.

<sup>40</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 247.



All current quarrels over ideology begin from the implicit or explicit repudiation of Aristotle's contention concerning the rough and schematic character of argumentation in the sciences that he subsumed under the name of politics and that have been successively called moral sciences, *Geisteswissenschaften*, human sciences, social sciences, critical social sciences, and finally the critique of ideology developed by the Frankfurt school. The thing that strikes me in contemporary discussions is not only. . . what is said about ideology but the claim to say it from a nonideological place called science.<sup>41</sup>

Ricoeur draws attention here to the different levels of exactness that can be expected in the practical sphere of politics and in the sciences. Indeed, Ricoeur often quotes Book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*,<sup>42</sup> where Aristotle explains that we should only look for the degree of exactness in each kind of investigation that the nature of the subject matter allows.<sup>43</sup> For Aristotle, theoretical reason is concerned with the pursuit of certain knowledge based upon necessary and self-evident first principles.<sup>44</sup> Practical reason, by contrast, is concerned with the sphere of human action in all its novelty, contingency, and uncertainty.<sup>45</sup> As Aristotle often summarizes the distinction: theoretical reason is concerned with that which is “not capable of being otherwise,” while practical reason concerns that which is. For this reason, the methods appropriate to practical matter are deliberation and argumentation—“for no one deliberates about things that cannot be otherwise”<sup>46</sup>—whereas theoretical matters can be worked out by logical demonstration (*apodeixis*) alone.

While Ricoeur does not take on board all of Aristotle's metaphysical assumptions, he does want to preserve a certain difference between the practical sphere of politics and the theoretical sphere of science. Yet, this difference is not

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<sup>41</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 255.

<sup>42</sup> For example, Paul Ricoeur, “History and Hermeneutics,” in *Philosophy of History and Action: Papers Presented at the First Jerusalem Philosophical Encounter (December 1974)*, ed. Yirmiahu Yovel (Dordrecht, Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1974), 5; *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 178; *From Text to Action*, 246.

<sup>43</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2014), 1094b, 3.

<sup>44</sup> For Ricoeur's discussion of Aristotle's conception of *théoria* and the break between the practical and the theoretic, see Paul Ricoeur, *Being, Essence, and Substance in Plato and Aristotle*, trans. David Pellauer and John Starkey (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 241, 162–63.

<sup>45</sup> For a discussion of the development of Ricoeur's conception of practical reason from the essay “Practical Reason” to *Oneself as Another*, see Laurent Jaffro, “La conception Ricoeurienne de la raison pratique,” *Études Ricoeuriennes / Ricoeur Studies* 3, no. 1 (2012): 156–71.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, trans. Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1139a11–14; *On Rhetoric*, 2nd ed., trans. George A. Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1357a1–6, 41.

simply a question of the different methods appropriate to the natural and human sciences respectively. Rather, as he explains in “History and Hermeneutics,” Ricoeur wants to “dig deeper than the opposition between the ‘theoretical’ and ‘practical’” as it is usually understood.<sup>47</sup> Instead, his philosophical hermeneutics begins by reflecting on the different “interests” that animate their respective objects and methods.<sup>48</sup>

What Ricoeur finds of particular importance in Aristotle’s way of thinking about practical reason is the way that it preserves its connection to notions such as desire, interest, and preference (*prohairesis*). Recall the passage from Obama with which we began. Here, truth and science were opposed to “political agendas and ideologies.” The implication here was that some political assertions are motivated by desires and interests while others are neutrally guided by the right information, their own personal motivations being irrelevant. To make such a distinction, however, Obama must assume a theoretical or “scientific” vantage point in the style of Mannheim or Althusser. In doing so, Obama is inviting his audience to join him outside the sphere of ideological influence and rely solely upon preference-neutral knowledge to guide their actions. Yet, for both Aristotle and Ricoeur, maintaining such a distinction is antithetical to the role of interest or desire in practical reason. “Like that of Aristotle,” Ricoeur explains, “our analysis places no break between desire and reason.”<sup>49</sup> This is because the kind of truth that practical reason is concerned with involves an agreement with “correct” or “right” desire.<sup>50</sup> Ricoeur’s conception of practical reason thus remains distinctively Aristotelian in the sense that it unites thought and action around the notion of “practical truth.”<sup>51</sup>

When it comes to practical matters, then, our desires, interests, and preferences—in short, all that is mediated by the social imaginary—must not be excluded from the analysis if the problem of ideology is to be posed in the right way. Without recourse to knowledge of a pre-symbolic reality beyond all possible dispute, practical questions can only be judged by offering reasons for acting. When mobilized as a reason for adopting a particular course of action, even the most exact knowledge becomes subject to the “rough and schematic character of argumentation.” Indeed, to

<sup>47</sup> Ricoeur, “History and Hermeneutics,” 6.

<sup>48</sup> Ricoeur, “History and Hermeneutics,” 3.

<sup>49</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 191.

<sup>50</sup> Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol. II, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 1139a25–30. Hereafter, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

<sup>51</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 87. For a more recent interpretation of practical truth in Aristotle that dovetails with that of Ricoeur, see C. M. M. Olfert, *Aristotle on Practical Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Olfert, against the “objects view” of the difference between theoretical and practical reason, argues that the distinguishing feature of practical reason is the fact that it aims at practical truth.

act under the impression that what ought to be done can be determined by purely theoretical or scientific means would be to conflate the two kinds of reason in a particularly dangerous way.

Ricoeur is unequivocal in his emphasis on the importance of keeping these two spheres distinct, even calling their conflation the “most dangerous of all ideas.”<sup>52</sup> In “Practical Reason,”<sup>53</sup> Ricoeur emphasizes this point with reference to Kant’s practical philosophy. By failing to “recognize the specificity of the domain of action” and “elevating the rule of universalization to the rank of a supreme principle,” Ricoeur charges Kant with leaving the door open for “the deadly idea. . . that there is a science of praxis.”<sup>54</sup> For Ricoeur, failing to keep these two spheres apart means overlooking the different degrees of certainty appropriate to the theoretical sphere and the sphere of application and practice.

In spite of these strong warnings, however, Ricoeur insists we should find something “liberating” in the idea that practice cannot be wholly guided by scientific methods, noting that there nonetheless remains a certain rationality to practice.<sup>55</sup> And we should find this idea liberating, he continues, because it allows us to deal rationally with the domain of action in a way that is both ontologically and epistemologically appropriate: for the domain of action is, ontologically, that of “changing things” and from an epistemological perspective that of the verisimilar, the likely, or the probable (*eikos*).<sup>56</sup> Given that practical reason is concerned with human action, the meanings of which are always subject to conflicts of interpretation, it can never achieve the high threshold of precision and accuracy required by the sciences.

With this sketch of Ricoeur’s conception of practical reason, we can now pick up where we left off at the end of *Lectures*. Reading beyond Ricoeur’s initial response to Mannheim’s paradox, he continues: “My more ultimate answer [to Mannheim’s paradox] is that we must let *ourselves* be drawn into the circle and then must try to make the circle a spiral.”<sup>57</sup> On my reading, this emphasis on the “self” is an important clue as to why the problem of ideology is fundamentally a matter of practical reason. Rather than pertaining to any abstract, theoretical conception of consciousness or subjectivity, at the level of action ideology is ultimately a problem for *selves* in determinate social relations. It is selves who act, and it is therefore selves who will either remain trapped

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<sup>52</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 199.

<sup>53</sup> This paper was first delivered in 1977 (Ricoeur, “La Raison Pratique”).

<sup>54</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 199.

<sup>55</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 199.

<sup>56</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 199.

<sup>57</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 312, emphasis mine.

in the circle of ideology or succeed in making it a spiral. Yet, what is it about Ricoeur's conception of the self that can help bring the problem of ideology to some practical resolution? As we will discuss in what follows, it is the self's capacity for judgment. It is in this sense that Ricoeur wants to avoid Mannheim's paradox by allowing the "correlation ideology-utopia to replace the impossible correlation ideology-science" in the hopes that a "solution to the problem of *judgment* may be found."<sup>58</sup>

### Phronesis: Wisdom in Judgment

All of the clues that we have discussed so far have led us to the concept of judgment. Although frequent reference to judgment can be found in many of Ricoeur's writings, it is not until *Oneself as Another*, *The Just*, and *Reflections on The Just* that a more systematic picture of the concept begins to emerge.<sup>59</sup> In these writings, Ricoeur understands judgment not simply as an individual act of cognition but as a social capacity, owing to the intersubjective and institutional constitution of selfhood. Indeed, as Gregory D. Hoskins has argued, it is this "capacity to judge. . . that subtends the various capacities that constitute the subject of Ricoeur's philosophical anthropology."<sup>60</sup> In a similar vein, Philippe Lacour argues that the logic of judgment in Ricoeur's work is "the key" to his thinking on practical reasoning as a whole.<sup>61</sup>

Building on these insights, I now want to begin to connect the clues from the end of *Lectures* with Ricoeur's later development of phronesis and its relation to judgment. To begin, I turn to Ricoeur's final words in *Lectures*:

[Mannheim] talks of a criterion of appropriateness. This criterion is rather difficult to apply but it may be our only alternative. . . . The *judgment of appropriateness* is the way to solve [Mannheim's] noncongruence problem. It is a *concrete judgment of taste*, an ability to appreciate what is *fitting in a given situation*.

<sup>58</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 173, emphasis mine.

<sup>59</sup> Ricoeur's earliest in-depth study of "judgment" is a 1958-59 course. See Paul Ricoeur, *Le Jugement Cours de M. Ricoeur* (Paris: Groupe de Philosophie, 1959). See also Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); *The Just*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); *Reflections on The Just*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>60</sup> Gregory D. Hoskins, "The Capacity to Judge and the Contours of a Theory of Political Judgment," in *Paul Ricoeur and the Task of Political Philosophy*, ed. Greg S. Johnson and Dan R. Stiver (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2013), 98.

<sup>61</sup> Philippe Lacour, "Le jugement et sa logique dans la philosophie de Ricoeur (Deuxième partie)," *Études Ricoeuriennes / Ricoeur Studies* 8, no. 1 (2017): 140.

Instead of a pseudo-Hegelian claim to have a total view, the question is one of *practical wisdom*, we have the security of judgment because we appreciate what can be done in a situation. We cannot get out of the circle of ideology and utopia, but *the judgment of appropriateness* may help us to understand how the circle can become a spiral.<sup>62</sup>

There are two points here that I would like to take up. The first is Ricoeur's identification of the question as being one of "practical wisdom" or phronesis. The second concerns the related ideas of a "judgment of appropriateness," a "concrete judgment of taste," or "what is fitting in a given situation."

Given Ricoeur's affinity with Aristotle, it is perhaps best to begin there as both a starting point and a point of contrast with Ricoeur's use of "phronesis."<sup>63</sup> In Aristotle's ethical and political writings, phronesis is an intellectual virtue concerned with action that involves, like other virtues, deciding upon the mean between two vices in accordance with what is prescribed by correct reasoning.<sup>64</sup> Aristotle defines phronesis as "a state involving true reason, a practical one, concerned with what is good or bad for a human being."<sup>65</sup> This state (*hexis*) is rational in the sense that it aims at truth, which, in practical matters, concerns an "agreement with right desire."<sup>66</sup> For Aristotle, desire is ineliminable here because practical reason is essentially *prescriptive* and thus involves some vision of what ought to be realized through our actions.

Another important aspect of phronesis for Aristotle is the way it relates universals to particulars. Unlike theoretical knowledge, whose concern is "judgment about what is universal and necessary,"<sup>67</sup> phronesis is concerned more with what is particular, "for [phronesis] is concerned with conduct, and particulars are the sphere of conduct."<sup>68</sup> For example, consider the way a doctor must decide about the best course of treatment for a specific patient. Although the doctor has general knowledge about what sorts of remedies cure specific types of illnesses, determining what illness a patient has, and how best to treat that illness in specific circumstances involves a

<sup>62</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 314, emphases mine.

<sup>63</sup> For Ricoeur's interpretation of Aristotle's notion of phronesis in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, see Paul Ricoeur, "À la gloire de la *phronesis*," in *La vérité pratique: Aristote, Éthique à nicomaque, Livre VI*, ed. Jean-Yves Châteaueau (Paris: Vrin, 1997), 13–22. A similar interpretation can be found in Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 79–89. For a comparison of Ricoeur's understanding of phronesis with that of Gadamer, see Arthos's discussion of the "seven differences" in *Hermeneutics after Ricoeur*, 9–22.

<sup>64</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1138b18–25.

<sup>65</sup> C. D. C. Reeve, *Aristotle on Practical Wisdom: Nicomachean Ethics VI* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 1140b4–5, 56.

<sup>66</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139a29–30.

<sup>67</sup> Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1140b30.

<sup>68</sup> Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1141b14–17.

greater understanding of the particularities of the case than it does knowledge of the generals. For Aristotle, this is why theoretical knowledge is not sufficient to be good at something. Accumulated experience of particulars is also needed.

The last aspect of Aristotelian phronesis that needs to be addressed is what he calls the *phronimos*, namely, those individuals who embody and exemplify the virtue of practical wisdom and serve as the reference point in our discernment of the mean.<sup>69</sup> This reference to *phronimos* plays an important role in discerning what is *phronetic* in a given situation. The reason for this is that, unlike theoretical reason, which can rely upon the foundational security of first principles in its operation, practical reason must take its point of departure from those opinions that are taken to be wise or reasonable.

With this sketch of Aristotelian phronesis, I now want to show how Ricoeur builds upon this concept in and beyond *Oneself as Another*. In order not to lose our thread, I will only touch upon those aspects of Ricoeur's "little ethics" that are most relevant to our discussion. Ricoeur's goal in the three studies that make up his little ethics is to defend three essentially related theses. Ricoeur's first thesis is that there is a primacy of ethical teleology over moral deontology; second, that it is necessary for the aim of ethics to "pass through the sieve" of moral norms; and, finally, that when the norms of morality, by virtue of their universality, lead to impasses in the attempt to actualize those norms in practice, recourse must be had back to ethics in the form of a particular kind of judgment that Ricoeur wants to "qualify as phronetic."<sup>70</sup> What I want to show is that when it comes to the problem of ideology, the idea of a *phronetic* judgment that we find in the later Ricoeur consolidates his earlier solution in a more developed way. In phronetic judgment, utopia finds its place as a component of the self's capacity to attest to a teleological vision. Emphasizing this affirmative aspect of phronetic judgment with respect to the problem of ideology may help to overcome Ricoeur's image, among some critical theorists, as someone engaged only in a "hermeneutics of suspicion."<sup>71</sup> Let us now take a closer look at Ricoeur's understanding of phronesis.

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<sup>69</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b36 ff.

<sup>70</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 170; *The Just*, xxii.

<sup>71</sup> Rahel Jaeggi, for example, criticizes Ricoeur's "hermeneutics of suspicion" as a method of ideology critique for still being a hermeneutics, which she argues involves having to "reconstruct the perspective of those concerned. . . not in an external and objective way but as the agents experience them" ("Rethinking Ideology," in *New Waves in Political Philosophy*, ed. Boudewijn de Bruin and Christopher F. Zurn [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009], 80). Yet, by taking a longer view of Ricoeur's work, it is clear that hermeneutics plays only a partial role, alongside rhetoric and poetics, in dealing with ideology. I discuss this further below.

Summarizing his little ethics, Ricoeur states in *Critique and Conviction* that the problem to which phronesis served as an answer was that of making “new decisions in the face of difficult cases.”<sup>72</sup> This problem arises upon recognizing the self’s finitude in relation to the situations that confront them.<sup>73</sup> In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur identifies three features of phronesis that can assist us in managing this finitude when forming judgments. These features are: (1) “respect for adverse positions”; (2) the search for the “just mean”; and (3) the counsel of the wise, or the *phronimos*.<sup>74</sup> Each of these three features captures something essential about the aim of phronesis, which is to enact a phronetic judgment, or to invent a novel form of conduct that navigates through adverse positions to locate what is just in that particular situation.

What Ricoeur wants from this concept in the political sphere can be clarified by means of an analogy with the legal sphere. In law, each case brought to trial revolves around a conflict of some sort that has occurred between the parties involved. One of the principal tasks of a judge is to hear out the opposing sides so that all the relevant points of view can be taken into consideration and put into productive conflict. In forming his or her judgment, the judge aims to determine the just mean between the parties with respect to legal precedent in essentially similar cases. In this example, the *phronimos* can be understood as analogous to the notion of legal precedent.

Yet, this is but an analogy. There are important differences between moral systems and legal systems. As Ricoeur points out: “The whole question is. . . whether a moral system, which does not have the support of the judicial institution, is capable of establishing its own coherence.”<sup>75</sup> What marks the essential difference here, Ricoeur continues, is that on the moral plane we are most often dealing with unexpressed “specificatory premises” that mark the intermingling of relations of domination and violence that are themselves institutionalized.<sup>76</sup> This difference is crucial for the way phronetic judgment attempts to navigate between the pathological effects of ideology and utopia within the social imaginary, which, in different ways, each have the potential to draw attention away from domination in the political sphere.

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<sup>72</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 92.

<sup>73</sup> Concerning my use of the notion of “finitude” here, I am inclined to agree with Sebastian Purcell, who argues that there is a fundamental difference between the meaning of “finitude” in Ricoeur and Heidegger, for example. On Purcell’s reading, by “finitude” Ricoeur means something like a “lack of self-coincidence” rather than the global horizon of all human reality (“Hermeneutics and Truth: From *Alētheia* to Attestation,” *Études Ricoeuriennes / Ricoeur Studies* 4, no. 1 [2013]: 149).

<sup>74</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 273.

<sup>75</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 278.

<sup>76</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 279–80.

We now turn to the second clue I identified at the end of *Lectures*, namely, the “judgment of appropriateness,” the “concrete judgment of taste,” or that which is “fitting in a given situation.” As I read them, these ideas are serving as a placeholder for what Ricoeur will later develop in terms of the “the *equitable*”—phronesis actualized in judgment.<sup>77</sup> Here, we can see how Ricoeur again makes use of Aristotle, specifically Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle distinguishes between equity and (legal) justice.<sup>78</sup> The problem for Aristotle is this: since all law is universal and conduct is particular, a difficulty arises in attempting to subsume conduct under a law without in some sense violating the law’s universality.<sup>79</sup> Importantly, this is not a theoretical problem for Aristotle, but a practical problem in the sense that it is constitutive of interpreting and applying the law. For Aristotle, the equitable is thus “a correction of the law where it is defective owing to its universality.”<sup>80</sup>

Turning back to Ricoeur, it is now possible to see how his notion of phronesis is concerned with the same kind of difficulty, albeit beyond the confines of the law in the broader realm of what Ricoeur calls “political language.”<sup>81</sup> The difficulty is that phronetic judgment has to rewrite its own rules, as it were, in a way that is more faithful to those rules than another. In similar fashion, on its journey back to ethics, having passed through the “sieve” of morality, the ethical aim must be tentatively actualized in a way that will, to some extent, always violate certain norms and the original aims of the action’s initiator. Consider, for example, cases of civil disobedience wherein individuals deliberately violate the law in order to live up to some higher sense of justice than the legal. In such cases, those involved must judge which course of action will best correct existing forms of injustice that fly below the radar of the law’s rigid universality.

What this example captures about phronetic judgment is the inventive moment that it necessarily involves, a moment of novelty that can never be fully accounted for in terms of what is traditional, precedential, or conventional. As a preliminary definition, we might say that *phronesis is the virtue of judging what is equitable in situations where injustice will have to be done to one set of values for the sake of another*. In phronetic judgment, the two vices to be avoided are, on the one hand, the rigid universality of

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<sup>77</sup> “It remains to give a name to the just on the plane of practical reason, the one where judgment occurs in a situation. I propose that the just then is no longer either the good or the legal, but the *equitable*” (Ricoeur, *The Just*, xxiv).

<sup>78</sup> For example, Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 261.

<sup>79</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1137b10–14.

<sup>80</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1137b26–27.

<sup>81</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “The Fragility of Political Language,” trans. David Pellauer, *Philosophy Today* 31, no. 1 (1987): 35–44.



deontological norms, which can often reinforce domination masked by ideology and, on the other, the capricious particularity of ethical aims, which have yet to pass the test of deontology.

With this sketch of Ricoeur's basic understanding of phronesis and its relation to judgment, it is now possible to address the issue to which my discussion has been leading up: What does the problem of Mannheim's paradox look like now from the perspective of Ricoeur's more developed concept of phronesis, "wisdom in judgment"?

### Spiraling the Circle

In this final section I describe the tripartite core of Ricoeur's conception of phronetic judgment and explain how it can serve to spiral the practical circle of ideology and utopia.

In the Preface to *The Just*, Ricoeur explains his qualification of the problem of judgment as "phronetic":

The whole problem, which I will risk qualifying with the adjective *phronetic*, lies in exploring the *middle* zone where the judgment is formed, halfway between proof, defined by the constraints of logic, and sophism, motivated by the desire to seduce or the temptation to intimidate. This middle zone can be designated by many names, depending on the strategy used: *rhetoric*, to the extent that rhetoric, following Aristotle's definition, consists in giving a "rejoinder" to dialectic, itself understood as a doctrine of probable reasoning; *hermeneutic*, to the extent that this joins application to understanding or explanation; *poetic*, to the extent that the invention of an appropriate solution to the unique situation stems from what, since Kant, we have called the productive imagination. . . .

Today I would say that the reflective judgment of Kant's third *Critique* brings together the three aspects distinguished by these three disciplines: probability, subsumption (or application), innovation.<sup>82</sup>

This passage brings together a number of themes that run throughout Ricoeur's work. As I read it, by qualifying the problem of judgment as phronetic Ricoeur is attempting to bring together those aspects of rhetoric, hermeneutics, and poetics that allow

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<sup>82</sup> Ricoeur, *The Just*, xxii.

judgment to navigate between an indifferent universalism and a capricious particularism. These aspects are: (1) the art of interpretation characteristic of hermeneutics; (2) the imaginative invention characteristic of poetics; and (3) the probable argumentation characteristic of rhetoric. As I will argue, each of these three aspects play an essential role in the phronetic effort to spiral the circle.

(1) To begin, phronetic judgment is hermeneutic in that ideological distortion must first be identified and interpreted before it can be overcome. If Ricoeur's basic understanding of the social imaginary is correct, there should be both ideological and utopian layers of meaning to every action. To connect this to our earlier discussion about constitutive symbolism, Ricoeur understands action as meaningful "to the extent that it meets conditions of acceptability established within a community of language and of values."<sup>83</sup> These conditions of acceptability, as Ricoeur will say later in the same essay, are "symbolic codes [that] confer a certain *readability* upon action."<sup>84</sup> Ideologies and utopias form an important part of these symbolic codes and bestow actions with a distinctively political meaning. Yet, in order to thematize and objectify these ideological and utopian layers of meaning, an effort must first be made to distance oneself from our more original relation of belonging. It is here that Ricoeur locates the essential, even if limited, role of more scientific forms of explanation in ideology critique when he points to the "necessity of a detour through the explanation of causes."<sup>85</sup> By pursuing the dialectic of explanation and understanding characteristic of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, it is possible to break open the closed circle of ideology by thematizing operative motivational frameworks that participate in the perpetuation and legitimation of systems of domination.

(2) Yet, hermeneutics is only one moment of phronetic judgment: a broken circle does not yet make a spiral. What is learned from interpretation must still be brought back into the sphere of action by *someone*. It is therefore falls on individuals, acting in concert, to innovate equitable solutions where laws and institutions fail. Let us briefly return to the final paragraphs of Ricoeur's *Lectures*, where he emphasizes the personal character of his response and the necessary element of risk that this involves:

My more ultimate answer [to Mannheim's paradox] is that we must let *ourselves* be drawn into the circle and then must try to make the circle a spiral. We cannot eliminate from a social ethics the element of *risk*. We wager on a certain set of values and then try to be consistent with them; verification is

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<sup>83</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 189.

<sup>84</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 195.

<sup>85</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 292.

therefore a question of our whole life. No one can escape this. Anyone who claims to proceed in a value-free way will find nothing.<sup>86</sup>

Within the now-broken circle, the agents of phronetic judgment will ultimately have to risk *themselves* on a determinate vision of the good life. This element of risk is unavoidable because the referent of the judgment is only a *desired* future. Yet, it is important to recall that innovation for Ricoeur does not mean creation *ex nihilo*.<sup>87</sup> Rather, as Ricoeur explains in *The Rule of Metaphor*, innovation “is a way of responding in a creative fashion to a question presented by things.”<sup>88</sup> At the political level, the poetic aspect of phronetic judgment aims at a “conversion of the *imaginary*.”<sup>89</sup> More precisely, it aims to modify the social imaginary in an equitable way. In doing so, it attempts to stir up “the sedimented universe of conventional ideas,” which, if successful, will become future “premises of rhetorical argumentation.”<sup>90</sup> It is here that a new meaning is produced, and the circle first broken by hermeneutic distancing is set into motion.

(3) If the poetic moment of phronetic judgment involves the production of a new meaning, the last question that remains to be addressed concerns the truth status of this innovation. What kind of “truth” can phronetic judgment aspire to? In *Reflections on The Just*, Ricoeur dedicates a section of his essay “Justice and Truth” to this question. Here, Ricoeur describes this kind of truth in the same terms of “fit” that we encountered in *Lectures*:

What kind of truth is at issue here? It is a truth that fits. . . . Can we speak then of objectivity? No, not in the constative sense of this term. It is a question rather of the certitude that in this situation this is the best decision, what has to be done. It is not a matter of constraint; the force of this conviction has nothing to do with a factual determination. It is the sense *hic et nunc* of what obviously fits, of what ought to be done.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 312.

<sup>87</sup> Paul Ricoeur and Cornelius Castoriadis, “Dialogue on History and the Social Imaginary,” trans. Scott Davidson, in *Ricoeur and Castoriadis in Discussion: On Human Creation, Historical Novelty, and the Social Imaginary*, ed. Suzi Adams (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 5.

<sup>88</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello, SJ (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 146.

<sup>89</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Rhetoric-Poetics-Hermeneutics,” in *From Metaphysics to Rhetoric*, ed. Michel Meyer (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer, 2012), 143.

<sup>90</sup> Ricoeur, “Rhetoric-Poetics-Hermeneutics,” 143.

<sup>91</sup> Ricoeur, *Reflections on The Just*, 70.

This notion of fit brings us to the third and final aspect of phronetic judgment—rhetoric. Phronetic judgment is rhetorical in the sense that it must be found persuasive by others, namely, those who will suffer the resulting course of action. Since it aims at the realization of what is equitable in singular situations—that is, something novel—the “truth” of phronetic judgment is not merely “constative”; it does not aim to describe things *as they are*. In other words, because phronesis is not constrained by factual determinations alone, it must be recognized *as phronetic* by those involved.

Here, Ricoeur finds inspiration in Kant’s notion of reflective judgment. As in Kant, the kind of universality sought by phronetic judgment is that of “communicability.”<sup>92</sup> Paradoxically, communicability attempts to institute a universality that is not pre-given. The truth of phronetic judgment thus remains bound to its ability to be persuasively communicated to others.<sup>93</sup> It is important to recall, however, that political argumentation is bound by a “logic of the probable,” where arguments are never final. Even when successful, the outcome of phronesis may always be challenged and will have to be defended in the court of public opinion. And when it fails, it will need to start again, and look for new ways of arguing that activate the social imaginary and disrupt ideological distortion. As Aristotle recognized long ago, herein lies the importance of rhetoric: it is not enough to merely see what is true and just, these values must also be actualized in speech, lest they be defeated by their opposites.<sup>94</sup>

## Conclusion

By taking a longer view on Ricoeur’s thinking about ideology, I have argued the concept of phronetic judgment consolidates certain aspects of his earlier reflections on ideology, utopia, and the social imagination within his later reflections on ethics, politics, and practical philosophy more generally. Reading Ricoeur in this way reveals a surprising continuity in his political thought that may help to bring together the

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<sup>92</sup> Ricoeur, *The Just*, 97–98.

<sup>93</sup> For an account of Ricoeur’s theory of truth that moves in the same direction as my argument here, see Todd S. Mei, “Constructing Ricoeur’s Hermeneutical Theory of Truth,” in *Hermeneutics and Phenomenology in Paul Ricoeur: Between Text and Phenomenon*, ed. Scott Davidson and Marc-Antoine Vallée (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 197–215. Mei discusses in more detail the role of communicability and agreement in Ricoeur’s hermeneutical theory of truth, which he describes as a “holistic fallibilism.”

<sup>94</sup> Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 1355a21–24, 35.

different stages of his corpus.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, doing so may also stimulate further interest from critical theorists who might not otherwise see the immediate relevance of Ricoeur's later works to ideology critique.

However, there are also political implications to our reading. Above all, Ricoeur exposes the idleness of trying to detach politics from our desires and preferences. This serves as a much-needed corrective to the idea that politics can be conducted on the basis of facts and data alone. The problem with this prevalent line of thought is that it surrenders a central site of political struggle—the social imaginary. To overcome ideological distortion, new visions for the future are needed. The point, therefore, is not to deny the social imaginary, but to find our place within it and risk ourselves on something new. Phronetic judgment is Ricoeur's model for doing so. While inescapably fallible, this process finds support in the very selves who initiate it. This means that we must take responsibility not only for our decisions but also the consequences of their actualization. Ricoeur's insistence upon the fragility of politics thus serves as a warning akin to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: our capacity to innovate is both a gift and a curse, and we must not abandon our creations even when they fail to resemble the good intentions that imagined them into existence.

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<sup>95</sup> George H. Taylor, "Why Ideology and Utopia Today?" in *Ideology and Utopia and in the Twenty-First Century: The Surplus of Meaning in Ricoeur's Dialectical Concept*, ed. Stephanie N. Arel and Dan R. Stiver (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2019), 228.

## **Attitude Isn't Everything: Hermeneutics as an Unfinished Project**

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### **Introduction: The Ambiguity of Hermeneutics**

What does hermeneutics mean today? For many observers, the term will readily signify one of the distinctive theoretical orientations of Continental European philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Here, we recall the post-Heideggerian philosophical agenda advanced by Hans-Georg Gadamer (and also Paul Ricoeur) to elucidate the phenomena of human understanding and interpretation. According to philosophical hermeneutics, we understand ourselves and the world in light of language, history, and art. But, upon closer inspection, the perplexingly polysemic meaning of hermeneutics emerges. Of course, hermeneutics is far older than Heidegger or Gadamer's engagement with it, and this fact is no mere antiquarian curiosity. Shopping for newly published hermeneutics books on Amazon or browsing the term in scholarly databases will reveal that there remains under the name hermeneutics a robust output of work on the methodology of scriptural and ecclesiastical interpretation. In addition, the nineteenth-century meaning of hermeneutics, which names the philosophical quest for methodological foundations

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Haley Burke, Jeff Malpas, Elise Poll, and the Editors of this journal issue. The anonymous reviewers also provided extremely helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup> David Liakos and Theodore George, "Hermeneutics in Post-War Continental European Philosophy," in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy, 1945–2015*, ed. Kelly Becker and Iain D. Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 399–415.

for the humanities and social sciences, persists as well.<sup>3</sup> A theme emerges from this incomplete but revealing survey, one that may be put by way of a contrast with the philosophical cousin of hermeneutics, namely, phenomenology. Steven Crowell, one of its most distinguished contemporary practitioners, argues that phenomenology today amounts to a “‘research program’ in the loose sense that analytic philosophy might be considered one.”<sup>4</sup> As Crowell clarifies, a philosophical research program in this sense means a body of work that can advance claims in response to theoretical as well as cultural and political problems in a manner governed by broadly shared philosophical commitments and a coherent methodological approach. In the contemporary intellectual landscape, hermeneutics occupies a far more ambiguous position than does phenomenology, or at least Crowell’s conception of phenomenology.<sup>5</sup> The present paper concerns the question of whether the apparent obscurity of hermeneutics today constitutes a philosophical problem.

In a recent article, Claude Romano provides an example of the ubiquitous but vague meaning of hermeneutics today. He emphasizes the distinctively hermeneutical dimension of recent intellectual culture at large: “In numerous fields of knowledge—from literary criticism to the social sciences and philosophy—a hermeneutic paradigm has silently tended to replace the structuralist paradigm that was still dominant at the beginning of the 1980s, and whose decline now seems inexorable.”<sup>6</sup> Romano suggests that the humanities and social sciences have undergone a hermeneutic turn. That is, these disciplines have decisively rejected the idea that rules and structures exist independent of and prior to interpretation: “For hermeneutics, on the contrary, meaning is *irreducible*; we are always already living in it, and if we want to explain it, we can only refer it to a behavior which is already *meaningful*.”<sup>7</sup> According to Romano, a hermeneutical paradigm has largely superseded positivism and structuralism.

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<sup>3</sup> Kristin Gjesdal, “Hermeneutics and the Question of Method,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Philosophical Methodology*, ed. Giuseppina D’Oro and Søren Overgaard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 337–55.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Crowell, “A Philosophy of Mind: Phenomenology, Normativity, and Meaning,” in *Normativity, Meaning, and the Promise of Phenomenology*, ed. Matthew Burch, Jack Marsh, and Irene McMullin (London: Routledge, 2019), 329.

<sup>5</sup> I do not mean to distinguish phenomenology from hermeneutics in any absolute sense, which would be problematic for historical and philosophical reasons. Of course, Gadamer is deeply indebted to Husserl. But contemporary strains of philosophical hermeneutics that trace their origin to Gadamer, which I shall consider here, have unfolded in recent decades in a way that is relatively distinct from the path of proponents of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology.

<sup>6</sup> Claude Romano, “The Flexible Rule of the Hermeneut,” trans. Samuel Webb, *Sophia* 56, no. 3 (2017): 393.

<sup>7</sup> Romano, “The Flexible Rule of the Hermeneut,” 394.

Intellectual activity, he argues, is now defined in essentially hermeneutical, that is, interpretative, terms.

In making this claim, Romano indicates what I hope will be, by the end of this paper, evident. Hermeneutics today often signifies a sensibility, mood, or gesture more than it does any distinctive course of philosophical argument. As Romano sees it, most contemporary academic research contains hermeneutical contours. Along these lines, hermeneutics does not really constitute an autonomous research program or discipline (unlike phenomenology). It is often described as something more like an amorphous current or spirit of intellectual life—what I shall call here the sense of hermeneutics *as an attitude*. By speaking in these programmatic terms, Romano makes hermeneutics into something general and even vague. Despite his appreciation for the insights of hermeneutics, Romano is not deploying hermeneutics and its theoretical vocabulary to mean any historically specific or conceptually precise philosophical claim or thesis. Here, we encounter the remarkable importance of hermeneutics for contemporary thinking—but without discovering much clarity about the true meaning or definition of hermeneutics itself. Gadamerians and Ricoeurians, for instance, would demand a more specific account of hermeneutics than Romano provides in the passages quoted above; so too might any otherwise impartial philosophical observer who comes across the many references to hermeneutics today.

In the remainder of this paper, I shall elucidate the significance, as well as the limitations, of conceiving hermeneutics as an attitude. The overall purpose of the paper, then, is twofold. First, I aim to explain and criticize some prominent characterizations of hermeneutics in recent philosophical literature. Second, as an improvement upon these mischaracterizations, I seek to highlight and defend several more promising and salutary trends in contemporary philosophical hermeneutics.

To address the first aim, I will consider two references to hermeneutics in the sense under consideration. Alain Badiou provides our first conception of hermeneutics as a sensibility. For Badiou, hermeneutics names the anti-metaphysical tendencies of intellectual culture. This reference to hermeneutics, however, does not accurately describe all thinking that goes under that name. Badiou's polemical conception of hermeneutics reveals the conceptual poverty of seeing hermeneutics as a sensibility and not as a body of substantive philosophical research. The second, now approving, invocation of hermeneutics comes from Richard Rorty, who was among the first writers to expressly call hermeneutics an attitude. But Rorty's subsequent abandonment of hermeneutics as a name for his own thinking shows that his association with hermeneutics amounted only to a flirtation. I will also discuss how this fixation on hermeneutics as an attitude, a conception held in common by the



unlikely bedfellows of Badiou and Rorty, has produced the equally problematic reaction that hermeneutics must formulate a rigorous method for research in the humanities and social sciences. We shall find that this alternative, in addition to relying upon the attitude of hermeneutics as its central provocation, suffers from the same distorted fixation on methodology that Gadamer criticized convincingly in *Truth and Method*.

In response to the deficiencies of the attitude of hermeneutics, including the methodological response it inspires, the paper addresses our second aim by positively suggesting that hermeneutics should aim to be a genuine philosophical research program instead of a vague sensibility. We will examine, then, what I shall suggestively call *foundations for a contemporary hermeneutics* with reference to six promising contributions to hermeneutical research. My hope is that this paper will ultimately contribute to a conception of hermeneutics as more than just an attitude; rather, an unfinished and still promising philosophical project.

### **Badiou: Hermeneutics against Metaphysics**

In this and the following section, we shall consider two influential paradigms for conceiving of hermeneutics as an attitude or sensibility in order to clarify, and subsequently move beyond, the contemporary confusion surrounding the term. Badiou, our first example, has invoked hermeneutics in a harshly critical and polemical register. In a synoptic paper published in 2000, Badiou delivers a rallying cry to own up to “the courage of thought” by means of an unabashed revival of metaphysical speculation.<sup>8</sup> Thanks to this gesture, whose technical details do not interest us here but whose martial and valedictory tone characterizes many recent calls to “return” to metaphysics, Badiou’s work has figured in the landscape of increasingly prominent materialisms and realisms in contemporary Continental philosophy.<sup>9</sup> Situated as he is within this milieu, Badiou does not assess hermeneutics favorably relative to his own systematic philosophical project, which takes its point of departure from a critical reassessment of the many critiques and rejections of metaphysics in intellectual history: “The opera of the end of metaphysics, in a number of extraordinarily varied

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<sup>8</sup> Alain Badiou, “Metaphysics without Metaphysics,” trans. Megan Flocken and Javiera Perez Gomez, in *Division III of Heidegger’s Being and Time: The Unanswered Question of Being*, ed. Lee Braver (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 52.

<sup>9</sup> Adrian Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism, Volume One: The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 81–107.

productions, has remained in the repertoire for nearly three centuries. The main plot twists of the libretto are of great interest.”<sup>10</sup> Hermeneutics surfaces in this context as one of several putatively anti-metaphysical discourses whose legacy Badiou recommends we boldly transcend.

In Badiou’s view, four anti-metaphysical positions are most prominent, namely, Kantian critique, positivism, dialectic, and hermeneutics, the last of which he defines as follows:

Finally, that which discerns under the name of metaphysics, the nihilistic disposition of the entire history of the West. “Metaphysics” is then the prescription that the history of being be such that, in longing for return, it must commit itself to interminable hermeneutic postponement. Let us call this the *historical trial of metaphysics*, which in the end cannot oppose its technical proliferation save by the discretion of the poet, or by announcing the return of the dead gods. This time Heidegger is the necessary hero.<sup>11</sup>

Here, Badiou inscribes hermeneutics completely within the context of the later Heidegger’s struggle against metaphysics as ontotheology, that is, as the attempt to decisively determine the ontological ground or foundation of all entities and also to specify the highest theological instantiation of any entity at all.<sup>12</sup> For Heidegger, as Badiou aptly recognizes in this passage, the “history of being” names the sequence of historical epochs, each organized around its own metaphysical structure, that have engaged in versions of this two-pronged project, which all foreclose the irreducible multiplicity of being. In the face of this “nihilistic” outcome of the history of metaphysics, Heidegger hopes for “another beginning” for Western culture that will not engage in flattening attempts to pin down and specify the meaning of being but will rather ecstatically and poetically celebrate and embrace the multifaceted meaningfulness of being as such. Badiou overlooks here, however, in his reference to a hermeneutics he flatly equates with this Heideggerian project, how developments in the hermeneutic tradition after Heidegger have critically contested and, in some ways, advanced beyond Heidegger’s arguments. For example, Gadamer’s project enables us to sensitively disclose and respond to the truths within historical traditions instead of

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<sup>10</sup> Badiou, “Metaphysics without Metaphysics,” 39.

<sup>11</sup> Badiou, “Metaphysics without Metaphysics,” 40.

<sup>12</sup> Iain D. Thomson, *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7–43.

preparing for and contributing to a radical break or rupture with metaphysics.<sup>13</sup> In general, hermeneutics, we should remember, possesses a greater scope than the later Heidegger's project can fully encompass.

In fairness to Badiou, he does not mean to attend closely to the details of hermeneutics as such. Rather, he identifies a deficiency within the anti-metaphysical tendencies of recent philosophy in general which, he argues, abandon metaphysics but “only substitute that which we will call *archi-metaphysics*, that is, the suspension of the meaning of an indeterminate that is simply left to the historical contingency of its arrival.”<sup>14</sup> Hermeneutics, Badiou argues, falls prey to “archi-metaphysics” to the extent that, rather than attempting to positively specify the metaphysical meaning of being, it only passively awaits some meaning that is always, to invoke a Heideggerian expression, on the way. Jacques Derrida's celebration of the elusive “to come” of democracy and friendship may provide an apt example of this philosophical tendency.<sup>15</sup> On Badiou's account, hermeneutics avoids and resists any specific metaphysical determination by invoking instead some as-yet unheard, unseen, unknown meaning. But in so doing, Badiou argues, this ostensibly anti-metaphysical hermeneutics unwittingly replicates metaphysics by replacing particular ontological claims with, instead, a necessarily indeterminate ontological openness toward a meaning to come, such as the other beginning whose glimpses Heidegger finds in the poetry of Hölderlin or the paintings of Van Gogh.

Badiou's pro-metaphysical view invites controversy on multiple fronts. But for our purposes, his conception of hermeneutics deserves special scrutiny. Does hermeneutics, in contrast to bold metaphysical speculation, merely passively await a future arrival of meaning? Gadamerian hermeneutics, at least, lives up to the ideal of *ontological pluralism*. That is, hermeneutics actively discloses the multiple meanings of truth-claims from within tradition's rich bequests to the present. The interpretative activity of hermeneutics seeks out these meanings and carefully and charitably draws out their truth, finding thereby that the past always has something challengingly new to say to the present. This encounter transforms our present horizons of meaning and permits us in turn to see novel possible paths for the future. Past and present continually challenge and enrich each other in an ongoing “fusion of horizons” that

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<sup>13</sup> At any rate, this is my interpretation of Gadamer's advantage over Heidegger. See David Liakos, “Another Beginning? Heidegger, Gadamer, and Postmodernity,” *Epoché* 24, no. 1 (2019): 221–38.

<sup>14</sup> Badiou, “Metaphysics without Metaphysics,” 45. I should note that I reject Badiou's reading that the later Heidegger thinks being as such is ineffable or always distantly on the horizon. But this is not the space in which to adjudicate that issue, since I am concerned here with the legacy of Gadamerian hermeneutics and not with matters of Heidegger scholarship.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (New York: Verso, 2005), 29.

abjures any final determination but that welcomes and draws upon the surprising twists and turns of multiple meanings that we encounter, develop, and cultivate.<sup>16</sup> Instead of meekly awaiting an indeterminate future event of truth that is always on the way, Gadamerian hermeneutics searches for, responds to, and sensitively discloses the truths of tradition in ways that continually transform the present and open up the future. Gadamer does not merely await an event that is always on the horizon; instead, Gadamerian hermeneutics encourages us now to actively discover and clarify the plural meanings within tradition.

In an additional critique of the hermeneutic tradition, Badiou claims, “against archi-metaphysical critique, that categorical determinations are not unilaterally subjective.”<sup>17</sup> Here, Badiou suggests that what he sees as the kneejerk anti-metaphysical stance of hermeneutics encourages a naïve and relativistic subjectivism. This characterization also misses the mark, however, and could have benefited from a deepened engagement with post-Heideggerian hermeneutics. Gadamer models our relationship to history on an intimate conversation or dialogue. This dialogical entanglement of multiple “horizons” of significance suggests, as Gadamer avowedly followed Heidegger in claiming, that hermeneutics transcends the subject/object dichotomy: “Our line of thought prevents us from dividing the hermeneutic problem in terms of the subjectivity of the interpreter and the objectivity of the meaning to be understood.”<sup>18</sup> The phenomenological abstraction of the subject/object dichotomy could never capture or describe a genuinely intimate dialogue between partners. In associating hermeneutical thinking with a problematic form of subjectivism, Badiou misses this crucial ontological feature of dialogue in his reductive critique of what he calls hermeneutics, which in the Gadamerian tradition can never be equated with subjectivism.

While Heidegger himself was careful, as mentioned, to specify a rigorous equation between metaphysics and ontotheology, some post-Heideggerian hermeneutical thinkers, such as Gianni Vattimo, strongly reject metaphysics as such for its allegedly absolutist determination and reification of truth.<sup>19</sup> This point may be conceded to Badiou’s critique. Gadamerian ontological pluralism, meanwhile, encourages us to discover genuinely challenging truths even within traditional

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<sup>16</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 305–306; “Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1: *Hermeneutik I* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990), 311–12.

<sup>17</sup> Badiou, “Metaphysics without Metaphysics,” 52.

<sup>18</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 309; “Wahrheit und Methode,” 316.

<sup>19</sup> Gianni Vattimo, “What Need, What Metaphysics?” *Parrhesia* 21 (2014): 53–57.

metaphysics, whose depth and wisdom Gadamer always respected. For example, he announces that hermeneutics will journey “back into the problems of classical metaphysics” in his discussion of dialectic and the “speculative structure” of experience in the strongly ontological Part III of *Truth and Method*.<sup>20</sup> Badiou’s blind spot regarding the ontological commitments of hermeneutics and his association of hermeneutics with subjectivism reveal that he provides little more than a straw man of Heideggerian hermeneutics in the service of his own pro-metaphysical polemic.

I do not intend to offer a clumsy external critique of Badiou for failing to provide what he never even promised, namely, an accurate assessment of hermeneutical thought in general. Rather, I contend that Badiou fits into the landscape of invocations of hermeneutics that are unspecific and vague. In Badiou’s case, this problem deserves our attention because, in the midst of a contemporary revival of interest in various dialectical and speculative materialisms and realisms, hermeneutics risks appearing, precisely as Badiou mischaracterizes it, as little more than the phantom of a rigidly doctrinaire rejection of metaphysics and of bold philosophizing in general that today looks pitifully out of date.<sup>21</sup> Hermeneutics deserves better, and to live up to this potential, it requires a specifiable definition as something more than the platitudinous sensibility that Badiou detects among critics of dogmatic metaphysics.

### **Rorty: Hermeneutics as Flirtation**

In contrast to Badiou, Rorty, our second paradigm for conceiving hermeneutics as a nebulous current of thought, invokes hermeneutics in a validating and positive register. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty criticizes modern philosophy’s epistemological fixation on confronting mental and linguistic representations with the external world they purport to capture to justify our beliefs and practices. Rorty enlists Gadamerian hermeneutics as an ally in his departure from all such constructive philosophical thinking. In this context, Rorty interprets hermeneutics as “an expression of hope that the cultural space left behind by the demise of epistemology will not be filled—that our culture should become one in which the demand for

<sup>20</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 456, 466; “Wahrheit und Methode,” 464, 474.

<sup>21</sup> Levi Bryant, Nick Snircek, and Graham Harman, eds., *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011). The back cover of this volume declares: “the new currents of continental philosophy depart from the text-centered hermeneutic models of the past and engage in daring speculations about the nature of reality itself.” In particular, Levi Bryant lists “the Gadamerians” in a sequence of “exhausted” post-Kantian positions (“The Ontic Principle: Outline of an Object-Oriented Ontology,” in *The Speculative Turn*, 262).

constraint and confrontation is no longer felt.”<sup>22</sup> Without the systematic quest for epistemological grounding, philosophy will consist of an endless conversation that produces new, formative ways of imagining and speaking; hermeneutics names this edifying, literary cultural practice after the end of epistemology. Rorty purports to join hands with Gadamerian hermeneutics in a break with the consensus of constructive, systematic, modern philosophy.

With the benefit of hindsight, the most important feature of Rorty’s gesture may be his identification of hermeneutics with a cultural milieu.<sup>23</sup> He goes so far as to provide a provocative and stipulative definition of hermeneutics as “a polemical term in contemporary philosophy.”<sup>24</sup> Here, Rorty’s hermeneutics in fact anticipates Badiou’s reference, which provides merely the inversion of Rorty’s own avowedly “polemical” hermeneutics. Whereas for Badiou, hermeneutics forms part of a broad and reactionary rejection of metaphysical speculation characteristic of late-capitalist relativism, Rorty thinks hermeneutics functions as the playfully liberating rejoinder to an academic philosophical culture that quixotically constructs one practically pointless theory of knowledge after another. Reacting against the French “post-structuralist” reception of Heidegger, Badiou sees hermeneutics as one figure of an exhausted intellectual status quo. Rorty, for his part, identifies hermeneutics as the appropriate counterbalance to the boring inertia of professional analytic philosophy and as dovetailing with developments in post-Wittgensteinian philosophy of language.<sup>25</sup> Badiou and Rorty both invoke hermeneutics as part of an avowed manifesto: Badiou props up hermeneutics as one lamely ineffectual contrast for the announcement of his heroic metaphysical project; Rorty proclaims that conversational and edifying hermeneutics will replace constructive and systematic epistemology as the paradigm for intellectual activity. In these influential philosophical rallying cries, hermeneutics functions as a desideratum, either negatively by way of contrast (Badiou) or positively as the name for a new discourse (Rorty).

In his later work, as he transitioned outside academic philosophy altogether, Rorty drops his association with hermeneutics. In a 2003 interview, he distances himself from the tradition: “‘Hermeneutic philosophy’ is as vague and unfruitful a notion as ‘analytic philosophy.’ Both terms signify little more than dislike of each for

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 315.

<sup>23</sup> Theodore George and I emphasize this aspect of Rorty’s contribution to hermeneutics. See Liakos and George, “Hermeneutics in Post-War Continental European Philosophy,” 413.

<sup>24</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 357.

<sup>25</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 7.

the other.”<sup>26</sup> What accounts for this surprising shift from his earlier enthusiasm to later dismissal of hermeneutics? Ultimately, the union between Rorty and Gadamerian hermeneutics was bound to end, since Rorty never believed in “a ‘meaning of Being’ which a discipline called ‘hermeneutics’ might explore.”<sup>27</sup> In contrast to the Heideggerian and Gadamerian elucidation of the disclosive being of Dasein and the attendant priority accorded to the concept of truth, Rorty employed hermeneutics as a destructive, therapeutic reaction to systematic, epistemological philosophizing. This predominantly negative employment of hermeneutics could prove only a flimsy foundation for anything more than a passing dalliance between Rorty and hermeneutics. Rorty’s well-known allergy to references to truth stands uneasily alongside the iconic final line of Gadamer’s *magnum opus*: “What the tool of method does not achieve must—and really can—be achieved by a discipline of questioning and inquiry, a discipline that guarantees truth.”<sup>28</sup> And yet, even if his reading of *Truth and Method* can be challenged on several fronts, it cannot be denied that Rorty’s encounter with Gadamer proved influential for the subsequent understanding of hermeneutics in the Anglophone world, as evidenced by the engagement today with Gadamerian themes by writers influenced by Rorty such as Robert Brandom and John McDowell.

An episode from the “effective history”—that is, how the historical reception of a hermeneutic phenomenon both opens up and closes off implicit or forgotten horizons of questions and priorities—of Rorty’s reading of Gadamer is worth revisiting.<sup>29</sup> Here we shall discover the limitations, but also the positive potential, of Rorty’s engagement with hermeneutics. Rorty took part in a, today little remembered, roundtable discussion on hermeneutics alongside Charles Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus in 1980.<sup>30</sup> The latter two figures expressed sharp disagreement with the account of hermeneutics in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* that they rightly saw as rapidly reshaping the reception of the hermeneutical movement in professional Anglophone philosophy. Dreyfus and Taylor’s critique of Rorty centered on the technical issue of whether the natural sciences and humanities can be methodologically distinguished. For Rorty, Gadamer’s critique of the methodological fixation in the humanities and social sciences implies that forms of inquiry, while addressing different practical needs,

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<sup>26</sup> C. G. Prado, “A Conversation with Richard Rorty,” *Symposium* 7, no. 2 (2003): 228.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Rorty, “A Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 34, no. 1 (1980): 42.

<sup>28</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 484; “Wahrheit und Methode,” 494.

<sup>29</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300; “Wahrheit und Methode,” 305–306.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Rorty, Charles Taylor, and Hubert Dreyfus, “A Discussion,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 34, no. 1 (1980): 47–55.

do not possess unambiguous methodological demarcations that could positively contribute to research.<sup>31</sup> Taylor evinces considerable befuddlement at Rorty's understanding of hermeneutics. For Taylor, hermeneutics means, rather, the defense of the methodological autonomy and validity of the humanities against the powerful explanatory claims of the natural sciences: "Old-guard Diltheyans, their shoulders hunched over from years-long resistance against the encroaching pressure of positivist natural science, suddenly pitch forward on their faces as all opposition ceases to the reign of universal hermeneutics."<sup>32</sup> In adhering to Wilhelm Dilthey's distinction between the natural and human sciences, Taylor and Dreyfus both readily concede to natural science its capacity to provide "an account of the world as it is independently of the meanings it might have for human subjects, or how it figures in their experience."<sup>33</sup> Later, we will further explore and clarify Taylor's methodological response to Rorty.

To Rorty's way of thinking, though, this invocation of scientific realism appears retrograde and pragmatically useless. One reason he gives for disagreeing with Dreyfus and Taylor on this matter interestingly goes beyond his otherwise questionable reading of Gadamer and his frankly polemical appropriation of hermeneutics, which is merely the inversion of Badiou's own problematic reading of hermeneutics:

Why not refer people who want to dwell with and love people to the arts, and people who want to control and predict them to the human sciences? Why not, in short, just *give* the notions of "knowledge" and "objectivity" and "science" to the Weberians and the reductionists, and stop trying to hold on to terms which only look honorific because they are associated with the ability to predict and control?<sup>34</sup>

Rorty recommends abandoning the methodological direction of Dreyfus and Taylor. In place of the framework of realism, Rorty urges moving from carving up academic disciplines along methodological lines, as Dreyfus and Taylor suggest, and toward a sentimentalist distinction between the predictive and degrading power of science, on the one hand, and humanistic love and sensitivity, on the other. Later on, we will further explore this challenging gesture, which improves upon other aspects of Rorty's

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<sup>31</sup> Rorty, "A Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor," 39.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Taylor, "Understanding in Human Science," *The Review of Metaphysics* 34, no. 1 (1980): 26.

<sup>33</sup> Taylor, "Understanding in Human Science," 31. See also Rorty, Taylor, and Dreyfus, "A Discussion," 50.

<sup>34</sup> Rorty, "A Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor," 44.



otherwise negative and destructive employment of hermeneutics in a way that may prove suggestive for contemporary developments.

### **Neither an Attitude nor a Method**

Our consideration of Badiou and Rorty attempted to clarify the effective history of hermeneutics since Gadamer. Those thinkers treated hermeneutics as a cultural disposition, which helped pave the way for contemporary invocations of hermeneutics as an amorphous description of intellectual culture, as we saw in the example from Romano. This historical background explains some of the confusion today about the specific meaning and commitments of hermeneutical thinking. The question to which I now turn is what hermeneutics could or should mean if it is not merely an attitude. Rorty helpfully sets the terms of my discussion: “Two rough, sharply contrasting, answers to the question ‘What Is Hermeneutics?’ are that it is a *method* and that it is an *attitude*.”<sup>35</sup> This disjunction continues to structure the field of debate. With their roots in influential invocations such as those of Badiou and Rorty himself, references to a vague attitude known as “hermeneutics” abound. As we have seen, the dangers of that approach are manifest. Marching under the banner of a hermeneutics so nebulous as to amount to a polemical name for a cultural sensibility renders hermeneutics vulnerable to finding itself abandoned when a more attractive or useful appellation appears, as in fact happened when Rorty’s flirtation with hermeneutics ended. Hermeneutics may also serve as a foil for allegedly more ambitious metaphysical projects such as Badiou’s. But this reductive gesture makes hermeneutics into a straw man that will pale in comparison to exhortations to own up to purportedly more courageous forms of metaphysics.

As Rorty’s statement suggests, rather than an attitude, hermeneutics may also aspire to become a method. In fact, several thinkers today share Dilthey’s ambition for “developing an *epistemological foundation for the human sciences*.”<sup>36</sup> To be sure, Ricoeur’s well-known program of combining ontological as well as methodological concerns in hermeneutics remains influential, although considering this project is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this paper, since we have focused on the reception of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. In addition to Ricoeur’s ongoing influence, recent years have witnessed a notable revival of attempts to clarify and realize Dilthey’s ambition for epistemological foundations for the humanities and social sciences. Inspired by different strands of German Romanticism, Anglophone scholars such as Kristin

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<sup>35</sup> Rorty, “A Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor,” 39.

<sup>36</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 165.

Gjesdal and Rudolf Makkreel have called for a revival of methodological hermeneutics, emphasizing formal elements of humanistic research like philology, reconstruction of historical meanings and causes, theories of judgment, and translation.<sup>37</sup>

These thinkers have made important contributions to our understanding of and appreciation for nineteenth-century hermeneutics. But, as Michael N. Forster stresses, proponents of methodological hermeneutics maintain a withering attitude toward the Gadamerian perspective: “What is distinctive in his [Gadamer’s] position is, I think, misguided and indeed baneful.”<sup>38</sup> Following Heidegger, Gadamer’s ontological hermeneutics emphasizes how human existence is irreducibly interpretative and so emphasizes that any method is derivative of our primordial human openness to truth and meaning. Forster, like other members of the methodological camp who are influenced by nineteenth-century Romanticism, deems Gadamer’s approach unable to properly ground and justify humanistic research. In the wake of Gadamer’s problematic contributions, these scholars argue, the hermeneutical movement should return to its methodological heritage, which traces its roots to the nineteenth century. According to these philosophers, reviving the methodological approach to hermeneutics will enable a rigorous justification of the academic activity of the humanities and social sciences by demonstrating the objective foundations and normative criteria of their research.

What explains the continued yearning in hermeneutical thinking for a method of interpretation, particularly if Gadamer’s arguments in *Truth and Method* against these tendencies were as convincing as so many of his readers believed? The contemporary revenge of methodological considerations may be understood as, at least in part, a reaction to the imprecise and problematic characterization of hermeneutics as a mere attitude. The widespread conception of hermeneutics as an attitude has produced, in addition to confusion surrounding the specific content of hermeneutical thinking, a methodological countermovement that is the bad conscience of the attitude of hermeneutics. Out of the vacuum of its conceptualization by various figures since Gadamer as an obscure disposition or cultural outlook, contemporary hermeneutics has also spawned a countermovement that develops methodologically structured criteria and normative rules for humanistic research.

Recall that it was, significantly, Rorty who identified “a *method* and. . . an *attitude*” as the two main possibilities for hermeneutics. Taylor’s response to Rorty in

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<sup>37</sup> Gjesdal, “Hermeneutics and the Question of Method”; Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Orientation and Judgment in Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>38</sup> Michael N. Forster, *German Philosophy of Language: From Schlegel to Hegel and beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 310.

1980, which we discussed briefly above, illustrates the intimate connection between these two apparently opposite conceptions of hermeneutics. For Taylor, the steady spread of reductionism, according to which truth and meaning are best or even only comprehensible in terms of the thinking of the natural sciences, demanded a corresponding defensive retrenchment on the part of researchers in the humanities and social sciences to clarify the claims to truth of their disciplines.<sup>39</sup> The usefulness of Dilthey's approach, Taylor suggested in his exchange with Rorty, was that it could show that the humanities and social sciences include not merely emotional or intuitive content but also methodologically grounded conclusions, even if and in fact precisely because their method is not fully reducible to the techniques of natural science. Taylor and Dreyfus both worried that Rorty's insouciant deployment of Gadamerian thinking abolished the boundaries between the natural and human sciences in his formulation of an avant-garde, freewheeling discourse that he boldly called "hermeneutics."<sup>40</sup> Taylor considered Rorty's move a step too far since, in recharacterizing hermeneutics in so radical a way, Rorty robbed the humanities and social sciences of their main line of philosophical defense against scientific reductionism by eliminating the uniqueness of humanistic research. Rorty aligning himself with hermeneutics encouraged Taylor to double down on the Diltheyan definition of hermeneutics as primarily methodological.

I suggest that contemporary proponents of methodological hermeneutics share the same basically reactive motivation that caused Taylor to critique Rorty in the name of Dilthey. To understand the roots of this methodological reaction, we should in fact go all the way back to *Truth and Method*, which has exerted a critical influence on methodological hermeneutics analogous to the consternation Rorty elicited in Taylor. Research in the humanities faces an existential crisis in the academy today. Within this milieu, it is understandable, and even admirable, that some philosophers would return to the accomplishments of Herder, Schleiermacher, and Dilthey to validate humanistic knowledge. But they face the hurdle of Gadamer's apparent advancement beyond German Romanticism, which has set the terms of debate in hermeneutics ever since. Let us now discuss how *Truth and Method* treats the concept of method in the humanities, which provides the basis for Gadamer's critique of Romanticism.

It has not been sufficiently appreciated that, in criticizing method in his *magnum opus*, Gadamer meant to critique, quite specifically, "the Cartesian basis of modern

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<sup>39</sup> Taylor, "Understanding in Human Science," 26.

<sup>40</sup> Rorty, Taylor, and Dreyfus, "A Discussion," 47–51.

science.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, even though he does not always make this crucial point sufficiently explicit, Gadamer targets the modern reduction of truth to a predominantly mathematical and methodologically structured mode of intelligibility that Descartes formulated. This ideal of a method has so pervaded our modern and technological way of life that it is hard to conceptually specify and pin down, which accounts for Gadamer’s own frustrating vagueness about what he means, exactly, by “method.” But we find a hint in Gadamer’s controversial claim that Dilthey’s quest for a method is motivated by his “unresolved Cartesianism.”<sup>42</sup> In making Cartesian method his *bête noire*, Gadamer signals his critique of the application of a rule-governed mode of intelligibility to all intellectual activity. Descartes inaugurated this methodological ideal, and Dilthey perpetuated it (albeit in an altered form). Because the activity of the humanistic disciplines does not always admit of precise conceptual expression, their work can appear less rigorous than the natural sciences when they are judged by the standards of methodological objectivity proposed by Dilthey and others. This methodological measure, Gadamer suggests, unwittingly downgrades tradition, even though thinkers like Dilthey intend to cognitively validate the humanities. Gadamer challenges the ambition, which traces its roots to Cartesian method but which has developed into one of the foundational intellectual phenomena of modern life, to develop methodological principles for the humanities. Recent versions of this project (such as those cited above) abjure the classically Cartesian focus on mathematical truth by reviving more expansive figures such as Herder, Schleiermacher, and Dilthey. But providing normative rules and objective criteria for interpretation in the humanities still follows the scientific ideal of a rule-governed procedure and set of methodological principles. Such a standard remains basically characteristic of our modern and technological society and is to that extent questionable.

Contemporary methodological hermeneutics explicitly rejects, and purports to overcome, Gadamer’s critique of method in the humanities. To further understand this movement, it may be worth exploring how Gadamer’s encounter with method

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<sup>41</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 457; “Wahrheit und Methode,” 465. See also Gadamer’s reference to Descartes’s methodological treatise *Rules for the Directions of the Mind* as “the veritable manifesto of modern science” (*Truth and Method*, 456; “Wahrheit und Methode,” 464). On this point, I follow Gjesdal, “Hermeneutics and the Question of Method,” 341–42; Romano, “The Flexible Rule of the Hermeneut,” 400.

<sup>42</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 231; “Wahrheit und Methode,” 241. For a defense of Dilthey from Gadamer’s critique, see Makkreel, *Orientation and Judgment in Hermeneutics*, 50. One of the threads running through the revival of methodological hermeneutics is the objection that Gadamer misreads the main figures of Romantic hermeneutics.

bears comparison with Hegel's dialectical interrogation of forms or shapes of consciousness in *Phenomenology of Spirit*.<sup>43</sup> Hegel describes shapes of consciousness that, while dialectically superseded within the narrative of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, can continue to appear in the history of philosophy and culture. For example, Hegel quickly reveals the insufficiencies of Sense Certainty, but this basically empiricist epistemology is subsequently revived by twentieth-century Logical Positivism, despite Hegel's earlier identification of its underlying and manifest shortcomings. In a similar fashion, *Truth and Method* announced the philosophical death knell of methodological hermeneutics via Gadamer's powerful and convincing critique of the overextension of Cartesian method beyond its legitimate domain in the natural sciences and into research in the arts and humanities. Marked by their irreducible historicity, the objects of these disciplines speak to us directly, fusing with our present horizons of intelligibility in ways that cannot be predicted or controlled. Scholarly methods, Gadamer argues, thus cannot fully explain or capture these rich sources of meaningfulness. If we look to a method to provide the measure of the normativity of humanistic understanding, then such an attempt will eventually run aground of the categorical inappropriateness of such a standard.

And yet, despite Gadamer's accomplishment in confronting one of the main shapes of modern consciousness, the search for a method of the humanities, much like the various recipients of Hegel's dialectical critique, has returned, undead like a zombie.<sup>44</sup> In fact, Gadamer's methodological critics in hermeneutics today inadvertently support the thrust of the Gadamerian critique of method and its infiltration of the humanistic disciplines. For example, Forster boldly suggests that Gadamer's paradigm for hermeneutics has been superseded by avowedly methodological contributions to the hermeneutic tradition.<sup>45</sup> Quite to the contrary, the persistence of the craving for a method of the humanities is rather a testament to the enduring insight of Gadamer's diagnosis of the scientific spirit of modernity, which

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<sup>43</sup> Paul Redding, *Hegel's Hermeneutics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 44–49. Redding well situates Gadamer as a successor to Hegel.

<sup>44</sup> Tom Sparrow has called phenomenology “undead”: “One is often struck by the sense that it is extremely active, but at the same time lacking philosophical vitality and methodologically hollow” (*The End of Phenomenology: Metaphysics and the New Realism* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014], 187). According to Sparrow, the method of phenomenology has been moribund since Husserl and is now superseded by “speculative realism” as the center of philosophical progress. Putting aside other problems with Sparrow's thesis concerning phenomenology, my point about hermeneutics is not exactly analogous. I think the paradigm for hermeneutics initiated by Gadamer remains vital and compellingly heterogeneous, and that its purported replacement by pre-Gadamerian perspectives has been exaggerated. Thanks to Donovan Irven for drawing this connection to my attention.

<sup>45</sup> Forster, *German Philosophy of Language*, 286.

always returns to the apparent need for methodological criteria and rules for intellectual activity that *Truth and Method* persistently criticized.

In response to Rorty's claim that hermeneutics can be either an attitude or a method, our answer today should be: "*No, thank you!*" The attitude of hermeneutics is dangerously imprecise and unproductively vague; further, it has produced as its Janus face the revival of methodological hermeneutics, which was already convincingly criticized by Gadamer. Where shall hermeneutics turn? Contemporary phenomenology, especially strains that adhere to the heritage of Husserl, strives to achieve the status of a genuine research program. A research program (such as phenomenology) provides an overall agenda and makes intellectual progress possible. This admirable ambition of a broadly unified body of research should not be confused with the problematic aspiration that we just discussed to provide a methodology of interpretation, which amounts to a substantive (even if misguided) philosophical position. Hermeneutics today should heed the programmatic example of phenomenology, but without necessarily subscribing to any of the particular epistemological or metaphysical commitments held by Husserl's descendants. The example phenomenology provides for us now lies rather in its admirably robust output of research that is unified by a shared, recognizable, and cogent philosophical agenda that spurs productive debate, both internally and with other traditions.

It is important to note that Gadamer's critique of method and the influence of Heidegger have rendered Gadamerian hermeneutics ambivalent, to say the least, regarding the ideal of rigorous research, as James Risser underscores: "The issue of life and understanding, though, runs deeper than any consideration of the humanities as an area of scholarly research. And this is perhaps Gadamer's point."<sup>46</sup> Many writers in contemporary hermeneutics have already contributed positive and substantive philosophical research, and this essay has attempted merely to clear the way for a proper philosophical response to the coherence and unity of those contributions. My claim is simply that hermeneutics should neither remain tethered to a phenomenologically problematic methodological yearning nor should it rest content to relegate itself to the status of a nebulous attitude or sensibility. Both these conceptions risk obviating and imperiling recent progress in hermeneutical research, which should not be judged according to either of those philosophically inappropriate and confused intellectual goals.

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<sup>46</sup> James Risser, *The Life of Understanding: A Contemporary Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 4.

Before defining progress in hermeneutics today, let us revisit Rorty's provocative association of hermeneutics with love. Certainly, this gesture retains some of the indistinctness of the sense of hermeneutics as an attitude. But Rorty provides here an affective and moral framework for hermeneutical thinking. Rorty suggests love as the slogan of hermeneutics in order to encourage the hermeneutical movement to formulate a "vocabulary" to describe itself in terms that are not identical to those of the natural sciences.<sup>47</sup> Love is one way to describe understanding, that is, forming a connection with an item of inquiry rather than pinning it down with an objectifying method. Rorty's reference to a hermeneutics of love could inspire hermeneutical developments that seek to develop connections between cultural, ideological, and linguistic communities. In other words, unlike in his unhelpfully polemical references to the attitude of hermeneutics, Rorty here provides substantive content for defining hermeneutics without reference to method. This gesture lives up to, and develops, Gadamer's conception of hermeneutics. Recall that Rorty articulates the ideal of a hermeneutics of love in response to Taylor's reference to Dilthey. We would do well to remember Rorty's exclamation on behalf of the affective and moral orientation of hermeneutical thinking at a time when the dryly methodological fixation has returned to hermeneutics. Whereas Taylor's invocation of methodological hermeneutics signals his almost entirely defensive posture against scientism, Rorty's original reference to love suggests a bold, positive, and distinctive position for hermeneutics within the landscape of contemporary thought in general.

### Foundations for a Contemporary Hermeneutics

I will now outline some ways of characterizing hermeneutical research as neither an attitude nor a method but rather as an ongoing research program. Modifying the subtitle of *Truth and Method*, these programmatic remarks can be understood as "foundations for a *contemporary* hermeneutics."<sup>48</sup> With this phrase, I refer to some basic presuppositions held by the Gadamerian tradition. To that end, I will sketch six general points that, in my view, undergird many (although certainly not all) developments in recent and primarily Anglophone hermeneutical thinking, particularly those that avoid the pernicious consequences discussed in this paper concerning viewing hermeneutics as an attitude. These signposts mark promising future pathways for Gadamerian

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<sup>47</sup> Rorty, "A Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor," 44.

<sup>48</sup> Gadamer's phrase is "Grundzüge einer *philosophischen* Hermeneutik" ("Wahrheit und Methode," iii, my emphasis).

hermeneutics, showcasing its capacity for renewal and development under the aegis of a broadly unified intellectual framework. While emerging out of a shared historical background, these often-disparate trends share the common goal of sustaining and enriching philosophical hermeneutics as a research program in the sense of a broad range of commitments and approaches that seek to address recognized problems and advance a collaborative intellectual agenda. If we frame the following contributions to contemporary philosophical hermeneutics in this way, then the hermeneutical movement may receive proper recognition as an ongoing and vital body of research and not merely an attitude.

1. *Beyond traditionalism.* To the extent that it forges ahead as a vital research program and not merely an area of historical interest, hermeneutics cannot rest content with its own past accomplishments. Jean Grondin has rightly argued that *Truth and Method* has attained the status of a classic of philosophical literature; the same may be said, I would add, of a few other recent contributions to the hermeneutic tradition, such as Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.<sup>49</sup> To remain a viable tradition, we must, to be sure, ground ourselves in and build upon past accomplishments. Despite its appreciation for tradition in general, however, hermeneutics should not fall into the classicist trap of investigating and repeating the distinguished historical past. Although we could dispute his realist account of "objectivity" that improves upon Gadamer's alleged neglect of that concept, Günter Figal makes an important contribution to the development of hermeneutical thinking in his program for moving "from philosophical hermeneutics to hermeneutical philosophy."<sup>50</sup> Also promising are attempts by feminist philosophers such as Georgia Warnke to push Gadamerian insights toward politically liberatory projects, which Gadamer himself never considered, concerning our ability to critically reflect on and twist free from "the distortions of historical tradition."<sup>51</sup> All such contestations and extensions of the legacy of *Truth and Method* are essential, even (or especially) when their philosophical claims may be controversial, for the evolution of hermeneutics.

2. *Pluralism.* Hermeneutics today embraces a bold philosophical pluralism that remains open to multiple traditions. For instance, following my invocation of *Truth and Method* alongside *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, contributions to the hermeneutic tradition in recent decades have come from both sides of the notorious and

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<sup>49</sup> Jean Grondin, "Truth and Method as a Classic," *Apuntes Filosóficos* 21, no. 40 (2012): 35–43.

<sup>50</sup> Günter Figal, *Objectivity: The Hermeneutical and Philosophy*, trans. Theodore D. George (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 5–47.

<sup>51</sup> Georgia Warnke, "Hermeneutics and Feminism," in *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Hans-Helmuth Gander (London: Routledge, 2015), 648.



unproductive divide between Anglo-American analytic and Continental European philosophy.<sup>52</sup> Academic philosophy at large arguably already is in the process of overcoming this internal fissure, and hermeneutics should lead the way on this professional initiative, since this intellectual diversity is part of the tradition's heritage.<sup>53</sup> Philosophical engagement with themes of understanding and interpretation have little intrinsically to do with the professional strictures of the analytic/Continental divide, as the continuing influence of the hermeneutical dimensions of the work of Donald Davidson, for example, attests.<sup>54</sup> In a further encouraging development, philosophical hermeneutics is now fusing with horizons beyond narrowly Western academic boundaries in general by researchers in world philosophy, including in African and Latin American traditions.<sup>55</sup>

3. *Phenomenology of understanding.* Hermeneutics since Gadamer grounds itself in a phenomenology of understanding, as Donatella Di Cesare explains: "The question Gadamer asks is that of *understanding*—not the question of *interpretation*. Understanding is not interpretation; interpretation is rather a borderline case of understanding. Wherever understanding is replaced by interpretation, there Nietzsche's influence makes itself felt."<sup>56</sup> Hermeneutics describes and clarifies what happens when we attempt to understand, when we feel compelled to understand, and even when we fail to understand. In other words, hermeneutics attends to the event of understanding in the context of human existence.<sup>57</sup> To be sure, interpretation emerges in all such scenarios as a mode of and aid to understanding. Replacing truth with interpretation, however, either courts relativism (hence Di Cesare's reference to Nietzsche) or, as we discussed earlier, accords priority to methodological projects to provide a theory of interpretation. Hermeneutics, when it is conducted in a distinctively philosophical register, attends not only to the propriety of interpretation but rather to the way understanding ineluctably happens to us and has the character of an event. In this

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<sup>52</sup> Liakos and George, "Hermeneutics in Post-War Continental European Philosophy," 399.

<sup>53</sup> Iain D. Thomson, "Rethinking the Analytic/Continental Divide," in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy, 1945–2015*, ed. Kelly Becker and Iain D. Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 569–89.

<sup>54</sup> Jeff Malpas, ed., *Dialogues with Davidson: Acting, Interpreting, Understanding* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011). Davidson's place in the hermeneutic tradition is still worthy of attention.

<sup>55</sup> Tsenay Serequeberhan, *Existence and Heritage: Hermeneutic Explorations in African and Continental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015).

<sup>56</sup> Donatella Di Cesare, *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*, trans. Niall Keane (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 208. See also Jeff Malpas, "Placing Understanding/Understanding Place," *Sophia* 56, no. 3 (2017): 390.

<sup>57</sup> Theodore George, *The Responsibility to Understand: Hermeneutical Contours of Ethical Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 29.

manner, hermeneutics remains methodologically wedded to phenomenological investigations into the structure of experience, but at the same time expands the traditional boundaries of phenomenology by introducing considerations of history and language into the character of our human openness to reality.<sup>58</sup>

4. *The arts and humanities—and beyond.* While its main goal should not be, as we discussed, the formulation of a method of interpretation, hermeneutics emerges, both historically and conceptually, from the arts and humanities. Human understanding takes place in and through historicity, that is, our irreducible conditionedness by changes through time. In addition to historicity, hermeneutics begins also from what Gadamer calls “linguisticity,” which refers to the way we are bound by linguistic traditions.<sup>59</sup> On the basis of these core commitments, hermeneutical inquiry engages with those disciplines that embrace, study, and take place in and through history and language. Because hermeneutics emphasizes historicity and linguisticity, it correspondingly rejects scientism, the reduction of significance and meaning to the modes of intelligibility of the natural sciences, in the strongest and most phenomenologically precise terms. In the climate of the academy today, in which the ambitions of the mathematized and applied sciences encroach into and erroneously provide the measure for seemingly all scholarly initiatives, the hermeneutical account of historicity and linguisticity provides a necessary and persuasive explanation and defense of the activity of the arts and humanities as irreducible to natural science.<sup>60</sup> And yet Gadamerian hermeneutics need not remain confined to its traditional home in those disciplines. Groundbreaking and exciting work on the hermeneutical dimensions of nursing, for example, has demonstrated that philosophical hermeneutics provides a persuasive framework for research on the role of understanding in the medical sciences.<sup>61</sup>

5. *The conversation that we are.* Gadamer made a revolutionary contribution when he framed hermeneutics in terms of “the conversation that we ourselves are,” a phrase

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<sup>58</sup> Claude Romano, *At the Heart of Reason*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Claude Romano (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 485–503. Despite my earlier objection to his reference to hermeneutics as an attitude, I believe Romano is one of the most important contributors to contemporary hermeneutics. The relationship between Romano’s phenomenology and Gadamerian hermeneutics is a complex topic that should be studied further.

<sup>59</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 391, translation modified; “Wahrheit und Methode,” 393.

<sup>60</sup> Jason Blakely, *We Built Reality: How Social Science Infiltrated Culture, Politics, and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>61</sup> Graham McCaffrey, Shelley Raffin-Bouchal, and Nancy J. Moules, “Hermeneutics as Research Approach: A Reappraisal,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 11, no. 3 (2012): 214–29.

he adapted from Hölderlin.<sup>62</sup> With this gesture, Gadamer underlines his innovative development of a phenomenology of dialogue, in which partners challenge each other's points of view on a common subject matter in an unstructured manner. Out of such an open discussion, the matter at issue discloses itself in a new and clarifying way in light of the exchange between the mutually challenging perspectives of the interlocutors. In addition to this account of dialogue between persons, Gadamer's image of conversation also refers to an account of human culture as aspiring to what Theodore George aptly describes as follows: "In view of this humility and openness, the experience of understanding resists every closure; we are always called to understand again and anew."<sup>63</sup> These iconic features of hermeneutics, which continue to be unfolded in the contemporary reception of the Gadamerian tradition, imply a spirit of attentive listening and improvisational collaboration that inspires the basic ethical and political stance of hermeneutical thinking. For ongoing projects to improve political dialogue and elevate intercultural understanding and solidarity, hermeneutics provides a vital theoretical and practical orientation.<sup>64</sup> Hermeneutical conversation models openness to hearing the voices of other communities, as Rorty presciently observed when he connected hermeneutics to love.

6. *Metaphorology*. Finally, hermeneutics has aimed to develop what Hans Blumenberg refers to as "metaphorology."<sup>65</sup> With this expression, Blumenberg calls for the development of a novel research program that attends to metaphors as, far from aesthetic ornaments or linguistic flourishes, shaping the movement and orientation of our thinking. Human thought, and the discourse that expresses it, is molded by metaphors that articulate primordial human questions and fundamental ways of relating to the world that cannot be reduced to concepts, propositions, or theories. Metaphorology historically traces, clarifies, and brings to light such "absolute metaphors." Perhaps the most prominent example of such a project in hermeneutics today comes from Jeff Malpas, who defines hermeneutics as "essentially topological

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<sup>62</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 370; "Wahrheit und Methode," 383. I discuss the political legacy of this idea in David Liakos, "Hermeneutics and the Conservatism of Listening," *Cosmos and History* 16, no. 2 (2020): 495–519.

<sup>63</sup> Theodore George, "Are We a Conversation? Hermeneutics, Exteriority, and Transmittability," *Research in Phenomenology* 47, no. 3 (2017): 332.

<sup>64</sup> Lauren Swayne Barthold, *Overcoming Polarization in the Public Square: Civic Dialogue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Cynthia R. Nielsen, "Gadamer and Scholz on Solidarity: Disclosing, Avowing, and Performing Solidaristic Ties with Human and Natural Others," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 48, no. 3 (2017): 240–56.

<sup>65</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, trans. Robert Savage (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 1–5.

in character.”<sup>66</sup> For Malpas, human understanding is always embedded within particular orientations and situations that bound and enable our thinking; in other words, hermeneutics emerges in and requires a place. Though he would shy away from this connection, Malpas may be read as fulfilling Blumenberg’s call for a metaphorology by showing how “merely” metaphorical figures throughout hermeneutical philosophy (including the hermeneutic circle, horizon, world, conversation, triangulation, and play) in fact express the fundamental belonging of understanding to place, which remains more primordial than the formulation of any metaphor that recognizes this belonging. For Malpas, topology—that is, the ontological place in which we essentially orient ourselves and come to an understanding—precedes the assignment of any metaphorical meaning. Even so, we can still see Malpas’s topological hermeneutics as part of a wave of rigorous engagement on the part of hermeneutical research today with the forms and modes that shape and express human thinking. Indeed, place, while fundamental, remains only one example of the full scope of what metaphorology could address. Metaphorology attends to the unfolding of human thinking through language, metaphors, and images. The historical and philosophical analysis of these diverse figures by metaphorology provides a point of departure for further hermeneutical inquiry into the full scope of how we understand.

All six of these foundations for a contemporary hermeneutics exceed in depth the influential, but ultimately shallow, references to hermeneutics as a mere attitude, including the methodologically fixated reaction this conception has produced, in achieving the goal of the advancement of an ongoing research program. Already in various stages of development by writers in hermeneutics, these points of reference hint at where hermeneutics, as a coherent body of philosophical work, might move next in enriching but complicating and challenging Gadamer’s legacy. These signposts, including various combinations of and further possible additions to them, function as foundations for hermeneutical thinking today because they are intelligible in terms neither of a vague sensibility nor of a philosophically unambitious method of interpretation in the humanities. Rather, these directions reveal and uncover a dynamic and unified body of research that is likely not only to persist but also to flourish so long as the character and experience of human understanding demands a philosophical account.

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<sup>66</sup> Malpas, “Placing Understanding/Understanding Place,” 380.

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## **Book Review**

***Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense***

**by Richard Kearney**

**(New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 197 pages**

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In many ways, *Touch* is Richard Kearney's follow up to *Carnal Hermeneutics*, a collective volume he co-edited with Brian Treanor in 2015.<sup>1</sup> For Kearney, following Aristotle, touch, etymologically traced to *tact*, is, as he states in *Touch*, the interpretive catalyst for all other senses and the "most refined means of transition and translation; the touchstone of carnal hermeneutics" (38). Tactful interpretation, or embodied awareness, precedes linguistic understanding. In other words, good taste is possible long before we can name it as such. However, the collective dependence on technologically mediated communication has, on Kearney's telling, threatened our relationships with ourselves and the others with whom we share the world. In short, Kearney asks readers to imagine a "commons of the flesh" marked by incarnation where embodied hermeneutics make way for the symbiocene in favor of excarnation and the Anthropocene.<sup>2</sup> Thus, tact as the reciprocal bedrock of interpretive possibility leads Kearney to offer a timely diagnosis of what he calls a global "crisis of touch" and a critical invitation to consider the healing possibility of tactile wisdom.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Richard Kearney, "The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics," in Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor (eds.), *Carnal Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 15: "Life is hermeneutic through and through. It goes all the way up and all the way down. From head to foot and back again."

<sup>2</sup> "Incarnation is the image becoming flesh, excarnation is flesh becoming image. Incarnation invests flesh; excarnation divests it." (2)

Kearney begins his text with the claim that one can only live well to the extent that she learns to come to her senses again and again, and the first chapter unearths the etymological significance of touch as tact, savvy, flair, insight, and sound. This semantic distinction provides the opening for Kearney to demonstrate touch as the primordially endangered hermeneutic sense. Tracing tact in such a way, allows Kearney to underscore Husserl's "double-sensation" as the reciprocal and two-fold nature of touch (cf. 11). That is to say, I can touch and be touched by another, and there are good and bad ways to touch. Husserl's active-passive dialectic becomes then a touchstone throughout the text reminding readers of the hermeneutic and weighty ethical responsibility of tact. In the second chapter, Kearney sketches a brief philosophical phenomenology of touch. Aristotle's preference for tactile wisdom over Plato's optocentrism sets the stage for understanding a contemporary philosophical narrative of embodied hermeneutics. The chapter does not serve as a critique, but rather a foundational rhetorical strategy to establish the significance of carnal wisdom from the outset of phenomenological and philosophical inquiry. In addition to articulating a philosophical heritage that makes way for carnal wisdom, the second chapter, while not exhaustive, also serves as an excellent survey of central phenomenological themes and theorists. From Diderot to Irigaray and Kristeva to Nancy, Kearney tells a good story.

The philosophical lineage drawn in the second chapter provides a reasonable transition to the question that structures the remainder of the text. Kearney asks: "If we accept that no one goes unscathed in life, how might a therapeutics of touch help heal our hurts, even if it cannot cure them?" (60) Aristotle's notion of catharsis, or purged emotion, makes way for Kearney to remind readers of what he calls the double therapeutic (*pathos* and *muthos-mimesis*) of the wounded healer, who, rather than adopting a top-down Hippocratic medicinal therapy, instead chooses the holistic, tactile embodied, and uncertain salve of the Asclepian tradition. Moving from Greek myth, to Biblical stories, and mysticism, the third chapter is a narrative demonstration of the healing hope of tactile wisdom. Odysseus was recognized by the senses of his dog and his childhood nurse. Oedipus made generational amends and found healing through the pain of embodied vision after his eyes had been gouged. Chiron was the suffering centaur who heals the pain of others by touch. Jesus of Nazareth was the incarnate, tangible healer. Finally, mystic reverence and divine healing was frequently experienced and later expressed as embodied eroticism. Trauma spoken and shared thus becomes the very possibility of healing.

Recovery from trauma is the focus of the next two chapters of the text. Kearney walks readers through contemporary trauma therapies that recognize, as

Bessel Van der Kolk attests in his book of the same name, *The Body Keeps the Score*. The research highlighted around somatic therapies makes way for Kearney to reiterate his call for a commons of the flesh where sufferers are enabled to cultivate a shared memory of tactile compassion and healing (cf. 92). If trauma is stored in the body and touch is the catalyst for individual and collective healing, and if we are in a crisis of touch and excarnation, then Kearney is right in his urgent claim that finding our way back to tact is the “most vital task of our emerging symbiocene” (131). The trouble with any kind of remedy is that we are saturated in the technological and not likely to twist free of its firm clutches of our collective illness. How to attend to the crisis while still remaining in the world increasingly dependent on technological mediation, is the primary concern of the fifth and final chapter of the text. Moving the question of collective trauma and therapy into the space of the university classroom, Kearney recalls a seminar series he held at Boston College where students were asked to imagine the landscape of touch in the digital age of excarnation. Technology is here to stay, and we have become accustomed to excarnation. Kearney recognizes this challenge to the salve of incarnation and tactile wisdom, and, as he recounts the classroom discussions, concludes: “[in order] to live fully in tomorrow’s world we will need both virtual imagination and incarnate action” (132). Health, it would seem, is a matter of both/and not one/or the other.

The final pages of *Touch* serve as an addendum to the text written in direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic highlighting Kearney’s claim from the start: we must, and our history suggests we will, return again and again to our senses. *Touch* is a thoughtful critique of a central concern of our time. While some might ask after the relation between touch and language and the hermeneutic primacy Kearney gives to tact before words, the critical importance of the crisis he alerts us to promises much in making strides together toward building and sharing the commons of the flesh he so hopefully imagines.

## **Book Review**

### ***A Hermeneutics of Poetic Education:***

### ***The Play of the In-Between***

**by Catherine Homan**

**(London: Lexington Books, 2020), 218 pages**

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In a world dominated by technology and effectiveness measured by what can be calculated and applied only technically (that is to say, without a genuine, profound relationship with lived experience, which includes also imponderable aspects of the world), the reviewed book by Catherine Homan seems to be like water to a desert, wind to a face burned by the sun, air to breath, a glimpse of sense for education and its philosophy. In the book, issues of poetry, education, play, as well as the categories of the “in-between” and experience—of such vital importance for contemporary hermeneutics—are interwoven into a voice that calls us and teaches us to listen, just like a genuine piece of art can do. Due to my fascination with the experience and the phenomenon of listening, I particularly appreciate the passages or—to be more precise—the sentences that highlight the significance of art, which can teach us to listen. Homan takes the hermeneutic account seriously, and shows us how she listens to particular authors (Gadamer, Celan, Hölderlin, Fink, Nietzsche, Kant, Schiller, Plato, Aristotle, Shaftesbury, Anzaldúa, Alcoff, and others), while at the same time trying to shed light on the issue of poetic education.

In the “Introduction,” Homan demonstrates how poetry as a teacher of humanity—Homer’s standpoint, often repeated by ancient and modern thinkers—makes our ears more perceptive to what poets say or whisper to us through and thanks to poems. Contemporary poets, as Gadamer put it, must speak more quietly and our



ears must become more acute to hear what they say. Stemming from such a legacy of Gadamer, one could easily point out the issue of poetic education. However, Catherine Homan takes a bit different route, and goes a little further: she invites us to get closer to Hölderlin's poetry (as a teacher of Heidegger and Gadamer, among others) to make us look for the hidden aspects of the scenery for poetic education. Homan is convincing in her invitation to re-read, with her, classic thoughts through the poetry of, first, Hölderlin and, subsequently, Celan: in such a conversational fashion, she creates the expectation (projection) that, after a time of being a participant in the event of conversation, the sense of poetic education is going to be revealed.

The book consists of four chapters, preceded by "Introduction" and followed by "Conclusion: The Play of the In-Between" with the addition of "Bibliography" and "Index." Those who are interested in the note on the Author can easily find it at the very end of the book. Although I do not mind getting some spoilers while watching films, it does seem to me somewhat cruel to reveal the contents of a book, when it comes to reading. Reading is the art of being in the time and the inner space of speaking from within language and thus thinking itself. That is why I do not deem it necessary to summarize the content of each part of the book (if someone is interested in a quick overview, a summary can be found in the "Introduction," pp. 16–17; moreover, at the beginning of each chapter the Author delivers a short presentation of what is to be expected in it). I am certain that it will be quite an adventure for the reader to reach for the book, and see what subject matter will catch their attention and move their heart. In order to keep in touch with the reader of this review, I will share some aspects, questions, and matters I have gathered from my reading, and outline a couple of selected, more or less general, impressions of the book. For the potential reader who does not like spoilers or does not want to be poisoned by my comprehension, I can warmly recommend the book as a poetic text—"poetic" because it requires patience and an attuned pace of reading; "text" because it is constructed as a colorful fabric: by the joining and the intertwining of different voices to express the need for education (as conversation) *as a poetic experience*. I value this latter message the most.

Homan highlights the importance of play, openness, listening, difference, alterity, "in-betweenness," groundlessness, spontaneity, freedom, transformation, self-education (recognition of familiarity and strangeness), recognition of the truth that an artwork may reveal, harmony between the self and the world, conversation, language and hermeneutically understood tradition, poetical thinking, imagination, *Bildung*, the unsaid, dialogue, sense, and the like. Such notions and such categories are characteristic for the contemporary hermeneutics and the experience of the poetical. In the sense of

play that her book appreciates and values as being truly educative, the Author plays with all of them. Homan uses selected thoughts of classical (meaning, originally: those worth listening to) authors (including poets) in such a fashion that allows us to see the main points of her hermeneutics of poetic education. By doing so, Homan proves herself as a humanistic (modern hermeneutic) thinker immersed in the continuity of conversation—the continuity, which Gadamer used to call “philosophy.”

After finishing the book, I had the impression that something was missing: I could not hear Homan’s own voice otherwise than in the other authors’ voices. On the one hand, one could say that this makes for a perfect hermeneutic work; but, on the other hand, it could also be said it offers a perfect (hermeneutic?) hideout, an escape from speaking from within the Author’s inner language. While I was writing my book *Listening and Acouological Education* (Warsaw: WUW, 2019), I wondered whether the conversational way of being, as postulated and described by Gadamer, does not disavow—not only if taken literally—the possibility of self-expression outside of (above? beyond?) the conversation, outside of the philosophical continuity of dialogue? Perhaps Homan’s case is different. Maybe her way of (poetic) writing gives us what it takes: the enigma of an author who—in the reader’s recognition—is and is not in the book? Perhaps it is all about the enigmatic being, which marks her presence outlining it with the light of after-images of the great figures she (as a philosopher and a poetical educator) shows us? Maybe she deliberately hides behind her friends in thinking, in order to make sure that the threads concerning the poetic education are to be composed and thus evoked in the experience of reading? As for me, Homan’s book provokes such questions.

Another issue that addresses me strongly, is the problem of freedom and education as becoming human, i.e., becoming the conversation that we are (Hölderlin’s famous saying interpreted, differently, by Heidegger and by Gadamer). If we need freedom to become who we are, namely conversation, is it not a necessity to release our thinking from the dialogical chains of (the history of) the humanities? What about poetic education as a sort of (an exemplification of?) humanistic pedagogy? In the horizon of academic pedagogy, Homan’s book would be located in the humanistic, liberal trend. Is it not its autotelic aim to get through the interaction (of a conversation) with the discussed works (of the humanities), in order to become an authentic personality, namely the individual *voive* that can *be* freely, and thus genuinely, in the multiple relationships to itself, to others, and to the world? Is in the humanistic pedagogy not such a personality at stake, who can see above their own particularity and can welcome the other’s diversity, but is at the same time also *free* to create, to think freely, even spontaneously, and thus genuinely? Homan describes this, but I have

the impression that—in tune with her great narrative gifts—her book would be even better if it would be composed in a way, which would more explicitly and responsibly (*respondeo*) show Homan’s standpoint, her (own) voice.

The last comment selected for this review touches the announced explanation of the “nature of listening and how play, especially in our experiences of art and poetry, helps us cultivate this listening” (149). Unfortunately, in the whole book, there is no such explanation, and it does not contain even a short paragraph with Homan’s interpretation of listening. Instead, the book discusses contemporary issues related to the interpretation of some of the hermeneutic notions (for example, tradition, the fusion of horizons, the transformative aspect of art). It gathers also some reflections upon feminism, racism, approaches to the other, and postmodern readings of main hermeneutic claims or notions. One of the strong features of Homan’s book is that the Author uses the grammatical third female person (“she,” “her”) instead of the usual “his or her” or the contemporary “they.” This, in a way, represents her statement in bringing balance to the history/*her*-story of thoughts: this is how she, in her writing, makes her position clear and readable. But, in the case of listening, the reader is left only with announcements. I emphasize this because listening is of vital, even crucial importance both in hermeneutics as well as in poetry. However, it is also not indifferent, how one understands listening in education, even if one comprehends it as *Bildung*. In philosophy and academic pedagogy, scholars value the idea of *Bildung* as being opposed to mere socialization (especially in the manner it has been discussed at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries by Anglo-Saxon thinkers, but also already earlier, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by the German speaking philosophers of education to whose notions Homan refers in her interpretation). Another aspect is that the humanistic, countercultural, and critical turn in psychology and pedagogy revealed certain oppressive dimensions of traditional *Bildung*’s claims. In this context even, therefore, the way one understands listening (and attunement) or conceives its philosophical meaning (especially as and if resulting in “giving shape”) cannot be overestimated, not to mention overlooked.

Catherine Homan has written a beautiful book in both its poetic as well as its (self) educational dimension. I admire her ability to weave a variety of thought threads in writing/*thinking*. Since I learned of the title of the book, I was moved and interested by the promise of its content. After reading it, I wondered, for a while, whether the title should not rather be: “A hermeneutic of *the poetic of/ in* education.” But, exactly as in the case of my own book, the title is only an invitation, a “liminal gesture.” The rest is at the hands of the reader. Despite some of my critical comments, and precisely because of the evoked questions that the book promoted, I can utter nothing but

sincere words of appreciation for the Author wishing her further success in her poetic and thus philosophical way of being/thinking.

## **Book Review**

*Time of the Magicians:*

*Wittgenstein, Benjamin, Cassirer, Heidegger, and the  
Decade That Reinvented Philosophy*

by **Wolfram Eilenberger**

Trans. Shaun Whiteside. (New York: Penguin Press,  
2020), 432 pages.

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Every good book is travel writing, whether it knows it or not. Narrational, episodic, or lyrical, a good story takes the reader somewhere and back again, having perhaps changed them as a result of the journey. Sometimes we are transported to new landscapes and sometimes to new selves, but even the most mundane literature takes us somewhere we had not been before because it demands of us that we imagine.

Wolfram Eilenberger's *Time of the Magicians*, deftly translated by Shaun Whiteside, does just that with such ease and facility that one hardly notices they are in motion. It is an absorbing story to say the least, and one written with a hermeneutic sensitivity to both a historical moment and its wide sweeping consequences. *Time of the Magicians* is similar in style and intention to other intellectual histories of philosophy like Sarah Bakewell's *At the Existentialist Cafe*, John Kaag's *American Philosophy: A Love Story*, and Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club*. Tracing the paths and textures of four remarkable, deeply flawed, and undeniably influential figures on the course of philosophy—Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, and Ernst Cassirer—Eilenberger homes in on a decade (1919–1929) that would undoubtedly reimagine, or reinvent to use his words, the project of philosophy. From the abyss to

dizzying heights, across rivers, and with bridges and neighbors aplenty, Eilenberger takes the reader on a journey through the reconfiguration of philosophy itself through the lens of the unyielding crisis of interwar Europe, in particular the Weimar Republic. Indeed, we might say crisis is the orienting principle of the book. The crisis is on every front: political, cultural, intellectual. In a word, it is a hermeneutic crisis of the highest order.

Late in the book, Eilenberger discusses Wittgenstein's comparison of language to a labyrinthine cityscape, and it is here where I believe we find the text as microcosm. He writes:

The task of philosophers, then, is to draw a map of that city so that it is clear to the lost people (the philosophers themselves) where they actually are, and hence which paths are available to them at this point, so that they can continue walking with the greatest possible self-determination and clarity of direction. [...] In order to render an accurate picture of the city, we must thoroughly explore it for ourselves—starting from the spot where we find ourselves question. No one has their map in their head a priori, and in any case it would be of no use. In the end this city (of words) is understood through the comings and goings of those who live in and with it, who are themselves constantly in a state of motion and change. New passages, one-way streets, and cul-de-sacs constantly appear, including some features that are recognized as such only very late, indeed too late. (358–359)

This is the guiding insight of Eilenberger's book, and a significant one. Eilenberger offers his readers not just an intellectual history (though that alone would be sufficient), but also a guided tour of the alleyways and backroads known only among the city's natives. We witness not only keen distillations of Wittgenstein's, Cassirer's, Heidegger's, and Benjamin's philosophies, but with equal weight the circumstances, within which those philosophies are deeply embedded. We have the privileged position of seeing both the traveler's perspective and the map.

The book revolves around the infamous Davos conference where Cassirer and Heidegger go head-to-head on the task of post-Kantian philosophy, the theme of which was "What is a human being?", in an atmosphere that was becoming increasingly politically charged. Indeed, simply raising this question as the conference theme already points to a deep sense of both instability and uncertainty. As Eilenberger notes, if this event had not occurred, historians would have to invent it, as it captured the most pressing ideas of the decade and set the course for the philosophy that followed. What we find at the event is somehow both revolutionary in its insight and

banal in its practice. While Heidegger asserts Dasein's finitude, Cassirer points to the infinitude of the symbolic forms and systems human beings create as they live out their mortal condition. While Heidegger demands the casting off of all bourgeois culture towards the radical responsibility born of nothingness and anxiety, Cassirer calls for a liberation of the self from "original constraints and limitations (333)". What we witness here, is the height of the ontic and ontological divide in human form. Cassirer represents ontic philosophy in its most sophisticated form—meticulous, thorough, and infinitely rich. But for Heidegger, and much of the philosophical tradition that follows, this is not enough. Though the Davos meeting represents the event, around which the stories orbit, we must not forget that neither Wittgenstein nor Benjamin was invited. Neither could find a secure academic post or the veil of respectability such invitations require. Nevertheless, their philosophy speaks just as much to the question of the conference once we grant them entry.

Eilenberger's contributions here are many, but the foremost is his dexterity with elevating the everyday to a representative of the philosophical. Organized into sections thematically, the book consists entirely of vignettes and glimpses of the lives of these men. If philosophy is to be a way of life, we witness the ways, in which Wittgenstein, Benjamin, Heidegger, and Cassirer live out their philosophical position (or risk bad faith). Of particular note is the following passage:

No human being is born with the ability to fly. Not even Leonardo da Vinci. But once the laws of gravity, inertia, and air resistance have been revealed, with certain calculation and techniques, spaces open up for us to modify and circumvent our supposedly inalterably flightless fate. As creative shapers of our own access to the world, we play our own constellation (a law) off against another constellation (another law). And end up flying. (248)

One must ask of books of this kind, whether one risks idolizing the figures central to the text or whether they are raised as paradigmatic of the social conditions. Eilenberger is careful here in that above all these figures are shown to be more vulnerable, more precarious, than the history of philosophy otherwise alludes. Yes, both Heidegger and Wittgenstein were prone to self-aggrandizement, but here we see everything laid bare. These men, for all their intellectual greatness, are among the most broken specimens. Only Cassirer stands out in this regard as the most stable (and notably bourgeois) of the bunch. Indeed, it is against bourgeois culture, and the stability it provides, that Benjamin, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein most fitfully revolt in their professional lives, politics, and personal relationships.

The German original title *Zeit der Zauberer* is rendered *Time of the Magicians* in translation. Perhaps this is an allusion to Heidegger's moniker as the "Magician of Messkirch." I have wondered whether sorcerer or magi would have been more accurate as all four no doubt have enchanted us and held us in their sway. Magician implies illusion, a slight of hand. Perhaps the illusion lies not in the hands of these magicians, but in our own unwillingness to anchor these thinkers consistently and firmly in their historical moment despite—nay, because of—their attempts to write timelessly.

Eilenberger's *Time of the Magicians* is well worth our time and promises a multitude of passages, maps, and detours to understand this hermeneutically rich philosophical project, one that has undeniably shaped the course of philosophy and the practice of philosophy as a way of life.