

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.² 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

¹ 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.

² 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.³ 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.”⁴ 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.⁵ 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.”⁶ 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*.”⁷ According to Romano, a hermeneutical paradigm has largely superseded positivism and structuralism.

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Claude Romano, “The Flexible Rule of the Hermeneut,” trans. Samuel Webb, *Sophia* 56, no. 3 (2017): 393.

⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.”¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.¹² 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

¹⁰ Badiou, “Metaphysics without Metaphysics,” 39.

¹¹ Badiou, “Metaphysics without Metaphysics,” 40.

¹² 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.¹³ 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.”¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ This point may be conceded to Badiou’s critique. Gadamerian ontological pluralism, meanwhile, encourages us to discover genuinely challenging truths even within traditional

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ Badiou, “Metaphysics without Metaphysics,” 52.

¹⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 309; “Wahrheit und Methode,” 316.

¹⁹ 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*.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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

²⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 456, 466; “Wahrheit und Methode,” 464, 474.

²¹ 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.”²² 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.²³ He goes so far as to provide a provocative and stipulative definition of hermeneutics as “a polemical term in contemporary philosophy.”²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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

²² Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 315.

²³ 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.

²⁴ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 357.

²⁵ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 7.

the other.”²⁶ 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.”²⁷ 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.”²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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 1980.³⁰ 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,

²⁶ C. G. Prado, “A Conversation with Richard Rorty,” *Symposium* 7, no. 2 (2003): 228.

²⁷ Richard Rorty, “A Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 34, no. 1 (1980): 42.

²⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 484; “Wahrheit und Methode,” 494.

²⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300; “Wahrheit und Methode,” 305–306.

³⁰ 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.³¹ 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."³² 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."³³ 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?³⁴

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

³¹ Rorty, "A Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor," 39.

³² Charles Taylor, "Understanding in Human Science," *The Review of Metaphysics* 34, no. 1 (1980): 26.

³³ Taylor, "Understanding in Human Science," 31. See also Rorty, Taylor, and Dreyfus, "A Discussion," 50.

³⁴ 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*.”³⁵ 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*.”³⁶ 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

³⁵ Rorty, “A Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor,” 39.

³⁶ 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.³⁷

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.”³⁸ 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

³⁷ Gjesdal, “Hermeneutics and the Question of Method”; Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Orientation and Judgment in Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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."⁴⁰ 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

³⁹ Taylor, "Understanding in Human Science," 26.

⁴⁰ Rorty, Taylor, and Dreyfus, "A Discussion," 47–51.

science.”⁴¹ 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.”⁴² 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

⁴¹ 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.

⁴² 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*.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ 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

⁴³ Paul Redding, *Hegel's Hermeneutics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 44–49. Redding well situates Gadamer as a successor to Hegel.

⁴⁴ 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 heterogenous, and that its purported replacement by pre-Gadamerian perspectives has been exaggerated. Thanks to Donovan Irven for drawing this connection to my attention.

⁴⁵ 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."⁴⁶ 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.

⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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."⁴⁸ 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

⁴⁷ Rorty, "A Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor," 44.

⁴⁸ 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*.⁴⁹ 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."⁵⁰ 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."⁵¹ 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

⁴⁹ Jean Grondin, "Truth and Method as a Classic," *Apuntes Filosóficos* 21, no. 40 (2012): 35–43.

⁵⁰ Günter Figal, *Objectivity: The Hermeneutical and Philosophy*, trans. Theodore D. George (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 5–47.

⁵¹ 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.⁵² 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.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵

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."⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ 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

⁵² Liakos and George, "Hermeneutics in Post-War Continental European Philosophy," 399.

⁵³ 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.

⁵⁴ 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.

⁵⁵ Tsenay Serequeberhan, *Existence and Heritage: Hermeneutic Explorations in African and Continental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015).

⁵⁶ 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.

⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸

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.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹

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

⁵⁸ 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.

⁵⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 391, translation modified; “Wahrheit und Methode,” 393.

⁶⁰ Jason Blakely, *We Built Reality: How Social Science Infiltrated Culture, Politics, and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁶¹ 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.⁶² 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."⁶³ 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.⁶⁴ 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."⁶⁵ 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

⁶² 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.

⁶³ Theodore George, "Are We a Conversation? Hermeneutics, Exteriority, and Transmittability," *Research in Phenomenology* 47, no. 3 (2017): 332.

⁶⁴ 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.

⁶⁵ Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, trans. Robert Savage (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 1–5.

in character.”⁶⁶ 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.

⁶⁶ Malpas, “Placing Understanding/Understanding Place,” 380.