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.[1]

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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[1] 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.[2]

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."[3] 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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[2] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 1.

[3] 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."[4] 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?"[5]

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."[6]

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

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

[6] 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.[7] Technology and organization, however, cannot be their own end but should serve "a life to which I can say, "yes.""[8] 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."[9]

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

[8] Gadamer, "Lob der Theorie," 51.

[9] 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."[10] 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."[11] 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."[12] 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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[10] Paul Ricoeur, "'Hermeneutical Logic'?" in *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures*, vol. 2, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 68.
[11] Ricoeur, "'Hermeneutical Logic'?" 75.
[12] 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,"[13] 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.[14] 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.[15] 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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[13] Martin Heidegger, *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, trans. John van Buren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 51.

[14] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 291. See also Gadamer and Dutt, *Hermeneutik, Ästhetik, Praktische Philosophie*, 24–25.

[15] 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."[16] 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.[17] 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[18] so that "the symbol gives rise to thought."[19]

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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[16] 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.

[17] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 5.

[18] Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and Symbolism," in *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures*, vol. 2, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 7.

[19] 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."[20] 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.[21]

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.[22] 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."[23] 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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[20] Ricoeur, "'Hermeneutical Logic'?" 103.

[21] 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.

[22] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Leiberfahrung und Objetivierbarkeit," in *Die Verborgenheit der Gesundheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2018), 95.

[23] 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."[24] 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."[25]

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*).[26] 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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[24] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Philosophy and Practical Medicine," in *Die Verborgenheit der Gesundheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2018), 128.

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

[26] 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."[27]

The hermeneutic importance of the body has become front and center in Richard Kearney's *carnal hermeneutics*. More than any other hermeneutic philosopher, Kearny thematizes "the inextricable relationship between *sensation* and *interpretation*."[28] Like Gadamer, he criticizes that hermeneutic phenomenology championed language and historicity at the expense of the body.[29] Kearny 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.[30] 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.[31] 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.[32]

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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27 Gadamer, "Zum Problem der Intelligenz," 83.
28 Richard Kearney, "The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics," in *Carnal Hermeneutics*, ed. Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor (New York: Fordham University, Press, 2015), 17.
29 Kearney, "The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics" 16–17.
30 Kearney, "The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics," 55.
31 Michel Henry, *La Barbarie* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1987), 15.
32 See also Richard Kearny, *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."[33] 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.[34]

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 [*Einzelnheit*]."[35] 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."[36]

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.[37] It is well known that Gadamer makes the dynamic of question and answer the "primordial hermeneutical phenomenon" that structures human knowing.[38] Gadamer's insistence on the *personalist* nature of the conversational structure of hermeneutics, however, is often overlooked. He repeatedly emphasizes

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[33] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Zwischen Natur und Kunst," in *Die Verborgenheit der Gesundheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2018), 108.

[34] Gadamer, "Zwischen Natur und Kunst," 108.

[35] Gadamer and Dutt, *Hermeneutik, Ästhetik, Praktische Philosophie*, 41.

[36] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 361.

[37] Hans-Georg Gadamer and Silvio Vietta, *Im Gespräch* (München: W. Fink, 2002), 34–35.

[38] 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."[39]

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.[40] 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.[41] 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.[42] 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.[43]

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

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

[41] 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.

[42] Ricoeur, "Meurt le Personnalisme, Revient La Personne," 114.

[43] Ricoeur, "Meurt le Personnalisme, Revient La Personne," 116.

Therefore, Ricoeur wants a more open, less conceptually rigid, approach to personhood,[44] 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*).[45] 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."[46]

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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44 Ricoeur, "Meurt le Personnalisme, Revient La Personne," 115.
45 Ricoeur, "Meurt de Personnalisme, Revient La Personne," 116.
46 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."[47] 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."[48] 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.[49]

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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[47] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 194.
[48] 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.
[49] 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.[50] 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.[51]

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."[52] 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 techno-vision 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.[53]

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[50] Henry, *La Barbarie*, 2.

[51] Henry, *La Barbarie*, 2.

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

[53] 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,"[54] 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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[54] "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."[55] 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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[55] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Autorität und kritische Freiheit," in *Die Verborgenheit der Gesundheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2018), 157.