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## The Lingual Mediation of Being and the Infinite Process of Understanding : Gadamer's Radicalization of Heidegger's Question of Being

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## THE LINGUAL MEDIATION OF BEING AND THE INFINITE PROCESS OF UNDERSTANDING: GADAMER'S RADICALIZATION OF HEIDEGGER'S QUESTION OF BEING

**Abstract.** The extent of Heidegger's crucial influence on Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics became fully visible only relatively recently with the discovery of the young Heidegger. Early Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity as an attempt to understand human existence had a profound impact on Gadamer. Gadamer's hermeneutics opens up the horizon of mediation between the manifestation of Being and human understanding. Language, as the mediation between human beings and the world, discloses their original belonging together: In itself, the word is *mediation*; the word mediates itself. Gadamer's radicalization of Heidegger's question of Being leads him to the fundamental question of human understanding.

**Keywords:** philosophical hermeneutics, Heidegger, Gadamer, language, understanding

1. Die "Sache" of hermeneutics. 2. Hermeneutics, truth, and method. 3. The Hermeneutic primacy of language and the universality of hermeneutics. 4. Hermeneutic transcendence. 5. Heidegger's question of Being and Gadamer's radicalization of Heidegger.

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## 1. DIE "SACHE" OF HERMENEUTICS

The aim of this paper is to address critically my own reading of Heidegger and Gadamer not in the sense of disputing my former convictions or resolving the tension in my different readings of the hermeneutic tradition, but rather to give a testimony to the relevance of this tradition for the task of thinking.<sup>1</sup>

The extent of Heidegger's crucial influence on Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics became fully visible only relatively recently with the discovery of the young Heidegger.<sup>2</sup> It became clear that not *Being and Time* but far more early Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity (*Hermeneutik der Faktizität*) had a profound impact on Gadamer. Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity was the attempt to understand human existence. Human facticity is forgetful of itself and its interpretive nature.

Gadamer, who received his doctorate in 1922 with Paul Natorp in Marburg, got at the beginning of 1923 a copy of Heidegger's manuscript *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle*. In Gadamer's possession was, however, only the introduction, which served as a decisive argument for Heidegger's appointment to Marburg in the case of the lack of his publications. The text, which has come to be known as the *Natorp Bericht*, was written for Paul Natorp by the young *Privatdozent* from Freiburg in 1922. Gadamer's essay, which accompanies

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<sup>1</sup> For that reason I freely use some of my former writing on this subject: A. Wiercinski, *Hermeneutics between Philosophy and Theology: The Imperative to Think the Incommensurable*, LIT Verlag, Münster 2010; Idem, *Heidegger's Atheology: The Possibility of Unbelief*, in: *A Companion to Heidegger's "Phenomenology of Religious Life"*, eds. S. McGrath, A. Wiercinski, Rodopi, Amsterdam 2010, 151–180; Idem, *The Hermeneutic Retrieval of a Theological Insight: "Verbum Interius"*, in: *Between the Human and the Divine: Philosophical and Theological Hermeneutics*, ed. A. Wiercinski, The Hermeneutic Press, Toronto 2002, 1–23.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Reading Heidegger from the Start: Essays in His Earliest Thought*, eds. Th. Kisiel, J. van Buren, SUNY Press, Albany, N.Y. 1994; Th. Kisiel, *The Genesis of Heidegger's "Being and Time"*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Calif. 1993; J. van Buren, *The Young Heidegger: Rumor of the Hidden King*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Ind. 1994.

the first publication of a newly-discovered Heidegger's manuscript, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles: Ausarbeitung für die Marburger und die Göttinger Philosophische Fakultät* (1922), to mark Heidegger's hundredth birthday, discloses the importance of the philosophy of the young Heidegger on Gadamer. Heidegger's *theologische 'Jugendschrift'* became a real inspiration for Gadamer, particularly for the way history of philosophy can be read in a productive way to understand better contemporary situation.<sup>3</sup> Heidegger's preoccupation with Aristotle was, for him, a necessary philosophical detour for exposing Dasein to its own historicity. Phenomenology as a way of doing philosophy comprises three basic components: Reduction, construction, and destruction. They belong together and even the most radical attempt to begin all over again is pervaded by traditional concepts. The dismantling of horizons helps to understand Western history in its productive possibilities by confronting what is expressed in Tradition (*Überlieferung*) and what has been left unsaid. *Destruktion* of the metaphysics of presence reveals the fundamental temporal structures of our understanding of Being. The destruction of philosophical Tradition discloses the inexhaustible strangeness of the unfamiliar and allows Heidegger to escape the language of metaphysics.

The *Being* of factic life is the proper task of philosophy. The hermeneutics of facticity does not attempt to get at theoretical truths about the existence in general. On the contrary, by grasping basic movements of factic life, it attempts to understand what is always its own (*das Eigene*).

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<sup>3</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Heideggers 'theologische' Jugendschrift*, in: M. Heidegger, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles*, ed. G. Neumann with an essay by H.-G. Gadamer, Reclam, Stuttgart 2003, 76–86. A new edition in: M. Heidegger, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen ausgewählter Abhandlungen des Aristoteles zur Ontologie und Logik. Anhang – Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles: Anzeige der hermeneutischen Situation – Ausarbeitung für die Marburger und die Göttinger Philosophische Fakultät*, ed. G. Neumann, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt a. M. 2005 (English: *Phenomenological Interpretations with Respect to Aristotle: Indication of the Hermeneutical Situation*, trans. M. Baur, *Man and World* 25(1992)3–4, 355–393).

Making critical appropriation of the hermeneutic tradition from Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine to Schleiermacher and Dilthey, Heidegger reformulates the question of Being on the basis of facticity and the everyday world.<sup>4</sup> For him, human Dasein is the actual object (*eigentlicher Gegenstand*) of philosophical research, and as such represents the specific How (*das bestimmte Wie*) of factic life. Hermeneutics as the self-explication of the facticity indicates formally what human Dasein is. Facticity points to a primordial articulation of the world prior to any theoretical experience of the world. Thus, facticity as such is not an object of investigation. Factual beings are called to question their own existence in their facticity. Therefore, this basic direction of philosophical questioning is not externally added on to the factic life, but rather confronts life in what is most familiar and strange vis-à-vis one's presuppositions in moments of revelation. However, what is most familiar in its everydayness remains unquestioned. The factic life, as concerned about its own Being, is difficult to bear and avoids itself. The tendency to make things easy for itself is the most unmistakable manifestation of factic life.<sup>5</sup>

Since the object of philosophical research is factic life or human Dasein questioned in its Being, the task of philosophy is to apprehend explicitly basic movements of this questioning. Dasein's self-interpretation is not a process that is added to understanding. Rather, interpretation as a mode of being a human being belongs to life's own basic movements.

Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity emphasizes that the task of philosophy is to strengthen radically the factual character of life in its decisive possibilities of Being. By making factual life speak for itself on the basis of its very own factual possibilities, phenomenology must

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Th. Kiesel, *Heidegger's Early Lecture Courses*, in: *A Companion to Heidegger's "Being and Time"*, ed. J.J. Kockelmans, Catholic University Press, Washington, D.C. 1986, 22–39.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. M. Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretations with Respect to Aristotle: Indication of the Hermeneutical Situation*, op. cit., 359.

remain in the tendency of factual life, which is illuminated by phenomenological inquiry.

The main paradox of the hermeneutics of facticity lies in a double structure of facticity itself. On the one hand, it designates everydayness, which is already known insofar as it is unknown. On the other hand, it indicates that which potentially resists comprehension. Thus, the hermeneutics of facticity highlights the tension between understanding of factic life and the fundamental questionability of life and its manifestations. In fact, the conflict of interpretations appears as a positive characteristic of factic life. Philosophy must remain in this questionability. It calls for attentiveness to Being, which will allow for questioning a human Dasein in one's own Being to the point of becoming a question to oneself: *mihi quaestio factus sum*. This Augustinian struggle for understanding oneself was instrumental for the way Heidegger read Aristotle and admired his primordiality of questioning. What Heidegger discovered in Aristotle was, on the one hand, the faithfulness to the Parmenidean notion of the oneness and unity of Being, and, on the other hand, his twofoldness of Being, which has been often overlooked in the traditional substance-oriented readings of Aristotle.<sup>6</sup> In his phenomenological approach to the reading and understanding of Aristotle, Heidegger confronts Aristotle with questions relevant for philosophy today. It is exactly this radical questioning which distinguishes Heidegger's hermeneutics of Aristotle and contributes to his fame with students from Freiburg and Marburg. The absolute novelty for his students was the way Heidegger read Aristotle. It was Aristotle *redivivus* (Gadamer), "the Philosopher" who was brought back to life.<sup>7</sup> The radicality of questioning was rooted in the way Heidegger understood burning contemporary philosophical questions. What matters in philosophy, is radicality with which human beings question their own life (*Lebensverständnis der eigenen Gegenwart*). It is exactly this

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. W. A. Brogan, *Heidegger and Aristotle: The Twofoldness of Being*, SUNY Press, Albany, N.Y. 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger reading of Aristotle was very different from that of Hegel who understood himself as *Aristoteles redivivus et perfectus*.

“existential understanding of one’s present life,” which needs to be brought back to life. Therefore, what becomes essential is not the further elaboration of ontology, but the understanding of understanding as intimately involved and integrated in Tradition (*Überlieferung*). The practical reason is not the model for the disclosedness of one’s Dasein, but for a historical knowledge. The hermeneutic task of this knowledge is to make Tradition speak to us and thus to understand presence in its relationship to Tradition (*Überlieferung*).

This radicality of questioning, an existential appeal to the anticipation of death, and the call for authenticity inspired Heidegger in his reading of the history of Western philosophy. It was not only Aristotle, St. Paul, St. Augustine, and Kierkegaard, who brought him to the edge of his thinking. Heidegger’s fascination with a sentence from Schelling, “Fear of life itself drives people out of the center,” heralded something significantly new coming up: *Being and Time*.<sup>8</sup> It was a shift from a “Dasein *of* a human being” to a “Dasein *in* a human being.” However it was through his originary engagement with the Greek beginning, especially with Heraclitus and Parmenides, that Heidegger reinterpreted Dasein. Given the emphasis that Heidegger places on the ἀρχή, his philosophical program was becoming clear: To rewrite the history of Western philosophy (and maybe even the political history of the West) according to the topology of the Greek thinking. The inspiration, which Heidegger got from reading pre-Socratics, brought him to interpret ἀ-λήθεια as unconcealedness. The task of a philosopher is to elucidate the disclosure of an ontological world. At his point, it was obvious that Heidegger will not be *Aristotle redivivus*, but a thinker of Being, who’s proper vocation is the preservation of the True. The ethos of a philosopher is to rescue the True. Understanding ἀ-λήθεια as unconcealedness, places it in the dialectic horizon of concealment (*Verbergung*) and unconcealment (*Entbergung*) and opens up the world in which things are made intelligible for human beings in the first place. Dasein is always lost into the world, since it is always concealing when

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<sup>8</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Philosophische Lehrjahre: Eine Rückschau*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M. 2012, 217.

it unconceals. It is the mystery of language, which allows us to capture the nature of Dasein as disclosure. Disclosing itself to itself points to Dasein as disclosing its own possibilities.

Heidegger's philosophy is characterized by an immense feeling of his *Sprachnot*, which is not a simple struggling with language, but an expression of an authentic urgency required to address that which needs to be thought. And there is nothing paradoxical to speak about *Sprachnot* in case of a philosopher, who was the master of German. This *Sprachnot* is a noble distinction of somebody who dares to think (*Denknot*) and thus has something to say.

## 2. HERMENEUTICS, TRUTH, AND METHOD

Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, stresses that understanding is not an epistemological but ontological category.<sup>9</sup> If the truth of what does it mean to be a human being cannot be captured within fixed epistemological boundaries, we must inquire into the existential possibility of a human being. However, Heidegger is not interested in providing an anthropological account of the human being: "The analytic of Dasein remains wholly orientated toward the guiding task of working out the question of Being."<sup>10</sup> Only fundamental ontology, as the inquiry into the Being of beings can disclose the truth of the human being: "Basically, all ontology, no matter how rich and firmly compacted a system of categories it has at its disposal, remains blind and perverted from its ownmost aim, if it has not first adequately clarified the meaning of Being, and conceived this clarification as its fundamental task."<sup>11</sup>

By failing to look to the Being of human Dasein, traditional metaphysics' anthropocentric fixation leads to forgetfulness of the proper dignity of a human being.<sup>12</sup> Fundamental ontology is concerned with

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<sup>9</sup> M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Niemeyer, Tübingen 1993, 31.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. M. Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism*, in: *Idem, Basic Writings*, ed. D. F. Krell, Routledge, London 1978, 213–266, esp. 233ff.



a new method of thinking that is unconstrained by the metaphysical focus on beings, but places human Dasein in relation to Being. For Heidegger, “the question about the essence of Being is intimately linked to the question of who the human being is. Yet the determination of the human essence that is required here is not a matter for a free-floating anthropology, which at bottom represents humanity in the same way as zoology represents animals. The question about human Being is now determined in its direction and scope solely on the basis of the question of Being.”<sup>13</sup>

Since everything we talk about, and everything we have in view, is Being, philosophy requires an inquiry into Being. Heidegger holds that “it is fitting that we should raise anew the question of the meaning of Being.”<sup>14</sup> He emphasizes that Being does not conform to fixed logical categories, but “as that which is asked about, must be exhibited in a way of its own, essentially different from the way in which entities are discovered. Accordingly, *what is to be found out by asking* – the meaning of Being – also demands that it be conceived in a way of its own, essentially contrasting with the concepts in which entities acquire their determinate signification.”<sup>15</sup>

In reversing the hermeneutic problem, Heidegger understands *das Dasein als Verstehen*, as the mode of being that exists through understanding Being.<sup>16</sup> Our explanation of the world (*Auslegung*) is preceded by pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*) of our Being-in-the-world (*in-the-World-sein*).

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<sup>13</sup> M. Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. G. Fried, R. Polt, Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn. 2000, 219. Derrida calls Heidegger’s critique and attempted correction of metaphysical humanism, “a sort of re-evaluation or revalorisation of the essence and the dignity of man.” J. Derrida, *The Ends of Man*, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 30(1969)1, 49–50.

<sup>14</sup> M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, op. cit., 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>16</sup> Ricoeur criticizes the way Heidegger relates understanding and Being as a “short route.” See P. Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Ill. 1974, 6–8.

For Heidegger, Dasein is a form of Being, which understands itself in its Being, and that to some degree it does so explicitly. With reference to a human Dasein, Heidegger instantiates a mode of thinking that overcomes the anthropocentric triumphalism of a human being as the lord of beings. In fact, a human being is the “shepherd of Being.”<sup>17</sup> The actual importance of a human Being is in its subordination to Being: “Man remains referred to Being, and he is only this. This ‘only’ does not mean a limitation, but rather an excess. A belonging to Being prevails within man, a belonging which listens to Being because it is appropriated to Being.”<sup>18</sup>

It is peculiar to this entity that with and through its Being, this Being is disclosed to it. Dasein always understands itself in terms of its existence, in terms of a possibility: To be itself or not itself. Dasein’s understanding of Being pertains with equal primordially both to an understanding of a world, and to the understanding of the Being of beings accessible within the world. Understanding is Dasein’s ability to grasp the possibilities for Being and thus the mode of Being-in-the-world. Understanding is ontologically fundamental and prior to the act of existing. Following Heidegger, Gadamer conceives understanding as the mode of Being. In the second preface to *Truth and Method* Gadamer says: “Heidegger’s temporal analytics of Dasein has, I think, shown convincingly that understanding is not just one of the various possible behaviors of the subject but the mode of being of Dasein itself. It is in this sense that the term ‘hermeneutics’ has been used here. It denotes the basic being-in-motion of Dasein that constitutes its finitude and historicity, and hence embraces the whole of its experience of the world. Not caprice, or even an elaboration of a single aspect, but the nature of the thing itself makes the movement of understanding comprehensive and universal.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> M. Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism*, op. cit., 245.

<sup>18</sup> M. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. J. Stambaugh, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1969, 31.

<sup>19</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinsheimer, D. G. Marshall, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., Continuum, New York 2000, xxvii.

Heidegger's emphasis on the interpretative character of understanding and on language marks the hermeneutic turn in philosophy: To think a concept it is necessary to think the history of the concept, and the history of the concept is implicit in the language which expresses it. Thus there is no a-historical access to ideas; an idea is essentially a historical entity. Its historicity is a function of its being. Adopting the language of a negative or mystical theology, and pushing language to its limits, Heidegger attempts to deconstruct onto-theological thinking. His later hostility toward the philosophical theology of the Middle Ages, after his early fascination with Scholastic speculative grammar, questions the very possibility of a philosophical dialogue with medieval theology. However, the Gadamerian retrieval of *verbum interius* renews the young Heidegger's project of a phenomenological and hermeneutic rehabilitation of medieval theology. Hermeneutics must never forget that the remembering of language was effected through the retrieval of a theological insight. Heidegger's contention that a theist cannot think Being is thrown into question by his own legacy.<sup>20</sup>

Human Dasein discloses Being through thinking and language. Since thinking concerns Being, it is always in relationship with Being. Thinking is intimately linked to language. Thinking Being and not beings moves philosophy beyond the binary oppositions of metaphysics, and is, as such more rigorous than the conceptual. If thinking is the thinking of Being, thinking discloses Being to the human Dasein. The disclosure of Being occurs in language. However, language is not an instrument of disclosure. Since understanding is ontological as the fundamental mode of being-in-the-world, and being-in-the-world is lingual, the activity of interpretation consists in bringing to the fore what is already there. As such, interpretation is a mode of being not a way of doing. As human being we interpret insofar as we are.

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<sup>20</sup> See M. Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, ed. P. Jaeger, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M. 1983, 8–9.

Heidegger holds that “we are within language.”<sup>21</sup> Human Dasein resides within language. “Language is the house of Being.”<sup>22</sup> Therefore, language is a constitutive aspect of the human being. We are not in a position of stepping outside of language. It is not us that speaks but “language that speaks,”<sup>23</sup> (*die Sprache spricht*).

Coming to an understanding is made possible by language. Language provides the medium or middle ground. It is the place, where understanding happens. Thus the hermeneutic problem concerns not the correct mastery of language but coming to a proper understanding about the subject matter, which takes place in the medium of language.<sup>24</sup> Language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding happens in interpreting. The difference between the language of a text and the language of the interpreter, or the gulf that separates the translator from the original, is not merely a secondary question. On the contrary, the fact is that the problems of verbal expression are themselves problems of understanding. All understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of a language that allows the object to come into words and yet is at the same time the interpreter’s own language.<sup>25</sup>

The task of hermeneutics, from its historical origin as a theological and a legal hermeneutics goes beyond the limits that the concept of method sets to modern science. The phenomenon of the understanding of texts and their interpretation is the vital part of the human experience of the world. “The understanding and the interpretation of texts is not merely a concern of science, but obviously belongs to human experience of the world in general. The hermeneutic phenomenon is basically not a problem of method at all. It is not concerned with a method of

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<sup>21</sup> M. Heidegger, *The Way to Language*, in: Idem, *Basic Writings*, ed. D. F. Krell, Routledge, London 1978, 398.

<sup>22</sup> M. Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism*, op. cit., 217.

<sup>23</sup> M. Heidegger, *The Way to Language*, op. cit., 411.

<sup>24</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., 387.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.

understanding by means of which texts are subjected to scientific investigation like all other objects of experience."<sup>26</sup>

Hermeneutics is concerned with knowledge and truth, but is not a method of reading texts. According to Gadamer, "there is no hermeneutic method. Hermeneutics means not so much a procedure as the attitude of a person who wants to understand someone else, or who wants to understand a linguistic expression as a reader or listener. However this always means: understanding this person, this text. An interpreter who really has mastered scholarly methods uses them only so that the experience of the text becomes possible through better understanding. He will not blindly exploit the text in order to apply a method."<sup>27</sup>

What hermeneutics is concerned with is not a prescription for the practice of understanding, but a philosophical reflection of the way interpretive understanding is achieved. The problem of hermeneutics becomes universal in scope, even attaining a new dimension, through its transcendental interpretation of understanding. The general structure of understanding is concretized in historical understanding, in that the concrete bonds of custom and tradition and the corresponding possibilities of one's own future become effective in understanding itself. We can say that given the intermediate position in which hermeneutics operates, it follows that its work is not to develop a procedure of understanding, but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place.<sup>28</sup>

Our understanding is always historically situated. The central notion of prejudice represents the link with our tradition. We can never fully escape from our prejudices. Gadamer overcomes the negativity of prejudices as imposed by the Enlightenment's task to free human spirit from all prejudices in admiration for the Cartesian method and in opposition to tradition, prejudice, and authority. In fact, the Enlight-

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., xx.

<sup>27</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan: "Who Am I and Who Are You?" and Other Essays*, trans. R. Heinemann, B. Krajewski, State University of New York, Albany, N.Y. 1997, 161.

<sup>28</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., 295.

tenment's "prejudice against prejudice itself," closes the possibility of understanding human nature in its historicity and finitude.

In a critical encounter we can attempt to understand our prejudices and the way they condition our understanding. Hermeneutics reminds us that there is no presuppositionless access to what needs to be understood. When something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon the fore-structure with its components: Fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception (*Vorhabe*, *Vorsicht*, and *Vorgriff*). These three modes of understanding constitute the ontological realm of all understanding. Every understanding is thus happening in the horizon of the primordial pre-understanding. The circular character of interpretation enables the interpretation of a text rather by stressing that the meaning of a text is to be found within its cultural, historical, and literary context. The hermeneutic circle as a key feature of the process of understanding a text hermeneutically circles around the reference to the individual parts and the understanding of each individual part by reference to the whole. The whole text and the individual parts can be understood with reference to one another. In fact, "what is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way. (...) In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing."<sup>29</sup> Hermeneutic circle has an ontological status and is paradigmatic for any understanding. It refers to the basic structure of human cognition. The temporality of understanding makes us aware of the limits of our cognition. Understanding is never a subjective act. Interpretation is an inner unfolding of meaning. When we interpret a text we cannot fix its meaning. Particular meanings reveal a new sense to the whole. In turn, this new disclosure changes our self-understanding.

Gadamer is fully aware of the fundamental importance of Heidegger's three-fold structure of interpretation: Heidegger is not concerned with a prescription for the practice of understanding, but with a description of the way interpretive understanding is achieved. The po-

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<sup>29</sup> M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie, E. Robinson, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1962, 195.

int of Heidegger's hermeneutic reflection is not so much to prove that there is a circle as to show that this circle possesses an ontologically positive significance. For the interpreter to let himself be guided by the things themselves is obviously not a matter of a single, conscientious decision, but is the constant task. For it is necessary to keep one's gaze fixed on the thing throughout all the constant distractions that originate in the interpreter himself. A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. One projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. The initial meaning emerges only because one is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as one penetrates into the meaning, is an understanding what is there. This description is, of course, a rough abbreviation of the whole. The process that Heidegger describes is that every revision of the foreprojection is capable of projecting before itself a new projection of meaning; rival projects can emerge side by side until it becomes clearer what the unity of meaning is; interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones. This constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretation.<sup>30</sup>

Every understanding is based on some preliminary assumptions. As historical beings we always understand in reference to our fore-understanding of the world. Prejudices shape the horizon of understanding, which is situated and determined by historical, lingual, and cultural horizons of meaning. The task of interpretation is based on the presupposition that each time a text is read it is read differently; there is no definitive or final interpretation of the text. By opening up new horizons of meaning, we open ourselves to the truth of the text, which challenges us to participate in the ongoing dialogue that constitutes the tradition that we are.<sup>31</sup>

The truth of hermeneutics embraces the possibility of various interpretations of the matter to be interpreted. By illuminating the her-

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<sup>30</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., 269.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 363.

meneutic experience as the experience of human finitude, we discover that our task is to thematize the conditions of our understanding; not to overcome them but to develop consciousness of the effects of history (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*). With Gadamer we can say that the task of hermeneutics is to clarify the miracles of understanding, which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning. The essence of the hermeneutic problem is the consciousness of the historicity of human understanding. In Gadamer's words, "In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.*"<sup>32</sup>

Tradition and history are understood by the interpreter's ever changing horizon. We are thrown into a world and called to understand ourselves in our being-in-the-world as historical, finite, and lingual beings. However, modifying Heidegger, Gadamer holds that the real purpose of Dasein is to co-operate for mutual benefit with other Dasein (*Mitsein*). For that reason, instead of Heidegger's general notion of being with other Dasein (*Mitsein*), Gadamer speaks rather of a concrete being-with-the other (*Miteinandersein*).

### 3. THE HERMENEUTIC PRIMACY OF LANGUAGE AND THE UNIVERSALITY OF HERMENEUTICS

The ontological relationship between Being and a being is hermeneutically expressed as the relationship between the self-manifestation of Being and *Dasein's* understanding of Being. Following Heidegger, we can accentuate the passivity and receptivity of *Dasein* in the revelation of Being. In our attempt to allow Being to show itself, we realize that

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 276–277.



there is a constant play between concealment and unconcealment.<sup>33</sup> Being has to reveal itself to us to open us toward its self-manifestation. On our way to Being, language is both bridge and barrier<sup>34</sup>: It reveals Being, but only as a being. And the correlation of the manifestation of Being and the understanding of *Dasein* exposes the fact that they belong together in language.<sup>35</sup>

Gadamer's hermeneutic principle opens up the horizon of mediation between the manifestation of Being and human understanding. The hermeneutic approach is not a mere duplication of the past, nor the subjective, fashionable celebration of diversity, but a reliving of the event of the past: A process of an undoubtedly transformative character. Identifying the act of interpretation with the act of transformation, Gadamer emphasizes that what is first and foremost transformed is the interpreter. The past is engaged and brought together with the present – opening the way to new questions and traditions, which have been evolving along with the original meaning – thus building its own history. Fusing horizons, we go beyond something that is already familiar to us. In the interplay of that which is understood (*das Entborgene*) and that which is veiled and in need of being disclosed (*das Verborgene*), we realize that our access to that which wants to be disclosed is *in and through* language. We discover that language itself lives in the *in-between* of concealment and unconcealment (*Zueinandergehören von Verbergung und Entbergung*).

Disclosure and understanding constitute the hermeneutic dimension of the ontological difference. In language, Being uncovers itself and makes itself understandable. "Being that can be understood is language."<sup>36</sup> The dialectic of understanding, in which the same is al-

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<sup>33</sup> M. Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, in: Idem, *Poetry, Language Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter, Harper and Row, New York 1975 (originally published as *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, in: *Holzwege*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M. 1963), 41.

<sup>34</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2: *Hermeneutik II: Wahrheit und Methode*, Mohr, Tübingen 1986, 336.

<sup>35</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., 477.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 474.

ways understood differently, originates in the infinite constellations of meaning characterizing human thinking. Language contains the one, which is at this same time, the other. Speaking is dwelling in the totality of meaning. Every lingual expression is grounded in that totality, which encompasses all individual expressions and overcomes them. The statement “Being that can be understood is language” might be interpreted as the participation in the totality of meaning, and not as lingual idealism. In Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, Being, thinking, and language constitute the unity of Being and thinking in language. Thinking is not possible outside of language. That which is thought is experienced by a lingual being and is expressed in language, thus not only revealing Being, which is constituted lingually in itself, but also placing Being within a relationship with *Dasein*. Thinking and language are indivisible. The object of understanding is always determined by its lingual nature, since *to be* means *to exist in language*. The meaning of Being in its self-manifestation is not something that lies outside of *Dasein*, but it constitutes *Dasein*’s understanding of Being. *Dasein* has not an outside. Since history and language form *Dasein*, it never exists without history and language.<sup>37</sup>

Hermeneutics mediates thinking and speaking; it is fundamentally mediation, like the messenger-god Hermes, a mediator between the human and the divine by transmitting the messages of the gods and making them intelligible to humanity. In itself the word is mediation; the word mediates itself. The powerlessness of language, the pain of being unable to express everything brings us to hermeneutics. We have to mediate the limitation of experience with all that we have said and all we wish to say and need to say. It is not that we are surrounded by things we cannot name, we are beings held out into the unsaid. When Being comes to be, it appears as a word in us. A new being is always accompanied by a word. “The ideality of the meaning lies in the word itself. It is meaningful already. But this does not imply (...) that the word precedes all experience and simply advenes to an experience in an external way, by subjecting itself to it. Experience is not wordless

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<sup>37</sup> M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, op. cit., 86–90.

to begin with, subsequently becoming an object of reflection by being named, by being subsumed under the universality of the word. Rather, experience of itself seeks and finds words that express it. We seek the right word – i.e., the word that really belongs to the thing – so that in it the thing comes to language.”<sup>38</sup>

The hermeneutic task is to find a right, fitting word, which expresses, even if never completely, what needs to be thought. This never ending search for language is finite in its nature. The hermeneutic experience mediates infinite and finite being, and as such, is a lingual enactment of *Dasein's* being-in-the-world. It is a mediation in which divine and human being meet and unite. In language the divine manifests itself to human thinking, and in language human thinking find its way to the divine. Our task is to find the right root words for every new encounter and not rely on old lingual abstractions that served as a shortcut through a different meadow.

As a participation in shared meaning, lingually mediated understanding depends equally on that which is not and cannot be said. In dialogue, we engage not only that which is said, but also that which is unsaid. The basic and universal problem of the inadequacy of articulation in language allows Gadamer to make his case for the claim of the universality of hermeneutics. The universality of language and hence the universality of hermeneutics lies in the dialectic of question and answer. Yet this hermeneutic primordial phenomenon, *Ur-phenomenon*, as Gadamer calls it, specifies that “no assertion is possible that cannot be understood as an answer to a question and assertions can only be understood in that way.”<sup>39</sup> The words refer to the dialogue we are, yet they cannot bring us closer to our experience: “What is stated is not everything. The unsaid is what first makes what is stated into a word that can reach us.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., 417.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 11; also H.-G. Gadamer, *Die Universalität des hermeneutischen Problems*, in *Idem, Hermeneutik II*, op. cit., 219–231.

<sup>40</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., 504.

Understanding constitutes the fundamental structure of *Dasein*, an existential, a way of being, in which the other is always co-given, a cohabitant in the house of language. Coming to an understanding (*Verständigung*), then, is always coming to an understanding about something. Understanding each other (*sich verstehen*) is always understanding each other with respect to something. From language, we learn that the subject matter (*Sache*) is not merely an arbitrary object of discussion, independent of the process of mutual understanding (*Sichverstehen*), but rather is the path and goal of mutual understanding itself. Understanding as an enactment of life is open to Being, self, and otherness. The third part of *Truth and Method* can be understood as an ontological shift in Gadamer's hermeneutics, from hermeneutics as a methodology of interpretation in the human sciences to a universal philosophical hermeneutics.<sup>41</sup> Because understanding is the ontological structure of human being pervaded by language, hermeneutics is ontology. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics as the universal inquiry of philosophy springs from the universality of language, from the fact that "language can keep pace with the boundlessness of reason."<sup>42</sup> Language is a means of productive dialogue in which substantively different views confront one another and are ultimately fused into a new and deeper insight.

#### 4. HERMENEUTIC TRANSCENDENCE

The essential linguality of understanding, the enactment of historically effected consciousness in language, calls for an ongoing search for the primal words in which Being is always already expressed, the *verbum entis*. Lingually oriented hermeneutics considers language as the manifestation of Being in which Being reveals itself in the primal conflict (*Urstreit*) between concealment and unconcealment. It was Heidegger, who first thematized the dynamics of concealing (*Verbergen*) and re-

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<sup>41</sup> For Gadamer, ontological, philosophical and universal are synonyms for hermeneutics.

<sup>42</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., 401.

vealing (*Entbergen*) as the essence of truth: ἀ-λήθεια. Language as the mediation between human beings and the world discloses their original belonging together.<sup>43</sup> According to Gadamer, “we can only think in a language,” “we are always encompassed by the language that is our own.”<sup>44</sup> Understanding always happens as a lingual event: *Verstehen vollzieht sich im sprachlichen Geschehen*. Gadamer stresses the tension by inscribing language within the phenomenological process itself. Language is not a supplement of understanding. Understanding and interpretation are always intertwined with each other. Explication in language brings understanding to explicitness; it makes concrete the meaning that comes to be understood in the encounter with what has been handed down to us. Language is the mirror of finitude, that is, the mirror of temporality, because “every language is constantly being formed and developed the more it manifests Being. It is finite not because it is not all other languages at once but simply because it is language.”<sup>45</sup> Language is the *Vollzug* of the self-disclosure of Being. We speak because we *must* speak, Being speaks to us. After speaking we remain convinced that there is much more to say. A comprehensive *Vollzug* of meaning takes into account the unsaid, the intention, the context: “To make oneself understood – means to hold what is said together with an infinity of what is not said in one unified meaning and to ensure that it is understood in this way.”<sup>46</sup> Expressing what has not yet been said and what is yet to be said represents our ongoing search for language, more than the externalization of inner experience, the primordial expression of Being.

In this search for Being, the dialogical nature of our understanding plays an essential role. Being comes to language in the dialogue with ourselves, each other, and the tradition, the ongoing ‘conversation that we are.’ The event of understanding has a dialogical character. It is

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 474–476.

<sup>44</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. and trans. D. E. Linge, University of California Press, Berkeley, Calif. 1977, 62.

<sup>45</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., 457.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 469.

always possible to say something in a different way, to express a concrete meaning differently while facing the different language as the language of the other. It is a struggle to bridge two separate worlds while acknowledging the (difficult) gift of the other without however sacrificing the otherness of the other. Hospitality and responsibility describe the basic characteristic of a human being dwelling in-between familiarity and strangeness in the mode of *διά-λέγειν*, of welcoming the difference and the richness of the relationship with the Other. The initial distantiating, caused by the encounter with the unknown stranger (both as a person and as a meaning) calls for the appropriation of the original meaning, which describes the path to understanding oneself through otherness.

The conversational model of hermeneutic understanding is grounded in the nature of language, which has true being only in conversation. Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens oneself to the other, truly accepts one's point of view as valid and transposes oneself into the other to such an extent that one understands not the particular individual but what one says. Language has its true being only in dialogue, in *coming to an understanding*. This is not to be understood as if that were the purpose of language. Coming to an understanding is not a mere action, a purposeful activity, a setting up of signs through which I transmit my will to others. Coming to an understanding as such, rather, does not need any tools, in the proper sense of the word. It is a life process in which a community of life is lived out. To that extent, coming to an understanding through human conversation is no different from the understanding that occurs between animals. But human language must be thought of as a special and unique life process since, in linguistic communication, "world" is disclosed. Reaching an understanding in language places a subject matter before those communicating like a disputed object set between them. Thus the world is the common ground, trodden by none and recognized by all, uniting all who talk to one another. This understanding of the subject matter must take the form of language. It is not that the understanding is subsequ-

ently put into words; rather, the way understanding occurs, whether in the case of a text or a dialogue with another person who raises an issue with us, is the coming-into-language of the thing itself.<sup>47</sup> The language in which something comes to speak is not a possession at the disposal of one or the other of the interlocutors. Every conversation presupposes a common language, or better, creates a common language. Something is placed in the center, as the Greeks say, which the partners in dialogue share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one another. Hence reaching an understanding on the subject matter of a conversation necessarily means that a common language must first be worked out in the conversation. This is not an external matter of simply adjusting our tools; nor is it even right to say that the partners adapt themselves to one another but, rather, in a successful conversation they both come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were.<sup>48</sup>

Gadamer was particularly attentive to Schleiermacher's notion of the process of understanding as a dialogical relationship. For Schleiermacher, hermeneutics is the art of hearing. In the process of understanding happens the reconstruction of the speech act in order to disclose the meaning of the said: "Sinn der Rede." To convey a meaning, a speaker constructs a sentence, which, in turn, needs to be reconstructed by the receiver. However speaking and hearing happen simultaneously. We can speak of a dialogical event from face to face (*Reden und Zuhören geschehen dialogisch von Angesicht zu Angesicht*). The mysterious process of creating a meaning from words heard is the hermeneutic process.<sup>49</sup> In one of his last interviews Gadamer says: "For

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 370–371.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>49</sup> F.D.E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik und Kritik: Mit einem Anhang sprachphilosophischer Texte Schleiermachers*, ed. and introd. M. Frank, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1977.

me, conversation is the essential thing in life. We have to always speak to SOMEONE. Nobody speaks, if one does not speak to SOMEONE. I can say this from my life experience; it is important that the other feels involved in a conversation. I visited Heidegger a few days before his death. After the meal we went into his study. He said: ‘Would you still say that language is only in a conversation?’ I have answered ‘yes.’ No yeah, he said. Thus was our conversation over.”<sup>50</sup>

There is something terribly distressing when the conversation is over. It is a defeat of hermeneutics; a defeat of hope and optimism that we can come to an understanding. As long as we let allow ourselves being to be led by a conversation, we can maintain a positive trajectory of being on a way to understanding. Even despite significant differences it remains a ray of hope that we become the persons we are capable of being.

### 5. HEIDEGGER’S QUESTION OF BEING AND GADAMER’S RADICALIZATION OF HEIDEGGER

Gadamer does not ask the question of Being. For him, the question of Being has become the question of understanding essential for the entire human experience. Understanding involves interpretation: To understand the meaning, that meaning must be expressed in our own language. Thus, understanding as such is an event (*Ereignis*) that happens to the interpreter above and beyond our will.

Hermeneutic philosophy as concerned with the possibility of understanding is situated within the horizon of praxis. By overcoming the naive objectivity of the traditional hermeneutics with its attempt to domesticate the correct understanding, hermeneutics recognizes that

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<sup>50</sup> “Ich verlange: das Gespräch ist das Wesentliche. Wir haben immer zu JEMANDEM zu sprechen. Niemand spricht, der nicht zu JEMANDEM spricht. Dies kann ich aus meiner Erfahrung sagen, es ist wichtig, daß der andere sich ins Gespräch verwickelt fühlt. Ich besuchte Heidegger wenige Tage vor seinem Tod. Nach dem Essen gingen wir in sein Zimmer. Er sagte: ‘Also Sie sagen, Sprache ist nur im Gespräch?’ ‘Ja,’ erwiderte ich. ‘Ja, ja,’ meinte er. Damit war unser Gespräch beendet.” <http://www.bildung-und-mensch.de/schoengeistiges.htm>.



it is impossible to grasp Being in an immediate intuition. Philosophical hermeneutics understands itself as philosophy, as the thinking of a beyond, beyond physical reality, hence μετὰ τὰ φυσικά. What hermeneutics is concerned with is the human self-understanding. Hermeneutics is a philosophy of finitude: Human finitude is the awareness of the limit, i.e., not the awareness of having a limit, but rather of being a limit.<sup>51</sup> In that sense, the condition of possibility of understanding is a “historically effective consciousness.” This reflective activity of consciousness is connected with the consciousness of Being. Being mindful of Heidegger’s critique of his hermeneutics, Gadamer holds that any reflection on a given pre-understanding brings before a human Dasein something that otherwise happens unnoticed. And this something, as Gadamer writes, “what I have called the *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein* is inescapably more being than consciousness, and Being is never fully manifest.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, hermeneutics is not a philosophy of consciousness. This form of consciousness has the structure of experience understood as experience of finitude and limit. Therefore, hermeneutic philosophy, which accentuates human finitude is a thinking of the limit. The dialectics of the limit is an expression of our awareness of our finitude. “What makes a limit a limit always also includes knowledge of what is on both sides of it. It is the dialectic of the limit to exist only by being superseded. Thus the quality of being-in-itself that distinguishes the thing-in-itself from its appearance is in-itself only for us. What appears in logical generality in the dialectic of the limit becomes specified in consciousness by the experience that the being-in-itself distinguished from consciousness is the other of itself, and is known in its truth when it is known as self, i.e., when it knows itself in full and absolute self-consciousness.”<sup>53</sup>

Philosophical hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of finitude. Philosophical recognition of finitude situates all human understanding in the

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. A. Wiercinski, *Thinking Limits: Language and the Event of Incarnation*, *Analecta Hermeneutica* 4(2012).

<sup>52</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, op. cit., 38.

<sup>53</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., 338.

horizon of human finitude and incompleteness. The historicity and linguality of understanding belong to ontological conditions of human existence and uncover the limitations of the philosophical concept of experience. Philosophical hermeneutics limits the possibility of achieving a definite knowledge of the world. With Gadamer we can say that “there is no claim of definitive knowledge, with the exception of one: The acknowledgment of the finitude of human being in itself.”<sup>54</sup> Experiencing the finitude, we understand ourselves rooted in the (un)realizable future-to-come. We are in need of wisdom, clear conviction, and vision, always hoping for the impossible understanding and courageously dealing with all those feelings that no one could cope with.

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<sup>54</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *The Science of the Life-World*, *Analecta Husserliana* 2(1972), 185.

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