*understanding*

# Hermeneutics

Lawrence K. Schmidt



*understanding* **hermeneutics**

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*understanding* **hermeneutics**

**Lawrence K. Schmidt**

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*For Kassandra Reuss-Schmidt*

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# Abbreviations and references

CU Jürgen Habermas, "The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality", in *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur*, Gayle Ormiston & Alan Schrift (eds), 245–72 (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990).

DD Diane Michelfelder & Richard Palmer (eds), *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer–Derrida Encounter* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989).

DL Martin Heidegger, "A Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer", in *On the Way to Language*, Peter D. Hertz (trans.), 1–56 (New York: HarperCollins, 1971).

GH Theodore Kisiel, *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

HC Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*, Andrew Bowie (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

HF Martin Heidegger, *Ontology: Hermeneutics of Facticity*, John van Buren (trans.) (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).

LH Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism", in *Basic Writings*, 2nd rev. and expanded edn, David F. Krell (ed.), 213–66 (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

IT Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

HFD Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation", in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*., John B. Thompson (trans.), 75–88 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991).

R Jürgen Habermas, "A Review of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*", in *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur*, Gayle Ormiston & Alan Schrift (eds), 213–44 (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990).

RC Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Reply to My Critics", in *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur*, Gayle Ormiston & Alan Schrift (eds), 273–97 (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990).

SF Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection", in *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, Brice Wachterhauser (ed.), 277–99 (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1986).

SSP Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", in *Writing and Difference*, Alan Bass (trans.), 278–94 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

SW Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Works*, 6 vols, Rudolf Makkreel & Frithjof Rodi (eds) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989– ).

SW1 Dilthey, *Selected Works Volume 1: Introduction to the Human Sciences* (1991).

SW3 Dilthey, *Selected Works Volume 3: The Foundation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* (2002).

SW4 Dilthey, *Selected Works Volume 4: Hermeneutics and the Study of History* (1996).

SZ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Joan Stambaugh (trans.) (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996). The page references are to the German text, *Sein und Zeit*, and appear in the margins of this translation.

TCA Jürgen Habermas, *A Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, Thomas McCarthy (trans.) (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984).

TH Paul Ricouer, "The Task of Hermeneutics", in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, John B. Thompson (trans.), 53–74 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991).

TM Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. edn, Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (trans.) (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

VI E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967).

W Martin Heidegger, "Words", in *On the Way to Language*, Joan Stambaugh (trans.), 139–58 (New York: HarperCollins, 1971).

WL Martin Heidegger, "The Way to Language", in *Basic Writings*, 2nd rev. and expanded edn, David F. Krell (ed.), 393–426 (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

# introduction

## What is hermeneutics?

When someone asks me what hermeneutics means, I usually just say that it means interpretation. Sometimes I continue by adding that hermeneutics concerns theories for correctly interpreting texts. "Hermeneutics" and "interpretation" are derived from the same Greek word. While "hermeneutics" is not a common word in English, "interpretation" is. We are well aware that there are interpreters and interpretations in many fields of study. One interprets novels, poems, plays and movies. One interprets the Bible, the Torah, the Koran, the Tao Te Ching and the Brahmasutra. Should one interpret these texts? Can one do anything but interpret them? One interprets the law. The Supreme Court is supposed to interpret the Constitution of the United States. An actor interprets the role she has to portray. A conductor interprets a piece of music. We are also well aware of different theories of interpretation. Aristotle's *Poetics* tells us how to interpret Greek tragedy; he even states some rules. Literary criticism has developed many theories for interpreting literary texts. It would seem we know more about hermeneutics than we thought.

Do natural scientists interpret nature or do they explain it? Do they interpret the data collected from experiments? Do you interpret or just understand the motives of your best friend? Do you interpret a sculpture and, if so, how do you go about that? Is there only one correct interpretation of that sculpture or can there be several? Consider *Hamlet*; are there one or several correct interpretations? When you see a stop sign and stop, is that an interpretation? What if you drove through without stopping? Is that an interpretation? Is Pythagoras' theorem an interpretation?

We want to understand what hermeneutics means in contemporary continental philosophy. Contemporary analytic philosophy also discusses language, meaning and understanding texts; however, that analysis would require a separate book. The philosophical meaning of hermeneutics today is primarily determined by Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method*, which was originally to be entitled *Fundamentals of Philosophical Hermeneutics*. The publisher thought that "hermeneutics" was not known well enough for that word to be in the title, so the other title was chosen. For Gadamer hermeneutics is the philosophical theory of knowledge that claims all cases of understanding necessarily involve both interpretation and application.

What sorts of questions are addressed by hermeneutics? First, we can ask about the range of hermeneutics. It would appear that stop signs do not require interpretation. Either you know what it means when you see one, or you do not. The same is true for Pythagoras' theorem. Gravity is not an interpretation of nature but a law or, more accurately, a well-confirmed hypothesis that could be modified if the evidence calls for it. Scientific hypotheses do not seem to be interpretations in the sense that there are several interpretations of *Hamlet*. If you said to me "Watch out, a rattlesnake!", do I need to interpret what you said or do I just jump back? If we were hiking in the Grand Canyon, I would jump; if you said this to me in a restaurant in Paris, maybe I would begin to interpret, and I would surely stare at you. Is it only difficult passages in important texts that require careful interpretation? In the tradition, this is where hermeneutic rules of interpretation were first discussed. What exactly does Hegel mean in the introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* where he speaks of "a determinate negation"? As we shall discover, Friedrich Schleiermacher argues that hermeneutics is required in all cases of understanding spoken or written language. Gadamer goes even further (as just mentioned) to argue that any case of understanding anything necessarily involves interpretation.

We can ask when hermeneutics is required. Do we need to interpret and use the rules of interpretation only when something does not make sense, such as a rattlesnake in the Paris restaurant? It would seem so. In a student paper I read the sentence "Aristotle's image of the cave makes no sense". Do I need to interpret because this is a false statement? Or do I just see that the student has confused Plato and Aristotle? Is hermeneutics required only when one finds an apparent contradiction? Rudolf Carnap found several confusions, if not contradictions, in Heidegger's essay "What is Metaphysics?" Should he interpret, or is Heidegger just wrong? If I do not understand Pythagoras' theorem,

do I need an interpretation or a proof? Traditionally hermeneutics, as a set of rules for interpretation, has been used when a passage does not make sense. But, how do we know that it makes no sense? We must have already understood something in order to see a problem. On the other hand, perhaps the passage just does not make sense and any attempt to interpret it so that it would make sense would itself be a misinterpretation.

How does interpretation occur? What must the interpreter know and do in order to understand? For the moment let us limit hermeneutics to language. I read, "Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself." There is a problem. How can someone unfold himself, assuming that we have understood that it is a person being addressed? Only what is folded – such as a napkin – can be unfolded. Is the person bent over in a strange manner? A quick check of the dictionary reveals that "unfold" can also mean disclose. But still we do not usually say this about people. But, of course, it is Shakespeare (*Hamlet*, I.i.2) and some words were used differently in the sixteenth century. Hence the interpreter must understand the language as it was used when the text was written. A dictionary, editor or scholar may help. Today we would write "Stop and identify yourself". The interpreter must know the language as it was used at the time of the writing. What happens when there is no dictionary to help? Could one determine the correct meaning from the context? This seems possible to some extent. What belongs to this context? There is the rest of the text. From the context of the line from *Hamlet*, we understand that one guard is talking to another. The context could include other works by that author or other texts of the same genre from the same time. It could also include other texts on the same subject. If there is a difference between the language of the author and the language of the interpreter, is translation a model for how hermeneutics occurs? The translator must know both languages, but if the interpreter knows both languages, then she can just read the text in the author's language and does not need to "translate" it into her own language.

Is hermeneutics an ability, an art, a methodology or a science? Wilhelm Dilthey, as we shall see, thinks the best interpreters are geniuses and the rules of interpretation are discovered by observing their work. Nevertheless, these rules do allow for the development of a methodology. Schleiermacher thinks that some people have a talent to understand languages and are best suited to work on the grammatical, that is the linguistic, side of hermeneutics; others have a talent for understanding people and they can work on discovering the author's intention and his pattern of thought. However, if interpretation is required in all

understanding, then everyone must have this ability since we usually understand each other. Does this mean hermeneutics is something we acquire when we learn a language?

It seems that the type of text to be interpreted also conditions the interpretation. To correctly interpret the Bible, at least for a person of faith, would mean to presuppose that what it says is the absolute truth. What would appear to be immoral must be read in a different manner, perhaps as a warning about how depraved human beings can be. A description of a landscape should be accurate. If there seems to be a problem, one could visit the place. This seems sensible in a historical account, but would it be sensible in a lyric poem? If a poem or a philosophical essay just does not make sense, is it bad writing or are we bad readers, or both? In hermeneutics we shall find the principle of charity or good will. This principle claims that one should at first accept that what is written does make sense. If there appears to be confusion, the interpreter must work to clear it up. This would seem sensible if one were reading a great philosopher or poet. Should we use this principle in all cases? Suppose you wrote to me from the Paris restaurant saying that you saw a rattlesnake. Should I be charitable and accept this implausibility? Perhaps. Suppose I know the restaurant is decorated with objects from the Wild West. I would interpret that you meant that you saw a stuffed rattlesnake.

In our discussion of hermeneutics we shall encounter "the hermeneutic circle", a phrase meaning that the parts can only be understood from an understanding of the whole, but that the whole can only be understood from an understanding of the parts. It seems that neither process can then get started. One example of this relationship is where the parts are the words of a sentence and the whole is the sentence itself. Certainly if you do not understand an important word in a sentence you will not understand the sentence. Conversely, if you did not understand the whole sentence, as in the *Hamlet* example, then you would not have understood the word "unfold" correctly. The hermeneutic circle seems to present a problem. On the other hand, most of the time we just read and there is no problem. Words are understood and the sentence falls into place. Is the hermeneutic circle just involved in complicated cases, a lyric poem or a difficult passage in Hegel's *Phenomenology*? As we shall see, Schleiermacher will argue that we can break the circle by first obtaining a general impression of the whole in a preliminary reading, and then by moving back and forth from part to whole and back to the part until everything fits together. Heidegger says that the circle cannot be avoided, but must be entered in the correct manner.

What is the aim of hermeneutics? Clearly we want to understand correctly. Many argue that the author's intention is the criterion for correct understanding. You tell me "It's hot outside!" I understand you when I understand what you intended by saying this. Maybe your intention was just to state the fact that it is hot rather than warm outside. Or was your intention to tell me that it is hot and therefore uncomfortable outside? Or did you intend that I should turn on the air-conditioning? Whatever the case may be, it seems that I have correctly understood you when I have understood what you intended by those words. The poet intended that I understand a lot more then just his description of the journey, so I do not understand the poem until I have grasped all that the poet intended. Is this the case only with great writers? What about failed intentions? The student intended to write a good paper, but did not: he mixed up Plato and Aristotle. The criterion would seem to be what is written and not what is intended. But language changes and hence what is written may not mean to me what it meant when it was written. Therefore, the criterion is what the contemporary audience would understand. But audiences are just as prone to mistakes as are authors. Perhaps your paper was better than I thought. The audience just did not understand the play; it was too avant-garde. So, does language itself say what it means? Schleiermacher asserts that the aim is to understand the author better than he understood himself, since we, as interpreters, can come to know of hidden or unconscious motivations. Are these unconscious motivations somehow there in the written language of the text?

Is there one correct interpretation or can there be many? There are many interpretations of *Hamlet*. We would like to say that some are clearly better then others, but is there just one correct one? Perhaps not, but should there be one ideally? Why should there be only one? Why would it not be better for there to be several equally correct interpretations? A piece of music may be performed, that is interpreted, in different ways. In fact, it seems that it is never performed in exactly the same way. Does this mean that only one performance is the correct interpretation? We are prone to say that the law of gravity refers to just that single phenomenon; consequently there is just one correct interpretation or law, even if we do not have it now. What about a theory of knowledge? Is there just one correct one? Is there one correct hermeneutics? Perhaps the question about correct interpretation is misguided from the beginning, a pseudo-question. In our discussion of hermeneutics we shall discover that many of the questions about correct interpretation depend on how language itself is understood. This also

would seem to depend on a theory of understanding or a theory about what knowledge itself is.

To begin our discussion of hermeneutics let us return to the word itself. It is not a common word. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "hermeneutics" entered the English language in 1737 in the second edition of Daniel Waterland's *Review of the Doctrine of the Eucharist*. A century earlier the German Johann Dannhauer coined the Latin word "*hermeneutica*". "Hermeneutics" is a modified transliteration of the Greek verb "*hermeneuein*", which means to express aloud, to explain or interpret and to translate. The word "hermeneutics" used to be related etymologically to the god Hermes, who expressed the wishes of the gods to human beings, but this etymological connection is questioned today. This remains a good heuristic device. The Latin translation of the Greek word is "*interpretatio*", which, of course, is the root of the English "interpretation". Therefore in general hermeneutics does mean interpretation.

Hermeneutics in the very general sense of interpretation has probably existed since human beings began to speak. With writing, mistakes would also be made, if just in the mechanics of writing. As language developed and could say more, interpretations were probably also required more often. Since ancient times theories of interpretation developed in several specific disciplines. Legal hermeneutics concerned the correct interpretation of law and its codification to prevent misinterpretations. Biblical hermeneutics developed rules for interpreting the Bible correctly. In the Renaissance philological hermeneutics grew and concentrated on interpreting the classics.

We shall commence our discussion of hermeneutics with Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), since he understood himself as the first to unite the various discipline-specific hermeneutic theories into a universal hermeneutics. For Schleiermacher hermeneutics is the art of understanding spoken and written language. The strict practice of hermeneutics assumes that misunderstanding usually occurs, hence interpretation is always required. Since any expression in language is related to the totality of language and to the thinking of the author, he divides hermeneutics into two practices. Grammatical interpretation concerns understanding the language used by the author. It uses the grammatical and semantic rules of that language. It pertains to the meaning of words, as in our example from *Hamlet*. Technical or psychological interpretation concerns the thinking of the author, how the author develops his thoughts, and the form in which these reach expression. Psychological interpretation would be able to explain why

Shakespeare chose "unfold" and what he intended to accomplish by that choice. Grammatical and psychological interpretation depend on each other to complete the task of interpreting. The aim is to reconstruct the creative process of the author, discover the author's intended meaning and perhaps to understand the author better than he understood himself.

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) knows about hermeneutics from his careful study of Schleiermacher. However, his central project is to formulate a unique methodology for the human sciences since he believes that the natural scientific method is inappropriate for the human sciences. He argues that understanding is the method for the human sciences while causal explanation belongs to the natural sciences. Dilthey is important for our discussion since his analysis of understanding incorporates several elements from Schleiermacher's hermeneutics and his theory of understanding influences the further development of hermeneutics in Heidegger. Human beings, unlike physical objects, have an inner mental and emotional life. However, we cannot observe another's inner life directly but must gain access to it through its empirical manifestations. Methodological understanding is the process by which we gain access to and understand the manifestations of other people's lives, contemporary and historical. Since language is the most complete expression of another's inner life, hermeneutics as interpretive understanding of linguistic expressions models the general process of understanding in the human sciences. We shall carefully examine Dilthey's account of how we can understand another.

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) combines Husserl's method of phenomenological research with aspects of Dilthey's theory of understanding life – among many other important influences from thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Meister Eckhard, Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. Phenomenological research means carefully to describe our experience without making judgements about what the experience implies. Heidegger maintains that one must first understand the meaning of being and particularly the meaning of the being of human beings before one can discuss our knowledge of entities. Therefore philosophy must commence with a careful description of how human beings are in actual life. The description is phenomenological, and the examination is hermeneutic since it is the interpretive self-understanding we have of ourselves in life. This analysis culminates in *Being and Time*, one of the most significant philosophical works of the twentieth century. We shall concentrate on the role of hermeneutics and his description of understanding in *Being and Time*. Shortly after its publication,

Heidegger realizes that *Being and Time* cannot be completed since it had proceeded too far and too early. Heidegger rethinks his position by stepping back to a more original situation from which thinking must begin. In doing so Heidegger drops the term "hermeneutics". Language and poetry become more important in his thinking, and we shall ask to what extent hermeneutics is still part of Heidegger's thinking even if the term is not mentioned.

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) is primarily responsible for our thinking about hermeneutics today in contemporary philosophy for three reasons. First, Heidegger had dropped the term in his later thinking. Secondly, Sartre, who championed existentialism, which he developed in part from Heidegger's *Being and Time*, did not incorporate hermeneutics. Thirdly, Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, specifically develops Heidegger's analysis of understanding from *Being and Time* in his major work *Truth and Method*, calling his theory philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer provocatively names the fore-structures of understanding, which Heidegger identified, "prejudices". In his usage, however, prejudices are not just wrong; there are also positive prejudices that lead to correct understanding. We inherit our prejudices from our tradition. The epistemological task is to discover those positive prejudices. Understanding is necessarily hermeneutic understanding since one cannot escape the hermeneutic circle, as Heidegger had argued. Understanding occurs as a fusion of the so-called past horizon of the text with the present horizon of the one who understands. The central problem of hermeneutics, the necessary task of application, concerns how the text is brought to speak in the interpreter's now expanded horizon. Understanding is like a conversation where the interpreter must listen to and respect the views of the other person. In this conversation, where various positions are examined correct understanding is achieved when one position is agreed on by all. To explain how this happens, Gadamer must investigate the ontological status of language. He argues that "Being that can be understood is language". Language in its speculative being has the ability to shine forth and convince the conversation partners of its truthfulness. Gadamer concludes that hermeneutic understanding can reveal and guarantee truths that the scientific method cannot.

The final chapter considers four objections to Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. E. D. Hirsch Jr. maintains that validity in interpretation can be achieved by following traditional philological hermeneutics. He disagrees with Gadamer's claims that understanding necessarily involves prejudices and that one cannot escape the hermeneutic circle. The criterion for meaning is the author's intention. The significance of

a text must be distinguished from its meaning, but Gadamer conflates them, which causes problems for his theory. Jürgen Habermas argues that Gadamer underestimates the power of rational thought. Reason can discover the genesis of an inherited prejudice thereby making it transparent. If it is illegitimate the interpreter can criticize it. In this manner reason is able to break the hermeneutic circle, and hence a critique of ideology is possible. Because Gadamer does not acknowledge this possibility, philosophical hermeneutics is unable to avoid inherited ideologies. Paul Ricoeur proposes that Gadamer is only partly correct and must incorporate methodological explanation into his hermeneutics if he is to avoid relativism. Only a dialectic of explanation and understanding can satisfy the requirements for valid understanding. Jacques Derrida claims that Gadamer is still caught in the language and theory of metaphysics, since he states that the correct interpretation of a text is experienced in the hermeneutic event of truth. Derrida maintains that language only refers to language and not to something transcendentally signified. We conclude that hermeneutics in one form or another will continue as long as human beings use language to communicate with each other. Because Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics articulates one of the fundamental positions in hermeneutics, it will remain an important voice in the future hermeneutic conversation.

# one

# Schleiermacher's universal hermeneutics

Schleiermacher understands himself as proposing a new general or universal hermeneutics that would unite and support the particular disciplines of legal, biblical and philological hermeneutics. He faults his predecessors, Friedrich Ast and Friedrich A. Wolf, for limiting hermeneutics to the study of classical languages. Even if we now think that Schleiermacher was not the first to develop a universal theory, Schleiermacher himself and the tradition that followed have considered his hermeneutics to be the first universal theory. Schleiermacher declares, "Hermeneutics as the art of understanding does not yet exist in a general manner, there are instead only several forms of specific hermeneutics" (HC: 5). The particular rules of interpretation employed in the different specific hermeneutic theories require justification in a universal theory of interpretation.

## The art of understanding

Hermeneutics is the art of understanding. By "art" Schleiermacher does not mean that hermeneutics is merely a subjective, creative process. Rather, at that time "art" included the sense of knowing how to do something, which is the shared meaning in the terms "technical arts" and "fine arts". As an art hermeneutics includes methodological rules but their application is not rule-bound, as would be the case in a mechanical procedure. Schleiermacher states: "Every single language could perhaps be learned via rules, and what can be learned in this way

*Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher*

| | |
|---|---|
| 1768 | born on 21 November in Breslau, Silesia (now Poland) |
| 1785 | attends Moravian seminary at Barby |
| 1787 | enters the University of Halle studying theology and Kant |
| 1790 | passes the theological exams in Berlin |
| 1790–93 | tutor in East Prussia |
| 1794 | becomes an assistant pastor in Landsberg |
| 1796 | becomes Pastor of Charite near Berlin and participates in the Romantic circle in Berlin |
| 1799 | publishes *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* |
| 1804 | becomes the university preacher and professor of theology at the University of Halle |
| 1804–28 | publishes a German translation of Plato's works |
| 1809 | becomes the preacher for the Holy Trinity Church in Berlin |
| 1810 | also becomes professor of theology at the new University of Berlin, which he helps Wilhelm von Humboldt found |
| 1821–22 | publishes *The Christian Faith* |
| 1834 | dies on 6 February in Berlin |

is mechanism. Art is that for which there admittedly are rules. But the combinatory application of these rules cannot in turn be rule-bound" (HC: 229). Schleiermacher contrasts hermeneutics as the art of understanding with the art of speaking, which is rhetoric and deals with the externalization of thought. Speaking moves from the inner thought to its external expression in language, while hermeneutics moves from the external expression back to the thinking as the meaning of that expression. "No one can think without words. Without words the thought is not yet completed and clear" (HC: 8).

Hermeneutics is the art of understanding, so the goal of hermeneutic practice is to understand correctly what has been expressed by another, especially in written form. "Every utterance has a dual relationship, to the totality of language and to the whole thought of its originator" (*ibid*.). To say or write something presupposes that particular language. Clear thoughts occur, as Schleiermacher says, when the appropriate words have been discovered. Since language communicates it must be common to the speaker and listener. Words have their meaning in relation to the other words of that language. There is not just one meaning for a word that is represented by only one object. "Language is infinite because each element is determinable in a particular manner via the rest of the elements" (HC: 11). Because of this relatedness every utterance refers at least indirectly to all the other words and so to the totality of that language at that time. Although the speaker's language is

determined before his thinking, new thoughts can be expressed by the unique manner in which the speaker uses this common language. For some reason the speaker tries to communicate this particular thought, which is related to his other thoughts. This act of speaking occurs within the life of the speaker and hence indirectly relates to an individual's life, which is itself part of a society at a particular time. "Every language user can only be understood via their nationality and their era" (HC: 9).

Hermeneutics as understanding linguistic expressions could be thought to include all disciplines, but Schleiermacher restricts the scope of hermeneutics. We already noted that rhetoric concerns the expression of thoughts in language, whereas hermeneutics is the reverse process of discovering the thoughts behind an expression. Criticism, which Schleiermacher also discusses, is concerned with judgements about the authenticity of a part of a text or a text. Clearly hermeneutics and criticism depend on each other, for one must have the correct text in order to understand and explain completely what the author meant, but in order to judge a text's authenticity, one must have first understood it. Schleiermacher grants priority to the hermeneutic endeavour since some understanding of a text must have occurred before any judgement concerning authenticity can be made. Explication, as the presentation and justification of one's understanding, is just the expression of what one has hermeneutically understood.

Hermeneutics as the art of understanding utterances in their dual aspects has, therefore, two parts: the grammatical, which interprets the utterance "as derived from language", and the technical or psychological, which interprets the utterance "as a fact in the thinker" (HC: 8). Schleiermacher refers to this second part with both terms, "technical" and "psychological", but appears to have decided on "psychological" in the end, which will be used here. Hermeneutics requires both grammatical and psychological interpretation. Schleiermacher maintains it would be wrong in general to place the psychological over the grammatical; rather, the priority depends on the aim of the interpreter. If one is interested primarily in language as the means by which an individual communicates his thoughts, then the psychological will be more important. Whereas if one is interested in language as it determines the thinking of individuals at a particular time, then the grammatical side will predominate. However, both are always required to some degree, for to use just grammatical interpretation would imply complete knowledge of the language, whereas to use only the psychological would imply complete knowledge of the person, and neither of these is possible. Therefore, "one must move from one to the other, and no

rules can be given for how this is to be done" (HC: 11). That is why hermeneutics is an art.

Schleiermacher distinguishes a lax practice of hermeneutics from a strict practice. The lax practice, which had previously been the main one, assumes that understanding usually succeeds and hermeneutics is required only in difficult cases in order to avoid misunderstanding. Universal hermeneutics is the strict practice and "assumes that misunderstanding results as a matter of course" (HC: 22). Misunderstanding occurs because of hastiness or prejudice. Prejudice, Schleiermacher notes, is one's preference for one's own perspective and therefore one misreads what the author meant by adding something not intended or leaving something out. Although misunderstanding is assumed in the strict practice of hermeneutics, there is a continuum between a minimum and maximum need for hermeneutics. The minimum need is required in everyday conversations, for example about the weather or business dealings. The maximum need can occur in both aspects of an utterance. Grammatical interpretation is required in "the most productive and least repetitious, the classical", while psychological interpretation is needed in "the most individual and least common, the original" (HC: 13). Both types of interpretation are required in the work of genius.

The goal of hermeneutics is "to understand the utterance at first just as well and then better than its author" (HC: 23). One understands an author better by making explicit what is unconscious in the author's creative process. In order to begin the hermeneutic process one must endeavour to place oneself objectively and subjectively in the position of the author, objectively by learning the language as the author possessed it, and subjectively by learning about the author's life and thinking. However, to place oneself completely in the position of the author requires the completion of the interpretation.

Hermeneutics therefore "depends on the talent for language and the talent for knowledge of individual people" (HC: 11). On the grammatical side one needs a talent for interpreting language in the sense of its possibilities of expression, for example its analogies and metaphors. Schleiermacher notes that there are two sides to this talent that rarely coincide in one person. One is the extensive talent for comparing different languages; the other is the intensive talent for penetrating into the interior of one's own language. Similarly the talent for understanding others has both aspects. The extensive talent concerns understanding the individuality of one person through comparison to others, and so, to be able to reconstruct the "way of behaving of other people" (HC:

**KEY POINT**

Hermeneutics is the art of understanding what is expressed in written or spoken language. Every expression in language has a dual relationship to the totality of that language and to the whole thinking of the author, so hermeneutics has two interconnected parts, the grammatical and the psychological. Strict hermeneutic practice presupposes that misunderstanding usually occurs so that interpretation is always required. The goal of hermeneutics is to reconstruct the creative process of the author and even to understand him better than he understood himself.

13). The intensive talent concerns the "individual meaning of a person and of their particularities in relation to the concept of a human being" (*ibid*.).

Hermeneutics is the art of understanding what another means by her expressions in language. One needs to know about the language the author used: the grammatical side. One also needs to understand how the author thinks with reference to her particular culture and historical time: the psychological side. The goal of hermeneutics is to be able to reconstruct how the author's use of language is able to present her ideas. To interpret well requires a talent for understanding both the language and the individuality of the author.

### The hermeneutic circle

Since expressions in language relate to the totality of that language at that time and to the whole thinking of the author as embedded in the history of an era, there exists an interdependence of whole and part, which is known as the hermeneutic circle. "Complete knowledge is always in this apparent circle, that each particular can only be understood via the general, of which it is a part, and vice versa" (HC: 24). This whole–part interdependence exists on several levels. We have already mentioned the hermeneutic circle in relation to understanding a whole sentence made up by its parts, the words. In this case the hermeneutic circle implies that one cannot understand the whole sentence until one has understood the parts, but one cannot understand the parts, a word's specific meaning, until one has understood the whole sentence. At the more general level of one text, the hermeneutic circle means: a specific text, as the whole, can only be understood from an understanding of the parts, the sentences, but the meaning of the sentences "can only be understood from out of the whole" (HC: 27). At a still more general

level the circle concerns an author's work, as a part, in relation to the whole of his culture. In order to understand an author's writings, one must understand the language and history of his time, but in order to understand that language and history, one needs to have understood the writings of that time, including the author's. It would appear that understanding cannot get started at any level without making some, possibly prejudicial, presupposition about the meaning of either the parts or the whole.

However, Schleiermacher asserts that the hermeneutic circle is only an "apparent circle", since there is a way to break this interdependence. One must begin with a "cursory reading to get an overview of the whole" and "for this provisional understanding the knowledge of the particular that results from the general knowledge of the language is sufficient" (*ibid.*). The initial overview allows the central ideas and the direction of the text to be determined and then in subsequent readings the specific ideas and their development can be coordinated with the main ones. This results in a general methodological rule: one must begin the hermeneutic task with a general overview, and then return to the grammatical and psychological interpretation of the parts. If both interpretations agree, then one can proceed to the next part; if they disagree, one needs to discover the source of the disagreement.

If you have insufficient knowledge of a language, for example a foreign language you do not know or barely know, you could not begin the process of interpretation. This is like being caught in the interdependency of the hermeneutic circle. However, with a better understanding of that language, if not yet proficiency, you could begin to decipher the text. This stage would be analogous to the first general reading of a text and you could begin to escape the hermeneutic circle. Schleiermacher's point is that even if you are very proficient, you cannot just read and really understand the text right away, since the strict practice of hermeneutics assumes misunderstanding. You must start with a general overview and then begin again by interpreting each of the parts until you can reconstruct the whole text in its genesis, structure and meaning.

**KEY POINT**

The hermeneutic circle states that one cannot understand the whole until one has understood the parts, but that one cannot understand the parts until one has understood the whole. Schleiermacher breaks the impasse of the hermeneutic circle because with sufficient knowledge of the language one can and must first conduct a cursory reading to get an overview of the whole. This reading then allows for the detailed interpretation of the parts.

### Grammatical interpretation

As we have noted, the aim of hermeneutics is to reconstruct the utterance of the author. On the grammatical side one must understand the author's language. Hence Schleiermacher's first canon for grammatical interpretation states: "Everything in a given utterance which requires a more precise determination may only be determined from the language area which is common to the author and his original audience" (HC: 30). Languages change throughout time. Words take on new meanings and lose meanings. Thoughts are expressed in different ways. We broadly distinguish among contemporary English, Middle English and Old English. To understand Chaucer we must either learn Middle English or accept a translation, which means that the translator has already made many determinations for us on the grammatical side. The situation is more complex when the author writes in a foreign language. Before interpretation can even begin one must know enough of the language used by the author to gain the first general overview that precedes all grammatical interpretation.

Since speaking or writing is the author's attempt to communicate to her audience, a common use of language is presupposed. The first canon says that in order to determine what the author means by a statement it must be read from the position of that shared use of language. To interpret a statement from the contemporary understanding of language, when that statement comes from a previous use of language, leads to misunderstandings. When Democritus speaks of atoms, we would misunderstand if we thought of electrons, protons and neutrons. Schleiermacher maintains that the author's place in history, his education, his occupation and even his dialect may play a role in the determination of his language. Since the author also intends to communicate, the language he employs must also be the language of the intended audience. This is not to say that an author cannot create something new in language. Because of the shared meanings, a new metaphor, for example, can be understood by the reader from its context.

Schleiermacher remarks that although some people distinguish the meaning of a word, the sense of a proposition and the significance of a proposition in its context, this does not strictly agree with language use. He suggests that in the case of an epigram or gnomic expression the distinction between sense and significance would collapse. He proposes that one should think in terms of the more indeterminate and the more determinate expressions, where the "move from the more indeterminate to the determinate is an endless task in every process of explication"

(HC: 31). Here the relation of the hermeneutic circle comes into play. Every part of an utterance alone is indeterminate as to its meaning just as the single sentence torn from its context is indeterminate. Only from the context of the whole may the meaning of the parts be understood and vice versa.

The second canon for grammatical interpretation is: "The sense of every word in a given location must be determined according to its being-together with those that surround it" (HC: 44). Since most words have multiple meanings, the specific meaning intended by the author can only be discovered by examining the context in which it appears. For example, the word "plastic" can mean malleable or the synthetic substance. Although the phrase "plastic toy" would today probably mean a toy made of that synthetic material, it could mean a toy that could be shaped as in the sentence: "The plastic toy became a dragon in the child's hands." The interpreter moves back and forth between the canon concerning the specific language and the one about the meaning of words. One moves from the first to the second when one understands that each word has its own language area. For example, "plastic" today is more likely to refer to the material whereas two centuries ago it would mean something malleable. On the other hand, one moves from the second to the first when the meaning of a passage is not clear and one examines similar passages by that author or even other texts of that particular language area.

When problems arise for the interpreter a dictionary can help in suggesting possible meanings for a word from the author's language. It can also provide the syntax of the language at that time. Both could help the interpreter to avoid a mistake. On the other hand, the author could also have made a mistake. For example, in reading a student's paper we find, "The philosophers theories contradicted each other". We see that there is a grammatical error concerning the possessive case, but cannot determine the correct interpretation without knowing from the context whether one or more philosophers are being discussed. Grammatical interpretation concerns all linguistic elements in an expression, including the grammatical rules and the meanings of words, and how

**KEY POINT**

Grammatical interpretation concerns the linguistic elements of a text. The first canon states that the determination of the meaning of a linguistic element must be made from the language shared by the author and his audience. The second canon states that the proper sense of a word must be determined from its context.

the elements of a sentence are connected to form a meaningful unit. Since we are relatively proficient language users, the grammatical side of interpretation usually causes little trouble. However, its importance can be seen if you try to understand a text in a language that you do not know very well.

### Psychological interpretation

Psychological interpretation is the complement of grammatical interpretation, and both are undertaken simultaneously in the process of interpretation. The task of psychological interpretation is "to understand every given structure of thoughts as a moment of the life of a particular person" (HC: 101). Psychological interpretation aims to reconstruct the author's thinking and the way these thoughts are expressed. As in grammatical interpretation, psychological interpretation involves the whole–part interdependence of the hermeneutic circle. The author's whole act of writing or communication must be understood from an understanding of the particular parts, the main and secondary thoughts and their order of presentation; while the understanding of the particular parts depends on an understanding of the whole. The same hermeneutic interdependence exists between the author, as part, and the era in which she lives, the whole. As grammatical interpretation presupposes the particular language the author uses, psychological interpretation presupposes a partial understanding of the times in which the author writes and the author's life. On the one hand, the interpreter needs to know the subject matter about which the author writes. Schleiermacher calls this "the object that by which the author is moved to the utterance" (HC: 90). On the other hand, one needs to know the established modes of presentation, the various genres used when the author was writing and the logical rules for connecting ideas. Both the genre and logical rules are limiting conditions for the creative act. This preliminary understanding allows the interpreter to understand the author as "he collaborates in the language" (HC: 91). The interpreter's aim is to discover an author's individuality, what he thought and what is new and creative in that work.

Following the universal hermeneutic rule, psychological interpretation begins with an overview, an initial reading of the text. One's preliminary knowledge permits an initial understanding of the main idea or subject matter and the particular style and genre of the work. Since one must discover the main idea and the particular style, psychological interpretation has two tasks. The purely psychological task concerns the

understanding of "the principle which moves the writer" and the technical task concerns the "basic characteristics of the composition" (HC: 90). Both aim to reveal the author's individuality. Schleiermacher identifies four major stages in general psychological interpretation, two of which belong to each task:

1. After the preliminary reading and with the knowledge that the interpreter has of the author's circumstances, the interpreter tries to discover the seminal decision that determines "the unity and real directions of the work" (HC: 105). This constitutes one of the two parts of the purely psychological interpretation. The interpreter must discover the central motivating idea that the author had and that generated his effort to write the text.
2. The interpreter identifies "the composition as the *objective* realisation of the work" (HC: 105–6). This is the part of technical interpretation having to do with the composition, genre and means of expression used by the author. The interpreter, for example, identifies the genre as a narrative.
3. The interpreter needs to understand the "meditation as genetic realisation of the same [work]" (HC: 106). This forms the second part of technical interpretation. By "meditation" Schleiermacher means how the author thinks about the topic of his work and organizes his thoughts. For example, the interpreter could discover that the author developed his ideas in a causal chain as opposed to a historical narrative.
4. Finally, the interpreter considers the "secondary thoughts as the continual influence of the whole of the life in which the author is located" (*ibid*.). This constitutes the second part of purely psychological interpretation.

Purely psychological interpretation considers the author as free and searches for "his circumstances as principles of his self-determination" (*ibid*.). Technical interpretation considers "the power of form which governs the author" (*ibid*.). In general the purely psychological interpretation aims to understand the freely chosen seminal idea that the author intends to express in his work. Technical interpretation concerns how the author creatively expresses this idea within the structures of genre. We shall briefly examine each type of interpretation.

The purely psychological interpretation primarily aims to understand the emergence of the author's thoughts "from the totality of life-moments of the individual" (HC: 104). The interpreter wants to understand the

genesis of the main and secondary thoughts of the author so that one can psychologically reconstruct the genesis of the work to be interpreted. These thoughts are to be understood from the individuality of the author. The first thing to do is to understand "the unity of the work as a fact in the life of its author" (HC: 107). Schleiermacher calls the generative thought that motivates the author to write the "seminal decision" (HC: 110). He distinguishes two different areas of enquiry: the circumstances of the author's decision and the meaning or value of this decision for the author's whole life. The interpreter is aided in purely psychological interpretation by two factors. First, human beings tend to think or connect ideas in similar ways following the shared rules of logic. The text will often provide clues. In a philosophic essay, for example, one would hope that the logical relationships among the ideas would be evident, whereas a poem would require more work. The interpreter must try to think as the author did. Secondly, the more the interpreter knows about the subject matter that the author is addressing, the more able he will be to recognize the pattern of thoughts the author had.

Technical interpretation is the second part of psychological interpretation and complements the purely psychological. The technical task concerns "how the text emerges in terms of content and form from the living seminal decision" (HC: 132). It aims to demonstrate how the text as a whole follows from this decision. The technical side includes two parts: the meditation and the composition. The meditation concerns how the author thinks about the topic of his work and organizes his thoughts, while the composition concerns how the author organizes and expresses his topic for a specific audience. "Each text has its particular genetic sequence and what is original in it is the order in which the individual thoughts are thought. But the order can perhaps be a different one when they are communicated" (*ibid.*). The first act of will or the seminal decision can be so lively as to contain the whole in its main outlines. In this case the composition is close to the meditation. On the other hand, the less thought out the first act of will is the greater the difference between the meditation and the composition. Using language the author creates what is unique to this work through the particular "extensions and contractions of the linguistic elements" (*ibid.*). In addition technical interpretation is concerned with the emergence of the composition and here the "general laws of order in thought are to be applied" (*ibid.*).

"Everything must be understood and explicated via his [the author's] thoughts" (HC: 135). On the grammatical side the thoughts of another are related to one's own since the language is shared. On the

**KEY POINT**

Psychological interpretation complements grammatical interpretation. Psychological interpretation aims to understand the thinking of the author and how his thoughts are expressed in the text, so there are two parts: the purely psychological and the technical. The purely psychological tries to discover the author's seminal decision that has motivated his thinking and writing. The technical attempts to understand how the author's thoughts are expressed in his composition. The overarching aim of psychological interpretation is understanding the individuality of the author as expressed in the text.

psychological side we are interested in understanding the thoughts of another as the product of the other so "we must free ourselves from ourselves" (*ibid.*). To do this we begin with the general overview, and then we must understand the inner process by observation, which is based on self-observation. The interpreter must himself be versed in composition and in thinking about the subject matter of the text. By comparison he can then recognize the differences in the author.

The main question for the technical task is: how can I "recognize from the second act, the composition, which lies in the text before me, how this act developed in the author, how he came to the content and form of his text" (*ibid.*)? The initial overview gives the main thought and essential divisions of thought as well as the form, for example whether it is poetry or prose. Concerning the composition the author could have completely developed and ordered all the elements in the text before writing. But usually this is not the case. So one must explicate what enters into the work during composition. Schleiermacher writes there is "no thought without words, but … we can have a thought without already having its fitting expression" (HC: 144). One understands the composition as a deed of the author. We realize that the ordering of a number of elements can change the meaning, where some are highlighted and others recede. Hence we need to understand the motivation for this ordering. Before considering how correct interpretation is possible, it is necessary to present briefly Schleiermacher's understanding of how language functions.

### Schleiermacher on language

Language, for Schleiermacher, is a shared system for designating by some set of signs the general images human beings create through their schematization of experience. In experience a particular organic impression,

that is, a sensation, generates a determinate particular image or picture. This particular is then schematized to produce the general or universal image to which a linguistic sign is attached. For Schleiermacher the process of representation is a continual "oscillation between the determinacy of the particular and the indeterminacy of the general image" (HC: 272). Schleiermacher basically adopts Kant's idea of schematization. For example, the set of sensations I have of a particular tree produce in me the particular mental image or picture of that tree. Using my imagination I generate an indeterminate general image, that is, a schema, of tree in general. This is the process of schematization. The general image is indeterminate because as I have more experiences of trees the general image may change. The word "tree" is attached by me and others in our shared language to this general image. Furthermore, the indeterminacy of the general image indicates the temporality or historical nature of language.

Schleiermacher uses a transcendental argument to justify this position. A transcendental argument begins with the transcendental question: what are the necessary conditions for even the possibility of X? If we know X to hold, then we know that the necessary condition must also hold. Since we have some knowledge and truth, Schleiermacher argues we must assume two things: first, that the general images we have "are identical to the innate concepts" (HC: 271) designated in language, for if they were not there could be no shared understanding or knowledge; secondly, that the schematization process moving from organic impressions to these general images must represent actual differences in actual being, for if they did not then there would be no truth since the concepts would not reflect reality.

However, this process of schematization is not perfect in human beings. Mistakes are made. While looking at a horse I might think it was a cow. This occurs, according to Schleiermacher, because either I do not have the organic impression completely or I have jumped to the general image without waiting for its proper constitution. How can one then verify the correctness of one's general image? This cannot be accomplished on the organic level for we cannot observe the internal mental process that generates the general image. The only way to check this process, according to Schleiermacher, is by an "exchange of consciousness" (HC: 272), and this is accomplished through language. The word associated with the general image allows it to be remembered. However, it then appears that one must assume that each individual person schematizes the same thing into the same general image in order for language to be a shared system of designation. Schleiermacher counters

**KEY POINT**

Language is a shared system of signs (words) that are attached to the indeterminate general image gained by the schematization of experience. Transcendental arguments demonstrate that these general images are identical to the innate concepts and that they represent actual differences in reality. The pragmatic success of language proves that everyone's schematization is similar enough to know we are talking about the same thing in the same way.

this intervention by arguing that the continual success in the use of language is sufficient to demonstrate the shared meaning of words even if the schematization process is not exactly the same. If the other and I use a word to refer to the same object and describe its actions in the same way, then the sceptical objection becomes "immaterial" (HC: 274).

On the other hand, language is also not perfect. There is no universal language that would guarantee a universal identity in the construction of thought. Each language changes with the passage of time. Errors occur not only in the individual case of schematization but may be shared so that language itself may contain these errors. We also observe changes in meaning in a particular language as well as the existence of many languages. The specific formation of a language, Schleiermacher says, depends on "the character of the people" (HC: 278). Concerning the root words of a language, the nouns and verbs, one group of people, and so their language, will emphasize the subjects while another will emphasize the objects, or one will subordinate actions to things while another will emphasize actions. The same occurs in logical differentiation within the classification of concepts. Languages also differ externally in terms of sounds and internally in terms of content. It might be that there could be only a difference in sound; think of several words for one, for example "one", "eins" or "uno". But Schleiermacher doubts this. He says, "But no word that bears a logical unity within itself corresponds to a word of another language" (HC: 275). This results not from a difference in intellectual functions in themselves among different people, for then there could be no truth. Rather, this difference must be ascribed to "an original difference of the organic impressions" (*ibid.*). In addition since thinking itself involves an organic function, each individual "has their place in the totality of being and their thinking represents being, but not separately from their place" (HC: 277). Their place locates them in history, speaking a particular language and within a particular culture. In order to overcome conflicts in ideas, we must come to understand that individual's place. "The demand is completely to know the individuality

of a people or of a single person" (*ibid.*). This, Schleiermacher says, can only be continually approximated.

### How hermeneutics is possible

We must now ask how the interpreter can reconstruct the author's creative process. As we have mentioned the interpreter must discover the author's seminal decision that motivates the creative process and constitutes its unity. We must also understand how the author developed his thinking about this subject matter. And we must consider how the author expressed his ideas in the text, that is, we must discover the author's creative and individual use of language and genre in his composition.

In discussing psychological interpretation Schleiermacher identifies the divinatory and comparative methods. "The *divinatory* method is the one in which one, so to speak, transforms oneself into the other person and tries to understand the individual element directly" (HC: 92). Through the divinatory method the interpreter would come to reconstruct what particular circumstances lead the author to his seminal decision as well as to his secondary ideas. It would also include on the technical side the individual way the author connected his ideas for presentation and his individual use of the chosen genre. The comparative method discovers the individuality of the author's work through a comparison with others. On the purely psychological side this would include a comparison of how other contemporaries thought of the chosen subject matter and on the technical side how they used the genre and expressed their thoughts. Schleiermacher does indicate how the divinatory method can work. In addition to being an individual, every person "has a receptivity for all other people" (HC: 93). This receptivity is based "on the fact that everyone carries a minimum of everyone else within themselves, and divination is consequently excited by comparison with oneself" (HC: 93). So, although one cannot actually place oneself in the thinking of the author, one can guess or intuit how the author thought by comparison to how one thinks oneself since human beings are similar. That is why Schleiermacher thinks it is important that the interpreter be versed in writing and thinking. "In general it is the case that the more someone has observed themselves and others in relation to the activity of thought, the more they also have hermeneutic talent for this side" (HC: 128).

Schleiermacher claims that the way to understand the thoughts of the author is to go back to the time of the author and her audience. He presents two cases. In one, "the thinking and connection of thoughts

is one and the same in each, then, if the language is the same, understanding results on its own accord" (HC: 101). Since the language is shared and each thinks in language the same way, then the meaning of the thoughts and their connections would be similar in each person because the schematization of experience is similar. You say "The downpour caused the pool to overflow." Because the schematization process is similar in each of us, I connect my thoughts as you connected yours and I understand what you mean. The question is what happens in more complex utterances. Although talent and study are required, Schleiermacher does not see a fundamental barrier to understanding.

The second case Schleiermacher presents is where the language is shared but the thinking is essentially different. Here understanding "is, it would appear, unachievable" (*ibid*.). However, Schleiermacher argues that it is not the case. In every case of understanding we must assume there is some sort of difference in the thinking between the speaker and listener, "but not one that cannot be overcome" (*ibid*.). Even in everyday conversations, he continues, we suppose a difference but in "wishing to understand we presuppose that the difference can be overcome" (*ibid*.). The argument is that since we do, in fact, understand each other most of the time, we are able to overcome this difference in thinking.

The interpreter is aided in psychological interpretation by several factors. The interpreter can know about the author's subject matter and the way one thinks about it. Schleiermacher asks us to imagine two travellers who write about their conceptions of what they experience together. If we know the subject matter they experience, for example, a landscape, then it is easier to understand the individual differences in their thinking. However, if we only had the two descriptions it would be difficult to separate the subjective impressions from the objective description. If there is a goal in the text that can be discovered, then interpretation is easier because then there is a specific linking of the different ideas to that goal. In an argumentative essay, for example, the author will explicitly link his ideas. In a play it may be more difficult, but if the interpreter has the main point or seminal decision, then one could link the author's choices of what scenes to portray.

Schleiermacher contrasts free-flowing thoughts from ones that are more determined, to the extreme where one thought determines the other with necessity. This process of association occurs in everyone, but is different in each person. The more freely the thoughts occur, the more like dreaming it is. This is the extreme and cannot be understood, "because it does not follow any law of content" (HC: 125). Schleiermacher implies that usually there is some sort of psychological connection among

thoughts. In trying to place oneself in the position of the author whose thoughts are freely flowing, one tries oneself to freely associate from one idea to another, and this could lead to the other idea that the author had. This reconstruction is possible, Schleiermacher argues, since although every thought is itself momentary, it leaves behind something on which the repeatability of the original moment depends (*ibid.*). If this were not the case, our experience of our lives would not be connected but merely momentary. This connection or flow of thoughts is retained in thinking. The interpreter can project by analogy the associations that the author might have had.

The better the interpreter knows the author, the easier it is to understand his train of thought. In some conversations the listener can develop the line of thought of the speaker before she has completed what she wanted to say. "Achieving this [exact knowledge of the individuality of the other person in the process of thought] is the essence of the hermeneutic task" (HC: 142). This can only be achieved indirectly depending on how much we know of the author external to his text. Schleiermacher says "we can infer from ourselves and our composition to the author and his composition. If we have complete knowledge of the author, so that we know him as we know ourself" (HC: 127), then we can try to understand the secondary thoughts and what the author did not think and what he rejected and why. If we do not have complete knowledge, we still can know this "via an analogy established between him and ourself, for which we have the elements in our knowledge of him" (*ibid.*). To the extent that we know what did not occur to the author, we can understand him better than he understands himself. "In general it is the case that the more someone has observed themselves and others in relation to the activity of thought, the more they also have hermeneutic talent for this side" (HC: 128).

**KEY POINT**

Hermeneutics is possible for two reasons. First, the process of schematization in language allows the interpreter to understand what the author means, especially in everyday language use. In more complex cases, the divinatory and comparative methods allow the interpreter to reconstruct the meaning of a text. To apply these methods the interpreter must know the language of the author and his intended audience, the life of the author and his times, as well as the subject matter discussed. The comparative method is used with the author's contemporaries and especially with oneself. The divinatory method is based on a similarity among human beings and argues by analogy and in comparison with oneself. Hermeneutics requires experience and talent on the part of the interpreter.

Hermeneutics is a possible, even if infinite, task. The interpreter can reconstruct what the author means since language permits the interpreter to know the approximate schematization experience that the author presents in language. In everyday language use we are so proficient that we do not notice this process of interpretation. In more complex cases the interpreter must use the comparative and divinatory methods. The interpreter can compare the author to other contemporaries to discover the individual style of the author and his particular meaning. The divinatory method is based on the similarity of human beings and through a comparison with herself the interpreter can discover how the author thought. The interpreter needs to know about the author and his times, the subject matter discussed and the language area of the text. Hermeneutics requires talent and experience.

We begin our discussion of hermeneutics in contemporary philosophy in the middle of the history of hermeneutics because Schleiermacher was understood by the tradition to be the first to develop a universal theory of hermeneutics and because his theory directly influences Dilthey, the next philosopher we shall discuss. Schleiermacher argues that hermeneutics is always required in understanding anything written or spoken. Since any linguistic expression refers to the totality of the language and the thinking of the author, hermeneutics has two interdependent branches: grammatical and psychological interpretation. After the initial reading the interpreter returns to the two branches of hermeneutics and uses the comparative and divinatory methods to reconstruct the genesis and meaning of the text. The schematization process of language guarantees that the interpreter can understand the meaning the author expresses. The tradition of interpretation that takes the author's intention or the original reader's response to be the criterion of correct interpretation develops from Schleiermacher's work. Dilthey accepted much of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, although his main focus is to develop a methodology for the human sciences called understanding, as opposed to causal explanation. We will notice the extent to which Dilthey bases his discussion of understanding on Schleiermacher's hermeneutics and carefully examine his account of how we understand others. Dilthey, as we shall see, may be said to broaden the scope of hermeneutics from linguistic expressions to all expressions of human beings within the human sciences.

### Key points

1. Hermeneutics is the universal art of understanding linguistic expressions and aims to reconstruct the creative process.
2. Hermeneutics is divided into grammatical and psychological interpretation and is always required since misunderstanding is presupposed.
3. The impasse of the hermeneutic circle of whole and parts can be broken by beginning with a preliminary reading of the whole.
4. Using the comparative and divinatory methods the interpreter can reconstruct the thinking of an author and the meaning of his text.
5. Hermeneutics requires the interpreter to have a talent for language and for understanding others.

## two

# Dilthey's hermeneutic understanding

Dilthey formulates an empirically based methodology for the human sciences that recognizes the distinctive nature of the human sciences. He does not think that the positivistic methodology of the exact natural sciences can be used for the human sciences since the objects of the human sciences are essentially constituted by self-conscious human agents. On the other hand, idealistic theories in the human sciences lack the necessary empirical base for their conclusions. The human sciences require their own unique methodology, which Dilthey terms understanding (*Verstehen*) as opposed to explanation (*Erklären*). The philosophical justification of understanding requires a critique of historical consciousness in the Kantian sense.

As we shall see, Dilthey's theory of understanding influences the hermeneutic theories of Heidegger and Gadamer. Dilthey, however, hardly uses the word "hermeneutics" in his discussions of understanding in the human sciences. He knows the field of hermeneutics very well but reserves the word "hermeneutics" for its narrower sense as a set of rules for interpreting written works, as we saw in Schleiermacher. In "The Rise of Hermeneutics" (1900), Dilthey defines hermeneutics as "the theory of the rules of interpreting written monuments" (SW4: 238). He concludes the essay by stating that the main purpose of hermeneutics beyond securing philological interpretations is:

> to preserve the universal validity of historical interpretation against the inroads of romantic caprice and skeptical subjectivity, and to give a theoretical justification for such validity, upon

*Wilhelm Dilthey*

1833 born on 19 November in Biebrich, near Wiesbaden, Germany
1852 begins the study of theology at the University of Heidelberg
1854 transfers to the University of Berlin, studies theology and history as well as Hegel and Schleiermacher
1855 passes theological exams
1856 graduates in philosophy and begins teaching in secondary schools
1860 "Schleiermacher's Hermeneutical System in Relation to Earlier Protestant Hermeneutics" is awarded a double prize, but not published
1864 awarded PhD in philosophy on Schleiermacher's ethics at the University of Berlin
1866 accepts an invitation to lecture in philosophy at the University of Basel
1868 moves to the University of Kiel
1870 *Schleiermacher's Life* Vol. 1, establishes his reputation
1871 moves to the University of Breslau
1882 moves to the University of Berlin to take a chair in philosophy
1883 publishes *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, Vol. 1
1900 publishes "The Rise of Hermeneutics"
1910 *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* is left unfinished
1911 dies on 1 October in Seis am Schlern, near Bozan, Italy

> which all the certainty of historical knowledge is founded. … [Hermeneutics becomes] an essential component in the foundation of the human sciences. (SW4: 250)

This main purpose of hermeneutics establishes Dilthey's sense of hermeneutics in the broad sense as a philosophical theory that justifies the universal validity of historical interpretations. In this broad sense hermeneutics may be connected to Dilthey's theory of understanding.

Dilthey repeats and develops this connection in the 1910 essay "The Understanding of Other Persons and Their Manifestations of Life". He writes:

> The rule-guided understanding of permanently fixed manifestations of life we call "exegesis" or "interpretation". Since it is only in language that the life of mind and spirit finds its complete and exhaustive expression – one that makes objective comprehension possible – exegesis culminates in the interpretation of the written records of human existence. … The science of this art is hermeneutics. (SW3: 237–8)

"Science" (*Wissenschaft*) in German means a systematically ordered and justified body of knowledge. Hence hermeneutics, as science, is the systematically ordered and justified body of knowledge relating to the art of interpreting the written records of human existence where the life of mind and spirit finds its complete and exhaustive expression. Hermeneutics justifies universal validity in historical interpretation. This presents hermeneutics with a new task: "Now hermeneutics must define its task relative to the epistemological task of demonstrating that it is possible to know the nexus of the historical world and to find the means for bringing it about" (SW3: 238). By nexus (*Zusammenhang*) Dilthey means a number of particulars interconnected to form a whole. The task of hermeneutics is the justification of understanding with reference to the written records of human existence where the life of human beings finds its complete expression. Although Dilthey still connects hermeneutics with the written, hermeneutics may be said to be the model for all forms of understanding the life of mind and spirit. Hermeneutics would be the model for understanding that is the particular mode of knowing that methodologically grounds the human sciences.

## The hermeneutic tradition

Dilthey's essays "Schleiermacher's Hermeneutical System in Relation to Earlier Protestant Hermeneutics" (SW4: 33–227) and "The Rise of Hermeneutics" (SW4: 235–59) are important documents in the history of hermeneutics. In the first essay Dilthey traces the development of hermeneutics in Protestantism, analyses the immediate influences on Schleiermacher's hermeneutics and compares his system to other hermeneutic systems. In the second essay, after relating hermeneutics and understanding in general, Dilthey traces the development of hermeneutics from the Greeks through a discussion of Schleiermacher. As important as these historical discussions are, we will note only Dilthey's characterization of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics because it influenced subsequent interpretations of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics.

Dilthey argues that Johann Fichte (1762–1814) and Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) were the two main influences on Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. Dilthey writes, "The essential uniqueness of the scientific form of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics consists precisely in fusing a theory of reproduction [Schlegel] with a theory of production [Fichte]" (SW4: 116). The theory of production implies that the I creates a particular

written work. The theory of reproduction states that the interpreter must reproduce the act of creation in order to understand. Dilthey praises Schleiermacher for having the "philological virtuosity" and "philosophical genius" to be able to develop the "general formulation and solution of the problem of hermeneutics" (SW4: 248). Schleiermacher's analysis of understanding is able to justify the hermeneutic rules for interpretation and to demonstrate that valid interpretations are possible. Understanding is a process of recreating the creative process.

> In the intuitive grasp of the creative process by which a literary work comes into being, he [Schleiermacher] saw the basic condition for grasping the other procedure, which understands the whole of the work out of individual signs and the spiritual intent of its creator out of that whole. (SW4: 246)

Dilthey discovers four crucial ideas in Schleiermacher that contribute to the further development of hermeneutics. One is that the hermeneutic rules for interpreting texts are a specific case of the process of understanding in general so that "the analysis of understanding is therefore the groundwork for the codification of interpretation" (SW4: 248). Secondly, the interpreter and author share a "general human nature" (SW4: 249) that permits the understanding of others. Thirdly, because of this shared human nature, the interpreter can recreate "an alien form of life" (*ibid*.) by imaginatively modifying her own psychic (i.e. mental) processes and thus understand the inner life of another (i.e. the divinatory method). Finally, in terms of logic, the interpreter can grasp the whole that the text is by means of "only relatively determinate individual signs" (*ibid*), that is, the words. This is possible because the interpreter already knows the grammatical rules, logical forms and history of the author's time.

**KEY POINT**

Dilthey knows the hermeneutic tradition well, especially Schleiermacher. Hermeneutics is defined as the science of the art of interpreting written documents. Dilthey identifies four important points in Schleiermacher's work for the development of hermeneutics:

- The analysis of understanding grounds interpretation.
- The interpreter and author share a common human nature.
- The interpreter can thereby recreate the author's ideas.
- One can understand the whole meaning of a text from the words.

The important task of hermeneutics for Dilthey is to serve as a model for understanding in the human sciences.

## Explanation and understanding

As we noted, Dilthey's project is to justify philosophically a methodology for the human sciences. He is characterized in the tradition as doing this by differentiating two modes of knowing that produce universally valid propositions. Explanation (*Erklären*) occurs in the natural sciences and understanding (*Verstehen*) occurs in the human sciences. This characterization is correct in general, but Dilthey does recognize the interdependence of these two modes of knowing, as we shall discover.

In *An Introduction to the Human Sciences* (1883), Dilthey briefly discusses the relation between the natural and human sciences in establishing the philosophical justification for the human sciences. For Dilthey the human sciences cannot be modelled on just the natural scientific method as they were by Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill, who "truncate and mutilate historical reality in order to assimilate it to the concepts and methods of the natural sciences" (SW1: 49). One must commence the investigation not with mere sense impressions but with the whole human being as feeling, willing and thinking. In this way the external world is present to the human being with as much certainty as self-consciousness. Since the human being is "a psychophysical life-unit" (SW1: 67), the human sciences will involve natural scientific knowledge. The natural environment and mental life require two points of view: the inner discovered by introspection and the outer discovered through perception. The natural sciences determine the causal connections within nature. However, concerning the observed correlation between material facts and mental states, "no connection of cause and effect can be applied to this connection" (*ibid.*). Dilthey's aim is to demonstrate the relative independence of the human sciences from the natural sciences. Human beings are influenced in two ways by the natural causal world. Nature affects us through our sensations; fire burns, so we act to protect ourselves. Human beings affect nature primarily through will and action. I want a means to cross the river, so I build a bridge, but in building the bridge I need to know and use the results of natural science. At the same time I can affect other human beings since they too can use the bridge. Hence knowledge from the natural sciences, the outer causal system, is important for the human sciences that deal with the inner mental or spiritual world of man.

In "The Rise of Hermeneutics", Dilthey's general aim is to demonstrate how "*scientific* knowledge of individuals" (SW4: 235) is possible by demonstrating that hermeneutics developed in the same manner as

natural science. Human action, much of our happiness and the human sciences in general presuppose that we can understand the mental states of others and "that such reunderstanding of what is singular can be raised to objectivity" (*ibid*.). Understanding is thus "quite distinct from all conceptual knowledge of nature" (*ibid*.). The objects of natural science are empirically presented to consciousness through the senses, while the objects of the human sciences are "first and foremost an inner reality, a nexus experienced from within" (SW4: 236). Since one's own inner nexus is directly apprehended by consciousness, the human sciences have an advantage over the natural sciences. However, to raise this understanding of the individual inner reality to objectivity presents problems, for:

> the existence of other people is given us at first only from the outside, in facts available to sense, that is, in gestures, sounds, and actions … We therefore call understanding that process by which we recognize, behind signs given to our senses, that psychic reality of which they are the expression. (*Ibid*.)

Dilthey uses the term "psychic" to refer to the mental as opposed to the physical side of human existence. He presents several cases, which include understanding the babbling of a child, a marble sculpture, musical notes, actions, constitutions and the *Critique of Pure Reason*, among others. In all cases "the same human spirit addresses us and demands interpretation" (SW4: 237). As we noted, interpretation is the rule-guided understanding of these outer sensible expressions of inner psychic states. It is only in language, Dilthey continues, that "human inner life find[s] its complete, exhaustive, and objectively understandable expression" (*ibid*.). Hermeneutics as the interpretation of written documents would presents the most objective understanding of human inner life. Therefore the analysis of understanding and the analysis of inner experience together provide "the possibility and the limits of universally valid knowledge in the human sciences" (SW4: 238).

In the "Addenda from Manuscripts", Dilthey states six theses about understanding:

- It is the process by which empirical objectifications of psychic life, that is, facial expressions, words or even a legal system, are used to know that psychic life conceptually.
- As different as these objectifications are, their understanding has "common characteristics based on the specific conditions of this mode of cognition" (SW4: 251).

- Rule-guided understanding of texts is exegesis or interpretation.
- Interpretation is a skill and few have mastered it. The practices of the good interpreters are preserved in the rules for interpretation. Interpretation develops like the natural sciences. "The theory of the rules of understanding textually fixed objectifications of life we call hermeneutics" (SW4: 252).
- Understanding is the fundamental procedure for the human sciences.
- Therefore, the analysis of understanding "is one of the main tasks for the foundation of the human sciences" (SW4: 253).

Dilthey's final attempt to distinguish the natural sciences from the human sciences is in the study "Delimitation of the Human Sciences", in *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* (1910). The fundamental basis for Dilthey's philosophy is life itself, the living human being in its environment. We are a psychophysical being, so we are affected by nature and also affect nature. Thus in the study of human beings, in the human sciences, both the physical and psychical are interconnected in life itself. However, this does not prevent us from abstracting from our experience two different sets of objects. We can abstract and posit physical objects "as underlying our impressions as a constructive device" (SW3: 102). In the human sciences "the first givens are lived experiences … [that] belong to a nexus that persists as permanent amidst all sorts of changes throughout the entire course of a life" (*ibid.*). A lived experience is a unity identified in the flow of life. We have states of consciousness that are expressed "in gestures, looks, and words; and they have their objectivity in institutions, states, churches, and scientific institutes" (SW3: 101–2). Just as the physical object may be abstracted from life, so too may the mental or spiritual object.

However, "the human sciences and natural sciences cannot be logically divided into two classes by means of two spheres of facts formed by them" (SW3: 103). The human sciences use facts from the natural sciences. One of Dilthey's examples is that the study of language depends on the physiology of the speech organs just as much as on a theory of meaning. The human sciences relate differently from the natural sciences to physical facts about human beings. They are used to discover what is not given in sensations at all but implicit in them, the inner world, and "it is in this creative, responsible, spiritual world rising sovereignly from us – and only in it – that life has its value, purpose, and meaning" (SW3: 104). Human beings therefore have two different tasks. One is to construct and explain nature as an ordered whole governed

by causal laws from the impressions we receive. The other is to return from nature to life itself where there is meaning, value and purpose. Here understanding returns from the sensuously given to what is never given in the senses, the inner world, which has expressed itself in those sensations. Because of these two different tasks, the natural sciences can be distinguished from the human sciences.

This inner world of human beings is the area of investigation in the human sciences. However, Dilthey writes, "it is a common error to resort to the psychic course of life – psychology – to account for our knowledge of this inner aspect" (SW3: 106). There is a debate over whether Dilthey is here rejecting his own descriptive psychology or just referring to positivistic psychology based on the natural scientific method. He uses an example to illustrate his point. A poem is presented to my senses on a piece of paper. A poet wrote it and it has been published in a book. The natural sciences could explain the process of putting ink on the page or how the binding holds the book together. The human science of poetics is interested in what is expressed about the human condition in those words. "What is expressed is not the inner processes in the poet; it is rather a nexus created in them but separable from them" (SW3: 107). It is a spiritual or mental nexus that has entered the outer world of the senses and "which we understand by a regress from that world" (*ibid*.). This could be understood as a rejection of Schleiermacher's idea that understanding is a process of recreating the creative process. Whether this is the case we shall examine in the next section. What is clear in this context is that the object of understanding "is completely distinct from psychic processes in the poet or his readers" (*ibid*.). What is to be understood is the meaningful whole of that aspect of humanity that is expressed through the words on the page. Thus the delimitation of the human sciences from the natural sciences is clear. "In the former group,

**KEY POINT**

Dilthey argues that the human sciences require a unique methodology different from the natural scientific method. The natural sciences *explain* a phenomenon by subsuming it under universal causal laws. The human sciences *understand* the mental or spiritual meanings that are expressed in external, empirical signs. Although the human sciences will sometimes require knowledge from the natural sciences, their conclusions refer to the inner realm of human meaning. Understanding occurs when the interpreter is able to recognize the inner state of another by means of that other person's empirical expressions. Seeing a facial expression the interpreter understands the emotional state of the other. In reading the words of a text the interpreter understands the intended meaning of the author.

a spiritual object emerges in the act of understanding; in the latter group, a physical object in the act of cognition" (*ibid.*). Finally, Dilthey states that we can understand ourselves "only if we project our experienced life into every sort of expression of our own and others' lives" (SW3: 109). So the human sciences "are founded upon this nexus of lived experience, expression, and understanding" (*ibid.*). We shall now look at these three fundamental concepts in the human sciences as they function in Dilthey's explication of how we understand other people.

## Understanding others

In his essay "The Understanding of Other Persons and Their Manifestations of Life" (1927) Dilthey elaborates his final position on what I have called Dilthey's hermeneutic understanding. Human life is the basic category in the human sciences. Life is "the nexus of interactions between persons as conditioned by the external world but considered independently of changes in time and place" (SW3: 248). In living their lives individuals feel, act and think and are aware of themselves in historical consciousness. Dilthey's drafts for a critique of historical reason are modelled on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Dilthey's project is to justify philosophically the workings of reason within historical consciousness. In historical consciousness we are aware that we live in the flux of time. "Temporality is contained in life as its first categorical determination" (SW3: 214). In our memory we have the past that cannot be changed. We are aware of the constant passing of the present, so "the present never *is*" (SW3: 216). We look to the future. "In our attitude to the future we are active and free" (SW3: 214).

In experiencing our temporality a relationship of part to whole is "re-experienced in understanding", and the part–whole relation is "that of the meaning of the parts for the whole" (SW3: 249). Dilthey maintains that we see this best in memory and his example is of a landscape. It is not recalled as mere sense data, but with reference to a "life-concern". He prefers the term "impression" instead of "image". "[There is] no self distinct from them [impressions] nor something that they are the impression of" (*ibid.*). That is, there is no distinct self or self-consciousness separated from an object. Rather, the impression includes the relatedness of the given with my life. For example, I am aware of the impression of the building storm clouds in relation to my concern to be sheltered from the lightning and rain. Dilthey terms this awareness of the part–whole relation in the living present or in a memory a lived experience

(*Erlebnis*). "That which forms a unity of presence in the flow of time because it has a unitary meaning is the smallest unit definable as a lived experience" (SW3: 216). The stream of consciousness is, so to speak, connected together in a nexus and is remembered as having a meaning as the unity of that flow. The experienced temporal flow of the building of the storm clouds is collected as a unity of meaning: the coming of a storm. In addition larger meaningful units in life are also termed lived experiences even if the parts are separated by other events. For example, the unity of my many experiences of my home is connected into a whole of meaning that constitutes my lived experience of my home. "The course of a life consists of parts, of lived experiences that are inwardly connected with each other" (SW3: 217).

Dilthey states that living through an experience and a lived experience are two ways of saying the same thing. Lived experience is a basic category of the awareness of life. "A lived experience is a unit whose parts are connected by a common meaning" (SW3: 254). "With lived experience we move from the world of physical phenomena into the realm of spiritual reality, which is the subject matter of the human sciences and of reflection on them" (SW3: 217). It should be noted that the German word that has been translated as "spiritual" also means "mental", so that Dilthey does not mean just a religious realm but a realm of all forms of the mental or intellectual, which would also include emotions and purposes. With lived experience we enter into the realm of the spiritual or mental, the human realm of emotions, desires, purposes and ideals, since we ascribe a meaning, an inner psychic unity, to the series of impressions we have in the flow of life.

In the beginning of his essay on understanding others Dilthey writes, "On the basis of lived experience and self-understanding and their constant interaction, there emerges the understanding of other persons and their manifestations of life" (SW3: 226). Manifestations of life are the external, empirically cognizable data that express or indicate the inner spiritual and mental aspects of human life. They are the givens in the human sciences as the sense data from non-human and human beings in their physical being are the basis for the natural sciences. Dilthey identifies three classes of manifestations of life. The first "consists of concepts, judgments and the larger thought-formations" (*ibid.*). These are the elements of science in the broad German sense that includes both the natural and the human sciences. They have separated themselves from the lived experiences from which they arose and do not indicate the particular manner in which they arose from the background of life. Examples would include: concepts such as gravity, home or flowers;

judgements such as "The sun is shining" or "John over-indulged last night"; or larger formations such as a textbook on biology or mathematics or an article in a newspaper. They intend to state the way things are in the world. As judgements they assert the validity of what is formulated in the proposition independent of the time and people involved in their generation. "Thus a judgment is the same for the person who formulated it and the one who understands it" (*ibid.*).

Actions make up the second class of manifestations of life. As manifestations, actions do not intend to communicate, but are able to indicate a relationship to a purpose. "There is a regular relation of concern between an action and what it expresses of the human spirit that allows us to make probable assumptions about it" (SW3: 227). Seeing someone nailing boards side by side, we can understand that his purpose is to build a fence. Dilthey distinguishes between the state of mind of the actor and the life-nexus that generates this state of mind. While nailing I would be concentrating on the task at hand and perhaps aware of the project as a whole, whereas the general relevance of this project to my life and how I came to decide to build a fence would belong to the life-nexus. In choosing to do one thing, other possibilities have been negated. Hence what I chose not to do would not be manifest in the action itself. "Apart from the elucidation of how a situation, a purpose, means, and a life-nexus intersect in an action, it allows no inclusive determination of the inner life from which it arose" (SW3: 227). Someone observing my work could understand that I am nailing boards together to build a fence and have collected the required materials, and that it somehow would fit into my plans, but that is about all.

Expressions of lived experience constitute the third class of manifestations of life. This class is unique for there is a special connection running from the inner life of the one who expresses his lived experience, through the manifestation of this lived experience, to the understanding that occurs in another who understands this expression. In manifestations of life that express lived experience, the inner state is manifested in the outer empirical world. For example, my angry glare and finger-pointing at the hammer express my inner state of not having the hammer when I need it and the desire that you bring it to me before the board slips out of place. Dilthey has said that language is most able to express inner life. So I would probably shout "Bring me the **@!! hammer now!" Expressions of lived experience may be much more complicated. Autobiographical sketches try to express the unity of lived experiences that one has discovered to form a meaningful whole. I might also try to express my inner state through music, poetry or another art form.

"An expression of lived experience can contain more of the nexus of psychic life than any introspection can catch sight of" (SW3: 227). This is due in part to aspects of my expression of which I am unaware. So my knitted brow reveals my disdain for the critical question while I believe I am politely answering the question. The unconscious elements that enter expressions of lived experience are the basis for understanding an author better than he understood himself. On the other hand, one may consciously misrepresent one's inner state. Deception, fraud and concealment are also possible in disguising lived experiences. Not only can I lie outright, but I can also conceal and manipulate what I express. Expressions of lived experience are also understood only within limits, never perfectly. "Such expressions are not to be judged as true or false but as truthful or untruthful" (*ibid*.). Dilthey declares that in a great work of art, and this appears to be its definition, there is no deception concerning the spiritual content; "indeed it does not want to say anything about its author. Truthful in itself, it stands – fixed, visible, and abiding – and it is this that makes possible a methodically reliable understanding of such works" (SW3: 228).

For each class of manifestations there is an elementary form of understanding. Understanding begins first in the practical or pragmatic situations of common interactions. Practical interaction presupposes that through outer empirical expressions we can know aspects of the inner life of others that the other has expressed. This connection between the inner meaning and outer expression starts in the earliest part of human life. "The child only learns to understand the gestures and facial expressions, movements and exclamations, words and sentences, because it constantly encounters them as the same and in the same relation to what they mean and express" (SW3: 230). This is the basis of acculturation, where "the child grows up within the order and ethos of the family that it shares with the other members" (SW3: 229). This connection between expression and inner meaning is the essential basis of all understanding.

Logically speaking, one understands a single manifestation using an inference by analogy that depends on having learned the general connection and inferring that this specific expression is another case of that connection. This inference concerning a basic connection is not deductive. There are no universal laws of connection that would allow one to subsume this particular case under a known law. "Elementary understanding is not an inference from an effect to a cause" (SW3: 228–9). Dilthey offers three examples of elementary understanding for the three classes of manifestations: the series of letters that form words and are structured into a sentence express a proposition; the

swinging hammer expresses a purpose, such as building a fence; a facial expression expresses pain. In elemental understanding the empirical manifestation and the inner content expressed therein are united. The facial grimace and pain form a unity. Although not explicitly stated, this unity means that one has become so acculturated that one has no difficulty understanding what inner state is expressed by the associated manifestation. One does not question the connection and understands immediately.

Dilthey adopts Hegel's concept of objective spirit, without its dialectical and teleological moments, to indicate all the ways "a commonality existing among individuals has objectified itself in the world of senses" (SW3: 229). Objective spirit would include all the connections learned in acculturation that allowed for elementary understanding. It would also include larger manifestations of life, such as lifestyles, customs, laws, religion, art, philosophy and science. For example, the legal system that is objectified in the laws, judges, prosecutors, court houses, institutions and so on would manifest the inner sense of justice held by that society at that time. Dilthey declares that even an individual work of art will reflect some common elements of a particular age and region. There exists a tension between the individuality of manifestations of life and the common manifestations that are of objective spirit, to which we shall turn in a moment. As noted above, one's acculturation is the learning or adopting of these specific aspects of objective spirit for one's time and place. Objective spirit is "the medium in which understanding of other persons and their life-manifestations takes place" (*ibid*.). It is the medium for understanding since objective spirit indicates the set of established connections between the inner psychic states and their empirical expressions current in a particular culture. Thus individuals usually apprehend manifestations within a situation of established commonalities, that is, within objective spirit. "Locating the individual manifestation of life within a common context is facilitated by the fact that objective spirit possesses an articulated order" (SW3: 230). Having learned the meanings that words have within the ordered context of language, one can understand the individual manifestation in a stated sentence. "A sentence is intelligible by virtue of the commonality that exists within a linguistic community about the meaning of words and of forms of inflection and about the sense of syntactical structure" (*ibid*.). The same may be said for gestures and actions, in so far as they are part of this common order. In one culture you shake hands as a greeting while in another you shake hands to close an agreement. The inference is by analogy "where a predicate is assigned to a subject with probability

on the basis of a finite series of cases involved in a common situation" (SW3: 231).

Higher forms of understanding are based on the elemental. There are several types of higher understanding. In one type there is a greater distance between the manifestation of life and the one who wants to understand it. The unity of manifestation and meaning found in elementary understanding does not exist. One must work to make the connection between the manifestation and the inner state manifested. It could be a connection other than normally expected, for example an unusual use of a word as we noted with "unfold" in *Hamlet*. When understanding runs into a difficulty, we must reconsider the inner–outer connections that have been used. We may consult a dictionary to see if we can find a meaning for the word that will resolve the problem. Another type of higher understanding is required when there are multiple, temporally separated manifestations that express an inner nexus, such as one's character. Other higher forms concern understanding as an intentionally produced series of manifestations and the inner nexus or many nexus being expressed. Dilthey's example is understanding a play. You follow the action, understanding the motivations, develop the character of the personae from their expressions, connect the separate scenes of life into a whole and so on. "The process of understanding and re-experiencing will then come to fruition as intended by the poet" (SW3: 232), if one has understood correctly. It is a further step, Dilthey continues, when you consider the play to be a work of art. Then understanding moves to consider the relationship between the artist and the creation of that work of art. The common characteristic of higher forms of understanding is "that they take given manifestations and arrive at an understanding of the nexus of a whole through an inductive inference" (SW3: 233). Dilthey distinguishes expression of an inner state from the production of a possible inner state. The relation of external to internal is one of either expression to what is expressed or produced to what motivates the production. By production Dilthey means the creative ability of the human spirit to create something new in terms of possible life experiences. The author could express the meaning of his lived experience or the author, by means of his creative energy, could produce an expression of life, that is, a production, that was not experienced but is an imaginatively possible lived experience.

"Understanding always has something individual as its object" (*ibid.*). It may aim to understand the whole of a work or a person's whole life. "Just as objective spirit contains within itself an order that is articulated in terms of types, humanity also encompasses a kind of ordering system

that leads from the regularity and structure of the universally human to the types by which understanding grasps individuals" (SW3: 234). For example, the ordered structure of a legal system in one state is similar to the legal system in another, and both reflect each state's common sense of justice. Individuals are part of the universal, humanity, which is itself ordered. For example, the human need for shelter is an ordering structure common to all individuals. Different ways of providing shelter constitute the different types of sheltering within humanity. This general ordering system of sheltering could aid one in understanding the way a foreign culture shelters its people. And my house could be understood as my individual realization of the type of shelter common in my culture. A more complex example would consider the human trait to express oneself in music.

Dilthey's idea is important since it demonstrates the way understanding can grasp both the universal as type in the ordering of objective spirit or humanity and the individual as a particular instantiation of that type. Dilthey states, "individuals are not distinguished qualitatively but by means of the relative emphasis of particular moments – however one may express this psychologically" (*ibid.*). Internally the individual is unique due to "different accentuations of structural moments" (*ibid.*). If a close family member dies, the other members will be in mourning. Being in mourning is a type of human behaviour and consciousness. It is ordered in the system of customs within our culture, within the overarching ordering system of objective spirit. However, each family member may be individuated by means of the differing emphases or accentuations they embody. One may be more emotionally shaken than another is. Externally individuation occurs because "circumstances produce [different] changes in psychic life and its state" (*ibid.*). Here the milieu and history play an important role in understanding. The milieu includes both the physical and social environments. One family member may have already experienced the deaths of close friends, while the others have not.

Dilthey is now in a position to explain how one understands another and her manifestations of life by explaining how transposition, recreating and re-experiencing occur. Transposition is that understanding that is able to discover the "vital connectedness in what is given" (*ibid.*). This means that transposition is being able to understand the inner psychic state of another that she has expressed in the outer, empirical facts. This is possible only if "the connectedness that exists in one's own lived experience and has been experienced in innumerable cases is always available to accompany the possibilities inherent in the object" (*ibid.*). Transposition can occur through the manifestations of a particular

person or through a work of art such as a poem. As a simple example, take my friend's statement from his report of last night: "The clap of thunder was so loud that I sat straight up in bed." For transposition to occur I must have my own lived experiences of thunderstorms and, at least, of being awakened by a loud noise. And I must have had enough of these experiences to be able to connect some specific inner states with the external event; that is, I know what thunder is. Of course I understand the language used so that when I hear his report I am able to transpose myself into his situation. Even if I never "sat straight up" in such a situation, I do understand what this means and can imaginatively transpose myself into his situation. If I had never experienced thunder, transposition would be, at best, difficult. Dilthey's example is a poem. "Every line of a poem is transformed back into life through the inner nexus of the lived experience from which the poem arose. Through elementary operations of understanding, physically presented words evoke possibilities that lie within the psyche" (*ibid*.). I recall similar situations and my psychic states associated with them, which I have experienced. Through imagination other possibilities are presented. "If the perspective of understanding requires the presence of the experience of one's own psychic nexus, this can also be described as the transfer of one's self into a given complex of manifestations of life" (SW3: 235).

"On the basis of this transfer or transposition there arises the highest form of understanding in which the totality of psychic life is active – re-creating or re-experiencing" (*ibid*.). Re-experiencing involves a series of transpositions that can be said to be the inverse of the creative process. In the creative process one moves from lived experiences to their expression, while in understanding one starts with the expressions and moves towards the inner meaning of the lived experiences. Re-experiencing is a sympathetic reliving of a series of events that forms a whole. Dilthey writes, "Re-experiencing attains its fulfillment when an event has been processed by the consciousness of a poet, artist, or historian and lies before us in a fixed and permanent work" (*ibid*.). This means that re-experiencing occurs when I have before me the creative work of an artist that guides me in re-experiencing what he intends. The historian cannot actually experience the past, but must interpretively understand the written documents, historical facts, motivations of the principle actors and so on, and then present these in such a manner that when we read this account we are able to re-experience the event and its meaning as the historian intended us to.

In understanding we must re-experience a nexus of lived experiences, but "not the one that stimulated the poet, but the one that, on

its basis, the poet places in the mouth of an ideal person" (*ibid.*). Here Dilthey clearly states that re-experiencing does not mean reliving the exact psychic states that the creator had and that stimulated his creation. The aim is to re-experience the states of an ideal person, that is, the person who would have had those mental states that are expressed in the work. The scenes in a play are expressions of ideal persons that should form a meaningful whole, but are not the expressions of the playwright's actual life. Dilthey does not state that what is understood in re-experiencing is the typical as embodied in the order of objective spirit or humanity, but it must be implied. As just stated, consideration of the individuality of the work or the author as a creative individual is a further step. He does write, "The triumph of re-experiencing is that it completes the fragments of a course of events in such a way that we believe them to possess a continuity" (*ibid.*). This continuity is the unity of parts into a meaningful whole.

Dilthey states that he is not going to discuss here the concepts of sympathy and empathy that would figure in a psychological account of re-experiencing, but will indicate how re-experiencing leads to "our appropriation of the world of human spirit" (*ibid.*). He identifies two modes. One mode is that the presentation of the milieu and external situation aids in re-experiencing. The presentation of the milieu allows for a more accurate understanding of the specific historical and cultural type of lived experience that is presented. The interpreter's previous knowledge of the customs of contemporary American culture would permit one to re-experience "Let's do lunch sometime" as almost like saying goodbye, whereas a century ago, if one said this at all, it would be a more serious invitation. The second mode is that "the imagination can increase or diminish the intensity of the attitudes, powers, feelings, strivings, and thought-tendencies that characterize our own life-nexus in order to re-create the psychic life of any other person" (SW3: 236). This mode is crucial, for it indicates how Dilthey thought we could re-experience an inner state that we had not experienced before. The imaginative variation of the psychic states permits the one who understands to "re-experience something that lies outside any possibility in their real life" (*ibid.*).

Dilthey's example of understanding Luther is illustrative and will be summarized. Dilthey admits that he and many of his contemporaries cannot relive the religious state of Luther in their real life. Too much has changed; their historical, cultural situation is different. However, he can re-experience it. This involves the study and understanding of the reports by contemporaries and the historical documents of the religious disputes and councils. These would be examples of the use of the milieu

and external situation. It would also involve the study of Luther's letters and writings. By such investigations and using the two modes just presented, Dilthey is able to begin imaginatively to transpose himself into Luther's situation. He notes the monks' means of communicating, their living situation and how religious controversies affect their inner being. He discovers how religious ideas are spread to the laity, how councils and movements spread the doctrine and how "what has been achieved by intense struggles in lonely cells asserts itself despite the church's opposition" (*ibid*.). He can then re-experience Luther's development "on the basis of a connectedness that proceeds from the universally human through the religious sphere to its historical setting and, finally, his individuality" (SW3: 237). Therefore, although he cannot live Luther's psychic state in his real life, Dilthey can re-experience it through extensive historical investigation and imaginatively altering his own psychic states to recreate in himself states similar to those Luther had.

This itself presupposes that there are universal states of humanity, that objective spirit can be understood and ordered and that more and more specific types of these states can be imaginatively re-experienced using imaginative variations of our own psychic states as well as sympathy and empathy. Finally, the individuality of Luther can be projected by discovering the specific and unique aspects of his type. Of course, Dilthey realizes that this task of re-experiencing can never be completed; the life of the individual is ineffable (SW4: 249).

Understanding is the method for attaining objective validity in the human sciences. Not only is there the understanding of others and their life manifestations, but the human sciences involve understanding larger connected wholes, such as legal systems, customs, cultures and the rise and fall of empires. However, all these other forms of understanding in the human sciences depend on our ability to understand others and their manifestations of life. Interpretation is the rule-guided understanding of permanent manifestations of life and since mind or spirit finds its complete expression in language, and rule-guided understanding in language is the science of hermeneutics, hermeneutics has a new and important task. Hermeneutics is, therefore, the model for all understanding in the human sciences.

What must be the case if Dilthey's theory of understanding is to work? The crucial point is the connection between lived experience and its empirical expression that is learned as a child acculturates. This connection must be relatively stable and shared by a group of people. One must be able to experience this connection enough times for it to solidify into a dependable means of moving from the manifestations

**KEY POINT**

Life gains meaning in lived experience with reference to a life-concern. This meaning is expressed in an external manifestation of life that other human beings can sense. In acculturation the child learns many connections between inner meaning and the associated external manifestation. These form her elemental understanding. Human beings can express their own inner state and can understand the inner psychic state of another by means of these shared connections (transposition). Higher forms of understanding are more complex and require re-experiencing using the two modes of the milieu and imaginative modifications of one's own inner life.

of life, the empirical expressions, to the inner lived experience, and of moving in the reverse direction. If this were not possible then we could not know what others felt and thought, and we could not express to others what we felt and thought; there would be no human interaction. This learned connection is elemental understanding and enables one to understand simple manifestations of life.

This connection between lived experience and its empirical manifestation presupposes that human mentality is so structured that from the flow of experiences constituting life in its temporality, meaningful aspects of this flow may be isolated, that is, a lived experience. Further, manifestations of lived experience must contain something non-individual in them as well as being ultimately individual. The non-individual or universal aspect of lived experience permits the intersubjective elementary understanding within a group. If they were absolutely individual there could be no bridge to understand others.

Higher forms of understanding are built from this basis. One essential requirement is that there is an ordered structure in objective spirit and humanity. This means that all human beings share some very general structures in living their lives. Our example was that we all need shelter. All human beings also share very general ways of manifesting their lives. The example was the legal system and the inner sense of justice. A continuum of ordered structures exists from the very particular ones that one is acculturated into, through ever-larger groups of people in time and space, until one reaches the universal for objective spirit and humanity. This alone provides the possibility of understanding human beings from a different temporal and cultural situation.

The ability to understand others outside one's acculturated group depends on the two modes of higher understanding. The milieu and external situation allow for the location of types and then more specific types of universal structures that the other embodies. The second

mode concerns the human ability to create in one's own consciousness a lived experience that one has not had by imaginatively modifying the psychic states one has experienced. This mode is more essential than the first since it not only allows for the understanding of the milieu and external circumstances different from my own, but especially for re-experiencing the internal states of others. Dilthey considers this to be an additive process where once you have imaginatively relived another state you can then use this one in the future to imaginatively relive even more different states.

Although Dilthey restricts hermeneutics to the science of the art of understanding written documents, since the written contains the most complete expression of human spirit and mind, I have suggested that hermeneutic understanding is a model for all understanding in the human sciences. It would not be a large step to use hermeneutics to name all cases of understanding in the human sciences.

### Key points

1. Following Schleiermacher, Dilthey defines hermeneutics as the science of understanding written monuments and its task today is to demonstrate how one can attain objectively valid understanding in the human sciences.
2. Dilthey's life project is to justify the methodology for the human sciences, understanding, which is different from the natural scientific method, explanation.
3. In acculturation the child learns a number of specific connections between inner meaning and external manifestations that permit him to understand others' psychic states and to express his own states to others.
4. Higher forms of understanding are based on the elemental ones and employ one's ability to imaginatively modify one's own lived experiences to re-experience another's meaning.
5. The ordered structure of objective spirit and human being allow an interpreter to understand foreign cultures and people.

# three

# Heidegger's hermeneutic ontology

Before discussing *Being and Time*, the work that established Martin Heidegger's international reputation, it will be helpful briefly to sketch the background of his radically new questioning. He entered the University of Freiburg to study theology before switching to mathematics and philosophy. As a student Heidegger read widely; he was well acquainted with Schleiermacher's hermeneutics and theology and Dilthey's philosophy. However, he primarily investigated ontology in Scholasticism. When Edmund Husserl came to Freiburg in 1916, Heidegger had already studied his work and soon began to work with him. When he returned from active military service at the start of 1919, Heidegger had thought out his new, radical philosophy, which he initially discussed in his lecture course entitled "The Idea of Philosophy and the Problem of Worldviews". In *The Genesis of Heidegger's* Being and Time, Theodore Kisiel writes:

> the itinerary of breaking through the theoretical wall of a petrified scholasticism to a more experiential sense of the religious life had begun with the "Catholic" paradigm of Eckhartian detachment, but was ultimately sustained and carried to completion through the "hermeneutic insights extending to the theory of historical cognition" that came from Schleiermacher's and Dilthey's like-minded return to the immediacy of lived experience. (GH: 114–15)

To highlight Heidegger's new position, we shall compare it to Husserl's phenomenology. Phenomenology declares that philosophy must start

*Martin Heidegger*

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|---|---|
| 1889 | born on 26 September in Messkirch, Germany |
| 1909 | enters the University of Freiburg studying theology |
| 1913 | is awarded PhD in philosophy for "The Doctrine of Judgment in Psychologism" |
| 1915 | Habilitation (teaching qualification) in philosophy is awarded for "The Doctrine of Categories and Signification in Duns Scotus", directed by Heinrich Rickert |
| 1919 | teaches lecture course on "The Idea of Philosophy and the Problem of Worldviews" |
| 1922 | writes the introduction for a book on Aristotle, "Indication of the Hermeneutic Situation", for a possible teaching position in Marburg, Germany |
| 1923 | teaches lecture course on "Ontology – Hermeneutics of Facticity", and then accepts the position in Marburg |
| 1927 | publishes *Being and Time* |
| 1928 | becomes Professor of Philosophy at the University of Freiburg |
| 1933 | becomes Rector of the university and joins the National Socialist Party |
| 1934 | resigns Rectorship, but stays in the National Socialist Party |
| 1936–38 | writes *Contributions to Philosophy: From Enowning* |
| 1945–46 | is banned from teaching following his denazification hearings |
| 1947 | publishes "The Letter on Humanism" |
| 1951 | resumes university lectures as emeritus professor |
| 1959 | publishes *On the Way to Language* |
| 1975 | dies on 26 May in Freiburg, Germany |

by carefully describing experience without incorporating any presuppositions about the meaning of that experience. Husserl's maxim "To the things themselves!" means that philosophy must return to a pure description of the things themselves as they are experienced. His famous example is walking around a table. From each position only a particular perspective of the table is experienced. You never see the whole table, although in experience we are also conscious of the whole table. To explain this phenomenon Husserl argues that since consciousness is always consciousness of something and we are conscious of the whole table, this awareness of the whole table must be an act of consciousness itself. In technical terms Husserl maintains that in an intentional act consciousness proposes the whole table to itself as the intentional object. The intentional object may then be confirmed or disproved by further experience. In addition to physical objects, concepts or meanings are also intentional objects. The transcendental ego as consciousness intends the objects of consciousness.

In his 1919 lecture Heidegger discusses an example of phenomenological description. In section 14 he describes his experience of entering the lecture hall and looking at the lectern. In his experience he does not see brown surfaces that meet at right angles nor a small box on a larger box, but rather, all at once, the lectern. The lectern is not a meaning that has been added to the sense data of brown surfaces, as empiricists would argue. Nor does he have the experience of intending the whole lectern while looking at only a perspective of it, as Husserl would argue. The lectern is seen all at once and in context. It is set too high and there is a book on it that is in the way. Hence the lectern is experienced from a particular orientation, with a particular elucidation and from a particular background. Importantly, what is experienced already has a particular meaning within a meaningful context. The environment of this experience is not first seen as a set of objects that must be given meanings; rather, the lived environment is at once meaningful. Implicitly Heidegger accuses Husserl of presupposing the subject–object duality of modern philosophy, where the ego as subject is confronted by external objects. Although Heidegger does not mention Dilthey by name, the word he uses for experience, "lived experience", is the same as Dilthey's and his description is similar to Dilthey's. As you recall, Dilthey argued that a lived experience is a unity of meaning taken from the flux of life oriented to some concern. To indicate the absence of the subject–object duality in this experience, Heidegger uses the indefinite pronoun and states that "it worlds" (*es weltet*) and "there is" (*es gibt*, literally it gives). Differing from Dilthey, these expressions emphasize that the subject does not attach meaning to an experienced object, but rather that the meaning is already there as soon as the so-called object is present. Objects do not pass in front of the apprehending subject, but there is an event or happening where the meaningful "object" appears in a context of meaning oriented by the concerns of the "subject". In Heidegger's example the lectern is set too high for him. Heidegger was rather short and probably the previous lecturer was taller and had adjusted the lectern for his height. Therefore what is new and radical in Heidegger's philosophy is that phenomenological description must start by describing this lived experience of "it worlds". He introduces the term "facticity" to denote this sense of experience.

## The hermeneutics of facticity

In the summer term of 1923, Heidegger taught a lecture course entitled "Ontology – The Hermeneutics of Facticity", which Gadamer, whom we

shall discuss next, attended. In this course Heidegger clearly delineates the role hermeneutics will play in his developing philosophy, which culminates in *Being and Time*. Ontology is the study of being, but it must be understood here, Heidegger tells us, as an "indefinite and vague directive" in the sense that "being should in some thematic way come to be investigated and come to language" (HF: 1). There are two problems with the modern philosophical concept of ontology. First, it presupposes that the meaning of being is to be determined only by examining objective objects and does not consider other possible ways beings might be. Secondly, because of this first problem, modern ontology does not even consider the being of human beings, which is decisive for philosophy and ontology. Because "ontology" could be misleading, Heidegger continues, the title of this course should be "The Hermeneutics of Facticity" (HF: 3).

Facticity means Dasein's particular mode of being. We shall first clarify Dasein and then facticity. "Dasein" is composed of "*da*" meaning "there" and "*sein*" meaning "to be"; thus "Dasein" literally means "there-being" (some translate Dasein as being-there). In German "Dasein" can mean human being, although it is not the usual word for human being (*Mensch*). Heidegger prefers "Dasein" instead of "*Mensch*" to avoid improper metaphysical connotations associated with "human being" and because, as we shall discover, the mode of being of human beings is to be in the there, that is, in the world. Dasein is "'our' 'own' Dasein" (HF: 5). Heidegger uses quotation marks to indicate the terms may be misleading, especially if one thinks of the common philosophical usage. Each of us has the mode of being that is Dasein, and this mode of being is my own, but not in the sense that I am something else, a substance or subject, that has the mode of being of Dasein. Nor am I an individual viewed from the outside. "'Our own' is rather a how of being, an indication which points to a possible path of being-wakeful" (*ibid*.). The how of being is our manner of living. It could be wakeful in the sense of being aware of this manner of being, or it could be unaware of it as if sleeping through life. Heidegger criticizes the contemporary concept of human being. The problem with the philosophical definition of man as a living being endowed with reason is that it misunderstands the Greek *logos* to mean reason and not discourse. Dasein "initially contains nothing of the ideas of 'ego', person, ego-pole, center of acts. Even the concept of the self is, when employed here, not to be taken as something having its origin in an 'ego'!" (HF: 24).

Turning to the concept of facticity, Heidegger writes, "More precisely, this expression means: *in each case* 'this' Dasein in its being-there *for*

*a while at the particular time* (…) insofar as it is, in the character of its being, *'there' in the manner of be-ing*" (HF: 5). "For a while at the particular time" simply means I live, as Dasein, for a certain amount of time within a particular historical period. Heidegger notes that being there for a while also implies that I cannot run away and am at home in the there in some sense. "Being there in the manner of be-ing", Heidegger states, means specifically not to be there in the mode of being of an object (the mistake of traditional ontology). This phrase means *how* one is living or being there. That is, the way Dasein is, is an active living of life. Factical means the articulation of our mode of being Dasein and as such belongs to facticity. "If we take 'life' to be a mode of 'being', then 'factical life' means: our own Dasein which is 'there' for us in one expression or another of the character of its being, and this expression too, is in the manner of being" (*ibid.*). That is, our way of being in being there for a while, our facticity, includes an expression, articulation or understanding of our own way of being. This is important since it means that at this most basic level our way of being includes an understanding of our own manner of being.

## Hermeneutics and phenomenology

What does hermeneutics mean in the title "Hermeneutics of Facticity"? Heidegger first traces the development of the term in order to overcome its contemporary meaning and return to its original meaning, which he then discusses in relation to facticity. The Greek word "*hermeneutike*" (hermeneutics) is formed from the Greek words meaning interpreting, interpretation and interpreter. Its etymology is obscure although it is thought to be related to the messenger God, Hermes. In the *Ion*, Plato describes the poets as the interpreters of the gods and the rhapsodists as the interpreters of interpreters. Heidegger prefers to translate the Greek word, which is usually translated as "interpreter", as "herald", the "one who communicates, announces, and makes known" (HF: 6). In Plato's *Theatetus* hermeneutics is associated with *logos*, meaning discourse, and so hermeneutics communicates not just the theoretical but also other aspects of human being. Therefore, "hermeneutics is the announcement and making known of the being of a being in its being in relation to … (me)" (HF: 7). According to Heidegger, Aristotle connects hermeneutics with conversation, "the factical mode of actualizing *logos*" and language is "making something known through words" (*ibid.*). Aristotle's work is correctly entitled *On Interpretation* (*peri hermeneias*), since it concerns

discourse, which makes "something accessible as being there out in the open" (HF: 8). Furthermore, hermeneutics concerns the truth of what is said: "*aletheuein* [being-true] (making what was previously concealed, covered up, available as unconcealed, as out there in the open)" (*ibid*.).

Although Heidegger does not discuss this concept of (hermeneutic) truth here, we can note that truth concerns bringing what was previously concealed into the openness of the there of Dasein as unconcealed. For example, when Heidegger enters the lecture hall he notices at some point that the lectern is set too high and may say to himself, "Too high again!" At first the lectern remains concealed; his attention is perhaps focused on the doorway or a glance toward the students. As we noted, Heidegger's new, radical claim is that meaning, or the unconcealed as truth, is encountered in the lived experience itself. The lectern is experienced or unconcealed as being too high for him. This sense of truth is quite different from the traditional correspondence theory of truth. An empiricist account of it would claim that the sense data from the object, the lectern, are received by the subject's mind, which coordinates them into the perceived object. The subject then judges on the basis of this information that the lectern is set too high. Truth means the correspondence between the judgement and the actual object. What is important for Heidegger is that the meaning or truth as unconcealment occurs in or is constitutive of the lived experience itself and not a later judgement by a subject about an already experienced object.

Heidegger continues the discussion of hermeneutics by claiming that the concept of hermeneutics slowly changes after the Greeks. Schleiermacher "reduces" (HF: 10) hermeneutics to an art or technique of understanding from its connectedness with life that was still present in Augustine. His universal hermeneutics is a formal methodology encompassing theological and philological hermeneutics. Dilthey follows Schleiermacher and defines hermeneutics as the rules for understanding written documents, which is supported by his analysis of understanding. Dilthey, as we noted, understood the history of hermeneutics as developing towards a methodology that could guarantee universally valid propositions, paralleling the development of the scientific method. Heidegger, however, understands the history of hermeneutics as a falling away from the true and original meaning of hermeneutics. Dilthey's position is "a disastrous limitation" since he ignored the "Patristic period and Luther" (HF: 11) when hermeneutics was still concerned with the whole human being in relation to God.

Consequently the meaning of hermeneutics in the hermeneutics of facticity does not indicate the modern sense of a "doctrine about

interpretation", but means a "self-interpretation of facticity", where "facticity is being encountered, seen, grasped, and expressed in concepts" (HF: 11). Hermeneutics is used, Heidegger continues, to bring out several aspects of facticity. From the perspective of the so-called object, it indicates that this "object" is capable of and in need of interpretation, and also that it exists "in some state of having-been-interpreted" (*ibid.*), as we saw in the example of the lectern. The task of hermeneutics is to interpret Dasein to itself. "In hermeneutics what is developed for Dasein is a possibility of its becoming and being for itself in the manner of an *understanding* of itself" (*ibid.*). This is hermeneutics in the Greek sense: the way of being of a being (Dasein) is announced and made known (to that Dasein); it is an actualization of *logos* in language; and it uncovers something that has been covered up (the ontological tradition covered up Dasein's actual mode of being). In a hermeneutics of facticity Dasein has the possibility of understanding itself. Understanding is no longer a relation to the life of another (Dilthey), nor intentionality as constitution (Husserl), but "a *how of Dasein* itself" (HF: 12). Such interpreting does not involve a subject–object relation, as if one Dasein, the subject, stood opposed to another Dasein, the object, and objectively recorded its findings. The "*how* of Dasein" implies that interpreting is part of its manner of being.

The further investigation of facticity needs to clarify "*in what way* and *when*" (*ibid.*) this self-interpretation occurs in Dasein's life. Since interpretation is a mode of its being, it is one of Dasein's possibilities. Its aim is the radical "*wakefulness* of Dasein for itself" (*ibid.*), that is, it aims to uncover a clear self-understanding. Hermeneutics in this sense is "prior ontologically and factico-temporally to all accomplishments in the sciences" (*ibid.*). It is ontologically prior since one must first understand the possible ways Dasein can be before one can discover how Dasein understands objects in the world, that is, science. It is "factico-temporally" prior since in living one has already interpreted oneself in one way or another, and this self-interpretation is the basis from which one can start to interpret the facts of the world. "*Existence*" names the special way Dasein is, "the ownmost possibility of be-ing itself" (*ibid.*). Hence the interpretive concepts "which grow out of this interpretation are to be designated as *existentials*" (*ibid.*). These existentials are neither schemata nor later additions, but are possibilities of being, different ways of how Dasein exists. They are discovered in the analysis of Dasein's factical being.

That Dasein is a being-possible means that Dasein has choices to make, different possible ways it could be. In its factical life Dasein

modifies itself "from out of the situation with respect to, on the basis of, and with a view to which hermeneutical questioning is operating in the particular case" (HF: 13). In a concrete situation I modify myself by choosing an open possibility of being on the basis of my interpretation of my situation, that is, I choose to act one way or another on the basis of my present self-understanding. "Interpretation begins in the 'today'" (HF: 14) and for us (now) that is an average everyday understanding embodied by the they (*das Man*). "The they" means no person in particular but the reigning public opinion. Hermeneutics begins "out of a fundamental experience, and here this means a philosophical wakefulness, in which Dasein is encountering itself … The more we succeed in bringing facticity hermeneutically into our grasp and into concepts, the more transparent this possibility [Dasein's self-encounter] becomes" (*ibid.*). Thus the hermeneutics of facticity means the interpretive self-understanding of Dasein that she has of herself in factical life. This interpretation must begin with Dasein in its everydayness as the they, that is, the reigning opinion, understands itself. This initial interpretation and interpretive concepts (formal indications) must aim to uncover Dasein to itself.

The method by which to gain access to Dasein without presupposition is phenomenology. However, as with hermeneutics, the concept of phenomenology has also been corrupted in the philosophical tradition. Heidegger returns to the Greek concept. "Phenomenon" in Greek comes from a word that means to show itself. Thus phenomenon means "being-present as an object from out of itself" (HF: 53). However, in the history of science this sense of phenomenon is limited to the way physical beings show themselves. Neo-Kantians applied the scientific understanding of phenomena to the human sciences. "In formulating his theory of the human sciences as a 'critique of historical reason', even Dilthey, who originally came out of history and theology, conspicuously relied on this Kantian approach" (HF: 54). Opposing this tradition Husserl developed the concept of intentionality "in such a manner that he provided more firmly established guidelines for research into experience and contexts of experience" (HF: 55). However, "for Husserl, a definite ideal of science was prescribed in *mathematics* and the mathematical natural sciences" (HF: 56). This is Heidegger's thinly veiled critique of Husserl since, according to Heidegger, the mathematical model biases the investigation in a particular direction. "One should approach a scientific discipline not as a system of propositions and grounds for justifying them, but rather as something in which factical Dasein critically confronts itself and explicates itself" (*ibid.*). The phenomenological

method does give proper access to the investigation, but one must first investigate Dasein in its facticity before moving into other domains, such as mathematics.

Phenomenology must be understood as the specific "how of research" (HF: 58). The aim is to approach the objects of investigation "as they show themselves in themselves" (*ibid*.). However, we encounter an object in the way we are familiar with it and this is usually a result of tradition. Since a tradition can preserve an inaccurate understanding, a "fundamental historical critique" is required, and "this means: a regress to Greek philosophy, to Aristotle, in order to see how a certain original dimension came to be fallen away from and covered up and to see that we are situated in this *falling away*" (HF: 59). This original dimension, the uncovering mode of access to objects, allowed them to present themselves in themselves. However, this Greek mode of access needs to be modified in order for it to work in the contemporary historical situation, because today we are affected by the tradition of metaphysics. If the mode of being of the object under investigation is a "covering-itself-up" (HF: 60) then it needs to be uncovered. "The task involved – making it a phenomenon – will become phenomenological in a radical sense" (*ibid*.). The hermeneutics of facticity as the interpretive understanding of facticity must begin with Dasein as it understands itself today. However, today Dasein's self-understanding covers over its actual mode of being. "One must step away from the subject matter initially given and back to that on which it is based" (HF: 58). This is accomplished by Heidegger's concept of formal indication, which he connects to phenomenology.

A formal indication is a concept or structure that is between the temporal flowing of life and a justified concept or structure. It is meant to indicate a preliminary direction of enquiry that can be followed. "A *formal indication* is always misunderstood when it is treated as a fixed universal proposition and used to make deductions from and fantasized with in a constructivistic dialectical fashion" (HF: 62). Rather, a formal indication points out a direction that further enquiry can take. "Everything depends upon our understanding being guided from out of the indefinite and vague but still intelligible content of the indication onto the right path of looking" (*ibid*.). In other words, what is initially presented for hermeneutic explication requires further analysis to uncover the actual structure or concept that permits what is initially presented to be there at all. What is initially presented for further elucidation is called the "forehaving". "The forehaving in which Dasein (in each case our own Dasein in its being-there for a while at the particular time) stands for this investigation can be expressed in a formal indication:

**KEY POINT**

Heidegger's new insight is that philosophy must commence with a phenomenological description of our actual experience. In experience we discover that things appear all at once, within a context, and with a meaning in relation to my own situation: the example of the lectern. Heidegger names human being "Dasein" to avoid traditional metaphysical connotations and to emphasize that its mode of being is not the mode of being of an object. Facticity names our unique mode of being. Hermeneutics means the announcement and making known in language of the being of a being (Dasein) in its being. Therefore the hermeneutics of facticity is Dasein's self-understanding of its own manner of being: existence. The existentials are the interpretive concepts discovered in the hermeneutics of facticity. Phenomenology is the correct method to gain proper access to describe Dasein in its factical life. The hermeneutics of facticity is the interpretive self-understanding of Dasein in its life. Since Dasein exists in its average everydayness, which has covered over its true way of being, the hermeneutic analysis must uncover this mode of being. In order to accomplish this, the structural elements of Dasein's being uncovered in everydayness must be tentatively accepted as formal indications. These formal indications direct the hermeneutic investigation towards Dasein's true mode of being. The formal indication of Dasein's factical life is being in a world.

*the being-there of Dasein (factical life) is being in a world*" (*Ibid.*). Being in a world indicates in a formal manner Dasein's way of being, but this being in a world is not yet properly understood and requires hermeneutic interpretation. In the next sections we shall examine Heidegger's developed description of Dasein's being in a world in his groundbreaking book, *Being and Time*.

## The hermeneutic analysis in *Being and Time*

*Being and Time* solidified Heidegger's position as one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. Published in April 1927, *Being and Time* systematically presents Heidegger's new way of approaching philosophy and is the final analysis of the hermeneutics of facticity. Our analysis of hermeneutics in contemporary philosophy will concentrate on three aspects of this work. First, we consider Heidegger's introduction, where he discusses the question of the meaning of being, the methodology to be used to answer that question, that is, phenomenology, and the initial approach to this question through an interpretation of Dasein, that is, hermeneutics. Secondly, we shall examine

how things show themselves from themselves in Dasein's experience. Thirdly we shall analyse how Dasein understands correctly since this influences the further development of hermeneutics in contemporary philosophy.

Heidegger starts *Being and Time* by justifying why the ontological question about the meaning of being needs to be raised anew. Three prejudices have hidden the need to ask about the meaning of being. First, some believe that "'being' is the most 'universal' concept" (SZ: 3). Since everything that is, is, the term is the most universal one and thus understood. Secondly, others claim that "the concept 'being' is indefinable" (SZ: 4). Since being is the most universal term it cannot be defined using some other, higher category by means of a differentiation, as human beings are defined as rational animals. Nor can it be defined using attributes of being, since this would only define a subset of beings. Thirdly, it is argued that "'Being' is the self-evident concept" (*ibid*.). We use the verb "to be" all the time and if it were not self-evident, then we would not know what we were saying. To these prejudices Heidegger responds that being the most universal concept indicates rather its obscurity, being indefinable indicates that "'being' is not something like a being" (*ibid*.) and so we need to ask about its meaning and, finally, being self-evident indicates that we have already understood being in a particular manner that might be incorrect, and so we need to ask what being actually means.

To gain the proper access to the question about the meaning of being requires that we identify a particular being that is able to provide an unbiased access into the enquiry. Luckily, "regarding, understanding and grasping, choosing and gaining access to" are modes of being "of *the* being we inquirers ourselves in each case are" (SZ: 7), which, as we noted, Heidegger calls Dasein. Our questioning can proceed since one of our modes of being is to question. "The explicit and lucid formulation of the question of the meaning of being requires a prior suitable explication of a being (Da-sein) with regard to its being" (*ibid*.; this translator hyphenates Dasein, which Heidegger did not). Thus, before the general question of the meaning of being can be asked, we must enquire about the being of Dasein itself who will ask about the meaning of being in general. We must enquire how Dasein asks and understands in order to ensure that her questioning of being can provide a proper access to an investigation into the meaning of being in general.

Heidegger distinguishes the ontological and ontic levels of being. Ontology means the organized body of knowledge about the different ways entities are, whereas ontic refers to the actual ways individual

beings are. For example, an ontological characteristic of all human beings is that they have feelings. That I am afraid right now is an ontic exemplification of the ontological characteristic of having feelings. Since Dasein's mode of being is different from other entities, Heidegger defines its mode of being as existence. Existence means "the very being to which Da-sein can relate in one way or another, and somehow always does relate" (SZ: 12). Dasein relates to its own being, so existence names this mode of being of Dasein, its being concerned about its own being, as opposed to other entities' modes of being that are not concerned with the question of being. Existential understanding refers to the recognition of the different structures of existence, which are termed existentials. Existentiality names "the coherence of these structures" (*ibid*.). Heidegger creates the word "existentiell" to label the ontic exemplification of the existentials. Existentiell understanding refers to the particular way each Dasein understands itself in its actual mode of being, that is, in the choices it makes concerning possible ways it could be. For example, that I am reading Heidegger and trying to understand him would be an existentiell understanding of my actual, ontic mode of being. That all human beings understand in one way or another would be an existential. Not only does Dasein understand itself, it also understands other things and other human beings. Since any ontological theory originates in Dasein's understanding, one must first understand Dasein in its way of being. "Thus *fundamental ontology*, from which alone all other ontologies can originate, must be sought in the *existential analysis of Da-sein*" (SZ: 13). In other words, before one can develop an ontology that answers the question of the meaning of being in general, one must investigate the structures of Dasein's being: the existentials. This investigation conducted by Heidegger in *Being and Time* is called fundamental ontology.

Having justified raising the question about the meaning of being anew and demonstrating that one must first understand Dasein's mode of being, Heidegger turns to the method of analysis for fundamental ontology so that the correct access to the modes of being of Dasein can be secured. The problem is that Dasein has mostly misunderstood itself as being in the mode of being an object. Therefore the proper access to Dasein's mode of being must be done "in such a way that this being can show itself to itself on its own terms" (SZ: 16). Proper access to the meaning of the being of Dasein should come from the things themselves and not from the investigator's presuppositions. Phenomenology's maxim "To the things themselves!" implies not accepting "free floating constructions and accidental findings" (SZ: 28); nor does it accept

seemingly demonstrated concepts or pseudo-questions from tradition. To uncover the proper sense of phenomenology Heidegger again returns to the Greek roots of the two words that constitute phenomenology: phenomenon and *logos*. He returns to the Greek to avoid connotations that may have accrued to the terms since then and to expose their original sense. Phenomenon originally means "*what shows itself in itself*, what is manifest" (*ibid*.).

The concept of *logos* is particularly difficult since the philosophical tradition has used several improper translations, especially understanding it as reason. Its central meaning is speech, but in a particular sense. "*Logos* as speech really means *deloun*, to make manifest 'what is being talked about' in speech" (SZ: 32). Heidegger finds that Aristotle's discussion of speech as *apophainesthai* (i.e. speech that lets us see from itself what is being talked about) clarifies this sense of *logos* as speech. *Logos* in this sense is also connected with the concepts of true and false, not in the sense of correspondence but in the sense of *alētheia*, uncoveredness.

> This 'being true' of *logos* as *aletheuein* [being true] means: to take beings that are being talked about in *legein* [discoursing] as *apophainesthai* [letting be seen from itself] out of their concealment; to let them be seen as something unconcealed (*alethes* [true]); to discover them. (SZ: 33)

Putting these two senses together, Heidegger defines phenomenology as "to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself" (SZ: 34). This is what "To the things themselves!" means. Since the being of entities is generally concealed or covered up, or only shows itself in a distorted way, the meaning of being needs to be uncovered or unconcealed. Therefore Heidegger concludes, "*Ontology is possible only as phenomenology*" (SZ: 35).

As we saw above, the investigation into the meaning of being in general must be preceded by an analysis of the modes of being of Dasein, that is, fundamental ontology. "From the investigation itself we shall see that the methodological meaning of phenomenological description is *interpretation*" (SZ: 37). The phenomenological investigation of Dasein is an interpretation of its own understanding of its mode of being in order to uncover its existentials, the basic structures of its mode of being. "Phenomenology of Da-sein is *hermeneutics* in the original signification of that word, which designates the work of interpretation" (*ibid*.). The first meaning of hermeneutics is the work of interpretation and is

**KEY POINT**

Philosophers think they know the meaning of being, but they do not. Hence the question about the meaning of being must be asked anew. We can ask ourselves this question, since questioning belongs to Dasein's mode of being. However, before we can ask about the meaning of being in general, we must enquire into Dasein's mode of being in a fundamental ontology. Phenomenology is the proper method of investigation since it tries to avoid traditional presuppositions and returns to the things themselves. Phenomenology means "to let what shows itself be seen" (SZ: 34). The phenomenological investigation of the being of Dasein is hermeneutics, an interpretive understanding of the existentiality of existence.

like Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. Because of Dasein's priority, that is, that its self-understanding is the precondition for any other ontology, "the present hermeneutic is at the same time 'hermeneutics' in the sense that it works out the conditions of the possibility of every ontological investigation" (*ibid.*). This is the second sense of hermeneutics. However, because Dasein's mode of being is existence, "hermeneutics as the interpretation of the being of Da-sein, receives a specific third and, philosophically understood, *primary* meaning of an analysis of the existentiality of existence" (SZ: 38). In other words, hermeneutics in its primary sense is the interpretive understanding, including demonstration and explication, of the coherence of the structures – the existentials – of Dasein's way of being, that is, existence. Heidegger's project in *Being and Time* is thus a hermeneutic ontology.

With reference to the development of the concept of hermeneutics we have discovered that Schleiermacher unites the various discipline-specific hermeneutics into a universal hermeneutics that is the art of understanding correctly what another has expressed in language. Although Dilthey tended to reserve the term "hermeneutics" for the science of interpreting written documents, its new task is to preserve universal validity in historical interpretation. Further, since hermeneutics is the model for correctly understanding manifestations of life in their most complete form, in language, hermeneutics could be understood as the model for understanding in the human sciences. With Heidegger hermeneutics in its primary sense is the analysis of the existentiality of existence and as such a precondition for answering the philosophical question concerning the meaning of being.

## Dasein's being-in-the-world

Hermeneutics is the interpretive understanding of the structures, the existentials, of Dasein's mode of being. One of these existentials is understanding itself. Before entering a discussion of understanding as an existential of Dasein, it is necessary to indicate, in the briefest manner, what hermeneutics has uncovered about Dasein's existence prior to the examination of understanding. This is important for the general discussion of hermeneutics because in this discussion Heidegger elaborates his new theory of meaning.

Existence is the being of Dasein to which it always relates. So hermeneutics, as fundamental ontology, uncovers the fact that this being to which I always relate is "always-being-my-own-being" (SZ: 42). Further, Dasein has choices to make as to how it will be. "It *is* its possibilities" (*ibid.*). Dasein does not exist as a thing or object, as objectively present, so that it can be defined by means of categories; rather, the structures of Dasein's possible ways of being are termed existentials. Because of its possibilities of being and its self-understanding, Dasein can choose and win itself (authenticity), or it can have not yet found itself or lose itself (inauthenticity) (SZ: 42–3). Dasein usually understands itself inauthentically in the state of average everydayness. That is, we have not understood ourselves hermeneutically, but have accepted what tradition has told us.

Heidegger notes that Dilthey begins from life as a whole and tries to understand it through life's experiences in their structural and developmental interconnections. He was "on the way to the question of 'life'" (SZ: 47) and in this way working in the direction Heidegger takes. However, Heidegger claims that Dilthey was limited by his concepts and focus.

We have seen that phenomenology is the way to gain an unprejudiced access to the investigation since it means "to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself" (SZ: 34). We have also seen that we must start with an examination of Dasein in its factical life, that is, a hermeneutics of facticity. What reveals itself from itself is that Dasein's basic mode of being is "being-in-the-world" (SZ: 53). Dasein is in the world not as a coin is in a box, but as I live in my house even when outside it. "In" means more a dwelling in and being familiar with an area. Dasein is familiar with and lives in its world. Heidegger identifies four meanings for "world". The usual ontic conception of the world is the totality of objectively present beings in the world, that is, the set of all things. The usual ontological conception means the modes of being

of all those things objectively present in the ontic conception, that is, all the ways that things are in the world. One could think of Aristotle's categories. With reference to Dasein, world can also be understood in a pre-ontological, existentiell way as the set of things as they are encountered by Dasein in its daily life, which will be explained next. Finally, world can be understood ontologically as worldliness, which is the ontological sense of the existentiell meaning and is what Heidegger wants to clarify.

The first question to examine is how things show themselves from themselves to Dasein in his being-in-the-world. One might think that the things of the world are objects. That is what we are told. Perhaps some would say that the real objects are those of natural science. In both cases we have to worry that we are importing ideas from our tradition and not letting the things show themselves from themselves. What we find more originally, Heidegger argues, is that we are involved with things in our everyday living in various pragmatic situations. "We will call the beings encountered in taking care *useful things*" (SZ: 68). Heidegger asserts that things of the world first show themselves to Dasein as useful things. In fact, he continues, there is not one isolated useful thing encountered, but we encounter a totality of useful things, each having their particular "in order to" (*ibid.*). Like his choice of Dasein, Heidegger uses the everyday phrase "in order to" to refer neutrally to what we would call the meaningful relationships among the various useful things and how we use them so that he can avoid the normal metaphysical connotations associated with these terms. This "in order to" has the structure of "a reference of something to something" (*ibid.*). Heidegger's example is hammering with a hammer. The hammer is encountered in the workshop with reference to other useful things such as nails and boards. The hammer's "in order to" is hammering, for example hammering nails into the boards in order to build a fence to keep the animals in. The reference of the hammer refers to connecting the boards with nails, to building a fence and so on. "The less we just stare at the thing called hammer and the more actively we use it, the more original our relation to it becomes and the more undisguisedly it is encountered as what it is, as a useful thing" (SZ: 69). Heidegger argues that phenomenological hermeneutics reveals the truer nature ("more undisguisedly") of the things in the world when they are encountered in a pragmatic situation. More importantly the meanings that things have come originally from the pragmatic situation, as we saw in the example of the lectern. In fact, the most original encounter with useful things occurs when one is using them and not thinking about them.

What is uncovered is a useful thing. The useful thing's mode of being is called "handiness" (*ibid*.). The useful thing is revealed not only with reference to other useful things but also in reference to Dasein. The particular type of seeing or sight that Dasein has in dealing with useful things "is called circumspection" (SZ: 68). Circumspection sees the pragmatic situation. "The what-for" (SZ: 70) of useful things refers to what they can be used for, here to build a fence. Heidegger again uses a common phrase to name neutrally what we might say is the thing's purpose. The hammer also refers to what it is made of, for example, wood and steel, as well as to other people, for example, its maker. In this way the references of the hammer also extend to nature and the public world. Circumspection views the whole pragmatic situation. Therefore, "handiness is the ontological categorical definition of beings as they are 'in themselves'" (SZ: 72). It is ontological since it names the way or mode of being of these entities; the ontic mode of being of the hammer is hammering. It is categorical and not an existential since it refers to the being of non-Dasein like entities.

Although one could examine the merits of phenomenological hermeneutics in any of the analyses Heidegger elaborates in *Being and Time*, the uncovering of useful things in their relation to Dasein most clearly presents Heidegger's philosophical claim and methodology. Heidegger's philosophy in *Being and Time* depends on the claim that phenomenology can "let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself" (SZ: 34). This implies that Heidegger's description of the encountering of things in the world is both accurate and has not incorporated any presuppositions from outside. For example, if one begins with consciousness only, as German Idealism does, then one has presupposed that Dasein is essentially consciousness and not a being-in-the-world. If one begins with empiricism, one has presupposed that there are objects in the world that send data to the subject. Heidegger's claim is that his description of Dasein's encounter with the stuff of the world makes no presuppositions but allows things, that is, the situation, to present themselves as they actually are. He uses terms – such as "in order to" and "for what" – that do not incorporate any presuppositions in order accurately to characterize the situation. His particular claim here is that his phenomenological description uncovers the ways things in the world are most originally encountered by Dasein. Most originally means without incorporating presuppositions and asserts there is no "earlier" or more fundamental way in which things in the world are encountered. Further, the phenomenological description is hermeneutic in the sense of an interpretive understanding that Dasein develops about

itself as being-in-the-world. In the end, as in all phenomenologies, it must be left to the thoughtful reader to decide on the accuracy of the phenomenological description.

We have uncovered the being of useful things as handiness. Through three negative cases the derivative status of things objectively present is proven. First, something may be unusable for the task at hand and becomes conspicuous. Secondly, something may be missing and not at hand that is needed for the task. Its "unhandiness" becomes obtrusive. Thirdly, something may be in the way of the task, and as long as it blocks the way it is obstinate. "The modes of conspicuousness, obtrusiveness, and obstinacy have the function of bringing to the fore the character of objective presence in what is at hand" (SZ: 74). Most ontologies argue that the things in the world are primarily objects, for example Descartes's extended things, and are only in a secondary or derivative sense useful things. Heidegger's point is that a proper hermeneutic ontology demonstrates that the ontological and primary being of things is handiness and only when they fail to be handy do they become just objects, merely objectively present.

Included in the being of useful things, as we noted, is a reference to something else. The hammer referred to its serviceability in nailing the boards together. This reference is relevant to Dasein's possibilities of being, that is, how Dasein could be or act in the future. Dasein acts for-the-sake-of-which, that is, acts for the sake of what it wants to accomplish. Heidegger uses the common phrase instead of saying that human beings always act for some end or purpose to avoid metaphysical connotations. The hammer is relevant to Dasein's task of building a fence in order to keep the animals in for the sake of Dasein's food supply. "*As that for which one lets beings be encountered in the kind of being of relevance, the wherein of self-referential understanding is the phenomenon of world*" (SZ: 86). The worldliness of the world, its ontological character, is the totality of relevance that Dasein discovers in terms of the totality of references of useful things and its own for-the-sakes-of-which. In other words, the ontological characterization of the world is composed of all relevant things and people Dasein discovers in her pragmatic situation, which itself is constituted by all the references of the useful things therein and in terms of Dasein's own projects. So the world of the craftsman is his workshop environment, including other people involved in one way or another; the world of the teacher is her books, students, colleagues, the institution and so on. Heidegger's theory of meaning is that things have meaning or significance to the extent that they have this relevance to Dasein through their references. So, the

hammer means its usefulness in hammering nails, as a tool made by someone, as part of a workshop that can build things for someone and so on. Therefore meaning is not, as other theories contend, added on to an already known object; nor is it constituted by consciousness. Rather, meaning is already given in the hermeneutic situation.

After criticizing Descartes's view of the world, Heidegger takes up the question of who Dasein is. Here again one must be careful not to import presuppositions by just saying the who of Dasein is I myself, since who I am may not be at all clear. Heidegger starts his phenomenological description with the originally given surrounding world of the pragmatic situation. Not only are useful things revealed in the workplace, but others are also there as assistants, those for whom the work is done, those who supplied the useful things and so on. They are just as originally there as Dasein and the useful things. "The world of Da-sein is a *with-world*. Being-in is *being-with* others. The innerworldly being-in-itself of others is *Mitda-sein* [with-Dasein]" (SZ: 118). It is not the case that others are first encountered as things that must then be recognized as human beings, for example as Descartes thought. Nor do I begin with myself alone and then have to prove the existence of other people. Rather, other people, that is, other Daseins, are just as originally given in the world as are useful things and Dasein itself. The existential-ontological characteristic of Dasein is therefore being-with. Being-with is a mode of Dasein's being, and Dasein is always already with other people. If I happen to be alone, this is just a deficient mode of my general characteristic of being-with. As taking care of things is part of Dasein's being, so is concern for others a part of Dasein's being. As circumspection viewed useful things, considerateness and tolerance are the modes of Dasein's sight or view of others. Other people, as we noted, also participate in the "referential totality of significance", which "is anchored in the being of Da-sein toward its ownmost being" through its for-the-sake-of-which (SZ: 123). Someone may supply the boards, someone else the nails and someone else may help me build the fence. I understand and relate to these people from the perspective of my project of building a fence. Of course, in actual life there are many projects and we can be concerned about others in their projects.

In being-in-the-world with others I stand in different relations to the others. I may be the boss, servant, friend and so on. In its average everyday being Dasein also relates to "*the they* (*das Man*)" (SZ: 126). The they is not some definite individual but what one considers to be the case for most others in such statements as "One does not read those kinds of books", "Everyone reads this newspaper" and "One does not

**KEY POINT**

The mode of being of Dasein who is my own is being-in-the-world. Dasein originally encounters things in the world as useful things in a pragmatic situation. Things as mere objects are derivative. Useful things are connected together in a referential totality. These references are relevant to and mean something to Dasein. Dasein's world is constituted by the totality of relevance in which it lives. Dasein is also being-with and encounters other people just as originally as useful things. Dasein discovers itself to be a they-self in its average everydayness.

say that in public". For the most part in our average everydayness we understand ourselves from the perspective of the they or public opinion. Hence the they creates averageness: everyone does it like that. The they tends to level down the possibilities of being; one conforms. The way of being of the they constitutes publicness and disburdens Dasein of its responsibility to itself, for the they dictates the proper way. To the extent that Dasein conforms to the they, the who of Dasein is the they-self. "The self of everyday Da-sein is the *they-self* which we distinguish from the *authentic self*, the self which has explicitly grasped itself" (SZ: 129). Heidegger takes a rather dim view of the usual state of human beings.

### (Hermeneutic) understanding as an existential

Dasein is being-in-the-world and we have noted the basic structures of "being together with the world (taking care of things), being-with (concern), and being one's self (who)" (SZ: 131). Heidegger now develops the structure of "being-in" more carefully. Dasein as being-in exists in the there (the *da* of Da-sein). The there is the clearing as it is disclosed by Dasein for itself. The pragmatic environment of the workshop is part of the there for the carpenter. We must now ask, "How does the there come to be for Dasein? How does Dasein come to discover that he is in the workshop?" Heidegger first discusses the existential constitution of the there – that is, the constitutive factors of Dasein that allow for the disclosing of the there for Dasein – and then considers how they function in the everyday being of Dasein.

In ontic, actual life, one is quite familiar with oneself being in a mood. We may be joyful, bored, depressed or just tired. We recognize how our moods affect our awareness and dealings with the world around us, that is, the there. Ontologically the constitutive factor or existential that is the condition for the possibility of being ontically in any sort of mood is

called "attunement" (SZ: 134). Attunement is one way Dasein discloses or uncovers itself to itself in the there of being-in. It is precognitive and prior to any psychological explication. One particular mood can burst forth into Dasein's everyday being, and it is "that it is and has to be" (*ibid*.). This means that I am aware in a particular attunement that I do exist in the world and have to go on living and choosing, even if I go on by trying to end my life. It means further that the whence and whither of my life are obscure: I do not know from where I have come and where I will actually go in my life. Technically this "that it is" is termed "thrownness" (SZ: 135). Dasein is thrown into the world in the sense that it can become aware that it exists and must be. Heidegger identifies three characteristics of attunement. First, "*Attunement discloses Da-sein in its thrownness, initially and for the most part in the mode of an evasive turning away*" (SZ: 136). Most often in our everyday lives we try to avoid, cover up or flee from this attunement or awareness that we are and have to be. Secondly, attunement discloses our being-in-the-world as a whole, that is, it discloses the world, our being-there-with and our existence, and "*first makes possible directing oneself toward something*" (SZ: 137). For example, I am aware of being hungry and desiring the ice-cream cone my friend is licking over there. Thirdly, "*in attunement lies existentially a disclosive submission to world out of which things that matter to us can be encountered*" (SZ: 137–8). That is, in whatever mood I am in, that mood discloses the world in which some things matter to me and other things do not, and I initially submit to this disclosed world in the sense of accepting the way things appear as mattering to me.

Heidegger's example of attunement is fear, which he later distinguishes from *Angst* or anxiety. In fearing I am afraid of something or somebody disclosed to me in a region of the world within the context of relevance that I inhabit. The growl of the bear is disclosed to me somewhere ahead while hiking along the trail. In a sense I feel that I am and have to be, although I would rather not be, in this situation. I am in the state, the attunement, of fearing and may clarify my situation, if not paralysed by fear. Is there an escape route? Should I drop my pack and move away? Is the bear coming closer? What fear is afraid about is finally myself, my being. Will I get hurt or become the bear's lunch?

The second constitutive factor in the disclosure of the there is understanding. Heidegger does not speak of hermeneutic understanding since "hermeneutics" has been reserved for the interpretation of Dasein. However, as we shall discover, all understanding is interpretive and interpretive understanding is hermeneutic understanding in the contemporary context, as we shall see in the discussion of Gadamer. For this

reason, Heidegger's discussion of (hermeneutic) understanding merits careful attention.

Understanding and attunement are equiprimordial. Equiprimordiality means that the constitutive factors of being-in, which will be uncovered, are effective together and at the same time. One is not prior to the other although we must discuss them in sequence. Every attunement involves understanding, and every understanding involves attunement. In fearing the bear, I already understand it to be a bear and understand other aspects of my situation. In understanding that my friend has an ice-cream cone, I feel my hunger and desire. Understanding, as an existential, is the ontological condition for the possibility of any ontic distinction between, say, understanding and explanation. Implicitly, understanding has already been discussed in the disclosure of the world as the significance of the pragmatic situation, in taking care of things, in concern for others and in recognizing Dasein's projects. The kind of being that Dasein has is being possible. This means that there are various courses of action, choices or possible ways to continue that are open to Dasein. "The mode of being of Da-sein as potentiality of being lies existentially in understanding" (SZ: 143). In the discussion of attunement we saw that Dasein is thrown and has, at any particular time, a certain mood that discloses the there. Connected with this is the equiprimordial understanding of the situation in which one finds oneself and the possibilities that are recognized for the future. "This means that Da-sein is a being-possible entrusted to itself, thrown possibility throughout" (SZ: 144). As we noted, Dasein understands itself within its pragmatic situation where tools are understood in relation to their relevance to the task at hand. The worldliness of the world is understood in terms of the totality of relevance. Understanding has the structure of a project. "It [understanding] projects the being of Da-sein upon its for-the-sake-of-which just as primordially as upon significance as the worldliness of its actual world" (SZ: 145). That is, in understanding I choose a possible way to be or act, that is, I project a possible way to be with reference to my for-the-sake-of-which – my project. I decide to act, for example, to build the fence with reference to the understood significance of my situation – here are the hammer, nails and boards. In this manner "projection always concerns the complete disclosedness of being-in-the-world" (SZ: 146). Understanding may be authentic, understanding itself with reference to its for-the-sake-of-which, or inauthentic, understanding "itself initially and for the most part in terms of the world" (*ibid.*). In each case it may be either genuine (uncovering and truthful) or not genuine (covering over and falsifying).

Understanding as projecting a possibility is called the sight of Dasein. This would include the "circumspection of taking care of things, the considerateness of concern", and a sight or view concerning Dasein's own existence (*ibid.*).

Understanding is a thrown project. From a particular situation of being-in-the-world Dasein projects a certain possibility for itself. "The development of possibilities projected in understanding" (SZ: 148) is interpretation. Since all understanding is projection, all understanding involves interpretation. Heidegger does not explicitly connect interpretive understanding with hermeneutics since he has reserved the term hermeneutics for the interpretive understanding of Dasein in its existentiality, that is, fundamental ontology. However, as we shall see, his description of understanding as interpretation includes aspects of traditional hermeneutics.

Heidegger's discussion of understanding concerns a case of genuine inauthentic understanding, that is, a correct understanding of things in the world. As being-in-the-world Dasein already has some sort of understanding of its situation, and in the case of things this would be in circumspection. Understanding itself as interpretation is the explicit working out of the previously understood. Hence, explicit understanding "has the structure of something as something" (SZ: 149). Let me return to the workshop. I already have a certain understanding of the situation. I am building a fence and have collected the materials. I take two boards and a nail and then go to get the hammer. There are three hammers on the rack, say a ball-peen hammer, a curved-claw hammer and a short-handled sledgehammer. I need to understand which hammer is the correct one. I recall my previous experiences and come to understand that the curved-claw hammer is the correct one for this project. I understand explicitly the something, one of the three hammers, as something, the hammer appropriate for the task. Of course, any carpenter, and probably anybody who wants to build a fence, will already know which hammer to use and just take it. If it helps, imagine the carpenter's new apprentice being sent to get the forgotten hammer. Finding the appropriate hammer would then involve understanding more clearly. Just staring at the hammers, Heidegger notes, would not be a case of understanding.

Heidegger identifies three different fore-structures that characterize the initial situation of understanding, and in the case of things in the world these things have already been understood in terms of the totality of relevance. One is the fore-having (*Vorhabe*). Literally it means what one has before. "Interpretation operates in being toward a totality

of relevance which has already been understood" (SZ: 150). I already know the difference between hammers and screwdrivers and have some experience with the hammers, but it cannot be much, since if I did, there would be no need for explicit understanding. Heidegger uses the common meaning of *Vorhabe* as well, which is one's intention. I am building a fence. Another structure is the fore-sight (*Vorsicht*). Literally it means a previous looking towards. It is connected with Dasein's sight, which we noted in discussing circumspection and considerateness. The movement of understanding from what is still unclear to explicitness "is always done under the guidance of a perspective which fixes that with regard to which what has been understood is to be interpreted" (*ibid.*). I am interested in finding the hammer that I can use to secure the nail and not one to plant a fencepost. Fore-sight "'approaches' what has been taken in fore-having with a definite interpretation in view" (*ibid.*). Heidegger implicitly uses the common meaning of *Vorsicht*, which is to be careful or be warned, to indicate that the perspective chosen by Dasein for developing the interpretation implies a need to be careful. The third structure is the fore-conception (*Vorgriff*). It means literally the previously grasped in the sense of concepts. "Interpretation has always already decided, finally or provisionally, upon a definite conceptuality" (*ibid.*). The concepts may be appropriate to the beings that are being interpreted or one may try to force the beings into inappropriate concepts. Concerning the hammers I might consider them in terms of how hard it is to swing them or the shape of their heads, which would be appropriate, whereas to consider them in terms of their colour would be inappropriate. "The interpretation of something as something is essentially grounded in fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception" (*ibid.*).

Since understanding is always an interpretation of something as something that involves these three fore-structures, "interpretation is never a presuppositionless grasping of something previously given" (*ibid.*). Heidegger notes that even in exact textual interpretation any claim to a presuppositionless "what 'is there' … is nothing else than the self-evident, undisputed prejudice of the interpreter" (*ibid.*). This statement is important since it emphasizes Heidegger's thesis that there is no direct understanding that could avoid these fore-structures of understanding. Theories of direct sense perception or direct intuition merely cover over what actually happens and are the result of a prejudice in the one who claims to be able to understand in this manner. Heidegger's analysis of Dasein has demonstrated that all understanding is interpretation, and since understanding is an existential, it is the condition

for the possibility of any particular ontic case of understanding. Since hermeneutics traditionally concerns a theory of interpretation, we can say that for Heidegger all understanding is hermeneutic understanding since it necessarily involves interpretation.

In understanding, Dasein discloses to itself the pragmatic situation. It reveals useful things, others and itself in terms of the totality of relevance. In this manner things can be said to have a meaning. "But strictly speaking, what is understood is not the meaning, but beings, or being" (SZ: 151). I understand the hammer in its usefulness, that is, for hammering, which is one of its modes of being. In understanding I understand something, the hammer, as something: the tool needed to secure the nail.

Heidegger then considers the objection that is likely to be raised against his theory. If understanding is necessarily based on the fore-structures and is always interpretation, then "how should it produce scientific results without going in a circle?" (SZ: 152). "The circle is a *circulus vitiosus*" (*ibid.*), that is, a vicious circle where one presupposes in the premises (i.e. the fore-structure) something that appears in the conclusion, which is claimed to have been proved by the argument. Without mentioning Dilthey, Heidegger claims that if this were the case, then there could be no universally valid historical knowledge. Some, he continues, might be content with the circle since the spiritual or intellectual significance of their objects would make up for the lack of logical rigour. Others think that it would be better if they could avoid the circle altogether and develop a historiography modelled on the natural sciences. "*But to see a* vitiosum *in this circle and to look for ways to avoid it, even to 'feel' that is an inevitable imperfection, is to misunderstand understanding from the ground up*" (SZ: 153). Heidegger does not call this the hermeneutic circle of understanding, but the problematic is the same. If the understanding of the part depends on the understanding of the whole and the understanding of the whole depends on the understanding of the part, it would seem that one must presuppose an understanding of either the part or the whole in order to begin. Making that presupposition would amount to a vicious circle. But this is to misunderstand interpretation. "What is decisive is not to get out of the circle, but to get in it in the right way" (*ibid.*). This circle in interpretive understanding cannot be avoided since it indicates the role of the fore-structures of understanding in all cases of understanding whether one is aware of this or not. The fore-structures belong to the existential constitution of Dasein.

How does one then enter the circle correctly? It occurs:

> when the interpreter has understood that its first, constant, and last task is not to let fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception be given to it by chance ideas and popular conceptions, but to guarantee the scientific theme by developing these in terms of the things themselves. (*Ibid.*)

By "scientific" Heidegger means a philosophically justifiable result rather than anything specific to the natural sciences. Heidegger has hinted at what he means in the discussion of the fore-conception. There he said that the concepts used in interpretation can be appropriate to the beings to be interpreted or one could try to force beings into inappropriate concepts. Clearly the appropriate ones come from the things themselves and the inappropriate ones may come from chance ideas or popular conceptions. He also pointed out that these concepts may be taken provisionally or as final. To take them provisionally is the correct way since one might discover in the process of interpretation that they are not the appropriate ones. As previously mentioned, "To the things themselves!" is the maxim of phenomenology, and phenomenology provides the proper access to an unprejudiced investigation since it means "to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself" (SZ: 34). Therefore the constant task of the interpreter is to check whether the provisionally accepted conceptions in the fore-conception, which she has, are in fact the ones that show themselves from the thing itself that is being understood. The interpreter is to avoid just accepting chance concepts or ones that are popular if they have not been tested on the things themselves.

It might seem that the statement or proposition is the best way to present what is understood and that it does not involve interpretation. Heidegger collects the three senses of statement together, defining a statement as "a pointing out which communicates and defines" (SZ: 156). He then demonstrates the derivative status of the statement by showing how the three fore-structures of understanding are involved in any statement. To point something out requires that it be brought forth from a background. The fore-having supplies the background as the totality of relevance within which something is pointed "out in the mode of determining" (SZ: 157). Further, in pointing out and determining, there is a directed viewpoint, the intended direction of the statement. In the fore-sight "the predicate which is to be delineated and attributed is itself loosened, so to speak, in its inexplicit enclosure in beings themselves" (*ibid.*). This means that the predicate used in the statement must be abstracted from its connection with various beings so that it

can be predicated of this subject. Finally the fore-conception functions in a statement since "language always already contains a developed set of concepts" (*ibid.*).

Heidegger's example is "The hammer is heavy". From the tools in the workshop given in the fore-having the hammer is brought forth with the intention of determining it in relation to the situation. The predicate "heavy" is loosened from its enclosure in beings, that is, it is abstracted from its other contexts, in the fore-sight. The fore-conception delivers the concepts to be used. Here they are appropriate and final. To say, "The hammer is flammable" would be to use an inappropriate concept. Of course, in our normal living experience, that is, in heedful circumspection, one would be more likely to say, "Too heavy, the other hammer!" Heidegger then shows what happens in interpretive understanding to get to the statement and its derivative nature. In the fore-having the hammer as a useful thing is transformed "into something 'about which' the statement that points it out is made. The fore-sight aims at something objectively present in what is at hand" (SZ: 158). The predicate "heavy" may now be ascribed to the objectively present hammer. The "as" structure of understanding finally changes. "The 'as' of circumspect interpretation that understands (*hermeneia*), the existential hermeneutical 'as' … [becomes] the apophantical 'as' of the statement" (*ibid.*). The apophantical "as" in understanding something as something is abstracted from the lived context of circumspection and forced into a determination of the objectively present as having this or that quality. Thus a statement is an interpretive understanding that derives from the original circumspective understanding of the lived situation through a particular limitation.

In addition to attunement and understanding, discourse (*Rede*) is the third equiprimordial existential in the disclosure of the there. "Discourse is the articulation of intelligibility" (SZ: 161) and the foundation of language. Discourse is the articulation in language of the attuned, interpretive understanding of Dasein's being-in-the-world. The totality of relevance that constitutes the worldliness of the world as "the totality of significations of intelligibility is put into words" (*ibid.*) in discourse. Importantly, Heidegger states that "Words accrue to significations. But word-things are not provided with significations" (*ibid.*). This means that it is not the case that meanings or significations are in some way already understood and available and then are attached to word-things that are also already there in objective presence. Rather in the living development of language significance grows on to words.

After examining attunement, understanding and discourse, Heidegger indicates how they are exemplified in average everydayness. Idle talk is the

**KEY POINT**

Dasein discloses the there of its being-in-the-world by means of the equiprimordial existentials of attunement, understanding and discourse. How one is attuned to the world in which one lives reveals this world in a particular light. Understanding projects possible ways that Dasein could be and in doing so reveals to itself the situation in which it is. Understanding is either authentic, about Dasein, or inauthentic, about other beings, and each case may be genuine or not genuine. Understanding is necessarily interpretation since understanding begins with the fore-having, fore-sight and fore-conception. One understands something as something, but this does not involve a vicious circle. Genuine or correct understanding can be achieved when the interpreter bases the fore-structures of understanding on the things themselves. As interpretive understanding it is hermeneutic understanding. Discourse articulates understanding in language. Since attunement, understanding and discourse are equiprimordial, words accrue significations. In having fallen prey to the they, Dasein is tempted, tranquilized and alienated from its authentic self.

expression of average understanding and attunement. It is superficial and groundless. The everydayness of sight as disclosing is curiosity. Curiosity only discloses the outward appearance of things. It claims to be serious but is not. It seeks novelty, claims to understand quickly and then moves on. The result of idle talk and curiosity is ambiguity with reference to things, others and the being of Dasein. In ambiguity everything appears to be understood when it is not, but the public, the they, says it is. These everyday ways of being, in the mode of the they-self, lead to Dasein's entanglement in the public world. One has fallen prey to the they. In falling prey one is tempted by the they, tranquilized into accepting the they's decisions, and alienated from one's authentic self and so self-entangled. This is how Dasein is thrown into the average everyday world.

Heidegger's discussion of attunement, understanding and discourse are essential for the discussion of hermeneutics in contemporary philosophy. Although he does not speak of hermeneutic understanding, since all understanding is interpretation and involves the (hermeneutic) circle, all understanding is hermeneutic understanding. Further, since understanding is an existential of Dasein, Heidegger broadens the concept of hermeneutic understanding to include all cases of understanding. Hermeneutics is not reserved for the spoken or written; nor is it just a model for the human sciences. Hermeneutics becomes the universal way in which the there of Dasein is uncovered.

### (Hermeneutic) truth

Since understanding is always interpretive and since correct understanding occurs when the fore-structures of understanding are grounded in the things themselves, we need briefly to examine Heidegger's discussion of truth as discovering and discoveredness of beings from section 44 (SZ: 212–30). After noticing the connection between truth and being in early Greek thought, Heidegger's first task is to demonstrate the ontological foundations of the traditional concept of truth. The traditional correspondence theory of truth states that a statement or judgement is true if and only if it corresponds or agrees with the actual state of affairs or objects referred to. Heidegger problematizes the sense of agreement, asking how an ideal content can be related to real objects. To clarify the meaning of this relationship he presents a phenomenological description of a situation of confirmation. Someone with her back to a picture on a wall says that it is hanging crookedly. To confirm this statement she turns around and sees the crooked picture on the wall. What does not occur, Heidegger argues, is a comparison of representations, nor an agreement between knowing with its object, nor an agreement between something psychical with something physical (all traditional explanations of correspondence). Rather, "*Confirmation* means *the being's showing itself in its self-sameness*" (SZ: 218). As in the cases of the lectern and the hammer, meaning and so the confirmation of truth is discovered to be in the experience of the situation and not an act of an independent subject. The crooked picture shows itself to Dasein as it is. "The *being true* (*truth*) of a statement must be understood as *discovering*. … Being-true as discovering is in turn ontologically possible only on the basis of being-in-the-world" (SZ: 218–19). Only because Dasein is a being-in-the-world where the meanings of beings are revealed in the pragmatic situation can confirmation and truth occur. Recall the example of the too heavy hammer. In the pragmatic situation the hammer is discovered to be too heavy. As we said, one might exclaim, "Too heavy, the other hammer!" From this situation one might formulate the secondary or derivative statement that the hammer is too heavy, the truth of which would then depend on the primary experience of the hammer as it reveals itself to Dasein.

Therefore, "being true as discovering is a manner of the being of Dasein" (SZ: 220). This means that the primary sense of truth is discovering and so is part of how Dasein is. Only in a secondary sense does truth concern the content, the "to be discovered (discoveredness)" (*ibid.*). We have discussed how the world is disclosed to or discovered by Dasein in

**KEY POINT**

Heidegger argues that the traditional concept of truth as correspondence is grounded in the fact that and only made possible because discovering is one of Dasein's modes of being. Dasein is both in truth, since it has always and already disclosed the world in understanding as thrown projection, and in untruth, since Dasein has mostly fallen prey to the they and so misunderstands. Truth is the unconcealing (*a-letheia*) of what was concealed from Dasein.

attunement, understanding and discourse. Heidegger concludes, "Dasein is 'in the truth'" (SZ: 221) and clarifies this in four considerations. First, as just noted, disclosedness is part of the being of Dasein in that it understands. Secondly, since Dasein is thrown into the world it always already understands the world in one way or another. This understanding would constitute the fore-structures of any particular understanding. Thirdly, Dasein as potentiality-of-being projects possible ways it can be in the future. In understanding one can aim at an explicit understanding of the subject matter presented in the fore-structures. However, fourthly, Dasein in its average everydayness has fallen prey to the they and so "Dasein is in 'untruth'" (SZ: 222). This means that for the most part Dasein misunderstands and we saw that correct understanding can occur only when the interpreter bases his fore-structures on the things themselves and not on chance ideas and popular conceptions. Concerning the secondary sense of truth as discoveredness, what we would call the content of a statement, Heidegger notes, "Truth (discoveredness) must always first be wrested from beings" (*ibid.*). Since we have usually fallen prey to the they and misunderstand, correct understanding is the unconcealment of what is concealed. The Greek expression for truth, *a-letheia*, that Heidegger adopts, means un-concealed.

The goal of hermeneutics is correct understanding. For Heidegger correct understanding is ontologically grounded in Dasein's mode of being called discovering, being true. However, since Dasein is both in truth and untruth, truth as discoveredness occurs when Dasein is able to unconceal beings as they show themselves from themselves. In other words the interpreter must base the fore-structures of hermeneutic understanding on the things themselves in order to unconceal hermeneutic truth. This process of unconcealment in language is central to Gadamer's hermeneutics and the contemporary debates about hermeneutics. However, we must first examine what happens to hermeneutics when Heidegger's thinking turns and the project of *Being and Time* is left unfinished.

### Key points

1. The hermeneutics of facticity is the interpretive self-understanding of Dasein in its actual life.
2. To discover the meaning of being one must first discover the meaning of being of Dasein. The method of analysis is phenomenological hermeneutics, an interpretive self-understanding of Dasein as it shows itself from itself.
3. Dasein as being-in-the-world encounters useful things and other Daseins, but usually has fallen prey to the they. Dasein reveals the there through attunement, understanding and discourse.
4. Understanding is always the interpretation of something, given in the fore-structures of understanding, as something, and so a hermeneutic understanding. Understanding is successful when the fore-structures are based on the things themselves.
5. Truth as unconcealing is grounded in Dasein's mode of being called discovering.

# four

# Hermeneutics in the later Heidegger

As we noted in Chapter 3, Heidegger never completed the envisaged work of *Being and Time*. There was a turning (*Kehre*) in his thinking in the 1930s, and philosophers have come to speak of the "later" Heidegger to indicate his different path of thinking. For our discussion of hermeneutics in contemporary philosophy, we shall consider only four points from the later Heidegger. First, we shall briefly examine Heidegger's remarks concerning *Being and Time* and his new point of departure. Then, we shall discuss his remarks on why he has dropped the term "hermeneutics." Next, we shall consider the central place language has in Heidegger's later philosophy by examining his essay "The Way to Language". In what sense is a hermeneutics still involved in understanding language? Finally, we shall briefly ponder Heidegger's hermeneutic praxis in his interpretation of poetry and compare it to the traditional sense of hermeneutics.

## Beyond *Being and Time*

In the middle of the "Letter on Humanism (1947)", Heidegger explains why "Time and Being", the continuation of *Being and Time*, was not published. It was held back, he writes, "because thinking failed in the adequate saying of this turning and did not succeed with the help of the language of metaphysics" (LH: 231). Thinking failed because the method of phenomenological hermeneutics, the fundamental ontology of Dasein, was still caught in the language and method of metaphysics.

The existentials of Dasein, although specific to Dasein and not referring to objects, were nevertheless still modelled on the categories of traditional metaphysics. They were considered the necessary conditions for the possibility of the various ontic ways in which everyday Dasein was revealed. However:

> this turning is not a change of standpoint from *Being and Time*, but in it the thinking that was sought first arrives at the location of the dimension out of which *Being and Time* is experienced, that is to say, experienced from the fundamental experience of the oblivion of Being. (LH: 231–2)

In Heidegger's later thought, Being itself plays such a central role that translators have capitalized it. The history of the oblivion of Being is the central misunderstanding of the meaning of Being in the philosophical tradition.

Heidegger does not turn to a different question; he does not abandon the question concerning the meaning of Being and the relationship between Dasein and Being. However, the language of metaphysics in *Being and Time* hampered his attainment of a more original starting-point for his thinking. As we discussed, Heidegger criticizes Husserl for beginning his phenomenological description from the position of the intentionality of consciousness, which Heidegger considered an unwarranted presupposition of the subject–object duality. Heidegger considered the hermeneutics of facticity a more original position from which to phenomenologically describe human experience that made no presuppositions. With his turning, Heidegger criticizes himself for incorporating metaphysical elements into his description of Dasein's being-in-the-world and discovers another more original position from which to describe how everything comes to be. The fundamental experience of the oblivion of Being, that is, the covering over of Being and the meaning of Being in the history of Western metaphysics, had not been understood appropriately. Fundamental ontology "strives to reach back into the essential ground from which thought concerning the truth of Being emerges" (LH: 258). The problem, as Heidegger sees it, is that in *Being and Time* it was necessary to communicate his ideas in the current terms of philosophy, even though, as we have seen, he tried to use unbiased terms. "In the meantime," Heidegger continues, "I have learned to see that these very terms were bound to lead immediately and inevitably into error" (LH: 259). As we shall see in the next section, Heidegger also stops using the term "hermeneutics".

In "A Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer" (1959) Heidegger writes, "The fundamental flaw of the book *Being and Time* is perhaps that I ventured forth too far and too early" (DL: 7). Although he does not elaborate, we can say that *Being and Time* went "too far" in that it proposed to answer the question about the meaning of being having discovered that temporality was the meaning of the Being of Dasein. It was "too early" in the sense that the method of phenomenological hermeneutics, the fundamental ontology of Dasein, was still caught in the language and method of metaphysics. Later in the dialogue Heidegger is asked about his turning. He responds, "I have left an earlier standpoint, not in order to exchange it for another one, but because even the former standpoint was merely a way-station along a way" (DL: 12). The earlier standpoint was that of *Being and Time*. In recognizing that *Being and Time* went too far too early, Heidegger did not abandon his central question and begin a new line of thought. Rather, he came to see that *Being and Time* was a way-station along a path of thinking: "And the paths of thinking hold within them that mysterious quality that we can walk them forward and backward, and that indeed only the way back will lead us forward" (*ibid.*). *Being and Time* is a way-station along this path. Through a criticism of Dilthey's life philosophy and Husserl's phenomenology it uncovered a more original access to the question of Being by identifying the existentials of Dasein and its self-understanding of its authenticity. However, it had made some assumptions that needed to be questioned. Heidegger sought an even more original or fundamental situation from which to understand the question of Being. This is the way back that could then lead forwards along this path of thinking by avoiding the problems and hidden presuppositions encountered in *Being and Time*.

Heidegger's new position is difficult to comprehend and is rather poetic. Our discussion of hermeneutics does not require a comprehension of Heidegger's later thought, although an awareness of its general direction is helpful in understanding some of the criticisms of hermeneutics that we shall discuss in Chapter 7. For this reason we shall sketch this new position in relation to *Being and Time*. In this new situation beings still come to be in the there (*da*) of Dasein, but now the there is called the clearing of the truth of Being. In *Being and Time* the there and the appearance of things within the world resulted from Dasein's own self-understanding, as we saw, for example, in the discussion of useful things. Now, what appears in the clearing comes to be in a different manner. Perhaps we can understand that the problem with *Being and Time* is that it examined the coming to be of beings from the position of

Dasein's self-understanding, and this is still too close to the metaphysics of subjectivity. In the new situation things come to be through an interaction of Being and human beings where Being is more active. Being itself exists through time and actively conditions, but does not completely determine, what will come to be at different times in history. This conditioning establishes what Heidegger calls the epochs in the history of Being. Being does not completely determine what comes to be because it needs human beings to respond to its conditioning, which Heidegger terms the sending or calling of Being. How human beings respond to Being's call influences what things come to be in a particular epoch.

Heidegger uses the word "*Ereignis*" to name the event or happening whereby beings come to be. In German "*Ereignis*" means event, occurrence or happening. However, Heidegger states that for him *Ereignis* is a technical term that names his new original position where beings come to be in their own manner and have their own world depending on the interaction of Being and human beings. Heidegger intends the relationship between "own" (*eigen*) and *Ereignis* to be thought, but we lose this relationship in translation. In the translations cited here, "*Ereignis*" has been translated as the neologism "propriation", like the sense of appropriation without the connotation of an active subject. I shall use both terms.

We can get some indication of Heidegger's new position by briefly examining some passages from "Letter on Humanism". Language now plays a central role in how human beings respond to the call of Being in the *Ereignis*: "Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells" (LH: 217). In some way, which we shall shortly examine more closely, the interaction of Being and human beings occurs in language, and human beings attain their essential being in speaking. In *Being and Time* language and discourse were existentials of Dasein, that is, necessary conditions for Dasein's self-understanding in disclosing the there of Dasein. Now language is more central. Language is called the house of Being because it functions as the medium in which Being and human beings interact to bring beings into presence. Thinking, which occurs in language, "lets itself be claimed by Being so that it can say the truth of Being" (LH: 218). Hence, thinking is now the thinking of Being in two senses of "of". First, "thinking, propriated by Being, belongs to being", which means that Being is the "subject" and sends or calls thinking to a particular way of thinking. Secondly, "thinking is of Being" in listening to Being (LH: 220). Here human beings respond to the call of Being by thinking and so participate in the coming to be of beings. Before, meaning and truth were unconcealed within the pragmatic situation.

**KEY POINT**

*Being and Time* went too far and too early, since it used the language of metaphysics and had not incorporated the history of Being. Heidegger turned to a new way of thinking by going back to a more original situation where beings come to presence in the *Ereignis*. In this more original situation language, as medium, is the house of Being where human beings respond to the calling of Being. Being throws Dasein in its fateful sending into the clearing of the truth of Being, and Dasein in responding is the shepherd of Being.

Now Dasein is called by Being to listen to Being in order to discover and preserve the truth of Being in the clearing or there (*da*). Dasein participates in uncovering truth. The discussion of the they in *Being and Time* demonstrated the state of language as the language of metaphysics. "Language under the domination of the modern metaphysics of subjectivity almost irremediably falls out of its element. Language still denies us its essence: that it is the house of the truth of Being" (LH: 222–3). Dasein is now to uncover the truth of Being in the house of language. The human being realizes her true essence by participating in language in the *Ereignis* of Being and human beings. Now man is thrown into the clearing of Being so that "he might guard the truth of Being, in order that beings might appear in the light of Being as the beings they are. Man does not decide …. The advent of beings lies in the destiny of Being" (LH: 234). In guarding the truth of Being "man is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of Being" (LH: 245). In *Being and Time* man was not thrown by Being but, so to speak, just found himself in everydayness. In particular, the coming to be of beings and their meaning occurred in the pragmatic situation, whereas now they come to be as a result of the historically changing call of Being, which Heidegger calls the destiny of Being. "As the destiny that sends truth, Being remains concealed. But the world's destiny is heralded in poetry, without yet becoming manifest as the history of Being" (LH: 242). Being and the meaning of Being are still concealed in the *Ereignis*. Poetry offers a new access by which to think about the *Ereignis* and the world's destiny. The later Heidegger turns more to poetry than phenomenological description to gain a new understanding of the advent of Being.

### "Hermeneutics" disappears

With Heidegger's turning, we see that fundamental ontology, and so the hermeneutics of Dasein, were replaced by a more primordial thinking

about the truth of Being and language. In "A Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer", Heidegger, as the enquirer, is asked about his use of hermeneutics. After referring to the introduction of *Being and Time*, he continues to say that he first encountered "hermeneutics" in his theological studies and later in Dilthey "in his theory of the History of Ideas" (DL: 10). Dilthey knew hermeneutics from his work on Schleiermacher. Heidegger then quotes the first lines of the introduction to Schleiermacher's *Hermeneutics and Criticism* (HC: 3), which define hermeneutics and criticism and their interdependence. This broadens the philological concept of hermeneutics, Heidegger claims, to include the interpretation of visual arts. In *Being and Time* hermeneutics is used in a still broader sense, and it means "the attempt first of all to define the nature of interpretation on hermeneutic grounds" (DL: 11). But then, Heidegger says that "in my later writings I no longer employ the term 'hermeneutics'" (DL: 12).

What has happened to hermeneutics? Is it that the technical sense of hermeneutics in *Being and Time* as the analysis of the existentiality of existence is no longer discussed since Heidegger has turned to a more original situation? This is certainly the case. However, we must ask to what extent hermeneutics as interpretive understanding is still present in the later Heidegger even if the term is not mentioned?

Later in the dialogue, Heidegger returns to the topic of hermeneutics in the context of discussing language as the house of Being. He returns again to the Greek word and Plato's passage that says the poets are the interpreters of the gods. This time he notes that the etymological reference to Hermes is "a playful thinking that is more compelling than the rigor of science" (DL: 29). Again the point is to show that hermeneutics means more than interpretation; more originally it means "the bearing of message and tidings" (*ibid*.). This was the sense it had in *Being and Time*. However, "what mattered then, and still does, is to bring out the Being of beings – though no longer in the manner of metaphysics, but such that Being itself will shine out, Being itself – that is to say: the presence of present beings" (DL: 30). As we noted, part of the problem with *Being and Time* was its metaphysical tone and its failure to examine the sending of Being. Now, Being shines forth and "makes its claim on man, calling him to its essential being" (*ibid*.). This occurs in language as the house of Being. "Language defines the hermeneutic relation" (*ibid*.). There is a hermeneutic relation between man and the presence of present beings. "'Relation' does want to say that man, in his very being, is in demand, is needed, that he, as the being he is, belongs within a needfulness which claims him" (DL: 32). As we have noted, how

**KEY POINT**

After Heidegger's turning to the *Ereignis*, he no longer uses the term "hermeneutics". Hermeneutics as the analysis of the existentiality of existence, central to *Being and Time*, clearly suffers the same problems as that work. Even speaking of the hermeneutic relation in language between human beings and Being or the hermeneutic circle in language itself Heidegger claims to be superficial.

human beings respond to the sending of Being brings beings into the clearing of the truth of Being, that is, into being. This occurs in language as the house of Being. So it would seem that there is a hermeneutic relation in the *Ereignis*.

Towards the end of the dialogue Heidegger notes that to speak *about* language is to turn it into an object. Rather one should speak "*from* language" and this can only be a dialogue. However, "it is a dialogue from out of the nature of language" (DL: 51). "I once called this strange relation the hermeneutic circle" (*ibid.*). In *Being and Time* we saw that the circle is not to be avoided but entered in the right manner. "But this necessary acceptance of the hermeneutic circle does not mean that the notion of the accepted circle gives us an originary experience of the hermeneutic relation" (*ibid.*). The problem appears to be that the term "hermeneutic circle" involves too many misleading connotations. Thus Heidegger no longer uses the term, since "talk of a circle always remains superficial" (*ibid.*). The use of "hermeneutics" and the "hermeneutic circle" do not uncover the more original position of human beings in the *Ereignis*. We must turn to an examination of language to discover in what sense, if at all, hermeneutics could still be a part of Heidegger's thinking, even if the term is not used.

### The way to language

Heidegger published "The Way to Language" in 1959. As do many of his later essays, it traces a path of thinking from what appears to be the contemporary answer to the subject matter discussed, usually through a criticism of the history of that concept, to the true essence of the topic as it appears at the centre of Heidegger's later thinking. As is also typical, he warns the reader to consider carefully "what transpires with the way while we are under way on it" (WL: 397) since the path of thinking will lead one back to a more original way of thinking. The aim of this essay is to understand language, which means "*to bring language as language*

*to language*" (WL: 398). Heidegger tells us that language is used here in three different senses, but that we must discover how these three are joined together.

In the first section of this essay Heidegger begins with the contemporary idea of language. Language is speech, a capability human beings usually have. In speaking we use our "phonic instruments" (WL: 400). This technical sense of language is the clearest and yet reveals the least about language. He returns to Aristotle's *On Interpretation*, where Aristotle said that the voice shows the affections of the soul and writing shows the sounds of the voice. Aristotle also argues that although human beings speak and write in different languages, the affections of the soul and the matters that they present are the same in all people. Heidegger emphasizes the sense of showing in Aristotle, where showing means "letting appear, which for its part depends on the ruling sway of revealing (*alētheia*)" (WL: 401). As we have seen, language is the house of Being and we are to think from the truth of Being. We noted before that *alētheia* means unconcealed and is Heidegger's concept of truth. Aristotle has indicated a proper sense of language. However, with the Stoics and in Hellenistic Greece, this relationship of showing and what is shown in language is corrupted. "The sign becomes an instrument for designating" (*ibid*.). Truth becomes correspondence. This mistaken sense of language is continued in the Western tradition and culminates in Wilhelm von Humboldt's discussion of language. Humboldt understands language as a human activity, "a labor of spirit" (quoted in WL: 403). However, Heidegger continues, this labour of spirit is a positing. "Because spirit is grasped as subject and thus represented in the subject/object schema, positing (thesis) must be the synthesis between the subject and its objects" (WL: 404). Humboldt reveals language only in one form, as a series of assertions. This is "the language of the metaphysics of his age" (WL: 405). Hence Humboldt's view of language does not reach the essence of language.

In the second section Heidegger returns to ask how language shows itself independent of the traditional understanding of language, "the way to language wants to let language be experienced as language" (WL: 406). Again the way to language begins with speech, but now we must pay closer attention to the situation of speaking. In speaking speakers are present but not as the cause of speech as before, but "in speech the speakers have their presencing" (*ibid*.). "Presencing" refers to the situation wherein by speaking we find ourselves among others and with things as they matter to us. Dasein in speaking with others comes to be what it is, namely that being with language (*logos*).

In speech what is spoken about also comes to presence. The spoken "derives in manifold ways from the unspoken, whether in the form of the not yet spoken or of what has to remain unspoken" (WL: 407). That is, in speaking human beings disclose or uncover and thereby bring to presence what is spoken about from its hidden position. With all that comes forth in speaking there is a unity that Heidegger calls the rift-design (*der Aufriss*). "The rift-design is the totality of traits in the kind of drawing that permeates what is opened up and set free in language" (WL: 408). The totality of traits refers to all the different kinds of distinctions that language enables us to understand. Different languages appear to have different rift-designs. In other words each language has its own conceptual matrix. In speaking, a particular structure or "drawing" is brought to presence in the connecting of these traits. "The rift-design is the drawing of the essence of language, the well-joined structure of a showing" (*ibid*.). In speaking we say something to someone and mutually disclose to each other the conceptual matrix embodied in that language. "We shall call the essence of language as a whole *the saying* [*die Sage*]" (WL: 409). The showing in saying is not primarily a human activity, but "is preceded by a thing's letting itself be shown" (WL: 410). In a sense, the thing must have already come to be in its presencing in order that it may be spoken of. In fact, Heidegger asserts that we have to listen to the silent saying of language. We speak using the language that we have learned, which makes us already at home in that language. Therefore, "language speaks by saying; that is by showing" (WL: 411). But language also requires human speech. We must be "granted entry into the saying" (*ibid*.). We are granted entry into language as the house of Being. Language speaks silently by bringing forth the saying to which human beings respond by bringing the saying into spoken language.

To explain these last results Heidegger turns to the original situation of human beings in the third section. Since "saying is a showing", it "lets what is coming to presence shine forth, lets what is withdrawing into absence vanish" (WL: 413–14). This occurs in the clearing, in the "there" of Dasein. Its occurrence is the most original situation of Heidegger's turning, the *Ereignis*. In this text Heidegger tells us, "Propriation [*Ereignis*], espied in the showing of the saying, can be represented neither as an event [*Vorkommnis*] nor as a happening [*Geschehen*]; it can only be experienced in the showing of the saying as that which grants" (WL: 415). It is neither since "event" or "happening" might indicate that this event was the result or outcome of a previous event. But, this is not the case with the *Ereignis*. Furthermore, "event" or "happening" could

indicate that the event could be explained by something else, but this is also not the case with the *Ereignis*. The *Ereignis* is the most original situation. Heidegger asserts that there is nothing more original from which it issued and which could be an explanation for it. "It is the bestowal whose giving reaches out in order to grant for the first time something like a 'There is/It gives' [*Es gibt*] which 'being' too needs if, as presencing, it is to come into its own" (*ibid.*). Heidegger says, "the showing of the saying is owning" (WL: 414) in the sense that things show themselves in their *own* way and are in their *own* manner, provided human beings correctly bring the saying into language.

In the *Ereignis* the organized structure of the saying (something like the conceptual matrix in language) unfolds and allows what shows itself to show itself. "Propriation bestows on mortals residence in their essence, such that they can be the ones who speak" (WL: 416). The essence of human beings is to speak and speak by listening to language, which occurs in the *Ereignis*. Language is the house of Being where human beings properly reside. Human beings, as speakers, are required in the *Ereignis* "in order to bring the soundless saying into the resonance of language" (WL: 418). The self-showing of things in the *Ereignis* is the rift-design of language in its silent saying, hence human beings are required, as speakers, to bring the structure of the showing into spoken language. "Propriation is thus the saying's way-making movement toward language" (*ibid.*). What is shown in the *Ereignis* within the clearing of the saying moves to complete expression in human beings. Therefore, to return to the statement at the beginning of the essay, "Such way-making brings language (the essence of language) as language (the saying) to language (to the resounding word)" (*ibid.*). Language, as we noted, is the house of Being, "because, as the saying, it is propriation's mode" (WL: 424). "Propriation's mode" of being means the way the *Ereignis* occurs or happens. It happens in different ways

**KEY POINT**

Language, as Aristotle says, has to do with a showing and letting things appear as uncovered. However, this original sense of language was corrupted by understanding language as a system of signs for designating already known objects. Language, properly understood, contains a totality of traits that are unified in the saying. The essence of language is the saying. Human beings are granted entrance into language, into the house of Being, in order to bring the silent saying of language into resounding speech. This task is the essence of human being. In the *Ereignis* human beings respond to the saying of language and thereby permit the presencing of beings in accordance with the sending of Being.

throughout time, so language is itself historical. In the history of Being, Being sends itself in different ways that constitute the epochs of Being. Human beings "remain within the essence of language to which we have been granted entry" (WL: 423) as speaking beings.

We must ask whether hermeneutics as interpretive understanding is contained within this characterization of the *Ereignis* and language. We see that human beings are needed in the *Ereignis* in order to take the silent saying of language as it is sent by Being and put it into resounding words, that is, into spoken language. Being sends the way-making movement of the saying and human beings must respond. Today, Being sends itself as the essence of technology, which Heidegger calls the "enframing". "The enframing, because it sets upon human beings – that is, challenges them – to order everything that comes to presence into a technical inventory, unfolds essentially after the manner of propriation [*Ereignis*]; at the same time it distorts propriation" (WL: 420). Today human beings respond to the sending of Being in the mode of modern technology. Speech becomes information and things come to be only as technical inventory. However, in so responding to the sending of Being in the *Ereignis*, human beings also distort it. The question is how much interpretive leeway do human beings have in responding to the saying of Being. On the one hand, the history of Being as the destiny of man that sets the saying of language would appear to determine how human beings respond to the saying. "Every proper language, because it is allotted to human beings through the way-making movement of the saying, is sent, hence fateful" (WL: 422). There appears to be little room for interpretive understanding. On the other hand, if human beings are to have any freedom in determining their future, it would appear that they must be able to interpretively respond to the saying of Being sent to them. In some way, Heidegger claims, we are able to learn about language as the house of Being by thoughtfully following the way to language. "Perhaps we can in some slight measure prepare for the transformation in our kinship with language. … Every thinking that is on the trail of something is a poetizing, and all poetry a thinking" (WL: 425). Perhaps in thinking about the *Ereignis*, language as the house of Being, and our role in responding, we can interpretively understand and prepare for a transformation in our response. In this slight chance perhaps hermeneutics as interpretive understanding does have a role to play in Heidegger's later thinking, especially in listening to what poetry has to say.

## Heidegger's hermeneutic praxis

In listening to the poets we may gain insight into Being. We shall examine Heidegger's hermeneutic praxis in his essay "Words" (1959). Our contention is that Heidegger basically follows a traditional hermeneutic method as it developed from Schleiermacher, with two major exceptions. Heidegger does not rely on the purely psychological interpretation, which seeks to discover the seminal idea of the poet. This was also Dilthey's criticism of Schleiermacher. Nor does Heidegger claim that understanding occurs when one can recreate the creative act, for which Dilthey to some extent continued to argue. Rather, Heidegger tries to hear the saying of the words.

After announcing the theme of his reading – "From where does the poetic word arise?" – Heidegger turns to Stefan George's poem "Words" ("*Das Wort*"). He notes that it was first published in 1919 and then included in George's last volume of poetry published in 1928. "In the first hearing and reading of the poem" (W: 141), we will notice that it is made of seven two-line stanzas. Heidegger begins with a first reading as in the hermeneutic tradition. We will, he continues, be enchanted by the poet's experiences in the first six stanzas, while the last one is different and seems oppressing: "So I renounced and sadly see: / Where word breaks off no thing may be" (W: 140). But the last stanza is important since it concludes the poem and contains the title word. "Only this final stanza makes us hear what, according to the title, is the poetic intent of the whole poem: Words" (W: 141). That "word" is singular in the final line, yet plural in the title, is a problem we face in the translation. The translation is not wrong because the German singular "*das Wort*" can mean a collection of many words, even in the sense of discourse, while "the word" in English would imply one specific word. One should notice that Heidegger speaks of the poetic intent of the poem and not the author's intention. So the last line is important, but "one is tempted to turn the final line into a statement with the content: No thing is where the word breaks off" (*ibid.*). Hence the initial reading has located the poem in its language context and offered an initial interpretation by taking the last line to be a statement and the poetic intent. This initial interpretation is also confirmed by the parts of the poem. The colon in the penultimate line "arouses the expectation that it will be followed by a statement" (W: 142), as also occurs in the fifth stanza and is confirmed by the quotation marks. It reads: "She sought for long and tidings told: / 'No like of this these depths enfold'" (W: 140). Here grammatical interpretation helps confirm the proposed reading.

Heidegger begins his second reading by noticing that although structurally similar, there is a difference between the two statements. Using the method of comparison the fifth stanza is seen to be an announcement whereas the final one is a renouncing. By connecting the word "renounce" to Greek and Latin terms, Heidegger is able to understand "renounce" in "the old German word 'Sagan', to say" (W: 142). The stanza then means that the poet has learned renunciation through a journey. This connects the last stanza to the journeys in the first six stanzas. Further, "once" in the fourth stanza, Heidegger tells us, is being used "in the old meaning which signifies 'one time'" (W: 143). This allows him to group the first six stanzas into two triads. The first representing the other journeys and the last representing this particular one. Hence by considering possible meanings of a part, a word, he is able to develop a unified whole. After further interpretation Heidegger concludes his second reading. Very briefly, "my land" is taken to refer to poetry, and poets need words. Thus the first triad presents the poet's usual journeys to find the words he is seeking where he is successful. However, the particular journey of the second triad recounts the time when the goddess of fate, as Heidegger interprets the "twilit norn", was unable to provide the poet with the word he sought. The sixth stanza reads, "And straight it vanished from my hand, / The treasure never graced my land …" (W: 140). Since "the word first bestows presence, that is, Being in which things appear as beings" (W: 146), without the word the treasure slips away. This is what the poet learned.

However, "much still remains obscure in this poem" (W: 147). So the unity of part and whole that was achieved is still in need of further interpretation. Heidegger then connects this poem to the greater whole of its place in the final volume of George's poems where it is included. The poem occurs in the section entitled "Song". This is related to a saying so that "Singing is the gathering of Saying in song" (W: 148). The last stanza reflects the poet's understanding "that only the word lets a thing be as thing" (*ibid.*). This idea is corroborated by another poem from that section of George's book. This poem adds the thought that saying is "the echo of an inexpressible Saying whose sound is barely perceptible and songlike" (W: 150). So now the last stanza means "a thing may be only where the word is granted" (*ibid.*). Renunciation becomes an affirmation of the mystery of the word. "Renunciation owes thanks – it is a thanking" (W: 152). This interpretation finds support in another poem by George that Heidegger interprets. Finally, we understand the last stanza to mean: "The *treasure rich and frail* is the word's hidden essence (verbal) which, invisibly in its Saying and even already in what is unsaid,

extends to us the thing as thing" (W: 154). This brings us, Heidegger concludes, to ponder the original "belonging of Saying and Being, word and thing" (W: 155). This would complete Heidegger's interpretation of the poem; however, at the end he suggests we forget what he has said and simply "listen to the poem" (W: 156). We would then grow more thoughtful and realize how "the more simply the poem sings in the mode of song, the more readily our hearing may err" (*ibid.*).

Through this example, we can see that Heidegger basically follows the traditional hermeneutic method for interpreting poems. He begins with a first reading, locating the poem in its context and the language area, and noticing its form. Through grammatical and comparative methods he concludes his first interpretation. However, since the parts do not quite fit together, he initiates another interpretation, which unifies the parts into a whole in a more satisfactory way. But there are still some obscurities so he widens the context of interpretation by locating this poem in its place in George's volume and includes support from other poems by George. This results in a final interpretation where the poem points towards the relationship of saying and Being that lies at the heart of Heidegger's philosophy. Heidegger's approach is different from traditional hermeneutics in that he does not use a version of Schleiermacher's psychological interpretation to uncover the author's intent or the way the author constructed the poem. Nor does he claim to have reconstructed the creative act of the author. Rather, he listens to the saying of the poem itself.

In our discussion of hermeneutics and language in Heidegger's later thought, we have seen that he no longer speaks of hermeneutics and the hermeneutic circle. *Being and Time* was a way-station on his path of thinking, and he needed to think back to the more original situation of the *Ereignis* in order to continue to think about the meaning of Being. Therefore, hermeneutics as the analysis of the existentiality of existence is no longer discussed. At most *Being and Time* is a stage in thinking that one might need in order to be able to think with the later Heidegger. Language, however, becomes more central to his thought. Language is now the house of Being, where the essence of language is the silent saying of the sending of Being. Human beings are needed to respond to the saying by bringing it to speech. This enables the *Ereignis* to happen where beings come to presence. Heidegger is unclear as to whether there could be a sense of hermeneutics as interpretive understanding in the human response to the saying of language. If hermeneutics plays a role in the later Heidegger, it would be primarily as a method of interpreting especially poetry and excluding any psychological interpretation. Had

Heidegger's student, Hans-Georg Gadamer, not placed hermeneutics at the centre of his philosophy, "hermeneutics" may well have disappeared from the philosophical conversation.

### Key points

1. Heidegger did not finish *Being and Time* because he found it too close to the language of metaphysics.
2. Heidegger turned in his thinking by stepping back to a more original situation, the *Ereignis*, where human beings and Being need each other to bring beings into presence.
3. In his later thought Heidegger no longer speaks of hermeneutics.
4. Language is the house of Being where human beings are needed to respond to the silent saying of the sending of Being by speaking so that beings may come to presence.
5. Heidegger's interpretive praxis follows traditional hermeneutics where psychological interpretation is replaced by a listening to the saying of the text.

# five

# Gadamer's theory of hermeneutic experience

Hans-Georg Gadamer formulates his hermeneutic theory, philosophical hermeneutics, in *Truth and Method* (1960). The original title was to have been "Fundamentals of a Philosophical Hermeneutics", but the publisher thought "hermeneutics" was too obscure. With the success of *Truth and Method* philosophical hermeneutics has become a respected branch of contemporary continental philosophy. The stated aim of *Truth and Method* is to provide a philosophical justification for "the experience of truth that transcends the domain of scientific method" (TM: xxii). Such experiences of truth, Gadamer argues, occur in art, philosophy and the human sciences. *Truth and Method* is divided into three parts, which concern the experience of truth in art, the experience of truth in the understanding of the human sciences and the ontological foundation of hermeneutics in language. Our discussion will concentrate on the fundamental structures of hermeneutic experience and its basis in language that constitute the second half of the book.

## The history of hermeneutics

After arguing that an experience of truth happens in understanding a work of art that does not rely on method, Gadamer applies this to hermeneutics at the end of the first part of *Truth and Method*. He discovers two different hermeneutic tasks, reconstruction and integration, associated with Schleiermacher and Hegel respectively. He interprets the history of modern hermeneutics following "Hegel rather than

*Hans-Georg Gadamer*

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| 1900 | born on 11 February in Marburg, Germany |
| 1902 | the Gadamers return to Breslau, Silesia (now in Poland) |
| 1918 | enters the University of Breslau |
| 1919 | transfers to the University of Marburg after his father becomes the chair of pharmacological chemistry at that university |
| 1922 | is awarded a PhD in philosophy for "The Nature of Pleasure according to Plato's Dialogues", contracts polio and reads Heidegger's "Indication of the Hermeneutic Situation" |
| 1923 | marries Frida Kratz, moves to Freiburg to study with Heidegger and accompanies Heidegger back to Marburg |
| 1927 | passes state examination in classical philology |
| 1928 | is awarded a habilitation (teaching qualification) in philosophy for "Interpretation of Plato's *Philebus*", directed by Martin Heidegger, which was published in 1931 as *Plato's Dialectical Ethics* |
| 1939 | becomes full professor and chair of philosophy at the University of Leipzig after several temporary positions in Kiel and Marburg |
| 1946 | becomes the Rector of the University of Leipzig |
| 1947 | accepts a teaching position at the University of Frankfurt |
| 1949 | takes Karl Jasper's chair in philosophy at the University of Heidelberg |
| 1950 | marries Kate Lekebusch |
| 1960 | publishes *Truth and Method* |
| 1968 | officially retires but continues teaching until 1970 |
| 1970–90 | travels extensively lecturing in North America and Europe |
| 1985 | publication of his *Collected Works* begins |
| 2002 | dies on 13 March in Heidelberg |

Schleiermacher" (TM: 173). Although Gadamer admits that his presentation is pointed, he nevertheless stands by his major critical points. We shall briefly trace Gadamer's analysis, which he opposes to Dilthey's, which in turn followed Schleiermacher's ideal of reconstruction.

Modern hermeneutics developed in biblical interpretation and the philological investigations of the classics. For Spinoza and Johann Martin Chladenius (1710–59) hermeneutics, as a technique for interpreting, is only required when the meaning of the text is unclear. The aim of hermeneutics is to understand the truth that the text contains. The task of hermeneutics is to integrate this truth into one's life. Understanding means coming to be in agreement concerning some subject matter. Gadamer argues that Schleiermacher's hermeneutics proposes a radical change in the task of understanding. Instead of working towards an agreement about the truth of a text, the interpreter's central task is

to recreate the creative process of the author in order to understand the author's intended meaning. The task of hermeneutics shifts to reconstruction. The goal of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics is to understand "not only the exact words and their objective meaning, but also the individuality of the speaker or author" (TM: 186), which implies "a recreation of the creative act" (TM: 187). Although Gadamer recognizes Schleiermacher's "brilliant comments on grammatical interpretation" (TM: 186), his criticism centres on Schleiermacher's psychological interpretation, which "gradually came to dominate the development of this thought" (TM: 187). To recreate the author's thinking, the interpreter must discover the author's seminal decision. For Gadamer, this emphasis on psychological interpretation implies that the subject matter is ignored in understanding a text and is replaced by an aesthetic reconstruction of the individuality of the author. The divinatory interpretation of the creative act presupposes congeniality, "namely that all individuality is a manifestation of universal life" (TM: 189). Only this presupposition, Gadamer claims, grants the interpreter access to the author's thinking. Schleiermacher applies the hermeneutic circle of part and whole to the author so that his individual thoughts must be understood "as an element in the total context of a man's life" (TM: 190). As we shall see, Gadamer considers this divinatory act of recreation to be impossible. Schleiermacher argues that the interpreter can understand an author better than the author understands herself because in the reconstruction of the author's thinking, the interpreter will be aware of influences that the author was not. According to Gadamer, this just demonstrates that "Schleiermacher is applying the aesthetics of genius to his universal hermeneutics" (TM: 192). Gadamer insists that better understanding should refer to a better understanding of the subject matter under discussion.

Gadamer sketches the influence of Schleiermacher's romantic theory of understanding in the development of the historical school of thought in order to criticize Dilthey, "who consciously takes up romantic hermeneutics and expands it into a historical method – indeed into an epistemology of the human sciences" (TM: 198). Dilthey is especially important because he argues that understanding in the human sciences is essentially different from understanding in the natural sciences. Dilthey's project is to justify philosophically knowledge claims in the human sciences. He recognizes that the historian, who is to understand history, is himself a historical being living in a particular tradition. Since the historian cannot attain an objective point of view, which is possible in the natural sciences, valid knowledge must be derived

from lived experiences. Dilthey argues that validity is possible since in an experience "the identity between consciousness and object … is still demonstrable reality" (TM: 222). In other words, valid meaning is created "from the historical reality of life" (TM: 223). According to Gadamer, the problem Dilthey faces concerns moving from valid knowledge at the individual level to valid knowledge of meaningful structures within history itself. To accomplish this he must introduce "'logical subjects' instead of 'real subjects'" (TM: 224). These subjects are collective groups of individuals that create meaningful, historical structures. Dilthey contends that individual life is able to understand life in general and historical consciousness can understand tradition, since both are founded in life. Due to a basic similarity in human beings, one can relive the historical world through a type of "universal sympathy" (TM: 233). Furthermore, such a "con-genial intuitive bond" (*ibid.*) produces valid knowledge by using the scientific method of comparative studies. At this point in his argument, Gadamer claims Dilthey mistakenly transcends the correctly identified historicality and finitude of human understanding as lived experience and adopts the ahistorical standpoint of scientific thought. This demonstrates "the unresolved Cartesianism from which he [Dilthey] starts" (TM: 237). "The fact that it is necessary to adopt the 'standpoint of reflection and doubt' and that this is what happens 'in all forms of scientific reflection' (and not elsewhere) is simply incompatible with Dilthey's life philosophy" (TM: 238). Gadamer's critique is that if the historian is embedded in history, and this means within the hermeneutic circle of understanding, she cannot escape this circle to attain a standpoint of reflection that would permit methodologically justified knowledge. Dilthey's use of Schleiermacher's concept of congenial understanding and divinatory interpretation to escape the hermeneutic circle, according to Gadamer, makes the same false presuppositions as Schleiermacher did.

Building on Husserl's phenomenological description, Heidegger is first able to free the concept of life from the idea of methodological justification, which was central to Dilthey and Husserl. There is also no original difference between natural scientific and humanistic understanding as in Dilthey, nor is a true methodology of understanding to be discovered through Husserl's transcendental reflection. Heidegger reveals understanding to be "the *original form of the realization of Dasein*, which is being-in-the-world" (TM: 259). In understanding, Dasein is projecting possibilities of its own being. In being-in-the-world, Dasein is thrown, discovering itself to be always and already within a historical context and so having a past. Therefore, "the structure of

**KEY POINT**

In the beginning of modern hermeneutics, the task of hermeneutics concerns the integration of the truth of the text's subject matter. Although Schleiermacher develops a universal theory, he changes the task of hermeneutics to reconstruction by emphasizing psychological interpretation. Dilthey expands the hermeneutic task of reconstruction to include understanding in the human sciences, but the epistemological requirements for validity in historical knowledge required a Cartesian subject incompatible with his life philosophy. Heidegger returns the task of hermeneutics to integration by demonstrating that understanding is the realization of Dasein.

Dasein is thrown projection" (TM: 264). The basis of any projective understanding has already been conditioned by the facticity of being, by Dasein's having been thrown into the world, and hence by the historical tradition within which Dasein lives. So any understanding or truth claim depends on the temporal horizon in which Dasein lives and its projective interpretation towards its possibilities of being. "Everything that makes possible and limits Dasein's projection ineluctably precedes it" (*ibid.*). This must also be the case for the hermeneutic understanding of the historical tradition, and this, Gadamer contends, means that the task of hermeneutics is returned to integration.

### Prejudices and the authority of tradition

Gadamer accepts the accuracy of Heidegger's ontological description of understanding as the basis for developing his own philosophical hermeneutics. As you will recall, Heidegger reveals understanding to be a fundamental ontological structure of human being. This means that we are always understanding in one way or another. Understanding is thrown projection. As projection, understanding concerns the future possibilities of human being and culminates in self-understanding. For Gadamer, as we shall see, this means that even understanding a text from the past culminates in a self-understanding with reference to future possibilities of being. Thrownness means that one has always already understood in some manner, and hence that any act of understanding commences with the fore-structures of understanding and interprets these as something. Therefore, the interpreter cannot escape the hermeneutic circle and attain direct knowledge. "Heidegger derives the circular structure of understanding from the temporality of Dasein" (TM: 266). According to Gadamer the thrownness of understanding means that

the inherited tradition forms the initial point of departure for all acts of understanding. Gadamer commences his analysis of understanding by quoting Heidegger's claim that the productive possibility of the hermeneutic circle occurs when we realize our constant task is not "to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves" (SZ: 153; quoted in TM: 266). Gadamer's task in philosophical hermeneutics is to demonstrate how correct understanding may be achieved by grounding the fore-structures of understanding on the things themselves. While Heidegger reveals understanding as an ontological structure of human being, Gadamer will examine understanding epistemologically. He will describe the experience of truth or how to achieve correct understanding. Since one is interested in understanding correctly, this description implies prescriptions for correct understanding.

Gadamer employs the word "prejudices" (*Vorurteile*) to designate collectively Heidegger's fore-structures of understanding. In German "*vor-*" means "pre-" and "*Urteil*" means "judgement" so with reference to Heidegger's fore-structures "*Vorurteil*" would mean prejudgement. In normal German usage, however, "*Vorurteil*" means prejudice. Gadamer's choice of this term is provocative since he argues that today's negative connotation of prejudice only develops with the Enlightenment. Since the Enlightenment valued the use of one's own reason over the acceptance of an authority, authority was considered a negative prejudice. The Romantic reaction, which favoured the past over the present, just reversed the evaluation of prejudice. "Primeval wisdom is only the counter image of 'primeval stupidity'" (TM: 274). Neither understood the original meaning of prejudice, which Gadamer employs: a prejudice, as a prejudgement, is neither positive nor negative until the final judgement is rendered. Since "prejudice" plays a central role in philosophical hermeneutics, the reader must bear in mind its intended neutral connotation.

At any particular point in time one's prejudices, as one's inherited fore-structures of understanding, include everything one knows consciously or unconsciously. They include the meaning of words, our preferences, the facts we accept, our values and aesthetic judgements, our judgements concerning human nature and the divine and so on. We are unaware of most of our prejudices most of the time although some can be called into conscious awareness. For example, in reading the first sentence of the previous paragraph your prejudices concerning English syntax and semantics were all operating at a level of which you were

not aware. Probably you understood "prejudice" in its normal negative connotation. Perhaps by the end of the sentence you questioned how one's fore-structures could be prejudices. Maybe you left a mental note to yourself to return to this if it was not clarified in the further reading. By now, hopefully, you have adopted a new prejudice concerning the meaning of the word "prejudice", at least for Gadamer's usage.

All understanding begins from our prejudices. The thrownness of understanding implies that all our prejudices are inherited from our past in the process of acculturation. In learning a language, in your education and upbringing, you have acquired your set of prejudices from which any case of understanding proceeds. Only some of these have been consciously tested. "*That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being*" (TM: 276–7). Since prejudices may be either legitimate, based on the things themselves, or illegitimate, based on chance ideas and popular conceptions, Gadamer can now "formulate the fundamental epistemological question for a truly historical hermeneutics as follows: What is the ground of the legitimacy of prejudices? What differentiates legitimate prejudices from those numerous other prejudices whose overcoming is the undoubted task of critical reason?" (TM: 277). From what Heidegger said and Gadamer quoted, we know prejudices will be legitimized when they are grounded on the things themselves. The rest of *Truth and Method* will demonstrate how this process of legitimization and the critical task of rejecting illegitimate prejudices happen in understanding.

Gadamer's first task is to rehabilitate the authority of tradition in order to prove that legitimate prejudices may be found there. By examining how authority is gained and lost, Gadamer counters the Enlightenment opposition of reason and authority. One acknowledges the authority of another because one judges "the other is superior to oneself in judgment and insight and for that reason his judgment takes precedence" (TM: 279). Hence, acknowledgement of an authority is an act of reason. We accept the weather prediction because the meteorologists have more information and skill than we do. One might blindly obey another who has more power; however, this is not an acknowledgement of authority but a recognition of power. Traditions bequeath judgements and customs from one generation to the next. The student accepts the authority of the teacher to convey accurate information until she comes of age, which means she is able to make her own, reasoned judgements. A person loses her authority when we have reasonable grounds for suspicion. It would be reasonable, for example, to question

a "scientific" report supporting a drug that we discover to have been written by someone indirectly funded by the drug company.

Gadamer also rejects the Enlightenment antithesis between reason and tradition. He argues that a tradition "needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated. It is, essentially, preservation. … Preservation is an act of reason though an inconspicuous one" (TM: 281). For something to have survived in a tradition implies that it has probably been judged worthy by those who have embraced it. The authority of tradition is not absolute as the Romantics thought; not everything in a tradition is true, but it is a possible source for legitimate prejudices. The reason we study the past is that we think we might learn something from it.

Gadamer discusses the example of the classics to exemplify the authority of tradition. Although Gadamer may accept the German classics as authoritative for himself, the classical is meant to indicate a historical mode of being: "the historical process of preservation that, through constantly proving itself, allows something true to come into being" (TM: 287). A text is judged to belong to the classics because it has been found over and again to contain true or legitimate prejudices. This does not mean that the future will make this same judgement. As a person may lose his authority, a text may lose its classical status. The temporality of understanding discovered in the fore-structures of understanding implies that all of our prejudices have come from the past. One always stands within tradition(s). The task for hermeneutic understanding is to differentiate the legitimate prejudices from all the illegitimate ones that need to be criticized and dropped. Understanding must commence from our inherited prejudices and concerns only a few of them while the others constitute the unquestioned background for understanding. "*Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition*, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated" (TM: 290).

**KEY POINT**

Gadamer develops his theory of understanding on the basis of Heidegger's ontological description of the fore-structures of understanding, which Gadamer provocatively terms prejudices. Prejudices may be either legitimate, which lead to understanding, or illegitimate, which do not. The epistemological task of *Truth and Method* is to explicate how we justify our prejudices in the event of understanding. Gadamer starts by arguing for the authority of tradition since it is reasonable to expect legitimate prejudices to be contained in tradition, as in the case of the classics.

## The hermeneutic circle and effective history

Understanding transpires within the hermeneutic circle. In interpreting a text the interpreter moves from a projected meaning for the whole to the parts and then returns to the whole. "The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding" (TM: 291). This process of understanding is "the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter" (TM: 293). One example of the movement of tradition is the different ways that Plato's *Republic* has been found to have something illuminating to say in the course of its preservation within tradition. The movement of the interpreter includes not only the reading of the original text but also an examination of that reading in light of other interpretations of Plato with the goal of establishing a unity of meaning for the text. The tradition, as inherited language, provides for the anticipation of meaning, while the interpreter, through her critical judgement, continues to form tradition. To Heidegger's ontological description of the hermeneutic circle, Gadamer identifies a further implication: "the 'fore-conception of completeness'" (TM: 293–4). It states that the interpreter must *initially* assume that the text has both "an immanent unity of meaning" (TM: 294), that is, that it is coherent and that what it says is true. This assumption is analogous to the principle of charity in other theories of interpretation. Only when this assumption cannot be maintained in reading the text does the interpreter look for another psychological or historical explication.

This assumption of completeness is also logically required in order to call one of our prejudices into question through the confrontation with a different prejudice from the text. "It is impossible to make ourselves aware of a prejudice while it is constantly operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, provoked" (TM: 299). The initial assumption of coherence and truth allows the text's prejudice to call our own prejudice into question. Imagine reading Plato's allegory of the cave, in English translation, to a young adult of the twenty-first century. Understanding what is read using his contemporary meanings, that is, his inherited prejudices, he might complain about the inconsistency of being chained up and yet not able to look around at the fire. Or, if he understood that we are in the position of those chained in the cave, he might argue the whole thing is just nonsense since he is clearly not chained up or in a cave. It would take some work to get him to, in effect, use the fore-conception of completeness in order to ask what assumptions must be made in order to understand this text as coherent and truthful. Once he did this, he would have called into question his prejudice for literal

readings as opposed to allegorical reading and his prejudice favouring the veracity of sensations. Of course, this is just the initial step and does not determine how the text will be judged in the final analysis. "The locus of hermeneutics is this in-between" (TM: 295), between what is familiar or shared and what is foreign in the text. The value of what is foreign in a text enables the interpreter to call into question what is familiar and usually accepted without question.

The temporal distance between an interpreter and the text is not a gulf to be bridged, but "a positive and productive condition enabling understanding" (TM: 297). The aim of interpretation, Gadamer argues, is not to bridge the temporal gap and reconstruct the original situation of the text, but to discover what the text has to say to us. The productivity of temporal distance derives from what we have said about preservation in tradition. A text or prejudice that has been preserved in tradition is likely to be valuable or true for two reasons. First, "certain sources of error are automatically excluded" (TM: 298) in the sense that a false prejudice will not be preserved. Of course this is not necessarily the case because illegitimate prejudices have been preserved for a long time in a tradition, before they were discovered to be illegitimate. Nevertheless, a text that has been judged and found valuable throughout a tradition, a classical text, suggests that we also consider its possible value. Secondly, "new sources of understanding are continually emerging that reveal unsuspected elements of meaning" (*ibid.*). For example, changes in our understanding of the world may allow Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* to be read with greater insight today than in the Middle Ages. Gadamer modifies his original statement from "only" to "often temporal distance can solve" (*ibid.*) the critical question of distinguishing true prejudices from false ones. In the footnote explaining this change, Gadamer emphasizes that it is distance itself (and I would say difference itself) that is important in solving the question. It is important since we can call our own prejudices into question only through the confrontation of other, different prejudices. The greater the distance is between interpreter and text, the more likely it is to lead to different prejudices. The initial recognition of these different prejudices calls our own prejudices into question. "The essence of the question is to open up possibilities" (TM: 299) of learning and self-understanding. Once these conflicting possibilities have emerged, the process of adjudication and understanding may proceed.

As we have noticed, the past influences understanding in two ways. First, through acculturation and learning a language we inherit our set of prejudices that initially guide understanding. Secondly, tradition

preserves a series of interpretations of meaningful texts that we inherit. In understanding and evaluating elements in the tradition we pass them on to the future. Gadamer employs the concept of effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) to indicate these effects of history on understanding. "*Understanding is, essentially, a historically effected event*" (TM: 300). Our consciousness is, therefore, a historically effected consciousness in the broad sense that means whether we are aware of it or not, our inherited prejudices always constitute the background and basis from which we understand. Effective historical consciousness in the narrower sense means that one is reflectively aware of having a historically effected consciousness. This implies that the interpreter realizes she stands within the hermeneutic circle of understanding and that her hermeneutic situation has been affected by tradition by means of her inherited prejudices.

The term horizon indicates one's hermeneutic situation, that is, one's inherited set of prejudices. These prejudices "constitute, then, the horizon of a particular present, for they represent that beyond which it is impossible to see" (TM: 306). The concept of horizon also indicates that one's horizon can change by adopting other prejudices, can expand by including more prejudices, or can contract by excluding some prejudices. In attempting to understand an inherited text, it *seems* that one should transpose oneself into the historical horizon of that author or an original reader. However, Gadamer argues that this empathetic transposition is a Romantic fiction that is neither desirable nor possible. It is not desirable because even if the interpreter could completely ignore his own position and adopt just the position, the horizon, of the other, then "the person understanding has, as it were, stopped trying to reach an agreement" (TM: 303) and just adopted the other's position. However, as Gadamer has stated, the purpose of interpretive understanding is to discover the truth about the subject matter presented in the text. In adopting the past horizon, "we have given up the claim to find in the past any truth that is valid and intelligible for ourselves" (*ibid*.). If you could ignore all your own prejudices and just adopt the author's prejudices, then one could only understand in the manner, perhaps biased, in which the author understood, and we would make "our own standpoint safely unattainable" (*ibid*.). Furthermore, it is not even possible to ignore all of our own prejudices since our own prejudices must be provoked, as we have seen, in order for them to be called into question. Therefore most of our prejudices would continue functioning in an unconscious manner. Consciousness is not able to just forget everything it knows. Certainly in order to understand a text we must project its historical

horizon. "But it is not the case that we acquire this horizon by transposing ourselves into a historical situation. Rather, we must always already have a horizon in order to be able to transpose ourselves into a situation" (TM: 305). Transposition means "we must imagine the other situation. But into this other situation we must bring, precisely, ourselves" (*ibid*.). In other words, using the fore-conception of completeness, we expand our present horizon by including the different and opposing prejudices from the text while calling our own prejudices into question.

Horizon denotes both the momentary limits set by the horizon as well as the idea that one's horizon will change as one moves. In the hermeneutic situation your horizon is determined by your prejudices, which establish your sphere of possible meaning. In coming to a new understanding through the encounter with a text, what you understand changes, and so your horizon of meaning changes. A truly closed and static horizon is impossible since "the historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint" (TM: 304). The life of a tradition is itself the movement of one large horizon within which my own horizon can be distinguished from a past horizon as stages in the continual movement of tradition. "Our own past and that other past toward which our historical consciousness is directed help to shape this moving horizon out of which human life always lives and which determines it as heritage and tradition" (*ibid*.). As we just noted, in understanding a text we project the text's horizon within our own horizon. Therefore, "*understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves*" (TM: 306). The adjudication of the conflicting prejudices from my own and the text's projected horizon, which is the discovery of legitimate prejudices, will take place within this expanded horizon of meaning. First, however, Gadamer discusses the "central problem of hermeneutics" (TM: 307):

**KEY POINT**

Understanding occurs within the hermeneutic circle. This circle requires the interpreter to presuppose initially that the text is both coherent and truthful, the fore-conception of completeness, in order to recognize conflicting prejudices in the text and thereby to call his own prejudices into question. The temporal distance between the interpreter and text is productive in eliminating errors and opening new possibilities of meaning. Historically effected consciousness in the narrower sense signifies that we are aware of the effect of history by inheriting our prejudices. Understanding is the fusion of horizons where the interpreter's horizon is expanded to include the projected horizon of the past.

the problem of application, which is essential for projecting a historical horizon as a phase in the process of understanding.

## Application and hermeneutic experience

Heidegger demonstrated that all understanding is interpretive because of the hermeneutic circle. Gadamer will now argue that all interpretive understanding requires application in order to project the meaning of the text. Application is "just as integral a part of the hermeneutical process as are understanding and interpretation" (TM: 308). At the outset we need to emphasize that application does not mean that one first understands the text and then later applies it to one's own situation. Rather, application is an integral part of understanding itself. At the end of his discussion Gadamer clearly states, "Application does not mean first understanding a given universal in itself and then afterward applying it to a concrete case. It is the very understanding of the universal – the text – itself" (TM: 341). Application is an integral process within the projection of the text's meaning within the interpreter's expanded horizon.

To explicate the process of application Gadamer turns to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* as "a model of the problems of hermeneutics" (TM: 324). Aristotle argues that the realization of the ethical norm in a particular concrete situation requires deliberation to determine how that universal can be instantiated in this particular situation: in other words, how it is to be applied and realized. Aristotle's ethical deliberation is a model for application for two reasons. First, it demonstrates how one can logically apply a universal, the text, to a particular situation, the interpreter's, without deductively subsuming the individual under a universal law. Secondly, it demonstrates how one who is involved in understanding can achieve self-knowledge without assuming an objective perspective. Gadamer identifies three aspects of Aristotle's discussion relevant to hermeneutic application.

First, universal ethical norms, such as courage, are "guiding images" (TM: 317) and not universal generalizations, and thus their realization requires a consideration of the concrete situation. Further, as the discussion of equity demonstrates (*Nicomachean Ethics*: 1137a31), the realization or application of a law to a particular circumstance may involve modification of the letter of the law in order to realize its true meaning. Similarly the projection or application of the text's prejudice may involve a modification of its meaning to make it intelligible in the horizon of the interpreter, but this modification is a realization of its true meaning.

For example, in projecting the meaning of what Aristotle intends in the discussion of equity, the contemporary interpreter would include the functioning of precedents in legal theory, although Aristotle could not consider this possibility. The interpreter projects Aristotle's meaning by applying what he said to the contemporary legal situation.

Secondly, the application of an ethical norm to a concrete situation is not determined ahead of time, as if one could deduce its application, but is uncertain and requires deliberation. Deliberation ends in "seeing what is immediately to be done" (TM: 322). Perhaps several possible acts are considered, and then one discovers which act is the mean for that actor. Aristotle compares this sense of seeing what is to be done with the way we see that the triangle is the simplest plane figure. Returning to the example of interpreting Aristotle, what Aristotle means by equity is not firmly established ahead of time, as if Aristotle could establish a determinate meaning by knowing all possible interpretive contexts. Rather, the interpreter must consider what Aristotle would have said today in the context of precedent law theory; in other words she must apply or translate what he did say into the contemporary context. Aristotle himself stated that the one who achieves equity must consider how the original lawgiver would have applied his law to the present case, which was unknown at the time the law was written.

Thirdly, "sympathetic understanding" (TM: 322) is associated with moral knowledge in the sense that Aristotle says only friends can offer advice. The application of the text, that is, the projecting of its horizon, requires that the interpreter approach the text sympathetically by strengthening what it has to say, as we noted formally in the foreconception of completeness.

Gadamer uses the example of legal hermeneutics to demonstrate how application works. He considers two cases of understanding a law: the judge who needs to understand how the law applies to a particular case and the legal historian who "seeks to determine the meaning of the law by considering the whole range of its applications" (TM: 325). In precedent law, the case of the judge is more obvious. Following what Aristotle said about equity, the judge is not bound by the letter of the law but must consider how the original lawgivers would have considered this law in reference to the present concrete case. "He has to take account of the change in circumstances and hence define afresh the normative function of the law" (TM: 327). Since the circumstances of this particular case may not have been considered by the lawgiver, the judge may establish a new precedent case that correctly realizes the meaning of the law. In other words, he applies the true meaning of the law to this particular case.

In the case of the legal historian it might appear that his task is to discover the meaning of the law by only considering its application when the law was created. However, Gadamer argues that the legal historian, who is interested in explicating the complete or true meaning of the law, must include the later cases where the law has been used. In precedent law the legal historian must consider the history of precedent cases that concern this law if he is to discuss the meaning of the law and not just what one originally decided, since these precedents are considered to be part of the original meaning or spirit of the law itself. "Trying to understand the law in terms of its historical origin, the historian cannot disregard its continuing effect" (TM: 328).

After making the same argument concerning the meaning of scriptural passages in theological hermeneutics, Gadamer turns to historical and literary understanding. The literary critic, like the judge, must consider what the text has to say to us today, that is, what the author would have written had he known what we know. The philologist, like the legal historian, would appear to be only interested in what the original readers understood. However, this would not be the complete meaning of the text. To discover the complete meaning of a text, the philologist must consider the effective history of the text, that is, the meanings of this text that have been affirmed to be part of the text's meaning throughout its tradition. Hence, the philologist must also apply the text to the current situation.

Having argued that interpretive understanding necessarily involves application in the projection of the text's horizon and that understanding is the fusion of these supposedly separate horizons, Gadamer returns to a consideration of historically effected consciousness. We have noticed that history affects the interpreter's consciousness by establishing her horizon of meaning or set of inherited prejudices. In naive understanding she simply follows these prejudices unaware of their effect. However, effective historical consciousness in the narrow sense is aware of its historical conditioning, can reflect on this conditioning and can adjudicate between its own and the text's horizons in the fusion of horizons. Since it is reflectively aware of itself, Gadamer asks whether this implies that effective historical consciousness is just a stage in Hegel's dialectic of consciousness. To discover how hermeneutic consciousness differs from Hegel's account of the dialectic of consciousness, Gadamer examines the concept of experience.

According to Gadamer, the problem with the contemporary concept of experience, including Dilthey's, is that it is modelled on science and "takes no account of the inner historicity of experience" (TM: 346). Francis Bacon is important in understanding experience not because of

his emphasis on experiments but because he examines "the prejudices that hold the human mind captive" (TM: 349), that is, the idols of the mind. For example, the idol of the tribe says that we tend to remember what we agree with and forget what disagrees with our opinion. It is also generally the case that an experience is considered valid until it is contradicted by another experience. Gadamer enlists Aristotle's image of a fleeing army coming to stand again to explicate the process of experience. The image presents first one, then another and another soldier turning around ready to fight again. After an indeterminate number of soldiers turn around the army can be said to be ready to fight again. Each soldier turning around is analogous to an experience; the army ready to fight again represents knowledge of the universal. The point is "the birth of experience [occurs] as an event over which no one has control and which is not even determined by the particular weight of this or that observation" (TM: 352). Hegel is important because he demonstrates that the primary sense of experience is negative; having an experience, in this sense, means to discover what one thought was the case is not, in fact, the case. Therefore, "strictly speaking, we cannot have the same experience twice" (TM: 353). Hegel's mistake is to think that this negative experience leads to a dialectical synthesis and finally to absolute knowledge. Rather, Gadamer argues, the negativity of experience leads to an openness for future experience. Aeschylus' formula, "learning through suffering" (quoted in TM: 356) attests to this openness for future experience since it not only refers to the negative experience of learning that one did not know, but also to the finitude of human knowledge in general. Therefore, "the truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience" (TM: 355). Hence the reflectivity of consciousness does not lead to absolute knowledge, but rather to the truth of experience itself.

**KEY POINT**

The projection of the text's meaning always requires application. Application does not mean that the interpreter first understands the text and then applies it to her situation. Application is rather part of just understanding what the text has to say. Similar to Aristotle's analysis of ethical deliberation, application realizes the text's meaning for the concrete situation of the interpreter. Using the example of a legal historian, Gadamer argues that his understanding of a law cannot be limited to its initial use, but must include how it has been interpreted since then because these precedent cases are considered to be part of the law's full meaning. The truth of the experience of self-reflective, historically effected consciousness is that one is fundamentally open to future experiences that correct what we thought we knew.

## The dialectic of question and answer

In the hermeneutic experience of understanding a text, the application of the text signifies bringing the text to speak again in the expanded horizon of the interpreter. It is like having a Thou speak to the interpreter. Gadamer relates three possible I–Thou relations to three different ways to relate to a text. In the first I–Thou relation, the I treats the other as an object, where the Thou's behaviour is subsumed under categories of typical behaviour in order to make him predictable. Correlated to this relation is the hermeneutic relation where the interpreter naively believes "in method and in the objectivity that can be attained through it" (TM: 358). The text is read as an instantiation of general laws. The interpreter takes the position of an ideal observer and claims to be reading just what the text says. The second I–Thou relation acknowledges the other as a person, but claims to know the other from her own point of view and, in fact, to be able to know him better than he understands himself. "In claiming to know him, one robs his claims of their legitimacy" (TM: 360). The associated hermeneutic relation is the traditional one of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. "In the otherness of the past it seeks not the instantiation of a general law but something historically unique" (*ibid.*). The interpreter transcends her own historical conditioning and claims to be able to understand the author better than he understood himself. The third I–Thou relation experiences "the Thou truly as a Thou – i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us" (TM: 361). The I listens to the other and is open to the claims of the other. This does not mean I blindly agree with the other, but that I "must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so" (*ibid.*). This correlates to the proper hermeneutic relation to a text. The interpreter must listen to what the text, as part of tradition, has to say. Recognizing the truth of experience, the interpreter is open to having a new experience, that is, is "open to the truth claim encountered in it [tradition]" (TM: 362).

Gadamer's model for understanding is a dialogue about a topic where the aim is to come to agree about this topic. As we have just seen, the proper hermeneutic relation to a text is like the third I–Thou relation. The logical form of openness to experience is the question. Every question points in the direction of what is asked about. "A question places what is questioned in a particular perspective" (*ibid.*). A question must presuppose something in order to bring what is questioned into the open. Thus every question has a horizon, and to ask the question correctly the question must be framed in the correct horizon so that the

indeterminacy of what is being questioned is brought into the open. A slanted question presupposes an incorrect horizon so that it cannot be answered: to ask for the colour of the number two is slanted because it assumes that numbers have colours; "When did you stop beating your wife?" assumes, hopefully incorrectly, that you did beat her at one time. To ask what the author intended, as opposed to what the text means, would be a slanted question for Gadamer since it presupposes the wrong criterion of meaning. Hence asking the right question is not easy. "There is no such thing as a method of learning to ask questions, of learning to see what is questionable" (TM: 365). Although we speak of having suddenly discovered the solution to a problem, Gadamer suggests that perhaps it is more that "a question occurs to us that breaks through into the open and thereby makes an answer possible" (TM: 365).

Asking and answering questions form a dialogue. In an inauthentic dialogue one "engages in dialogue only to prove [oneself] … right and not to gain insight" (TM: 363). In an authentic dialogue each is open to what the other has to say.

> What decides a question is the preponderance of reason for the one and against the other possibility. But this is still not full knowledge. The thing itself is known only when the counter-instances are dissolved, only when the counterarguments are seen to be incorrect. (TM: 364)

In interpreting a text the interpreter must bring the text to speak like another in dialogue with oneself. This is the work of application. Using the fore-conception of completeness, the interpreter develops the arguments of the text, which may call his own position into question. The conflicting positions or prejudices exist within the expanded horizon where the fusion of horizons takes place. Within this expanded horizon the question concerning the subject matter under discussion is to be decided by discovering the legitimate prejudices.

In thinking about the interpretation of texts as a dialogue of question and answer, Gadamer discovers two questions that are posed; but since these question merge, there is only one answer. The first question is posed to the interpreter by the historical text. Something from the past raises a question for me and that is why I am interested in understanding what the text has to say. "The voice that speaks to us from the past –whether text, work, trace – itself poses a question and places our meaning in openness" (TM: 374). Returning to the example of Plato's cave analogy, the question that motivates an examination of

this text might be one about the value of sensations in determining our knowledge. The text will be interpreted from within the horizon of the question posed by the tradition. To answer this first question "we must attempt to reconstruct the question to which the traditionary text is the answer" (TM: 374). We might propose that Plato questioned why philosophers, who should be acknowledged as the ones who know the truth, are disregarded in the public's mind. However, Gadamer continues, in reconstructing this second question we are still operating within the horizon of the first question. Hence, "a reconstructed question can never stand within its original horizon" (*ibid.*). The interpreter must go beyond the historical horizon of the question to which the text was an answer since she cannot ignore what she knows and the author did not know. In reconstructing Plato's question we must ask it in terms of the whole tradition of the problem of the justification of knowledge. Such reconstruction is the central aspect of hermeneutics discussed above as application. The reconstructed question "merges with the question that tradition is for us" (*ibid.*), that is, the first question put to the interpreter by tradition. Gadamer states that this merging of the questions is what he referred to as the fusion of horizons. Projecting the text's horizon means "that we regain the concepts of a historical past in such a way that they also include our own comprehension of them" (*ibid.*). Consequently interpreting a text is more than recreating the author's intention. It seeks an answer to the merged question about a certain subject matter.

Gadamer develops philosophical hermeneutics from Heidegger's ontological description of understanding, where the fore-structures of understanding are called prejudices. The epistemological question that philosophical hermeneutics will answer is: how can we differentiate

**KEY POINT**

In order to understand a text, the interpreter is required to bring the text to speak to him in his expanded horizon of meaning. The relationship between the interpreter and the speaking text is like the I–Thou relation. In the proper I–Thou relation the I must acknowledge the other as a person, listen to the claims of the other, and allow them to count. In a similar manner and using the fore-conception of completeness, the interpreter must allow the text to present its own claims and call his prejudices into question. The tradition or text first raises a question for the interpreter about some subject matter and thereby establishes the horizon of the question within which the text will be interpreted. To interpret the text, the question to which the text is an answer must be reconstructed. This reconstruction brings the text to speak to the interpreter and is the fusion of horizons.

the legitimate prejudices by means of which we correctly understand from the illegitimate ones? He rehabilitates the concepts of authority and tradition to demonstrate that tradition is a possible source of legitimate prejudices, that is, that we can learn something by interpreting traditional texts. The interpreter is embedded within effective history and must become aware of her hermeneutic situation. In interpreting a text the interpreter must use the fore-conception of completeness in order to call her own prejudices into question and to project the text's horizon of meaning. To project the text's horizon, the interpreter must apply or translate the text to her own, and now expanded, horizon of meaning. Therefore, interpretive understanding always requires application. In bringing a text to speak the interpreter enters into a dialogue with the text as if it were another person. The fusion of horizons that is understanding occurs within this dialogue. The perceptive reader, however, will have noticed that although Gadamer has discussed the basic elements of hermeneutic experience, he has not resolved the question of how prejudices are discovered to be legitimate within the fusion of horizons. We have only been told that legitimate prejudices are based on the things themselves, that correct understanding takes place when the parts and whole form a unity of meaning, that distance, temporal or otherwise, will aid this process, and that understanding happens as the fusion of horizons. "The fusion of horizons that takes place in understanding is actually the achievement of language" (TM: 378). Therefore, we need to examine the concept of language before we can explain how the fusion of horizons results in correct understanding.

### Key points

1. Understanding is a dialogue of question and answer, the purpose of which is to establish agreement about the subject matter under discussion.
2. Because of the hermeneutic circle and the effect of history in understanding, the epistemological task of philosophical hermeneutics is to identify the legitimate prejudices by which we understand.
3. The authority of tradition is a justified source for legitimate prejudices. Therefore, a text may have something truthful to say to us.
4. Interpretive understanding requires that the interpreter apply the text to her situation in order to understand what the text has to say.

5. The event of understanding occurs in the fusion of the interpreter's and text's horizons, which are mistakenly thought to exist independently.

# six

# Gadamer's ontological turn towards language

The hermeneutic experience begins when the interpreter is questioned by something from tradition and seeks to find an answer by examining a text. The interpreter is embedded within tradition since he has inherited a set of prejudices that constitute his horizon of understanding. Correct understanding occurs when he is able to legitimize his prejudices by grounding them in the things themselves. The hermeneutic circle of understanding implies that the interpreter cannot escape the effect of history to an objective standpoint. Hence, he must bring a text to speak by expanding his horizon of meaning, that is, by listening to what the text has to say. The fore-conception of completeness permits the interpreter to call his own prejudices into question by contrasting them with those of the text. All understanding includes the application of the text to the interpreter's horizon by projecting the text's horizon into his own, now expanded, horizon. Understanding is the event of the fusion of these two horizons where prejudices are legitimized and the answer to the original question is discovered. However, Gadamer has not indicated how the resolution of conflicting prejudices happens during the interpretive process. In order to accomplish this Gadamer must first examine language.

## Language and hermeneutic experience

Language is the medium in which conversations take place. As we have discussed, conversations are a model for understanding texts since the

interpreter must bring the text to speak. Each speaker must listen to the other if the conversation is to conclude in an agreement. The speakers do not know how the conversation will progress, and in a sense it is guided by the subject matter under discussion. "Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us" (TM: 383). When the interlocutors speak different languages, a translator is required. The translator must take the meaning of one speaker and translate it into the language context of the other speaker. She must apply the meaning of what was said in one language to the other language. In so doing some connotations or relationships in the original language are lost. She must, in a sense, interpret what was said. This type of conversation demonstrates that interpretation and application are part of coming to agreement in any conversation. Of course, in a normal conversation these aspects almost disappear due to the commonality of the shared language. Sometimes, however, we do ask the other person whether by saying this she meant that; we reformulate what was said to check to see if we have correctly interpreted and applied what was said.

Language is also the medium in which we understand texts. Here as well the example of translating a text from one language into another illustrates the role of interpretation and application in understanding texts. "The translator's task of re-creation differs only in degree, not in kind, from the general hermeneutical task that any text represents" (TM: 387). The closer the language of the text is to the language of the interpreter, the less noticeable and more automatic are the tasks of interpretation and application. Differing from a conversation, the interpreter must bring the text to speak. "The text brings a subject matter into language, but that it does so is ultimately the achievement of the interpreter" (TM: 388). Therefore, to understand a text is not to recreate how it came into being, but to understand what the text has to say. "But this means that the interpreter's own thoughts have gone into re-awakening the text's meaning" (*ibid.*). This is the process of application. Gadamer concludes, "The linguisticality of understanding is the concretion of historically effected consciousness" (TM: 389). Linguisticality means that understanding occurs in the medium of language. Our consciousness, which is always effected by the past, is concretely (i.e. actually) what we have understood through language, through the fusion of horizons. For Gadamer, as for Heidegger, language is disclosure of the world.

Language is also the object of hermeneutic experience. There are many non-linguistic objects, such as works of art, monuments, architectural structures and social institutions, that have been preserved from previous human activity. However, in order to investigate, interpret and

think about them, we must use language. "Language is the language of reason itself" (TM: 401). However, "linguistic tradition is tradition in the proper sense of the word – i.e., something handed down" (TM: 389). What has been written or preserved in an oral tradition detaches itself from the time and place of its origin and enters the sphere of meaning. "The ideality of the word is what raises everything linguistic beyond the finitude and transience that characterize other remnants of past existence" (TM: 390). The continuity of memory preserves the ideality of the word in tradition. In the written text there is self-alienation, a will to permanence and a relation to the subject matter discussed, so that in reading a text we participate "in what the text shares with us" (TM: 391). The written text must be brought to speak by the interpreter. "All writing claims it can be awakened into spoken language" (TM: 394). The ideality of the word or the autonomy of meaning enables the reader to experience what the text has to say to her.

The completion of the hermeneutic endeavour of interpreting happens in language. Understanding what a text has to say, as we have seen, always involves interpretation and application, which means "we have to translate it into our own language" (TM: 396). The fusion of horizons, or the dialectic of question and answer that we have used to characterize the hermeneutic experience, takes place through the medium of language. In fact, prejudices themselves are linguistic. "To interpret means precisely to bring one's own preconceptions into play so that the text's meaning can really be made to speak to us" (TM: 397, translation modified). Since the fusion of horizons involves the expanded horizon of the interpreter and since different interpreters in different historical times will have different expanded horizons, the correct understanding of what the text has to say will be stated differently in different hermeneutic situations. "There cannot, therefore, be any single interpretation that is correct 'in itself'" (*ibid.*). This does not mean that interpretations become subjective, nor does it imply that one cannot misinterpret. Rather, "the verbal explicitness that understanding

**KEY POINT**

Language constitutes both the medium and the object of hermeneutic experience. In bringing a text to speak, the interpreter enters into a conversation with the text that takes place in the medium of language. As the example of translation demonstrates, the interpreter's task of bringing the text to speak involves both interpretation and application. The ideality of the word and the continuity of memory constitute the object of hermeneutic experience, so that the written word transcends the circumstances of its use.

achieves through interpretation does not create a second sense apart from that which is understood and interpreted" (TM: 398). In order to understand how one can come to be in agreement in the conversation between the interpreter and the text, Gadamer examines the development of the concept of language in the West.

## The development of the concept of language

Gadamer commences his discussion of language with Plato's *Cratylus*, where two theories concerning the relationship between the word and the thing named are examined. In the conventionalist theory a word is a sign that we agree to use to represent an already known object. That it is hard to change the meanings of words in a living language indicates a weakness in this theory. In the similarity theory the word is said to be a copy of what it names. The problem here is that one cannot criticize a word for being a bad representation of the object. However, both theories falsely presuppose that we can know the object to be named without using language. Gadamer, following Heidegger, maintains that the correct word "brings the thing to presentation" (TM: 410) and that there is no gap between the word and its meaning. The *Cratylus* concludes by demonstrating that the word is not a copy and so "the only alternative seems to be that it is a sign" (TM: 413). But this leads in the wrong direction because language is then thought of as a sign system. Following Heidegger's analysis of meaning and experience, which we discussed in the example of the lectern, Gadamer contends: "Language and thinking about things are so bound together that it is an abstraction to conceive of the system of truths as a pregiven system of possibilities of being for which the signifying subject selects corresponding signs" (TM: 417). Experience does not happen outside and before language, but within language. "We seek the right word – i.e. the word that really belongs to the thing – so that in it the thing comes into language" (*ibid*.).

This sense of the word as the event of world disclosure is exemplified in the Christian concept of incarnation, where the word is thought of as a verb. The divine word brings the being named into existence. What interests Gadamer are the three distinctions Thomas Aquinas draws between the divine word and human words. First, while the divine word is pure actuality, the human word must move from potentiality to actuality. Human thought begins with words from our memory and then considers how to express its thinking accurately. When the correct word is found, "the thing is then present in it" (TM: 425). Understanding

begins with our prejudices, our inherited language, and then through interpretation finds the correct words to bring the subject matter into explicit understanding. However, secondly, the human word is essentially incomplete while the divine one is complete. The human word is not incomplete because it cannot accurately reflect our thinking but because "our intellect is imperfect" (*ibid.*). As a historically effected consciousness, our understanding cannot achieve an objective standpoint or absolute truth. Finally, while the divine word expresses the essence of the thing completely, the human word can do so only incompletely. Although human words bring the subject matter into presence, human finitude and our openness to future experience imply that the subject matter is never totally present. These distinctions demonstrate that thinking and speaking form an inner unity. Thinking happens in language. They further demonstrate that human words, since incomplete, can be developed in the event of concept formation.

The discussion of the formation of concepts enters a new stage with Nicolas of Cusa (1401–64), who emphasized the creative element in concept formation. For him "it is the human mind that both complicates and explicates" (TM: 435). The different human languages illustrate the creative complication of language where different linguistic communities developed their concepts in relation to their own way of life. Gadamer's example is the word "camel". English and German have only one word, whereas a North African language has many words that denote different and important relationships between human beings and camels. On the other hand, these concepts still refer "to the inner – i.e., 'natural' – word" (TM: 437). This means that there is still a subject matter being disclosed in different ways in different languages. Therefore, an expression in one language may be better or more fitting than an expression in another language. Cusa's theory of language proposes a middle position between nominalism and essentialism. It is nominalistic since it presupposes not a pre-established order of things that knowledge approaches, but "that this order is created by differentiation and combination out of the given nature of things" (TM: 438). It is essentialistic since the many different expressions for a subject matter do "not preclude all expressions from being a reflection of the thing itself" (*ibid.*).

To clarify the relationship between the many human languages and the subject matters that they disclose in different ways, Gadamer elicits Humboldt's theory of language. According to Humboldt, "every language should be seen as a particular view of the world" (TM: 440). He investigates how differences in various languages emerge from the inner structure of the human linguistic faculty. Gadamer reverses Humboldt's

abstract concept of language. Verbal form is connected to the content of tradition. Language presents a worldview not due to its formal structure but "because of what is said or handed down in this language" (TM: 441). The central idea in Humboldt that Gadamer appropriates is that "a language-view is a worldview" (TM: 442). Although every living being exists in an environment that affects it, only human beings have the freedom to reflect on their environment and understand it in language. That different cultural traditions have developed different concepts in reflecting on the environment has led to the differences in particular languages. Therefore, to speak a particular language brings the associated view of the world embodied in that language into reflective awareness. "Language has its true being only in dialogue, in coming to an understanding" (TM: 446). Hence a linguistic tradition indicates what subject matters and matters of fact that linguistic community has agreed on. Since each language is a human language, it may expand to include any possible insight contained in another language. However, there is no perfect language in which the world in itself would appear. "The infinite perfectibility of the human experience of the world means that, whatever language we use, we never succeed in seeing anything but an ever more extended aspect, a 'view' of the world" (TM: 447).

To clarify the idea of a language-view Gadamer refers to Husserl's discussion of the perceptual perspectives of a thing in itself and implicitly to the way the intentionality of consciousness is able to intend the whole object. Husserl argues that when we walk around a table, for example, we experience different and distinct perspectives of the table. No particular perceptual perspective reveals the whole table. Intentional consciousness unifies these perceptual perspectives by an intentional act that presents the whole table to consciousness. There are, however, two important differences between Husserl's theory of perceptual perspectives and Gadamer's concept of "linguistic shadings" or the particular perspectives of each language-view. First, each perceptual shading or perspective is distinct from every other one, while linguistic shadings are open to include other perspectives. In the discussion of the concept of horizon, we found that the interpreter's horizon is not static but can expand to include other horizons. Secondly, all the distinct perceptual shadings co-constitute the thing in itself. However, as we just noted, the world in itself cannot be disclosed by expanding the linguistic shadings. There is no perfect language that would disclose the world in itself. This also implies that these linguistic perspectives "of the world are not relative in the sense that one could oppose them to the 'world in itself'" (*ibid.*). Unlike intentional consciousness, which

**KEY POINT**

Both the conventionalist and the similarity theories of language falsely assume that we first know something before assigning a word to it. The correct relationship is that when the right word is found, the thing is disclosed to us. Since human languages are imperfect in relation to divine language, what comes to be in human language is incomplete. For that reason concepts can develop to better express our experience of the world. Each particular human language, a language-view, presents only a particular worldview. Although each language-view or horizon of meaning can be expanded to include any other one, there can be no perfect language in which the world in itself would be disclosed.

can constitute the intentional object in itself, historically effected consciousness is unable to reach an objective position from which the total subject matter can be understood. Gadamer argues one cannot object that his unconditional affirmation of the conditional nature of understanding is self-contradictory since these claims are not on the same logical level. "The consciousness of being conditioned does not supersede our conditionedness" (TM: 448). The ontological description of language demonstrates that there is no perfect language and that each language-view is just a limited view of the world.

### The universality of hermeneutics

Having clarified the relationship between language and the world it discloses, Gadamer can more accurately define the sense in which the interpreter belongs to tradition. That a question from the tradition first addresses the interpreter who then responds in her interpretation proves that the hermeneutic experience is an event in language. The disclosing event that language is may be viewed from the perspective of the interpreter and the perspective of the subject matter that comes to expression. From the perspective of the interpreter the event of language implies "the word that has come down to us as tradition and to which we are to listen really encounters us" (TM: 461). It is not the case that the interpreter's mind controls what addresses her from tradition. The experienced interpreter is open to new experiences. As we have discussed, the interpreter is called into questioning by the tradition and interprets the text's answer to the subject matter under discussion.

From the perspective of the so-called object, the word of tradition, the event of language signifies "the coming into play, the playing out,

of the content of tradition in its constantly widening possibilities of significance and resonance" (TM: 462). In addressing the interpreter, the tradition transfers what it has to say into the interpreter's thinking. The interpretation brings something new into language by listening to what the tradition has to say. In this manner the interpreter preserves the tradition and furthers its effect. Gadamer underscores the point that in the new appropriation of tradition something comes to be that was not there before, but "there is no being-in-itself that is increasingly revealed" (*ibid.*). As we discovered in the discussion of the language-view that presents a worldview, there is no world in itself that could be revealed in a perfect language and which could function as a criterion to measure the different language-views. In a similar sense there is no thing in itself that could function as a criterion for its progressive unveiling in different languages. Since the mode of being of tradition is language and it addresses us, "it is literally more correct to say that language speaks us, rather than that we speak it" (TM: 463). We inherit our prejudices from tradition and these constitute our linguistic horizon of possible meaning. Since understanding must begin with this inherited language and its conceptual scheme, one can say that language speaks us. In interpreting a past text the interpreter enters into the event of tradition and language. Therefore, "it really is true to say that this event is not our action upon the thing, but the act of the thing itself" (*ibid.*).

This hermeneutic event of interpretation is speculative in a sense similar to and yet different from Hegel's concept. It is similar to Hegel's concept in that the speculative event is a mirroring where there is a "duplication that is still only the one thing" (TM: 466). As we saw in the discussion of the meaning of a law, the different precedent cases did not establish a new law but realized the meaning of the law itself. In the historically different interpretations of a text, it is the text itself that comes to speak in the interpreter's horizon. "The hermeneutic relation is a speculative relation" (TM: 471). Gadamer's concept of the speculative event differs from Hegel's concerning the speculative movement in history. In Hegel the teleological progression of the dialectic is established when the thesis comes to be expressed again in the synthesis. The speculative hermeneutic relation in the dialectic of question and answer "is always a relative and incomplete movement" (TM: 471), which means that it does not teleologically approach absolute knowledge. Historically effected consciousness in knowing the truth of experience "knows about the absolute openness of the event of meaning" (TM: 472).

Nevertheless, in order for the historically different interpretations of a text to be speculative events, subjective misinterpretations must

be eliminated. Gadamer states that consciousness has a standard in the hermeneutic event to judge the event of meaning: "the content of tradition itself is the sole criterion and it expresses itself in language" (*ibid*.). Tradition cannot be the criterion for correct interpretation in the sense that the tradition is always correct in relation to the present interpreter. This would eliminate the possibility of a critique of tradition that Gadamer affirms. It would amount to the position of the Romantics where the past is always correct, which Gadamer has argued against. The content of tradition is the standard in the sense that the correct, new interpretation of the text continues the tradition. However, Gadamer continues, there is no consciousness, as in Hegel, where the subject matter appears "in the light of eternity. Every appropriation of tradition is historically different, but this does not mean that each one represents only an imperfect understanding of it. Rather, each is the experience of an 'aspect' of the thing itself" (TM: 473). The same German word that is translated here as "aspect" was translated as "view" in the discussion of the language-view being a worldview. This connection is important since just as a particular language only presents a particular worldview, so each correct interpretation also only presents a view or aspect of the thing itself. Just as there is no perfect language that presents the world in itself there is no perfect interpretation that presents the thing itself, which can also be translated as the subject matter, in its totality. Both cases indicate the fundamental finitude of human understanding. Different yet correct interpretations of a text in different historical horizons are speculative in that this multiplicity of aspects is of the one subject matter that is expressed in the text. "Being one and the same and yet different proves that all interpretation is, in fact, speculative" (*ibid*.). Gadamer's discussion of the speculative event of understanding concentrates on the case where the tradition is judged to be correct, while the case where the interpreter is correct and the tradition mistaken is not discussed although implied. However, in that case the interpreter would not have a new experience in the strict sense because she would not have learned something new. Nevertheless, Gadamer might have noticed a case where in the dialogue something new is revealed that was in neither the interpreter's horizon nor the text's horizon.

As an example of the speculative event of understanding, consider a successful performance of *Hamlet*. Even if you claim that this performance is the most appropriate, that is the most correct, interpretation of *Hamlet* for this historical situation, I do not think you would claim that it is the one and only possible correct interpretation for all times. If one did make this claim, it would imply that no future performance

should be attempted since it would by definition fail. In fact, each performance of this particular production is slightly different; would that imply that only one performance is the correct one? Consider next a number of successful performances of *Hamlet* in the past. If there were no perfect performance, then it would seem reasonable to suppose that there have been a number of successful performances since Shakespeare first produced *Hamlet*. If one tried to argue against Gadamer and claim that the author determines the correct meaning, then one would have to choose or hypothesize that only one performance of *Hamlet* that Shakespeare directed and acted in is the correct interpretation. All other performances would then be misinterpretations. If this were the case, it would be reasonable to ask why anyone invests the time and effort to produce *Hamlet* if it is bound to fail. If one were to argue that one must try to reconstruct the original, then it would seem an impossible task. We do not know exactly how Shakespeare directed the play. More problematic would be to discover actors who thought and felt exactly as Shakespeare's actors did. Who would claim to be Shakespeare himself? Gadamer's proposal appears more reasonable. There have been and will continue to be successful and correct interpretations of *Hamlet*. There is no single perfect performance, but rather a series of successful performances of *Hamlet* that bring the subject matter of the play to the stage. Each successful and yet different performance stages an "aspect" or perspective of the single subject matter of *Hamlet*. It is a speculative event by being different and yet mirroring the same one subject matter.

Gadamer has demonstrated that language is both the medium and object of understanding and that it is the mode of being of tradition. In the hermeneutic event of understanding, the thing itself, as the subject matter of a text, addresses the interpreter. In the successful interpretation the speculative event of a perspective of the subject matter comes into the language horizon of the interpreter. Being speculative means that the same subject matter comes into language in different, yet correct, interpretations. These results uncover a universal ontological actuality: "Being that can be understood is language" (TM: 474). The universality of hermeneutics is confirmed by the fact that any understanding of being where interpreters come to agree occurs in language and understanding language requires interpretation and application, hence hermeneutics. This claim does not mean being is language or that language determines being. Rather, as we saw, the disclosed world is that part of the environment that human beings reflectively understand, think about and interpret within their language horizon. A particular language, a language-view, presents a worldview. Therefore, what can be understood

or misunderstood is always accomplished using language. Since understanding occurs within the hermeneutic circle and one cannot escape the circle to an objective standpoint, all understanding starts with our inherited prejudices. Since the mode of being of tradition is language, our prejudices themselves are linguistic. Hence, understanding happens within language. To even become reflectively aware of a so-called raw sense datum means to have brought it into the conceptual matrix of language. Thinking itself happens as an inner dialogue in language. Therefore, being that can be understood, which means that it can be thought about and interpretively understood, occurs within language and is bounded by language. Language is not a sign system used to designate already known beings. Language itself brings beings into presence within historically effected consciousness.

Gadamer refers to Plato's metaphysics of the beautiful in order to develop two points concerning hermeneutic understanding. In Plato the beautiful is connected to the good and so the true. However, the beautiful has an advantage over the good and the true since the beautiful shines forth of itself and makes itself immediately evident or enlightening in the event of its apprehension. Gadamer's first point is that "the appearance of the beautiful and the mode of being of understanding have the character of an event" (TM: 485). We have seen that the hermeneutic experience of coming to understand is an experience in the primary sense of recognizing that what we thought was the case is wrong and that something else is the case. In discussing the speculative nature of understanding, we saw that the subject matter or thing itself was primarily active in the sense of playing itself out in the movement of tradition. In the expanded horizon of the interpreter where the adjudication of prejudices occurs, various answers to the question posed by tradition and the text are considered. As is the case with the beautiful itself, the beautifully stated answer shines forth and is evident, thereby bringing the interlocutors into agreement. Gadamer writes:

> This concept of evidentness belongs to the tradition of rhetoric. The eikos, the verisimilar, the "probable" (Wahr-Scheinliche: "true shining"), the "evident" [*Einleuchtende*: enlightening], belong in a series of things that defend their rightness against the truth and certainty of what is proved and known.
>
> (TM: 485, translation modified)

The rhetorical tradition recognizes that not everything that is true can be scientifically proven. What cannot be proven, but is well said or

beautifully said can be acknowledged as true. These terms from the rhetorical tradition signify that something may be accepted as evident or enlightening although it has not been scientifically proven true. In fact, what is well said is able to assert "itself by reason of its own merit" (*ibid*.). In the dialogue of question and answer what is enlightening shines forth and convinces the interlocutors. "What is evident (einleuchtend) is always something that is said – a proposal, a plan, a conjecture, an argument, or something of that sort" (*ibid*.). What convinces us by its evidentness "is always something surprising as well, like a new light being turned on" (TM: 486). When something speaks to us from tradition, it makes a claim on us and is evident, even if it is not decided in every detail.

The second point Gadamer derives from the discussion of the beautiful is that the hermeneutic experience shares a sense of immediacy that is also in the experience of the beautiful and in "all evidence of *truth*" (TM: 485). The beautiful in its radiance presents itself immediately as beautiful and as the good and true. In the hermeneutic event of truth what appears as evident, shines forth and is immediately convincing as the beautiful is immediately beautiful. "If we start from the basic ontological view that being is *language – i.e., self-presentation* – as revealed to us by the hermeneutical experience of being" (TM: 487), then the truth of being presents itself immediately in the correct word or what is well said, as the beautiful presents itself. The truth of experience is that the interpreter is open to the possibility of a genuine experience. We do not presume to know the truth already. In interpreting a text, "what we encounter in tradition says something to us" (TM: 489). As interpreters we must expand our horizon to include what the text has to say. If the text has something truthful to say about the subject matter under discussion and the interpreter listens and accepts this, then it is a genuine experience, "an encounter with something that asserts itself as truth" (*ibid*.).

Taking these two points together, Gadamer finally, although implicitly, answers the initial epistemological question concerning legitimate prejudices. In the dialogue between interlocutors or the interpreter and the text, various possible interpretations, that is, possible prejudices, are considered. At some point in a manner that cannot be predicted (remember Aristotle's image of the army) one interpretation or prejudice(s) shines (shine) forth as the evident or correct one and convinces the interlocutors of its truthfulness. This is the hermeneutic event of truth. This event occurs when the interpreter, in considering various meanings for the parts and whole, experiences their coherent unity of meaning. It is as if

everything suddenly falls into its proper place, and the fusion of horizons is completed by discovering the true prejudices and rejecting the illegitimate ones. As we noted at the beginning of this section, Gadamer states that in the event of language it is more correct to say language speaks us and that this event is more an act of the thing itself than our subjective act. We may now clarify these statements with reference to the hermeneutic event of truth. That the well-stated or beautifully said shines forth and convinces the interpreter is more an act of the subject matter itself. In disclosing the correct interpretation or legitimate prejudice it is the disclosive language of the beautifully said that informs us.

If one more or less agrees with what Heidegger said about language as the house of Being, as Gadamer did, then this solution to the question of discovering legitimate prejudices that permit correct understanding is quite reasonable and convincing. To the more sceptical reader a few additional points may be made. If we consider the interpreter's movements between the whole and parts to be like solving a puzzle, we might agree that usually the solution to the puzzle appears suddenly and everything, so to speak, falls into its proper place. Remember the line from *Hamlet*: "Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself." As soon as one understands that "unfold" can mean disclose, whether by consulting a dictionary or just remembering, the sentence suddenly makes sense. In a sense, what makes the sentence make sense and convinces us of its unity of meaning is the power of language to form a unity of meaning. As another case, consider the emergence of a new metaphor. There is no logic that could predict when a new juxtaposition of concepts will work and be accepted. Rather, in reading or hearing it this juxtaposition just makes sense; it, so to speak, shines forth and convinces us. If it did not it would not succeed. In a similar manner a beautiful, that is, good, poem is able to say something in such a way that it convinces us of its power to present its topic. Its use of language discloses its theme to us in a way that is more accurate or truthful than we could do ourselves. The poem does not prove its truth but in being well said convinces us of its truth. Perhaps, the greatest impediment to acknowledging what Gadamer proposes is our prejudice in favour of the scientific method and its concept of truth, which Heidegger and, following him, Gadamer question. Under this paradigm one might agree that what Gadamer has said could apply to the discovery of a hypothesis but not to its confirmation where scientific truth is disclosed. We cannot enter this debate here, but I remind the reader what Gadamer said about the true sense of experience and his introductory comments about the experiences of truth that are different from those of science.

Returning to Gadamer's discussion of the hermeneutic event of truth, we must note that in this discussion Gadamer also concentrates on the case where the tradition has something truthful to say to us. It is a genuine experience when we discover that what we thought was true was not the case. We have learned something from the tradition. Unfortunately, Gadamer does not discuss the case where the text is found to have nothing to say and the interpreter's position remains the correct one. He does say it is wrong for the interpreter to presume his "superior knowledge of the subject matter" (TM: 489). But this is not enough. Perhaps Gadamer does not discuss the case where the interpreter is correct because such a case would not be a genuine experience of truth since we do not learn we were wrong. Although, as we have seen, Gadamer argues for the rehabilitation of the authority of tradition opposing the Enlightenment's critique, there he clearly states that the tradition cannot be thought to be always correct. Furthermore, this would be exactly the position of the Romantics that he criticizes. However, Gadamer does not consider explicitly the possible case where in the dialogue of question and answer a new truth could emerge from the discussion that neither the text nor interpreter had known before. Perhaps Gadamer implicitly acknowledges this possibility when he refers to his earlier discussion of the concept of play in the analysis of the work of art and writes, "the play of language itself, which addresses us, proposes and withdraws, asks and fulfills itself in the answer" (TM: 490). In the dialogue of question and answer the implications of what is said in language may take the lead and a new truthful position may develop.

Considering this situation, when Gadamer states, "Someone who understands is always already drawn into an event through which meaning asserts itself" (*ibid.*), this does not have to exclusively mean that it is just the text's meaning that asserts itself. Whether the truth comes from the text, the interpreter or their dialogue, it is nevertheless the case that hermeneutic understanding is an event of truth. "In understanding we are drawn into an event of truth and arrive, as it were, too late, if we want to know what we are supposed to believe" (*ibid.*). Gadamer says one arrives too late if one wants to know what is correct because the event of truth implies that one has experienced the truth. If one still questions and wonders what is correct, then there would not have been an event of truth. This clearly does not mean that in some future encounter with the subject matter, a new question and process of understanding may be initiated, for the truth of experience is just to be open to such possibilities. Gadamer concludes *Truth and Method* by stating that although there is no understanding "free of all prejudices" (*ibid.*),

**KEY POINT**

Since our prejudices and tradition are linguistic, and understanding begins from our inherited prejudices, it is more correct to say language speaks us than we speak it. The relation between a text and its effective history of differing but correct interpretations is speculative since each interpretation presents an aspect of what the text says, that is, there is no second being created in correct interpretation. Hermeneutics is universal because "Being that can be understood is language." In the hermeneutic event of truth, the correct interpretation of a text, that is, the legitimate prejudice(s), shines (shine) forth into the openness of the dialectic of question and answer, convincing the interlocutors. Therefore, the hermeneutic discipline of questioning and enquiry can guarantee truth without relying on the scientific method.

nevertheless "what the tool of method does not achieve must – and really can – be achieved by a discipline of questioning and inquiring, a discipline that guarantees truth" (TM: 491). Because we necessarily have a historically effected consciousness only some of our prejudices may be called into question in the encounter with the text or another person. Understanding always happens within the hermeneutic circle, from which there is no escape to an objective position. The impossibility of an impartial observer, that is, one not effected by history and free of negative prejudices, demonstrates the limits of methods that assume impartiality. Nevertheless, the hermeneutic dialogue of question and answer can lead to an event of truth where the interlocutors come to agree on the evidentness of the truth they have experienced.

Building on Heidegger's ontological description of understanding, Gadamer proposes his philosophical hermeneutics. He renames the fore-structures of understanding prejudices and poses the central question for hermeneutics: how one can identify the legitimate prejudices by which we understand correctly? After rehabilitating the authority of tradition as a possible source for legitimate prejudices, Gadamer describes the elements of the hermeneutic experience of truth. The interpreter must initially presuppose the coherence and truthfulness of the text, the fore-conception of completeness, in order to question her own prejudices. The interpreter's horizon of meaning must be expanded to include the text's horizon; understanding is the fusion of these supposedly separate horizons. In order to project the text's horizon, the interpreter must apply or "translate" what the text says into her own context. This process of application does not create a new second meaning but is the realization of the text's meaning in the interpreter's now expanded horizon, as a precedent case realizes the true meaning of a law. The interpreter

who recognizes the truth of experience is open to learn something new and is aware of the effect of history on her understanding. In bringing the text to speak for itself the interpreter enters into a dialogue with the text. A question is raised for the interpreter by the tradition and she seeks to discover the questions that the text answers in order to understand what the text says about the subject matter under investigation. Although Gadamer has located the process of understanding in the fusion of horizons and the dialectic of question and answer, he has not yet explained how legitimate prejudices are discovered. To do this he first examines the concept of language. Since language is the medium and object of hermeneutic experience, it is the ontological ground for understanding. This history of the concept of language demonstrates that human language, since imperfect, discloses only an aspect of the subject matter. On the other hand, the different historical and correct interpretations of a text are speculative because each presents the meaning of the text itself. Hermeneutics is universal because "Being that can be understood is language." In the hermeneutic event of truth, the correct interpretation of a text, that is, the legitimate prejudice(s), shines (shine) forth into the openness of the dialectic of question and answer convincing the interlocutors. Therefore, the hermeneutic discipline of questioning and enquiry can guarantee truth without relying on the scientific method.

With the publication of *Truth and Method* Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics dominated the study of hermeneutics in continental philosophy. In Chapter 7 we shall discuss four positions criticizing Gadamer's hermeneutics. One group of critics argues that it is the author's intention that determines the meaning of the text and that Gadamer's discussion of application really concerns the significance of the text's meaning, which must be determined first. Other critics argue that Gadamer has not adequately provided for the possibility of criticizing tradition and that he underestimates the power of reason to critique what is inherited through tradition. A third group of critics proposes to reintroduce methodology into philosophical hermeneutics in order to secure the results of understanding. Finally, we shall turn to the deconstructionists, who argue that philosophical hermeneutics remains trapped in metaphysical thought and still falsely hopes to find the answer to the question concerning the correct meaning of a text.

### Key points

1. The ontological ground for hermeneutic experience is language since it is the medium and object of understanding.
2. Language is not a system of signs that are assigned to already known objects; rather the correct expression first brings the object into presence.
3. Each particular human language, a language-view, presents only a particular worldview.
4. Hermeneutics is universal since being that can be understood is language.
5. In the hermeneutic event of truth the correct interpretation shines forth and convinces the interpreters.

**seven**

# Hermeneutic controversies

With the publication of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics joined the conversation of continental philosophy. Of course Heidegger's use of hermeneutics in *Being and Time* continued to be discussed, but hermeneutics was not the central focus of Heidegger studies. So when hermeneutics was debated, the discussion usually concerned Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.

In this concluding chapter we shall investigate four general criticisms of philosophical hermeneutics by examining one philosopher from each position before assessing the future of hermeneutics:

- E. D. Hirsch represents the traditional position of literary interpretation and philology, which developed from Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. The traditional position argues that the meaning of a text is determined by the author's intention.
- Jürgen Habermas argues that philosophical hermeneutics is unable to criticize tradition since Gadamer underestimates the power of reflection. Gadamer's hermeneutics must be modified to include a critique of ideology.
- Paul Ricoeur contends that hermeneutics must include both a theory of understanding, along the lines of Gadamer's theory, and a theory of explanation in order to validate interpretation. Because philosophical hermeneutics lacks a theory of explanation, Gadamer's hermeneutics results in relativism.
- Jacques Derrida's brief debate with Gadamer represents the general criticism of deconstructionists that Gadamer's philosophical

hermeneutics remains trapped within metaphysics and thus is not radical enough.

We shall conclude that as long as there are texts that are read and discussed, hermeneutics will continue to be an essential topic in the philosophical conversation. Since Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics enunciates one of the fundamental hermeneutic positions, it will continue to be necessary to understand his approach to hermeneutics.

### E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

Hirsch (1928– ) argues in *Validity in Interpretation* (1967) that the verbal meaning of a text is determined by the author's intention. After briefly examining his theory of interpretation, we shall discuss his specific criticisms of Gadamer's hermeneutics, which appear in "Appendix II: Gadamer's Theory of Interpretation", first published in the *Review of Metaphysics* (March 1965). Hirsch formulates four central theses:

- the universal individual principle is that the author's will determines the meaning of an utterance;
- the universal social principle is that genre determines the type of the whole meaning of an utterance;
- meaning, what the author intended, is distinct from significance, any other relevance that meaning may have to the interpreter; and
- the understanding of the verbal meaning expressed in a text can be validated by means of probabilistic arguments.

Hirsch argues that the author's meaning is the only normative concept for interpretation that is "universally compelling and generally sharable" (VI: 25). He enlists Husserl's theory of meaning to claim that meaning can only be created by consciousness. Husserl argues, as I have mentioned, that consciousness is always consciousness of something. The something of consciousness is the intentional object and the act of consciousness is its intention. Different intentional acts may have the same intentional object. You can view a physical object from different points of view, the different intentional acts, but be conscious of, that is intend, the whole object, the intentional object. In the area of language, verbal meaning is the intentional object that the author wills. "Verbal meaning is whatever someone has willed to convey by

a particular sequence of linguistic signs and which can be conveyed (shared) by means of those linguistic signs" (VI: 31).

Verbal meaning must be reproducible, for otherwise I could not remember or claim that I meant the same content at different times and that would imply language would be impossible. The psychologistic objection that each mental event is unique ignores Husserl's point that different intentional acts, different mental events, can have the same intentional object. The historicist's objection that past meaning is intrinsically alien ignores the fact that I can return to my past meaning. Although this demonstrates reproducibility in oneself, the real problem in interpretation concerns the reproducibility of the same meaning in others.

Verbal meaning must also be determinant and unchanging, for otherwise I could not reproduce the same meaning in myself. Again, Husserl's account demonstrates that the same, that is, determinate, intentional object can be intended by different intentional acts. It is important to notice that Hirsch argues that determinacy means self-identity and not definiteness or precision. This means that what is willed is a type and not a unique individual. A type is a class concept that contains more than one individual and is bounded, that is, one can determine whether an individual, a trait, is a member of the type or not. This means that two different linguistic expressions can have the same meaning. "Now verbal meaning can be defined more particularly as a *willed type* which an author expresses by linguistic symbols and which can be understood by another through those symbols" (VI: 49).

The problem in interpretation is whether we can understand, that is, reproduce, the verbal meaning that the author has willed. Hirsch follows the ideas of Schleiermacher and Dilthey in this respect. He admits that we cannot know with certainty what the author actually willed, but must reconstruct this meaning on the basis of linguistic signs and other evidence. The interpreter must reconstruct "the author's subjective stance" (VI: 238). "The interpreter needs to adopt sympathetically the author's stance (his disposition to engage in particular kinds of intentional acts) so that he can 'intend' with some degree of probability the same intentional objects as the author" (*ibid*.). Hirsch develops Dilthey's theory with the help of Husserl in arguing for "the imaginative reconstruction of the speaking subject" (VI: 242), which, he notes, does not mean the actual historical person but only that part of him that determines verbal meaning. Consciousness, Hirsch claims, is able to reconstruct imaginatively the author's stance by separating its own thoughts in one part of consciousness and reconstructing the author's in another part, in a, so

to speak, doubling of consciousness. "An interpreter must almost always adopt a stance different than his own" (VI: 243). Gadamer, as we have seen in his discussion of application, disagrees with this possibility.

Speaking involves two interrelated functions: the author's willing of a determinant meaning and the expression of that meaning in linguistic signs.

> The great and paradoxical problem that must be confronted in considering the double-sidedness of speech is that the general norms of language are elastic and variable while the norms that obtain for a particular utterance must be definitive and determinate if the determinate meaning of the utterance is to be communicated. (VI: 69)

The interpreter's task is to discover the specific use the author made of the general norms. The interpreter, therefore, must know the language as it existed when the author wrote. The concept of a shared type "can unite the particularity of meaning with the sociality of interpretation" (VI: 71). That is, any linguistic expression is a shared type that can express a determinate meaning. "It will be convenient to call that type which embraces the whole meaning of an utterance by the traditional name 'genre'" (*ibid.*). Hirsch defines the intrinsic genre to be "*that sense of the whole by means of which an interpreter can correctly understand any part in its determinacy*" (VI: 86). The intrinsic genre, as a shared type, is needed by both the speaker, in order to share his meaning, and the interpreter, in order to determine the sense of the whole. From the genre the interpreter must then discover the particular meaning the author intended by the particular manner in which he determined the genre by his use of linguistic symbols.

To avoid confusions in discussing interpretation, Hirsch maintains that it is necessary to distinguish meaning and significance. Meaning, that is, verbal meaning, is the willed and shared type or "what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence" (VI: 8). Significance is "a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable" (VI: 8). Unfortunately we use "interpretation" to cover discussions of both the meaning of a text and its significance. Overlooking this distinction, which is what he accuses Gadamer of doing, leads to a confusion and the amalgamation of the distinct practices of understanding, explication and criticism. Understanding in interpretation should be limited to the construction of the verbal meaning of a text. Explanation is the presentation of the

understood meaning to a particular audience and often uses categories and conceptions that are not in the language area of the original text. "An explanation tries to point to the meaning in new terms" (VI: 136). Therefore, an interpreter must first understand a text before she can explain it. Hirsch agrees that every age needs new explanations of the determinate meaning of texts since "the historical givens with which an interpreter must reckon – the language and the concerns of his audience – vary from age to age" (VI: 137). Judgement and criticism refer to an interpreter's discussion of the significance of a text's meaning, that is the relationship of the text's meaning to something else.

An interpretation that states the verbal meaning of a text cannot claim certainty but must be validated. Interpretation begins with a guess about the intrinsic genre to which the text belongs. This guess is the interpretive hypothesis. Validating an interpretive hypothesis proceeds by means of probabilistic arguments based on what is known at that time. "A validation has to show not merely that an interpretation is plausible, but that it is the most plausible one available" (VI: 171). The validation needs to demonstrate that the reading makes sense from the context of the author. This is why it is essential in validation to reconstruct "the author's subjective stance to the extent that this stance is relevant to the text at hand" (VI: 238). Hirsch's use of probability arguments follows the pattern of such arguments used in the scientific method. With reference to Schleiermacher's concepts of divinatory and comparative methods, Hirsch suggests that the divinatory "is the productive guess or hypothesis" (VI: 204) and the comparative is the critical since "guesses are always tested by making comparisons" (VI: 205).

Among several possible criticisms that Hirsch argues he can avoid is the one we mentioned that concerns failed intentions, for example, a student paper that does not say what the student intended. This case appears to demonstrate that the meaning of the text lies in the written expression and not the author's intention. Hirsch argues against this conclusion by differentiating the dimension of communication from the willed meaning of the author. "If the author has bungled so badly that his utterance will be misconstrued, then it serves him right when people misunderstand him" (VI: 233–4). Verbal meaning is defined as the willed type of meaning set by the author; however, "the single criterion for verbal meaning is communicability" (VI: 234). Communicability is the criterion that judges whether the author has been able successfully to represent her willed type of verbal meaning in the linguistic signs chosen. Hirsch's example of Edgar Allan Poe's new and creative use of "immemorial" demonstrates that one can use words in

**KEY POINT**

Hirsch argues that only the author's intention can determine the meaning of an utterance. He accepts Husserl's account of meaning where different intentional acts can have the same intentional object or meaning. Verbal meaning is a willed and shared type that the author is able to communicate by using the conventions of language and genre. The interpreter, also using these conventions, develops an interpretive hypothesis concerning the intrinsic genre. Through reading the text and examining other relevant information, the interpreter proposes her understanding of the author's intended meaning. This understanding is validated by probabilistic arguments.

a non-conventional way that could communicate when the interpreter has discovered the author's intention. On the other hand, the student paper presents "incommunicable word sequences" (VI: 235) and thus "represents no determinate verbal meaning at all" (VI: 234). Irony as well, Hirsch concludes, demonstrates that it is the author's intention and not semantic autonomy, that is, Gadamer's idea of the ideality of the word, that determines a text's meaning.

Hirsch specifically criticizes Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics in his appended essay. He recognizes that Gadamer, following Heidegger, argues against method because of the historicity of understanding. However, in opposing the philological method, Hirsch claims that Gadamer's theory "contains inner conflicts and inconsistencies" (VI: 247). Hirsch analyses three failed attempts by Gadamer to save the idea of correct interpretation from the relativism implied by historicity: "tradition, quasi-repetition, and horizon-fusion" (VI: 254). To demonstrate that Gadamer rejects relativism, Hirsch quotes his statement that if "there is no criterion for validity" then one is led to "an untenable hermeneutic nihilism" (TM: 951; quoted in VI: 251).

Concerning tradition, Hirsch correctly analyses Gadamer's contention that the meaning of a text is not determined by the author or the reader, but concerns the subject matter of the text. The aim of interpretation, as we saw, is to come to agreement about the truth of the subject matter. Hirsch counters that when "Gadamer identifies meaning and subject matter … [this] is a repudiation not simply of psychologism but of consciousness itself" (VI: 248). Hirsch, as we have seen, maintains that Husserl correctly identifies meaning with the intentionality of consciousness. Gadamer, following Heidegger's critique of Husserl, argues that meaning is always already contained in the fore-structures of understanding and is inherited in our prejudices. This basic philosophic difference underlies much of their disagreement. Concerning the

meaning of a text, Hirsch accurately presents Gadamer's position that the meaning of a written text separates itself from the original situation of the writer and reader due to the ideality of the word. Hirsch, however, claims that if language speaks "its own meaning, then whatever language says to us is its meaning. It means whatever we take it to mean" (VI: 249). Hirsch asserts that a text would then have no determinate meaning because Gadamer argues that interpretation is not a reproductive, but a productive and infinite task. Therefore, meaning must be indeterminate and so Gadamer is inconsistent when he rejects relativism but accepts the ideality of the word and the resulting productivity of interpretation.

Hirsch suggests that Gadamer may try to avoid this indeterminacy by claiming "a historically changing meaning [that] preserves the infinite productiveness of interpretation without relinquishing the idea of determinate meaning" (*ibid*.). However, Hirsch argues that if two contemporary interpreters disagreed, there would be no way to compare their opposing interpretations to other interpretations in the tradition since by hypothesis the meaning changes with time. To avoid this problem Hirsch suggests that Gadamer may have introduced his idea of the productive distance in time or temporal distance. But then Gadamer must claim "the reader who follows the path of tradition is right, and the reader who leaves this path is wrong" (VI: 250). However, since meanings change with time there is no way to decide which reader is in fact following tradition. Hence, tradition cannot save Gadamer from relativism.

Hirsch's second point, quasi-repetition, concerns Gadamer's concept of the speculative, that is, that one and the same meaning appears in historically different interpretations. According to Hirsch this implies that Gadamer argues that a text has a stable and repeatable meaning based on its written signs and subject matter, but that its understanding is always different due to the necessity of applying the text to the interpreter's horizon. Hirsch concludes, "This seems to say that the meaning of the text is self-identical and repeatable and, in the next breath, that the repetition is not really a repetition and the identity not really an identity" (VI: 252). Gadamer cannot have it both ways.

Hirsch's third point concerns the fusion of horizons and Gadamer's claim that understanding always requires explication (i.e. interpretation). Hirsch grants that one can express the meaning of an author in different words, as when the student restates what the teacher said in her own words. However, this only means that the same meaning is presented using different words and not that one understands differently. Gadamer

does argue that the interpreter must find the right words to express the meaning of a text in the process of fusing the horizons. Hirsch critically asks, "How can an interpreter fuse two perspectives – his own and that of the text – unless he has somehow appropriated the original perspective and amalgamated it with his own?" (VI: 254). Hirsch's point is that the interpreter must first understand the original text, that is, the author's intention, before she can fuse this horizon with her own, that is, in an explication or interpretation. These two activities must be kept separate. Hirsch concludes that Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons presupposes an understanding of the text that his assumption of radical historicity denies. Therefore, in all three cases Gadamer cannot save the idea of correct interpretation and is forced into relativism.

"The fundamental distinction overlooked by Gadamer is that between the meaning of a text and the significance of that meaning to a present situation" (VI: 255). As we have discussed, Hirsch contends that understanding, explication and significance must be distinguished and Gadamer conflates them. Hirsch would agree with Gadamer about the importance of vital understandings of a text, differing historical interpretations and the fusion of horizons only if Gadamer had been discussing the text's significance and not its meaning. What Hirsch denies is Gadamer's claim for the necessary role of application in understanding just the meaning of a text. While Gadamer maintains that one cannot ignore what one knows to arrive at the author's perspective, Hirsch argues that consciousness can double itself so that in one part of consciousness the interpreter can reconstruct the author's meaning without importing his own beliefs. Hirsch contends that Gadamer bases his argument on Heidegger's doctrine of radical historicity, which means "the being of past meaning cannot become the being of present meaning" (VI: 256). Hirsch argues that it is arbitrary, and so wrong, to separate the past from the present, because three minutes ago is just as past as is three years or centuries ago. Furthermore, if Heidegger's thesis were correct then there could be no understanding of written texts, since they are all from the past. Radical historicity, Hirsch argues, is itself just "a dogma, an idea of reason, an act of faith" because it cannot be falsified (VI: 256–7). Furthermore, the doctrine is self-contradictory in that it claims that one can understand another at the same time but not someone from the past. However, people have distinct and different perspectives at the same time and yet can understand each other; therefore in principle one can understand someone from another time with his different perspective. For Hirsch the doctrine of historicity cannot be maintained.

"The firmest conception and the most powerful weapon in Gadamer's attack on the objectivity of interpretation is not the doctrine of historicity but the doctrine of prejudice" (VI: 258). Hirsch accepts the hermeneutic circle in understanding. That means he recognizes that interpretations must begin with the pre-apprehension of the whole and that this affects the understanding of the parts. However, siding with Dilthey, the circle "is not vicious because a genuine dialectic always occurs between our idea of the whole and our perception of the parts that constitute it" (VI: 259). One can escape the hermeneutic circle because the shared linguistic norms, the genre, provide the basis for interpretive hypotheses that can be validated. The problem is that Gadamer transforms "the concept of pre-apprehension into the word 'prejudice'" (*ibid.*). The concept of prejudice means "a preferred or habitual stance, making the equation imply that an interpreter cannot alter his habitual attitudes even if he wants to" (VI: 260). Since it is an empirical fact that interpreters do change their attitudes, the use of prejudice for pre-apprehensions is illegitimate. Although Gadamer argues that we cannot escape our prejudices, the purpose of *Truth and Method* is to demonstrate how they may be called into question and legitimized in the hermeneutic event of truth. The difference is that Gadamer relies on the event of truth while Hirsch argues that an interpretive hypothesis must be validated.

Hirsch concludes his essay by indicating how the idea of pre-understanding, when understood as constituted by pre-apprehensions rather than prejudices, could be positively incorporated into his theory of validity in interpretation. The pre-apprehensions would be the

**KEY POINT**

Hirsch and Gadamer differ over the constitution of meaning. Hirsch, following Husserl, argues that verbal meaning can only be intended by the author, whereas Gadamer, following Heidegger, argues that meaning is always already given and must be interpreted. Hirsch contends that meaning and significance must be strictly distinguished but Gadamer conflates them. Since consciousness can isolate part of itself, the interpreter can reconstruct the author's intended meaning without incorporating her own beliefs. Gadamer disagrees and argues that there is always a moment of application in just understanding a meaning. Gadamer proposes a hermeneutic event of truth, while Hirsch argues that an interpretive hypothesis must be validated using probabilistic arguments. Hirsch argues that the historicity of understanding that Gadamer accepts leads to relativism and that Gadamer's concept of prejudice inaccurately limits the proper idea of pre-apprehension as an interpretive hypothesis.

preliminary grasp of meaning in the interpreter's guess or the interpretive hypothesis. These pre-apprehensions could conflict with others, other possible interpretations. The criterion for valid pre-apprehensions would be the author's intended meaning. It is possible to give probabilistic arguments to validate one interpretive hypothesis, one pre-apprehension, since the cultural norms and linguistic conventions, that is, genre, allow the interpreter to make a good guess at the author's intended meaning.

### Jürgen Habermas

Habermas (1929– ) agrees with Heidegger's and Gadamer's critique of objectivistic self-understanding, their critique of positivism in relation to the social sciences and their assertion that all understanding starts with the fore-structures of understanding that imply the historicity of understanding. However, Habermas argues that philosophical hermeneutics must include self-reflective, critical understanding based on the methodological distantiation of the object of understanding. In particular, Habermas charges Gadamer with not acknowledging the power of reflection to criticize one's inherited prejudices. Finally Habermas criticizes Gadamer's claim for the universality of hermeneutics.

In his "A Review of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*" (1967), Habermas argues that Gadamer's correct criticism of objective science cannot "lead to a suspension of the methodological distanciation of the object, which distinguishes a self-reflective understanding from everyday communicative experience" (R: 235). Gadamer's strict opposition of truth to method and his critique of all methodology go too far. That the object of understanding is itself part of the human tradition and not a physical object does imply that the natural scientific method cannot be applied. However, it does not mean, Habermas asserts, that all methodology is suspect. In self-reflective understanding, the interpreter can adopt a distanced position to the object that would allow for the application of method in a sense different than the natural scientific method. Without methodological control, that is, the possibility of critique, Gadamer "obliges the positivistic devaluation of hermeneutics" (R: 234), which declares hermeneutics to be relativistic or merely subjective.

Gadamer is correct in arguing that the interpreter is embedded in tradition by means of her inherited prejudices so that understanding cannot step outside tradition to claim an objective understanding. However, Gadamer's fundamental mistake is that he "fails to appreciate the power of reflection that is developed in understanding" (R: 236).

Habermas agrees that reflection cannot escape the tradition in which it finds itself, but "in grasping the genesis of the tradition from which it proceeds and on which it turns back, reflection shakes the dogmatism of life-practices" (*ibid.*). Reflective reconstruction of tradition, Habermas argues, can illuminate the conditions under which a prejudice has been accepted. If this reconstruction exposes a process, by means of power relationships or some other dogmatic authority, that has illegitimately solidified a prejudice as part of the tradition, the one who understands is able, through the power of self-reflection, to reject that prejudice and criticize the tradition.

The absence of any critical possibility is exemplified in Gadamer's discussion of the authority of tradition and specifically in the process of education. Habermas claims that Gadamer's understanding of tradition is conservative since he "is convinced that true authority need not be authoritarian" (*ibid.*). Habermas quotes Gadamer's contention, which we examined, that the recognition of authority concerns not obedience but rather reason. However, Habermas counters that the acceptance of a prejudice in the educational process is not merely one of recognition and reason, but also includes "the potential threat of sanctions" (R: 237). If in the reconstruction of the genesis of a particular prejudice you discover that its authority was due to force and not reason, you could then question this prejudice and criticize it. "A structure of preunderstanding or prejudgment that has been rendered transparent can no longer function as a prejudice" (*ibid.*). Habermas agrees with Gadamer that understanding must commence within the interpreter's tradition. However, in a conscious reconsideration of an inherited prejudice, reflection develops a retroactive power that can make the prejudice transparent, that is, we can understand why it was accepted. Therefore, "Gadamer's prejudice for the right of prejudices certified by tradition denies the power of reflection" (*ibid.*).

Habermas considers Gadamer's counter-argument that reflective critique "calls for a reference system that goes beyond the framework of tradition as such" (R: 238). He agrees that language is the mode of being of tradition and that the interpreter cannot escape the horizon of language. However, he claims that Gadamer again does not understand the power of reflection that works within language to transcend the particularity of the interpreter's inherited language. "Language is *also* a medium of domination and social power; it serves to legitimate relations of organized force" (R: 239). So, "language is *also* ideological" (*ibid.*). In other words, language, as the happening of tradition, is not only constituted by the mediation of interpreters in effective historical

consciousness, as Gadamer argues, but is also formed within the historical process by actual modes of production and social power relations. "The happening of tradition appears as an absolute power only to a self-sufficient hermeneutics; in fact it is relative to systems of labor and domination" (R: 241). Habermas means that the happening of tradition does not occur just in the domain of linguistic interpretation, but that labour and power relations within society also affect the development of tradition. These relations may be examined by reflection for their effects within the inherited linguistic structures, thereby making possible the critique of the inherited structures. For example, in a capitalist system the inherited prejudice that your economic status is the justified result of your effort does not result from reaching an agreement but from the system of labour and domination. On reflection you could expose the genesis of this prejudice in the ideology of the ruling class and criticize it.

Gadamer responds to Habermas's criticisms in "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection" (1967) by asserting the universality of hermeneutics. In general Gadamer argues that Habermas's use of the power of reflection to support a sociological methodology fails, since "the hermeneutic experience is prior to all methodical alienation because it is the matrix out of which arise the questions that it then directs to science" (SF: 284). Gadamer's point is that your matrix of inherited prejudices first establishes what is questionable. In the above example, the normal worker's inherited prejudices usually prevent him from even seeing that prejudice as questionable. On the other hand, a trained member of the Communist Party would question that prejudice. Therefore, it is tradition, as one's inherited prejudices, that determines what is questionable before reflective consciousness is even aware of an inherited prejudice.

Gadamer states that he did not mean that truth and method are "mutually exclusive" (*ibid.*) but that the use of any method must pay the price of "toning down and abstraction" (SF: 295), which narrows the objects under investigation. This may not be a problem in the natural sciences, but in the human sciences this leads to a narrowing of human social relations, where finally social science aims at the "scientific ordering and control of society" (SF: 296). Habermas, Gadamer admits, does not go this far, but in arguing for the emancipatory interest of reflection on the model of psychoanalysis, he presupposes the knowledge and authority of the doctor in relation to the patient. In another text Habermas had used the example of psychoanalysis to illustrate the emancipatory potential of reflection. Gadamer counters that when

this relationship is used as a model for understanding and questioning inherited prejudices, one cannot determine which social group will be given the authority of the doctor. In the hermeneutic conversation the doctor and patient are on the same level. They are partners in the same linguistic game and one cannot presume to have superior knowledge. "A game partner who is always 'seeing through' his game partner, who does not take seriously what they are standing for, is a spoilsport whom one shuns" (SF: 297). Gadamer concludes that the use of psychoanalysis as a model for understanding in society fails since it must dogmatically assume who will be the doctor with superior knowledge.

Concerning Habermas's contention that hermeneutics ignores the real effect that work and domination have in justifying prejudgements, Gadamer argues that "it is absurd to regard the concrete factors of work and politics as outside the scope of hermeneutics" (SF: 288). Hermeneutic reflection concerns everything that can be understood using language, and this includes what we can understand about work and politics. Although some prejudices may come from these factors in society, when we think about them they have entered into the realm of language and of hermeneutics. "Reality does not happen 'behind the back' of language, it happens behind the backs of those who live in the subjective opinion that they have understood 'the world' …; that is, reality happens precisely within language" (SF: 292). As we noticed in Gadamer's discussion of language, language discloses the world as a worldview, so one cannot get behind it. To claim to understand the world itself means that one has falsely supposed that the hermeneutic circle can be escaped to reach an objective point of view. "Habermas sees the critique of ideology as the means of unmasking the 'deceptions of language'. But this critique, of course, is in itself a linguistic act of reflection" (SF: 287).

Gadamer asserts that Habermas is being dogmatic in thinking that authority is always wrong. Reason and authority are not "abstract antitheses" (SF: 290). In accepting this antithesis from the Enlightenment, Habermas grants reflection a false power. Gadamer admits that there are cases where an authority exercises dogmatic power, as in education, the military and through political forces. However, mere obedience to authority does not indicate whether it is legitimate or not. "It seems evident to me that *acceptance* or *acknowledgement* is the decisive thing for relationships to authority" (*ibid.*). When the powerless follow the powerful this is not acceptance, "not true obedience and it is not based on authority but on force" (*ibid.*). The loss of authority demonstrates that authority is not based on dogmatic power but on dogmatic acceptance.

Dogmatic acceptance means "one concedes superiority in knowledge and insight to the authority" (*ibid.*). According to Gadamer the real dispute is whether reflection, as Habermas argues, "always dissolves what one has previously accepted" (SF: 291) or whether reflection, as Gadamer argues, just presents an alternative to what is accepted without judging which is correct.

> The idea that tradition, as such, should be and should remain the only ground for acceptance of presuppositions (a view that Habermas ascribes to me) flies in the face of my basic thesis that authority is rooted in insight as a hermeneutical process. (*ibid.*)

Gadamer challenges Habermas by pointing out that "a universalized emancipatory reflection" would aim to reject all authority and thus the "ultimate guiding image of emancipatory reflection in the social sciences must be an anarchistic utopia" (SF: 298), which, of course, is not Habermas's goal.

Habermas responds to Gadamer's insistence on the universality of hermeneutics in "The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality" (1970). Habermas recognizes four ways that hermeneutics can be useful to the social sciences. First, hermeneutics "destroys the objectivistic self-understanding" of a positivistic social science. Secondly, it reminds the scientist of the "symbolic pre-structuring of the social scientific object". Thirdly, it corrects the "scientistic self-understanding in the natural sciences", but does not affect the scientific method itself. Fourthly, hermeneutics is needed to translate "important scientific information into the language of the social life-world" (CU: 250). Habermas understands this fourth aspect to be the basis for the hermeneutic claim to universality, which is, quoting Gadamer, "the universality of human linguisticality as an element that is itself unlimited and that supports everything, not just linguistically transmitted cultural objects" (CU: 251).

Habermas identifies three possible ways in which the hermeneutic claim to universality may be refuted. One way would be to use Jean Piaget's genetic epistemology, which "uncovers the non-linguistic roots of operative thought" (*ibid.*). If Piaget's theory were successful, then one could base operative thinking on these pre-linguistic structures and hermeneutics would find its "limit in the linguistic systems of science and the theories of rational choice" (CU: 252). A second way would be generative linguistics: a general theory of natural languages. If this project were completed, then its theory of meaning based on linguistic

structures would replace the hermeneutic theory of meaning. The third way to refute the hermeneutic claim to universality emerges from an analysis of understanding in psychoanalysis and a critique of ideology for collective phenomena. Habermas elaborates this third possibility in this essay.

Psychoanalysis concerns linguistic expressions where the subject does not understand the motivations for these expressions. This situation is an example of "systematically distorted communication" (*ibid.*). Habermas concedes that individual pathological problems in a particular person's speaking can be ignored by hermeneutics. "The self-conception of hermeneutics can only be shaken when it appears that patterns of systematically distorted communication are also in evidence in 'normal' … speech" (CU: 254). Depth or critical hermeneutics assumes systematically distorted communication so that the author does not know the true meaning of what she says. Psychoanalysis demonstrates the possibility of distorted communication and its possible solution. Sigmund Freud has formulated the conditions where one could expect distorted communication. Alfred Lorenzer developed a "depth-hermeneutical decoding of the meaning of specifically incomprehensible objectifications as an understanding of analogous scenes" (CU: 255). Habermas identifies three theoretical assumptions in depth-hermeneutic language analysis. The psychoanalyst is able to identify distorted communication because she has a preconception of what normal communication is. She recognizes an earlier palaeo-symbolic stage that later generates the normal coordination of symbols in language and these palaeo-symbols themselves are organized. Finally, she rejects the model of translation from a pre-understanding to understanding, and adopts the Freudian model of ego, id and super-ego. The palaeo-symbolic stage demonstrates that hermeneutics is not universal since this prior stage is responsible for the coordination of symbols in language.

Habermas contends that if the knowing subject could assure himself that he has communicative competence through a theoretical reconstruction, he could break the hermeneutic claim to universality. Gadamer tries to defend the universal claim by countering that any identification of misunderstanding or distorted communication "always has to lead back to a consensus that has already been reliably established through converging tradition" (CU: 265). That means that the agreement established in tradition forms the pre-understanding or backdrop that first allows the identification of a misunderstanding. Hence tradition is prior to any critical stance. Habermas replies that although this seems plausible, it is not because of "the depth-hermeneutical insight that a

consensus achieved by seemingly 'reasonable' means may well be the result of pseudo-communication" (CU: 266). Pseudo-communication includes agreements reached by means of compulsion and distortion. Gadamer would be correct only if we could know that the agreements reached in tradition occurred without compulsion or distortion. However, depth hermeneutics and the critique of ideology expose the possible role of force in traditional agreements. "A critically enlightened hermeneutics that differentiates between insight and delusion incorporates the meta-hermeneutical awareness of the conditions for the possibility of systematically distorted communication" (CU: 267). Therefore, critique must suppose an ideal consensus and so must follow the regulative principle of rational discourse.

Habermas concludes by returning to Gadamer's concept of the authority of tradition and his critique of psychoanalysis. Habermas argues that the truth claims of tradition can only be legitimately acknowledged if the consensus reached in tradition was free from the use of force. "The experience of distorted communication contradicts this pre-supposition" (CU: 269). Since authority means a force that has been legitimized and acquired "permanence only through the objective semblance of an unforced pseudo-communicative agreement" (*ibid.*), the authority of tradition must conflict with reason. Therefore, Gadamer cannot criticize the Enlightenment's opposition of reason and authority. Habermas quotes Gadamer's claim that the psychoanalyst's emancipatory reflection must be recognized and so based on a prior consensus in society. Habermas reiterates that this consensus in tradition could be "a forced consensus which resulted from pseudo-communication" (CU: 270). Gadamer is correct that critique is based on the tradition in which it stands. However, this implies that "a depth-hermeneutic which adheres to the regulative principle of rational discourse" (*ibid.*) must expose those prejudices in tradition that have been justified by a forced pseudo-communication.

Gadamer responds to this essay in "Reply to My Critics" (1971). He defends the hermeneutic claim to universality since understanding and communicative agreement are not limited to text interpretation but include all forms of social life because we are a community of speakers. "Nothing is left out of this speech community; absolutely no experience of the world is excluded" (RC: 277). So the natural sciences, forms of production and politics are included. Gadamer admits, "It would be absurd to assert that all our experience of the world is nothing other than a linguistic process" (RC: 278). However, he argues that Piaget's theory and other non-linguistic means of communication do not negatively affect the universality of hermeneutics, since "speaking is … communicated

existence. And it is indeed in the communicability of understanding that the theme of hermeneutics lies" (*ibid.*). This means that although some experiences may be non-linguistic, the understanding, communication and discussion of those experiences are linguistic.

Gadamer again criticizes Habermas's use of psychoanalysis for presupposing and not discussing the analogy between the doctor–patient relation and the general relationship of speakers in society at large. Habermas thinks that since one can correct distorted understanding in the patient, this is also possible in society by means of a depth hermeneutics. Gadamer questions this possibility, as before, because the patient–doctor relation is justified by their accepted social roles, whereas in a conversation in social life neither interlocutor can claim to be the acknowledged expert. Each must listen to the other to produce the openness of a proper conversation. In a conversation one expects each to give their reasons. "The hermeneutic situation found in the relationship of social partnership is very different from that evident in the analytical relationship" (RC: 280).

Gadamer contends that hermeneutic reflection can be critical by exposing the prejudices of an ideology. Every interpretative understanding calls conflicting prejudices into question. In bringing these to light hermeneutic reflection can correct the prejudice that has been dominant. "One seeks to understand what is there, indeed to understand better by seeing through the prejudice of another" (RC: 283). The other prejudice could be the one from an ideology or distorted communication. That there is more than one correct interpretation in the effective history of that subject matter or text does not imply relativism in a dangerous sense. "It is only according to the measuring stick of an absolute knowledge, something foreign to us, that this is a threatening relativism" (*ibid.*). Hermeneutic reflection opens up possibilities for understanding that would not happen without it, but it "is not itself a criterion of truth" (RC: 284). In entering a conversation one expects that the conditions for such a conversation exist, that is, that force is not involved. The point of hermeneutics is to bring the prejudices of the speakers into the open and question them. Habermas misunderstands Gadamer's statements about establishing a connection to tradition: "contained within this is in no sense a preference for that which is customary, to which one must be blindly subservient" (RC: 288). The agreement reached in conversation does not have to be either conservative or revolutionary. "It is the idea of reason itself that cannot give up the idea of general agreement. That is the solidarity which unites us all" (RC: 289). Hence it is Habermas who grants reflection a false power.

In the first volume of his *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), Habermas briefly returns to Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, arguing that one can claim to understand the meaning of a text only if the interpreter is able to reconstruct "the *reasons* that allow the author's utterances to appear as *rational*" (TCA: 132). This means the interpreter must be able to present the common knowledge presupposed by the author and her audience that would allow the text to be part of a communicative endeavour. If an interpreter does not make this effort to discover the reasoning of the author, "the interpreter would not be taking his subject seriously as a responsible subject" (TCA: 133). For Habermas this means that the interpreter must assume the performative attitude of a communicative actor even in interpreting a text. Habermas recognizes that Gadamer includes this in his discussion of the preconception of completion, which he quotes. This process of bridging the temporal distance between interpreter and author is what Gadamer discusses as the broadening of our horizon in the fusion of horizons. However, Habermas claims that Gadamer "gives the interpretive model of *Verstehen* [understanding] a peculiarly *one-sided twist*" (TCA: 134). He still charges Gadamer with believing that "the knowledge embodied in the text is … fundamentally superior to the interpreter's" (*ibid*.). Habermas justifies this by stating that Gadamer took the interpretation of classical texts as paradigmatic and quotes Gadamer's definition of the classical

**KEY POINT**

The central disagreement between Habermas and Gadamer concerns the power of reason and the methodological justification of interpretations. Habermas charges Gadamer with an uncritical acceptance of traditional meaning because he neglects the power of reason to reveal the genesis of prejudices and thereby to discover those prejudices whose authority is based on force instead of reason. Gadamer counters that he never claimed that the text's or the traditional meaning is always superior to the interpreter's. He argues that Habermas's model for critique – psychoanalysis – fails since it must unjustifiably presuppose that one interlocutor has superior knowledge, like the analyst in relation to the patient. While Habermas denies the universality of hermeneutics because there are pre-linguistic experiences of the world, Gadamer affirms the claimed universality because to understand and communicate about these experiences requires language and thus hermeneutic analysis. Habermas claims that some critical methodology must be incorporated into hermeneutic understanding if it is not to succumb to a dangerous relativism. Gadamer argues that in the event of truth, the legitimate prejudice shines forth and convinces the dialogue partners and this event does not rely on methodology, that is, one comes too late to ask for a methodological justification.

as being able to stand up to historical criticism. Gadamer, as we have seen in his response to Habermas concerning the authority of tradition, would disagree, claiming he does recognize that either the interpreter's or the text's prejudice could be found to be correct. Furthermore, as we saw, the classical is a mode of being within tradition. A classical text has been found to be meaningful, but a text could lose its status, as an authority can lose her status, when the interpreter judges them to be less meaningful or knowledgeable.

### Paul Ricoeur

Ricoeur (1913–2005) contends that hermeneutics has come to an impasse because it lacks a critical procedure. The epistemological problem of correct interpretation must be addressed, and this can be accomplished by reintroducing explanation into hermeneutics. Correct understanding of a text, therefore, requires a dialectic of explanation and understanding. In addition Marx, Nietzsche and Freud have demonstrated that the surface meaning of what is said may hide a deeper and different meaning. To unmask this deeper meaning Ricoeur proposes that a hermeneutics of suspicion must be incorporated into philosophical hermeneutics. Of the many themes in Ricoeur's philosophy we shall only be concerned with his analysis of the impasse in hermeneutics and his proposed solution.

In "The Task of Hermeneutics" (1973), Ricoeur reviews the history of modern hermeneutics to demonstrate an internal aporia or impasse that calls for a reorientation of hermeneutics today. Schleiermacher begins the process of excluding a critical procedure in understanding when he incorporates into his theory the Romantic idea "that mind is the creative unconscious at work in gifted individuals" (TH: 56). Ricoeur recognizes the critical potential of Schleiermacher's grammatical interpretation, but claims that "its critical value bears only upon errors in the meaning of words" (TH: 57). Furthermore, Ricoeur argues that in his later works Schleiermacher privileges divinatory over grammatical interpretation, for here "the proper task of hermeneutics is accomplished" (*ibid.*) where one can understand the author better than he understood himself. Although Ricoeur recognizes that divinatory interpretation involves both comparison, which has a critical element, and an "affinity with the author" (*ibid.*), Schleiermacher's emphasis on the purely psychological undercuts any critical element. Ricoeur concludes that these problems can only be resolved "by shifting the interpretive emphasis from the

empathic investigations of hidden subjectivities toward the sense and reference of the work itself" (TH: 58).

Dilthey is responsible for separating explanation and understanding, a move "disastrous" for hermeneutics in Ricoeur's opinion (TH: 53). Hermeneutics "is thereby severed from naturalistic explanation and thrown back into the sphere of psychological intuition" (TH: 59). According to Ricoeur, Dilthey argued that the human sciences presuppose "a primordial capacity to transpose oneself into the mental life of others" (*ibid.*). The key to demonstrating how this is possible is the concept of interconnectedness (nexus) where life externalizes itself in manifestations that can be deciphered by others in understanding. The question Ricoeur asks is, "How are concepts to be formed in the sphere of life, in the sphere of fluctuating experience which is opposed, it seems, to natural regularity?" (TH: 60). After 1900 Dilthey was able to use Husserl's theory of meaning and his concept of intentionality in order to derive stable concepts from the flow of life. Dilthey changes his claim to transpose oneself immediately into the other to the idea of reproduction "by interpreting objectified signs" (TH: 61). However, "the later Dilthey tried to generalize the concept of hermeneutics, anchoring it ever more deeply in the teleology of life" in an Hegelian objective spirit (TH: 62). Ricoeur agrees with Gadamer's assessment of Dilthey that he is caught "between a philosophy of life, with its profound irrationalism, and a philosophy of meaning, which has the same pretensions as the Hegelian philosophy of objective spirit" (*ibid.*). Ricoeur credits Dilthey with understanding the crux of the problem, that is, that one can understand others only through "units of meaning that rise above the historical flux" (TH: 63). However, in order to make critique possible, Dilthey must relinquish the psychological notion of transference and interpret the text from its own meaning.

Heidegger turns hermeneutics to ontology and away from the crucial question of epistemology in the human sciences. Heidegger inverts the hermeneutic task in two ways. First, he moves from the epistemological question of how we understand to the ontological question of the meaning of being and specifically the meaning of the being of Dasein. Secondly, hermeneutics does not concern the understanding of others in communication with oneself, but "understanding, in its primordial sense, is implicated in the relation with my situation, in the fundamental understanding of my position within being" (TH: 65). In making understanding a fundamental structure of Dasein's being, Heidegger does de-psychologize understanding. Understanding no longer means the empathetic recreation of another's thinking. However, instead of

understanding a text or what another has expressed, understanding is primarily a "power-to-be" (TH: 66), that is, a possible way for Dasein to be. According to Ricoeur, interpretation in Heidegger does not concern the meaningful expressions of others, but primarily concerns the situation in which Dasein finds itself. Ricoeur concludes, "Any return to the theory of knowledge is thus precluded" (TH: 67).

Heidegger's discussion of the hermeneutic circle demonstrates the absence of a critical dimension in his hermeneutics. From the perspective of a theory of knowledge, these fore-structures are prejudices that imply that the hermeneutic circle of understanding is itself vicious. According to Ricoeur the basic impasse of hermeneutics between understanding and explanation is transformed to one between ontology and epistemology.

> With Heidegger's philosophy, we are always engaged in going back to the foundations, but we are left incapable of beginning the movement of return that would lead from the fundamental ontology to the properly epistemological question of the status of the human science. (TH: 69)

The question of correct understanding, as we have seen, depends on legitimizing the fore-structures of understanding on the things themselves and not accepting chance ideas and popular conceptions. Ricoeur even quotes this important passage in Heidegger, but contends that Heidegger drops the question immediately since he continues "the ontological presuppositions of historiological knowledge transcend in principle the idea of rigor proper to the historical sciences" (SZ: 153, quoted in TH: 70). The ontological situation of understanding in Dasein prefigures and so biases any theory of knowledge that would attempt critically to examine the pre-understanding.

Ricoeur contends that Gadamer does make the impasse of ontology and epistemology, or understanding and explanation, central to his philosophical hermeneutics. He is credited with beginning the return from ontology towards epistemology by taking Dilthey's question concerning truth in the human sciences seriously. However, Gadamer limits the application of the scientific method since it implies an "alienating distanciation" (*ibid.*) that breaks the primordial belonging that first makes possible any relation to the subject matter. In this sense Gadamer follows Heidegger in claiming that the ontological preconditions of understanding pre-empt any application of the scientific method. This problem, Ricoeur continues, can be found in all three parts of *Truth and*

*Method*. Being seized by a work of art precedes any judgement of taste. We belong to history and it has affected our consciousness before any historical methodology can be applied. In language "our cobelonging to the things that the great voices of mankind have said" (TH: 71) precedes any scientific treatment of language. Therefore, any critical potential in the scientific method or explanation is rejected since it comes after the primordial relationship of belonging that exists between the interpreter and the matter to be understood.

Ricoeur questions whether Gadamer:

> has actually overcome the romantic starting point of hermeneutics as such and whether his assertion (that the finite character of human beings lies in the fact that, from the outset, it finds itself within traditions) escapes the play of reversals in which he sees romanticism confined as it confronts the claims of any critical philosophy. (TH: 71–2)

Gadamer argues, as we saw, that our historically effected consciousness is first determined by the effect of history and that understanding cannot get to a position outside this effect, that is, to an objective distance that would allow the application of method. However, if this is the case, Ricoeur asks, "*How is it possible to introduce a critical instance into a consciousness of belonging that is expressly defined by the rejection of distanciation*?" (TH: 73). Unlike Gadamer, Ricoeur asserts that historical consciousness must assume distantiation in order critically to evaluate what it inherits. Ricoeur discovers three elements in Gadamer that indicate the possibility of a productive distantiation. First, in Gadamer's discussion of effective history there is a tension between proximity and distance, which could allow for distance. Secondly, the concept of the fusion of horizons requires there to be a distanced, historical horizon that is to be fused. Thirdly, in language as dialogue "the interlocutors fade away in face of the things said that, as it were, direct the dialogue" (TH: 74). This will allow Ricoeur to develop the idea of the "matter of the text which belongs neither to its author nor to its reader" as a control instance for interpretation (*ibid*.).

In "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation" (1973) Ricoeur enunciates his understanding of language and hermeneutics, which breaks the impasse he discovers in the tradition of hermeneutics. Ricoeur argues that there are three forms of distantiation that occur in language and the written text that permit and demand explanation in understanding a text. Distance is not alienating, as Gadamer thought,

but productive. He rejects Gadamer's opposition of truth to method and argues that there is a dialectical relation between understanding and explanation in hermeneutics.

Language is realized as discourse in "the dialectic of event and meaning" (HFD: 77). Discourse as event implies that discourse is realized in the present, refers back to a speaker, is always about something and is addressed to someone. As event, discourse is part of the historicity of being. However, the event of discourse also establishes meaning. "The very first distanciation is thus the distanciation of the saying in the said" (HFD: 78). Meaning separates itself from the event of discourse and endures. The shared conventions of language allow meaning to appear in the event of discourse.

The second form of distantiation occurs when discourse is written in the form of a work. Ricoeur defines a work as longer than a sentence and forming a unitary whole, composed in conformation with a literary genre and unique in the sense of style. The author is the artisan who creates the literary work. The intersubjective element of meaning is incorporated into the work through the use of linguistic conventions, especially genre, in its composition. "The work of discourse presents the characteristics of organization and structure which enable structural methods to be applied to discourse itself" (HFD: 82). The work is structured and so requires one to reintroduce explanation into understanding. "A new phase of hermeneutics is opened by the success of structural analysis; henceforth explanation is the obligatory path of understanding" (*ibid.*). It is at this point that Ricoeur distinguishes his hermeneutics from Gadamer's. Ricoeur, like Hirsch, identifies an essential role for the explanation of structure in understanding and validating an interpretation. When speaking becomes writing the text frees itself from the intention of the author. Ricoeur parts company with Hirsch in this respect and agrees with Gadamer. However, the text's independence is a positive alienation, "a significance that cannot be reduced to the nuance of decline that Gadamer tends to give it" (HFD: 83).

In written discourse as a work, a new sense of reference emerges that constitutes the third form of distantiation. Following Gottlob Frege's distinction between sense – the meaning of a statement, and reference – its claim to represent reality, Ricoeur argues that in fiction and poetry the first-order references of the work are abolished. That is, the sense or meaning of the text makes no claim to represent reality. However, this permits a new, second-order reference that refers not only to objects in the world but to something like Heidegger's being-in-the-world. That is, the text's meaning presents a possible world. This second-order, possible

world is "the most fundamental hermeneutical problem" (HFD: 86). It implies that the interpreter does not seek the psychological state of the author behind the text, but must interpret the "*proposed world* that I could inhabit" that is "*in front of* the text" (*ibid.*). In interpreting the world in front of the work, the interpreter considers it with reference to her own possibilities of being. It is "the problem of the appropriation (*Aneignung*) of the text, its application (*Anwendung*) to the present situation of the reader" (HFD: 87). Appropriation is connected to the distantiation of the proposed world created in the writing of the work, since this is what offers the interpreter possibilities. Understanding is thereby separated from the author's intention and congeniality in the sense that the written work has its own quasi-objectivity. "We understand ourselves only by the long detour of the signs of humanity deposited in cultural works" (*ibid.*). To appropriate the world of the work, the reader must imaginatively enter into this world. However, this world is not determined by the reader but presents itself in its difference through the distantiation of writing. We expose "ourselves to the text and [receive] from it an enlarged self" (HFD: 88). In accepting or rejecting possibilities proposed in the world of the work, the reader must lose himself in order to find himself. Such a listening to the text, Ricoeur argues, requires distantiation of the self to itself. "A critique of the illusions of the subject, in a Marxian or Freudian manner, therefore can and must be incorporated into self-understanding" (*ibid.*). Such a critical distance may incorporate a critique of ideology. "The critique of ideology is the necessary detour that self-understanding must take if the latter is to be formed by the matter of the text and not by the prejudices of the reader" (*ibid.*). To complete the process of appropriation the reader must judge that the world of the text offers him real possibilities.

In *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (1976), which presents the material from the previous essay in greater detail, Ricoeur explains more clearly the role of explanation in the hermeneutic project. The point is not to separate explanation and understanding but to demonstrate how they must work together in hermeneutics. "In explanation we explicate or unfold the range of propositions and meanings, whereas in understanding we comprehend or grasp as a whole the chain of partial meanings in one act of synthesis" (IT: 72). Since discourse is an event with meaning, the dialectic of explanation and understanding starts here. "The development of explanation as an autonomous process proceeds from the exteriorization of the event in the meaning, which is made complete by writing and the generative codes of literature" (IT: 74). Explanation is based on the "facts" of the

shared meanings of words and the shared codes of literature. Explanation is required when discourse is written and becomes a work. Ricoeur discusses first the transition from naive understanding to explanation and then the transition from explanation to mature understanding or comprehension.

To begin one must first "guess the meaning of a text because the author's intention is beyond our reach" (IT: 75). Since what is written down is separated from the author and original audience, "understanding takes place in a nonpsychological and properly semantical space" (IT: 76). Although the meaning of words and literary codes restrict the initial reading, misunderstanding is possible, which is why one must guess the meaning of a text. There are no rules for guessing the verbal meaning although there are rules for validation, which is the explanatory process. "Guessing corresponds to what Schleiermacher called the 'divinatory', validation to what he called the 'grammatical'" (*ibid*.). In guessing the meaning of a text we are involved in the hermeneutic circle. "The presupposition of a certain kind of whole is implied in the recognition of the parts" (IT: 77). And the understanding of the parts requires a sense for the whole. "There is no necessity, no evidence, concerning what is important and what is unimportant. The judgment of importance is itself a guess" (*ibid*.). Since the text as work is also an individual work, one must guess its uniqueness because this is a process of "narrowing down the scope of the generic concepts" in genre and style (*ibid*.). Finally one must also guess the potential horizon of meaning for the text. For example, one could read the text symbolically as opposed to literally. Secondary meanings and other possible horizons "open the work to several readings" (IT: 78).

What is important is that these guesses must be validated. "As concerns the procedures for validation by which we test our guesses, I agree with E. D. Hirsch that they are closer to a logic of probability than to a logic of empirical verification" (*ibid*.). Validation in hermeneutics is different from verification in the natural sciences. The hermeneutic circle includes the interconnectedness of guess and validation. "Guess and validation are in a sense circularly related as subjective and objective approaches to the text" (IT: 79). Part of the validation process includes the falsification of competing interpretations. "An interpretation must not only be probable, but more probable than another interpretation" (*ibid*.). Although a text may have multiple interpretations, not all of them are equally good.

Mature understanding results in moving from explication to comprehension. The reader may have two attitudes towards a literary work.

He may "remain in a kind of state of suspense as regards any kind of referred to reality" (IT: 81). The work could be read merely for entertainment, it could be read and analysed in terms of stylistics or it could be read in order to establish that the reader's own interpretation is better than another one. On the other hand, the reader's attitude could be to "imaginatively actualize the potential non-ostensive references of the text in a new situation, that of the reader" (*ibid.*). In this case the reader takes the references of the text as not referring directly to reality, the first-order references, but as creating the world of the text in front of the text, the second-order references. That is, the reader imaginatively places herself in the world created by the work.

Ricoeur presents several examples to demonstrate how structural analysis deepens the explanation of a text. Structural analysis is a necessary intermediate step between naive interpretation and critical interpretation. One could then form a "unique hermeneutic arc" (IT: 87) from a naive and surface interpretation to a critical and depth interpretation. Explanation and understanding are different stages on this arc. "To understand a text is to follow its movement from sense to reference: from what it says, to what it talks about." (IT: 87–8). Following Frege, Husserl and Dilthey, Ricoeur takes "this anti-historicist trend into account" in his hermeneutics in three ways (IT: 91). First, he argues for semantic autonomy grounded in the objectivity of meaning. Secondly, the interpreter must use explanatory procedures in understanding. "The text – objectified and dehistoricized – becomes the necessary mediation between writer and reader" (*ibid.*). Thirdly, the existential concept of appropriation is still pertinent. "To 'make one's own' what was previously 'foreign' remains the ultimate aim of all hermeneutics" (*ibid.*). However, the concept of appropriation needs a critical component to avoid three misconceptions. First, what is appropriated is not the author's intention, but the meaning of the text, that is, the world of the work in front of the text. Ricoeur proposes that this understanding of the text is close to Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons. Secondly, hermeneutics is not ruled by the original addressee of the text, but "the meaning of the text is open to anyone who can read" (IT: 93), which Ricoeur credits Gadamer with having convincingly demonstrated. Thirdly, the appropriation of the meaning of a text is not subjectively or relativistically determined by just the reader, the problem Ricoeur finds in Gadamer's concept of application. Rather, what is "made one's own" is "the project of a world, the pro-position of a mode of being in the world that the text opens up in front of itself by means of its non-ostensive references" (IT: 94).

Owing to these three forms of distantiation, explanation enters hermeneutics at three levels. First, semantic autonomy allows for the explication of the meaning of a text independent of the author's intention. Secondly, structural analysis permits the explication of the structured linguistic conventions that form the composition of the work. Finally, in applying the world of the work in front of the text to oneself, one adopts a critical position to oneself that permits an explication of oneself in the sense of a critique of ideology. By incorporating explanation into understanding, Ricoeur argues that we can validate interpretations and so avoid the subjectivism of contemporary hermeneutics.

Gadamer and Ricoeur met in 1976 at the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy and their exchange is recorded in "The Conflict of Interpretations" (1982). Gadamer argues that the conflict is between a hermeneutics of suspicion developing from Nietzsche and his own philosophical hermeneutics in relation to Heidegger's concept of facticity. His central point is that one cannot unite interpretation as unmasking a pretended meaning, the hermeneutics of suspicion, with interpretation as coming to be in agreement. Gadamer's example is a verbal blunder. A hermeneutics of suspicion would ask what lies hidden behind the statement and therefore break the possibility of communication. On the other hand, philosophical hermeneutics would assume the speaker means what he says unless there is evidence to the contrary, which provides the basis for factical social life. The hermeneutics of suspicion takes a particular case and generalizes it. Only when some information in the inherited context is present can one justifiably try to unmask what is said. If one is suspicious all the time there would not be communication. Gadamer suggests that dialogue, and not Ricoeur's theory of text, is the best model for hermeneutics. In dialogue each is open to the other and when agreement is reached, each speaker is changed. The proper place for critique is in the exchange of views in a dialogue.

Ricoeur responds that the conflict is not between theories of interpretation but within interpretation itself. It is the dialectic of explanation and comprehension or understanding, and both are required if interpretation is to be mature as opposed to naive. As we have seen, Ricoeur argues that structural analysis, as a form of explanation, deepens the interpretation of a text and adds methodological control to interpretation. For him, understanding without explanation is blind while explanation without understanding is empty.

Gadamer's second major disagreement with Ricoeur concerns the use of methodologically controlled explication in interpretation. In his essay "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion", Gadamer traces the conflict between

**KEY POINT**

Ricoeur argues that explanation and a hermeneutics of suspicion must be incorporated into philosophical hermeneutics in order to break the impasse of modern hermeneutic theories from Schleiermacher to Gadamer. He identifies three productive forms of distance in the literary work that make explanation possible. In speaking one communicates a determinate meaning that is distanced from one's own intentions. In a written work the meaning of the work is distanced from the author and the original audience. Structural analysis is able to explicate the deeper meaning of a work. In applying the proposed world of the work to my actual situation, I distance myself from myself, and this permits a critique of myself as a critique of ideology. Gadamer's response to Ricoeur is that a hermeneutics of suspicion is warranted only when something in the context justifies it and thus is part of philosophical hermeneutics. He also argues that explanation, as methodically controlled understanding, is anathema to the experience of truth in philosophical hermeneutics.

science and rhetoric or hermeneutics. Heidegger's critique of Husserl demonstrates the difference between the rationality of rigorous science and the rationality of life. Dialogue is the model for the appropriation of meaning in the common being of the speakers, in their life. He concludes that these two ways of understanding are fundamentally different. Therefore Ricoeur's attempt to include methodologically controlled explanation in understanding will not succeed in the end.

Ricoeur, of course, would disagree. In the 1976 discussion Ricoeur illustrates the role of objective explanation in reaching a more mature understanding. One can simply appreciate a Beethoven symphony. However, if one knows the structure of sonatas and can analyse how this structure functions in the first movement, then both our understanding and enjoyment are increased. Therefore, it is possible and desirable to integrate explanation into understanding.

### Jacques Derrida

Derrida (1930–2004) charges philosophical hermeneutics with still remaining trapped in a metaphysics of the present in spite of its attempt to follow Heidegger's critique of metaphysics. The hermeneutic event of truth, where the subject matter presents an aspect of itself, still implies that there is a truth, a meaning, that can be discovered. Gadamer did not recognize the radicality of Nietzsche's critique of truth, and therefore Gadamer's event of truth in dialogue is compromised by the classical

attempt to discover truth. Derrida argues that there is no truth or meaning, but rather only many different perspectives, different interpretations. These perspectives do not reveal an underlying meaning, but are only the play of difference.

Derrida's deconstructive philosophy both is and is not a hermeneutic theory. Deconstruction is a version of hermeneutics since it includes a theory of understanding and is concerned with interpreting texts. Since Derrida develops several aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy, it might appear that his hermeneutics would be a hermeneutics of suspicion. It would be if "suspicion" meant that one is suspicious about any claim to a definite textual meaning, a correct interpretation, or Truth itself. However, it would not be one if "suspicion" meant that there was a hidden or deeper meaning that is the correct meaning. One of the central tenets of deconstruction is that there is no single Truth, no single correct interpretation, and no key that would unlock the mystery of a text. So deconstruction is not hermeneutics since there is nothing to uncover, no single meaning to decipher.

In "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1966), Derrida argues that the concept of structure has been decentred by the work of Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger. Previously in the history of metaphysics there was a centre, origin or *telos* that, as the essential point of presence, governed and organized the elements of the structure into a whole. The centre, as the metaphysical point of presence, is the key to the metaphysical system. For example, Plato's Form of the Good structures and organizes the realm of forms. Consciousness, as spirit, returns to itself in Hegel's teleological and dialectical progression. "The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure … but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure" (SSP: 278). Hegel's spirit organizes the structure so that the real is rational and the rational real, but it also disciplines the play of consciousness by determining its dialectical progression.

The event of rupture, the disruption of the centered structure, started when it became necessary to think about "the structurality of the structure" (SSP: 280). When one began to question the centre and understand it as "a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse" (*ibid.*). Nietzsche demonstrates that there is no Truth, just truths and different perspectives. He argues that when the real world has been discovered to be false

this does not mean we are left with just an apparent world. Rather, when one side of a duality has been destroyed, the other side is destroyed as well. Freud proves that self-consciousness cannot claim to know itself. Heidegger demonstrates that the history of metaphysics of presence is a history of the forgetfulness of Being. However, Derrida maintains that each critique of metaphysics is caught in a unique circle since each one must use the language of metaphysics to critique metaphysics. Is this a new form of the hermeneutic circle?

One example of this decentring of structure can be examined in the relationship between the sign as signifier and the object as signified. Language itself is composed of linguistic signs that refer to their meanings. In traditional linguistic systems, signs are connected in some fixed manner or another to their meanings. As we have seen, Schleiermacher connects the meaning of a word to its sign by means of a Kantian process of schematization. Dilthey argues that in acculturation elemental understanding settled on a fixed connection between the inner meaning and the outer sign. Husserl uses the intentionality of consciousness, and Heidegger argues that the connection was already there in the pre-understanding of the pragmatic situation and later in saying of language. Gadamer contends that the connection between the sign and what it signified is the result of coming to be in agreement. Derrida questions the stability of the structure of language as a system of signifiers and signified. If the meaning of the word as sign depends on another word as the signified and this one depends again on another one and so on, the linguistic system loses its centre, its rule for relating the signifier to the actual thing signified, that is, the transcendental signified. "The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely" (*ibid.*). Words only refer to other words and then to further words and so on. There is nothing else behind signification.

The problem of this unique circularity arises because any critique of the relationship between the signifier and signified must use language. It must use the word "sign". This use of the word itself brings in the whole metaphysical system. "For the signification 'sign' has always been understood and determined, in its meaning, as sign-of, a signifier referring to a signified, a signifier different from its signified" (SSP: 281). Derrida states that there are two different ways to erase the difference between the signifier and the signified. The classical one is to reduce the signifier to thought. The other, which Derrida is using against the first, "consists in putting into question the system in which the preceding reduction functioned: first and foremost, the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible" (*ibid.*). The problem with destructive critiques is that

the critique of metaphysics must use the language of metaphysics and thereby reintroduces the whole of metaphysics. Nietzsche is caught in this trap, which allows Heidegger to regard Nietzsche "with as much lucidity and rigor as bad faith and misconstruction, as the last metaphysician, the last 'Platonist.' One could do the same for Heidegger himself" (SSP: 281–2). Derrida does, as we shall see.

We must skip Derrida's analysis of ethnology and Claude Lévi-Strauss and note only his conclusion. The analysis discovers no totalization due to the lack of a centre. To understand this lack of centre and the resulting multiplicity is to understand the aspect of play in relation to history and presence. In history play enters as a rupture in the development of a structured historical account. Something new enters that ruptures the continuity. Play also disrupts the presencing of presence. The presence of something is its stability within a system. However, what comes to presence depends on the alternative of presence and absence. Play is the fortuitous arrangements of what is and what is not. Therefore "Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around" (SSP: 292), as Heidegger would claim. One can adopt two attitudes to the loss of a centre. One may mourn this loss and look to the past where there was a systematic unity of structure. Derrida's choice is the other attitude, that of a Nietzschean affirmation of play. "This affirmation then determines the noncenter otherwise than as loss of the center" (*ibid*.). Correspondingly there are two interpretations of interpretation. "The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play" (*ibid*.) and this characterizes hermeneutics from Schleiermacher to Gadamer. The other attitude, which Derrida affirms, no longer looks for a centre and affirms the play of différance itself. "Différance" is a neologism Derrida created from the normal French word "*différence*," meaning difference, to mark the play of difference. "Différance" means to both differ and to defer. Its pronunciation in French is the same as "*différence*" which Derrida uses to point out the priority of the written over the spoken.

The lack of a totalizing structure, the absence of a centre and the transcendental signified and the affirmation of the play of différance structure Derrida's implicit critique of philosophical hermeneutics. Since there is no transcendental signified, a text has no meaning, no truth, but refers solely to other texts. In particular there can be no subject matter that a text discloses and about which we could come to agree. Derrida would question Gadamer's hermeneutic event of truth, even if only an aspect of the thing itself becomes present, for following Nietzsche there is no Truth, just different perspectives, different truths.

Derrida and Gadamer encountered one another in Paris in 1981. Gadamer presented a shorter version of his essay "Text and Interpretation" and Derrida presented his essay "Interpreting Signatures (Nietzsche/Heidegger): Two Questions". Derrida responded to Gadamer's essay in "Three Questions to Hans-Georg Gadamer", to which Gadamer responded in "Reply to Jacques Derrida" (1984).

In "Text and Interpretation" Gadamer responds to Derrida's previous critique of Heidegger's evaluation of Nietzsche as the last metaphysician. Derrida charges Heidegger, not Nietzsche, with being the last metaphysician. Gadamer contends that "the French followers of Nietzsche have not grasped the significance of the seductive in Nietzsche's thought" (DD: 25) and that led them falsely to interpret Nietzsche as more radical than he is. Actually Heidegger's thinking of Being "goes behind the back of metaphysics" (*ibid.*). Since Being is always a concealing as well as an unconcealing, Being is never completely present and so this is not part of the metaphysics of presence, as Derrida asserts. Gadamer argues that when he claims "being that can be understood is language", this implies "that which is can never be completely understood" (*ibid.*). Therefore, Gadamer as well cannot be charged with ascribing to the metaphysics of presence.

In opposition to Derrida's emphasis on writing as the ground from which to apprehend understanding, Gadamer reiterates his thesis that dialogue and coming to be in agreement are the proper models for interpretive understanding. For this reason "the concept of text presents a special sort of challenge" (DD: 27). The development of the understanding of language has led to the opposition of sign theory and linguistics to Heidegger's and Gadamer's idea of language as the disclosure of world. Heidegger further demonstrated that this disclosure is always a matter of interpretation. "But does this mean that interpretation is an insertion [*Einlegen*] of meaning and not a discovery [*Finden*] of meaning?" (DD: 30). Nietzsche and implicitly Derrida, in the sense of différance, contend that interpretation is an interruption and an insertion, while Gadamer maintains that interpretation uncovers or discovers the subject matter present in the text. In discussing the history of the word "text" and what counts as a text today, Gadamer notes that a personal letter is not considered a text since it is just a written form of conversation. "For a written conversation basically the same fundamental condition obtains as for an oral exchange. Both partners must have good will to try to understand one another" (DD: 33). Since dialogue is the basic model for understanding, Gadamer maintains that good will is required in coming to agree about a written text. The written text must be brought

back into a speaking. The aim of the writer is to be understood by the reader, so the reader must "let the printed text speak again" (DD: 35), in particular to speak to me, the reader, as if I were in a conversation with the author.

To distinguish the literary text as the pre-eminent sense of text, Gadamer discusses three forms of counter-texts: the anti-text, the pseudo-text and the pre-text. A pre-text is one whose true meaning is hidden and must be unmasked. This type of text is erroneously taken as paradigmatic in Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion and Habermas's critique of ideology, and implicitly in Derrida's deconstruction. As we discussed, they propose psychoanalysis as a model for unmasking the hidden meaning in a text. The literary text, Gadamer proposes, is the pre-eminent sense of a text since in this case the text speaks. "The discourse of the interpreter is therefore not itself a text; rather it *serves* a text" (DD: 41). The interpreter or reader is taken up into the speaking of the text where its truth speaks to us. Literary texts confront "our understanding with normative claims and … continually stand before every new way the text can speak" (*ibid*.). This understanding of the literary text directly challenges Derrida's claim that a text is itself always an interpretation and that the interpretation of a text is just another text where there is no final subject matter to which this series of texts refers. It also contradicts Derrida's concept of différance, the differing and deferring of meaning, by claiming that the literary text continually makes normative claims.

In response to Gadamer's essay, Derrida poses three critical questions concerning the concept of good will that Gadamer invoked. First he asks whether "an appeal to good will" (DD: 52) and the aim of reaching consensus in understanding do not imply a moral axiom concerning the dignity of the conversation partner. In a Kantian sense this would invoke an unconditional, categorical imperative. In fact, as Kant said, the only thing that is absolutely good is good will. Further, this appeal to good will and its ethical implications would belong to what Heidegger terms, "'the determination of the being of beings as will, or willing subjectivity'" (DD: 52–3). Therefore, Gadamer's appeal to good will belongs "to a particular epoch, namely, that of a metaphysics of the will" (DD: 53). In other words, Derrida argues that if dialogue is the model for understanding and dialogue requires approaching the other with good will to reach consensus, as Gadamer argues, then Gadamer's theory of understanding is based on the ethical imperative of good will. Further, if Heidegger charges Nietzsche with being the last metaphysician because of his concept of the will to power, a willing subjectivity, then Gadamer's appeal to good will would mean, and in Heidegger's estimation too, that

his theory of understanding still belongs to a metaphysics of the will. So now Gadamer would be the last metaphysician.

Derrida's second question concerns how good will could function in the model of psychoanalysis. Would enlarging the interpretive context solve the problem as Gadamer suggests? "Or, on the contrary – as I am inclined to look at it – would this not involve a breach, an overall re-structuring of the context, even of the very concept of context?" (*ibid.*). Gadamer's enlarged context is that of "the living experience of living dialogue" (*ibid.*). Enlarging the context refers to the fusion of horizons. Derrida considers this to be the most important, but also the most problematic, point Gadamer makes. Gadamer claims that our lived experience is a coming to be in agreement through dialogue. Derrida would argue, following Nietzsche, that everyday dialogue is usually not one of rational agreement, but one of talking past one another, motivated by non-rational drives, by force, and one where suspicion is called for. Enlarging the context would then be a "discontinuous re-structuring" rather than a continual expansion.

Derrida's third question concerns good will as a precondition of understanding. He suggests that the precondition of understanding is not rapport, in the sense of a sympathetic consensus, but rather the "interruption of *rapport*, a certain *rapport* of interruption, the suspending of all mediation" (*ibid.*). Derrida implies that the precondition for understanding may be the recognition of difference and not sympathetic agreement. He closes his comments by remarking on Gadamer's repeated claim concerning the experience of being understood that we all have and that is not to be thought of metaphysically. Derrida counters that metaphysics itself is usually, if not always, "the description of experience as such, of presentation as such" (DD: 54). Therefore Gadamer's assertion of the basic experience of being understood indicates its metaphysical undertones. In fact, Derrida questions whether we even have this experience of being "perfectly understood" (DD: 55). If his interventions are correct, a different theory for interpreting texts is required.

Gadamer responds that Derrida's questions demonstrate that he has not understood Gadamer. First, he states that his reference to good will has nothing to do with Kant's ethics, but is explicitly a reference to Plato's "*eumeneis elenchoi*" (*ibid.*), which may be translated as a friendly questioning or dialogue. In such a dialogue, one does not argue for one's own position and point out the weaknesses of one's opponent; rather, one seeks to strengthen the other's position so that one can see what is illuminating in it. Such a dialogue does not presuppose an ethical imperative since even immoral people try to understand one another.

To even speak or write, Gadamer concludes, indicates that one wants to be understood. "Derrida directs questions to me and therefore he must assume that I am willing to understand them" (*ibid.*). That is, if one were always suspicious of what the other said, there would be no point in speaking to one another for no agreement could ever be reached.

Secondly, Gadamer claims that he did not intend to incorporate psychoanalysis into his hermeneutics. His point is that psychoanalysis aims at a completely different result; it "does not seek to understand what someone wants to say, but instead what the person doesn't want to say or even admit to his or herself" (DD: 56). Gadamer agrees with Derrida that the psychoanalytic model of understanding involves a breach or rupture. He further recognizes that one could enter a conversation with an intention radically different from one of coming to an agreement. Therefore, his reference to Ricoeur intended to point out that Ricoeur also does not accept a radical breach because he argues for uniting a hermeneutics of suspicion with a hermeneutics of intention. Derrida, on the other hand, argues that there is always a breach, but this is owing to his concept of truth. Derrida, following Nietzsche, contends that the concept of truth implied by Gadamer's notion of harmonious agreement is "a naive notion that ever since Nietzsche, we can no longer accept" (*ibid.*). Derrida's critique of this concept of truth is the reason he claims Gadamer's discussion of the lived context and living dialogue is so problematic. Plato, Gadamer continues, has demonstrated that the dialogue of question and answer that produces "genuine mutual understanding" is "able to eliminate the false agreements, misunderstandings and misinterpretation that cling to words taken by themselves" (*ibid.*). Language is more than a system of signs and is constituted by these agreed-on conventions, that is on the results of previous dialogues where agreement has been reached. Therefore, Gadamer finds himself justified in beginning with mutual agreement in order to understand the function of language. Such a presupposition is "not at all a kind of metaphysics," (*ibid.*) but one that everyone, even Derrida, makes in asking questions. Concerning their discussion, Gadamer remarks that although we could not come to agree, this does not bother Derrida since that result supports his metaphysics. Derrida invokes Nietzsche "because both of them are mistaken about themselves. Actually both speak and write in order to be understood" (DD: 57).

Gadamer admits that "the solidarities that bind human beings together and make them partners in a dialogue" (*ibid.*) are not always sufficient to achieve total mutual agreement. Gadamer agrees with Derrida that we experience limits and sometimes do not communicate. Implicitly

Gadamer agrees with Derrida that he has not experienced being perfectly understood. However, this means only that the dialogue that we are is never ending and not that one does not aim to reach agreement in dialogue. Furthermore, Gadamer reiterates that our ability to converse, even when unsuccessful, is still based on those agreements or solidarities that constitute our shared language. Gadamer thinks that Derrida would disagree with this in the case of texts, since for Derrida "any word appearing in written form is always already a breach" (*ibid.*). Gadamer would agree that the literary text requires that we break with our customary expectations and that the text "deals us a blow" (*ibid.*). However, Gadamer's analysis of the literary text demonstrates that in losing ourselves into the text, we find ourselves again in learning from the text.

Derrida's contribution to this meeting, "Interpreting Signatures (Nietzsche/Heidegger): Two Questions", might appear irrelevant to a consideration of Gadamer's hermeneutics since he neither mentions Gadamer's name nor directly questions any central aspect of philosophical hermeneutics. However, the lecture is a performative critique of what Gadamer and Heidegger understand interpretation to be. Derrida does not argue that Gadamer's theory of interpretation, which involves a dialogue with the text and coming to be in agreement, is wrong. Rather, he presents the proper way to interpret a text, which is a deconstructive reading where the interpreter demonstrates that the supposed unity and thesis of the text are undercut by the text itself. Derrida starts at the beginning of Heidegger's *Nietzsche*, where the name Nietzsche appears in quotation marks. What Heidegger means is, "'Nietzsche' is nothing other than the name of this thinking" (DD: 61), so that biographical and autobiographical information are not important in understanding the unity of Nietzsche's thought. Derrida notes two possible paths that one could pursue. The deconstructive path is to question the assumed unity of the name, since Nietzsche above all risked "seeing the name dismembered and multiplied in masks and similitudes" (DD: 62). A Nietzschean understanding of names implies that the meaning of a text, as well, is not univocal, and therefore interpretation cannot aim to come to agreement about the one meaning of a text.

The other strategy, which Heidegger adopts, is to determine the essentiality of the name "Nietzsche" by his thought and disregard anything to do with the person. Heidegger's aim is to understand Nietzsche as the last metaphysician and to save him from misinterpretations. Heidegger raises the objection that one might have, namely that Nietzsche did write an autobiography, which suggests he thought his life important in understanding his texts. But Heidegger claims that *Ecco Homo* is not

**KEY POINT**

While Hirsch, Habermas and Ricoeur argue that philosophical hermeneutics requires a methodology in order to avoid relativism, Derrida charges Gadamer with not being radical enough since he retains the hermeneutic event of truth and meaning. The fundamental disagreement between Derrida and Gadamer concerns the nature of language. Derrida maintains that language is a decentred system of signifiers without anything being transcendentally signified. Gadamer claims that language discloses the world even if only an aspect of the subject matter is understood. Therefore the correct interpretation of a text according to Derrida is a deconstructive one that demonstrates the text is polysemous, allowing multiple interpretations and even one that contradicts the text's thesis. For Gadamer the correct interpretation of a literary text listens to the normative claims of the text. The interpretation discloses the speculative perspective of the text's subject matter.

autobiography. However, Derrida charges Heidegger with accepting a traditional sense of autobiography and not, as the text itself demands, considering a more radical sense of autobiography. Derrida argues that "when he [Heidegger] is pretending to rescue Nietzsche … he does so with categories that can themselves serve to distort" (*ibid.*), such as the opposition between essential and inessential thinkers. Using other examples from Heidegger's text, Derrida demonstrates that Heidegger has accepted the metaphysical position that the thinking in a text "be one, one matter" (DD: 68). He has attempted to gather Nietzsche's thought under one name, not recognizing that the passages Heidegger partially quotes demonstrate that there are many Nietzsches. Therefore, it is not Nietzsche who is the metaphysician but Heidegger. Nietzsche affirms many interpretations, many truths, whereas Heidegger, and by implication Gadamer, tries to discover the one meaning of a text that we can come to agree on. Therefore, not only does Derrida perform a deconstructive interpretation, which illustrates what interpretation really is, but he also demonstrates that Heidegger, and Gadamer, who follows him, is actually trapped in the metaphysics of presence as he confirmed in Gadamer's concept of good will.

## Hermeneutics' future

As long as human beings still communicate in language, the future of hermeneutics is assured, even if only informally. As we noted in the beginning, an informal hermeneutics has accompanied the use of

language since it is always possible that one might not understand the other person, and need to ask for clarification. The fundamental finitude of human being implies that we shall continue the conversation that we are as long as we are. Further, our finitude means that there will never be a perfect language in which the world would appear in the light of eternity. Humboldt is probably correct that each different human language presents only a perspective of the world. In communicating with each other we will require an understanding of translation and hence an understanding of how language works, which is part of hermeneutics. It should be reiterated in closing that my presentation has concerned the discussion of hermeneutics in continental philosophy and hence we have not examined the extensive discussion of language, meaning and understanding in analytic philosophy.

Hermeneutics as a formal theory concerning successful interpretation will continue in the future as long as human beings reflect on the question of understanding. Since philosophers have never achieved universal agreement that has not been questioned, it is unlikely that they will agree on a specific hermeneutics. How the fundamental question concerning the nature of language is answered will determine the parameters of different hermeneutic theories. At the moment there are several competing theories. The only area where there is general consensus concerns the rules for what Schleiermacher called grammatical interpretation. Most agree that the hermeneutic circle applies to the relationship of the meaning of words to the meaning of the sentence that the words constitute. Many extend this interdependence to the relationship between the sentences and the text. Most would agree that the interpreter must know the semantics and syntax of the language the author used. Disagreement arises concerning how one can determine the meaning of a sentence or text. Some will argue that one can escape the hermeneutic circle and at least approach the determinate meaning of the sentence or text. Others maintain that one cannot escape the hermeneutic circle although understanding is still possible. How and whether one can decide the meaning of a sentence or text depends on the theory of language that one ascribes to and, in particular, on the explanation of how meaning is related to the use of language.

Whether there is a criterion for correct interpretation and, if there is, what it is are hotly contested issues, which we discussed in this chapter. One school of thought, to which Hirsch belongs, maintains that the author's intention is the final criterion. Although one cannot be absolutely sure, one can provide probabilistic arguments that can validate one interpretation over others. Habermas proposes a theory of

communicative action where rational reflection has the power to review the genesis of our prejudices and thereby criticize illegitimate ones. In this manner ideologies and their associated texts can be exposed and refuted. He argues that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics fails because it underestimates the power of reason and is forced to accept the truth of tradition. Ricoeur argues that the meaning of a text is determinate and can be correctly understood if the interpreter employs methodological explanation to move from a naive understanding to a mature comprehension of the text's meaning. He faults Gadamer for rejecting method and thereby making interpretations relative. Derrida, on the other hand, claims that there is no criterion for correct interpretation since texts are themselves polysemous. Following Nietzsche's concept of many truths and the absence of the Truth, Derrida criticizes Gadamer's hermeneutics since it retains the metaphysical concept of truth in arguing for the speculative event of hermeneutic truth.

Gadamer, as we have discussed, defends philosophical hermeneutics. In the discussion of application he argues that it is neither desirable nor possible to adopt the position of the author. The meaning of a text is what it has to say to the interpreter about the subject matter. He claims Habermas has misunderstood his discussion about the authority of tradition because he clearly allows for critique. He criticizes both Habermas's and Ricoeur's use of psychoanalysis as a model for understanding because it presupposes the authority of the psychoanalyst, which cannot be transferred to normal cases of interpretation. Further, Ricoeur's attempt to unite methodological explanation and understanding fails because hermeneutic truth results from listening to the text and occurs in the event of truth where one comes too late if one wants methodologically validated truth. Derrida and Gadamer fundamentally disagree about the nature of language. Gadamer, following Heidegger, maintains that language discloses the world and correct understanding is more an active listening to the speaking of language than a determination of meaning by the subject. Derrida incorporates Nietzsche's ideas concerning perspectival truth to argue that language refers only to language and therefore texts are necessarily polysemous.

The future of philosophical hermeneutics is uncertain. Some certainly believe that it has been refuted while others maintain that it is an important voice in the continuing conversation about interpretation. According to philosophical hermeneutics itself, in the future the subject matter of philosophical hermeneutics will be understood differently and yet correctly in the speculative event of its effective history.

# Questions for discussion and revision

## **one** Schleiermacher's universal hermeneutics

1. How does Schleiermacher's discussion of language compare to your own understanding of what language is and how we learn it?
2. Using a student paper or other linguistic expression, try to interpret it using Schleiermacher's hermeneutics.
3. Take a contemporary interpretation of a poem and compare it to Schleiermacher's discussion of grammatical and psychological interpretation. What similarities and differences do you find?

## **two** Dilthey's hermeneutic understanding

1. Do you agree with Dilthey that there is a difference between explanation and understanding with reference to the separation of the human sciences from the natural sciences? Explain your answer.
2. Develop a short list of the different types of elemental understanding you have learned. Evaluate the connection between inner meaning and external manifestation.
3. How would Dilthey describe the process of understanding a literary work of art, perhaps a play by Shakespeare? To what extent have you re-experienced what the author intended? And how would you say that in understanding it you have re-experienced what the author intended?

## **three** Heidegger's hermeneutic ontology

1. Do you think that Heidegger's phenomenological description of how we

encounter the things of this world as they show themselves from themselves is accurate when he says we first encounter them as useful things and only later and derivatively as objectively present objects?
2. Is understanding always interpretive? Examine a complicated case, perhaps a philosophical text (in a simple case we are too likely to overlook some steps). In coming to understand this did you use the fore-structures of understanding? How were they used? How were they based on the things themselves to attain a correct understanding?
3. Compare and contrast Heidegger's and Schleiermacher's discussion of the hermeneutic circle in understanding. Do you think Heidegger can avoid the problem of presupposition and so relativism in his hermeneutics? Why or why not?

## four Hermeneutics in the later Heidegger

1. What basic changes can you discover between the analysis in *Being and Time* and Heidegger's later thought?
2. How far could you follow the way to language and where along the path did you have problems, if you did?
3. To what extent, if at all, does hermeneutics play a role in Heidegger's later thinking?

## five Gadamer's theory of hermeneutic experience

1. Assuming that we inherit our prejudices from tradition, and understand within the hermeneutic circle, would you agree that the classical is a good example of the authority of tradition? Why or why not?
2. Does the discussion of the judge and the legal historian convince you that application is a necessary part of interpretive understanding?
3. Does Gadamer's discussion of experience convince you that the truth of experience is an openness to new experiences?

## six Gadamer's ontological turn towards language

1. Do you agree that a particular language only presents a particular view of the world? If not, what aspects of Gadamer's discussion of language need modification?
2. Do you agree or disagree with Gadamer's statement "Being that can be understood is language"? Why or why not?
3. Using an example of a particular text or passage, discuss how the various elements of understanding that Gadamer describes function in correctly interpreting that text or passage.

1. Using Gadamer's example of the judge and the legal historian, discuss Hirsch's distinction between meaning and significance. How would Hirsch respond to Gadamer's claim that the true meaning of a law must include the precedent cases?
2. Consider several examples of failed intentions. How would Hirsch defend his thesis that the author's intention determines meaning?
3. Critically evaluate Habermas's argument that reflection has the power to expose illegitimate prejudices using an example from your education and one from a social ideology. Do you think Gadamer's counter-argument has merit?
4. Discuss the three forms of distantiation that Ricoeur identifies, and demonstrate how these incorporate explanation into hermeneutic understanding thereby correcting Gadamer's relativism. How would Gadamer respond?
5. Compare and contrast Derrida's and Gadamer's understanding of language. How does Derrida's essay "Interpreting Signatures" illustrate his theory of language?
6. Discuss Derrida's critical remarks concerning the good will and Gadamer's response. Whose arguments do you find more convincing and why?

# Further reading

## General introductions

Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Joel Weinsheimer (trans.) (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994) is a survey of hermeneutics from the ancient Greeks until today that discusses more thinkers, although with less textual detail. It has a good bibliography. Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969) is a useful initial English-language introduction, particularly with reference to literary interpretation.

## Schleiermacher

To date there is very little published in English on Schleiermacher's hermeneutics (but see the introductory material in *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings* (HC)). Jacqueline Mariña (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) is a collection of expert essays on Schleiermacher's thought, two of which discuss hermeneutics.

## Dilthey

Herbert Arthur Hodges, *Wilhelm Dilthey: An Introduction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1944; reprinted New York: Howard Fertig, 1969) is a short introduction to Dilthey with a chapter on understanding. Michael Ermarth, *Wilhelm Dilthey: The Critique of Historical Reason* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978) is a more advanced analysis, with a short biography and a longer chapter on hermeneutic understanding. Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human*

*Studies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975) is another more advanced analysis that emphasizes the importance of Dilthey's psychology and aesthetics on his theory of understanding, with brief comparisons to Husserl and Heidegger. Jos De Mul, *The Tragedy of Finitude: Dilthey's Hermeneutics of Life*, Tonny Burrett (trans.) (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004) is a recent analysis of Dilthey that includes discussions of Dilthey in reference to Heidegger, Gadamer and Derrida.

### Heidegger

Of the extensive literature available, I have selected several works of note. Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's* Being and Time, *Division I* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991) is an advanced, but clear, discussion of the first division of *Being and Time* emphasizing the pragmatic situation and comparing Heidegger's thought with other contemporary philosophers. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Heidegger's Ways*, John W. Stanley (trans.) (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994) contains Gadamer's essays on Heidegger ranging from introductory to advanced discussions. Eugene F. Kaelin, *Heidegger's* Being and Time: *A Reader for Readers* (Tallahassee, FL: University Presses of Florida, 1988) is a careful section-by-section commentary. George Pattison, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to the Later Heidegger* (London: Routledge, 2000) is a competent, if somewhat advanced, discussion of the later Heidegger. Richard Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999) is a clearly written introduction to all of Heidegger's thought.

### Gadamer

Robert J. Dostal (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) is a recent collection of essays including three on interpretation, one on the relation to Habermas and Derrida, a short biography and bibliography. Jean Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, Kathryn Plant (trans.) (Chesham: Acumen, 2003) is an important and readable introduction to Gadamer through an analysis of *Truth and Method*. James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997) provides an analysis and defence of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, incorporating material written after *Truth and Method* and especially in relation to deconstruction. My own *The Epistemology of Hans-Georg Gadamer: An Analysis of the Legitimization of* Vorurteile (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1987) is a more detailed analysis of understanding and the event of truth in *Truth and Method*. Finally, Joel C. Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of* Truth and Method (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985) is a thorough section-by-section commentary on *Truth and Method* with an introductory essay on hermeneutics and the natural sciences.

## Hermeneutic controversies

David Couzens Hoy, *The Critical Circle: Literature and History in Contemporary Hermeneutics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978) is a clear introduction to Gadamer's hermeneutics in relation to literary criticism, with critical discussions of Hirsch, Habermas, Ricoeur and Derrida, among others. Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987) is a commendable, clearly written presentation of Gadamer's hermeneutics through an examination of his disagreements with Schleiermacher, Hirsch, Habermas and Rorty.

### *Gadamer–Hirsch*

William Irwin, *Intentionalist Interpretation: A Philosophical Explanation and Defense* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999) is a more advanced argument for the author's intention determining meaning in relation to Hirsch and with a chapter criticizing Gadamer.

### *Gadamer–Habermas*

Demetrius Teigas, *Knowledge and Hermeneutic Understanding: A Study of the Habermas-Gadamer Debate* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1995) is an extended comparison of Gadamer and Habermas with special reference to their debate.

### *Gadamer–Ricoeur*

Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, "The Conflict of Interpretations", in *Phenomenology: Dialogues and Bridges*, Ronald Bruzina and Bruce Wilshire (eds), 299–320 (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1982) is a transcript of their conversation at the SPEP meeting in 1976. David M. Kaplan, *Ricoeur's Critical Theory* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003) provides an advanced analysis of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, arguing its superiority to Gadamer's and Habermas's.

### *Gadamer–Derrida*

See first the essays collected in Diane Michelfelder & Richard Palmer (eds), *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer–Derrida Encounter* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989) (DD). John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987) is a lively, yet advanced, discussion in which Derrida's critique of Heidegger and Caputo's critique of Gadamer propel hermeneutics to a radical Nietzschean–Kierkegaardian level. John D. Caputo, "Good Will and the Hermeneutics of Friendship: Gadamer and Derrida", *Philosophy and Social Criticism* **28** (2002), 512–22 is his reconsideration of their relationship, which finds more agreement, although still a distinction. Jacques Derrida, "Uninterrupted Dialogue: Between Two Infinities,

the Poem", Thomas Dutoit and Philippe Romanski (trans.), *Research in Phenomenology* **34** (2004), 3–19**,** is an English translation of part of Derrida's 2003 homage to Gadamer. Finally, my edited volume *The Specter of Relativism: Truth, Dialogue, and* Phronesis *in Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995) is a collection of moderate to advanced essays concerning the question of truth from the perspectives of Gadamer and Derrida.

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