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LANGUAGE, TRUTH, AND REASON: GADAMER WITH NISHIDA

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ABSTRACT

One of the hallmarks of contemporary life is a widespread feeling of resignation about the ability of human reason to reach truth in ethical and political matters. This dissertation outlines the philosophical sources of this crisis and then sets out what I see as a way forward in Hans-Georg Gadamer's rehabilitation of dialogical rationality, which holds out the promise of our uncovering this kind of truth in and through language. This contention poses two tasks for this project. The first task is to give an account of the event through which the truth-disclosing function of language grounds our normative claims. Here truth is uncovered in the linguistic space opened up and constituted by the participants in a dialogue. In this process, the individual actions and intentions of the participants are taken up into a movement that has its own dynamic, such that the truth is something that acts on our understanding in an event of *self*-presentation. I shed light on the ontological foundations of this difficult and radical concept of truth by comparing it to Nishida Kitarō's distinctive philosophical account of the structure of experience, which is founded on an attempt to display the perspectives of subject and object as moments within a more basic and encompassing reality. Finally, the claim that truth 'happens' when things come to presentation in language relies on an understanding of language as essentially disclosive rather than referential. The second task of this dissertation is thus to give a fuller account of the nature and workings of linguistic disclosure.

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This study is dedicated to my wife, Akiko Yasumatsu

Introduction

Skepticism about our ability to reach the truth in our judgments about what is good, or just, or right, or beautiful, about what we should do and how we should live, is now so prevalent that one might even say that it has become part of the common sense of our age. This skepticism has been fueled in large part by an outlook that exalts those truths that can be tested by science, that are verifiable, that are logically and mathematically demonstrable, and that can be captured in the neutral, purely descriptive language of the detached observer. This carefully circumscribed realm excludes the evaluative language of the engaged self, a self anchored in lived experience and its characteristic qualities, meanings, and values. Yet some of the most important knowledge claims, ones in which the most is at stake, are precisely the kinds of value judgments that are formulated in this language.

This erosion of confidence in our powers of judgment and the attendant loss of our orientation in the life-world can be partly traced back to the achievement of a certain kind of objectively valid knowledge by the scientific rationalism of the early modern period. The astonishing practical success which science has enjoyed as a result leads us to ontologize certain features of what, in a very general sense, can be called its method, such as the attempt to take up what has been called “the view from nowhere,” or the evacuation of qualities and values from nature in order to make it intelligible in purely mechanical and mathematical terms, so that being comes to be equated with that which exists in-itself. As a result, the domain of truth has been largely pruned down to what can be made accessible by method.

In this new dispensation, no loss is felt so keenly as the abolition of the life-world and its attendant forms of truth, viz., those that are disclosed to the engaged and participatory standpoint. Nevertheless, both the ideal of epistemic objectivity and the ontological objectivism which it gives rise to have become entangled in serious philosophical difficulties, such as in the various problems posed by the attempt to account for mental states from the external or third person standpoint of physicalism, or in the controversies generated by naturalistically reductive accounts of ethical and aesthetic experience. Both stances have met acute resistance, too, from major figures in the phenomenological tradition, such as Heidegger, who links being with the event of appearing, and Merleau-Ponty, who equates being with the phenomenal field or the world of perception. These thinkers maintain that the world as it appears to a first person vantage point cannot be simply reduced without remainder to the terms of an absolute point of view.

The central premise of this dissertation is that in this return to the *Lebenswelt*, it is the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, above all, which, by holding out the promise of our reaching a kind of truth fully apart from the truths uncovered by method or presented in science, opens up a productive and compelling way of thinking about the ethical and political that moves us beyond the impasse between the discredited foundationalist search for timeless universals, on the one side, and the relativism and irrationalism of certain strands of postmodern thought, on the other. Gadamer is able to do this by preserving a sense of how knowledge is constrained by its various contexts without allowing this to lead to a pernicious relativism or to the abandonment of claims to truth. Hence in *Truth and Method*, his magnum opus, he had shown that the claim to truth that is made in the humanities is characterized by what he calls a *Horizontverschmelzung*, or “fusion of horizons.” The interpreter in the human sciences cannot simply leave behind his or her background assumptions and cultural horizon, but must bring these to the text or work of art to be understood, which, in turn, has its own cultural and historical horizon; the interaction here has the structure of a dialogue. It is in this fusion of horizons that the meanings of the text or artwork

emerge, meanings that can uncover new aspects of the world and the self and change the self-understanding of the inquirer. This unveiling of the truth of the text or the work of art is something that happens in and through language, such that language is disclosive of truth.

The legitimate cognitive claims of language, which have for so long been undermined by the focus in our time on the natural sciences, can in this way also ground our normative judgments. This contention, and the issues and questions it raises, will pose two tasks for this dissertation. The first task will be to give a careful account of the process – and ultimately event – through which the truth-disclosing function of language grounds our normative claims. Like inquiry in the human sciences, or the encounter with the work of art, the experience of truth here involves the fusion of linguistic horizons—this time between the horizons of those who speak and listen together in their search to understand *die Sache*, the matter or thing at issue between them. The difference between this event and that in the interplay of reader and text or spectator and artwork is that in the latter the *Sache* speaks to us and makes a claim on us in its presentation in and through the text or work, whereas in the face-to-face exchange we speak in addition to *each other* in a common search for the truth of the *Sache*. And because this search for truth is a preeminently rational activity, this meeting of interlocutors will raise the question of reason in a way that it was not raised in the other instances of *Horizontverschmelzung*. The intimate connection of language to reason as well as to the dialogical structure of the event of truth, then, is paradigmatically exhibited in the kind of understanding that we reach with one another in conversation. Here truth is uncovered in the space between conversation partners, a space opened up and constituted by the merging of the horizons of the participants in the dialogue.

The capacity of language to reveal truth in this way relies on an understanding of language as disclosive. Until now, very little attention has been given to the concealing and revealing nature and capacities of language, despite the centrality of this notion to Gadamer's work. The second task of this dissertation will be to give a fuller account of the nature and

workings of linguistic disclosure as well as of the interpretation of truth in terms of unconcealment. By doing this I hope to provide, from a new perspective, a broad and coherent view of Gadamer's oeuvre and to strengthen the foundations of his project as a whole.

The two aims of this work will follow separate trajectories, each of which will unfold in different sets of chapters. The second and third chapters will be given over to the task of defending a conception of language as that which both reveals and conceals as well as describing the nature and process of linguistic disclosure itself. The first and fourth chapters will take up the task of providing an account of Gadamer's hermeneutic and dialogical conception of reason as a historically and culturally conditioned mode of knowing revelatory of truth. The fifth and final chapter sheds light on the ontological foundations of Gadamer's difficult and radical concept of truth as the self-presentation of the thing by comparing it with Nishida Kitarō's distinctive account of the structure of experience, which displays the perspectives of subject and object as moments within a more basic and encompassing reality. Having given an initial overview of the work as a whole, we turn in the rest of this introduction to a synopsis of each chapter.

The goal of the first chapter will be to trace the movement in Gadamer's work from an analysis and critique of the rise of method and the instrumentalisation of reason which accompanies it to an elaboration of the social, practical, and linguistic dimensions of a fuller and more robust concept of reason. The reign of method, the instrumentalisation of reason, and the ascendancy of the natural sciences in our time has led both to the objectification of being and a narrow, highly regimented conception of truth. Although the waning of moral confidence, i.e., the ebbing of trust in the ability of the unaided judgments of the individual to reach truth in ethical and political matters which has followed these developments, has inclined us to turn for such answers to experts and specialists, it is precisely problems of this sort which are least amenable to the techniques and expertise of scientific and quasi-scientific specialists. What is called for here

instead is the recovery a certain conception of social and dialogical rationality – a conception which has been eclipsed by both method and by a kind of instrumental reason.

While reason in the form of objective insight that can reach final, comprehensive truths about the world and human life is no longer possible for us, this does not justify the contemporary reduction of reason to its instrumental features. The identification of the whole of the life of reason with its function of charting a course of action is a distortion that truncates the potential and capacities of human rationality. For a larger sense of what reason is and can be, Gadamer turns to the thought of both Plato and Aristotle. In the virtuoso displays of dialectical rationality to be found in Plato's dialogues as well as in the painstaking elaboration of the nature and significance of practical rationality in Aristotle's treatise on ethics, Gadamer locates an understanding of human rationality as emerging from a participatory involvement with the world and with others, both as interlocutors and as objects of our ethical regard.

Human reason, then, is not exhausted by the abstract and instrumentally abbreviated rationality that governs so much of contemporary life and thought; reason is incarnate in existence, that is, it is concrete, finite, and historically conditioned, and, as such, embodied in the language we speak. This rationality of language is exhibited in its capacity to disclose truth. Thus the participatory involvement with the world and with others is also a source of truth, something that is made possible by the earlier displacement of a scientific understanding of being by an ontology of lived experience that is achieved in the thought of Martin Heidegger, Gadamer's teacher and predecessor. Truth is disclosed here in the search for, and discovery of, a shared language in and through which the matter at issue between the participants in a conversation can come to presentation. Such an understanding of language as revelatory of truth can in this way ground the retrieval of older modes of social and dialogical rationality.

Although this claim that the normative judgments of the engaged standpoint – in deliberation and dialogue with others – are capable of reaching truth relies in crucial ways on

Gadamer's conception of language as first and foremost disclosive rather than fundamentally designative, outside of the tradition out of which Gadamer works language is still understood as essentially designative and performative. Hence the second chapter begins to take up the task of giving an account of the nature linguistic disclosure.

An understanding of language as disclosive sees language as that which more fully articulates, increases, and completes the intelligibility of things so that they can make an appearance in our experience *as* what they are. We trace the origins of this conception of language to Herder, who shows that the referential function of language presupposes and depends on its disclosive capacities. While not denying that language can refer to things in the world, represent them, and communicate information, Gadamer will follow Herder here in maintaining that language is first and foremost that which makes manifest.

Herder also suggests that disclosure is a holistic phenomenon insofar as words depend for their meaning on a relation to other words with which they can be contrasted. Wilhelm von Humboldt will adopt this holism in understanding language as an inescapable medium in and through which a worldview is carried. Gadamer, in turn, will draw on these philosophical sources and on Heidegger in developing a view of language as a holistic, non-objectifiable medium through which the self-showing of things occurs. This view of language as a disclosive medium to which we belong and in which we encounter the world – rather than as a tool which belongs to us that can be used to correctly represent the world – is made possible by Heidegger's ontological rehabilitation of pre-objective being. Thus things are always given and disclosed in a language that encompasses us—yet it is the things themselves and not merely words that are given.

Gadamer demonstrates that there is operative here a unity of word and thing such that the thing itself can come to presence in the word. We elucidate this phenomenon by explicating Gadamer's claim that the word functions in this sense like an image in and through which something is made present. This chapter closes, finally, with a reflection on the limits of the power of language to

unconceal. Though the term ‘disclosure’ signals the uncovering or opening up of meaning, we will also see that the experience of language is an experience of finitude; this aspect of linguistic experience, moreover, will need to be incorporated into our conception of language if we are to really understand all that is promised in the idea of disclosure.

While the second chapter outlines a conception of what language must be if we are to understand language as first and foremost disclosive rather than referential, the third chapter brings into focus the way in which disclosure itself functions, that is, it lays out how language reveals and conceals and how it is able to do so. The central contention here is that words and expressions cannot disclose in isolation; their capacity to reveal depends on the broader implicit and unexpressed setting in which they are situated. Since linguistic disclosure is the uncovering of the thing through the disclosure of its meaning so that it can appear *as* this thing or that, the full expression of this claim must subscribe to a version of semantic holism, i.e., the idea that the meaning of a word is not exhausted by what is expressly stated, but that it depends on a wider unsaid whole which encompasses and fills it out.

I maintain that the experience of loss in translation shows that there is an essential connection between the meaning that is disclosed in a word or expression and the unexpressed background context of the language. This is because it is this unsaid whole which differs between languages and enables each to reveal different things, things which for precisely this reason are not always able to be disclosed in other languages. To see this we need a theory of translation which, rather than understanding translation as the restitution of meaning, views it as a balance of compromise, constraint, and imaginative transformation. Here we look to Paul Ricoeur’s conception of translation rather than Gadamer’s, whose views on translation are in tension with the meaning holism he embraces.

We turn to Ricoeur’s theory of metaphor, too, for help in developing this claim more fully. For Ricoeur metaphors are formed through the overlap of different semantic fields; we will

show how there is a kind of metaphoricity at work in the structure of disclosure. Here the intersecting domains of intelligibility are the meanings which belong to things, on the one side, and those which belong to words, on the other; the unsaid contextual whole on which the meaning of individual words depends accounts for the capacity of each language to express the intelligibility of things – and so unconceal them – in ways which can be unique and inimitable. To aid in substantiating this claim I draw on examples of difficulty and loss in translation taken from the attempt to translate certain essential words and phrases from Japanese into English.

In the fourth chapter we bring together the conceptions of rationality, language, and meaning elaborated in the previous chapters to show the way in which our normative claims can be grounded in the truth-disclosing function of language. Truth is uncovered in the discovery of a common language, and hence a common perspective, through which what is at stake between the participants in a dialogue can come to presence.

As the closing moments of the third chapter demonstrated, such conversations depend on a background of shared assumptions and understandings that make possible the disclosure of things. Yet these exchanges also must develop between presence and absence; what is absent or missing is a shared understanding of the subject matter. That is, while much must be held in common and known to all for communication to succeed, there will also be in such conversations something that is not shared, or not known, that will pose questions and problems that are taken up in lines of inquiry or modes of advocacy which aim at truth. These pursuits must take place in a particular language, whose history, vocabulary, values, and view of the world provide the standpoint from which its speakers look out onto the subject matter, guiding how the participants will articulate questions and possibilities and supplying the rhetorical modes of expression that can convince others to share one's understanding of the thing.

To understand how truth can emerge from this finite being-with-one-another of dialogue, we will take up in a close and comprehensive fashion Gadamer's rehabilitation of the cognitive

significance of rhetoric and of the guiding concepts of humanism; this is a project which views rationality as embodied in a mode of being. This is a kind of rationality which cannot be formalized in a set of rules but is rather to be found in a certain disposition. To be rational is to aspire to be in the world in a certain kind of way, and so to be a certain kind of person, viz., one who has honed her capacity for critical judgment but is also open to the world and to the claims of her interlocutors, attempting to see from the viewpoint of others and to speak about things in a way that does justice to them. Yet the presence of all of these elements in a dialogue is no guarantee that the participants will arrive at their goal, because understanding is not the mastery of something by an autonomous subject, but movement of the thing itself in which those who would understand are caught up, an event in which things come to presentation in language.

This is a radical and difficult conception of truth; it will be the aim of the fifth and final chapter to explain this idea more fully. Truth as the self-presentation of the thing is founded on what Gadamer calls the “belonging together” of self, world, and language. Gadamer is drawing here at least partly on a complex and extraordinary idea found in the work of Heidegger, the initial and most prominent formulation of which appears in *Being and Time*. In this work Heidegger attempts to overcome the dualism of subject and object – and thus the philosophical difficulties and problems that this dichotomy entails – with an account of experience in terms of what he calls *In-der-Welt-sein*, or “being-in-the-world,” a phenomenon in which self (which is part of what Heidegger calls *Dasein*) and world cannot be separated out from each other. This relation of intertwining and ontological continuity between self and world allows us to understand our linguistic utterances as the expression of a natural correspondence between the mind and things.

This ontological ground explains how truth is possible, but it has difficulty accounting for what is false, mistaken, or distorted in language. That is, what has still been left out of this explanation is how we are to reconcile what is untruthful in language with the claim that self and

world belong together as aspects of a single, unitary phenomenon, one which is made manifest in language. For this we must posit a discontinuity or gap between the self and the world, since we do not coincide perfectly with things. Yet we will not want to fall back here on a discredited dualism; indeed, we will need to preserve all that has been achieved philosophically with the thesis of the interlacing of self and world with one another.

In order to mediate between the unitary phenomenon of self and world on one side, and the break between self and world, on the other, between continuity and discontinuity, I draw on the work of the early twentieth-century Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945). Nishida, too, views the relation between self and world in terms of ontological continuity, but one that is dynamic and changing rather than static and fixed. The bond between self and world, then, as open and changing, is also *changeable*; one can cultivate or neglect this relational continuity, and so achieve or fail to achieve it in its fullest forms. I support this claim with an examination of aesthetic, athletic, and ethical modes of self-cultivation which illustrate what the fuller integration of self and world can be. Such practices involve, at their best and most skillful, the achievement, in action, of the doing of the thing itself. I maintain that we can cultivate our capacity to perceive things along similar lines, bringing the self and world together into a kind of harmony so that the expression of such perceptions comes to be the expression of truth, or the self-presentation of the thing in language. This also helps us to account for what is false, mistaken, or distorted in language and thus to develop a more complete and convincing account of truth.

Finally, in a kind of coda to this work, I have included my translations of three of Gadamer's untranslated essays on language in the appendix: *Lesen ist wie Übersetzen* (1989), *Die Vielfalt der Sprachen und das Verstehen der Welt* (1990), and *Heimat und Sprache* (1992). My intention with these pieces is to allow Gadamer to have the last word; my hope is only that by the end of this study we will be able hear, in a new way, what he has to say.

Chapter 1

The Fullness of Reason

One of the hallmarks of contemporary life is a widespread feeling of resignation, if not despair, about the ability of human reason to reach truth in ethical and political matters. The aim of this first chapter will be to present an account of certain philosophically significant sources and of the developmental arc of this crisis in moral confidence before setting out the broad outlines of what I see as a way forward in Gadamer's recovery and rehabilitation of dialogical rationality. The causes of this erosion of faith in our rational capacities are manifold, but chief among them is the rise and dominance of both epistemic and ontological forms of objectivism, which have their source in a particular interpretation of the procedures of the natural sciences. To elucidate this move from the systematic investigation of nature to the objectification of being we begin with Gadamer's analysis of the ascent of modern method, which has a twofold origin in the Cartesian quest for objectively valid knowledge as well as in the attempt of early modern science to master nature. Gadamer's contention is that this development has had far-reaching and unwelcome repercussions for the way we think about knowledge, rationality, and truth.

The perception that the rational judgments of the individual can no longer reach normative truths has led to apathy about political – and even ethical – questions, for some, and to a belief for many others that whatever answers, if any, are to be had will have to come from the scientific or quasi-scientific expertise of the specialists and advisors who have come to play such a prominent and essential role in the administration of our technocratic society. This is partly explained by the fact that while we have lost confidence in the capacity of traditional and pre-scientific modes of knowing – such as what Horkheimer and Adorno have called “objective

reason”¹ – to uncover metaphysical as well as ethical verities, the seemingly endless procession of accomplishments in the natural sciences has led to a tremendous self-assurance about our ability to secure truth in the realm of nature, so that in the 19th and 20th centuries, method, instrumental thinking, and science are turned from the natural world to the various spheres of human life. Gadamer will claim that this rationalization process distorts the realm of practice and undercuts social reason. As substantive problems of social practice are turned into technical problems whose solutions are guided either by a formal and instrumental rationality, by institutions and social structures shaped by this rationality, or by science and other technical fields, the result is an increasing reliance on bureaucratic processes and on experts and technocrats for the formation of social policy and for answers to the political and ethical questions of the day. However, neither an abstract, procedural, rationality, nor the technical knowledge of the specialist can provide substantive answers to the problems of ethical and political life, nor can they tell us what it would be good or right to do in a particular case. These are forms of knowledge and truth that these modes of cognition do not fully reach.

Given the patent inadequacy of the techniques of scientific rationalism with respect to normative questions, Gadamer asserts that we must “learn to recover our natural reason and our moral and political prudence.”² We will show how he opens a path in this direction through a critique of method that draws on Heidegger’s earlier criticisms of all forms of objectivism. Heidegger had undermined objectivism by showing that there is no independent, self-subsisting subject that could ever stand over against objects allegedly existing in-themselves and so in this way see them as they ‘really’ are. Instead, there is only the givenness of an always already

¹ Objective reason was seen as a principle residing in both the mind and the world, so that the world was believed to have an objective, rational order or structure that the mind could discover. The goal of objective reason is to attain harmony between the order of the cosmos and the institutions and social relations of human life by discovering that order and setting human purposes so that they would be in accord with it, in the belief that knowledge of the nature of reality also leads to knowledge of how one ought to live.

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Hermeneutics and Social Science,” *Cultural Hermeneutics* 2 (1975): 314.

understood and situated event, an unfolding standpoint that both constitutes our opening onto the world and is not separable from it.

The failure of objectivism to reduce the immense domain of what appears to the first person viewpoint to strictly objective elements leads me to a proposal for a richer conception of experience, one that restores the ‘weight’ of things by holding together the quasi-objective elements of being and the phenomenality of the appearances within the context of an ontological pluralism. With this we reach a conception of things that does not diminish what is *there*, and in doing so counter the naturalistic impoverishment of the world and its objects.

We will see that this recuperation of pre-objective being also makes possible Gadamer’s rehabilitation of forms of rationality and truth that have always belonged to this sphere. Gadamer restores an understanding of reason as emerging out of our concrete situatedness in the finite and historical realm of pre-objective experience. This domain of lived experience has its own kind of validity and forms of truth that are not reached by science, method, or instrumental thought. Here, as Gadamer demonstrates, coming to know something is a matter of finding the appropriate language rather than deploying a procedure, so that – in conversation with others – truth and reality are disclosed.

I. The Ascent of Method

Modern method, which is characterized by the institution of ‘objective’ distance, by the employment of universally accessible procedures that secure the verifiability of results, and by a structured isolation of its objects that makes possible manipulative intervention, originates in two distinct but interrelated developments, namely the appearance of Cartesian rationalism, on the one

hand, and the emergence of the New Science, on the other.³ The methodical Cartesian search for irrefutable first principles begins, of course, by doubting everything which it is possible to doubt in the hope of reaching something which it is not possible to doubt. Descartes attempts in this way to derive, through rational reflection, a set of facts that share the characteristics of true propositions, viz., simplicity, clarity, and distinctness, which would enable these to serve as unshakeable foundations for knowledge. The idea at the heart of Descartes' method – one that was to become a fundamental presupposition of the Enlightenment – is the notion that a methodologically disciplined use of reason can safeguard us from all error and enable us to secure certainty in our judgments. These judgments would then qualify as justified, and all other judgments not grounded in method are regarded as ‘unfounded’ judgments. In this manner, judgments grounded in prejudice are excluded as potential sources of truth, and tradition is replaced by rational method as the ultimate source of epistemic authority.⁴

Gadamer maintains that this method is a response to the alienation [*Fremdheit*] of modernity: “the age of mechanics felt alienated from nature conceived as the natural world and expressed this feeling epistemologically in the concept of self-consciousness [*Selbstbewußtseins*] and in the rule, developed into a method, that only "clear and distinct perceptions" are certain.”⁵ This experience of alienation, of things being no longer evident or obvious, can be seen in the Cartesian anxiety about the match (or lack thereof) between reality and our idea of it derived from our senses. It appears, too, in the puzzlement over how two ontologically distinct substances, i.e., mind and matter, can ever come to be related to one another. In short, method as a regimented

³ Gadamer nowhere offers a comprehensive definition of method in general. His conception of method must be pieced together from remarks found in the early essay “What is Truth?” (1957) and scattered through *Truth and Method* and in writings afterwards, especially in essays such as “Language and Understanding” (1970), “Text and Interpretation” (1981), “From Word to Concept” (1994), and in the collections of speeches and essays titled *Reason in the Age of Science* (1976) and *Praise of Theory* (1983).

⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd revised edition (New York: Continuum, 2004), 279 (hereafter TM); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Warheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1990), 282 (hereafter WM).

⁵ Gadamer, TM, 56; WM, 70-71.

search for the foundations of knowledge, a project that continues from Descartes to Husserl, emerges simultaneously with epistemology and the bifurcation between subject and object that accompanies it.⁶ One already finds at the very origins of method, then, some of the central ontological presuppositions of philosophical modernity; we will need to return to this background framework in a much more comprehensive and substantial way when we examine Gadamer's critique of method.

The elements of method that Gadamer identifies here, i.e., the emphasis on self-awareness, on the formulation of rules, and on clarity and certainty, are also present in the procedures employed by the natural sciences. Gadamer mentions the first of these features in connection with Francis Bacon, one of the key figures in the rise of the New Science. Bacon viewed the human mind as prone to error, noting the way in which the faculty of the understanding is vulnerable to the influence of the emotions and to human interests. These forms of mental error Bacon calls the "Idols of the Tribe" and the "Idols of the Cave." The Idols of the Tribe are rooted in human nature or the nature of the mind and as such are universal. The Idols of the Cave are those limitations specific to particular individuals due to their mental and physical constitution, education, habit and other accidents of their condition.⁷ The Bacon scholar Stephen Gaukroger maintains that an important difference between these two groups is that whereas the Idols of the Cave can be remedied by submitting to Bacon's method of eliminative induction, the

⁶ See Weinsheimer for an elaboration of the idea of method as a response to finding oneself no longer at home in the world; Joel Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 4-5.

⁷ The Idols of the Tribe are, very briefly: imputing more order to nature than is actually there; ignoring counter-examples to one's propositions; over hasty generalizing from a particular situation to all other situations; a restless seeking after more fundamental explanations than those one already possesses; believing to be true what one wants to be true; relying on the senses, which can be unreliable; and finally the tendency to think in abstractions. The Idols of the Cave are, again very briefly: the application of principles or conclusions from one's own subject to other areas; the tendency to focus overmuch on differences or conversely, on similarities; an excessive fascination with the very old or the very new; and a focus on the elements that constitute something over its structure or vice-versa. Francis Bacon, *New Organon*, in *Francis Bacon Selected Philosophical Works*, ed. Rose-Mary Sargent (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1999), 97-101.

Idols of the Tribe are much more difficult, perhaps impossible, to purge completely. Instead, Gaukroger says that these tendencies of the mind need to be curbed in order to prepare natural philosophers to follow his inductive procedure, since it is a method that goes against their natural inclinations.⁸ For Gadamer, Bacon's real achievement lies in this thorough cataloguing and systematic purging of the prejudices that direct the human mind away from true knowledge - a methodical discipline of mental self-purification [*eine methodische Selbstreinigung des Geistes*] that makes the use of methodical reason possible - rather than in his method of induction.⁹

In addition to the methodological ideal of exercising complete control over consciousness, the procedures of science also share the Cartesian focus on clarity and certainty. This can be seen in the scientific attempt to obtain results that can be publicly verified, since what is verifiable is certain. Verifiability requires scientists to be so clear and precise about the steps taken to obtain a particular result that anyone else could in principle follow the same steps and reach the exact same conclusion, as in the repeatability of experiments, for example. Gadamer clarifies this relation between method, repeatability and certainty thusly:

The ideal of knowledge that is determined through the concept of method consists in pacing out a path of knowledge so consciously that it is always possible to retrace one's steps. *Methodos* means the path of repeated investigation [nachgehen]. Always to be able to once again go over the ground one has traversed, that is methodical and distinguishes the procedures of science. But with this a curtailment is necessarily placed in general on what can emerge in any truth claim. When verification - regardless of what form - primarily defines truth (veritas), then the standard with which knowledge is measured is no longer its truth but its certainty. Therefore, since Descartes's classic formulation of the rule of certainty has been considered the ethos of modern science, only that which satisfied the ideal of certainty satisfied the conditions of truth.¹⁰

⁸ Stephen Gaukroger, *Francis Bacon and the Transformation of Early Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 125.

⁹ See Gadamer, TM, 344; WM, 355.

¹⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "What is Truth?" trans. Brice R. Wachterhauser, in *Hermeneutics and Truth*, ed. Brice R. Wachterhauser (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 37; Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Was ist Wahrheit?" in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1990), 48 (hereafter all references to the collected works after vol. 1 will be *GW* followed by the volume number).

Gadamer never presents a comprehensive conception of modern scientific method, but he seems to suggest that there are at least two aims which organize the procedures of science, namely, the aspiration to objectively valid knowledge, on the one hand, and the objective of gaining control over nature, on the other.¹¹ The elements of method that we have already outlined, for example, converge on these goals in the form of the scientific experiment. Thus insofar as method brings the subjective elements which function in any observation under its control, and to the extent that it ensures that the results of the procedures it utilizes can be publicly verified by being anonymously repeated, it makes possible the idea of objective knowledge.¹² Similarly, insofar as the experimental approach excludes the subject-related features of things, such as the qualitative and the normative, and abstracts conditioning factors from the environment by means of the experimental hypothesis so that its objects can be described in precise mathematical terms, and insofar as this approach uncovers law-like regularities by means of procedures which are repeatable and so verifiable, it enables us to obtain an extensive degree of power over nature.¹³

¹¹ Joel Weinsheimer levels the charge that Gadamer claims that science has but one method, induction, and that this is not a tenable conception of scientific method. I think that I have now shown this not to be the case. On the other hand, Weinsheimer acknowledges that “In one respect, it doesn’t matter what the specific character of scientific method is, because Gadamer’s argument is directed against method as such,” and “Gadamer’s focal thesis retains its pertinence, truth cannot be equated with methodical proof” (Weinsheimer, *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, op. cit., 19-20). Monica Vilhauer anticipates the objection that Gadamer’s characterization of scientific method may appear too simplistic to those currently involved in debates over the methodology of the natural sciences within the philosophy of science, but “it is the older depiction of method that Gadamer finds alive and well in his era and in need of confrontation [...] the older, narrower view of scientific method still dominates our thinking today, in spite of the more sophisticated debates that are going on in highly specialized philosophical circles. Because of this, Gadamer’s critique of modern science and his project to rethink knowledge and truth beyond the confines of modern method are still relevant.” Monica Vilhauer, *Gadamer’s Ethics of Play: Hermeneutics and the Other* (Lanham: Lexington, 2010), n.2.

¹² Hans-Georg Gadamer, “From Word to Concept: The Task of Hermeneutics as Philosophy” trans. Richard E. Palmer in *The Gadamer Reader*, ed. Richard E. Palmer (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 114 (hereafter GR); Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Vom Wort zum Begriff: Die Aufgabe der Hermeneutik als Philosophie” in *Gadamer Lesebuch*, ed. Jean Grondin (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1997), 105 (hereafter GL).

¹³ See “Language and Understanding,” trans. Richard E. Palmer, GR, 95; Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Sprache und Verstehen,” *GW* 2, 186, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, “What is Practice? The Conditions of Social Reason,” trans. Frederick G. Lawrence, in *Reason in the Age of Science*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 70 (hereafter RAS); Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Was ist Praxis? Die Bedingungen gesellschaftlicher Vernunft,” *GW*

Between Cartesianism on the one side, then, and the procedures of the natural sciences on the other, a general conception of method has come into view whose main features can be enumerated. First, both the object of inquiry and the consciousness of the inquiring subject must undergo a process of filtering in order for the subject to gain the proper, ‘objective’ distance from the objects of its investigation; second, this subject must secure the certainty of his or her judgments through the disciplined use of reason; third, a clear procedure in steps that others can follow must be laid out so that the results obtained can be substantiated; finally, it must be possible to isolate and manipulate the objects of inquiry and the relations which obtain between them so as to produce certain knowledge about them.

§

Gadamer does not have an objection to method *per se*,¹⁴ nor even to its use outside of the natural sciences; in the forward to the second edition of *Truth and Method* he acknowledges the necessity of working with methods in the human sciences.¹⁵ What he finds problematic is the conviction, seen, for example, in the Enlightenment prejudice against prejudice, that truth is reached *only* through method, that method encompasses the whole of knowledge. This belief originates in a certain way that science has of understanding itself; Gadamer notes that this is a “concept of knowledge based on scientific procedures” which “tolerates no restriction of its claim to universality.”¹⁶ More specifically, this form of scientism arises from a certain (mis)-

4, 216-217. This can also be found in *Vernunft im Zeitalter der Wissenschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1976) (hereafter *VZW*).

¹⁴ The role of repeatability, verification, and the control of subjective elements in achieving objective knowledge are all, according to Gadamer, “fully in order.” See Gadamer, “From Word to Concept,” GR, 114; *GL*, 105.

¹⁵ “The methodical spirit of science permeates everywhere. Therefore I did not remotely intend to deny the necessity of methodical work within the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*),” Gadamer, TM, xxvi; “Vorwort zur 2. Auflage,” *GW* 2, 439.

¹⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “On the Problem of Self-Understanding” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. by David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 54 (hereafter PH); Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Zur Problematik des Selbstverständnisses,” *KS I*, 78. Or again: “Abstracted from the fundamental relation to the world that is given in the linguistic nature of our experience of it, science attempts to become certain about entities by methodically organizing its knowledge of the world. Consequently it condemns as

interpretation of the nature and significance of the ‘objectively’ valid knowledge that is reached in the natural sciences.

As we have already seen, the notion that objectively valid truth is reached by disengaged thinking can be traced back to Descartes, Bacon, Galileo, and other figures in the rise of the New Science. These thinkers were increasingly sensitive to the ways in which particular points of view could distort reality, and they found that bracketing out subjective elements of experience, such as aspects of phenomena that depend on social practices, that are relative to the senses, and that are functions of the structure and capacities of the body, enabled them to overcome these distortions. This contrast between an underlying, objective truth and our ordinary, subjective experience seemed to provide overwhelming evidence that obtaining objective valid knowledge required the taking up of a detached stance toward the world.¹⁷

The disengaged standpoint has also proven very valuable for coping with reality effectively. It is this detached perspective, for example, which in grasping its objects purged of not only qualities and values, but also of other phenomena that are normally features of lived experience such as weight, color, and local spatial and temporal context, that has enabled science to uncover phenomena such as laws of nature and natural kinds, and so consequently resulted in a dramatic increase in the explanatory and predictive power of science.

The methodological requirements for obtaining objectively valid knowledge of nature that have been presented here do not by themselves substantiate the claim that what is real is only that which is exhausted by what science uncovers and that which exists independently of any subject, i.e., in-itself. *This* conclusion is reached by a particular, yet fateful, interpretation of the philosophical significance of these requirements in a positivistic philosophy of science. This

heresy all knowledge that does not allow of this kind of certainty and that therefore cannot serve the growing domination of being,” TM, 471; WM, 479-480.

¹⁷ For a brief but clear account of this historical background, see Charles Taylor, “Engaged Agency and Background in Heidegger,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Charles B. Guignon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 200), 317-336.

interpretation forgets that science treats the world *as if* it were a quantifiable world in-itself that can be grasped from what has been called “the view from nowhere,” and ontologizes this method by claiming that the world simply *is* such an entity.¹⁸ As Husserl puts it, we “take for *true being* what is actually a *method*”¹⁹ so that what qualifies as real is only that which can be measured and grasped by an external, third person standpoint. This is a way of understanding the real in terms of what can be seen from the standpoint an ideal observer, since in this picture the world becomes a kind of stage and entities – other people and things – become items on it, all of which are laid out like a spectacle for a hypothetical, disengaged viewer.

What is lost in this move from epistemic objectivity to ontological objectivism is both the human world itself, inasmuch as this disenchantment of nature is accompanied by the flattening out of lived experience, with its characteristic qualities, meanings, and values, as well as the forms of truth and validity that belong to this sphere, viz., those truths which originate in a standpoint internal to experience, that is, in an engaged and participatory point of view. Recall that in the attempt to achieve epistemological objectivity, the subject had taken hold of reality with methodological self-certainty by means of its rational constructions, and then articulated this reality in the neutral, purely descriptive language of the detached observer.²⁰ But rather than simply presenting this as *one* form of truth, ontological objectivism leads to the conclusion that this can be the *only* form of truth, since what is real, i.e., that which exists in-itself, can only be grasped by the disengaged viewpoint and its method.

The notion that reality has only one dimension, and truth, one model, is a philosophical rather than scientific claim, a claim that is motivated, no doubt, by the spectacular success of the natural sciences. Nevertheless, this *philosophical claim* is commonly misinterpreted as being a

¹⁸ See David Carr, “Husserl’s Problematic Concept of the Life World,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 7 (1970): 331-39.

¹⁹ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 51-52. Also see pp. 3, 23, 32.

²⁰ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Text and Interpretation,” trans. Richard E. Palmer, GR, 166; Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Text und Interpretation,” *GW* 2, 338.

scientific discovery, so that contemporary life has come in this way to be dominated by a monolithic view of reality and truth.

II. Technological Rationality and the Expertengesellschaft

In this new dispensation in which truth is exhausted by method, there is no longer a place for the older idea of truth as opened up by the rationality operative in language, that is, by rhetoric, dialogue, and tradition. Instead, the scope of reason is curtailed so that it comes to be equated with what Gadamer calls technical or technological rationality (he refers to this form of reason on various occasions as *technische Vernunft/Vernunftigkeit /Rationalität /beherrschbarer Zweckrationalität*), which is the pursuit of determinate ends in a consistent, efficiency-oriented, and rational manner.²¹ While these terms encompass purposive means-ends rationality, Gadamer also has in mind something more rigorous and sweeping, namely, that form of procedural thinking that involves the rule-governed organization of means to reach ends which organizes so much of modern life.²²

The rise and spread of technical or technological reason has resulted in our “being overwhelmed in our economic and social system by a rationalization of all the relations of life, one that follows an immanent structural compulsion.”²³ This “highly bureaucratized, thoroughly

²¹ See Gadamer, *TM*, 572; *WM*, 468; Gadamer, *RAS* 84; *GW* 4, 226; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, trans. Chris Dawson (New Haven: Yale University Press), 79 (hereafter *PT*); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Lob der Theorie: Reden und Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983), 97 (hereafter *LT*).

²² Gadamer notes that Max Weber had already foreseen and diagnosed this anonymous domination of society by technical reason – or what Gadamer also, but more rarely, calls, echoing the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, instrumental reason (*instrumentell Rationalität*). See *PT* 59, 94, 96; *LT* 115-116, 118 and *Gadamer in Conversation: Reflections and Commentary*, ed. and trans. by Richard E. Palmer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 82 (hereafter *GIC*); Carsten Dutt, *Hermeneutik, Ästhetik, Praktische Philosophie: Hans-Georg Gadamer im Gespräch* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2000), 71. What distinguishes Gadamer’s analysis from Weber’s is a refusal of the inevitability of the “iron cage” of modernity.

²³ Gadamer, *RAS* 83, translation modified; *VZW*, 71.

organized and thoroughly specialized society,” with its system of rationalized economic production and its bureaucratized political sphere, requires, in order to operate effectively, a division of labor according to specialized functions.²⁴ Within the system of labor each has his or her prescribed place and must adapt to a fixed and pre-given structure of tasks and purposes.²⁵ Most individuals in such a society must concentrate on the function they have to fulfill or perform in society. Gadamer refers here to functionaries [*Funktionäre*], but he seems to have in mind anyone whose work requires a degree of specialization, rather than the bureaucrats of various stripes which the English term ‘functionary’ suggests: “in our modern society, based as it is on the division of labor, we are all functionaries in the sense that in our various occupations we carry out highly specialized functions.”²⁶ Moreover “it is constitutive of the notion of the functionary that he be completely concentrated upon the administration of his function. In the scientific, technical, economic, monetary processes, and most especially in administration, politics, and similar forms, he has to maintain himself as what he is: one inserted for the sake of the smooth functioning of the apparatus. That is why he is in demand, and therein lie his chances for advancement.”²⁷ As ever more functionaries man the apparatus of society, decision-making power comes to be concentrated into the hands of the few, the experts. “Put in terms of a slogan, the society of experts is simultaneously a society of functionaries as well.”²⁸ Here we have the ideal of the technocratic society [*Expertengesellschaft*], namely, a society maintained by functionaries and managed by experts.²⁹

The appearance of the expert can be traced to the late modern application of scientific rationalism to all of the spheres of life, so that we now have a science of child-rearing practices,

²⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Limitations of the Expert,” trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss, in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History*, ed. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 192.

²⁵ Gadamer, GIC, 83; *Hans-Georg Gadamer im Gespräch*, op. cit., 72.

²⁶ Gadamer, GIC, 83; *Hans-Georg Gadamer im Gespräch*, op. cit., 72.

²⁷ Gadamer, RAS, 74; *VZW*, 60.

²⁸ Gadamer, RAS, 74; *VZW*, 60.

²⁹ Gadamer, RAS, 72; *VZW*, 58.

of warfare, of market research, of public opinion polling, and so on.³⁰ Those who are experts in certain fields, such as business and management experts, military experts, legal experts, etc., come to play an authoritative role in society, especially in its decision-making process. And this, with certain qualifications, is as it should be, since such specialists are indispensable for the competent management and control of the complex theoretical and technical processes of our civilization. Besides, we are not able to meet every situation, or face every question, simply by relying on our own understanding and abilities. We must utilize all possible sources of knowledge, so that where the relevant science exists, we should avail ourselves of it. Moreover, as social beings it is inevitable that we have recourse to the knowledge and abilities of others; this trust in the superiority of knowledge or skills possessed by others is the true source of authority, and authority is indispensable to the structure of every society.³¹ Therefore, Gadamer maintains, “Our society is not deformed just because experts are consulted and recognized for the superiority of their knowledge. Quite the opposite. It is almost a duty for human beings to incorporate as much knowledge as is possible in any of their decisions.”³²

But we have also come, Gadamer thinks, to misunderstand the authority of the expert. The restriction of truth claims to what can emerge through the application of method has exacerbated our reliance on scientific and quasi-scientific experts and their fields of expertise. Moreover, “the longing of the citizenry for orientation and normative patterns invests the expert with an exaggerated authority. Modern society expects him to provide a substitute for past moral

³⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Notes on Planning for the Future” in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History*, op. cit., 165; Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Über die Planung der Zukunft,” *GW* 2, 155.

³¹ See Gadamer, “The Limitations of the Expert,” op. cit., 188, 190.

³² Gadamer, “The Limitations of the Expert,” op. cit., 188-189; Gadamer goes on in the same passage to highlight the value of instrumental reason: “Max Weber’s famous expression rationality” [*Zweckrationalität*] applies here. For Weber demonstrated that there was a great danger implicit in those decisions which are determined by emotion or interest: In them the will to be rational is absent which would tie the attainability of the end to the rational determination of means.” Gadamer clearly acknowledges, then, that there is an important and appropriate role for both expertise and technical rationality in modern life.

and political orientations,³³ or for own practical and political experience.³⁴ Thus we have recourse to experts in the formation of social policy and in making, as a community or society, our most significant political decisions. The problem lies not with the involvement of experts in policymaking or our decision-making processes, but with our belief that there are experts for all policies and decisions, and that the final authority for these must rest with those who know, those who possess the scientific or quasi-scientific knowledge of the specialist.³⁵ The real political activity of the citizen, in turn, has been reduced participation in elections. As a consequence, the formation of public opinion has become the object of complex techniques developed by political pollsters, social psychologists, sociologists, political analysts, and other specialists.³⁶

This exaltation of the expert has taken us away from what actually lies in the power of every individual, namely, the ability to reach answers, and even to arrive at truths, in the ethical and political spheres of human life and activity. This is a task (and even a responsibility) moreover, which we cannot simply turn over to specialists, because the scientific knowledge possessed by experts lacks the requisite social and normative resources to provide the guidance we need. Scientific knowledge lacks the social and normative character of the concrete, historical language of a people, which provides its speakers with “the shared interpretation of the world that makes moral and social solidarity possible,”³⁷ and which also makes possible, ultimately and most importantly, the disclosure of truth. The abstract and formal character of the language in which scientific and technical knowledge is articulated, on the other hand, which can be seen, for instance, in taxonomic classification, the expression of general laws, or systems of universal

³³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Hermeneutics and Social Science,” *op. cit.*, 307-316, 312.

³⁴ Gadamer, *RAS*, 72; *VZW*, 58.

³⁵ Gadamer, “The Limitations of the Expert,” *op. cit.*, 188, 190.

³⁶ See Gadamer, *PT*, 45; *LT*, 61-62.

³⁷ Gadamer, “Language and Understanding,” *GR*, 96; *GL*, 75.

notation, cannot provide from within its own resources the kind of social controls necessary to ensure that it is not put to unethical uses.³⁸

Nor can we turn to an instrumentally abbreviated rationality for ethical guidance in this and other matters. Instrumental reason is methodical and comprehensive, systematic and efficient—but its purposeful calculation of the most efficient means to an end by reference to universally applicable rules or regulations is also formal and abstract, so that it has no specific content. In short, it amounts to a technique rather than being a mode of understanding that could enable us to successfully navigate the great social and political issues, policies, and decisions of the day.

This leaves us with the question of how we are to restore more robust and democratic forms moral deliberation to the realm of social practice in place of a politics oriented to merely functional goals, even as faith in our ability to reach truth in precisely these matters has been eroded by the ascendance of a scientific understanding of knowledge and truth and an instrumental interpretation of reason. The way forward, I suggest, lies in Gadamer's critique of method and the objectivism that underlies it.

III. Against Method: Gadamer's Critique

The reduction of truth to method, to what can be uncovered by a fixed mode of investigation that approaches the world with a pre-schematized framework, leads according to Gadamer to a form of epistemic imperialism in which “what is attainable by method defines what

³⁸ “Theoretical reason and the instrumentality of science are not able in themselves to place any limits on the technological capacity that man has built up,” (Gadamer, “Language and Understanding,” GR, 102-103; GL, 80-81).

can be an object for exploration.”³⁹ More specifically, the universal application of method restricts the scope of inquiry – and thus what can emerge in any truth claim – to what can be grasped from an ‘objective’ distance, to what can be verified, and to what can be subjected to our controlling intervention. Yet truth is *not* exhausted by method – this is the great theme and lesson of *Truth and Method*. There are important modes of truth that depend on an involved and participatory stance rather than distance, that cannot be verified, and that, rather than being produced through our controlling interventions, take the form of an event which happens to us. These forms of truth are to be found both in the human sciences (paradigmatically in the encounter with the work of art and in the interpretation of the text) once they are “liberated from the spurious narrowing imposed by the model of the natural sciences,”⁴⁰ and in the experience of language.

Insofar as the first two divisions of *Truth and Method* explore the nature and possibility of non-objective truth by showing the way in which the truths of the human sciences elude capture by method, Gadamer’s critique of method amounts to an indirect attack on the equation of truth with method. But in the third and final division of *Truth and Method* Gadamer goes further than this and rejects the claim of method to reach perfect epistemic objectivity. Here the critique of method does not merely involve the legitimation of a sphere of non-objective truth which must be distinguished from a domain of objectivity; the claim is rather that no such objective domain, even in the natural sciences, is possible.

The notion that method can arrive at a ‘purely objective’ epistemic stance, it will be recalled, has its source in a form of scientism which maintains that the standpoint reached by

³⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Expressive Force of Language: On the Function of Rhetoric in Gaining Knowledge,” trans. Chris Dawson, PT, 133; Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Die Ausdruckskraft der Sprache,” *LT*, 161.

⁴⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Problem of Historical Consciousness,” trans. Jeff L. Close, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 5 (1975): 5; Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Le Problème de la conscience historique (Louvain: Institut Supérieur de Philosophie, Université Catholique de Louvain, 1963).

science is purely objective both because it is shorn of all traces of subjectivity and because it is universal, i.e., it is a stance that encompasses the whole of being. Gadamer points out, however, that scientific objectivity does not, as it thinks, grasp the whole of what exists. Even if the world picture of scientific objectivity includes the scientific observer as one item or object among others in the whole which it articulates, this disengaged, external, third person standpoint depends upon and presupposes the observer's point of view, the viewpoint of consciousness, which is not, in important ways, visible to the scientific gaze.⁴¹ Gadamer does not develop this objection at any length, either in *Truth and Method* or in his later works. One reason for this, presumably, is that he did not have to. As we shall see, Heidegger, Gadamer's teacher and predecessor, had already shown that whatever (always only partial and temporary) detached stance we manage to achieve presupposes and depends upon an involved and participatory standpoint. And fifteen years before the publication of *Truth and Method*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty had advanced in exhaustive detail the claim that the standpoint of objectivism cannot fully capture the pre-objective world of perception. Looking beyond hermeneutics and phenomenology, one sees, too, that this is a live thesis in other precincts of philosophy, as in the various difficulties posed by the attempt to account for mental states from the external or third person standpoint of physicalism or in the controversies generated by naturalistic accounts of ethical and aesthetic experience.

But there is a further reason that science does not and cannot encompass the whole of being within its purview, and this is because it constitutes merely one standpoint among other

⁴¹ Gadamer, *TM*, 448; *WM*, 455. Moreover, as Gadamer observes, that which escapes the method of the natural sciences is excluded from the outset; this is a refusal which gives science the appearance of being total in its knowledge. There is operative here an unstated reliance on concealed, and so protected, prejudices and interests. These hidden preconceptions and anticipations guide thinking and action and are not easily dislodged, especially when they are disguised - as they are in science - as presuppositionless starting points free of all prejudice which claim self-evident certainty. Prejudices such as these thus constitute a powerful form of concealment that can determine one's whole relation to the world. We need only think of the way in which scientific rationalism has unquestioningly been applied to social life, or the way in which science or those with scientific or quasi-scientific expertise are invoked, as a matter of course, as the highest authority in the decision-making processes of society. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Semantics and Hermeneutics," trans. David E. Linge, *PH*, 92; Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Semantik und Hermeneutik," *GW* 2, 181-182.

possible ones rather than a view from nowhere. The scientific viewpoint is actually, as Gadamer observes, a practically engaged one, that is, one that is constituted by an interest in the control and prediction of the objects under investigation. The world is objectified by the scientist in order to make the things in it calculable and available for his or her purposes. Therefore, the object of scientific objectivity, which is ostensibly supposed to exist ‘in-itself,’ is relative to a specific mode of knowing and willing. Gadamer illustrates this point by noting the way in which Max Scheler had shown that the mechanistic model of the universe is related in a special way to our capacity to make things.⁴²

This is not to say, however, that science cannot achieve a significant degree of disengagement from its objects, nor that this detached, yet always human, perspective does not obtain valid knowledge of nature—only that such knowledge does not consist in access to a world existing in-itself which is disclosed to an unsituated vantage point. The mistake of thinkers in thrall to scientism, and in particular those who ontologize the methods of science, is to equate the limited disengagement that is actually achieved in the partly detached standpoint with an unlimited stance that would encompass and at the same time transcend all particular perspectives, thereby arriving at a conception of things as they are apart from any particular viewpoint on them.

Yet no matter how detached, no matter to what extent various subjective elements have been purged from the controlled experience of an experiment, the disengaged stance of the scientist can never be absolute. And that is because in order to see something we must be standing *somewhere*, we must have a point of view—the notion of having a view from nowhere is incoherent, unintelligible. But to stand somewhere, to have a point of view, is to be engaged on

⁴² Gadamer, TM, 450; WM, 454.

some level, rather than completely disengaged. This means that no standpoint can ever be wholly 'purified' of subjective conditioning factors.⁴³

For Gadamer, an absolute, universal, context-free stance is not possible for a historical humanity whose very existence is limited and qualified in various ways. This includes a self-understanding in the family, state and society in which one lives and which emerges before any form of subjective, individual self-understanding.⁴⁴ Hence "we are always situated within traditions;" tradition is "always a part of us."⁴⁵ Because tradition is the way in which the past is born into the future, our being is historical. As historical beings, we are prejudiced by our history; the very possibility of experience depends upon our belonging to a wider context or horizon which we are not able to simply transcend.⁴⁶ This historically effected consciousness [*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*] is, Gadamer declares, "more being than consciousness" [*mehr Sein als Bewußtsein*];⁴⁷ this recalls – not insignificantly, as we shall see – Heidegger's claim that we are "thrown" into "facticity."

⁴³ Nor indeed can we ever make completely explicit and so be fully aware and in control of such factors; we can never be fully transparent to ourselves. Gadamer reminds us that this theme already looms large in two of the great modern masters of suspicion: "From Nietzsche we learned to doubt the grounding of truth in the self-certainty of self-consciousness. Through Freud we became acquainted with the astonishing scientific discoveries that came with taking these doubts seriously," "Text and Interpretation," GR, 167; *GL*, 149-150. In the same passage Gadamer also acknowledges Heidegger's contribution to the critique of consciousness; later in *Truth and Method* he sums up his own: "To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete. All self-knowledge arises from what is historically pre-given, what with Hegel we call "substance," because it underlies all subjective intentions and actions, and hence both prescribes and limits every possibility for understanding any tradition whatsoever in its historical alterity. This almost defines the aim of philosophical hermeneutics: its task is to retrace the path of Hegel's phenomenology of mind until we discover in all that is subjective the substantiality that determines it," TM, 301; *WM*, 307.

⁴⁴ "The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life" (Gadamer, TM, 278; *WM* 281).

⁴⁵ Gadamer, TM, 283; *WM*, 286.

⁴⁶ These themes are closely tied the Gadamer's notion of prejudice [*Vorurteil*] which we will closely examine in Chapter 4.

⁴⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Reflections on My Philosophical Journey," in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, Chicago: Open Court, 1996) 27; Hans Georg Gadamer, "Selbstdarstellung Hans-Georg Gadamer," *GW* 2, 495-496.

What phenomenology calls the given, then, is always given to a temporal and cultural perspective; this means that what is given is always already *understood* from that perspective.

There is no uninterpreted given, not even for science:

Does the given exist as something from whose secure starting point one can search for the universal, the law, the rule, and so find its fulfillment? Or is the given not in fact itself the result of an interpretation? Interpretation performs the never fully complete mediation between man and world, and to this extent the fact that we understand something *as* something is the only real immediacy and givenness. For only in the light of interpretation does something become a fact, and only within the processes of interpretation is an observation expressible.⁴⁸

Science, like every other point of view, is rooted in interpretive understanding: “The phenomenon of human understanding not only pervades all human relations to the world. It also has an independent validity within science, and it resists any attempt to interpret it within scientific method.”⁴⁹ Thus what is affirmed in *Truth and Method* “– that the province of hermeneutics is universal and especially that language is the form in which understanding is achieved – embraces “pre-hermeneutic” consciousness as well as all modes of hermeneutic consciousness.”⁵⁰

Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics is not a theory of hermeneutics in the classical sense of a specialized technique restricted to the interpretation of Holy Scripture, law, and literature. Nor is it even a theory of the interpretation of human expression in general. Hermeneutics denotes a phenomenology of understanding, one that inquires into the true nature, possibility, and workings of understanding.⁵¹ Understanding, however, is not a mere faculty or power of the intellect.

Gadamer explicitly follows Heidegger in announcing that his hermeneutic project is an ontological one:

I took as my own point of departure a critique of the idealism and methodologism of an era that was dominated by epistemology. In my critique I followed

⁴⁸ Gadamer, “Text and Interpretation,” GR, 167; *GL*, 150.

⁴⁹ Gadamer, TM, xx; *WM*, 1.

⁵⁰ Gadamer, TM, xxxi; *GW* 2, 444.

⁵¹ Paul Ricoeur outlines the enlargement of our “understanding of understanding” throughout the history of hermeneutics and shows how this understanding develops from Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Husserl, and Heidegger to Gadamer. See Paul Ricoeur, “The Task of Hermeneutics” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 43-44.

Heidegger's raising of the concept of understanding to the status of an existential—that is, to a fundamental categorical determinant of human existence. This was of particular importance for me, because it was the impetus that enabled me to go beyond the discussion of method [...].⁵²

And again:

Heidegger's critique of the phenomenological concept of consciousness was even more radical, and—similarly in Scheler—he showed that even the concept of pure perception was dogmatic. Hermeneutical understanding of something *as* something was discovered to exist even in the so-called perception itself. In the final analysis, this means that for Heidegger, interpretation is not an additional or appended procedure of knowing but comprises the basic structure of "Being-in-the-world."⁵³

As these remarks indicate, Heidegger's work, especially *Being and Time*, is decisive both for Gadamer's critique of method and for his hermeneutics as a whole. Understanding is not simply one of the possible activities in which we can engage in or avoid at will, it is our very mode of being. We exist as understanding and interpreting beings. Because understanding is our very way of being in the world, it is prior to and more universal than the objectifying and controlling interventions of method. Whereas the notion that method can attain an absolute viewpoint presupposes the idea of a pure consciousness perfectly detachable from the world and its objects such that it could see them as they 'really' are, Heidegger shows that the understanding self and its understood world belong to one another, that they compose an always already understood situation and cannot be separated out from one another. The recovery of pre-objective being which follows from this has momentous consequences for our understanding of the nature of rationality and, finally, of truth. To see this we will have to turn to a fuller account of Heidegger's claim that what understands and what is understood constitute a single, unitary phenomenon.

⁵² Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation," GR, 158; *GL*, 142.

⁵³ Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation," GR, 167; *GL*, 150.

IV. In-der-Welt-Sein: The Retrieval of Pre-Objective Being

The indispensable element in objectivist accounts of knowledge and experience is the image of a subject divided from, and facing, an array of qualitatively bald and value-free objects. Throughout his work Heidegger summons us again and again to a radical rejection of this dualistic picture. He thinks that the subject-object framework is derived from, and parasitic on, a more primordial qualitative and value-laden phenomenon which he calls *In-der-Welt-sein*, or “being-in-the-world,” in which self and world cannot be separated out from each other. This is an interpretation of human life as a situated event that inheres in an always already meaningful world of lived experience. In this section we will follow Heidegger’s account of being-in-the-world as he presents it in *Being and Time* since I do not view Heidegger as departing even in his later works in an *essential* way from this initial formulation.

For the ontology of “being-in-the-world,” the self (which is part of what Heidegger calls Dasein, or being-there) is not able to be separated from world because Dasein is a self-disclosing which is at the same time the opening up of a world. As Heidegger puts it, Dasein *is* its disclosedness, “it *is* itself the clearing [...] by its very nature, Dasein brings its there along with it.”⁵⁴ Because what Dasein is, is not separable from what the world is, Dasein and world belong together as aspects of the single, unitary phenomenon of being-in-the-world.

Being-in-the-world is an expression which signifies that we *inhabit* the world. To say that we inhabit the world means that we are in the world not as one extended object in space is inside of another, because only things that exist as objectively present can stand in such a relationship to one another, and Dasein does not exist in this manner. A being that exists as objectively present is a “what,” an entity whose being is a matter of indifference to it; or to speak even more precisely,

⁵⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 125 (hereafter BT); Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 19th edition, (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006), 133 (hereafter SZ).

“it ‘is’ in such a way that its being can neither be indifferent nor non-indifferent to it.”⁵⁵ Dasein, on the other hand, is a “who” to whom things matter. If Dasein is not “in” the world as an item in a container, what does it mean to say that Dasein *in* the world? Heidegger says that being-in is dwelling, staying near, being familiar with, being absorbed in, being together with something and so able to encounter it. We are in the world as one is “in” the world of academia, business, or sports; or “in” the spirit of a game or a holiday; or “inside” a language or culture that is native to one. Heidegger specifies ways of being-in by giving as examples both positive actions and practices such as ordering, producing, taking care of, using, giving up, asking about, undertaking, speaking about, etc., as well as negative ones such as omitting, neglecting, renouncing, resting, etc.⁵⁶ These examples show that Dasein, in inhabiting the world, is a “who” whose being can be made visible as care. Moreover, we inhabit the world in such a way that we simultaneously interpret ourselves and open up a space that makes possible the discovery of, and encounters with, entities.

Our inhabiting or dwelling in the world, as active, affective, and linguistic, both opens it up and discloses a self. As active and engaged, we find ourselves in the world first and foremost as agents immersed in practical situations. As such, we possess a practical knowing-how that entails a pre-predicative set of intentionalities which makes things show up for us as meaningful before we consciously thematize them. This background of skills and practices, as an understanding of how to behave toward things and people, embodies an understanding of the world as a whole. Moreover, this understanding of a world is simultaneously a form of self-understanding. This comes out most clearly in Heidegger’s discussion of the tools and cultural objects we use in order to act which he calls equipment [*Zeug*]. Our skills and practices disclose (as in the case of everything in the world) the being of these entities as being “handy”

⁵⁵ Heidegger, BT, 40; SZ, 42.

⁵⁶ Heidegger, BT, 51-53; SZ, 55-57.

[*Zuhandenheit*]. This handiness is the use of something in order to do something for the sake of someone that always refers to other useful things and users. In other words, handiness can only be handiness insofar as it is part of a larger referential context. Equipment must belong to a whole totality of other equipment, materials out of which it is made, and people whom it serves for it to have the being that it has. Equipment cannot show itself by itself. It must be part of this larger network of referential totality [*Verweisungsganzheit*]. This referential totality constitutes the worldhood of the world and includes within it references not only to equipment and the materials out of which equipment is fashioned, but also references to other Daseins who make and use this equipment, so that in encountering useful things others are also encountered. The *Verweisungsganzheit* is a network which we use and relate to all, finally, for the sake of interpreting ourselves.⁵⁷ So, for example, I write in order to pass the proposal defense, I defend the proposal in order to obtain the Ph.D. degree, I obtain the Ph.D. degree in order to teach and study philosophy, allowing me to understand and interpret myself as a teacher and scholar.

The affectivity of Dasein which discloses the self and its world—which Heidegger calls *Befindlichkeit*, or attunement—is “equiprimordial” with the disclosive background of actions and cultural objects which are connected to other actions and objects in the network of practices mentioned above. Attunement discloses how Dasein finds itself, namely, as thrown into a concrete situation which is itself embedded in a larger cultural and historical world already given and made; a world in which things already count as significant and as mattering as revealed by the practices of a society. Dasein is able to act and give direction to its life, to interpret and evaluate itself, because it is attuned to this public, yet tacit, context of goods, commitments, and ideals which define the society. Its identity and self-understanding depends on its taking up and aspiring to the normative possibilities that are part of this background of shared intelligibility.

⁵⁷ Heidegger, BT, 64-65, 70-72, 78; SZ, 68-70, 74-77, 84.

The intelligibility of the world disclosed by understanding and attunement is discursively articulated in language. Our possession of discursive capacities (which Heidegger calls *Rede*) enables us to apprehend the intelligible structures within experience, which we are then able to make manifest to others through linguistic expression. In this sense, discourse or *Rede* is the source or foundation of language but is not identical to it. So, for example, the practice in my culture of picnicking beneath cherry trees while contemplating the beauty and brevity of their flowers, coupled with a wistful mood, the presence of friends, and a perfect spring day makes the blossoming cherry trees at the park show up for us as the conditions needed for a day of cherry blossom viewing, so that I am able to say to the others around me “Let’s drink beneath the trees—they are in full bloom.” In this way I both make manifest entities (cherry blossoms to be contemplated together) and disclose my self (as a viewer of blossoms and a participant in this form of sociality) to others in a common world and so bring to articulation the intelligibility that is a central feature of our shared being-in-the-world.

These are sweeping and even radical claims, yet they also follow from precise phenomenological description of our situation. Careful attention to our experience shows that rather than being world-less, transcendental subjects “constituting” objects, or merely one object in the world among others as items are in a box, or on a stage, our very identity is intimately and essentially tied up with the world and not separable from it. A separate, isolated subject without a world is never given phenomenally.⁵⁸ We find ourselves always already thrown into a cultural and historical milieu of shared meanings and values to which we are attuned and which we articulate discursively with a language largely restricted to publicly available interpretations. This forms the wider, meaningful context for the past events and actions and future projects which constitute the role we have taken up, a role which was chosen from among the various self-interpretations possible in our world. This, in turn, gives sense to our everyday pre-predicative

⁵⁸ Heidegger, BT, 109; SZ, 116.

practical engagements with things and accounts for how they manifest an understanding of both the world as a whole as well as our selves. There is no room for an independent, self-subsistent identity for the self in this picture, since who and what we are depends on our being formed by and participating in a world we inherit and do not simply make—although this does not preclude our ability to creatively contribute to, and shape, the world we find ourselves in and which we in a certain sense are.

Just as staying close to the phenomena reveals that there is no self-subsistent, independent subject, such an approach also discloses that there is no world of objects ‘in-themselves’ to be apprehended by such a subject which are the ‘true’ elements that underlie perception and experience. Heidegger shows that the neutral perception of objects with determinate properties presupposes an already understood background of pre-predicative, practical intelligibility opened up by our goals, activities, and interests. Dasein, as being-in-the-world, is initially and for the most part taken in by or absorbed in its world through care, which manifests itself in a myriad of practical activities, and practice by its nature is not something that readily comes to explicit awareness, nor is it something that is straightforwardly encountered. What *does* come to awareness is always the result of a deficiency in Dasein’s absorption and involvement in its activities. Only when there is a problem does Dasein encounter something by explicitly looking at it, so that it is seen as an objectively present entity. The awareness and encountering that belongs to Dasein as a looking *at* is the taking up of a theoretical stance that constitutes the entity as objectively present and allows cognition or knowing to function as the primary mode of Dasein’s being-in-the-world.⁵⁹ But “knowing is a mode of Dasein that is founded on being-in-the-world.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Heidegger, BT, 55, 57; SZ, 59, 61.

⁶⁰ Heidegger, BT, 58; SZ, 62.

The world thus initially has a practical shape and significance which we can leave behind only through making an effort to take up the detached stance which allows us to encounter the contextless objects with properties about which we can make assertions. These assertions pick out, through linguistic categories, the particular features of things from a whole indefinite background which is first perceived not as a set of objects with properties, but as a web of practically constituted things involved with our projects, goals, activities, and intertwined with other things.

In sum, the subject-object dichotomy and the epistemology it entails had devalued all points of view rooted in the perspective of the subject insofar as the epistemic ideal in this ontology was the third person standpoint, which grasps a detached, self-subsistent, independent object “in itself” apart from all subjective coloring and projection. For the ontology of being-in-the-world, on the other hand, such an object-in-itself is not possible, the object pole is a derivative aspect of the unitary phenomenon of being-in-the-world and not a separate thing. On this view, there are no disinterested, presuppositionless viewpoints, since the world is the always already understood context within which entities can show up meaningfully as anything at all.

There are, then, only various involved, participatory standpoints that are not separable from what is disclosed in them. What is disclosed is what “shows forth,” “shows itself,” or “becomes manifest”⁶¹ in relation to the practices, language and overall form of life that constitutes our standpoint. Since there is no perspective-free viewpoint which would show us what things ‘really’ are, what shows up or appears is just what those things are—and access to appearances is access to the things themselves. In this sense, we can understand what appears as a manifestation of the thing itself rather than as a ‘mere’ appearance.

This legitimation of a viewpoint internal to experience endows the appearances with a kind of ontological dignity, returning us to a richer, pre-modern conception of experience and

⁶¹ Heidegger, BT, 25; SZ, 29.

restoring a certain fullness to being. The idea that we must take the appearances seriously goes against the grain of centuries of philosophic and scientific thought; it is a remarkable claim with very profound implications for our view of reality when we consider the sorts of things we find in the appearances, such as moral and aesthetic qualities and values.

However, we should not be led by these considerations to the broader conclusion that science does not reach being. After all, what would account for the astounding practical success of science and the almost exponential leaps in technology that it makes possible if not the fact that its methods enables us to get a grip on how things stand—within a certain region of being, at least? In short, the enormous pragmatic efficaciousness of science does suggest that science uncovers that aspect of being that can be quantified and measured, that exhibits law-like regularity, and that appears to a partly (though never fully) and always temporarily disengaged standpoint. Nevertheless, this sphere is not a being-in-itself; its being is posited relative to the manner of inquiry undertaken by a specific science, so that we might speak, for example, of distinct ontological kinds, such as chemical (e.g. acids, oxidants, metals) and biological (e.g. genes, species, mammals) kinds.⁶²

The acknowledgement that science uncovers a domain of being, on the one hand, and the irreducibility of a determinate range of appearances to the terms of science, on the other, means that we must hold the truth of what Wilfred Sellars calls “the manifest image” together with the truth of the scientific image. As Gadamer puts it, “the sun has not ceased to set for us, even though the Copernican explanation of the universe has become part of our knowledge...we cannot try to supersede or refute natural appearances by viewing things through the “eyes” of scientific understanding.”⁶³ This would seem to entail that we have to speak here of a kind of ontological pluralism in which these different dimensions of being are disclosed to different

⁶² See Gadamer, *TM*, 451-52; *WM*, 456.

⁶³ Gadamer, *TM*, 449; *WM*, 452-453.

standpoints—or what Gadamer calls comportments toward the world [*Weltverhalten*]. Yet one must acknowledge that there is an order of preference here. Science methodically isolates its objects, abstracting conditioning and other factors from the environment in order obtain knowledge of manipulatable relationships, such that it presupposes and depends on the standpoint of perceptual consciousness.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, these comportments would be neither reducible to one another nor able to be encompassed by some more universal ontological structure.

Every comportment toward the world requires the use of language. As we will see, meaning depends on language such that something can appear to the first person point of view *as* what it is. And there can be little doubt that the quantification and measurement of objects, the construction of experiments, the formulation of laws, and the description of things in the quasi-neutral prose of a third person standpoint all presuppose language as well, so that science is one of the comportments toward the world (*Weltverhalten*) made possible by language. Language itself, however, is not another comportment toward the world, it is what transcends and embraces all such orientations. Language helps to constitute irreducible horizons of significance; as Heidegger has shown, every horizon allows certain things to appear while preventing others from becoming manifest. It should come as no surprise, then, to find Gadamer maintaining that language possesses a creative power that can reconcile the first and third personal relationships to the world which we have in ordinary experience and in scientific thought. “In this whole of language, appearances retain their legitimacy just as much as does science.”⁶⁵ But the recognition that both science and the life-world each have their forms of validity and truth is not to be read as endorsing the possibility of our reaching the infamous “view from nowhere.” Insofar as there is no standpoint, no *Weltverhalten*, outside of language, there can be no purely objective viewpoint. All points of view, including the point of view of science, belong to us and so never constitute

⁶⁴ See Gadamer, “Language and Understanding,” GR, 94-95. *GL*, 73.

⁶⁵ Gadamer, TM, 449-450; *WM*, 453.

more than a human perspective. This is one of the great insights that emerges out of the tradition of thought in which Gadamer works and which provides the background for his thinking about the nature of rationality and, ultimately, truth.

V. Reason Renewed

The recuperation of pre-objective being accomplished in the work of Heidegger allows Gadamer to recover a way of reasoning about the truths available in this sphere that had been deposited by the triumph of scientific rationalism. If the given is always given in and to a perspective such that there can be no completely external view of things, then human rationality cannot be something external or prior to experience, but must rather emerge from and reflect it. We have to understand how reason originally arises out of our situatedness in the concrete, finite, historical world. This model of rationality is pre-modern – and finally and quintessentially – ancient.⁶⁶ Gadamer reminds us that before the reign of technocrats and the institutions run by them had undercut the active participation of the citizen in public affairs, and before the highly specialized modern division of labor had isolated us from one another in such extreme forms, immediate and natural interaction in daily life – with its personal contact and the exchange of views in conversation – was “the unique source and dominant mode for the elaboration of common convictions and normative ideas” as well as the way in which practical reason was developed among the citizens of a society.⁶⁷

Contemporary life has seen the detachment of these theoretical and practical aspects of reason from one another and the displacement of each by forms of thinking alien to what

⁶⁶ P. Christopher Smith observes that Gadamer learns “precisely from Plato that an understanding of something is reached in a dialogical process, i.e., in discussion. Understanding occurs not in subjective thought but in an interrogative discursive exchange between speakers.” See P. Christopher Smith, “Plato as Impulse and Obstacle in Gadamer’s Development of a Hermeneutic Theory,” in *Gadamer and Hermeneutics*, ed. H.J. Silverman (London: Routledge, 1991), 37.

⁶⁷ Gadamer, “Hermeneutics and Social Science,” op. cit., 313-314.

Gadamer claims is the ultimate unity and normativity of human reason. The rationality operative in rhetoric, dialogue, tradition – i.e., in the language through which common convictions are articulated – has been deposed by method and science, on the one side, and instrumental thinking has supplanted *phronesis* or prudence, on the other. Science, method, and instrumental reason have satisfied so much of our natural and very powerful desire to know and master the world around us that we come to think that they can also meet our desire to know what is good or right, what we should be and do.⁶⁸ Practice has in this manner become the application of science and scientific rationalism, so that practical reason has been replaced by the execution of technical tasks, often requiring our adapting to pre-given functions or our working out the means for attaining pre-given goals.⁶⁹

What emerges in this contrast between science and the application of its peculiar form of rationality is the modern opposition between theory and practice. On the one side there is a conception of theory whose function it is to give an account of the manifold or multiplicity of appearances. Here there are only ‘facts’ which must be grasped as such apart from any values; these facts are then organized by theory, which, as a mode of explanation, claims an absolute cognitive status. On the other side there is practice as the mastery of intrinsically non-normative procedures of technical control. This development solidifies the modern understanding of practice as the application of theory, as if they were two separate things. Practice, in this scheme, is not knowledge but rather the application of knowledge. In this way practice, as Gadamer observes, has degenerated into the deployment of technique.⁷⁰

But this, Gadamer insists, is not what practice really is. Practice involves the whole totality of our practical life, and so has to do with law, politics, and everything from ranging

⁶⁸ Gadamer, RAS, 148; *VZW*, 122.

⁶⁹ Gadamer, GIC, 83; *Hans-Georg Gadamer im Gespräch*, op. cit., 72.

⁷⁰ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “On the Possibility of a Philosophical Ethics,” in *Hermeneutics, Religion, and Ethics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 278; Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Über die Möglichkeit einer philosophischen Ethik,” *GL*, 86-87. Also see Gadamer, RAS, 74; *VZW*, 60.

questions of health and peace to issues of freedom and happiness. Practice pertains to human action and behavior as a whole, and so is in this sense our form of life.⁷¹ And this means that human practice has always had (and retains to some extent even now) a normative aspect, whether this is reflected in our treatment of the dead, or in the concern for justice reflected in our legal codes, or in the order we give to society that makes possible a common life.⁷²

Richard Bernstein points out the ambiguity here in Gadamer's thinking about *praxis*: "At the heart of Gadamer's thinking about *praxis* is a paradox. On the one hand, he acutely analyzes the deformation of *praxis* in the contemporary world, and yet on the other hand he seems to suggest, regardless of the type of community in which we live, that *phronesis* is a real possibility."⁷³ A likely response to this charge lies in Gadamer's observation that "perhaps the normative character of practice and hence the efficacy of practical reason is "in practice" still a lot greater than theory thinks it is. It certainly looks at first as if we are being overwhelmed in our economic and social system by a rationalization of all the relations of life that follows an immanent structural compulsion,"⁷⁴ but no human society or tradition can deteriorate to a point where the exercise of *phronesis* is no longer possible.⁷⁵ Gadamer cites as concrete evidence of this the revulsion people around the world feel for genetic engineering, the horrified reaction of those who witnessed the brainwashed victims in Stalin's show trials, the resistance to the technological thinking that would prolong the 'life' of patients in a vegetative state on life-support machines, and the growing awareness and criticism of the link between our ecological crises and our technological rationality.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Gadamer, GIC, 79; *Hans-Georg Gadamer im Gespräch*, op. cit., 65.

⁷² See Gadamer, RAS, 76-77; *VZW*, 61-63.

⁷³ Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 158.

⁷⁴ Gadamer, RAS, 83; *VZW*, 71.

⁷⁵ Gadamer, RAS, 82; *VZW*, 70-71.

⁷⁶ See Gadamer, RAS, 83-84; *VZW*, 72-73.

An enormous distance, an ontological gulf, even, separates the view that practice is intrinsically normative from a standpoint that maintains a strict division between facts and values. This is because the dichotomy between fact and value that is revealed so clearly in the modern division between theory and practice is, like this division itself, an artifact of objectivism. This distinction between the two entities is usually made in terms of facts that are viewed as ‘really’ ‘out there’ in the world and objective, and values which are seen as ‘merely’ ‘inside’ the mind and subjective. This construal of values as internal and subjective and facts as external and objective maps onto the distinction between inner and outer that is entailed by a subject-object ontology. The critique of these forms of dualism found in the work of Heidegger, however, also entails the impossibility of pulling apart facts and values in this way and takes us to a starting point in a pre-objective being in which things always already have a normative significance.

The understanding of both theory and practice as inherently normative has also been obstructed by the way in which practice is positioned in opposition to theory, and to science in particular.⁷⁷ In the essay “Praise of Theory,” Gadamer asks us to imagine what practice and theory might look like both outside of this oppositional context in which they depend on and define one another as well as shorn of the presuppositions of objectivism. He reminds us that the original Greek meaning of *theoria* was observation (of the stars, for instance), looking on (e.g., as a member of the audience at a play), being present (as a participant is at a festival, ritual, or ceremony).⁷⁸ The observation, looking on, and being present of *theoria* is not for the sake of something else, to preserve existence, to master life, or to be in some other way of immediate service to practice; it needs no justification. *Theoria* is seeing what is – but this is not an objective observation which establishes facts:

Theoria is not so much the individual momentary act as a way of comporting oneself, a position and condition. It is being present in the lovely double sense

⁷⁷ Gadamer, RAS, 89; *VZW*, 79-80.

⁷⁸ Gadamer, PT, 31; *LT* 44.

that means that the person is not only present but completely present. Participants in a ritual or ceremony are present in this way when they are engrossed in their participation as such, and this always includes their participating equally with others or possible others. Thus theory is not in the first instance a behavior whereby we control an object or put it at our disposal by explaining it. It has to do with a good of another kind.⁷⁹

Theoria is a position and a condition, one that means “we can see and think and so that we are “there.”⁸⁰ *Theoria* is the awareness of being-there. This allusion to Heidegger is an allusion to the participatory and pre-objective standpoint of *Dasein*, a situation in which *Dasein* is always already involved with others, just as participation in a ceremony always involves our “participating equally with others or possible others.” Rather than the detached stance of scientific objectivity, *theoria* is an involved perspective that is concerned both with others and with our own being, our own life, just as the mineness [*Jemeinigkeit*] of *Dasein* – i.e. that it is *I* who is in each case *Dasein* – is one of the basic characteristics of *Dasein*; this is a condition which takes us into questions of the good for me and the good of others.

What was only hinted at in the allusions to Heidegger is made explicit in Gadamer’s reflection here on Aristotle. We are reminded that the first line of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* reads, “all men desire by nature to know.” We take delight in seeing and knowing in and for itself – and this fulfills our own nature. There is, in short, a joy in being aware, in being present and being “there” and the value of “seeing what is” is apart from all usefulness or profit.⁸¹ To the extent that it is in our nature and part of a truly human life to desire and move toward what is intrinsically valuable, what is good, theory also includes the attempt to see what is *good* inasmuch a happy, full, or truly human life is not merely a matter of pragmatic self-preservation; this is the “good of another kind” with which theory has to do: “Each of us asks himself how he should live. He seeks his fulfillment in a happy life – and that is not something that is exhausted by acquiring things

⁷⁹ Gadamer, PT 31-32; *LT* 44-45.

⁸⁰ Gadamer, PT, 20; *LT*, 30-31.

⁸¹ See Gadamer, PT, 19-20; *LT*, 30.

and being successful; life is also devoted precisely to what is, to what is to be seen as well as what is beautiful to see.”⁸² In speaking of the beautiful here Gadamer has in mind the Greek *to kalon*, the noble and fine that is found in both the beautiful and the good. Theory as the knowledge of *what is* thus encompasses the knowledge of *what is good*.

In the knowledge of the good entailed in the philosophical return to the life-world, we discover the continuity and unity of the theoretical and practical aspects of human reason. As we can now see, this recovery of pre-objective being will mean that reason is not something that properly belongs to the detached spectator, to the observer who takes an objective distance from things. Instead, the theoretical and practical dimensions of rationality are united for Gadamer in the emergence in the “there” of what is being sought through the exercise of reason, which is “the brightness where what is, stands and shows itself.”⁸³ What shows itself emerges or makes an appearance either in the intersubjective “there” of conversation or of ethical deliberation. In the former case, ethical and political goals, principles, ideals, ideas and other beliefs, on the one hand, or choices we can endorse in response to the immediate as well as more distant questions and problems we face as a society are uncovered in the exchanges of a dialogical rationality. In the latter case, practical reason or prudence enables me to apprehend the right thing to do in the *hic et nunc* of a particular set of circumstances I encounter in my own life.

Gadamer speaks here of “the belonging together and difference of these two modes of rationality”⁸⁴ because these theoretical and practical uses of reason are distinct yet interrelated and dependent upon one another. Hence in the articulation of common convictions in dialogue, the beliefs we come to share have a practical significance insofar as they influence our perception

⁸² Gadamer, PT, 34; *LT*, 47-48.

⁸³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language,” trans. Lawrence K. Schmidt, in *Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, ed. Lawrence Schmidt (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2000), 49 (hereafter *LL*); Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Zur Phänomenologie von Ritual und Sprache,” *GW* 8, 439. This understanding of a rational episode in terms of a self-showing of the thing also explicitly and self-consciously relies on philosophical ground already prepared in the thought of Heidegger and will be explored in much greater detail in the fourth chapter.

⁸⁴ Gadamer, “Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language,” 49, *LL*; *GW* 8, 438.

of certain choices our society faces as ‘live’ ones that are actually available to us. These beliefs also shape the ethos that will guide both our endorsement of certain among these choices as well as those I decisions I must make about what should be done in the concrete conditions of my individual life.

Before proceeding further, I want to pause here to briefly consider the nature of this last form of practical reason by turning, as Gadamer himself does, to Aristotle’s account of prudence to illuminate the nature of application, the normativity of practical reason, and the complex interplay of theory and practice, universal and particular, at work this form of ethical knowledge.⁸⁵ Most importantly of all, this overview will allow us to ultimately see how Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis* serves for Gadamer as a guide to understanding what reason as a whole actually is and can be both in its dialogical and practical modes.

For Aristotle, practical rationality might be described as that form of thinking that we engage in when faced with a situation that strikes us as problematic in way that can be resolved by taking action. Aristotle distinguishes within practical reason between the capacity for instrumental deliberation and practical judgment, or *phronesis*. *Phronesis* is an active disposition that includes cleverness but also enables its possessor to discern the right means to the right end in particular circumstances (*NE* 1144a6-9), and it is this form of practical rationality that the practically wise person, or *phronimos*, possesses and is able to exercise when faced with a situation that calls for ethical choice.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Gadamer’s first and most substantive discussion of Aristotle’s ethics appears in *Truth and Method* in a section titled “The Hermeneutic Relevance of Aristotle.” Here he is concerned with explaining the kind of application involved in historical hermeneutics. He claims that historical understanding is a special case of applying something universal to a particular situation, since the same tradition (what is universal) must be understood differently time and again (what is particular). It is this kind of application of universals to particulars that he thinks an examination of *phronesis* will help us to understand. In writings after *Truth and Method* Gadamer draws on Aristotle’s concept of *phronesis* explicitly in relation to the question of ethical knowledge and the normative nature of practice.

⁸⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1985). Cited within the text of this work as *NE*.

If *phronesis* is to guide action with the right means to the right end in a particular situation, it will require knowledge of both universals and particulars. It will require knowledge of universals because as knowledge involving application, *what* is applied in moral knowledge is something asked of the *phronimos* in general, namely, the virtues or concepts of the good as they are embodied in the normative images and ideals, principles and concepts of the culture. Gadamer claims that these ideals or virtues are not merely contingent or local conventions, that there is something like the nature of the thing. Nevertheless, we acquire our image of the thing from the always already existent moral and political context in which we find ourselves, so that “they are not norms found in the stars, nor do they have an unchanging place in a natural moral universe, so that all that would be necessary would be to perceive them.”⁸⁷ Moreover, although there is a dimension of generality to moral knowledge, *phronesis* will also require knowledge of particulars, since it aims at reaching a decision about what to do in this situation, here and now. The right choice or action cannot be fully determined independently of the particular situation that we are faced with. For this reason, although moral knowledge involves universals, it is not something knowable in advance—and thus cannot be taught.

Aristotle thinks that this relation between particular and universal in an ethical judgment can be illustrated by the example of a geometer trying to solve a mathematical problem. Just as seeing a triangle *as* the solution to a mathematical problem is more than just the passive sensation of lines, but rather requires the geometer to bring some more general knowledge to bear on a particular problem, so the *phronimos* brings a knowledge of moral principles and goals to the deliberation of what to do in a particular situation, a deliberation that terminates in a perception that is both the perception of certain facts *as* morally relevant features of a situation, and the perception of an action *as* the embodiment of a rule, principle, or goal – as for example in seeing that my student needs encouragement, or realizing that saying ‘no’ to my child here and now

⁸⁷ Gadamer, TM, 318; WM, 326.

would be an act of kindness. So although the *phronimos* judges from a context of concepts, principles, and goals to which she subscribes, the solution to the problem of what to do here and now is not one that can be found through reasoning or by consulting rules, but consists rather in a direct perceptual grasp of the relevant particulars—one simply sees what to do.

From the account given above, it should be clear that the knowledge of the *phronimos* is not distinct from its application in a specific situation. The particulars of what is involved in this application can be brought out by comparing *phronesis* with theoretical knowledge on the one hand, and *techne*, or the knowledge of the craftsman, on the other. One of the key differences between theoretical knowledge and phronetic knowledge has to do with the position of the knower in each case. Practical wisdom, unlike theoretical knowledge, is not simply the knowledge of what something is, the knowledge that one comes to by standing over against a situation and observing it, i.e., the objective knowledge of a detached spectator. In a situation requiring one to make an ethical choice, the *phronimos* is confronted with circumstances that are those of his or her own life, such that the knower is an involved participant in what is to be known. This is why determining what is rational in the specific, concrete situation in which you find yourself – which certainly can have many parallels to other situations, yet remains the specific situation in which you stand – is something you must do for yourself. Thus what is rational is what it would be reasonable to do in this particular situation facing you here and now.

Like *techne*, *phronesis* is a form of applied knowledge. Yet it is not applied in the sense that one possesses the theoretical component of the knowledge beforehand which one simply applies. That is the model of application in *techne*, where the craftsman makes things according to a plan. This is a crucial difference between the two kinds of knowledge. *Phronesis* is without the prior certainty of being had and known before action because it can only be defined in application. And this is because the object of this knowledge is defined ontologically “not as

something general that always is as it is, but as something individual that can also be different.”⁸⁸

There are not two domains in *phronesis*, a domain of theory and then a sphere of praxis to which these ideas are applied; knowledge of the fluid and ever-changing reality of one’s own life is a knowledge that unites theory and practice.

Although Gadamer appropriates Aristotle’s account of *phronesis* partly in order to show that practical reason is not merely instrumental, that it plays a role in determining the ends as well as the means of action, the sense of ‘determine’ here is weaker than that of simply and freely choosing the end or goal of action. Following Aristotle, Gadamer notes that we are conditioned through upbringing, education, and custom to find some things rather than others to be natural and proper ends. What is transmitted to us via these modes of self-formation is a certain set of normative orientations which structure our social life and help constitute a tradition. This *ethos* is the living context within which *phronesis* always already stands.⁸⁹

Aristotle’s description of *phronesis*, with its emphasis on the concreteness and singularity of every cognitive episode, on the finitude and defeasibility of interpretation, on the exercise of judgment rather than the application of a technique or method, and on the contribution of the being of the knower to what is to be known, also serves, for Gadamer, as a model for reason as a whole. And just as *phronesis* is a form of thinking which belongs to and emerges from the life-world, the thematization of being-in-the-world stands in the background of Gadamer’s reclamation of reason in terms of the rationality of everyday life. Thus insofar as reason originates in the finite context of lived experience, its task is to discover what it would be reasonable to say or do here and now, either through a dialogue in which something comes to self-presentation in language or through the apprehension of something which appears as the appropriate thing to do for the prudent agent, the *phronimos*, in a particular set of circumstances.

⁸⁸ Gadamer, TM, 316; WM, 231.

⁸⁹ Gadamer, “The Limitations of the Expert,” op. cit., 185.

Nevertheless, such non-rule governed social deliberation and practical choice does not issue in absolute conclusions or unwavering universality. What is rational is what we have come together to see is true to claim or what it makes sense to do in *this* situation and at *this* time.

Hence normative judgments are made in concrete situations whose elements cannot be subsumed in advance under categories and rules, i.e., according to a method that could issue in an automatic decision or conclusion. Such choices and interpretations demand dialogue and deliberation rather than “the great monologue of modern method.”⁹⁰ They require prudential agents whose character and experience enable them to think and choose well, rather than automated decision procedures. That is, successful thought and action depends on the prior preparation of a ground which both situates and is situated in the participant(s), a mode of being which is illuminated by the guiding concepts of humanism, viz., *Bildung*, *sensus communis*, judgment, and taste. This underscores the idea that reason is not simply a faculty that one has, but is instead something that must be cultivated if we are to succeed in reaching an understanding with others or in making the right choice when faced with particular circumstances which call for action. According to Gadamer, one of the chief tasks of philosophy is to defend this kind of social and practical rationality against the dominance of method and instrumental reason.⁹¹

§

Gadamer’s recovery of a fuller and more adequate conception of rationality is one that encompasses the hermeneutic, social, and dialogical dimensions that makes possible both rhetorical persuasion and the successful exercise of prudential judgment. In the rest of this work we will be concerned chiefly with the former aspect of reason rather than the latter, as this is where Gadamer’s particular contribution to the renewal reason is primarily located. This is a renewal that moors reason in the life-world, returning us to the rough ground of lived experience.

⁹⁰ Gadamer, *TM*, 369; *WM*, 375.

⁹¹ See Gadamer, “Hermeneutics and Social Science,” *op. cit.*, 316.

As Gadamer says in speaking to an interlocutor about his life's work, "to put it the way Jaspers did, we wanted to grasp in what way reason was incarnate in existence itself [...] We were in search of a way to think in which we could see the truth of things, to discover the truth that was there in each thing before us in the world."⁹²

Because each thing before us in the world is there for a particular standpoint, it is also always already *understood* in some way according to, or from, that perspective. And this means that the exercise of rationality is not fully captured by the employment of univocally understood, because neutral and purely objective, or brute, facts in demonstrations which compel the agreement of all rational agents (with disagreement implying that one party is irrational or simply mistaken). If things are present as always already understood, then arriving at rational agreement will depend on the presence or absence of shared understandings. An understanding that is not shared prompts the articulation of an interpretation that can convince others to share it; an understanding that has not yet been found gives rise to a common search for it. In each case, the absence of understanding occasions a conversation. *Conversation* is the essential term here, since coming to an understanding with others requires me to explain how I understand as well as listen to the claims that others make, i.e., it necessitates a dialogue. The possibilities and risks of dialogue mean that those who present interpretations are as likely to change and persuade others as to be changed and persuaded by them. And all of this, in turn, will be affected by the skill, character, and experience of those proffering interpretations, the nature and make-up of the particular audience that hears them, and the language in which one's understanding is presented. In the course of this dialogue I attempt both to persuade others and allow myself to be persuaded so that, in the best case, what emerges out of this exchange is nothing less than the truth of the matter at stake in the conversation. In short, the hermeneutic turn in phenomenology initiated by

⁹² Gadamer, quoted in the introduction to the English translation of *Praise of Theory*, op. cit., vii.

Heidegger and developed so fully and richly in Gadamer's work has as one of its signal consequences the supplanting of rational demonstration by argument and dialogue.

The capacity of reason to discover the truth "there in each thing before us in the world" presupposes and depends on a certain conception of language, viz., as first and foremost disclosive rather than fundamentally designative. Nevertheless, outside of the traditions in which Gadamer works, language is still understood as essentially designative and performative. Moreover, as we noted in the introduction, questions about the nature, role, and significance of linguistic disclosure for Gadamer's thought, despite their centrality for his project as a whole, have not been widely explored. The next two chapters begin to open up these questions with an account of the nature of linguistic disclosure in the second chapter and a description of the structure and dynamics of disclosure in the third chapter.

Chapter 2

Word and World

Near the beginning of his interview with Gadamer, Jean Grondin asks Gadamer what his intention was in extending the term *Truth and Method* to cover both the first and second volumes of his collected works (in the English translation the title *Truth and Method* is only used for the first volume). Gadamer answers that he had offered only a sketch of language in the third part of *Truth and Method* and had not said everything that he really had in mind.⁹³ Yet the rudimentary character of this part of *Truth and Method*, Grondin notes later, is less a fault than the almost unavoidable consequence of “seeking to approach the maddening obscurity of language.”⁹⁴ Indeed, just before turning to theme of language in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer himself had already observed that “what language is belongs among the most mysterious questions that man ponders. Language is so uncannily near our thinking, and when it functions it is so little an object, that it seems to conceal its own being from us.”⁹⁵

We begin our approach to the question of language, then, by marking its simultaneous nearness and distance, its difficulty and its strangeness. Although our own investigation into language only aims to see a little farther into this darkness, our focus on the disclosive dimensions of language will eventually open up questions about the way in which language is intertwined with the larger radicality and uncanniness at the very heart of human experience. This passage across the boundaries of the familiar starts with the close and careful description of the

⁹³ See Jean Grondin and Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Looking Back With Gadamer Over His Writings and Their Effective History: A Dialogue with Jean Grondin (1996),” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 23, (2006): 87; “Dialogischer Rückblick auf das Gesammelte Werk und dessen Wirkungsgeschichte,” *GL*, 282.

⁹⁴ Jean Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, trans. Kathryn Plant (Montreal and Kingston: McGill and Queen’s University Press, 2003), 124. This book was published three years after Grondin’s interview with Gadamer.

⁹⁵ Gadamer, *TM*, 370; *WM*, 383.

phenomenon of linguistic disclosure—the forms it takes, the ways in which it differs from referential language, the ontology it has in view, and the profound unity of word and thing, of language and world, which it presupposes.

§

Our account of the disclosive capacities of language begins by distinguishing between the various forms of linguistic disclosure; what all of these forms share is a particular relation between linguistic disclosure and linguistic meaning. Language as disclosive, for Gadamer, completes and so fully gives the meaning of the thing, allowing it to appear *as* what it is.⁹⁶ This means that our possession of and by language amounts to an enriched mode of awareness in which we are able to grasp things more fully as what they are rather than – as seems to be the case for other animals – simply in terms of their practical significance. This claim takes us into a discussion of J. G. Herder, the thinker with whom this idea originates. A brief glance backward at the origins and development of an understanding of language as that which ‘reveals’ or ‘makes manifest’ will allow us to see more clearly the significance of this view and the consequences that arise from it. It will show, too, the historical sources of a certain constellation of ideas centered on language that Gadamer draws on and develops so fruitfully over the course of his writings.

In Herder we also find the idea that the meaning of a given word depends on the existence of other words from which this word takes its orientation and with which it can be contrasted, so that each part of language presupposes and relies on the existence of the whole. This linguistic holism was deeply influential for Wilhelm von Humboldt, who came to believe

⁹⁶ Some of Gadamer’s most prominent critics have misunderstood his views on language because they have missed precisely this point. Habermas describes Gadamer as a linguistic constructivist who sees language as constructing or endowing reality with meaning. Caputo, on the other hand, accuses him of an alinguistic essentialism in which reality which has an ideal, alinguistic intelligibility which is accessible without dependence on language. Neither of these gets Gadamer’s position right, namely, that language expresses and completes the meanings that things have. See Jürgen Habermas, “A Review of Gadamer’s Truth and Method” in *Understanding and Social Inquiry*, ed. Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas McCarthy (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977) and John Caputo, “Gadamer’s Closet Essentialism: A Derridean Critique,” in *Dialogue and Deconstruction*, ed. Diane Mitchfielder and Richard Palmer, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989).

that every language is an inescapable medium for its speakers and, as such, a totality that constitutes their worldview.

The conception of language found in the work of Herder and Humboldt stands in sharp contrast to the conventional picture of language as designative. This understanding of language takes shape under the influence of the representationalist epistemology of early modernity and the objectivist ontology that underlay it. It is really only with the work of Heidegger, whose ontological starting point is in a pre-objective being which is mediated through language, that it becomes possible to return again to the insights into the nature of language first formulated by Herder and Humboldt.

In Heidegger language is understood as a medium in which things show themselves as what they are. Gadamer, in turn, shows that this is possible because word and thing “belong” to one another, an aspect of language that becomes most apparent when we reflect on the experience of learning our native language. Learning to speak is less about learning words and grammar than it is about learning to see the world as it is presented by one’s language. This can also be observed in the process of coming to speak another language fluently; a true command of another language requires an understanding of what it is to view the world through the eyes of that language. Thus a foreign language that we can speak well is one that we inhabit, so that word and thing seem to the speaker to belong together. This, Gadamer will maintain, is because the thing itself is given in language. To help us understand this important claim we turn in the second section of this chapter to Gadamer’s discussion of the image, since – in a comparison that Gadamer explicitly makes – here, too, the image ‘gives’ the thing.

Nevertheless, the disclosure of things in language is always only partial; all that any language can do is provide a window onto the world. Gadamer makes this point by showing how each language embodies a linguistic worldview that ‘lights up’ an aspect of the world. The third and final section of this chapter brings into focus this finite and limited character of linguistic

disclosure and hence of language itself. Language is not a transcendent standpoint from which we could look out onto things, a *pensée de survol*, or viewing from above; rather, it helps to constitute the opening onto the world that is the being of the 'there.' That language is 'there' means that something always remain unseen, undisclosed, so that the experience of language is an experience of both limits and of a continual search for meaning, one that is epitomized above all by the question and response of conversation, which Gadamer calls the "essence" [*das Wesen*] of language.

I. Language as Disclosive Medium

Language is an enormously complex phenomenon that encompasses the *activities* of speaking and listening, reading and writing, as well as a *structure* of sedimented meanings, so it should come as no surprise to find multiple forms of linguistic disclosure, that is, modes of revealing and displaying, of making present, manifest, or evident. There is an initial distinction to be made between the way language discloses by making something present to perception and the way it makes something present to the imagination.

If we begin with perception, we will see that what language presents to perception can be divided between that which is displayed through the activity of speaking and that which is made manifest solely by virtue of my *capacity* to speak a particular language. In the former case, something is brought to light through the words that are spoken by one person to another or others. So, for example, a speaker with a keen ethical or aesthetic sensibility, or someone from a different culture, can bring out aspects of a situation, activity, thing, or person for his listeners that had had been overlooked, or even completely change the way in which something is understood and perceived by redescribing it in a new and different way.

In the latter case, the language that I speak, which belongs to me and, more significantly, to which I belong, is a medium in which I live and in which an understanding of the world is deposited and maintained. As Gadamer puts it, “language is not only an object in our hands, it is the reservoir of tradition and the medium in and through which we exist and perceive our world.”⁹⁷ Language in this sense, as sedimented structure, silently fuses with perception and is always already at work in shaping it. Perception, to borrow an expression from William James, is “shot through” with conception. This makes possible a certain form of consciousness and quality of awareness (which it appears animals lack, as we shall see) in which things can be present to us *as* what they are—not because I have a voice inside of my head naming the things I see, but because my very ability to see something *as* something is made possible by my possession of this ability to speak a language.

So the claim here is *not* that things depend on language to appear or become manifest—this would be patently absurd. Rather, language discloses by articulating or expressing the *sense* or *meaning* of a thing, so that it appears *as* something or other. We can contrast this with the case of something that is disclosed to perception but is still unintelligible, such as an object or implement belonging to a culture with which we are unfamiliar. Here we lack words to understand what we are seeing, so that the thing does not appear *as* what it is. Thus the idea is not that language discloses *simpliciter*, but that by articulating the intelligibility of things, it more fully discloses them as what they are.

This also explains how language can make something present to the imagination. In the disclosure of something to perception, language had depended on the presence of the thing itself to disclose insofar as it expresses or completes the meaning of the thing. In the disclosure of the something to the imagination, on the other hand, the thing is made present through language

⁹⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection,” trans. G.B. Hess and R.E. Palmer, PH, 29. This sentence is not found in the original German text, “Rhetorik, Hermeneutik, und Ideologiekritik” in *Kleine Schriften I*, (Tübingen: JCB Mohr, 1967), 121 (hereafter *KS*).

alone. My suggestion is that this is because words, whether spoken to others or read in a text, give the meaning of the thing, and that this presentation of intelligibility evokes the memory of the thing in its entirety and so in this way discloses it to the imagination.

In sum, the experience of the presence to perception or to the mind of something *as* something or other, i.e., in its meaning, is always accompanied by language, whether this takes the form of words spoken to others (about something currently in view or something distant in place or time) or read alone, or whether this takes the form of the whole of a language as the medium in and through which perception takes place.

This understanding of the relationship between word and thing first appears – although in a rather more rudimentary form – in the work of Herder. What Gadamer calls “the fundamentally linguistic character of our experience of the world”⁹⁸ is what Herder had termed “reflective awareness” [*Besonnenheit*].⁹⁹ *Besonnenheit* is a kind of enriched awareness peculiar to human beings made possible by the possession of language. This form of consciousness is so much a part of the familiar and taken for granted background framework of experience that it stands hidden in plain sight for accounts of language which begin with an already understood and meaningful array of things which words would then refer to and represent. What these approaches fail to grasp is that such a world must presuppose our already living in and having a language. Herder is able to bring this linguistic consciousness explicitly into focus by contrasting the human experience of the things of the world with that of other animals:

Let that lamb there, as an image, pass by under his eyes; it is to him, as it is to no other animal. Not as it would appear to the hungry, scenting wolf! Not as it would appear to [...] the rutting ram [...] Not as it appears to any other animal to which the sheep is indifferent and which therefore lets it, clear-darkly, pass by because its instinct makes it turn toward something else!—Not so with man! As soon as he feels the need to come to know the sheep, no instinct gets in his way;

⁹⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Nature of Things and the Language of Things,” trans. David E. Linge, PH, 77; Hans-Georg Gadamer, “*Die Natur der Sache und die Sprache der Dinge*,” *KS I*, 66.

⁹⁹ See Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, in *Johann Gottfried Herder Sprachphilosophie: Ausgewählte Schriften* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2005), 22, 27, 57-59, 61-62, 81.

no one sense of his pulls him too close to it or too far away from it. It stands there, entirely as it manifests itself to his senses. White, soft, wooly—his soul in reflective exercise seeks a distinguishing mark—the sheep bleats! [...] The sheep comes again. White, soft, wooly—the soul sees, touches, remembers, seeks a distinguishing mark—the sheep bleats, and the soul recognizes it. And it feels inside, “Yes, you are that which bleats.” It has recognized it humanly when it recognized and named it clearly, that is, with a distinguishing mark [...] The sound of the bleating perceived by a human soul as the distinguishing mark of the sheep became, by virtue of this reflection, the name of the sheep, even if his tongue had never tried to stammer it. He recognized the sheep by its bleating. This was a conceived sign through which the soul clearly remembered an idea—and what is that other than a word?¹⁰⁰

For all other animals, things figure as either relevant to a certain goal (e.g., as prey or predator, as mate or rival, as obstacle or as something affording passage, and so on) or they appear as being more or less without any practical significance and so hardly enter into consciousness at all.

While human beings can also view things this way and see, for example, sheep as mutton, or as livestock, the reflective stance enables objects to be grasped *as* what they are—aside from and independently of their immediate practical import. This is because language allows us to focus on objects and so recognize them as being a certain kind of thing through what Herder calls “distinguishing marks,” i.e., words and concepts.¹⁰¹

One needs words, then, in order to attain reflective awareness, in order to recognize something *as* something. Things can only be manifest to us as what they are if they have been linguistically articulated because language, by expressing the intelligible sense of a thing, makes it possible for a thing to appear *as* something. Note again that the claim is not that things need

¹⁰⁰ Johann Gottfried Herder, “Essay On the Origin of Language” in *On the Origin of Language*, trans. Alexander Gode (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1966), 117. My account of the significance of Herder’s philosophy of language is greatly indebted to Charles Taylor’s reading of Herder. See Charles Taylor, “Language and Human Nature” in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers Vol. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and Charles Taylor, “The Importance of Herder” in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

¹⁰¹ “Man manifests reflection when the force of his soul acts in such freedom that, in the vast ocean of sensations which permeates it [it can] single out one wave, arrest it, concentrate its attention on it, and be conscious of being attentive. He manifests reflection when, confronted with the vast hovering dream of images which pass by his senses, he can collect himself into a moment of wakefulness and dwell at will on one image [...] and can select in it distinguishing marks for himself so that he will know that this object is this and not another” (Herder, “Essay On the Origin of Language,” op. cit., 115-116).

language to appear, since obviously infants, animals, and people from other cultures who speak a different language encounter the appearance of things, but that they need language in order to appear as what they are i.e., with a certain meaning. Moreover, if language is what makes things manifest, this capacity of language is not merely one of its functions, rather, the ability of language to designate necessarily presupposes this disclosive function. In order to designate something *as* something, you already need to be able to pick that thing out as what it is, things need to already be manifest to us as something or other, and things can only be manifest to us in this way if they have been linguistically articulated.

Now if using words to designate things already presupposes a language as the vehicle for the reflective awareness of things, language is always already there. This sense of language as a whole that is presupposed in all of its parts is reinforced by another observation that Herder makes, namely, that “the difference between one (distinguishing mark or word) and another can never be recognized through anything but a third.”¹⁰² Here the suggestion seems to be that in order to use words to recognize something as something, one must already have other words with which this term contrasts in order for the word to be meaningful. What is implied is that the meaning of a word is at least to some degree dependent on the network of other words to which it belongs.

Wilhelm Humboldt, who was very much influenced by Herder, emphasizes this holistic character of language when he claims that every human being possesses language in its whole range, that is, the whole of a language dwells inside each speaker.¹⁰³ Thus he maintains that words only emerge from the totality of speech.¹⁰⁴ When a speaker uses a word she expresses the

¹⁰² Ibid., 120.

¹⁰³ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 57.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 70.

meaning of the word while at the same indicating the particular place of that word in that language.

According to Humboldt, there resides within this totality of speech, within the total whole of each language, a characteristic worldview. To acquire a new language is “to acquire a new standpoint in the worldview hitherto possessed.”¹⁰⁵ Language stands between us and the world so that the world and its objects are presented to us in a world of sounds. Language is a medium into which we are plunged and from which we cannot extract ourselves. “By the same act whereby [a person] spins language outside of himself, he spins himself into it, and every language draws about the people that possess it a circle whence it is possible to exit only by stepping over at once into the circle of another one.”¹⁰⁶

If Humboldt is right, we can never get outside of language and make it an object of our knowledge, we can never achieve the distance needed to objectify it. We cannot, in short, approach language and language-use from a point of view external to it. What we have to ask is what language looks like from the perspective of one who speaks, from a standpoint within language.¹⁰⁷

When we take an internal view of language, we find that we first of all *speak* a language. Speech for Humboldt is the fundamental form of language, because language is a social *activity*, not a thing, it is “no product (*ergon*), but an activity (*energeia*).”¹⁰⁸ Language is not a dead object, it is an activity that is creative and disclosive, though new inventions and discoveries must rely on

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 60.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 60.

¹⁰⁷ This thought is found both in Heidegger and Gadamer. “When we reflect on language as language we can no longer look for other notions such as activity, world-view, etc. under which to subsume language as a special case. Instead of explaining language in terms of one thing or another, and thus running away from it, the way to language intends to let language be experienced as language.” Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz. (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 119. Here is Gadamer: “What is true of understanding is just as true of language. Neither is to be grasped simply as a fact that can be empirically investigated. Neither is ever simply an object but instead comprehends everything that can ever be an object,” TM, 405; WM 408. Or again: “we are endeavoring to approach the mystery of language from the conversation that we ourselves are,” TM, 370; WM, 383.

¹⁰⁸ Humboldt, *On Language*, op. cit., 49.

our receptivity to what has come before, to what is already given in our language. What all of the things that are created and disclosed in language have in common is that they are all part of the expression or manifestation of a world. The *energeia* of language is, moreover, itself situated within contexts of activity that give linguistic utterances their meaning. These contexts, in turn, get their sense from being embedded in wider forms of life. Linguistic meaning, finally, depends on this whole background way of life.

Moreover, the subject of language, as speaker – and thus as participant in a conversation with others – can only be what she is as part of a speech community. Language is always *our* language. The modern apotheosis of the subject is severely undermined by the consequences that follow from this. The ideals for the subject of language of clarity, order, and control are never fully attainable, since this background is something I can never master because it is something which I can never fully articulate discursively and, as an atmosphere in which I live, something I can never leave behind.

The view of language which receives its initial formulation in the thought of Herder and Humboldt, namely, an understanding of language as first and foremost disclosive rather than designative (as well as the dependence of the latter function of language on the former), as a holistic medium containing a worldview, and as activity and as conversation – are, as we shall see, themes that Gadamer will later take up and place at the center of his thinking about linguistic disclosure, social rationality, and dialogical truth.

§

The conception of language uncovered by Herder and Humboldt entails a very different view from the common and widespread understanding of language as a system of signs to which – by convention – we attach particular meanings in order to refer to reality. Here the meaning of a word is what it designates, and the normativity of language is grounded in the correspondence

between a linguistic utterance and the object designated. Words are thus seen as instruments lying at our disposal for the purpose of assembling a correct representation of reality.

But we will not be able to bring the disclosive capacities of language fully into view as long as we subscribe to this standard and widespread understanding of language as a kind of instrument for signifying things. Using language is not like using a tool that one picks up and then lays aside when one is finished with it, as if the self were confronted with a world standing outside of language that was somehow already known to it and to which, when necessary, it applied the appropriate words. This understanding of language rests on several questionable presuppositions. First, this theory originates within the intellectual context of the science and epistemology of the early modern period. We have already examined the importance of the detached standpoint for the development of the methods of the natural sciences, but there was also a concerted attempt to understand perception and cognition *in toto* in terms of the same picture of a disengaged inquirer. The basic elements of this new model of perception are a subject and an independent reality from which this subject is detached (which ensures that this domain will be free from the distortion of subjective projections). When knowing is grasped in terms of a relation between subject and object which are mutually exterior to one another, the problem arises as to how it is that we can come to know objects, i.e., how we bridge the gap between mind and world. The solution to this problem was to see that knowledge is possible only if something mediates the divide between these distinct domains. Thus, we only get knowledge of the world – which lies outside the mind – through something inside the mind, as for example in the Cartesian “ideas” or internal mental representations that copy external objects and mediate our relation to reality. Knowledge, on this construal, is the correspondence of a representation with its object.

Language, in turn, was viewed within the framework of this new representationalist epistemology. Words are both attached to representations and used to gather them into classes in order to aid in the building up, or composition, of our impressions so that they accurately match

the world itself. Words, then, are instruments or tools lying at our disposal for the purpose of assembling a correct picture of reality. As such, they are something over which it is imperative that the subject of knowledge exercises complete control.¹⁰⁹ But as we saw in the first chapter, Heidegger's critique of subject-object dualism had already shown the ways in which representationalism falls short as a theory of perception and knowledge, which, in turn, casts grave doubt on the view of language as referential and instrumental. This is because Heidegger's recovery of pre-objective being alters the way we understand language by shifting the ontological ground of that understanding. Thus in an important passage in the lecture "The Expressive Force of Language," Gadamer contrasts the conception of language for objectivism with the understanding of language for the pre-objective standpoint:

"Object" or "Gegenstand" is defined through a "method" that prescribes how reality gets made into an object [...] This reality presents a new task for language. Because of the constructive character of the modern knowledge of nature, language has to give up its position of linguistic totality, so to speak, and limit itself to specific designatory functions [...] The ideal language of mathematics has in a certain sense reduced the function of language to designation, so that we no longer use language in the way Aristotle had in mind in that famous definition of what distinguishes man from the animals. There he says that man has language not so that we can give signals to one another as birds give one another warning and mating signals, but in such a way that we have the logos, the language that consists in *dehnen*, (revealing), in making the real state of affairs manifest. That means that we do not merely point to something but also recognize it for what it is. Now this, clearly, is the life-world of language: it is itself an interpretation of the life world. This expression "life-world" [*Lebenswelt*] is one of those rare successful philosophical words. It is an expression of Husserl's that in the last few decades that, so to speak, has found its way into the Germans' sense of language. In this word the life-world takes cognizance of itself in opposition to the scientific world of objects defined by the methodical attainment of knowledge.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ See the useful discussions of this historical background in Charles Taylor, "Theories of Meaning" and "Language and Human Nature," in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers Vol. 1*, op. cit.

¹¹⁰ Gadamer, PT, 127-128; LT 154-156.

The move from an objectivist ontology to an ontology of lived experience, then, entails a move from a conception of language as referential to an understanding of language as disclosive.¹¹¹ In objectivism, the starting point for thinking, experience, and knowledge is a subject facing a field of objects (what Heidegger calls the “present-at-hand”). ‘Objects,’ as measurable and amenable to calculation, are clear and determinate entities whose meaning can be known and experienced outside of, or before, language; they are pre-given.¹¹² The function of language in this scheme is to designate the objects we encounter.

The return to the pre-objective standpoint of the life-world as an ontological ground and starting point brings with it a very different view of language. This is because the life-world is given and disclosed in language. Hence on this view language is a universal and inescapable medium which mediates our relation to the world:

The between-world of language [...] demonstrates against mathematical language the basically mediated character of all access to the world, and more than this, it demonstrates the impossibility of going beyond the linguistic schema of the world. The almost mythical status of the concept of self-consciousness – which was adopted in its apodictic self-certainty and elevated to the status of the origin and justification of all validity, and the ideal of ultimate grounding in general – loses its credibility, however, in the face of the priority of the domain of language, a domain that we cannot undermine and within which all consciousness and all knowledge articulate themselves.¹¹³

Thus Gadamer declares that “we never find ourselves as consciousness over against the world and, as it were, grasp after a tool of understanding in a wordless condition. Rather, in all our knowledge of ourselves and in all knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed

¹¹¹ This is not to suggest, however, that language does not sometimes function referentially, it is only to say that language is not exhausted by this capacity and that this function does not characterize what is essential about it.

¹¹² See, for example, Merleau-Ponty for this link between objectivism and the determinacy of its objects. According to Merleau-Ponty, objectivism views the world as perfectly explicit in itself, that is, all of the objects of the world are viewed as clear, precise, and determinate: “In the world taken in itself everything is determined. There are many unclear sights, as for example a landscape on a misty day, but then we always say that no real landscape is in itself unclear. It is so only for us,” *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), 6. Also see p. 41 of the same text.

¹¹³ Gadamer, “Text and Interpretation,” GR, 167; *GL*, 149-150.

by the language that is our own.”¹¹⁴ In this regard language is far more like a medium into which we are immersed and from which we cannot escape than an instrument at our disposal. Even if we leave our native language behind, we never leave language *as such* behind, as Humboldt had already pointed out. We can never get outside of language and make it an object of our knowledge to get a fully ‘objective’ view of it and its workings. And that means that the picture that a designative theory of meaning and language gives us of a disengaged subject exercising complete and transparent control over his or her linguistic instruments in order to designate things is not the right way to think about language, since this already begins from an understanding of language users as standing outside of language.¹¹⁵

Instead, we have to see that “it is from language as a medium that our whole experience of the world, and especially hermeneutical experience, unfolds.”¹¹⁶ And this will mean that the given is not given as in objectivism to a Cartesian subjectivity as the givenness of alinguistic ‘facts.’ Rather, “in contrast with the illusion of self-consciousness as well as the naiveté of a positivist concept of facts, the between world of language has proven itself to be the true dimension in which that which is given is given.”¹¹⁷ Here Gadamer follows Heidegger in rejecting the idea that there could be a bare or meaningless perceptual experience of an extralinguistic reality that is then overlaid with signification—or that things could already be fully meaningful and known without language. So that for Gadamer as for Heidegger, we do not hear pure sounds

¹¹⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Man and Language,” trans. David E. Linge, PH, 62; Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Mensch und Sprache,” *GW* 2, 149. Our being encompassed by the language which is our own will also mean that language does not simply emanate or issue from a subject: “The subjective starting point, which has become natural to modern thought, leads us wholly into error. Language is not to be conceived as a preliminary projection of the world by subjectivity, either as the subjectivity of individual consciousness or as that of the spirit of a people. These are all mythologies,” Gadamer, “The Nature of Things and the Language of Things,” PH, 79; *KS I*, 67. The nature and significance for the question of truth of this shift away from the subject or self as an experiencing and knowing center is something that will only fully emerge in the fourth and fifth chapters of this work.

¹¹⁵ This image turns out in fact merely to reflect a particular moment in the history of human self-understanding, one tied very closely to the emergence and development of the natural sciences and of representationalist epistemology.

¹¹⁶ Gadamer, TM, 453; *WM*, 461.

¹¹⁷ Gadamer, “Text and Interpretation,” GR, 166; *GL*, 150.

or have neutral atomic perceptions but hear the noise, to use Heidegger's examples, of a motorcycle engine, or the north wind, and perceive and participate in an always already interpreted scene of meaningful things and events which language "shows" to us as the things they are.¹¹⁸

This "showing" of things by language is possible because word and thing belong together in such a way that language presents or gives us the thing. Thus Gadamer claims that language has a being of its own [*das eigene Sein der Sprache*].¹¹⁹ By this he means that the being of language is not instrumental, that is, words are not, as the conventional view would have it, tools to which we attach meanings in order to designate objects and states-of-affairs—they are meaningful already, since what is preserved in them is the specific way in which things have been articulated and disclosed. The being of language is what is said in it. Hence language and what is given in it are so closely knit together that language itself – as language – hardly enters into the awareness of those who are actively engaged in speaking and listening:

The more language is a living operation, the less we are aware of it. Thus it follows from the self-forgetfulness of language that its real being consists in what is said in it. What is said in it constitutes the common world in which we live and to which belongs also the whole great chain of tradition reaching us from the literature of foreign languages, living as well as dead. The real being of language is that into which we are taken up when we hear it - what is said [*Das eigentliche Sein der Sprache ist das, worin wir aufgehen, wenn wir sie hören, das Gesagte*].¹²⁰

This presentational and disclosive character of language becomes even more apparent when we reflect on what is involved in learning to speak. Learning to speak is not a matter of learning how to follow the rules for using a system of signs, it is the process of growing into a familiarity with the world, with other people, and with ourselves.¹²¹ The process of coming to speak the language which we belong to is something so close to us, so tightly interwoven with

¹¹⁸ See Heidegger, BT, 140-141, 153; SZ, 150, 163-164.

¹¹⁹ Gadamer, TM, 417; WM, 422.

¹²⁰ Gadamer, "Man and Language," PH, 65; GW 2, 151.

¹²¹ Gadamer, "Man and Language, 63; GW 2, 149.

who we are, that it can be difficult to get a firm grasp on it. There is, however, another, very closely related experience of language that more conspicuously highlights this profound relationship between language and things. This is the experience of becoming fluent in a foreign language. Speaking another language fluently does not involve translating our native language into this language and vice-versa (if only in our minds) in order to express ourselves and understand others. Instead, one really understands a language by living in it; knowing how to speak a language is “an accomplishment of life” [*Lebensvollzug*].¹²² When someone lives in a language, they enter the worldview it embodies and experience what seems to be the absolute suitability or appropriateness of the words of that language for the things they talk about. For the fluent speaker of a second language, not only is translation not necessary, this sense of the perfect suitability of *this* word for *that* thing often makes it seem impossible.¹²³ We experience the unity of word and thing because the thing itself is given in language.¹²⁴

II. Word and Image, Word as Image

To understand how it is that things can be given in language, we have to grasp how, as Gadamer maintains, the word functions almost like an image in and through which the thing itself is made present.¹²⁵ This is an especially difficult task given that the attempt to link word and image has long been discredited. Gadamer locates the decisive moment in this history in Plato’s *Cratylus*. In this work Plato reduces to absurdity the notion that the word could be an image that

¹²² Gadamer, TM, 386; *WM*, 388.

¹²³ See Gadamer, TM, 403; *WM* 406.

¹²⁴ See Gadamer, TM, 417; *WM*, 421.

¹²⁵ “A word is not just a sign. In a sense that is hard to grasp, it is also something almost like a copy or image,” Gadamer, TM, 416. In the original German Gadamer uses the word *Abbild* rather than *Bild*. This suggests that insofar as the word is like an image, it is an image that belongs to and depends on the being of the thing it images, and this, we shall see, will turn out to be a significant feature of the relation between word and thing. “*Das Wort ist nicht nur Zeichen. In irgendeinem schwer zu erfassenden Sinne ist es doch auch fast so etwas wie ein Abbild,*” *WM*, 420.

copied its object, leaving as the only other apparent alternative the idea that the word is a sign endowed with a particular meaning by conventional agreement.¹²⁶ But Gadamer points out that Plato overlooks as a third possibility the idea that a word could be something like an image without, however, being an instrument used to indicate the thing because of its likeness to the original, i.e., without being a copy. Words function as non-instrumental, non-imitative, image-like entities in that they belong to the being of what they “image” such that in them the thing itself can come into language.¹²⁷

To get a better sense of how Gadamer understands image here, it will help to turn to his earlier analysis in *Truth and Method* of “the ontological valence of the picture.”¹²⁸ In this section of the book Gadamer is concerned to show why, among representations with a pictorial quality, it is the image [*Bild*] rather than the sign or the symbol which can achieve the status of a work of art. Situated between the pure indication [*Verweisung*] that is the essence of the sign, and the pure substitution [*Vertreten*] that is the essence of the symbol, the image has something of both in it. Like the sign, the image refers to something outside of itself, that is, it indicates what it represents, a feature of the image that is most clearly seen in the portrait. The difference between the sign and the image is that the sign – if it is a good sign – in indicating something disappears in the interest of making present *only* what is absent. It only draws enough attention to itself to do this, and no more. An image that does this is a copy rather than an image. As a copy the image

¹²⁶ See TM 406-14; *WM* 410-418 for Gadamer’s discussion of the *Cratylus* and its significance.

¹²⁷ Gadamer, TM, 416-417; *WM* 420-421. The relation between word and image in Gadamer is a topic which has not attracted much attention or commentary, although James Risser’s “The Remembrance of Truth: The Truth of Remembrance” in *Hermeneutics and Truth*, ed. Brice Wachterhauser (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1994) constitutes an important exception.

¹²⁸ What follows is drawn from the section of *Truth and Method* titled, “The Ontological Valence of the Picture” [*Die Seinsvalenz des Bildes*], TM, 130-138; *WM*, 139-149. Weinsheimer has mostly translated *Bild* throughout this section as ‘picture’ (the exceptions being the discussion of the relation of the image to its original and that of the copy to its original as well as the discussion of the mirror image. In both cases he uses ‘image’). The German *Bild* is a more capacious term and is used by Gadamer to mean both picture (as in a painting) as well as image (which can range from icons and statues to mirror images and mental representations). I have chosen to use ‘image’ throughout this discussion to because ‘picture’ seems to me too narrowly focused in its meaning.

effaces itself, that is, it loses its quality as a distinct image in trying to be nothing except a reproduction of the original for the purposes of bringing the original to mind.

But the representation of something in an image [*Bild*] is not a copy of it. To see why, we need to distinguish the way in which a copy [*Abbild*] is related to its original [*Ur-bild*] from the way in which an image [*Bild*] is related to its original. In the case of the copy, the viewer is directed away from the copy itself and toward the original that it represents. In the case of the image, the original appears *in* the image, which is essentially connected to it. This is seen most clearly in the mirror image. That which is shown in the mirror is an image of the thing itself rather than a copy of it; moreover, unlike a copy, a mirror image does not have a separate existence apart from what it presents—it remains inseparable from its original. These traits appear again – though in a somewhat inflected form – in the aesthetic image. Here, in contrast to the mirror image, the aesthetic image has its own reality, its own being. But this is precisely what enables it to make present what it represents. Insofar as this image becomes one of the ways in which the original can appear, the aesthetic image belongs to the thing itself. In short, the aesthetic image presents its own appearance while remaining a part of what is represented. It does this through a certain *way* of presenting what it represents, that is, it expresses something about what is represented that can only come to expression in the image.

The religious image is exemplary in this regard. Not only is the religious image in ontological communion with the original so that the divine becomes present for the believer through the image, but it also becomes picturable, and so accessible, in a way that would not have been possible without the image. This would seem to account both for the central role played by the icons, statues, and pictures found throughout the religions of the world as well as for the near universal reverence that worshippers appear to show them. It is this intuitive sense of the ontological power of the image that lies behind the modern aesthetic religion of culture, for which the work of art always has something sacred about it. Even for the consciousness that approaches

art through the lens of aesthetic differentiation, the destruction of works of art is perceived as sacrilegious.¹²⁹

What occurs with the religious image is only a more dramatic version of what happens in every image that rises to the level of a work of art. The example of the artistic photograph illustrates this point very nicely. While a good passport photograph negates its own being as a distinct image in order to indicate the original by copying it, an artistic photograph is able to show us something about the original that we would not have seen without it precisely by differing from the original as a distinct image. This is because what this photograph says about and adds to its subject depends on things like frame and focus, and what is photographed is precisely what cannot be framed or focused from the natural first person standpoint. The image then, can bring out something which is not available by merely looking at the original. What is represented through the image experiences an augmentation of meaning, or what Gadamer describes as “an increase in being,” [*Zuwachs an Sein*] that is, the thing exists in a different and fuller way in the image.¹³⁰

The symbol, too, resembles the image insofar as it also shares in the being of what is presented by really making present what is symbolized. But it does this by *taking the place* of what is symbolized. This explains the reverence shown to symbols like flags, uniforms, and crucifixes. The difference between a symbol and an image is that symbols, unlike images, cannot bring about an increase in being for what they make present. So, for example, although the being of a country is made present in its flag, the being of the country does not exist *more* fully when the symbol exists, because symbols do not say anything about what they symbolize. This is shown by the fact that a symbol from one culture has no meaning for someone from another culture unless the meaning is explained to them, since the linkage between the symbol and

¹²⁹ See Gadamer, TM, 144; *WM*, 156.

¹³⁰ See Gadamer, TM, 135; *WM*, 145.

symbolized is instituted by convention. The meaning of the image, however, is given to it by its own content.

The essence of the image is thus neither a pure pointing-to-something nor a pure taking-the-place of something, but an increasing of the being of something in the presentation of it. In and through its image, the intelligibility of the thing is enhanced and it is made present in a richer way. Unlike the form of representation that we find in the sign and the symbol, then, the representation of something in the image is actually a coming-to-presentation of the thing itself. The image can be said in this sense to share in, and belong to, the being of what is represented.

Just as the image belongs to the being of what it represents insofar as the original comes to presence in it, “a word has a mysterious connection with what it “images;” it belongs to its being” [*Dem Wort kommt auf eine rätselhafte Weise Gebundenheit an das ‘Abgebildete,’ Zugehörigkeit zum Sein des Abgebildeten zu*].¹³¹ Moreover, the thing is articulated in language so that it comes to presentation or is disclosed in a more complete way there. Like the increase in being experienced by something presented in the aesthetic or religious image, the thing exists more fully in language. Word and image are explicitly linked together by Gadamer in this regard. “Word and image are not merely imitative illustrations, but allow what they present to be fully for the first time what it is” [*Wort und Bild sind nicht bloße nachfolgende Illustrationen, sondern lassen das, was sie darstellen, damit erst ganz sein, was es ist*].¹³²

Yet word and image also differ in an important way: unlike the word, the image resembles what it represents, there is always a moment of recognition in the encounter with the image. This is true even for the those artistic styles which are not obviously mimetic, such as the avant-garde art movements of the late nineteenth and early 20th century or the abstract expressionism that followed them. In his essays “The Speechless Image” and “Art and

¹³¹ Gadamer, *WM*, 420; *TM*, 416.

¹³² Gadamer, *WM* 148; *TM*, 137.

Imitation,” Gadamer maintains that what is found in much of the art of our time is less the representation of things *as such* than aesthetic echoes of the contemporary world: an obsession with rationally planned construction and experimentation, an experience of the growing impersonality and anonymity of life, a sense that much of what was once stable and familiar has disintegrated.¹³³ The greatest works of modern art go beyond the simple representation of these themes and achieve a substantiality and irreplaceability through the presentation of a certain kind of order.

The order here is not that found in a world of enduring and familiar things. Gadamer observes that we are actually no longer able to experience what things *are* in the artifacts that populate the modern industrial world. Such ‘things’ are produced at will and in mass, to be purchased at the prompting of advertisements and disposed of when they no longer work, so that nothing seems irreplaceable anymore. Nor is it the order seen in the mythico-religious interpretation of human experience, for this hardly seems possible for us today. Instead, non-objective works of art testify to order as a whole. It is this spiritual and ordering energy encountered in the work that one recognizes as familiar, since these ordering energies make our life what it is in building a human world.

Thus even non-objective images, insofar as they are works of art, resemble what they present—albeit abstractly. The word, on the other hand, presents the thing without resembling it. How should we understand this strange movement from the appearances to their articulation in language? My suggestion is that we view a word as non-imitative, but image-like insofar as it ‘images’ or presents the thing by presenting something of the *meaning* of the thing, although it never presents all of the meanings something can have. Just as the encounter with the image in the pictorial work of art is an event in which the thing itself comes to self-presentation through

¹³³ These pieces appear in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Kunst und Nachahmung,” *KS II*, 16-26 and “Von Verstummen des Bildes” *KS II*, 227-234.

the image in a fuller way, the word is an image in this sense—the thing itself is expressively articulated in language so that it comes to presentation or is disclosed in a fuller way there.

This is a point with significant implications and one to which we will return. The word is like a kind of image (rather than a sign used to indicate something else) insofar as it is the intelligible face of the thing itself. For the speakers of a particular language it is nearly impossible to hear the words of that language, whether spoken or read to oneself, as merely sound or noise – there is always something intelligible in this sound. This intelligibility of language somehow gives the thing spoken or written about; when we listen to someone speak, or when we read, we are taken up into what is said so that something is made present. But what is made present is not a series of pictorial images, each one of which would belong to an individual word; rather, it is the *sense* of the thing or things that emerges in language. A certain meaning or intelligibility *which belongs to the thing* is presented in language. In other words, the things of the world are not arrayed before us as mute sense data onto which we would then project our own meanings. Things have a being and a meaning of their own that guides and constrains their presentation in language.

Nevertheless, we should not be led to conclude from this that things are encountered as already meaningful in a fully formed, determinate way, that things precede their manifestation in language, and that language would then name the things. This is an “illusion” that conceals the fundamentally linguistic character of our experience:¹³⁴ “Our verbal experience of the world is prior to everything that is recognized and addressed as existing. That language and world are related in a fundamental way does not mean, then, that world becomes the object of language. Rather, the object of knowledge and statements is always already enclosed within the world horizon of language.”¹³⁵ On this view, language cannot be a tool for representing or referring to

¹³⁴ Gadamer, ‘The Nature of Things and the Language of Things,’ PH, 77; *KS I*, 66.

¹³⁵ Gadamer, TM, 447; *WM*, 454.

something that is already pre-linguistically and meaningfully present since it is not an object in the world in any sense. Rather, it is what makes possible that we have a world at all; it gives us the world as a whole.¹³⁶ That is, the things of the world and the world itself only appear in and through language. This is a point we will return to again to elucidate in more detail.

There seems to be a certain tension here between, on the one hand, the claim that things have a meaning of their own which must be accommodated, and the idea, on the other, that we never encounter the meanings of things independently of the way our language presents them to us. This difficulty is overcome if, with Gadamer, we accept that meanings reside in things, but view language as that which brings out and completes these meanings so that things are able to be encountered *as* what they are. This means that the word does not simply mirror the intelligibility of the thing, it completes this intelligibility by fully articulating it in a determinate way so that the thing comes into language as what it is.¹³⁷ But the linguistic presentation of things is not a sequential or temporal process - word and thing belong together. There is here an inner and intimate unity of word and thing [*die innige Einheit von Wort und Sache*].¹³⁸ As we have seen, words are neither copies of things nor signs that are allotted to them; they belong to the being of the things they present and are part of them insofar as they allow what they present to be fully for the first time what it is. As Gadamer puts it, “Whoever has language “has” the world.”¹³⁹ Brice Wachterhauser maintains that this is so because for Gadamer language “is the medium of intelligible reality itself.”¹⁴⁰ The complex relation between the intelligibility of words and the intelligibility of things is neither one of identity nor one in which the two domains could ever be pulled apart.

¹³⁶ Gadamer, TM, 440; WM, 446.

¹³⁷ Gadamer observes that “that which comes into language is not something that is pre-given before language; rather, the word gives it its own determinateness [*Bestimmtheit*],” TM, 470; WM 479.

¹³⁸ Gadamer, TM, 404; WM, 407.

¹³⁹ “*Wer Sprache hat, ‘hat’ die Welt,*” Gadamer, WM, 457; TM, 449.

¹⁴⁰ Brice Wachterhauser, “The Belongingness of Word and Reality,” in *Hermeneutics and Truth*, op cit., 162.

Language and thinking about things are so bound together that it is an abstraction to conceive of the system of truths as a pre-given system of possibilities of being for which the signifying subject selects corresponding signs. A word is not a sign that one selects, nor is it a sign that one makes or gives to another; it is not an existent thing that one picks up and gives an ideality of meaning in order to make another being visible through it. This is mistaken on both counts. Rather, the ideality of the meaning lies in the word itself. It is meaningful already. But this does not imply, on the other hand, that the word precedes all experience and simply advenes to an experience in an external way, by subjecting itself to it. Experience is not wordless to begin with, subsequently becoming an object of reflection by being named, by being subsumed under the universality of the word. Rather, experience of itself seeks and finds words that express it. We seek the right word—i.e., the word that really belongs to the thing – so that in it the thing comes into language.¹⁴¹

Language, then, both expresses and completes the meanings that things have, and in doing so allows them to present themselves as what they are. Since grasping the meaning of something is to *understand* it as something or other, Gadamer claims that understanding is fundamentally linguistic. Moreover, it is not merely the case that through the use of language this or that thing is understood as what it is, but that experience as a whole is linguistically structured. There is no pure, immediate, or uninterpreted given. “Pure seeing and pure hearing are abstractions that artificially reduce phenomena. Perception always includes meaning.”¹⁴² Perception is never the simple mirroring of what is present, it always involves – through an articulation of what is there – the understanding of something as something. That something is understood *as* something, then, is the only real immediacy and givenness. And that means that the given is always linguistically mediated. The fuller hermeneutic significance of the claim that the given is always already understood now becomes clearer, viz., that the given is always an interpretation, but that this interpretation, insofar as it is made possible by language, just *is* an appearance of the thing itself. Like the image, then, the word “is an event of being – in it being appears, meaningfully and visibly.”¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Gadamer, TM, 416-417; *WM*, 421.

¹⁴² Gadamer, TM, 80; *WM*, 97.

¹⁴³ Gadamer, TM, 138; *WM*, 149.

III. Language and Finitude

Although being is disclosed in language, it is not fully displayed there, as if wholly laid open to an objective gaze. The same thing can be articulated in a variety of ways—although not in just any way at all, as Gadamer is careful to note. Reflection on the consequences of this phenomenon leads from an account of the relation between word and thing to a discussion of the relation between words and worlds. This is because the words and concepts used in speaking about a thing are formed according to what a community regards as important about a thing, i.e., according to their needs and interests, as well as by following the nature and contours of the thing itself. The different languages of the world can in this sense be seen as variations on a logic of experience and, as such, expressions of human freedom in relation to the environment.¹⁴⁴ In each linguistic inflection of this logic there is a relatively stable fixing of words and means of expression that allows a definite articulation of things to be built up over time into a structured whole.¹⁴⁵ Because this totality of what has been articulated in each language enables us to present the world to ourselves in a particular way, we are able to gain distance, and so freedom, from the immediacy of what is encountered in our surroundings—as opposed to remaining embedded in a merely animal environment. According to Gadamer, to have such a free, distanced orientation toward things as whole through language is to have a world.¹⁴⁶

Yet in ordinary, everyday experience this understanding is not explicitly thematized as such. Most people, most of the time, take themselves to be referring to and dealing with *the* world rather than *a* world in the things that are disclosed to them through the language that they speak. In other words, the status of our world as *a* world, as one of a multiplicity of worlds, always remains in the background of our acting and speaking. It is only in certain experiences, such as

¹⁴⁴ See Gadamer, *TM*, 433-34, 441; *WM* 439, 447-448.

¹⁴⁵ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem,” trans. Richard E. Palmer, *GR*, 86; “Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Die Universalität des hermenutischen Problems,” *GW* 2, 228.

¹⁴⁶ Gadamer, *TM*, 442; *WM* 448.

when we learn a foreign language or encounter a text from another time or place, that world, the way a language discloses things as a whole, shows itself. World as such is not disclosed, is not consciously thematized, until such moments.

To come in this way to see the world as *a* world, as one of many possible worlds, is to realize that a language gives us one among many possible standpoints on the world as a whole, that is, it gives us a worldview. In this regard Gadamer, following Humboldt, maintains that every language contains a worldview. Every language is a view of the world not because it has its own formal structure and so counts as a particular type of language, for example as a member of the Romance, or Sino-Tibetan, or Altaic family of languages, but because of its content, because of what is has been said and handed down in that language.¹⁴⁷ The differences in content between the many and varied languages of the world has lead to a multiplicity of worldviews, so that the world appears differently in different languages. This is not to suggest, however, that each linguistically constituted worldview is a closed and finished system within which its speakers are trapped. On the contrary, one can learn other languages and enter the alternative worldviews that they contain, although in doing so one never completely leaves behind one's own linguistic horizon. In this way, learning a foreign language gives one a new standpoint on one's previous worldview.¹⁴⁸ For this reason, Gadamer says that every worldview is always capable of having its world picture enlarged through the incorporation of insights from other traditions.¹⁴⁹

Insofar as every language is an aspect or view of the world, this expansion of a linguistic worldview with new insights amounts to the extension of an aspect of the world. But the plurality of these views of the world does not mean that every view of the world is merely a relative one that never reaches the world itself. Rather, what the world is does not differ from the views in

¹⁴⁷ Gadamer, TM 438-39; *WM* 445.

¹⁴⁸ Gadamer, TM, 449; *WM*, 457.

¹⁴⁹ Gadamer, TM, 444; *WM*, 451.

which it presents itself.¹⁵⁰ This increase in the understanding of the world, moreover, is not measured by, or relative to, a world-in-itself that lies beyond all language. There is, as we have already seen, no such world-in-itself that can be discovered in its being-in-itself from a standpoint outside of the linguistically constituted human world.¹⁵¹

Another way to understand this relationship between language and world is to draw on an image that Gadamer himself uses, namely, the metaphor of language as light. Since the language through which things come to presentation always belongs to a particular time and culture, we might view each language as a particular way of ‘lighting up’ different aspects of the world in various cultures.¹⁵² Light is an especially apt metaphor for Gadamer’s conception of language because like light, language both increases the intelligibility of the world and uncovers novel features of it, not by constructing this intelligibility or projecting these features onto a featureless background, but by illuminating the meaningful structures that belong to the world itself, structures which are prior to language, though not able to be understood, and so not accessible, without language. And just as the world exhibits a pre-linguistic, yet meaningful, structure, language possesses its own, autonomous intelligibility. Words can increase the intelligibility of what is reflected through them, or disclose new or different aspects of the world because of what

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Gadamer, TM, 449; WM, 456.

¹⁵² Gadamer observes in *Truth and Method* that “Thomas points out that [...] the word resembles light, which is what makes color visible,” (TM, 425; WM, 430). In a speech given 20 years later he asks:

How did there become a “there” all of a sudden? “And God said, let there be light.” Did the word bring the light? Was the word light? Is the word light? Isn’t light really there where the word is found, where ruins or mute inscriptions are first deciphered and begin to speak? Or whenever new drawings, reports, and stories illuminate the darkness of the past for us [...] (Gadamer, “Culture and Word,” trans. Dennis J. Schmidt, in *Hermeneutics and the Poetic Motion: Translation Perspectives V*, ed. Dennis J. Schmidt (Binghamton: SUNY Press, 1990), 13; “*Die Kultur und das Wort*,” LT, 11-12).

Here Gadamer explicitly links language as light to the being of the “there,” something whose significance will soon become apparent.

we will see in the next chapter is the ‘metaphoricity’ of language. In speaking, words are chosen because through their intelligible content they make manifest the thing.

All of this is possible because word and thing, language and world, belong to one another—our language is at the same time the very language of the things of the world; the intelligibility of things is found in language and comes to presentation there, not because language is the only thing which can make an otherwise unintelligible reality intelligible, but because word and thing, language and reality, share a profound affinity that makes language eminently suited to expressing the meanings that inhere in things.¹⁵³ In the fifth chapter of this work we will be in a position to examine the deepest ground of this kinship between language and world.

The image of a particular linguistic tradition ‘lighting up’ an aspect of the world also captures the partial, finite, and perspectival nature of the view which each language opens like a window onto the world. The very possibility of light depends on a background darkness; something must remain unlit around every thing that comes to light in language, and this means that in revealing something language also conceals other aspects of the thing. Thus although language is a perspective in and through which things appear or are uncovered, what is uncovered is always only a partial view of the thing, one that can never disclose it completely.

Nothing ever becomes fully present in language because language is “there” rather than constituting a standpoint that could transcend pre-objective being and enable all things to be wholly present to us. So although Heidegger radically re-thinks the human as that which holds opens the site for the appearance of being, this is not, Gadamer observes, the openness to all

¹⁵³ I am following Brice Wachterhauser’s suggestion here that we can read Gadamer as claiming that language increases the intelligibility of the world in Brice Wachterhauser, “Getting it Right: Realism, Relativism, and Truth,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 52-78.

beings in the manner of Aristotle's *nous* or Hegel's absolute knowledge.¹⁵⁴ Following Heidegger, he emphasizes the way in which the "there" "despite all one's openness [...] remains at the same time hidden, concealed."¹⁵⁵

Even in the apparent unconcealment that takes place within the borders of a linguistic worldview, something still remains hidden and withdrawn. In the phenomenon of being "thrown," certain dimensions of our historical being are present in that they are operative, but absent in that they are inaccessible. "One would like to uncover what is still shrouded in darkness, and yet one finds that it continually escapes us, and yet for all that, it is always still there. This is exactly what the hermeneutics of facticity knows about."¹⁵⁶ Unlike the contingent forms of concealment that are a consequence of our inhabiting different worldviews, such as those which are a consequence of disparate cultures or times which permit the disclosure of different aspects of the same thing, or even different things, here we encounter something which by its very nature can never be made fully transparent. In the condition of facticity we come to one of the limits of all openness. Gadamer reminds us that Schelling designated such limits with the expression *das Unvordenkliche*, "the immemorial."¹⁵⁷ Pointing to the universal experience of home and homeland [*Heimat*] to illustrate the *Unvordenkliche*, Gadamer notes the impossibility of articulating all that home and homeland mean for us: "[O]ne can never communicate to someone what home [*Heimat*] is for you. A possession? Something lost? Seeing something once again?

¹⁵⁴ Gadamer makes this and the following observations in "Hermeneutics and the Ontological Difference," trans. Richard Palmer, GR, 357-371; "Hermeneutik und ontologische Differenz," *GW* 10, 58-70, an essay that, we are told in the helpful introduction by Palmer, forms part of the collection of Gadamer's papers on Heidegger and which constitutes a kind of philosophical memoir of the development of Heidegger's views in the period 1922-1924.

¹⁵⁵ Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and the Ontological Difference," GR, 365; *GW* 10, 65.

¹⁵⁶ Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and the Ontological Difference," GR, 364; *GW* 10, 64.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.* In this essay Palmer leaves the term untranslated, but inserts "that which could not be thought of in advance" in brackets after *das Unvordenkliche* and "unanticipatability" in brackets after *Unvordenklichkeit*. I chose to emphasize the other way in which this term is also translated, namely, "the immemorial" or that prior to which we cannot think, because this seems to better capture Gadamer's intended meaning here.

Memory and a return to what one recollects?”¹⁵⁸ This example was chosen with some care, as the later essay *Heimat und Sprache* makes clear. Here Gadamer explicitly links the immemorial character of home with that of language.

But what is home [*Heimat*] for us, this place of original familiarity? Where is it, what would it be, without language? Language belongs above all to the immemoriality [*Unvordenklichkeit*] of homeland [*Heimat*]. We know this even from the fleeting experience of travelling. When we return home from a foreign country and foreign language the sudden re-encounter with one’s own mother tongue is positively startling, and it is really the whole of the familiar, the manners and customs of an accustomed world which are suffused with the tones of one’s own language [...] in fact, a homeland is above all a linguistic homeland. The mother tongue keeps something of an immemorial at-homeness [*Heimatlichkeit*] for everyone.¹⁵⁹

Our sense of home is entwined with and inseparable from our native language; both of these things, along with a past which is carried into the present in the form of tradition, come together with the other elements of factual life to help constitute our standpoint on the world. Gadamer underscores the temporal dimension of this linguistic worldview in calling this perspective a *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*, or historically-effected consciousness.¹⁶⁰ This is a standpoint which we cannot get behind, a “horizon” beyond which it is impossible to see insofar as a complete inventory can never be taken of all the sources of this form of consciousness. In order to account for that part of the historical past which is operative in our present we would need to command a full and objective view of this past, and this, of course, is something which is not possible for the finite and limited beings that we are. Moreover, any view of the past is of necessity incomplete. Heidegger’s claim that thrownness is part of the structure of human existence means not only that the judgments of the understanding are always made from a wider

¹⁵⁸ Gadamer, “Hermeneutics and the Ontological Difference,” GR, 365; *GW* 10, 64; translation slightly modified.

¹⁵⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Heimat und Sprache,” *GW* 8, 366, trans. David W. Johnson and Julia Welz in the appendix of this work as “Home and Language.”

¹⁶⁰ Gadamer equates “the whole of our experience,” or the “universal and human experience of life,” which includes aesthetic, historical, and scientific experience with “the linguistic constitution of the world” which “presents itself as the consciousness that is effected by history [*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*] and that provides an initial schematization for all our possibilities of knowing” (Gadamer, “The Universality of the Hermeneutic Problem,” GR, 85; *GW* 2, 228).

context or horizon which one is not able to simply transcend, but also that it is this very horizon which makes possible *any* understanding, including an understanding of the past.

So, for example, the interpreter does not simply leave behind his or her world horizon in trying to make sense of the past as it is preserved in the texts of the tradition, but rather brings this viewpoint to the text, which has its own world horizon. It is in this “fusion of horizons”

[*Horizontverschmelzung*] that the meaning of the text emerges. The subject matter

acquires its life only from the light in which it is presented to us. We accept the fact that the subject presents different aspects of itself at different times or from different standpoints. We accept the fact that these aspects do not simply cancel one another out as research proceeds, but are like mutually exclusive conditions that exist by themselves and combine only in us. Our historical consciousness is filled with a variety of voices in which the echo of the past is heard. Only in the multifariousness of such voices does it exist: this constitutes the nature of the tradition in which we want to share and have a part. Modern historical research is not only research, but the handing down of a tradition. We do not see it only in terms of progress and verified results; in it we have, as it were, a new experience of history whenever the past resounds in a new voice.¹⁶¹

In this way we are able to reveal a dimension of the subject matter which could not have come to light without the particular standpoint from which the subject was approached, i.e., the specific world horizon which the writer or reader brings to the world of their subject. This is why Gadamer says that “we understand in a different way, if we understand at all” and that “the discovery of a true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process.”¹⁶²

The various ways in which the “there” is, in Grondin’s elegantly translated phrase, “woven from presence and absence”¹⁶³ precludes a conception of language as the activity of making statements that could fully display all things in an objective manner. The logic of language is not the objectifying logic of the proposition—it is the dialogic of conversation,

¹⁶¹ Gadamer, TM, 285; *WM*, 289.

¹⁶² Gadamer, TM, 296, 298; *WM*, 302, 303.

¹⁶³ Jean Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, trans. Kathryn Plant (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press), 146.

speech, and response from out of which the statement can first emerge.¹⁶⁴ In the pre-objective being-with-one-another [*Miteinander*]¹⁶⁵ of the “there” and the language through which it is disclosed, we find ourselves always already entwined in the hermeneutical logic of question and answer: “In the end, isn’t the word [*Wort*] only there in the answer [*Antwort*]? Isn’t the real word the word that is spoken to someone, and to which one must respond? [...] Isn’t every word ultimately an answer, or reply? Aren’t we always answering when we risk a word, that is, don’t we always try to speak in a way that is appropriate to the other, the circumstance, the topic, the cause?”¹⁶⁶ One might wonder, of course, whether *all* utterances constitute questions or answers to questions. In “Semantics and Hermeneutics,” Gadamer acknowledges that performatives such as the curse, the blessing, the command, or the complaint are not answers to questions *sensu stricto*; yet their meaning depends, like statements, on their status as a response to an occasional “context of action.”¹⁶⁷ He maintains, moreover, that all speaking is a response in this sense.

In the shift that happens in thinking about language from the *solus ipse* of monologue to the sociality of dialogue, further kinds of concealment and absence become apparent. We will see in the next chapter that any given discourse is a response to a prior unsaid which includes the linguistic and social whole in which the interchange is situated, a motivational background and a context of action with their occasional and expressive dimensions, and the mutual determination of meaning by speakers in dialogue. This unsaid encompasses both the whole that the speaker

¹⁶⁴ “The word spoken to one is not representable in conceptual symbols [...] The word is rather there as something that reaches one [...] language belongs to practice, in human being together-with-one-another and human interchange. Hermeneutics says that language belongs to conversation, that is, language is really only what it is, if it supports the attempt to understand and leads to exchange, speech, and response. It is not propositions and judgments, but questions and answers. As a result, the basic orientation of philosophical thinking about language today has changed. This is a change that leads from monologue to dialogue” (Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Die Vielfalt der Sprachen und das Verstehen der Welt,” in *GW* 8, 343, trans. David W. Johnson and Sabine Bobenhausen in the appendix of this work as “The Diversity of Languages and the Understanding of the World”).

¹⁶⁵ See Gadamer, “Zur Phänomenologie von Ritual und Sprache,” *GW* 8, 409, for the link between language and the dimension of the *Miteinander*.

¹⁶⁶ Gadamer, “Culture and the Word,” op. cit., 4; “Kultur und Wort,” *LT*, 13.

¹⁶⁷ Gadamer, “Semantics and Hermeneutics,” *PH*, 89-90; *GW* 2, 179-80.

responds to as well as the way in which this whole is included in the speaker's response, and, as such, is something which can remain partly or even wholly out of view.

In addition to this unsaid to which speech is a response and which it must draw on and express in answering, the totality of meaning that the virtuality of speech brings into play – which can never be expressed totally – includes the meaning of that which wants to be said. For that which wants to be said, too, something meaningful always remains hidden and withdrawn, because nothing is ever fully sayable. Thus “[a]ll human speaking is finite in such a way that there is laid up within it an infinity of meaning to be explicated and laid out.”¹⁶⁸ According to Grondin, this condition is what Gadamer terms *Sprachlichkeit*, or linguisticity. He maintains that this concept not only describes the linguistic character of our experience of the world, it also and more importantly designates this never-ending search for language, for words to say that which seeks to be expressed and understood. But “language never succeeds in exhausting everything that wants to be said and understood,” so that “[t]he original hermeneutic experience is less that of language than that of the *limits* of language.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Gadamer, TM, 454; WM, 462.

¹⁶⁹ Jean Grondin, *Sources of Hermeneutics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 150. Grondin maintains that the notion of *Sprachlichkeit* or linguisticity has not always been well understood. His point finds support in Supplement II of *Truth and Method*: “I would say that the misunderstanding in the question of the linguisticity of our understanding is really one about language—i.e., seeing language as a stock of words and phrases, of concepts, viewpoints and opinions. In fact, language is the single word, whose virtuality opens for us the infinity of discourse, of speaking with one another, of the freedom of “expressing oneself” and “letting oneself be expressed,” TM, 553; “*Wie weit schreibt sprache das denken vor?*”, GW 2, 206. In a note to his remark quoted above, Grondin refers us to Gadamer’s essay “Boundaries of Language.” Gadamer concludes this essay thusly:

Finally the deepest of the problems that essentially inheres in the boundary of language is to be indicated [...] It is the awareness that every speaker has in each moment when he seeks the correct word – and that is the word that reaches the other – the awareness that he never completely attains it. What reaches the other through language, what has been completely said in words, is always less than has been meant or was intended. An unstilled desire for the appropriate word – that is what constitutes the true life and essence of language. Here a close relationship appears between an inability to satisfy this desire, *desir* (Lacan), and the fact that our own human existence dissipates in time and before death (Gadamer, “Boundaries of Language,” trans. Lawrence K. Schmidt, LL, 17).

The finitude of linguistic experience means that *Sprachlichkeit* has a “speculative” dimension: insofar as every utterance never fully reaches what wishes to be said we must seek to understand or ‘speculate’ on the fuller meaning of all such utterances; this, in turn, requires an open and searching stance. “Speculative means the opposite of the dogmatism of everyday experience. A speculative person is someone who does not abandon himself directly to the tangibility of appearances or to the fixed determinateness of the meant, but who is able to reflect, or—to put it in Hegelian terms—who sees that the “in-itself” is a “for-me.”¹⁷⁰ The “in-itself” is “for-me” in the sense that my apprehension of it is always a perspectival and so finite one that never exhausts all the meanings a thing can have.

So although language possesses the capacity to make things manifest, this does not entail that it has the power to fully or completely reveal that which it is aimed at disclosing. The inherent complexity of reality will mean that the same thing can be said in many ways. Moreover, language forms part of our pre-understanding, it bears our prejudices and the sedimentations of our history and culture. This is one of the marks of its finitude and the reason why all of our understandings, to the extent that they are linguistic, amount to one perspective among others. Words make manifest, but in doing so they only ever uncover an aspect of the thing. There always remains more to be said.

Lawrence Schmidt also characterizes *Sprachlichkeit* in similar terms, calling attention to Gadamer’s characterization of it in the late essay “Europa und die Oikoumene” (1993) as “an impulse toward the word” (Lawrence K. Schmidt, “Dewey and Gadamer on Language,” *LL*, 136).

¹⁷⁰ Gadamer, *TM*, 462; *WM*, 470.

Chapter 3

Linguistic Disclosure: Structures and Models

The previous chapter began to uncover the immense philosophical significance of a disclosive conception of language for the nature of perception and experience, for our access both to things and to the world as a whole, and for an understanding of our condition and our capacities. Yet this significance will turn on whether or not we can also give an adequate account of *how* language is able to disclose what it does. One of the principal aims of this chapter will be to undertake this task. We will proceed by defending the claim that disclosure is not a power that belongs to the word in isolation or even to the whole sentence; the capacity of words and sentences to reveal depends on an unspoken whole that surrounds everything we say or write. That is, the full meaning of our utterances and the words we write depends on a ‘fusion’ of the said and the unsaid; meaning cannot be wholly carried by and restricted to the explicit content of what is actually said or written.

This is shown in Gadamer’s close analysis of the statement; it is also shown above all, I maintain, in the widely noted phenomena of ‘loss’ in translating something from one language into another. We will follow the tensions in, and development of, Gadamer’s own views on translation, views whose ambiguity showcases two different approaches to understanding translation, approaches which arise from conflicting conceptions of linguistic meaning. We look to Paul Ricoeur’s short text *On Translation* to do, finally, what Gadamer does not, namely, to articulate an understanding of translation that can be reconciled with the meaning holism he advocates.

This inquiry into the experience of loss in translation also lends significant support to the central thesis about language that we have been exploring, namely, that language is disclosive,

that it possesses the capacity to conceal and unconceal. Although translation between languages is always possible, it is not always possible without loss. How are we to understand what is lost here? For the standard view of translation as the restitution of meaning, there can be no such loss. And yet there *is* loss, as I attempt to illustrate with examples drawn from the translation of Japanese into English. These examples come from the traditional vocabulary of Japanese aesthetics as well as from more commonplace expressions. The fundamental cultural sensibility which these examples help to both constitute and give expression to, on the one hand, and the difficulty faced by the translator in rendering these expressions fully into English, on the other, marks an essential gap between worlds and what is disclosed in them. Hence I advocate the idea that the loss here is the loss of that which was disclosed in the original language.

To substantiate this view, we show why the full meaning of certain words and phrases cannot be recovered in another language by taking a closer look at the way in which a certain theory of linguistic meaning, i.e., semantic holism, accounts for how language discloses. For this kind of semantic holism, the meaning of a word is what is disclosed through the merging of what is said with the whole background of an unsaid which fills this sense out. Disparate languages bring different background wholes with them, and this is what sometimes enables each language to make different things manifest, things which cannot always be disclosed in other languages.

A comparative analysis of Ricoeur's conception of metaphor proves to be of great help in understanding the structure of this relation between a language and the things that are disclosed in it. Ricoeur had shown that the creation of metaphors involves bringing together semantic fields, one of which offers a new perspective on the other and so in this way is able to bring something new to light. I argue that this is the same dynamic at work in language as a whole; the structure of language itself is metaphorical, and this is predominantly what accounts for the capacity of languages to unconceal in singular ways.

I. Said and Unsaid

Any account which aims to locate a theory of linguistic meaning in Gadamer's work would do well to begin with his analysis of the statement, which can be found in Part III of *Truth and Method* in the subsection titled "The middle of language and its speculative structure"¹⁷¹ as well as in his early piece "Man and Language" (1966) written not long afterwards, and in later essays such as "Language and Understanding" (1970) "Boundaries of Language" (1985), and "Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language" (1992). Gadamer's claim is that in all linguistic expression there is a joining together of the said and unsaid, so that the complete meaning of a word or expression can never be grasped solely from the content that it explicitly presents. One of the main difficulties that such a view must overcome is the challenge posed by the linguistic statement [*Aussage*], i.e., the proposition or assertion, which at first glance seems to undermine the purported universal status of this phenomenon. This is because the statement is conventionally understood as a proposition that conveys information by representing an objective content such that the meaning of the statement is contained solely in the content presented. Nevertheless, through a careful examination of the statement, Gadamer demonstrates that even here linguistic meaning arises out of a fusion of said and unsaid. By focusing his analysis on "pure" statements, i.e., statements that are made in highly structured contexts in order to methodically reduce their meaning to what is expressly stated, he shows that even in the most extreme cases of propositional language, linguistic sense is not exhausted by expressed content.

The attempt to formulate and make use of such "pure" statements can be found in the assertions of science, in the propositions of logic, and even in the statements made in the courtroom and in those given to the police under questioning. The scientific statement is an

¹⁷¹ This is Rodney Coltman's suggested correction of Weinsheimer's translation of "*Die Mitte der Sprache und ihre spekulative struktur*" as "Language as medium and its speculative structure," which Coltman thinks quite misleading. Nowhere does this become more evident than in Gadamer's claims about the "virtuality" of language, which we examine below. See Rodney Coltman, *The Language of Hermeneutics: Gadamer and Heidegger in Dialogue* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 105, 113, 147, n.4, 149-150, n.40.

assertion whose truths have been methodically ascertained. The isolated and abstract character of these statements allows them to be used for any and all purposes and contributes to the tremendous practical success which science has enjoyed.¹⁷² Likewise, in the logical proposition there is an abstraction from everything that is not expressly stated, so that only that which the proposition says becomes the object of analysis. It is this abstraction which permits the formalization of assertions and the demonstration of conclusions which result from the necessary connections between them.

Something less rigorous, yet still very methodical, can be seen in the statements given in response to the questions of a lawyer or a detective. Here “the horizon of meaning of what is to be said is concealed by methodical exactness; what remains is the “pure” sense of the statements. That is what goes on record.”¹⁷³ So, for example, the witness or defendant is asked questions whose motivation is unclear; they also remain uninformed about key points of the case. Moreover, they cannot control how the statements will be used in an investigation, in the arguments of a lawyer, or in the justification of the verdict. Yet there are good reasons for this procedure, since this is how the court or the police attempt to arrive at an uninfluenced statement about the facts.¹⁷⁴

Although Gadamer fully recognizes that the pursuit of “pure” statements in these contexts has a certain justification, then, he questions whether it is ever possible to completely restrict the meaning of a proffered statement to its content alone. When we consider the theoretical propositions of science, for example, we find that the full meaning of such statements only becomes apparent when they are understood against a certain background of motivation. To see this, we have to see that the language of science is language mediated by a certain set of

¹⁷² See Gadamer, “Language and Understanding,” GR, 102; *GL* 80.

¹⁷³ Gadamer, TM, 464; *WM*, 473.

¹⁷⁴ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Boundaries of Language,” trans. by Lawrence K. Schmidt, *LL*, 15; Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Grenzen der Sprache,” *GW* 8, 358-359.

disciplines.¹⁷⁵ These disciplines, as has become clear, are characterized by the attempt to view objects under investigation through the lenses of quantification and the third-person point of view as well as by the commitment to search out law-like regularities by ensuring that the procedure utilized is in principle able to be repeated. The mathematization of nature, and the construction of mental models which enable us to view things from a standpoint that transcends what appears to our senses, in addition to the method of controlled observation through repeatable experiment, enables science to obtain objectively valid and verifiable – and so in this sense certain – knowledge.¹⁷⁶ This accounts for the astounding success of science in explaining, controlling, predicting, and otherwise coping with the natural world.

The assertions of science, then, are the assertions of a certain form of rationality whose methodological presuppositions and interests motivate and so fill out the meaning of each statement. So, for example, the meaning of an assertion to the effect that “the soil type in this field or the organism in that habitat is an instance of *x*” cannot be restricted to the contents of the subject and predicate. What remains unsaid includes something else, namely, that from a quantitative and objectifying viewpoint with the goal of control and prediction, this soil or that organism is an *x*. Thus, on the one hand, Gadamer acknowledges that science has transformed our world by privileging a certain form of access to it, on the other, he claims that this form of access is neither the only nor even the most encompassing access that we possess.¹⁷⁷ This assertion recalls the distinction we examined earlier which Gadamer makes between the comportment toward the world of scientific (quasi-) objectivity and the first-person standpoint on the world of ordinary experience.

¹⁷⁵ See Gadamer, “Language and Understanding,” GR, 100; *GL* 78.

¹⁷⁶ See Gadamer, TM, 446; *WM* 453; and Gadamer, “What is Truth?,” in *Hermeneutics and Truth*, op. cit., 37; *KS I*, 50.

¹⁷⁷ See Gadamer, “Language and Understanding,” GR, 94; *GL*, 73.

In the contextless propositions of logic, however, there appears to be a relatively unproblematic and exhaustive equivalence between semantic meaning and propositional content. Although Gadamer calls the development of propositional logic one of the most significant and consequential inventions of Western culture, he also observes at the same time that such “sentences” are extreme cases of language.¹⁷⁸ Indeed, there is even a certain sense in which these sentences do not count as language – at least as we speak it to one another – at all. When and where, he asks, has anyone ever uttered the sentences, “All human beings are mortal. Darius is a human being. Therefore, Darius is mortal”?¹⁷⁹ The suggestion here seems to be that the ‘statements’ of logic are too narrow in their application to demonstrate anything significant about the nature of linguistic meaning in general, since the overwhelming majority of statements are not logical assertions—they are words we address to one another.

The pure statements that come closest to this kind of language are the statements made by a person who is being formally interrogated by, for instance, a lawyer or a detective. Yet close phenomenological description shows that methodically reducing meaning to what is stated in this way often distorts it: “Anyone who has experienced an interrogation - even if only as a witness - knows what it is to make a statement and how little it is a statement of what one means.”¹⁸⁰ This becomes especially clear when statements are “taken,” i.e., written down, since the expressive dimension that contributes to the meaning of what I say, such as my stance, facial expression, tone of voice, manner of speaking (which can convey urgency, hesitation, intensity, doubt, and so on) all of which indicate my attitude to the subject matter and to my interlocutor, are effaced.

But it is not only a statement’s being written down which leads to a loss or distortion of meaning. The answers given to the formal, almost artificial questions asked at a trial, for example, are not the same as statements made in the context of an ordinary conversation. In the

¹⁷⁸ See Gadamer, “Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language,” *LL*, 30; *GW* 8, 414.

¹⁷⁹ Gadamer, “Language and Understanding,” *GR*, 101-102; *GL* 80.

¹⁸⁰ Gadamer, *TM*, 464; *WM*, 473.

latter, the situation and context of action in which questions are asked and answers are given fill out the meaning of what is said through what Gadamer calls the “occasionality” [*Okkasionalität*] of language, i.e., the concrete circumstances within which an utterance is made, such as who makes it, to whom, when, and for what reason.¹⁸¹ Moreover, in an actual dialogue, the words of another are offered in response to my own, and these in turn call forth other words from me, so that more and more comes to be said in the direction that the conversation has taken. Because many words possess multiple meanings rather than a single unchanging one, it is only this process of speaking to another person that builds up a context which fixes the moments of meaning in our speaking, so that we together come to agree on what we mean.¹⁸² Thus the question we must answer in an interrogation is like a barrier that inhibits “the spirit of speaking,” a spirit driven by a need for self-expression and a desire to enter into dialogue.¹⁸³ We feel uneasy before such questions and find them hard to answer because we don’t know precisely why they are being asked. It is difficult to get fully into view what lies behind these questions, and without this clear direction of meaning, we are not really able to grasp their sense. Because “the motivational background of a question first opens up the realm out of which an answer can be brought and given,” authentic answers can be given to questions only insofar as they are brought from out of the unexpressed horizon of meaning that surrounds every question and fills out its sense.¹⁸⁴ Just as in the scientific statement, the full meaning of a question depends on a surrounding context of motivation.

All speaking, according to Gadamer, is motivated in this way, that is, it makes sense to ask of anything that is said, “Why do you say that?”¹⁸⁵ To understand why someone says what they do, Gadamer maintains that we must get clear about how they came to what was said, in

¹⁸¹ See Gadamer, “Semantics and Hermeneutics,” PH, 88; *GW 2*, 178-179.

¹⁸² See Gadamer, “Language and Understanding,” GR, 106-107; *GL*, 84-85.

¹⁸³ Gadamer, “Man and Language,” PH, 67; *GW 2*, 152-153.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

particular, what *question* they asked themselves to which their utterances are an answer. Hence every statement or proposition is also essentially an answer to a question, and the full meaning of each one can only be grasped by understanding the question that it answers. In linking questions and statements together in this way, Gadamer is here explicitly inspired by Collingwood's idea of a "logic of question and answer" according to which we can only understand a text when we have understood the question to which it is an answer.¹⁸⁶ At the beginning of the next chapter we will circle back to this important idea; I want only to note here that the claim that the meaning of a statement depends on the question to which it constitutes an answer and thus on an unarticulated background of motivation presents yet another obstacle for the idea that the meaning of a statement can be comprehended solely from the content it presents.

All of this leads to the conclusion that it is only when what is not said is grasped along with what is stated does what is said become fully understandable. It is this background of the mutual determination of meaning by speakers, of motivation, and of the occasional and expressive dimensions of language that shines through what is said in living conversations. Linguistic meaning, then, does not perfectly coincide with what is expressly stated; there is a realm of sense originating in the unsaid that cannot be methodically restricted or purged through the so-called "pure" statement without the loss or distortion of meaning.

There is also another dimension of the unsaid present in all linguistic expression which it would be impossible to eliminate without the collapse of linguistic meaning altogether; these are the neighboring words which are associated with all of the words in any sentence, and which must be presupposed in order for a word or sentence to be understood at all.¹⁸⁷ This region of the

¹⁸⁶ See Gadamer, TM 363; *WM*, 375-376.

¹⁸⁷ Some version of the claim that the meaning of a word or sentence cannot be determined solely from the content which it presents but must rely on context, surrounding sentences, related words, and so on is, of course, one with a long and complex genealogy. One thinks here not only of Herder and Humboldt, but also of Saussure, who makes the point that the value of a linguistic sign must "be assessed against comparable values, by contrast with other words. The content of a word is determined in the final analysis not by what it contains but by what exists outside it" (Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. and ed.

unsaid, unlike the expressive, occasional, and motivational background of conversation that we have been examining, belongs to the very structure of a language and as such is present in both what is spoken and written. Take, for instance, the word “book.” To identify or recognize something as a book I must already have in my lexicon neighboring words which contrast with and situate this word. So, for example, I must be able recognize other objects containing written material as non-books and understand the words which identify its properties such as paper and binding; I must also be familiar with the language of the practices in which books figure, such as the words associated with reading and writing. Moreover, there are still other, somewhat more distant words which contribute significantly to the meaning of this word—in the case of the word book these might be words from the practice of using libraries and the world of publishing. This array of words, in turn, will depend in part for their meanings on yet another range of words, in an ever-widening and circle of connections. In this sense, words depend for their meaning on an implicit background of associated words, objects, and practices which provide the broadest context for the words we speak and hear, read and write, giving them a particular direction and sense. Here again the complete meaning of an expression, and therefore what is disclosed in it, is not reducible to or exhausted by the words that constitute its content. The capacity of words to disclose depends too, then, on this unspoken linguistic and social whole in which the words are situated.

Gadamer has in mind both this unsaid whole of language and life-form as well as the more local, contextual, and occasional whole in which an utterance is embedded when he observes that

Every word breaks forth as if from a center [*Mitte*] and is related to a whole, through which alone it is a word. Every word causes the whole of the language to

Roy Harris (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing, 2006), 114), of Frege, who claims that the meaning of words must be accounted for in the context of the sentences in which they occur, and of Wittgenstein, who observes: “It is only in language that something is a proposition. To understand a proposition is to understand a language” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, trans. A. Kenny (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 21).

which it belongs to resonate [*antönen*] and the whole world-view that underlies it to appear. Thus every word, as the event of a moment, carries with it the unsaid, to which it is related by responding and summoning. The occasionality of human speech is not a casual imperfection of its expressive power; it is, rather, the logical expression of the living virtuality of speech [*die lebendige Virtualität des Redens*] that brings a totality [*ein Ganzes*] of meaning [*Sinn*] into play, without being able to express it totally.¹⁸⁸

To say what one means is always to speak pregnantly, to “hold what is said together with an infinity of what is not said in one unified meaning and to ensure that it is understood in this way.”¹⁸⁹ Gadamer maintains that someone who speaks in this manner speaks in a “speculative” [*spekulative*] way. The term comes from *speculum*, or mirror, and is meant to suggest, among other things, that speculative speech allows the unsaid to be present in what is said by somehow ‘reflecting’ this unsaid.¹⁹⁰ Precisely how we are to understand this Gadamer does not make clear; Günter Figal makes the helpful suggestion that what is meant here is best understood by considering hermeneutical experience in the narrow sense, i.e., the interpretation [*Interpretation*] of a work: “In the performance of a piece of music or the recitation of a text not only is present that which is immediately played or spoken but also the whole to which the played and spoken belongs. One understands the whole and with it what is immediately presented and present; and yet one “has” the whole only from that which is momentarily presented. Thus, it is the case with anything said which is understood, if we follow Gadamer, that it brings with it a context to which it belongs, its “horizon of meaning [...]”¹⁹¹

There is a second sense of reflection – one that is intertwined with the first – at work here as well; not only is the unsaid reflected in the said, but the thing or issue (*die Sache*), that is, the matter spoken of, is mirrored in the words spoken. But this mirroring is not the simple copying or

¹⁸⁸ Gadamer, TM, 454; *WM* 462.

¹⁸⁹ TM, 464; *WM*, 473.

¹⁹⁰ “Someone who speaks is behaving speculatively when his words do not reflect beings, but express a relation to the whole of being,” (TM, 465; *WM*, 473). For the origin of the term “speculative” see TM, 461, n.106; *WM* 469, n.106.

¹⁹¹ Günter Figal, “The Doing of the Thing Itself” trans. Robert Dostal, in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert Dostal (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 119.

duplication of a pre-given entity. The totality of meaning contained in language which Gadamer here calls the “virtuality” of speech is not, as James Risser points out, “a presence waiting to be realized.”¹⁹² That is, reflection is not the re-presentation of a static and already given meaning—it is the coming to language of *die Sache* itself, since “it is in the course [*Bahnen*] of language that the order and structure of experience forms itself, at once originally and constantly changing.”¹⁹³ In this process, neither language nor the thing have priority, both belong to one another. As we saw in our discussion of word and image, the word belongs to the being of the thing in the same way that the mirror image belongs to the being of that which is mirrored; similarly, the mirror image could not be what it is without that which it mirrored, so that that which is mirrored belongs to the being of the mirror image, just as the word could not be what it is without the thing, so that the thing belongs to the being of the word. Gadamer calls this unity of word – which reflects and so presents the thing – and thing a “speculative” unity:

To be expressed in language does not mean that a second being is acquired. The way in which a thing presents itself is, rather, a part of its own being. Thus everything that is language has a speculative unity: It contains a distinction, between its being and the way it presents itself, but this is a distinction that is really not a distinction at all. The speculative mode of being of language has a universal ontological significance. To be sure, what comes into language is something different from the spoken word itself. But the word is a word only because of what comes into language in it. Its own physical being exists only in order to disappear into what is said. Likewise, that which comes into language is not something that is pre-given before language; rather, the word gives it its own determinateness [*Bestimmtheit*].¹⁹⁴

The two kinds of reflection or mirroring found in language are, it can now be seen, distinct but interrelated. In the first form of reflection we examined, insofar as what is said expresses what was meant and is understood in this way, it reflects the unsaid and hence makes some part of it present, though in an indirect way. One might say that the whole of the unsaid is

¹⁹² James Risser, “Hermeneutics of the Possible” in *The Specter of Relativism*, ed. Lawrence K. Schmidt (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 121-122.

¹⁹³ Gadamer, TM, 453, WM, 461. The translation is Kathleen Wright’s correction of Weinsheimer. See Kathleen Wright, “Gadamer: The Speculative Structure of Language” in *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Brice Wachterhauser (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), 206.

¹⁹⁴ Gadamer, TM, 470; WM 479.

present in what is said in the same way that the whole person is present in an individual act or utterance, that is, never fully on display in a manner available to direct and complete inspection, and yet for all of this present in a very real – though less direct – way. Moreover, this unsaid whole is precisely what allows the words we speak to be understood in their fullest sense and so enables these words to reveal or display, i.e., “reflect” what they bring to language. This second form of reflection is what we have referred to as linguistic disclosure. In sum, the speculative structure of language is what makes it possible for the various wholes within which words and sentences are embedded to be present in a way that enables these words to disclose the things about which they speak.¹⁹⁵

II. On Translation

It is perhaps in the experience of translation, above all, that the essential connection between meaning, background context, and disclosure can be seen most clearly. But to see this we must first dispense with the widely held idea of translation as the simple restoration of meaning. John Sallis’s work *On Translation* reveals the limitations and flaws of this approach, which he calls the classical determination of translation. He traces this view of translation from Plato through Cicero to Locke and finally Gadamer. This conception of translation posits the existence of a domain of meaning which is independent of its particular instantiations in language. In the work of translation one moves from a linguistic unit (word, phrase, sentence, etc) to its corresponding meaning lying within this independent domain, in order to pass from here to the words which correspond to this meaning in the other language. A correct translation must

¹⁹⁵ The speculative structure language is a subject that cannot be fully treated in isolation from the great themes at the heart of Gadamer’s philosophy of language, i.e., the significance of dialogue, the nature of linguisticity [*Sprachlichkeit*], or the summons to openness and vigilance in the face of concealment and finitude. Indeed, we will find that as with the logic of question and answer, the full significance of this idea will become apparent only at the end of the fourth chapter.

ensure that the meaning of the translated words matches the meaning of the words in the original, and the goal of translation on this view is the restitution of meaning.

That this definition of translation will not suffice becomes especially evident in the translation of philosophic and poetic texts—as opposed, for example, to something like technical information. It is not the case that such texts are untranslatable (since translation does, after all, happen), but that, as Sallis observes, the inevitable but necessary reductions, transpositions, and shifts must result in a loss (though in fortunate circumstances, sometimes a gain) in translation. That is, the reductions, transpositions, and shifts which occur, i.e., the resolution of polysemy, the transposition of syntactic structures, the shift from one metaphoric to another, and the change in tempo necessary for successful translations, do not leave the meaning of the original untouched.¹⁹⁶ Anyone who has had the experience of reading poetry both in the original, and afterwards, in translation, will recognize the kind of change in meaning that Sallis describes. Meaning cannot always be distinguished from particular words and expressions; it is not floating ‘out there’ waiting and available to be expressed by the right words, every one of which would have their equivalent in each of the languages of the world.

For Sallis, Gadamer stands at the end of this history of translation. This may come as a surprise, given the account of linguistic meaning that is found in Gadamer’s work. Yet his place in this development is complicated. According to Sallis, Gadamer frames his discussion of translation within the classical determination, but he carries that determination to its limits and so gestures toward another understanding of translation altogether.¹⁹⁷ Gadamer’s apparent accession to the classical view of translation comes in his remarks on translation at the beginning of the third and final part *Truth and Method*, in the section titled “Language as the Medium of Hermeneutic Experience.” Here Gadamer is concerned to elucidate the nature of understanding.

¹⁹⁶ John Sallis, *On Translation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 87.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

His suggestion is that since in translation understanding is disrupted, we are able to see with the greatest clarity the conditions of all understanding. He then goes on to describe translation as the preservation and carrying over [*hinübertragen*] of meaning into another context where, in order for this meaning to be understood, its validity must be established in a new way in this other language world. This requires the translator to interpret that meaning in order to express it in the other language, so that every translation is already an interpretation. So although Gadamer speaks about transporting meaning from one language to another, he also explicitly equates this process of translation with interpretation. Yet meaning which has been restituted should not require interpretation.

Sallis maintains that we find the same kind of equivocation when, a little further on in this section, Gadamer speaks of translation as an activity of appropriating an alien meaning and making it one's own. But the fusion of horizons that takes place here seems only to serve as the context within which this meaning is preserved and re-expressed.¹⁹⁸ Nevertheless, Sallis identifies multiple features of translation that complicate and finally undermine this notion of translation as the restitution of meaning. For example, insofar as translation is also interpretation, certain features of a text will have to be downplayed or suppressed while others are highlighted, certain ambiguities must be resolved even as others are created. This side of translation does not escape

¹⁹⁸ Sallis, *On Translation*, op. cit., 103. The relevant portion of text in *Truth and Method* reads:

As one tries in conversation to transpose oneself into the other person in order to understand his point of view, so also does the translator try to transpose himself completely into his author. But doing so does not automatically mean that understanding [*Verständigung*] is achieved in a conversation, nor for the translator does such transposition mean success in re-creating the meaning. The structures are clearly analogous. Reaching an understanding [*Verständigung*] in conversation presupposes that both partners are ready for it and are trying to recognize the full value of what is alien and opposed to them. If this happens mutually, and each of the partners, while simultaneously holding on to his own arguments, weighs the counterarguments, it is finally possible to achieve—in an imperceptible but not arbitrary reciprocal translation of the other's position (we call this an exchange of views)—a common diction and a common dictum. Similarly, the translator must preserve the character of his own language, the language into which he is translating, while still recognizing the value of the alien, even antagonistic character of the text and its expression, (Gadamer, TM 388-389; *WM*, 390).

Gadamer's notice: "The requirement that a translation be faithful cannot remove the fundamental gulf between the two languages. However faithful we try to be, we have to make difficult decisions. In our translation if we want to emphasize a feature of the original that is important to us, then we can do so only by playing down or entirely suppressing other features [...]" Translation, like all interpretation, is a highlighting."¹⁹⁹ It is difficult to imagine that such changes would not affect the meaning of what was translated. Moreover, just before this passage Gadamer had described the "fundamental gulf" between languages as a gap between the spirit of the words of one language and those of another, "a gap that can never be completely closed."²⁰⁰ Sallis pointedly asks whether the spirit of words is anything other than their meaning, that is, that which makes words what they are, that which makes them something more than mere sounds.²⁰¹ Thus the gulf between languages that could never be fully crossed in the movement of translation would be a gap in meaning.

Gadamer continues a little further on in the same section: "since he [the translator] is always in the position of not really being able to express all the dimensions of his text, he must make a constant renunciation. Every translation that takes its task seriously is at once clearer and flatter than the original. Even if it is a masterly re-creation, it must lack some of the overtones that vibrate in the original."²⁰² Translation makes what is said sound flat because, as Gadamer remarks in "Man and Language," an essay written shortly after *Truth and Method*, the original is only reflected on one level, i.e., in terms of words and sentences, but the translation often lacks the depth and dimensionality which houses the suggestive background and range of meaning built up between the lines in the original.²⁰³ There is a clear sense in this essay that Gadamer has gone beyond merely taking the classical determination of translation to its limits, as Sallis has it; he

¹⁹⁹ TM 387-388; *WM*, 389.

²⁰⁰ TM 387, 386; *WM*, 389.

²⁰¹ See Sallis, *On Translation*, op. cit., 104.

²⁰² Gadamer, TM, 388; *WM*, 389-90.

²⁰³ See Gadamer, "Man and Language" PH, 68; *GW* 2, 153.

draws on a conception of linguistic meaning that is incompatible with the classical view of meaning in explaining a difficulty encountered in translation, a difficulty which the classical paradigm of translation cannot make sense of or account for.

In “Semantics and Hermeneutics” (1972), an even later essay, Gadamer is still more explicit about rejecting the classical determination of translation and the view of linguistic meaning that underlies it, which he describes as defining meaning in terms of the interchangeability of one linguistic unit (word or expression) with another one. On this view, if one linguistic unit can be substituted for another one without changing the meaning, then that linguistic unit has the same meaning as the one it replaces.²⁰⁴ Meaning here is independent of its instantiation in particular expressions. Yet this definition of linguistic meaning is not easily reconciled with a semantic analysis that treats linguistic expressions as whole units of meaning. Such analysis shows that even within the same language, an entire linguistic expression cannot simply be re-expressed without change by replacing each word of the expression with its synonym, nor are two similar expressions simply interchangeable with one another. This is because in a given context, only one expression can be the “right” one. Gadamer mentions in this regard the poetic use of words as exhibiting this in an exemplary way. The translation of poetry, especially lyric poetry, highlights the near impossibility of finding corresponding expressions in the foreign language that one is translating into, a problem stemming from the fact that the same or closely related words in the target language can have very different values in the context of the

²⁰⁴ “[I]t is difficult to find a better definition for the sense or meaning of an expression than its interchangeability with another expression. If one expression can take the place of another without changing the meaning of the whole, then that expression has the same meaning as the one it replaces. Still, it is doubtful just in what measure such a theory of meaning in speaking that is based on interchangeability can be valid for the actual entirety of the phenomenon of language. And that it is a matter of the whole of speaking and not of the interchangeable single expression as such is not to be denied. The potential of semantic analysis lies precisely in getting beyond a theory of meaning that isolates words from the whole. Within its wider perspective what emerges is that the theory of interchangeability, which was to define the meaning of words, has limited validity. The structure of a linguistic form cannot be described simply on the basis of the correspondence and the possibility of substitution of single expressions,” (Gadamer, “Semantics and Hermeneutics,” PH, 84; *GW* 2, 175).

foreign language. For this reason, lyric poetry cannot be rendered into another language without an enormous loss in expressiveness. More than anything else it is the extreme case of the near untranslatability of lyric poetry that demonstrates the failure of the substitution theory of meaning.²⁰⁵ By the time he writes “Boundaries of Language” (1985) Gadamer can say, “There are not so much degrees of translatability from one language into another as degrees of untranslatability [...] The better one speaks the target language, as we say, the less one will be able to bear the mere approximations that he encounters in the so-called translation.”²⁰⁶

Translation is not and cannot be the simple restitution of meaning. It is, Gadamer says, “like an especially laborious process of understanding, in which one views the distance between one’s own opinion and its contrary as ultimately unbridgeable. And, as in conversation, when there are such unbridgeable differences, a compromise can sometimes be achieved in the to and fro of dialogue, so in the to and fro of weighing and balancing possibilities, the translator will seek the best solution—a solution that can never be more than a compromise.”²⁰⁷ Sallis describes this to and fro movement as the setting out from the sphere of what is one’s own, into what is alien, and back again. It is a movement between languages as well as between different candidate words or expressions in the language into which the words are to be translated. In addition to judgment and reason, then, the free oscillation between alien spheres in translation will require the powers of the imagination. The play of the imagination as it hovers between and mediates differences is not completely free, however. It is bound by what comes to be said in the original, that is, what shows itself or comes to presence in the original.²⁰⁸ A successful translation will be a transformation of the original regulated by what this original makes manifest.²⁰⁹ Sallis here makes

²⁰⁵ See Gadamer, “Semantics and Hermeneutics” PH, 83-87, *GW* 2, 174-177. Also see my translation of *Lesen ist wie Übersetzen* (*GW* 8, 279-85) in the Appendix of this work.

²⁰⁶ Gadamer, “Boundaries of Language,” *LL*, 17, *GW* 8, 360.

²⁰⁷ *TM*, 388; *WM*, 390.

²⁰⁸ Sallis, *On Translation*, op. cit., 98-99.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 111. This description of translation is also echoed in Gadamer: “the subject matter can scarcely be separated from the language. Only that translator can truly re-create who brings into language the subject

explicit and develops what is only implicit in Gadamer's comparison of translation with the understanding reached in an especially difficult conversation, giving a sense of what translation can be if it is not to be the restitution of meaning in another language.

Gadamer never fully develops an alternative view of translation along these lines, one which can sit comfortably with his account of linguistic meaning as that which is disclosed through the fusion of the said and unsaid. He seems to shy away at times from too fully embracing the phenomenon of the loss in translation which results from the unity of word and thing in order to avoid the unpalatable conclusion that some things are simply untranslatable:

Language is the language of reason itself. One says this, and then one hesitates. For this makes language so close to reason - which means, to the things it names - that one may ask why there should be different languages at all, since all seem to have the same proximity to reason and to objects [...] The agony of translation consists ultimately in the fact that the original words seem to be inseparable from the things they refer to, so that to make a text intelligible one often has to give an interpretive paraphrase of it rather than translate it. The more sensitively our historical consciousness reacts, the more it seems to be aware of the untranslatability of the unfamiliar. But this makes the intimate unity of word and thing a hermeneutical scandal. How can we possibly understand anything written in a foreign language if we are thus imprisoned in our own? *It is necessary to see the speciousness of this argument.* In actual fact the sensitivity of our historical consciousness tells us the opposite. The work of understanding and interpretation always remains meaningful. This shows the superior universality with which reason rises above the limitations of any given language.²¹⁰

Gadamer points to the kinship between language and reason to emphasize the verbal nature of understanding; in doing so he also underscores the universality of language and so of our capacity to understand. Yet this does not then simply permit one conclude that everything is unproblematically translatable. Translation is rather an unending process of attempting to rebuild the feeling and content of one language into another, a never finished conversation of the translator with him or herself.²¹¹

matter that the text points to; but this means finding a language that is not only his but is also proportionate to the original," (TM, 389; WM, 390).

²¹⁰ Gadamer, TM, 403; WM, 406.

²¹¹ See Gadamer, "Boundaries of Language," LL, 17, GW 8, 360.

Gadamer's equivocations between, and resistance to, both the notions of full translatability on the one side, and complete untranslatability on the other, illustrate the difficulty of navigating the nuances and complexities of the terrain here with this dichotomy in hand. For Ricoeur it is a dichotomy too roughly hewn for the experience that it seeks to capture. In *On Translation*, his brief but extremely suggestive reflections on translation, Ricoeur proposes that we replace the theoretical alternatives of translatability versus untranslatability with the practical alternatives – which stem from the practice of translation itself – of faithfulness versus betrayal. The former alternatives are paralyzing and, finally, false. Untranslatability entails a radical diversity of languages and thus the impossibility of translation. Yet *there is* translation. There have always been traders, travelers, ambassadors, and spies who have been able to cross linguistic boundaries.²¹² Since there is such a thing as translation, it must be possible. But this possibility presupposes that underneath all of the heterogeneity of the world's languages one can discover and reconstruct the *a priori* universal structures, the transcendentals of the absolute language that renders translation possible.²¹³ Although Ricoeur acknowledges partial successes such as Chomskyian generational grammar, this is an attempt which fails and has to fail: “first, there is no consensus on what would characterize a perfect language at the level of the lexicon of original ideas entering into composition; this consensus presupposes a total equivalence between the sign and the thing, without anything arbitrary, thus more broadly between language and the world, something which constitutes either a tautology, a preferred division being decreed a picture of the world, or an unverifiable claim, in the absence of an exhaustive survey of all the spoken languages.”²¹⁴ Moreover, no one can explain how the natural languages are to be derived from this supposed perfect language; how one gets from what is universal and *a priori* to what is

²¹² Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, trans. Eileen Brennan (New York: Routledge, 2006), 32.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 16.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

empirical and historical.²¹⁵ A *prima facie* plausible candidate for that which could bridge this apparently insurmountable gap would be the idea that this absolute language houses a system of ideal meanings which would be mirrored in the lexical systems of all the languages of the world. But Ricoeur points out, in a passage that Gadamer could have written, that words have more than one meaning and that this polysemy partly arises from the fact that meaning is defined each time through usage.

[Usage] basically consists in screening the part of the word's meaning which suits the rest of the sentence and with it contributes to the unity of meaning expressed and offered for exchange. It is the context each time which, as we say, determines the meaning that the word has acquired in such-and-such a circumstance of discourse: from then on, the arguments over words can be endless: What did you mean? etc. And it is in the play of the question and the answer that things become clearer or become confused. For there are not only obvious contexts, there are hidden contexts and what we call the *connotations* which are not all intellectual, but affective, not all public, but peculiar to a circle, to a class, a group, or perhaps even a secret society; there is thus the whole margin hidden by censorship, prohibition, the margin of what is unspoken, crisscrossed by all the figures of the hidden [...] That is why we have never ceased making ourselves clear, making ourselves clear with words and sentences, making ourselves clear to others who do not see things from the same angle as we do.²¹⁶

This rejection of a domain of univocal meaning transcending use and context as well as of an ideal and universal language which would subtend it also deprives us of an absolute criterion for good translation, since “for such a criterion to be available, we would have to be able to compare the source and target texts with a third text which would bear the identical meaning that is supposed to be passed from the first to the second.”²¹⁷ Ricoeur also rejects an understanding of translation as the re-expression of a meaning that would exist apart from, yet stand behind, all the languages of the world so that these languages would code the same meanings in their different ways. However, he does acknowledge that there are relatively simple cases of translation, especially between languages in the same cultural zone, in which the same

²¹⁵ Ibid., 17.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 26.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 34.

meaning of a word or expression is also disclosed in the words or expressions of the second language. But this can be accounted for without an appeal to the classical theory of translation as the restitution of meaning. If we return to the earlier example of the word “book,” we can see that many languages belong to cultures that have books and the practices, institutions, and vocabulary associated with books. In this way, both the original word and the translated word rely on the broader whole of their respective languages and cultures for their meaning. This meaning is shared not because the same ideal meaning is intended by each word, but because both languages have the same (more or less) kind of socio-linguistic context in common, and this allows each word in its respective language to disclose the same thing. Moreover, it seems clear that there are a vast number of other words and expressions about which this is also true.

In many other, harder cases, a good translation cannot be founded on a demonstrable identity of meaning. Instead, it must aim at faithfulness, at what Ricoeur calls equivalence without identity.²¹⁸ Ricoeur identifies two forms of equivalence—an equivalence which can be reached because it has its source in a vast cultural area in which linguistic and other community identities are the result of extensive and enduring exchanges, such as within the Romance languages, between Germanic and Slavic, and in dual relationships as between a Latin language and a Germanic language such as Anglo-Saxon. But this cultural affinity covers over the true nature of equivalence, which is *produced* by translation rather than *presupposed* by it.²¹⁹

²¹⁸ Ricoeur, who attempts to always remain close to the practice and work of translation, adds:

And the only way of criticizing a translation – something we can always do – is to suggest another supposed, alleged, better or different one. And this, moreover, is what happens in the world of professional translators. As far as the great texts of our culture are concerned, we essentially live on a few retranslations which are reworked over and over again. This is what happens with the Bible, with Homer, with Shakespeare, with all the writers cited above and with the philosophers, from Plato to Nietzsche and Heidegger, (Ibid., 22).

²¹⁹ Ibid., 35.

The second form of equivalence, then, is constructed. Ricoeur calls this production of equivalence without identity the “construction of comparables.” These must be constructed downwards, beginning from the culture as a whole, because words and sentences are always part of larger texts, and texts in turn are part of cultures in and through which different visions of the world are articulated. Such visions can confront one another within the same cultural area, so that national or community cultures constitute a network of worldviews in competition with one another. Ricoeur asks us to merely to consider the West, with its periods of competitive self-understanding, from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and the Reformation, and then to the Enlightenment and Romanticism.

Other visions of the world are so different, so strange, so much the absolute other of the culture to which they are being compared (Ricoeur’s example here is ancient Greek versus classical Chinese) that they can be distinguished by an initial “fold” [*pli*] in what can be thought and experienced, a fold beyond which it is impossible to go.²²⁰ The daunting challenge that this fold poses for translation appears in the radically different ways that disparate languages carve up reality. This heterogeneity “affects all the operating levels of language: the phonetic and articulatory division at the root of phonetic systems; the lexical division that separates languages, not word for word, but from lexical system to lexical system, verbal meanings within a lexicon consisting in a network of differences and of synonyms; the syntactic division affecting, for example, the verbal systems and the position of an event in time or even the modes of linking and of consecution. That is not all; languages are different not only owing to the way they carve up reality but also owing to the way they put it together again at the level of discourse.”²²¹

In constructing comparables, one begins with an understanding of this fold and moves downward, passing through the great works of the culture, absorbing these interpretations of its

²²⁰ Ibid., 36.

²²¹ Ibid., 30.

spirit and coming down again from the text to the sentence and word.²²² Ricoeur gives as an example of this first, the exchanges between India and China – one supposes he is thinking here of the way in which Buddhism entered China via the translation of its canonical texts – and second, the translation of the Bible from Hebrew into Greek, into the Latin Vulgate (about which he observes, “before Jerome the Latins had created comparables, by deciding for all of us that *aretē* was translated by *virtus*, *polis* by *urbs* and *politēs* by *civis*”) and, from all three of these languages, into the German of Luther. In the construction of such comparables we see the risk and grandeur of translation; this involves both a creative betrayal as well as an equally creative appropriation of the original.²²³

One of Ricoeur’s major achievements in this text is to have given an account of the work of translation that can be brought together with the meaning-holism that is so central to an understanding of language as disclosive. Although his account of translation as the construction of comparables registers the loss in translation that can occur, the precise nature of this loss lies unexcavated. What is clear in this formula of the “production of equivalence without identity” is that this loss is a loss of meaning. And if, as I have maintained, the meaning of a word or sentence is what it discloses, then the loss in translation here is a loss of that which was disclosed in the original language. What is lost might usefully be broadly divided into concepts, things, or entities, on the one side, and, to borrow an expression from John Sallis, “disclosive force,” on the other. In what follows we will address each of these in turn.

One of the virtues of Gadamer’s focus on poetry in discussions of translation is that it raises the question of the form of loss in translation that is at stake here. I suggest that the most keenly felt loss in translations of poetry is less a substantial and concrete ‘thing’ presented in the text, such as a particular character, idea, or concept, than it is the power of the original language

²²² Ibid., 31.

²²³ Ibid., 37.

to evoke an atmosphere or a sensibility, to present a way of seeing and feeling, to express a mood or a particular kind of aesthetic. What seems to be lost in many of these instances is the *disclosive force* of such language rather than the particular things that have been disclosed through it.

Perhaps this is why Gadamer maintains that poetry, and especially lyric poetry, in addition to being more or less untranslatable in that meaning cannot be detached from the entirety of particular linguistic expressions, is also untranslatable insofar as “the unity of sound-quality and meaning that characterizes every word we speak finds its ultimate fulfillment in poetic speech”²²⁴ such that “the unity of meaning and sound in the lyrical poem is obviously so intimate that one can create only indirect approximations in another material of language, or one must set entirely new poetry in place of the original.”²²⁵ That is, the loss of disclosive force in the translation of poetry stems partly from the way in which in the poetic word, above all, sense is tied to the very sound tones that belong to a particular language.

In his *Lyrical and Ethical Subjects*, Dennis Schmidt highlights the significance of this feature of poetic language in Gadamer’s analysis, maintaining that in the mutual reflection of sound and sense within the poem we find the real corporality of every language. In the poem, language shows itself as radically “there” as both more and less than the meaning it communicates. The poem takes us away from the possibilities of abstraction inherent in every language and “return[s] language to its body”; it takes us to the flesh of words, to the particular phonemes and sounds that belong *to this language, here*.²²⁶ The *mystery* here is how this specificity and corporality – this density – of a particular language is also necessarily tied to the meaning that it carries. Faced with this profound enigma, we may simply need to acknowledge, with Schmidt, that “the point at which language truly emerges as itself, is the point of its

²²⁴ Gadamer, “Composition and Interpretation” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, op. cit., 70; *GS* 8, 21.

²²⁵ Gadamer, “Philosophy and Literature,” trans. Anthony J. Steinbock, *Man and World* 18 (1985): 253, translation slightly altered.

²²⁶ Dennis Schmidt, *Lyrical and Ethical Subjects: Essays on the Periphery of the Word, Freedom, and History*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 34-35.

withdrawal. We find that the full experience of language includes the experience of its retreat from every experience. In other words, we begin from the fact that speech is marked by the same curious doubling motion we find in love; namely, that the nearer we approach the other the more clearly the distance, strangeness, and final otherness of the other become evident.”²²⁷

Linguistic disclosure is not – as Gadamer’s analysis of the lyric poem makes abundantly clear – only a function of the holism of linguistic meaning, it is also tied in a mysterious way to the particular sounds and tones of a given language. This is a consequential discovery, one that certainly calls for a fuller investigation. Unfortunately, we will not be able to pursue this line of inquiry here. The singular and irreproducible nature of the disclosive force that belongs to each language is of the greatest significance for questions of aesthetics; our present study, however, is aimed at drawing out the social, political, and ethical dimensions of linguistic disclosure.

More relevant for our purposes, then, is the way in which other kinds of translations, especially those involving the translation of concepts, values, and ideas specific to a culture and worldview, illustrate the way in which certain things can only be fully disclosed as what they are in and through a particular language. To grasp this, we should begin by returning to Gadamer’s observation that a word never presents all of the meanings that something can have. Following Nicholas of Cusa, he maintains that this is explained to an extent by the finite and inexact nature of human knowledge, which is reflected in human language. Only an infinite mind could rise above such limits to bring everything fully to language.²²⁸ This inability of language to express everything about a thing is also a result of the richness and the seeming inexhaustibility of things of the world and the things in it, which always outruns our ability to bring experience to words. Both the finitude of language and the complexity and depth of the phenomena can be seen in the way various languages articulate the same thing in different ways, as well as in the way one

²²⁷ Ibid., 40-41.

²²⁸ Gadamer, *TM*, 435; *WM*, 441.

language may have an especially felicitous expression for something that another language lacks. Gadamer refers in this regard to an African language which is said to have 200 different words for camel, according to the circumstances of the animal and its relation to a person.²²⁹ Or consider the word *wabi-sabi* [侘び寂び] in Japanese. This is a central term in the vocabulary of Japanese aesthetics for which there is no equivalent in English; it can be translated as “the aesthetic sense in Japanese art and culture emphasizing subdued taste and quiet refinement.” But what gets lost in translation here is what is *disclosed* by the word *wabi-sabi*. English doesn’t have a single word or expression in its stock of words that can articulate the precise sense of beauty that is revealed in the Japanese. But, one wants to object, even if English doesn’t have a single word or phrase that can fully reconstitute the meaning of *wabi-sabi*, haven’t we just accomplished this with the explanatory definition provided above—however verbose and invasive this would be if inserted into a translated text? Yet I still want to insist that even this amounts to the production of equivalence without identity of meaning. But why should this be so? What is it about certain words and phrases that prevents the full recovery of their meaning – and so what they disclose – in another language? I think the answer lies in this: there is a kind of metaphoricity at work in every language that accounts for the capacity of each one to unconceal in ways that are unique and inimitable.

III. The Metaphoricity of Language

The notion of metaphor that I am drawing on here has been elaborated and defended by Ricoeur, so we will first turn our attention to Ricoeur’s work on metaphor before returning to the question of loss in translation. In his major work on metaphor, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-*

²²⁹ See Gadamer, TM, 434; WM, 440.

Disciplinary Studies in the Creation of Meaning in Language, (1975) and several short articles which anticipate and further elucidate the results of this study, including “Creativity in Language: Word, Polysemy, Metaphor” (1973), “Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics” (1974), and “The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling” (1978), Ricoeur sets forth an original theory of metaphor. We will focus especially, though not exclusively, on *The Rule of Metaphor*. In this text, Ricoeur proceeds in three broad steps. First, he sets the stage by providing an historical overview of the “metaphoric process.” He then shows the role the image plays in this process. Finally, he examines the way in which metaphor discloses “what is” through what he terms metaphoric reference.

In briefly summarizing the results of Ricoeur’s long and patient journey through the history of metaphor theory, we can start with the basic point that he rejects the common view that metaphor, by substituting one word for another, more pleasing one, is merely decorative. His claim will be the opposite: the purpose of metaphor is to “shatter and to increase our sense of reality by shattering and increasing our language.”²³⁰ He begins by observing that most theories of metaphor have followed Aristotle’s lead in defining metaphor as the transferring of the name of one thing to something else to which it does not belong. He rejects this approach because it presupposes that words have proper or primary meanings in and of themselves. Instead, he follows I.A. Richards in viewing the meaning of words as dependent on the context of the sentence in which they are located. Metaphorical meaning, then, is displaced from the level of the word, where it arose as a result of “deviant denomination,” to the level of the sentence, where it is now understood as the result of “impertinent predication.”²³¹

²³⁰ Paul Ricoeur, “Word, Polysemy, Metaphor: Creativity in Language” in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdés (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 85.

²³¹ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies in the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 173-207.

In the substitution theory of Aristotle, no new information is provided by metaphor; one word is transposed with another for rhetorical and decorative effect. In “impertinent” predication, on the other hand, a new meaning emerges from the interaction of subject and predicate. Ricoeur credits Monroe Beardsley for “partly” accounting for this process of metaphoric innovation. According to Beardsley, the logical incompatibility of the predicate with the subject is the key to understanding the inventiveness of metaphor. The reader or listener is stimulated by the logically empty or contradictory predication to resolve it. This is done by constructing a new meaning by selecting among the range of connotations belonging to both subject and predicate those that are akin to one another.²³²

Ricoeur attributes this capacity to perceive similarity in and through (though not, as in the concept, above) difference and conflict to the imagination. The grasping of identity in difference is a simultaneous thinking and a seeing as well as a simultaneous production and discovery. The functioning of the imagination in the metaphoric process has two moments. In the first moment, imagination is constructive and discursive, and it is identified with the productive imagination of Kant. Here the productive imagination apprehends the semantic congruence or proximity between two terms in spite of, and through, the simultaneous incongruence and distance between them. Such apprehension is a thinking “to the extent that it effects a restructuration of semantic fields.”²³³ This involves the transgression of conceptual boundaries to connect what had been separated by these borders, so that a new meaning emerges. Just as the productive imagination brings together empirical and intelligible aspects of the concept, in the metaphorical process it brings together and relates terms that are normally distant, but it does this in such a way that the difference and thus tension between them remains; subject and predicate confront one another without fusing together.

²³² Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, op. cit., 191-194.

²³³ Paul Ricoeur, “The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 5, 1978, 143-159.

Ricoeur thinks that Beardsley has missed a crucial element in his explanation of the innovation involved in the metaphoric process. As we saw earlier, the generation of new meaning relies on the discovery of a heretofore hidden kinship between things. Yet this perception of similarity in the subject and predicate requires that they resemble one another in some manner, and it is this “work of resemblance” that cannot be confined to the level of verbal meaning. The detection of resemblance requires a “quasi-visual, quasi-auditory, quasi-tactile, quasi-olfactory” image, or what Ricoeur calls an “icon.”²³⁴ Here we arrive at the second moment of imagination, which perceives the concrete and sensible similarities between the subject and what has been predicated of it so that the vehicle (the pictorial envelope) is “seen as” the tenor (the conceptual import). Ricoeur explicitly compares this “seeing as” to the role of Kant’s schema in uniting the empty concept with the blind intuition, so that just as the productive imagination mediates between sensation and concept in Kantian epistemology, it mediates between image and meaning in Ricoeur’s scheme: “Thanks to its character as half thought and half experience, it joins the light of sense with the fullness of the image.”²³⁵ The result is an iconic image, an appearance on which we read a new connection and a new meaning which resolves the semantic incompatibility perceived at the level of literal meaning. The bizarre predication of metaphor both creates and discovers an image or images that enable one to perceive the kinship between terms in and through their difference. This is what Ricoeur calls the paradox of novel metaphorical predication: “We see similarity by construing it, that the visionary grasping of resemblance is at the same time a verbal invention.”²³⁶

With this we have reached the third and final stage of the metaphoric process. As we saw above, the literal or first order meaning (and reference) of the metaphor is suspended by the impertinent predication of the metaphorical statement. The continued attempt to make sense of

²³⁴ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, op. cit., 235.

²³⁵ Ibid., 253.

²³⁶ Ricoeur, “Word, Polysemy, Metaphor,” op. cit., 79.

this statement opens up a figurative or second order meaning (and reference). Thus although on the literal level we acknowledge that *x* is not *y*, on the figurative level we acknowledge that *x is y*. Metaphoric statements, then, have what Ricoeur calls a split reference, one literal and one metaphorical.²³⁷ Yet the term “reference” does not quite capture what happens on the figurative level of metaphor. Each term of the metaphoric relation has its own meaning, which carries with it connotations, uses, and relations typical of that meaning. When in a metaphorical expression these semantic fields are brought together for the first time, one—or sometimes both—fields provide a novel perspective on the other, and something new comes to be seen. Because the bizarre or impertinent predication of metaphoric statements allows us to detect similarities between terms which previous categorization had prevented us from seeing, a live metaphor is able to filter or bring out new aspects in the principal subject that had been hidden. Metaphors, then, do not simply describe or refer—they make manifest what was previously concealed.

My claim is that this structural dynamic of the metaphorical process is recapitulated in the way in which words disclose things. Just as in the formation of metaphors differing semantic fields are brought together on the basis of a previously unnoticed kinship, so that something new is seen, things, in all of their complexity and depth of intelligible meaning, are brought together with the sedimented meanings that belong to words or expressions which disclose and (partially) complete this intelligibility of things. Brice Wachterhauser astutely sums up the relationship between these distinct, but interrelated, dimensions: “concepts and objects, or language and the world, constitute spaces of overlapping or interpenetrating intelligibility of meaning. The world or the object has its own intelligibility that can resist or confirm our ways of thinking and speaking about it, but language has a creative power to elicit or evoke the intelligibility of the

²³⁷ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, op. cit., 224-231.

object.”²³⁸ Just as with the metaphor, disclosure is an event that takes place at the point where separate domains of meaning intersect.

But the analogy here extends even further. The meaning of words, as we have already observed, depends to some degree for their exact sense on a surrounding context of associated words, such as synonyms, antonyms, and other words and expressions, such as the related sentiments, ideas, and narrative of the great texts of the culture, which situate and color these words in one respect or another. The meaning of such words will depend, too, on their usage in proverbs, songs, idioms, and in the practices and institutions that they help to constitute. This coalescence of said and unsaid meaning that belongs to the intelligibility of the word, then, gives the word a particular way of revealing the thing by constituting a specific standpoint from which the thing is disclosed, just as one term of the metaphoric relation provides a novel perspective on the other. The result is a partial and always incomplete articulation of the meanings of things rather than the full representation of a pre-existing reality. I suggest we find here an explanation for why one language can fail to uncover in translation that which was disclosed in the original. Since different languages provide different contexts of associated words and practices for equivalent words and concepts, some languages are unable to furnish, through the equivalent term, the perspective on the thing that will reveal precisely the same meaning that is uncovered by the original language.

To return to our earlier example of the central and traditional concept of Japanese aesthetics, *wabi-sabi*, we will see that when broken down into its component parts, we first of all find *wabi* [侘び], which refers to the beauty to be found in the rustic and in the very simple. But the adjective form of this word – *wabishii* [侘びしい] – conjures for the Japanese speaker that which is wretched and lonely, dreary and shabby. An important and related concept is *wabi-zumai*

²³⁸ Brice Wachterhauser, “Getting it Right: Realism, Relativism, and Truth” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 74.

[侘び住まい], which refers to an uncomplicated, natural, and simple style of living. This word is associated with the secluded lifestyle of mountain hermits. The second word in the compound *wabi-sabi*, *sabi* [寂び], is translated as elegant simplicity. This word stems originally from the noun *sabu* [さぶ] which refers to the rust and patina that covers objects with the passage of time; *sabi* is also closely tied to the word *sabishii* [寂しい], or lonely.

No matter how much or how fully one attempts to describe *wabi-sabi* in a language other than Japanese, one needs to become familiar with the associated words, practices, images, cultural artifacts, and ceremonies of Japanese culture in order for it to fully disclose what it does. The aesthetic of *wabi-sabi* has its origins in late medieval developments in the traditional tea ceremony. Because this ceremony involved so many other arts, including the crafting of tea implements, architecture, gardening, calligraphy, Japanese ink painting, flower arranging, and poetry, these, too were both infused with and helped to embody the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic. This example illustrates especially clearly the way in which certain words can disclose what they do because the context of the whole language and the form of life in which it is embedded cannot be reproduced in another language.

All of this does not amount to the claim that a concept like *wabi-sabi* cannot be understood by someone who does not speak Japanese, only that it cannot be fully grasped through whatever English words are used to translate it. What is needed to understand *wabi-sabi*, to see what this expression makes *manifest*, is not fluency in the Japanese language or the ability to fully participate in this culture, but some sense of what it would be like to have such an insider's view. And this entails a degree of familiarity with some of the words and practices associated with this expression, especially when the wider linguistic and cultural setting that encompasses a word or phrase is very different from one's own.

We can make this point with another example, also taken from the Japanese language. These are two deceptively simple but very revealing phrases used by Japanese speakers everyday, and by everyone, which attests to the crucial sociolinguistic position they occupy within the language. The first expression is *yoroshiku onegai-shimasu* [宜しくお願いします]. Literally translated, the core meaning of the phrase is something like, “Please favor me with your goodwill.” Japanese speakers use this expression when meeting people for the first time, when greeting people at the New Year, when sending regards to others in situations when one is not going to be present, when requesting a favor, when beginning a new project with others, when opening and closing a business deal, when ending a business letter, when asking a person in a position of authority or power to look after or keep an eye out for one’s intimates, when asking for cooperation, understanding, or patience, when asking customers for repeat business (or to return again another time), when securing agreement from others, when relying on others to do a job for one, when asking for help, when marrying off one’s daughter, and on and on. Yet the range of situations in which this expression can be intelligibly employed constitutes an explicit recognition of the ways in which our lives are inextricably linked, and of the ways in which my own success and happiness depend upon the goodwill, cooperation, and aid of others. From this we can see that the literal translation does not disclose the feelings and the sense of sociality that is manifest to Japanese speakers in the original.

The next expression is *shitsurei-shimasu* [失礼します] (literally, doing something without *rei* [礼], i.e., proper respect, courtesy, appreciation, or gratitude), is usually translated as “I (will/am) commit(ting) a rudeness, or I am being/will be discourteous.” The translation of this phrase would seem to be a fairly straightforward matter, and in many cases it is. But besides all of the situations in which one would normally apologize, speakers also use this expression when entering a classroom, office, or other room, when entering a home that is not one’s own, when

entering a room without knowing if it is occupied, when entering a room that one is about to clean as a maid does, when entering the private space surrounding the person of another, when touching the person of another (e.g. tailors, barbers, etc), before hanging up the phone with a superior, after misspeaking, after having interrupted someone in conversation, after inadvertently bumping into someone, on leave taking, etc. The use of this phrase in these situations expresses and reveals a concern for the ways in which my actions and words impinge upon others and affect them and their situation, and if these actions have put others out, that this be acknowledged and mitigated, a sensibility that, again, is not really conveyed by the literal translation.

The difficulty of translation here is not the mere polysemy of meaning in these expressions. One could, after all simply translate each expression with different English phrases in different contexts. The real difficulty is that the English language equivalents cannot disclose the sentiments, goals, demands, and social relations that are evoked by this expression—you must learn something of the language to truly grasp these. Truly knowing something of the language, in turn, will mean knowing the interpretation of the world and the self that is constituted by the language. In our own examples, the range of meanings opened up by the last two expressions evince the profound interdependence between self and other in Japanese culture which results in a basic orientation of the self outward in a posture of generalized solicitude. This orientation toward others is articulated and reinforced again and again in the Japanese language through a vast range of other words, expressions, phrases, idioms, proverbs, and metaphors. Ultimately, it is a specific ontology of the human self as, to borrow an expression from Michael Sandel, a prominent communitarian critic of liberalism, an “encumbered self” that is presupposed here and that enables us to make full sense of the expressions we have been looking at. An encumbered self, as opposed to the free, independent, and unencumbered individual of liberal political theory, is one that speaks a particular language and inherits a particular tradition, is shaped by specific institutions and practices, takes up its social roles and is situated in a particular story. Perhaps

most importantly, the encumbered self is open to expectations and obligations it has not willed or chosen, obligations that stem from the communities and traditions that constitute the self.

The extraordinary burdens imposed on those who would fully understand the meaning of what has been translated in the examples above are not merely a function of cultural distance. Nor are they a contingent feature of the process of reading language in translation or listening to an interpreter—they are difficulties which are inseparable from the very nature of language and of linguistic disclosure. Our analysis of translation and metaphoricity has shown the ways in which the meaning of words, and thus what they disclose, depends upon associated words, practices, images, cultural artifacts, modes of self-understanding, and, finally, ways of life. Much, then, must at times be presupposed if two people are to come to an understanding in language about something with one another. This is an idea that is tied in large and important ways to the disclosure of truth, and, as such, a claim with which we will open the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Language and Truth

In this chapter we draw on the account of reason, language, and meaning developed thus far in order to show the way in which the truth-disclosing function of language can ground our normative claims. Truth is disclosed in the discovery of a shared language in which an aspect of the *Sache*, of the matter at issue between the participants in a conversation, can come to presentation. For such conversations to be possible at all, they must presuppose and rely on an implicit set of understandings about the subject matter and about the world as a whole that are always already in place; on the other hand, these conversations also receive their impetus from either the absence of understanding or a lack of shared agreement. The inquiry or advocacy that follows this interruption of understanding or agreement unfolds as the participants draw upon the rhetorical resources provided by shared pre-understandings or prejudices to explain how they understand. As the precondition for a genuine dialogue, this common background is also the precondition for the truths that can emerge from such dialogues.

In these exchanges of dialogical rationality, we find a conception of human reason as arising out of our situatedness in the concrete, finite, historical world; its task is to discover what it would be reasonable to say or do here and now. This requires prudential agents whose character and experience enable them to both choose well and speak correctly about the matter at hand. Gadamer focuses on this latter aspect of reason, which holds out the promise of our uncovering ethical and political truths. This rationality is paradigmatically exhibited in the kind of understanding that we reach with one another through a dialogue in which I must speak well, judge rightly, and attempt both to persuade others and allow myself to be persuaded. In the best case, what emerges out of this exchange is nothing less than the truth of the matter at stake in the

conversation. In this event of collectively coming to the truth through a dialogue, the individual actions and intentions of the participants are taken up into a movement that has its own dynamic such that the truth is something that acts on our understanding in an event that happens to us.

Although the various elements of Gadamer's work that are treated here, such as the recovery of the guiding concepts of humanism in the service of a rehabilitated notion of dialogical reason, the defense of the cognitive significance of rhetoric, the concern with ethical and political questions, and the account of linguistic disclosure and its relation to a radical conception of truth, have been the focus of other studies, this chapter brings these disparate themes together, showing for the first time their interconnections and significance in a larger normative project.

I. The Conditions of Dialogue

Throughout this study we have seen the movement of concealment and unconcealment at work in language, as for example in the reflection on the finitude of linguistic experience in the second chapter, or in the discussion of loss in translation in the third chapter. These investigations have shown that language is not a vast stockpile of labels, of words and statements which we affix to a present-at-hand assortment of objects all fully on display and available to inspection. Rather, insofar as language is disclosive, it is the medium that allows us to be "there" together with others and present in finite and limited ways to the meanings offered to us by things. For Gadamer this interplay of revealing and concealing in the intersubjective "there" of language is epitomized above all in conversation. For this reason he calls conversation "the essence" [*das Wesen*] of language.²³⁹ The intersubjective, second-person standpoint of the face-to-face

²³⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Logocentrism," trans. Richard Palmer and Diane Mitchfielder, in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, op. cit., 117; Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Frühromantik, Hermeneutik, Dekonstruktivismus," *GW* 10, 128. There are a number of other

delineates the dimension of meaning in which conversation moves. Here there is always an absence on the other side of presence, something unseen and unknown—a condition far removed from the impossible omniscience of the third-person stance and its ideal of objectivity. What remains out of reach is, as we have said, the whole of the unsaid which surrounds and supports the exchange of words in a conversation, the inexhaustible meaning of what wants to come to language and wants to be said, that which is hidden from the worldview or perspective of the language in which the conversation is held, and finally, the immemorial sources of the horizons to which the speakers belong and from which they understand one another.

To arrive at the *other* side of dialogue, i.e., at that which can be made manifest or revealed in the language of conversation, we must first take a long detour through a series of preliminary considerations. We can begin with the point that although the kinds of conversations with which we will be concerned here aim at achieving an understanding – and so agreement – between participants, they must also presuppose an extensive degree of agreement in an array of already shared understandings. Hence the attempt to come to an understanding in dialogue begins with the disturbance of an agreement in understanding. This situation is an encounter with what disorients and challenges us, with what is strange, what is *atopon*, or placeless. We are not able to fit what we face into that pre-schematized orientation to the world embodied in our current categories of understanding.²⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Gadamer thinks we must not over-emphasize this disagreement and disturbance in understanding: “We need to recognize that agreement in

reasons why Gadamer views conversation as the essence of language. In an earlier essay “The Incapacity for Conversation,” he says “Language may be codified and be more or less fixed in dictionaries, grammars, and literature—yet its unique vitality, its obsolescence and self-renewal, its coarsening, and its refinement into the high genre of literary art, all this lives only through the living exchange of people talking with one another. Language exists only in conversation” (trans. David Vessey and Chris Blauwkamp, in *The Continental Philosophy Review* 39 (2006): 351-352; “Die Unfähigkeit zum Gespräch,” *GW* 2, 207). Even linguistic meaning depends to an extent on a word’s being offered to another, as we saw in the previous chapter. Moreover, Gadamer claims that the very language of thought is a dialogue with oneself (TM, 547; “Wie weit schreibt sprache das denken vor?,” *GW* 2, 199). Finally, dialogue, of course, serves for Gadamer as the model for reader and text as well as for the self that understands the linguistically constituted world.

²⁴⁰ See Gadamer, “Language and Understanding,” GR, 93-94; *GW* 2, 185.

understanding is more primordial than misunderstanding, so that over and over again understanding leads us back into a reconstruction of agreement in understanding [*Einverständnis*].”²⁴¹

This becomes evident when we consider what it means to speak to another person: “To speak with one another is not primarily hashing things out with each other” [*Sichmiteinander-Auseinandersetzen*],²⁴² it is the building up of agreement between the speakers about the world and the thing being discussed; the stillness that precedes and follows such episodes is really the manifestation of a silent and shared understanding of that which all regard as self-evident. In this way language bears and constantly builds up within itself a common orientation toward the world. Hence the truth that emerges from a dialogue will not be the kind of knowledge whose basis lies in a presuppositionless beginning, insofar as some form of *Einverständnis* must be presumed if communication is to be possible at all. This *Einverständnis* is what all acknowledge; the speakers are so much in agreement in this respect that no justification for their starting point is necessary.²⁴³ Here we begin to sense the distance of dialogical truth from models of truth and knowledge that involve logical proof or the ostensibly secure foundation of a presuppositionless beginning.

Although the presence of shared understandings are a necessary presupposition for all communication, the simple fact that an understanding is shared does not ensure that all who share it accept or agree with it. It is always possible for us to critically reflect on, and even transform, our commonly held understandings. Thus in “Language and Understanding” (1970) an important lecture given a year before the so-called Gadamer-Habermas debate, Gadamer responds to the charge of ‘conservatism’ leveled at him by Habermas in his 1967 review of *Truth and Method* when he warns that it is a serious mistake to interpret the universality of the agreement in

²⁴¹ Gadamer, “Language and Understanding,” GR, 96; *GW* 2, 188.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Gadamer, “Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language,” op. cit., 23; *GW* 8, 406.

understanding as including within it a basically conservative stance which seeks to harmonize social conflicts and tensions: “To “understand” the structures and ordering of our world, to understand ourselves with each other in this world, just as much presupposes critique and struggle with what has grown rigid or outdated as it does the recognition or defense of the existing orders of things.”²⁴⁴ Gadamer offers as an example of this the way in which new words and expressions arise with each generation to give expression to new experiences and goals (one thinks here in this regard of the discourses of feminism or environmentalism, for example), although this new language is never new in an absolute sense. The life of language unfolds in this living tension between language as something we have in common and as something that provides the impetus to transform that which is held in common. But this polarity is found not only in language. Many of the institutions of society are like this, according to Gadamer. There is an emphasis on convention, a focus on bringing about conformity and imposing standards, in the educational system of society, for instance, but this does not mean education is only a repressive process that undercuts the revolutionary potential of thought.²⁴⁵

Nevertheless, we can never critique and transform *all* of our shared understandings at once, something must always remain for communication to be possible at all. This point emerges in Gadamer’s response to Habermas’s accusation in the same review that Gadamer fails to appreciate the power of reflection. According to Habermas, emancipatory reflection is required to reinstate authentic communication because contemporary language is now so distorted that real communication is no longer possible. Gadamer replies to this charge by maintaining that communication is always a possibility because the ground which makes it possible is an agreement that is always already in place and which cannot simply be dislodged *in toto*.²⁴⁶ In “What is Practice? The Conditions of Social Reason” (1974) an article written a few years after

²⁴⁴ Gadamer, “Language and Understanding, GR, 97; *GW* 2, 188.

²⁴⁵ Gadamer, “Language and Understanding, GR, 98; *GW* 2, 189-190.

²⁴⁶ Gadamer, “Hermeneutics and Social Science,” *op. cit.*, 315.

the debate, Gadamer suggests that at least part of the common agreement at the basis of communication was implicit and even constituted something like a cultural unconscious which precisely for this reason is able to resist even the most disruptive forces: “In every culture a series of things is taken for granted and lies fully beyond the explicit consciousness of anyone, and even in the greatest dissolution of traditional forms, mores, and customs the degree to which things held in common still determine everyone is only more concealed.”²⁴⁷

This form of shared understanding is carried in the language of the participants in a dialogue. Indeed, Gadamer even maintains that “every conversation presupposes a common language.”²⁴⁸ By “conversation” here Gadamer means conversation in the eminent sense, namely, a substantive dialogue which aims to uncover a significant truth. He suggests that it is impossible for the participants in this kind of conversation to conduct it in two different languages – even if each understands the other’s language – and observes that the participants in such conversations always seem to drift toward the exclusive use of either one or the other of the languages. To better understand this we should recall that in the first chapter it was asserted that to see something, one must be standing somewhere and thus must be looking at the object from a particular point of view. This metaphor was used to illustrate the incoherence of the claim that one could experience, understand, or know something from an absolute standpoint, from a viewpoint that would embrace and transcend all perspectives. This also means that the very intelligibility of the issues at stake in such a conversation and of the questions and possibilities that this conversation raises depends on our approaching them from a specific direction. And that direction is largely determined by the language we speak. This is because a common language carries or discloses a shared interpretation of the world. This understanding is both tacit and evoked each time we speak to one another. The human world as is by now clear is (as opposed,

²⁴⁷ Gadamer, “What is Practice? The Conditions of Social Reason,” RAS, 82; *GW* 4, 225.

²⁴⁸ Gadamer, TM, 371; *WM*, 384.

for example, to the animal environment) verbal in nature. The common orientation which defines it is formed by the collective historical experience sedimented in each language; at its center stands a particular interpretation of the life-world which is embodied in words and expressions that reflect an encounter with the way things appear to a people from a first personal, involved standpoint.²⁴⁹

Gadamer revives the ancient sense of the term *rhetoric* to name this “whole of worldly knowledge” that is found in language. He reminds us that rhetoric once included not only aesthetics and poetics, but also the language of public and political life, of law, education, and trade, as well as of family and social life.²⁵⁰ He hopes to restore to this term the broad meaning that it had in antiquity and the middle ages, when it covered all forms of human communication and interaction and constituted the common language of the *sensus communis*, i.e., of a common sense, a sense that founds community.²⁵¹ This shared interpretation of the world held in a common language, moreover, is what makes possible moral and social solidarity.²⁵² This original solidarity, in which problems are seen as shared, will ultimately be what makes possible a new solidarity as we move forward through conversation into a new and shared understanding. In contrast to this, the abstract and univocal notation which characterizes the language of science and technology lacks the social and normative character of this linguistically embodied *sensus communis* of a people and so is unable to lay down the foundation for a common world.

Beyond a common language and all that it entails, there is also the shared understanding of what the conversation is about, what is at stake or what the issue or subject matter, *die Sache*, is: “Something is placed in the center, as the Greeks say, which the partners in dialogue both

²⁴⁹ See Gadamer, “The Expressive Force of Language,” PT, 128-129; *LT* 155-156, and “Text and Interpretation,” GR, 165; *GW* 2, 337.

²⁵⁰ Gadamer, “Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language,” op. cit., 24; *GW* 8, 406-407.

²⁵¹ See Gadamer, TM, 19; *WM*, 25-26 and “The Expressive Force of Language,” PT, 128; *LT*, 156.

²⁵² Gadamer, “Language and Understanding,” GR, 96; *GW* 2, 188.

share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one another.”²⁵³ The subject matter must have a largely stable meaning for all concerned if it is to be possible both to initiate an inquiry and to come to a resolution of it. In short, the very possibility of this mode of conversation presupposes a *verständigung*, a form of mutual comprehension based on an implicit agreement. And this initial agreement about *die Sache*, however tentative and general, can, like the broad form of agreement in place which makes conversation and communication possible at all, provide the basis for the narrower and more precise agreement in coming to an understanding about *die Sache* that is the goal of the discussion.²⁵⁴

But once the partners in a conversation take their orientation from the subject matter, we have also at the same time already made the move from a shared understanding to the disruption of understanding, insofar as something has become *questionable*. In this moment, agreement and disagreement, understanding and the lack of it, are both present. On the one hand, for the interlocutors even to see the force of a question requires a certain context which is both understood by all and which itself helps to make the question intelligible. We have already noted the way in which all disagreement and questioning presupposes certain forms of understanding and agreement. On the other hand, something is no longer clear, no longer understood, it has become a problem or a question. Moreover, a range of conditioning circumstances, from human finitude, in the form of the partial and perspectival nature of every standpoint, to the capacity of language to distort and conceal – a power which is nothing else than the other side of disclosure – to the complexity and immensity of the world, always stands in the background of such moments.

There are, of course, an innumerable amount of things which can become a question for us, but we will be concerned here with the narrow but very significant context of inquiry and advocacy around social, ethical, and political questions. Such dialogues can be broadly divided

²⁵³ TM, 371; WM, 384.

²⁵⁴ For this second suggestion, see Gadamer, “Hermeneutics and Social Science,” op. cit., 315: “[i]nsofar as speech and communication are possible at all, agreement would seem to be possible as well.”

into those in which we seek to arrive at a true judgment about a thing (such as the morality of euthanasia or of abortion) and those in which we engage in deliberation about what course of action *we* can endorse for our society when it is faced with a decision that must be taken (such as whether to go to war or whether to implement a national health insurance program). Theoretical and practical elements of rationality are intertwined here: whatever meaning we uncover in the former case will have practical significance (for what policies I support and decisions I make, who I vote for and associate with, etc.); whatever choice I come to approve of in the latter case will first be preceded by an interpretation of the meaning of the various elements involved, such as what a just society requires, what a just war involves, and so on. Both inquiry and advocacy, then, have theoretical and well as practical implications.

Inquiry and advocacy, whether in the search for the right interpretation or the appropriate collective action, as elements and categories of dialogue, present the possibility of a series of permutations. Some conversations begin with advocacy and end in inquiry, others begin with inquiry and end in advocacy, as one or more participants arrive at an understanding which they wish to persuade their interlocutors or others to share; still others begin and end with inquiry (hence inconclusively), or advocacy (and thus either inconclusively or ‘conclusively,’ though in the latter and best case always open to future revision). Then, too, the stance of the interlocutors can be a mix of these, e.g., a combination of advocates and inquirers or all advocates or all inquirers.

We will not attempt to rehearse every configuration listed here but will instead sketch the broader features of what is involved in both inquiry and advocacy. What is lacking in both is some form of shared understanding. In the case of inquiry, this could be, for example, because someone doubts something that had previously been accepted, or because it simply becomes apparent that we don’t know something. And when someone makes a claim that they wish to

persuade others to accept, what is advocated is usually something different or new so that what is said is questionable or in question.

In both instances, the truth about the meaning of the issue at stake or about the collective decision that should be endorsed is an open question and something to be arrived at –if this is indeed a possibility – together in dialogue. For both inquiry and advocacy, then, something has become a question, so we look together, asking questions, presenting to others what we take to be relevant to coming to a conclusion or decision, such as narrative accounts of past cases, the deployment of the normative concepts of our culture, and interpretations of our situation and its significance.

All of these uses of language are shaped by the rhetorical resources of the tradition to which we belong; they simultaneously make possible and limit the questions we are able to pose, the stories we tell, the moral vocabulary we can draw on, and the account we can give of our situation. There is thus no absolute language of the things themselves that we could discover, one that could exhaustively capture a single and true order of things: “The language that things have – whatever kind of things they may be – is not the *logos ousias*, and it is not fulfilled in the self-contemplation of an infinite intellect; it is the language that our finite, historical nature apprehends when we learn to speak.”²⁵⁵

The language we learn when we learn to speak places a pre-understood group of meanings at our disposal that allow us to disclose things in conventional and inherited ways. Language is thus the medium in which the past continues to live on in the present, providing a kind of stability.²⁵⁶ The stability here is more than just the stability found in simple continuity, according to Gadamer. The morals and customs, the institutions, practices, and fields of inquiry which language makes possible have embodied and preserved a trusted and well-understood

²⁵⁵ Gadamer, TM, 471; WM, 480.

²⁵⁶ See Gadamer, “What is Truth?” in *Hermeneutics and Truth*, op. cit., 45; GW 2, 55-56.

knowledge of human life for thousands of years. Our linguistic tradition is in this sense a storehouse of culturally inherited knowledge. This awareness of tradition as a form of comprehension and a source of insight and has been weakened by the triumph of scientific rationalism and the new concept of knowledge which arose with it in the seventeenth century, a conception that challenged the understanding and skills accumulated in domains such as literature, art, medicine, astronomy, philology, and rhetoric.²⁵⁷ Science makes space for its own ideal of knowledge and methods of precise mathematical measurement by directly opposing the linguisticity of the natural experience of the world, maligning it, as Bacon does, as a source of ‘mere’ prejudices.²⁵⁸ For Gadamer, one of the tasks of philosophy is to actively resist the displacement of this older mode of knowing by the epistemic imperialism of science.

Nevertheless, there is no danger here that we will simply abandon the rhetorical substance of tradition for a scientific mode of cognition. The sphere of rhetoric and hermeneutics has not shrunk with the advance of science, however great; rather, the ubiquity of rhetoric is such that even science depends on it. This is true within scientific discourse proper, whether in the formulation of hypotheses, in the thinking and expression that take place in the course of inventing something, or in the articulation of explanatory narratives, such as theories. It also holds outside of scientific discourse, when the researcher must communicate with the wider public beyond the small circle of specialists within his or her field. Such communication cannot succeed if it restricts itself to using technical terminology and mathematical symbolism. Scientific discourse must be integrated with, and mediated through, the wider and more encompassing living language in which it is embedded in order to disseminate and legitimize its discoveries and applications; only by incorporating a rhetorical element can scientific representations become

²⁵⁷ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Diversity of Europe: Inheritance and Future,” trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss, in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History*, op. cit., 226; Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Die Vielfalt Europas, Erbe und Zukunft,” in *Das Erbe Europas* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989), 15-16.

²⁵⁸ Gadamer, TM, 450; *WM*, 457.

effective determinants of our economic and social life. Hence the scientific researcher can neither transcend nor escape the linguistic articulation of the life-world.²⁵⁹

Language, and so what has been said and what can be said, is always already there, both for the scientist as for everyone else in his or her society. Adhering to a linguistic tradition in knowing the world is not something which can be freely chosen or rejected, we can neither switch traditions nor stand outside of all traditions in a ‘pure’ or primeval encounter with things; tradition, and the linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts which constitute it, is thus something we depend on. We are committed to certain a point of view on things, or, as Gadamer puts it, we are prejudiced by our tradition. Gadamer’s well-known discussion of prejudice and concomitant rehabilitation of authority and tradition comes in the second part of *Truth and Method*. The general theme of this section of the book is the extension of the question of truth to the human sciences; he contends that we must see prejudices as conditions of understanding in the human sciences and, finally, in *all* understanding.

Gadamer takes as his point of departure the observation that one of the central characteristics of the Enlightenment was faith in the power of an abstract rationality exercised by a detached Cartesian subject to disclose the “truth” of both the natural and social worlds. This basic presupposition of the Enlightenment also leads to a critical theory of prejudice, which divides prejudices into those from overhastiness and those from authority. The former arise from errors in the use of one’s reason; the latter is responsible for our not using our reason at all. Authority and reason are set in a relation of mutually exclusive opposition to one another.

Gadamer acknowledges that pre-judgments that can make us deaf to what we need to hear, and so in that sense can be expressions of irrationality, but he also notes that a global prejudice against prejudice is itself a prejudice, and is in fact the fundamental prejudice of the

²⁵⁹ See Gadamer, “The Expressive Force of Language,” PT, 133; *LT*, 161-162; “On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection,” PH, 24; *GW* 2, 236-237; “Hermeneutics and Social Science, 316;” and “Language and Understanding, GR, 99-100; *GW* 2, 191-192.

Enlightenment. This prejudice stems from the mistaken idea that it is possible for human beings to achieve a stance of absolute rationality. Contrary to this, Gadamer will insist that the finitude of the human standpoint means not only that prejudices unavoidable, but that they constitute the very conditions of any human understanding. So although prejudicial judgments may typically derive their authority from tradition rather than reason, this does not preclude them from being true. Moreover, the very fact that there are some prejudices in favor of authority that are *true* is implied by the notion of authority itself. The Enlightenment misunderstood the nature of authority, which it denigrated as opposed to reason and freedom. But Gadamer sees in the notion of authority in its original sense a form of rationality and an exercise of freedom: “authority cannot actually be bestowed but is earned, and must be earned if someone is to lay claim to it. It rests on acknowledgement and hence on an act of reason itself which, aware of its own limitations, trusts to the better insight of others. Authority in this sense, properly understood, has nothing to do with blind obedience to commands [...] acknowledging authority is always connected with the idea that what the authority says is not irrational and arbitrary, but can, in principle, be discovered to be true.”²⁶⁰

What both the Enlightenment, with its championing of reason and its denigration of the past, and the romantic reaction to the Enlightenment (as well as the historicism to which it gives rise), with its exaltation of the past as a phenomenon with its own standards and values that are not to be evaluated by our current ones, both have in common is an understanding of the present as defined by a break with the continuity of tradition and its meaning. This break with, or difference from, the past and tradition, in both the Enlightenment and historicist forms of thinking, is understood in terms of an opposition between a detached, universal, and objective rationality and the fundamentally different, irrational “other” of past tradition.

²⁶⁰ Gadamer, *TM*, 281; *WM*, 284-285.

This situation presupposes the existence of an absolute, universal, context-free form of rationality. Gadamer, of course, has rejected this characterization of human rationality and maintains that “reason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms—i.e., it is not its own master but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates.”²⁶¹ Absolute reason is not possible for a historical humanity whose very existence is limited and qualified in various ways. This includes a self-understanding in the family, state and society in which one lives which emerges before any form of subjective, individual self-understanding. Rather than a detached Cartesian consciousness that engages an abstract, universal rationality, Gadamer asserts that “the self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of life,” and that the historical being of this individual, as well as his or her judgments, are constituted by prejudices.²⁶² In short, there is no sharp break between the past and the present, tradition and reason: “we are always situated within traditions,” they are “always a part of us”; as historical beings we are prejudiced by our history.²⁶³

Yet it is these prejudices, prejudices that constitute our tradition and its history, which make possible the understanding of anything at all. Gadamer’s own example here comes from the activity of understanding in the human sciences: “we are always already affected by history. It determines in advance what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation.”²⁶⁴ In terms of the theme of our own investigation, we can say that entrée to the dialogue and access to the *Sache* is granted to us by the prejudices we bring to bear on what we try to understand. These prejudices give us an understanding of both the broader meaning as well as the moral significance of the issue at hand or of the situation and the possibilities it offers for collective action. Much of the context and resources for what we can see and say in this instance

²⁶¹ Gadamer, TM, 277; *WM*, 280-281.

²⁶² Gadamer, TM, 278; *WM*, 281.

²⁶³ Gadamer, TM, 283; *WM*, 286-287.

²⁶⁴ Gadamer, TM, 300; *WM*, 305-306.

comes from the normative vocabulary of our tradition, i.e., the moral rules, concepts, principles, and conceptions of the good that are found, for example, in the great texts of the culture such as (in the case of Americans) the Constitution or the Bible, or the criticisms of society found in utopian narratives and critiques of ideology.

We should not misconstrue this to mean that these convictions are immutable and beyond criticism, that being guided by our ethical and political ideals involve our conforming to the established standards of the current social order. Norms are not the same thing as laws which are applied to a given case. Instead, each concrete determination of a concept, rule, principle, and so on by the individual contributes to the meaning of these norms. Gadamer compares this to the problem of correct speech. What is admissible is unproblematically agreed upon and codified, and these rules can be learned and used as criteria in the teaching of language. But the life of language is not reducible to the strict adherence to such rules; it is found in innovation and in the last analysis from the contributions of every individual speaker of the language.²⁶⁵ Social life, too, in this way “consists of a constant process of transformation of what previously has been held valid.”²⁶⁶

This happens to the extent that we are able to distinguish prejudices which enable from those which distort. In order to begin to do this, we have to become aware of what our prejudices are. When a prejudice is operative it does not take the form of an explicit judgment, and so we cannot become aware of it as such. Only when a prejudice is provoked can we foreground [*abheben*] it. The encounter with a text or with an interlocutor can provide this provocation. Something asserts itself in its own, separate validity and addresses us, so that the process of understanding begins. Our prejudice becomes questionable in light of what the other says and we

²⁶⁵ See Gadamer, “Notes on Planning for the Future,” trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss, in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History*, op. cit., 172-173; *GW 2*, 163-164.

²⁶⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Hermeneutics as Theoretical and Practical Task,” trans. Fredrick G. Lawrence, *RAS*, 135; Hans-Georg Gadamer, “*Hermeneutik als theoretische und praktische Aufgabe*,” *GW 2*, 317.

suspend its validity for us so that possibilities are opened and kept open insofar as our prejudice remains in question. By gaining this kind of distance from our pre-judgments we are able to critically examine them, so that we may come to see that there are some pre-judgments we can (and should) do without because they distort or obscure rather than illuminate. Some examples which come to mind in this regard are such thick concepts, metaphors, and expressions as ‘loose’ or ‘fallen’ women, ‘noble savages,’ ‘knowing one’s place,’ ‘father’ of the nation, *mission civilisatrice*, ‘my station and its duties,’ *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*, et cetera. The critical and hermeneutic task, then, will be to “distinguish the true prejudices, by which we understand, from the false ones, by which we misunderstand.”²⁶⁷ But in this process we do not simply and immediately set aside our own judgment and accept the claims of others as valid. Instead, both sides put their prejudices into play and at risk. Only in this way can each experience the other’s claim to truth.

This critique and revision of our prejudices occurs through what Gadamer calls hermeneutical reflection, i.e., the bringing of something to conscious awareness that is normally concealed yet operative. “Reflection on a given preunderstanding brings before me something that otherwise happens behind my back,”²⁶⁸ namely, the workings of prejudice in the production of the *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*. Through this reflection my prejudices are constantly at stake as I deem what is justified and what unjustifiable in my preunderstanding. This surrender of distorting, unjustified, and false prejudices releases me from a form of unfreedom and allows me to gain a new understanding of what I had seen through the lens of the old preunderstanding. In this manner we ceaselessly form, through the unflagging power of experience to instruct us, new preunderstandings.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷ Gadamer, TM, 298; WM, 304.

²⁶⁸ Gadamer, “On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection,” PH, 38; GW 2, 247.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

Our capacity to relinquish certain prejudices does not entail that we could ever reach a state ‘free’ of prejudice. Because a perspective-free viewpoint on things is impossible, human cognition must always involve the apprehension of things from a standpoint conditioned by historical and cultural factors that we can never completely anticipate or bring under control. In view of this necessity of prejudices for any understanding at all, and given that these preunderstandings can be revised or even abandoned in favor of other, better or truer ones, the Enlightenment antithesis between reason on the one side and prejudice, authority, and tradition on the other appears untenable. Rather, in opposition to those who would associate prejudice and tradition with irrationality, Gadamer identifies the dialectic of preservation and renewal, the synthesis and mediation of past and present that can be achieved in a linguistic tradition with a rational disposition.

II. The Dialectic of Understanding

We have seen that in coming to an understanding with one another about *die Sache* we cannot coincide with or enter into the thing such that we could give voice to it in some ‘objective’ way—we can only speak about it from our finite, historical and cultural –as well as individual – point of view, with the language and concepts that belong to us. This, in turn, will put the point of view and prejudices of the self in an encounter with the corresponding claims and constraints of the dialogue partner and, insofar as we attempt to do justice to *die Sache*, with those of the thing itself. This involves the understanding in a dialectic that unfolds as we ask the appropriate questions, recount relevant past experiences, or apply pertinent moral principles to the situation at hand. In talking to, thinking with, and listening to others, we tried to persuade them and allow ourselves to be persuaded by them. In sum, if the truth of the thing is to come to language through dialogue, we must speak well, judge rightly, open ourselves to the claims of our

interlocutors, and listen with care to the thing itself. Each of these moments – sketched so briefly here – is so weighted with philosophical and historical considerations that all will require a separate and somewhat lengthy analysis.

Beginning with the injunction to beautiful speech, to speaking well, we see that this plainly amounts to nothing less than a rehabilitation of rhetoric. Although Gadamer already spoke of the significance of rhetoric in *Truth and Method* and in fact opens this work by embracing the “positive ambiguity of the rhetorical ideal” of “saying something well” found in the work of Vico, he underscores its importance in the essays to come in the years after, especially those found in his *Kleine Schriften* and in *Reason in the Age of Science*.²⁷⁰ In “The Scope and Function of Hermeneutic Reflection,” one of these essays, Gadamer points out that rhetoric is not only the theory of speaking persuasively, it develops out of a natural power that all possess to one degree or another. In this regard it is the same as the art of understanding, of hermeneutics. Both are natural human capacities, neither depends on an explicit awareness of rules to guide it. Indeed, for both, theory is a subsequent abstraction of praxis. The natural character of rhetoric is also reinforced by its universality. According to Gadamer, as we saw above, the presentation of the whole of the life world is rhetorical. Our interactions within this sphere, too, involve the constant deployment of rhetorical argumentation, to persuade, to make ourselves understood, to resolve conflicts. As Gadamer puts it, “[t]he ubiquity of rhetoric is unlimited.”²⁷¹

The everyday use of rhetorical argument depends for its success on the presentation of reasons that are evident to common sense, to the *sensus communis*. The rationality exhibited here relies on and lives in the convictions and ethos of those who speak and listen to one another as it persuades us that reasons work in its favor; it does not depend on formal rational demonstrations (as for instance in deductive or inductive procedures) or on proving a set of facts beyond doubt.

²⁷⁰ Gadamer, TM, 16-17; WM, 25.

²⁷¹ Gadamer, “On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection,” PH, 24; GW 2, 237.

The task of this hermeneutic, historical, and communicative reason is to establish what is preferable and reasonable in each case, and that means what convinces here and now.

Hermeneutic rationality involves knowing when and how one is required to speak, so that we grasp the *kairotic* moment in giving an account in defense of what we take to be true. This is a form of understanding, moreover, which stands outside of the codification of knowledge in rules or in the application of technique.

That which is convincing to ordinary or common reason is a way of knowing that takes its distance from models of knowledge that accept as true only what can be demonstrated, tested, or proven. As against this, rhetoric defends the claim to truth of the verisimilar or probable. And although convincing one's interlocutor(s) of the verisimilitude of something depends on oratorical eloquence, Gadamer eschews a conception of rhetoric as the mere technique of the art of speaking well, appealing to the philosophical and dialectical conception of rhetoric found in Plato's *Phaedrus* and, to a lesser extent, in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, texts which offer a justification of rhetoric as indivisible from the pursuit of the good, the true, and the beautiful. Rhetoric in the best and truest sense, for Gadamer, is an activity that is defined by its cognitive rather than its instrumental character.

It is on this basis, too, that Gadamer explicitly links rhetoric with hermeneutics, persuasion with interpretation. The aim and criteria of both speaking well and understanding rightly is to arrive at a particular kind of truth through convincing and being convinced of something without possessing proof; this happens both when an interpretation is successful and when we are persuaded of something through eloquence.²⁷² And like hermeneutic interpretation, this rhetoric is active and dialogical in character. If rhetoric is to play a role in the search for and discovery of truth, it must be taken up into the larger dialectic of understanding at work in all attempts to arrive at knowledge. Gadamer insists therefore that "[r]hetoric is indissoluble from

²⁷² Ibid.

dialectics; persuasion that is really convincing is indissoluble from knowledge.²⁷³ So although rhetoric seeks the endorsement of those who would listen, it does not simply resort to coercion, flattery, or deceit in order to impose its point of view. Gadamer remains fully aware of and sensitive to the problem of persuasive deception, to the dangers of a rhetoric separated from dialogue and from the search for truth. Hence he maintains that we have to understand rhetoric as an essential component of a communicative rationality, and so our rhetorical engagements as critical, reflective, and fallible transactions that open a space for the audience to form their own judgments about what is being asserted. While the ubiquity of rhetoric poses certain risks, then, it also calls us to the kind of vigilance that can enable us to distinguish between right and wrong uses of rhetoric as well as better and worse interpretations and arguments.

An ability to recognize the stronger argument or interpretation on the grounds of its e.g., coherence, consistency, or relevance, as well as success in distinguishing between sophistry and what Vico called the eloquence of “wisdom speaking,” rely on our capacity for and sense of judgment. Gadamer treats the theme of judgment at the beginning of *Truth and Method* in his opening discussion of the significance of the humanist tradition for the human sciences. He identifies judgment, along with *Bildung*, *sensus communis*, and taste as the one of the guiding concepts of humanism. He recalls to us the meaning and cognitive significance which these ideals had for the humanist tradition, maintaining, finally, that the human sciences can be founded on this kind of knowledge. These four concepts are so closely joined to one another that we will need to examine each of them in order to grasp Gadamer’s conception of judgment.

What Gadamer means by judgment thus extends beyond the notion of judgment as the subsumption of particulars under universals or the finding of universals for a given particular. Judgment is also a sense or ability for what is proper and improper, right and wrong. Gadamer proffers *tact* as an initial illustration of judgments of this sort. *Tact* is a tacit and unformulable

²⁷³ Gadamer, “Hermeneutics as Theoretical and Practical Task,” RAS, 122; *GW* 2, 307.

sensitivity to situations and how to behave in them; one sees and so passes over what should not be said or done, avoiding the offensive or intrusive. This is an understanding that cannot be derived from general principles. But tact extends beyond manners or customs. There is another and important kind of tact exhibited by the scholar in the human sciences. This in an unlearnable and inimitable sense, such as a sense for the aesthetic or the historical. There is no method for the distinctions that must be made between the beautiful and the ugly, or the evaluation of what is and is not possible for an age. There is no procedure that could bring one to grasp the true distance and otherness of the past. Tact is something that one must acquire, it is a knowing that has become a part of one's being.

Thus the form of knowing expressed in judgments embraces far more than the conclusions to be drawn from a solid chain of inference. As Gadamer says, "Whoever has sound judgment is not enabled primarily to judge particulars under universal viewpoints; instead, he knows what is important—i.e., he sees things from right and sound points of view. A swindler who correctly calculates human weakness and always makes the right move in his deceptions nevertheless does not possess "sound judgment" in the highest sense of the term."²⁷⁴ The distinction Gadamer makes here recalls Aristotle's division of practical reason into instrumental deliberation, on the one hand, and *phronesis*, on the other. The former Aristotle calls cleverness and describes as a capacity which "is such as to enable one to do the things that are conducive to the object one has set down, and to achieve it. So if one's object is something beautiful, this capacity is to be praised, but if it is base, it is shamelessness" (*NE* 1144a22-25).²⁷⁵ Though this kind of instrumental calculation stands in opposition to both *phronesis* and judgment "in the highest sense of the term," judgment and *phronesis* are not to be conflated with one another. For

²⁷⁴ Gadamer, *TM*, 28; *WM*, 37.

²⁷⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, op. cit.

Gadamer, judgment is more global a term than *phronesis* and includes both judgments about the truth of interpretations and arguments as well as judgments which issue in our taking an action.

Sound judgment always involves the judgment of an individual case, whether this judgment aims to arrive at the ‘right’ interpretation or the ‘right’ action. As such, judgment is a form of knowledge that cannot simply be imparted to others in the abstract manner of a code of principles or rules; it must be practiced from case to case. And this means that judgment necessitates “not merely applying the universal principle according to which it is judged, but co-determining, supplementing, and correcting that principle.”²⁷⁶ From this it follows that judgments require *taste*, though this does not mean that taste is the only thing that governs judgment; taste is merely a necessary (though not sufficient) component of judgment.

Gadamer maintains that taste is a mode of knowing, but this is a knowledge that is much more like a knowing *how* than a knowing *that*. Taste is something one must simply have. As such, mere imitation cannot substitute for it, nor can it be taught. Yet for all of this taste is not a private quality of the person. A person of taste has gained a certain distance from themselves and their individual preferences and so can see things from the viewpoint of others. But the universality of taste is not the empirical universality that we find in fashion, i.e., it is not a social sense that is constituted by the unanimous agreement of all. It functions within a community without being subordinate to it. It can do this because taste “knows something” that ensures its own independence from, and even superiority to, empirical universality. What it knows it knows with a kind of certainty, embracing what is tasteful and rejecting what is tasteless in an immediate way. Good taste is sure taste; it does not hesitate, look to others, or search for justification

However, we are not able to give a rational account of our judgments, to say *why* a particular thing has been accepted or refused. Taste is not something that lends itself to exhibition in concepts; in this regard it is like a sense. Gadamer describes it as an ability to hit one’s target

²⁷⁶ Gadamer, *TM*, 35; *WM*, 45.

without being able to demonstrate how one has done so. In spite of this ‘speechless’ character of taste, taste nevertheless makes a claim to universal validity—and this, too, is part of what accounts for the decisiveness of its judgment. As Kant had observed, in a judgment of taste I am not claiming merely that the judgment is one that belongs to me alone, but that everyone ought to share it; this is a claim to the necessary agreement of others.

Whereas Kant restricts the experience of taste to judgments of the beautiful, showing how it is that although judgments of taste are based on subjective experience, they can and do make legitimate claims to a universal validity, Gadamer holds that the normative scope of taste is much wider than this, bringing ethical judgments under the rubric of taste and asserting that “the beautiful in nature and art is to be supplemented by the whole ocean of the beautiful spread throughout the moral reality of mankind.”²⁷⁷ The connection between taste and normative judgment in this broader sense is one that can be traced back to an ancient Greek ethics (and aesthetics) of “good taste” ruled by the notion of proper measure. Achieving the life of virtue, according to Plato, for instance, required one to form a self in which reason, aspiration, and appetite were harmoniously integrated into a well-balanced and beautiful whole. In the Greek ideal, one who succeeded in living well, through care of the body and soul, displayed the physical and moral beauty human beings were capable of, and in doing so showed others what a human being could be.

Gadamer observes that if this thesis about the continuity of the ethical and the aesthetic in judgments of taste sounds strange to modern ears, this is first because of a skeptical attitude that regards taste as relative preference and so one that lacks normative force, and second and above all because of the influence of Kant’s moral philosophy, which purged all emotional and aesthetic elements from questions of ethics. Even though the history of the concept of taste shows that taste was originally a predominantly moral rather than an aesthetic idea, after Kant the use of taste is

²⁷⁷ Gadamer, *TM*, 34; *WM*, 44.

limited to the aesthetic domain. This is a turning point for the way we understand taste, for while Kant defends the claims of aesthetic taste to a certain kind of validity, he also pushes a more general sense of taste as a faculty of knowledge out of the center of ethics and philosophy.²⁷⁸ This is because he was concerned to preserve a place for art in a new world in which science was the final arbiter of truth and cognitive significance. Yet his achievement is an ambiguous one—he legitimates the subjective universality of taste but denies its claim to knowledge. But by returning us to the classical understanding of the connection between the aesthetic and the ethical, and so connecting taste with morality, Gadamer, conversely, recognizes the claim of taste to ‘know something.’ By seeing taste as a component of judgment, he expands the notion of judgment to include a sense for what is fitting, what works, and what is good.

Taste, then, is not the ground but the consummation of normative judgments.²⁷⁹ The ground of such judgments – i.e., what informs and orients them – is the *sensus communis*. Gadamer refers us primarily to Vico’s understanding of this concept while drawing important parallels to Aristotle’s ethics. Gadamer interprets *sensus communis*, as we have said, as the sense that founds community. This sense is a collective ethos, a “communal sense for what is true and right.”²⁸⁰ What is true and right is not, according to Aristotle, embodied in the abstract objectivity of the Platonic idea of the good but, to speak with Vico, in the concrete universality of a society. Aristotle nevertheless agrees with Plato when he says that what is good “is right by nature.”²⁸¹ So although an understanding of the good is, as Gadamer puts it, “acquired through living in the community and is determined by its structures and aims,”²⁸² it is not reducible to mere convention.

²⁷⁸ See Gadamer, *TM*, 36; *WM*, 46.

²⁷⁹ Gadamer, *TM*, 35; *WM*, 45.

²⁸⁰ Gadamer, *TM*, 20; *WM*, 26.

²⁸¹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, in *The Rhetoric and the Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (New York: Random House, 1984), 1373b.

²⁸² Gadamer, *TM*, 20; *WM*, 28.

This way of thinking about ethical life follows Hegel in locating what is essential about the ethical “in the substantiality of the moral order that has its embodiment in the great objectivities of family, society, and state” rather than “in the self-necessity of an imperative ethics.”²⁸³ To speak of ‘substance’ suggests that tradition, which furnishes social life with its structure and aims, is not exclusively an artifact of language, regardless of how dependent on language it may be. Values and convictions can also be embodied in the normative images, practices, habits, and sensibility of a culture. Such tacit preunderstandings cannot always be formulated in linguistically articulated beliefs and hence made fully explicit. Moreover, my consciousness is never fully transparent to itself, such that I could reach back into my personal history and that of my society to lay open all the sources of my current and potential preunderstandings. Nor can I survey my preunderstandings as a whole so that I could get a sense of their scope or the ways in which they shape my view of the world, since some among these will always need to be operative and therefore concealed for me to grasp anything at all, including other my prejudices.

This shows that not all prejudices can be excavated, that something always remains implicit and concealed. There is thus an ever-present, never fully articulated and articulatable background understanding of things, so that thought and action always issue from a wider horizon which we are not able to leave behind or even make fully explicit. Yet this context also gives meaning to and makes possible the judgments of the understanding. One of the clearest examples of this is just what we have been examining here, viz., the manner in which the ethos of a society furnishes criteria for our practical and intellectual judgments.

This relation between judgment and its ground in the *sensus communis* calls to mind Aristotle’s claim that a knowledge of moral concepts and principles—which are largely the result of upbringing, education, and experience, and a conception of *eudaimonea*—which is a social and

²⁸³ Gadamer, “On the Possibility of a Philosophical Ethics,” trans. Richard E. Palmer, GR, 282; *GW* 4, 180.

cultural ideal, are conditions for the possibility of the successful exercise of *phronesis*. Just as the *sensus communis* has a habitual core embodied in the practices and sensibility of a culture which inform and orient judgment, Aristotle speaks of habitual training in appropriate actions and emotional responses. And just as an ethics of taste is governed by an ethos that cannot be thematized, the *phronimos* judges from a context of concepts, principles, and goals to which she subscribes, though the solution to the problem of what to do here and now is not one that can be found through reasoning or by consulting rules but consists rather in a direct perceptual grasp of the relevant particulars.

The echoes of, and parallels with, Aristotle here are intentional. Gadamer explicitly takes Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* as a model for his own conception of a socially situated rationality whose basis is a sensibility oriented by a specific set of interests and formed by education and experience. There are, nonetheless, some differences between the two worth noting. The first concerns the scope of this form of reason; for Aristotle, *phronesis* guides deliberation in concrete situations and issues in action. For Gadamer, too, reasoned judgment-in-situation has its principle in a mode of being, but this rationality also comprises – in addition to practical prudence – the activity of correctly understanding the claims and interpretations proffered by others. A second difference is one of emphasis or accent. Gadamer pays extensive and meticulous attention to the role that upbringing, education, and experience play in the formation of the sensibility that lies at the ground of a capacity to think and choose well. This formation occurs in and through the *sensus communis* and constitutes an initial stage of the process Gadamer refers to as *Bildung*:

Every single individual who raises himself out of his natural being to the spiritual finds in the language, customs, and institutions of his people a pre-given body of material which, as in learning to speak, he has to make his own. Thus every individual is always engaged in the process of *Bildung* and in getting beyond his naturalness, inasmuch as the world into which he is growing is one that is humanly constituted through language and custom.²⁸⁴

²⁸⁴ Gadamer, TM, 13; WM, 20.

This description of rising from nature to spirit through culture reflects Gadamer's belief that human beings are characterized by the break with the immediacy of the sensible that is enjoined by the intellectual and rational side of our nature. He agrees with Hegel that we are not, in this respect, what we should be, that we need *Bildung*, i.e., formation, not in the vocational sense, but in the sense of edification, a being formed and the forming in ourselves of a cultivated consciousness. But *Bildung* in Gadamer's view is not only the process of becoming educated or cultured in the way that these terms are conventionally understood. Becoming a *gebildet* person is not finally to do with mastering an array of facts but rather about a certain way of appropriating our experiences.

In his analysis of the nature of experience [*Erfahrung*], Gadamer distinguishes between two uses of the word experience. The first refers to those experiences which conform to and confirm our expectations. The accretion of such experiences gives rise to a knowledge of the universal from the experience of the individual, such as that gained through induction or embodied in the formation of concepts. But we must not only regard experience in terms of its result; experience is also a process.²⁸⁵ Even an understanding rooted in long-sedimented experience can be altered or overturned by a suddenly new or different experience. For Gadamer, it is Hegel's dialectical description of experience which comes closest to "the truth of experience," namely, that experience is the "experience of negation."²⁸⁶ The acquisition of experience in this sense is primarily a disagreeable, even painful process: things are not what we supposed them to be, our assumptions are thwarted, our expectations are disappointed.

Yet this negativity is also productive. Negative experiences do not simply accumulate, they lead, instead, to the restructuring of previous experience; I come to realize, for example, that I have not correctly grasped something and that I must modify or even reject previously held

²⁸⁵ Gadamer, TM, 345-347; *WM*, 358-359.

²⁸⁶ Gadamer, TM, 349; *WM*, 360.

beliefs. In the course of this encounter with that which challenges and resists what I think I already know, my horizon gradually expands as it is cleared of false or distorting prejudices and takes on new beliefs, beliefs which have their source in other ideas, perspectives, and even cultures. By setting my views within this wider context, I gain a certain distance from them and am able to see my perspective the way others see it. In short, through wider experience I come to recognize my knowledge as partial and limited and move to a more inclusive view. Hence Gadamer approvingly cites Hegel's conception of *Bildung* as the notion of "rising to the universal." But this is not a conceptual universality or objectivity which reaches conclusive knowledge; it is the larger view of things to be found in the standpoints of possible others.

In affirming what is different from ourselves, we must make ourselves at home in what is alien. *Bildung* is not solely characterized by the confrontation with otherness, with strangeness and difficulty; it also includes an event of appropriation or homecoming. "To recognize one's own in the alien, to become at home in it, is the basic movement of spirit, whose being consists only in returning to itself from what is other."²⁸⁷ This is a process that begins with the task of making the language and customs of society one's own, as Gadamer already noted, and continues through a long series of educational and edifying experiences and encounters in the course of which that which is initially alien is assimilated. But for one on the way to becoming *gebildet*, the otherness of new experience is never simply and fully integrated; every such episode leads to a change in one's understanding and an augmentation of one's horizon—as for instance happens in acquiring foreign languages and conceptual worlds.

This wide acquaintance with a variety ideas, cultures, people, practices, and viewpoints enlarges and refines our ability to discriminate and to make qualitative distinctions; the capacity of such experiences to precipitate the revision or even refutation of our beliefs heightens our sensitivity to our own fallibility as well as to the potential value of what is different or unknown.

²⁸⁷ Gadamer, TM, 13; *WM*, 19-20.

Thus a cultured person is not simply one who possesses a broad knowledge of many things, such a person is someone in whom a particular sensibility has been cultivated through experience and education, namely, a sensitivity to the distinctions to be made between appropriate and inappropriate, good and bad, important and unimportant, or beautiful and ugly, and so on. That is, the cultured individual is one who possesses taste, tact, and more generally, sound judgment.

Another iteration of the point that *Bildung* has more to do with a sensibility than with a command of facts – however many and varied – also marks the difference between Gadamer's and Hegel's understanding of *Bildung*. For both Gadamer and Hegel, *Bildung* is given a certain unity and direction by the goal of attaining a more universal point of view (though even here for Gadamer *Bildung* does not have an endpoint in an ordinary teleological sense, since although the goal is to become more objective, there is no way to know ahead of time how this will happen). Nonetheless, Gadamer rejects the Hegelian picture of a dialectic of experience which culminates in absolute knowledge. Experience only leads to an openness to further experience.

The truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience. That is why a person who is called experienced has become so not only *through* experiences but is also open *to* new experiences. The consummation of his experience, the perfection that we call "being experienced," does not consist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else. Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience.²⁸⁸

With this extended passage through the guiding concepts of humanism, from the components of judgment to the openness of *Bildung*, we arrive at the other side of rhetoric: I offer interpretations and arguments, but so, too, do my interlocutors. Reaching an understanding in dialogue is not merely a matter of the successful assertion of one's own beliefs; I must remain open to the possibility of the truth of the other's claims. Here the openness of the cultivated

²⁸⁸ Gadamer, TM, 350; *WM*, 361.

person to new experiences also renders them more likely to be receptive to the viewpoints of others. Such viewpoints include both accounts or interpretations of the matter at hand as well as questions, addendums, objections, critiques, or other responses to what I have said. In either case, a receptivity to the views of others does not entail that we must always agree with them. But it does imply that at the conclusion of a discussion the participants part from one another having been changed by the encounter—whether they finally agree or disagree.

Insofar as we really remain open to the viewpoint of the other, those conversations in which we are able to reach agreement will ideally result in the realization on the part of both sides of the inadequacy of their initial viewpoints and the necessity of taking aboard the new information, critiques, and objections that emerge in the encounter with the dialogue partner. What happens in this to and fro of speaking and listening in turn is something new, a coming to an agreement within a newly shared framework in which “we do not remain what we were.”²⁸⁹ Where we cannot agree, where I do not accept the accounts or interpretations of the issue proffered by others, my reasons for rejecting these will still be incorporated into my own views and become a part of them. In other instances of disagreement, such as where I do not assent to the objections and criticism of my views, I must respond to these, and my response already constitutes an expansion of my original position. Where we cannot achieve consensus, then, we can nevertheless avoid confinement within the parameters of our own views and attain a degree of mutual insight to the extent that we follow out the possibilities of the discussion to the end. Thus here, too, the individual perspectives with which the discussants began the conversation are transformed, so that at the end of the dialogue they themselves are changed.

Hence every genuine conversation –whether or not it culminates in an agreement – is an event of speech in which both sides give way to a new and shared understanding by each bringing their respective horizons to the encounter. These perspectives fuse with one another in a process

²⁸⁹ Gadamer, *TM*, 371; *WM*, 384.

of mediation that results in the emergence of a common framework of intelligibility that differs from both horizons while preserving the ‘otherness’ of each one. This “fusion of horizons” or *Horizontverschmelzung*, that takes place in a conversation is a metaphorical description of the larger consensus beyond agreement and disagreement that lies behind every successful and authentic dialogue. ‘Success’ and ‘authenticity’ here arise from an encounter with what is truthful, as, paradigmatically, in the self-presentation of the *Sache* in and through a shared language, or failing that, as in the formulation, together with others, of a view informed by the stances of all participants, a common standpoint that, in the words of Georgia Warnke, “each recognizes to be closer to the truth than any of the original positions.”²⁹⁰

Reaching an understanding with others in this way is not something that simply depends on our being in possession of all the ‘facts’ or having the right information, still less is it contingent on the deployment of the correct procedure. This kind of knowledge, as Gadamer says, “rises from the being of a person.”²⁹¹ The multiplicity of ways in which knowing is tied to being are in evidence throughout Gadamer’s account of the dialectic of understanding, from the unavoidable prejudgments inherited from our tradition that help to constitute our self-understanding and that, by providing a standpoint from which to look out on things, make possible any knowledge at all, to the process of *Bildung*, of formation as transformation. What is formed and transformed is the sensibility of a self, beginning with the sense of tact and taste that underlies the capacity for sound judgment – which is essential to the ability to both find and evaluate the right words at the right moment as we speak and listen in turn – and ending in that tension between vigilance and openness which allows us to be changed in the right way by the interpretations and arguments of others.

²⁹⁰ Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 101.

²⁹¹ Gadamer, “Aristotle and the Ethic of Imperatives,” trans. Joseph Knippenberg, in *Action and Contemplation*, Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins, eds. (Albany: SUNY Press), 63.

III. The Experience of Truth

This model of social and communicative rationality, which is more a mode of being and a disposition than something that can be captured in a procedure or a set of rules, shows that there is, of course, no formula or procedure that one could follow to ensure that this fusion of horizons culminates in the experience of truth rather than of truthfulness. What we can say with some assurance is that there is a final component (though not ‘final’ in a temporal sense, since these elements are not sequentially ordered) of the dialectic of understanding which is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition of truth, namely, a willingness to allow oneself to be directed by what is at issue in the conversation, by the *Sache*. This means that in choosing the words that bring something to language, we allow ourselves to be constrained by the thing itself and conform our language to what the thing or experience calls for.

This task is only made more difficult with the advent of various forms of modern subjectivism and the appearance of a world increasingly dominated by the imperatives of technology. Viewed through the lens of technical rationality, things become things to be manipulated, material to be consumed, tools to be used. In this stance, things are not able to be what they themselves are in their own being—they are vanishing. For Gadamer the significance of the phenomenological return “to the things themselves” is that it is an attempt to really listen to things by suspending our assumptions, prejudices, constructions, and theories. Things speak to us, and are not merely objects available for our use and disposal; they have a being of their own to which we must accommodate ourselves; they resist certain practical and linguistic commitments toward them and prescribe others. Things, in short, have their own language, one that we can hear when we don’t force them to do or be something useful; this is a language to which the poet

remains true.²⁹² Truthfulness here is a matter of being faithful to the claims things make on us, that is, it is a matter of doing justice to the things we encounter in our experience.

The requirement to remain faithful to our experience can sometimes place enormous demands on our powers of expression, especially in those instances in which what is conventional and inherited in our language cannot do justice to the *singularity* of an experience. While the close resemblance between many of our experiences allows us to use the same language to describe them, all experiences are, finally, unique. Hence over time the association between a particular word or words and past experiences extends and enriches the meaning of this word or words; every time the word or expression is used again, it resonates with this range of implicit meaning. This intersection between words inherited from the past and the circumstances of the present is one of the central means by which the life of a language develops.²⁹³ Thus although the world is always already linguistically interpreted and organized, this world is also something “into which experience steps as something new” upsetting our expectations and the stability of language itself.²⁹⁴

Nonetheless, there are still certain distinctive and truly novel events that cannot be conveyed through conventional words and expressions—no matter how deeply we descend into their layers of sedimented meaning. To adequately articulate what we encounter in such situations, we must turn to the expressive possibilities opened up by the linguistic imagination. The movement here from the conventional to the possible is a motion that covers the tensile distance in language between universality and uniqueness. The universality found in language is exhibited in its conventional, standardized, and rule-governed features—all those things which make it possible for us to understand one another in unambiguous and straightforward ways, to be

²⁹² Gadamer, “The Nature of Things and the Language of Things,” PH, 70-72; *GW* 2, 66-68.

²⁹³ See Gadamer, TM, 427-428; *WM* 432-433.

²⁹⁴ Gadamer, “The Universality of the Hermeneutic Problem,” GR, 87; “*GW* 2, 230.

able to say something and be understood consistently. The virtues of this aspect of language are apparent in everything from ritual forms of politeness to the precision and objectivity of legal and scientific language and the clarity of propositional logic and computer program codes. However, this is also the least personal and expressive aspect of language. When taken to an extreme in this direction, the power of language to ‘say’ something, to address and to evoke, dissolves into, e.g., bureaucratic jargon, sterile corporate speak, political cant, and dead cliché.

The other side of language is its tendency toward individuation; it is this dimension that allows language to capture what is distinctive, singular, exceptional. This can be seen, for instance, in the particular linguistic style and unique ‘voice’ of a compelling writer or speaker. By arranging a series of words in an expression in a combination that has not been used before, a speaker or writer can break apart and restructure the standard and instituted affiliations and correspondences between words in a language. This inventive re-arrangement of the system of relations between words results in the unconventional association of words with one another, and through this, in the creation of novel meanings. Here the creativity of the linguistic imagination involves a kind of reorganization of sedimented language in order to disclose something new. One thinks for instance of the way in which the speeches of Churchill so forcefully articulated the sentiments and outlook of his countrymen in the middle of a new kind of war, or the manner in which Martin Luther King was able to sum up the hopes and ideals of a whole people at a particular historical moment.

Sometimes a fresh way of articulating an experience is found by using old words or expressions in new ways, by applying them to things they are not standardly used to describe, as in the use of figurative speech such as similes and metaphors. Such tropes are not merely decorative linguistic devices deployed to enhance our powers of depiction; they are at times the only adequate form of expression for certain kinds of experiences. This point is further underscored by the phenomenon of the ‘dead’ metaphor, i.e., a word whose long-established and

widespread use in an alien context has transformed a once metaphorical meaning into the ‘proper’ meaning of the word. According to Gadamer, this shows that what appears to be a carrying over of something from an original and proper realm of meaning to another, improper one, is instead actually a process through which something new is discovered.

Furthermore, Gadamer maintains, the structure of a language is built up through the spread of words and expressions into new realms of usage.²⁹⁵ That is, the very life of language lies in its metaphoricity, namely, in the way in which linguistic consciousness transposes something from one sphere into another in “a spontaneous and inventive seeking out of similarities by means of which it is possible to order things.”²⁹⁶ In other words, the metaphorical process is at the basis of concept formation, and language itself is in this sense fundamentally metaphorical. This is a claim that is consciously echoed and further elaborated by Ricoeur. Through his close study of the metaphoric process, Ricoeur had shown how metaphors, by shattering old categories and establishing new boundaries on the “ruins” of previous ones, simultaneously create and discover resemblance and proximity in difference and distance. According to Ricoeur, it is this metaphoricity of the linguistic imagination that accounts for the power of language to first bring order to experience as a whole through linguistic classification. His hypothesis is that “the dynamics of thought which breaks through previous categorization is the same as the one which generated all classifications. In other words, the figure of speech which we classify as metaphor would be at the origin of all semantic fields.”²⁹⁷ Like Gadamer, Ricoeur views the capacity to create metaphors and to form concepts as originating with the same power of the linguistic imagination to detect similarities across a series of previously unrelated or unassociated individuals.

²⁹⁵ See Gadamer, “Semantics and Hermeneutics,” PH, 85; *GW* 2, 176.

²⁹⁶ Gadamer, TM, 431; *WM*, 436.

²⁹⁷ Paul Ricoeur, “Word, polysemy, metaphor: Creativity in language,” in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, op. cit., 131.

Coining new concepts and phrases is also another way to do justice to the uniqueness of an entity or experience. New concepts are formed because they are more adequate to the particularity of new perceptions and experiences than the subordination of what is meant to the pre-established verbal meanings found in older concepts.²⁹⁸ Such concepts both express and help constitute the never-ending phenomenon of innovation in aesthetic, political, economic, scientific, technical, and other spheres of human life. They also arise in contact with other cultures, or as new ways of taking up the past transform the self-understanding of the society. The shock of the new present in all of these experiences eventually fades as this language contributes another layer to the linguistic sedimentation of the culture.

The attempt to adhere as closely as possible to what presents itself in our experience does not, of course, always require us to deploy the linguistic imagination in these ways. But it does necessitate a certain shift in focus, one that allows our selves and our language to be directed by the *Sache*. Gadamer points to Plato's dialogues as exemplary in this regard. Here we see that insofar as the participants shift their concern away from themselves and their pre-conceived notions to the thing itself, i.e., piety or justice, for example, that this can direct their thinking and their conversation. The dialectic of understanding, in short, culminates in a shift in the center of gravity away from the self and toward one's interlocutors and the thing itself. As I submit my claims to the questions and interpretations of others and follow the conversation and subject matter where they lead, attempting to do justice to things by listening to them and allowing them to speak, truth is disclosed in the discovery of a shared language through which the matter at issue in the conversation, the *Sache*, can come to presentation.²⁹⁹

We are faced with something of a puzzle, however, when this claim about the disclosure of truth through dialogue is set together with the earlier account of language as a disclosive

²⁹⁸ See Gadamer, *TM*, 427; *WM*, 432.

²⁹⁹ See Gadamer, *TM*, 459-460; *WM*, 467-469.

medium in which we live and which enables things to appear *as* what they are. In both instances, there is a unity of word and thing such that the things themselves are presented in and through language. This raises the question of what difference there is between our ordinary experience of a world of meaningful things – in which perception is permeated with conception – and the somewhat more extraordinary experience of truth. On one level, there is no difference, insofar as what is encountered in and through language in both cases are the things themselves. This means that what Herder had called reflective consciousness (*Besonnenheit*) is encompassed by and in a certain sense stands (though never fully, or at all times) in the truth. The word ‘truth’ as it is used here names an encounter with the phenomena that, with the rehabilitation or ‘saving’ of the appearances in the work of Heidegger and those who come after him, we have good reason to take at face value.

This kind of initial trust in the appearances can nonetheless always only be provisional, since, as Heidegger himself emphasizes, the appearances cannot always and straightforwardly be equated with the self-showing of the things themselves. One reason for this is that beings “can show themselves as they are *not* in themselves. In this self-showing beings ‘look like...’ Such self-showing we call *seeming* [*Scheinen*].” Yet “only because something claims to show itself in accordance with its meaning at all, that is claims to be a phenomenon, *can* it show itself *as* something it is *not*, or *can* it “only look like...” The original meaning (phenomenon, what is manifest) already contains and is the basis of *phainomenon* (“semblance”).”³⁰⁰ Moreover, even if we are able to confirm that what we encounter is not merely the seeming of a thing, but its being, we must also be wary of the assumption that the truth (or the lack of it) is exhausted by just *these* appearances, since the thing itself can sometimes remain withdrawn and so not show itself in what appears to us.

³⁰⁰ Heidegger, BT, 25; SZ 28-29.

This ambiguous character of the appearances becomes apparent when we encounter something puzzling, or problematic, or questionable in our experience. Something, for instance, is not evident, or known, and we must seek it out. And this is because although the meaningful realities of human life are there with us, they are at times also partly withdrawn or hidden, that is, inchoate, half-formed, and tacit, forming a vague background to our lived experiences until truthful language endows them with a kind of clarity and unity and so brings them into focus for the first time. Or again, what was once clear and taken to be true is no longer self-evident, and the reigning understanding is challenged or put in question as, e.g., covering up or distorting the phenomenon, until the thing itself is disclosed by another interpretation in language that articulates the phenomenon in a fuller, clearer, and more appropriate way than before.

Returning to our earlier question, we can see that a distinction must be made between the way in which language is interwoven with experience such that the meanings of things are always already disclosed to perception or the imagination, and a *process* in which something comes to presentation in a convincing way in a situation in which something had become obscure or questionable, that is, through circumstances in which the truth of something is at stake. The difference between the two is the difference between our ordinary experience of engaging with a world of intelligible appearances and an event of truth in which something hidden, distorted, or withdrawn emerges and becomes manifest.

Both of these experiences of language are experiences of linguistic disclosure, of language as presenting the thing, and as such involve a unity of word and thing which is found in overlapping domains of intelligibility, viz., the meaning of words which bring out, enhance, or expressively articulate and complete the meaning of things. Even in those cases where something is covered over or distorted by language, a similar dynamic is at work insofar as the intelligibility of words hides or deforms the meaning that belongs to things so that they cannot appear as what they actually are. As Brice Wachterhauser observes, this claim about the power of language both

to disclose and to hide things can also be justified as one that does justice to how we actually experience language:

We have all experienced, for example, the felicitous way in which finding the “right words” can open up a sphere of reality for us in ways that we could not anticipate prior to discovering the particular way in which certain ways of speaking have of disclosing the world to us. Finding the right words can open our eyes to what is before us. Similarly, we have all experienced what it is like to be trapped inside a language that distorts and frustrates our vision. Once liberated from such a language we realize in retrospect the powerful effect that language can have either to open us to reality or cut us off from it.³⁰¹

Language, then, can both cover over, or even distort, the phenomena about which it speaks, or it can elicit and expressively articulate it in a fuller way. That is, if language in presenting the appearances has the power to present reality, words can also hide the thing itself, just as they can make it manifest. The mere expression of something in language does not ensure that the thing itself has been expressed. Thus although language discloses a landscape of meaningful appearances, some of what is thus disclosed can be false, deceptive, or distorted—no doubt it is this feature of language that lies behind the widespread antipathy toward rhetoric. One need only think here of the empty slogans of the advertising industry, the misleading rhetoric of political life, or the concepts and categories of other times and places which we now repudiate (one thinks here of the concept of witches, or werewolves, or ‘natural’ slaves, or ‘uncivilized’ peoples, and so on). We have to ask, then, what accounts for the difference between language that distorts or hides even as it discloses certain appearances, and language that, in presenting the appearances, presents the truth.

This question really seems to be a question about whether we can uncover a criterion for hermeneutic truth. Lawrence Schmidt has argued convincingly that for Gadamer, truthful language and the language of truth is enlightening (*einleuchtend*), that is, the thing itself “shines forth” and presents itself and its truth. He notes that this concept has been taken from the

³⁰¹ Brice Wachterhauser, *Beyond Being* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 117.

metaphysics of light found in Greek philosophy, though without any implications of a transcendental source of light. Instead, it refers to the power of light to illuminate and to allow what has been illuminated to become visible. In the “light of the word” the thing presents itself as it is in a self-evident way.”³⁰² Moreover, Gadamer asserts, this is not so much a judgment *we* make as it is an activity of the thing itself: “there is something resembling [Hegelian] dialectic in hermeneutical experience: an activity of the thing itself [*ein Tun der Sache selbst*], an action that, unlike the methodology of modern science, is a passion, an understanding, an event that happens to one.”³⁰³ So although language can open up and disclose the world and the things in it, this is not a process over which any individual can exercise full control. If inquiry or advocacy is conducted as a genuine dialogue, i.e., as an open and active shared search for truth, the give and take of asking and answering, of contending and responding, will mean that the conversation will naturally unfold on its own from one point to the next until my perspective, or that of my interlocutor, or a perspective that is shared, shines forth of itself. Here is Gadamer on this conception of the nature of conversation:

We say that we "conduct" a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will "come out" of a conversation. Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us. Thus we can say that something was a good conversation or that it was ill fated. All this shows that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it—i.e., that it allows something to "emerge" which henceforth exists.³⁰⁴

³⁰² Lawrence K. Schmidt, “Uncovering Hermeneutic Truth,” in *The Specter of Relativism*, ed. Lawrence K. Schmidt (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 76.

³⁰³ Gadamer, TM, 460; *WM*, 469.

³⁰⁴ Gadamer, TM, 385; *WM*, 387.

There is in such language a kind of self-showing of the thing, in that the dialogue makes manifest an aspect of the *Sache*. This experience of being enlightened by the *Sache* is an event of speech in which in coming to understand, my understanding is acted upon by the thing; this is a doing of the thing itself [*Tun der Sache selbst*—I cannot simply impose my view. Truth, then, is something getting said or coming to (self) presentation in a convincing and self-evident way. To paraphrase another commentator on Gadamer: Gadamer has effected a Copernican revolution of sorts; no longer does the interpreter seize the truth, but rather, the interpreter is seized by the truth.³⁰⁵

In the event of truth, then, something becomes clear, but this experience is the encounter with what is immediately evident to the *sensus communis*, rather than the clarity of Cartesian certainty. Gadamer compares this experience to our experience of the beautiful, maintaining that the close relationship between the two is based on the metaphysics of light. He observes that the beautiful is characterized by a shining forth [*Vorscheinen*] just as the truth characterized by an evidentness [*Das einleuchtende*]. What Gadamer intends by the concept of evidentness “belongs to the tradition of rhetoric. The eikos, the verisimilar, the “probable” (*wahrscheinliche*: “true shining”), the “evident,” belong in a series of things that defend their rightness against the truth and certainty of what is proved and known.”³⁰⁶ And just as the experience of the beautiful is an encounter with what is charming and enchanting without having been integrated into the whole of our orientations and evaluations, “what is evident is always something surprising as well, like a new light being turned on, expanding the range of what we can take into consideration.”³⁰⁷ Finally, that which is beautiful, like that which is true, is also characterized by a kind of *immediacy*. The immediacy with which we are seized by the truth is an experience of being

³⁰⁵ William Irwin, “A Critique of Hermeneutic Truth as Disclosure,” *International Studies in Philosophy* 33 (2001): 63-75.

³⁰⁶ Gadamer, TM, 479; *WM*, 488-489.

³⁰⁷ Gadamer, TM, 480; *WM*, 489.

overcome, of being swept up into something rather than of making a conscious decision. When a text, for instance, discloses something true about the world, there is a compelling shining forth of what is meaningful in it that captivates us. Like truth, it is part of the very nature of the beautiful to shine with a radiance that makes it “immediately evident” [*einleuchtend*] and draws people to itself in a way that captivates them.³⁰⁸ Similarly

someone who understands is always already drawn into an event through which meaning asserts itself [...] When we understand a text, what is meaningful in it captivates us just as the beautiful captivates us. It has asserted itself and captivated us before we can come to ourselves and be in a position to test the claim to meaning that it makes. What we encounter in the experience of the beautiful and in understanding the meaning of tradition really has something of the truth of play about it. 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.³⁰⁹

To aid us in understanding this radical, even uncanny, conception of truth as an event into which we are drawn and in which something asserts itself, i.e., in which there is a doing of the thing itself in language, Gadamer likens the back and forth of asking and answering, of speaking and listening in turn to the playing of a game, as this passage suggests.³¹⁰ But he maintains that we must not explain the concept of the game, as is customary, from the standpoint of the consciousness of the player. On the contrary, he maintains that a game is a dynamic whole, *sui generis*, that embraces the subjectivity of the one who plays. The to and fro of the game thus does not have its source in the subjective attitudes and intentions of the players. For the individual player, however, this fact seems at first to be the result of his deliberate decision to relinquish his autonomy and conform to the game by reacting to the actions of the other players. Yet the true nature of the game is not captured by this kind of mutual adjustment of the players to the moves of one another, i.e., by the subjective attitudes adopted on the part of each. Rather, the game is

³⁰⁸ Gadamer, TM, 476-478; WM 485-487.

³⁰⁹ Gadamer, TM, 490; WM, 465.

³¹⁰ On the nature of the game and for a comparison between the game and dialogue, see Gadamer, “On the Problem of Self-Understanding” and “Man and Language,” PH, 53-57, 66; GW 2, 128-131, 151-152.

genuinely underway when the players lose themselves in and are carried away by it. That which is brought or comes into play, including the players, no longer depends on itself but is determined by a movement that follows its own laws. The real experience of play is an ecstatic self-forgetting that is experienced not as a loss of self-possession, but as a possession by the buoyancy of the game, a being taken up into a movement that has own its dynamic. The self that has been determined by and subordinated to the game does not control itself; one might say rather that it "happens." From the standpoint of a subjective self-understanding this is a difficult, if not impossible, point to grasp.

Like the moves in a game, every word in a dialogue 'comes into play' within a definite context within which it is understood and spoken. This context is provided by a shared language game (in this case the game of inquiry or advocacy) as well as by a common language. Yet there is also a sense in which each person speaks his own language in this encounter a well; this space both marks the distance between interlocutors and constitutes the region in which speech unfolds as we confront and engage one another across these differences. In this 'playing' out of a conversation, we risk words or hold onto them, provoke responses and respond ourselves, adapting ourselves to the moves of others in a game of give and take. There is also, as in all play, an element of chance, surprise, and accident present, part of a buoyancy that elevates us above ourselves and carries us along as statement elicits counterstatement and plays the dialogue further. Though the will of the individual is no longer determinative, this "will not be experienced as a loss of self-possession, but rather as an enrichment of our self, but without us thereby becoming aware of ourselves."³¹¹

Gadamer had made similar observations about the nature of the game in the first part of *Truth and Method* in a section called "Play as the Clue to Ontological Explanation." Here he drew an analogy between the being of the work of art and the being of play. In play those who

³¹¹ Gadamer, "On the Problem of Self-Understanding," *PH*, 57; *GW* 2, 131.

play tend to become absorbed in the to-and-fro of the game such that they lose the sense of themselves as intentional, independent and autonomous agents separate from the game. This absorption allows the being of the game as a happening that is something more than the consciousnesses of the players to emerge; “the players are not subjects of play; instead play merely reaches presentation through the players.”³¹² Ontologically, the playing of a game, like the happening of truth in a conversation, is an event composed of a dynamic interaction between participants in which something beyond the willing and doing of the individuals involved emerges into presence through an event of self-presentation.

Despite the culmination of Gadamer’s account of dialogical reason in this profound and profoundly positive ontological vision, it must be conceded that none of what we have said guarantees that we can always arrive in our conversations at judgments that reach truth, that we can overcome all disagreement. There is, to begin with, something in the fundamental relationship between revealing and concealing that ensures that there will always be other standpoints which remain unseen. “This relationship shows itself in that the mere presentation [*Vorliegenlassen*], of that which is present, while certainly true, which means revealed as it is, always, however, simultaneously points out whatsoever still can be meaningfully asked and revealed in progressive knowledge claims.”³¹³ But with each forward step we take in the development of this truth, we move further from the presuppositions with which we began “allowing these presuppositions to sink back into the darkness of self-evidence, making it infinitely difficult to step back from them in order to test new presuppositions, thereby winning really new knowledge.”³¹⁴ To put the point more generally, we might say that the way in which we recognize truth seems of necessity to prevent the recognition of other things that are also true, so that that which makes knowledge possible also hinders it.

³¹² Gadamer; TM, 103; *WM*, 108.

³¹³ Gadamer, “What is Truth?”, in *Hermeneutics and Truth*, op. cit., 40; *GW* 2, 51.

³¹⁴ Gadamer, “What is Truth?”, in *Hermeneutics and Truth*, op. cit., 41; *GW* 2, 51.

Another important source of conflict and disagreement about truth is that, as we have seen, the differences between languages, i.e., between what has been said and handed down in each language, leads to different worldviews. A linguistic worldview embodies the culture, traditions, and historical experience of a people, providing a particular linguistic orientation [*Verhalten*] to or perspective on the world [*Weltansicht*]. And although worldviews are not closed, that is, the world picture they provide is both accessible to others and, as open to new insights, constitutes a standpoint that is open to expansion, they never offer more than a perspective on the thing, “whatever language we use, we never succeed in seeing anything but an ever-more extended aspect, a “view” of the world.”³¹⁵ No language can say everything. This inability of language to express everything about a thing is also a result of the richness and the seeming inexhaustibility of things of the world and the things in it, which always outruns our ability to bring experience to words. The limits of language and the complexity and depth of the phenomena can be seen in the way various languages articulate the same thing in different ways, as well as in the way one language may have an especially felicitous expression for something that another language lacks.

Whatever truth emerges from a conversation, then, will only be an aspect of the thing. The ontological significance of this claim is now apparent: in the truth event the *Sache* asserts itself, but solely through a particular linguistic perspective, so that it always only presents an aspect of itself.³¹⁶ It is this perspective of the thing itself which is experienced as enlightening [*erleuchtend*].³¹⁷ Nevertheless, experience also shows that even within the same language more than one perspective in a discussion can “shine forth” and be encountered as enlightening. Wachterhauser urges us in such cases to remain faithful to the difficulty and complexity of the

³¹⁵ Gadamer, TM, 444; WM, 451.

³¹⁶ See Gadamer, TM, 468; WM, 448.

³¹⁷ I am following Lawrence Schmidt here in making this claim in these terms. See Lawrence K. Schmidt, “Uncovering Hermeneutic Truth,” in *The Specter of Relativism*, op. cit., 75.

phenomena rather than “managing” such dilemmas by simply opting for one account over the other. What is called for, instead, is an acknowledgement of the experience of truth that we have in both understandings of the thing. This, however, is not so easily accomplished in the contests – even struggles – of interpretation that arise in the course of ethical and political deliberation. Such dilemmas are perhaps more easily recognized in the compelling but irreconcilable visions found in the canonical philosophical texts (such as Aristotle on ethical life as opposed to Kant) or in literature.³¹⁸ The example of philosophical and literary texts can help us to see that in such clashes there is a richness and depth of meaning which belongs to both sides and which gives each view an inherent plausibility that is difficult to deny. Rather than simply resolving this conflict in favor of one side or the other, we should aim for an interpretation which seeks to resolve, to the extent this is possible, the contradictions and differences between each viewpoint while preserving the truth of both accounts. Because I am able to recognize that both accounts ‘have their truth,’ I have reason to think that this kind of interpretation can, in principle, succeed, that is, the initial encounter with or experience of truth holds out the hope that it may be possible to reach a larger truth that can embrace both views.

While this approach can restore a dimension of robust moral deliberation to the realm of practice, such an achievement will not obviate the need to mediate disagreement, nor will it overcome with any sort of finality the conflict of interpretations. There is much to disagree about. Which concepts and categories of our current moral vocabulary ought we to trust to guide us in our decision-making process? Which insights and principles contained in the great texts of the past ought to be relied on today? When, finally, a decision about the aims of our enormously complex, technocratic civilization or about the direction of our collective life together has been

³¹⁸ In fact, Wachterhauser’s claim is about the conflicts that arise in the interpretation of texts. I have extended and applied this insight to the kind of truth that unfolds in dialogue. See Brice Wachterhauser, “Gadamer’s Realism” in *Hermeneutics and Truth*, op. cit., 157-158.

made, how will we know that it is the right one? How can we deal with the claims that possible alternatives make on us?

The difficulty of these questions should serve to enhance our sensitivity to the fact that, in the end, our judgments are always human judgments, that is, they are made from the particular and limited standpoint of an individual and from within a community of interpreters with whom we are in a permanent dialogue and by whom we can be corrected; such judgments are hence always open to future revision. We have to acknowledge, moreover, that human finitude and human limits, in the form of the inherent and intractable complexity of the meaningful realities of human life and the multifarious character of the larger cultural, historical, and metaphysical reality within which they are situated, suggest that there will inevitably be disagreements about the meaning of experience, such that reaching the completeness of truth will always remain “an infinite task.”³¹⁹

³¹⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Ideal of Practical Philosophy,” trans. Chris Dawson, in *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, op. cit., 58; Hans-Georg Gadamer, “*Vom Ideal der praktischen Philosophie*,” *LT*, 74.

Chapter 5

Ontological Foundations

The previous chapter devoted much time and philosophical energy to preparing the ground for, and expounding, Gadamer's conception of truth as the coming to presence in language of the thing through the event of understanding. Yet something difficult, but essential, still seems to elude our grasp in all of this, namely, how we are to make full sense of the claim that in this event of truth there is a "doing of the thing itself," that the *thing* presents itself. After all, even if the things of the world seem to offer themselves to the understanding, it is still *we* who give voice to them. And despite all that we have said about the capacity of language to present the things themselves, one might wonder how it is that *our* language, as a human artifact, can constitute the language of things.

To move past these difficulties, we will need to take a wider view of the issues here, that is, we will need to take up the question of the ground which makes possible the self-presentation of the thing itself through linguistic disclosure. For Gadamer, this ground is ontological, and is found in the belonging together [*Zusammengehörigkeit*] of self, world, and language. Self and world belong to one another and constitute a unitary phenomenon, such that knower and known "correspond" to one another; insofar as language testifies to this correspondence, it is disclosive of truth. This situates the truth of our utterances on the site of something strange and profound; at the same time, it also circumscribes the range of our linguistic activity: on this view, linguistic utterance has been restricted to expressing the correspondence of mind and world, and that, in turn, is because at the base of this correspondence we find the belonging together of self, world, and language. Yet the experience of language also includes the experience of deception, error,

and distortion, it includes the encounter both with what is untruthful and with what is hidden and withdrawn.

What is needed here is a non-dualistic vision of the bond between consciousness and thing which simultaneously opens up this relation, both in its potential for development and in its possibilities for atrophy. Such a self-understanding would carry with it the imperative to a certain kind of self-shaping, and hold out the correspondence of mind and world as a goal rather than as a given. I argue below that just such a vision can be found in the work of the early twentieth-century Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945). Nishida provides an account of experience in terms of the interlacing of self and world, while also showing the ways in which the terms of this relation can come to be more tightly interwoven. This permits us to distinguish, in the language that arises from the exchanges of the self with other selves and the world, between the presentation of meaning and the expression of truth.

I. Self, World, and Language

One way to approach the difficulty of understanding truth as the “doing of the thing itself” is with an initial inquiry into Gadamer’s key concept of “belonging.” Philosophy, Gadamer says, has long been acquainted with the phenomenon of belonging. For classical and medieval thought, knowledge or truth belongs to being and is not primarily an activity of the subject; this kind of thought does not begin with a self-subsisting subject which makes everything else into an object. Thus he finds the superiority of classical metaphysics to lie in the fact that “from the outset it transcends the dualism of subjectivity and will, on the one hand, and object and being-in-itself, on the other, by conceiving their preexistent correspondence with each other.”³²⁰ Knowledge or truth, on this account, is the natural co-ordination of the human mind with the

³²⁰ Gadamer, “The Nature of Things and the Language of Things,” PH, 74; *GW* 2, 70-71.

things of the world.³²¹ The Greeks did not try to base the objectivity of knowledge on subjectivity, instead, they viewed knowledge as an element of being itself, so that the expression of the *logos* in dialectic “was not for the Greeks a movement performed by thought; what thought experiences is the movement of the thing itself.”³²² Hegel, too, Gadamer points out, consciously takes up this model of dialectic. And to the extent that philosophical hermeneutics seeks to show the interconnection of event and understanding, it sends us back to the Greeks as well as to Hegel.³²³

But it is not possible for us to simply appropriate this notion of belonging, to merely follow the Greeks or to repeat Hegel. Nor is the medieval rendition of the concept of belonging a live option for us, since this notion of truth rests on a theological correspondence: soul and object are united in their status as created by God, the former created to encounter beings, the latter created as capable of being known. Nonetheless, Gadamer is insistent that “philosophy may also not close its eyes to the truth of this correspondence.”³²⁴ We must ask, then, whether this correspondence can be grounded without a dependence on elements taken from classical metaphysics or theology, and this means asking whether there are finite possibilities of doing justice to this “correspondence of soul and being.” Gadamer contends that there is, and that it is *language* which “attests” to this correspondence. So although we can no longer presume that we are made to know the world, that we belong to it insofar as we are united in our creatureliness with what has been created, and though we cannot and will not want to simply echo the Greeks or the identity philosophy of German idealism, in “thinking out the consequences of language as medium” [*denken von der Mitte der Sprache aus*], we are still led beyond the concept of the

³²¹ Gadamer observes in this regard that “Plato defines the being of the “soul” as participating in true being—i.e., as belonging to the same sphere of being as the idea—and Aristotle says that the soul is, in a certain sense, everything that exists. In this thinking there is no question of a self-conscious spirit without world which would have to find its way to worldly being; both belong originally to each other. The relationship is primary” (TM, 455; *WM* 462-463).

³²² Gadamer, TM, 456; *WM*, 464.

³²³ See Gadamer, TM, 456; *WM*, 464.

³²⁴ Gadamer, “The Nature of Things and the Language of Things,” PH, 75; *GW* 2, 71.

object and the objectivity of knowledge to the idea that the knowing subject belongs to the object of knowledge.³²⁵

The medium of language can attest to the belonging together and correspondence of mind and thing, self and world, because language for Gadamer is, as Grondin remarks, “in a way the throwing forward *par excellence* of all presence to being. Gadamer himself speaks of an ontological direction (*Wendung* and not *Kehre*), following the directing thread of language.”³²⁶ Language as disclosive medium, in short, is our way of being a “thrown project” insofar as we belong to a linguistically embodied, historical tradition that is also the very condition that enables us to project ourselves upon our possibilities of acting and knowing—including, of course, a knowledge of the tradition itself and the historical past which is contained in it.³²⁷ Yet we belong to what we would know not only in the human sciences, but also in every act of understanding; Gadamer, as we saw in the first chapter, follows Heidegger in viewing the belonging together of Dasein and world as aspects of the single, unitary phenomenon of *In-der-Welt-sein*. In this unity of being-in-the-world we will see how it is that the language we speak can also be the language of

³²⁵ TM, 457; *WM*, 465. Francis Ambrosio draws an important parallel between Gadamer and Heidegger here, one which I will have more to say about later in this chapter: “*Die Mitte der Sprache*. This central thought in Gadamer's ontology of language signifies that language is the “center,” middle ground, or point of mediation between man and world. “Center” in the sense of their common origin out of which they emerge in their original unity; “middle ground” which they both occupy and which supports both; “point of mediation” as the medium of converse in which their relationship attains to understanding. The parallel here with Heidegger's concept of *das Ereignis* as the originating event of the belonging-together of man and Being is unmistakable” (Francis J. Ambrosio, “Dawn and Dusk: Gadamer and Heidegger on Truth,” *Man and World* 19 (1986): 21-53.

³²⁶ Jean Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, op. cit., 125.

³²⁷ The meaning of belonging for such knowledge, while not the focus of our concern here, is of the greatest significance for the project of *Truth and Method*, as Richard Palmer explains with admirable concision:

The phenomenon of belonging [*Zugehörigkeit*] [...] is the ground for the possibility of encountering one's heritage in the text. Because of our belonging to language and because of the belongingness of the text to language, a common horizon becomes possible. The emergence of a common horizon is what Gadamer calls fusion of horizons as it occurs for the historically operative consciousness. Linguisticity, then, becomes the basis for authentic historical consciousness (Richard Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 208.

things, how it is that the coming to presence of the thing in the event of truth can amount to the doing of the thing itself.

We begin by returning to the assertion that for Gadamer we are “thrown” into the world through the language and tradition to which we belong. To belong to a language entails that we do not possess or control language as we might a possession; instead, we belong to language just as we belong to a time, a culture, or a history, none of these things ‘belongs’ to us in any personal sense—in fact we belong to all of these partly through language. That we belong to language means that we participate in it by conforming our thinking and speaking to what has been said and handed down in it; doing this, moreover, is a condition of our achieving full subjectivity. But our belonging to language amounts to more even than this. To say that it is in and through language that we are a “thrown project” is to repeat, in another way, the opening claim of the fourth chapter that it is language which, as partly constituting our opening onto the world, allows us to be “there” together with others, present to being in finite and limited ways. Our presence to a world of meaningful things, then, is made possible by our belonging to the medium through which they are disclosed, namely, the language of the culture and tradition in which we find ourselves. “Language,” Gadamer observes, “is more than the consciousness of the speaker; so also it is more than a subjective act.”³²⁸ The disclosure of a world through language, accordingly, is not accomplished in the act of an individual subject or subjects. As Richard Palmer explains in the course of (re-) translating a passage in which Gadamer describes what this entails, the direction of disclosure “is not *from* subjectivity *through* the sign tool *to* the designated thing,” disclosure “moves in the other direction—from the thing, or situation, through language, to subjectivity.” Hence “language is ordered to the world rather than to our subjectivity.”³²⁹ In this regard, language possesses a kind of objectivity:

³²⁸ Gadamer, TM, xxxiii; “Vorwort zur 2. Auflage,” *GW* 2, 446.

³²⁹ Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, op. cit., 205.

Out of the commensurateness of language to world follows its peculiar objectivity [*Sachlichkeit*]. A situation or matter that behaves so and so—therein lies the recognition of self-sufficient otherness that presupposes its own distance between the matter and the speaker. On the basis of this distance, something like “situation” can come to definition and ultimately be capable of becoming the content of a statement that another can understand.³³⁰

Language thus possesses its own [*eigentümliche*] form of objectivity, insofar as what is disclosed in it is the self-presentation of something that acts on our understanding rather than being a construction or projection of the self.³³¹

Whereas in the objectivity or *Sachlichkeit* of language, “the world itself presents itself,”³³² in the initial stages of the event of truth, things do not simply announce or display themselves in the same manner in which a world is always already manifest to the speakers of a language; something is *not* disclosed *as* what it is, and remains concealed. It is precisely because the thing does not present itself that we undertake through reflection, inquiry, examination, and dialogue to make the thing manifest, to unveil it. And although in this respect there is a place for the initiative and activity of the subject, insofar as the self is inserted into the world and present to it through the language to which it belongs and through which things present themselves, we may no longer think of the self as the source of a language from which the meaning of the world would radiate. We must see the self instead as a participant in the broader process of bringing things to language. This shift in the center of gravity away from the self means that in choosing the words which bring something to language, we must allow ourselves to be guided by the demands of the thing, we must seek the language that belongs to the thing and that reveals it. There is a language appropriate to things in and through which they can be understood. “Thus we speak not only of a language of art but also of a language of nature—in short, of any language

³³⁰ Gadamer, TM, 442; *WM*, 449. Weinsheimer’s translation of this passage is somewhat clumsy and even a bit confusing. Palmer’s translation (which is quoted here) can be found in Richard Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, op. cit., 206.

³³¹ See Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, op. cit., 212.

³³² Gadamer, TM, 446; *WM*, 453.

that things have.”³³³ In this phenomenon we are reminded that the intelligibility of the world is verbal in nature, that understanding is *linguistic*. This prompts Gadamer to declare that “being that can be understood is language” [*Sein, dass verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache*].³³⁴ Language increases the intelligibility of being. This is something that, we can now see, takes place between the activity of the self and the constraints of the thing. There is a contribution to the experience of things from the self, in all of its finitude and historicity, but what the self contributes to the revelation of a thing is not opposed to the nature of the thing.

This agreement about things that takes place, both in the *Sachlichkeit* of language and the disclosure of truth, is one in which neither the human mind nor things have priority. Disclosure is thus neither simply a result of the positing activity of the subject, nor is it an annunciation of the object, an apprehension of the thing in its total and univocal meaning. “Rather, the correspondence that finds its concretion in the linguistic experience of the world is as such what is absolutely prior.”³³⁵ This correspondence is the “correspondence of soul and world”³³⁶ and is what comes to light in language. As Gadamer puts it, language is “a medium where I and world meet, or, rather, manifest their original belonging together [*Zusammengehörigkeit*].”³³⁷ With this what begins to come into view is the radical, even uncanny, conception of language and truth that is being advanced here. Another reading of Gadamer’s assertion that “being that can be understood is language” brings out this strangeness more fully. The ambiguity of this statement has made it the subject of multiple readings, not least of all by Gadamer himself.³³⁸ I want to

³³³ Gadamer, TM, 470; *WM*, 478.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*

³³⁵ Gadamer, “The Nature of Things and the Language of Things,” PH, 78; *GW* 2, 74.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*

³³⁷ Gadamer, TM, 469; *WM*, 478.

³³⁸ In the Forward to the Second Edition of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer acknowledges that this phrase implies the universality of understanding and its linguisticity. See TM, xxxi; “Vorwort zur 2. Auflage,” *GW* 2, 444. In “Text and Interpretation,” Gadamer adds another reading: “When I wrote the sentence, “Being that can be understood is language,” what was implied by this was that what is can never be completely understood. This is implied insofar as everything that goes under the name of language always goes beyond whatever achieves the status of a proposition. That which is to be understood is that which comes into

focus here on its ontological significance, that what language opens us up to is nothing less than an event of being. Gadamer offers this interpretation in his 1996 interview with Grondin in which he looks back at and assesses his work and accomplishments: “Above all [this statement] means: “Being can be experienced and understood and it means that being speaks [*Sein spricht*].”³³⁹ In this remarkable statement, the ontological ground of our encounter with that which discloses itself both in the factuality or *Sachlichkeit* of language as well as in the event of truth begins to come into view. We have seen that in both situations, the self is more an experiencer to which something happens than an active knower or controller that disposes over what occurs. Thus in the *Sachlichkeit* of language, a certain world opens itself to me in a language that I find myself always already underway in; in the encounter with that which asserts itself as truth, the movement of coming into language of the thing unfolds as an activity of the thing itself. What Gadamer is suggesting is that the language in which something comes to self-presentation is the language of being, that, in sum, the disclosure of things, in their ‘factualness’ and in their truth, is the speaking of being.

Though this is a metaphysically bold, even daring, conclusion, it is one founded on the ontological correlation and indivisibility of the subject and object of knowledge, on, as Gadamer has it, the “belonging together” of self, world, and language. Moreover, this is not a foundation that Gadamer needs to do much work in justifying to the extent that he follows what has already been accomplished in the work of Heidegger. But the difficulty here is not in the legitimation of such an ontological ground for linguistic disclosure—it is rather to be found in the problem of the relation between this ground and the various instances of language in which the thing is *not* disclosed, does *not* present itself.

language, but of course it is always that which is taken as something, taken as something true [wahr-genommen]. This is the hermeneutical dimension—a dimension in which Being “shows itself” (GR, 162; “*Text und Interpretation*,” *GW* 2, 334).

³³⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jean Grondin, “A Look Back Over the Collected Works and Their Effective History” trans. Richard E. Palmer, GR, 417; *GL*, 286.

So much of this study has been devoted to the theme of unconcealment in language that it can be easy to lose sight at times of the point that the linguisticity of human experience – and so the disclosure of things – encompasses both the ‘factualness’ of the world and the encounter with truth as well as ‘non-objective’ forms of language and modes of untruth—it is this latter aspect of language which poses a puzzle for the interpreter. Thus although Gadamer grounds linguistic disclosure in the ontological belonging together of subject and object, such that in the coming to presence of meaning, both in our search for truth and in the world at large, the language we speak comes to be equated with the very language of being, it is far from clear how such an ontological foundation for the disclosive capacities of language could ever account for deception, illusion, and error, for all the ways that language can distort and mask, since in these experiences of language something is also disclosed, even if in the shape of a covering over or hiding of the thing itself. Indeed, the ontology of “belonging” would seem to entail that in all of our linguistic engagements with the world, things are always what they give themselves to be, so that we always stand in truth.

II. Two Ontologies

We have reached an impasse in which much is at stake. We will need to account for what I have been calling ‘non-objective’ language without abandoning the ontological foundations of truth in the belonging together of self and world if we are to preserve all that has been won with the central insight of phenomenology that the intertwining of perceiver and perceived constitutes a single, unitary phenomenon.

In what follows I look to the work of Nishida, whose concepts of “pure experience” [*junsui keiken*, 純粹經驗] and “acting-intuition” [*kōiteki chokkan*, 行為的直感] complicate Gadamer’s notion of “belonging” in a way that allows us to reconcile ‘non-objective’ language

with the ontological continuity of self and world. In the rest of this chapter I lay out the way in which for Nishida, this continuity is dynamic rather than static; one can cultivate or neglect this bond and so achieve or fail to achieve the optimal forms of this relation. So, for example, aesthetic, athletic, and ethical practices involve, at their best and most skillful, the achievement, in action, of the doing of the thing itself. The significance of this phenomenon for our problem can be seen in our capacity to cultivate, in the same way, our powers of perception; by bringing the self and world closer together and so into a kind of harmony, our perceptions are able to be faithful to what is there to be perceived. This, in turn, forms the basis for language that articulates and does justice to such perceptions, that is, it forms the basis for the disclosure of truth.

The resonance between Gadamer's philosophy of language and Nishida's ontology has not been noted before; yet this connection also may come as no surprise to those familiar with the history of contact and mutual recognition between Heidegger and several of Nishida's students and associates in the first half of the twentieth century. Nishida's students Tanabe Hajime, Miki Kiyoshi, and Nishitani Keiji, and associates such as Kuki Shūzō and Watsuji Tetsurō all studied with Heidegger.³⁴⁰ Tanabe was the first scholar in the world to write a commentary on Heidegger's thought, in 1924; Miki wrote essays on Heidegger in 1930 and 1933; Kuki published *Heidegger's Philosophy*, the first book length study of Heidegger in any language, in 1933; Watsuji's *Climate and Culture*, which he began work on in 1928 and published in 1935, is explicitly both an appreciation and critique of Heidegger's thought.³⁴¹ But the direction of interest and attention flowed both ways; Heidegger also showed a genuine interest in Japanese thought and culture. In his 1954 essay, "A Dialogue on Language Between a Japanese and an Inquirer" he references Nishida, Tanabe, and Kuki, meditates on the Japanese words for "chic" [*iki* 粋] and "word/language" [*kotoba* 言葉]. Reflecting on the prospects for cross-cultural dialogue, he

³⁴⁰ Note that all Japanese names are written here surname first.

³⁴¹ This information is available from many sources; Curtis Rigsby has a nice summary of these issues in "Nishida on Heidegger," *Continental Philosophy Review* 42 (2010): 511-553.

observes that the concept of *das Nichts*, which appears in his essay “What is Metaphysics,” was grasped immediately by Japanese thinkers because of large presence in their own tradition of the Buddhist concept of emptiness.³⁴²

In his 1959 letter to the fifth East-West Philosophers’ Conference at the University of Hawaii, Heidegger writes: “Again and again it has seemed urgent to me that a dialogue take place with the thinkers of what is to us the Eastern world.”³⁴³ And Gadamer, in private correspondence, has said that those who study Heidegger would do well to pursue comparisons of his work with Asian philosophies.³⁴⁴ This mutual interest and admiration had its source in certain ideas which both sides recognized as shared philosophical ground. This is a very large subject and one that it is not necessary for our purposes to exhaust. Instead, we will be concerned with the way in which important parallels between certain foundational concepts in phenomenology and in Nishida’s thought can aid us in moving forward through the impasse we have encountered in Gadamer’s account of truth. Before we can begin this undertaking, however, some preliminary moves are in order. We will first need to clear up some ambiguities around Nishida’s key concept of pure experience. This will then enable us to see how Nishida is able to complicate Gadamer’s ontology in ways that will make possible an account of truth that incorporates both concealment and unconcealment.

§

As original and even astonishing as Nishida’s central philosophical ideas are, he sometimes had difficulty articulating them – to paraphrase the complaint of one of his Japanese

³⁴² Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper and Row, 1982). A good source for the connections between Heidegger and the Kyoto School, as well as Asian thought, is *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, ed. Graham Parkes (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), and Graham Parkes, “Rising Sun Over Black Forest: Heidegger’s Japanese Connections,” in Reinhard May, *Heidegger’s Hidden Sources: East Asian Influences on His Work*, trans. Graham Parkes (London: Routledge, 1996).

³⁴³ Graham Parkes, “Introduction,” *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, op. cit., 7.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

interpreters – with terminological clarity and rigor.³⁴⁵ Yet this is a problem, perhaps, that can accompany any exploration of new terrain; Heidegger, too, is strange and difficult. Nonetheless, this limitation sometimes has the effect of obscuring what is distinctive and valuable in Nishida's thought. One of the most important examples of this is his attempt to articulate his foundational concept of pure experience. Although he uses this concept in at least three different ways, he does not take pains to carefully distinguish these different senses. This is especially unfortunate because the rich and complex relation between the self and the world entailed in Nishida's account of pure experience constitutes one his most significant and productive contributions to 20th-century philosophy.

In this section and the next I will clarify some of the confusion around this concept by distinguishing Nishida's various uses of the term while also drawing out and making explicit what is only implicit in his account. This will allow us to see that for Nishida, the relationship between self and world is one of ontological continuity, and further, that the form which this continuity takes is dynamic rather than static as is the case for Heidegger, and since they follow Heidegger here, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty; one can cultivate or neglect this connection between self and world and achieve, or fail to achieve it in its most replete forms. This is an insight which can be productively related to a key theme in the work of all three thinkers, namely, the ways in which our practices, language, and history, in the case of Heidegger and Gadamer, or the structure and capacities of our body, in that of Merleau-Ponty, constitute the perceived world. Nishida's work on the relation between self and world allows us to show in addition that who we are and become also determines how things appear, and even *what* can appear in our perceptual experience – and so what can be expressed – giving us a new way to approach Gadamer's

³⁴⁵ See Yuasa Yasuo, *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory*, trans. Nagatomo Shigenori and T.P. Kasulis (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 66 (hereafter TB); Yuasa Yasuo, *Shinshinron I*, in *Yuasa Yasuo zenshū*, vol. 14 (Tokyo: Hakua Shobō, 1999), 182 (hereafter YYZ)

difficulties with the ground of truth and opening up an important new dimension of a foundational idea in hermeneutical phenomenology.

Rather than entering directly into Nishida's account of the complexities of pure experience, it seems best to begin by recapitulating his description of the essential structure and possibilities of the self in its relation to the world, as this structure, and those possibilities, reach their loftiest form in pure experience. To do this we will need to attend to the ideas and claims found mainly in his late essays, as this is where we find his most developed account of the self. Nishida begins his approach to the self there with a focus on that which seems straightforward and evident in our experience only to be brought, as his investigations develop, precisely to that which is *not* straightforward, to what is elusive and strange.

In his late, seminal, essay "Logic and Life," Nishida observes that "there is no such thing as a self without a body."³⁴⁶ We only begin to sense the significance of this seemingly unremarkable statement when it is paired with an equally pedestrian observation made a little further on in words that will surely remind some readers of Merleau-Ponty: "The body is that which is seen as well as that which sees."³⁴⁷ Insofar as the body, and thus the self, is that which perceives, it exists as something which possesses consciousness. This mental, subjective side of the self inhabits an "internal world," which Nishida also refers to as the dimension of immanence. Insofar as the body is that which is seen, the self exists in the world as thing, as object; this aspect of the self acts in the "external world," a world in which things transcend consciousness.³⁴⁸ Hence

³⁴⁶ Nishida Kitarō, "Logic and Life," trans. John W. M. Krummel and Shigenori Nagatomo, in *Place and Dialectic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 132 (hereafter LL); Nishida Kitarō, "Ronri to seimei," in *Nishida Kitarō zenshū*, vol. 8 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1979), 320 (hereafter NKZ).

³⁴⁷ Nishida, LL, 135; NKZ 8, 326. One is immediately struck by the parallels in much of what follows to Merleau-Ponty's thought. For an excellent comparison of the issues here, see Kazashi Nobuo, "Bodily Logos: James, Merleau-Ponty, and Nishida," in *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 107-120.

³⁴⁸ Nishida Kitarō, "The Standpoint of Active Intuition," trans. William Haver in *Ontology of Production: Three Essays*, trans. William Haver (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 70 (hereafter SAI); Nishida Kitarō, "Kōiteki chokkan no tachiba" in *Tetsugaku ronbunshū* 1, NKZ 8, 115.

“there is no merely internal world, nor is there a merely external world.”³⁴⁹ The body, and so the self, belongs to both, it is both consciousness and thing, subject and object, immanent and transcendent, seer and seen. As both, the body never perfectly coincides with either, so that there is a kind of ontological indeterminacy at the very heart of the self. Kazashi Nobuo nicely captures the ambiguity here when, in summing up Nishida’s position, he speaks of the irreducibility of our embodied being “either to the transparency of self-consciousness or the inertia of matter.”³⁵⁰

The body, and so the self, is not reducible to either side of the divide between seer and seen because it is both; in it there is an intertwining between the mental and physical, consciousness and thing, subject and object, an intertwining in which the terms of the relation are not separable. There is an intimate unity between the self and the world in the very way we exist. And this means that we have to see the connection from the self to the world in terms of a continuity rather than as a relationship between an independent, self-subsisting subject detached from and facing a field of objects existing in-themselves.

The philosopher Yuasa Yasuo suggests that this emphasis on the indivisibility of the self-world relation makes for an instructive comparison with Heidegger’s notion of *In-der-Welt-sein*.³⁵¹ Where Heidegger emphasized the temporal dimension of the relation of Dasein to its lived world in describing it in terms of the existential of care – and so as a thrown project (*geworfener Entwurf*) – Nishida’s focus on the ambiguous ontological status of the body as our way of being in the world underscores the spatial dimension of this relation and the interlacing of passivity and activity which characterizes it. That is, in addition to an awareness of the way in which we are temporally caught up in a past from out of which we project a future, Nishida wants to draw attention to the ways in which we both receive and enter into our world on the *spatial* plane. The body as thing exists as one spatial object among others and as such always finds itself “thrown

³⁴⁹ Nishida, SAI, 70; NKZ 8, 115.

³⁵⁰ Kazashi Nobuo, “Bodily Logos: James, Merleau-Ponty, and Nishida,” op. cit., 110.

³⁵¹ See Yuasa, TB, 52-55; YYZ 14, 166-170.

into” a relation to a world and other things that both transcend and act upon it. Here the self is a passive recipient, most importantly for Nishida, of sensible intuitions presented to it from without, or artistic, ethical, and even religious inspiration, which is given from within. In either case, something happens to or befalls me rather than my making something occur. Nishida somewhat confusingly calls both sense perception and the various forms of inspiration *intuition* (we will have more to say about this by way of clarification later). The body as subject, on the other hand, actively relates to the things of the world through its mental and physical action.

Nishida conceptualizes the structure of the relation between self and world thus in terms of acting and intuition, and brings the two terms together in the Japanese neologism “acting intuition” (*kōiteki chokkan*, 行為的直感). Action and intuition work together insofar as that which appears through the intuitions of bodily sense forms the basis for the will in determining the actions of the self. Yuasa describes this unity of passive and active functions as a “circuit” that relates the self to the world. The image of a circuit is one that recurs throughout the literature on acting intuition. The circuit as metaphor for thinking the relation of intuition to acting serves two important functions. First, it underscores the fact that acting and intuition compose a unitary phenomenon. Second, because the direction of movement along a circuit can be reversed, it alerts us to the possibility of a potential mode of interaction between acting and intuition outside of the usual way in which in the two are ordinarily related to one another. Nishida intended his concept of acting intuition to encompass both of these ideas. Hence acting intuition covers both the ordinary (and unitary) experience of the interaction between sensible intuition and intentional action as well as another kind of experience in which these functions are differently configured. It is in this latter experience that some of the fullest possibilities of the self are disclosed; in what follows we will aim to uncover and articulate the philosophical significance of this phenomenon (I will use the hyphenated English term “acting-intuition” to distinguish this from the ordinary circuit of acting and intuition).

We begin by recalling that the active-passive circuit of relatedness is above all a bodily phenomenon. The body, and so the self, as we have seen, is both subject and object, consciousness and thing, neither fully and straightforwardly one or the other. Yet neither, importantly, is the self given as an unambiguous and unproblematic integration of the two. Nishida contends that in the self as body, the for-itself and the in-itself remain distinct, even as they must be thought together, so that our self “is constituted in a profound contradiction.” On the one hand, “the self must be absolutely that which determines itself,”³⁵² on the other, “the self can be thought from the depths of the world,”³⁵³ that is, “as something like a singularity construed as the determination of the universal. But from that perspective, the self is necessarily a thing.”³⁵⁴ In other words, “we must see that in the depths of our selves there is that which utterly surpasses the self. Moreover, to the extent we think that as mere externality, what we call the self disappears.”³⁵⁵ In short, on the one side Nishida wants in his account to preserve the spontaneity of the subject, the freedom of the self as it creatively acts in and on the world; on the other, he wants to acknowledge the ways in which self, through the body, is embedded in and belongs to the wider external world of things and objects, and as such is not independent of the environment that conditions and even produces it. In “Logic and Life,” Nishida describes this as “the self-identity of what are absolutely opposed to each other.”³⁵⁶ Later, in his last writings, he maintains in the same vein that “the self can only be grasped as a form of contradictory identity” [*mujunteki jikodoitsu*, 矛盾的自己同一]³⁵⁷ Kazashi views this dialectical relationship at the ground of the self as a recurring but unstable movement or process. “The body as what sees and the body as

³⁵² Nishida, SAI, 81-82; NKZ 8, 131-132.

³⁵³ Nishida, SAI, 84; NKZ 8, 135.

³⁵⁴ Nishida, SAI, 82; NKZ 8, 132.

³⁵⁵ Nishida, SAI, 81-82 (translation modified); NKZ 8, 132.

³⁵⁶ Nishida, LL, 118; NKZ 8, 297.

³⁵⁷ Nishida Kitarō, “The Logic of the Place of Nothingness and the Religious Worldview,” trans. David A. Dilworth in *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, trans. David A. Dilworth (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 55; Nishida Kitarō, “Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki seikeikan,” in *Testugaku ronbunshū* 7, NKZ 11, 380.

what is seen are both strange givens, and hence, can turn out strangers to each other [...] In this sense, Nishida's awkward expression, "the self-identity of absolute contradictories," might be taken to capture the continual, and, at bottom, fragile nature of the integration between the body as what sees and the body as what is seen."³⁵⁸

According to Yuasa, it is precisely the dynamism and fragility of the connection between self as subject and self as object that enables us to distinguish one from the other. "Although the subjectivity of consciousness (the mind) and the objectivity of the body are inseparably conjoined, they are still distinguishable into subjectivity and objectivity (the for-itself and in-itself). This means that the respective functions of the mind and body are not completely one."³⁵⁹ The for-itself and the in-itself are distinguishable, above all, in those situations where we undertake a complex activity for the first time. Such activities, which can range from riding a bicycle to playing golf, from playing an instrument to riding a surfboard, are initially characterized by a self-consciousness that manifests itself in unsteady and awkward movements. As Yuasa explains, "the body does not move along with the mind, no matter how hard the mind tries. In other words, the body is something inert, resisting the mind's movements; this is an objectivity substantially restricting the self's subjectivity as a human being. As one trains, however, the movement of the body and mind gradually come into agreement."³⁶⁰

What Nishida and his interpreters want to show is that the bond between consciousness and thing, between the for-itself and the in-itself, subject and object, is a fluid and variable relation rather than a static connection. It is at this juncture that we can begin to see what sets Nishida apart from Heidegger, Gadamer, and Merleau-Ponty. In the following critique we focus our comparative analysis on the ontology of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. We turn briefly to Heidegger rather than Gadamer here because Gadamer does not spell out any more fully than we

³⁵⁸ Kazashi Nobuo, "Bodily Logos: James, Merleau-Ponty, and Nishida," *op. cit.*, 115.

³⁵⁹ Yuasa, TB, 69; YYZ 14, 188.

³⁶⁰ Yuasa, TB, 69-70; YYZ 14, 188.

already have the ontological dimension of his concept of *Zugehörigkeit*, but he *is* explicit about the influence of Heidegger on his own thinking in this regard.³⁶¹ I treat Merleau-Ponty with some care because although his position would seem to offer a way of overcoming the difficulties Gadamer faces, I show that this does not, in fact, turn out to be the case.

While it is true that we find in the philosophies of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty the elucidation of a new ontology of an intertwining and so indivisibility of self and world, both philosophers primarily limit themselves to displaying the ways in which the self and the world depend upon and determine one another, overlooking, to different degrees, the dynamic and open-ended quality of this continuity. Hence while Heidegger is able to overcome the dualism of subject and object – and so the philosophical difficulties and problems that this dichotomy entails – with an account of experience in terms of what he calls *In-der-Welt-sein*, or “being-in-the-world,” a phenomenon in which self (which is part of what Heidegger calls *Dasein*) and world cannot be separated out from each other, one of the central concerns of *Being and Time* then becomes to show that *Dasein* is not able to be separated from world because *Dasein* is a self-disclosing which is at the same time the opening up of a world. Merleau-Ponty, for his part, brings new insights, arguments, and evidence to the case for giving an account of human experience in terms of what he calls, following Heidegger, “*être au monde*.” Most of these are directed toward the development of his great insight that the body has a central role in the interweaving of subject and object by constituting the primordial world of perception, and that therefore a complete phenomenology must describe the pre-objective world as it appears to an incarnated consciousness.

In Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the “habit body,” however, we find a fuller recognition of the indeterminacy and complexity of the bond between self and world. A habit for Merleau-Ponty

³⁶¹ See, for example, Gadamer, *TM*, 248-249; *WM*, 262, and Gadamer, “On the Problem of Self-Understanding,” *PH*, 50-51; *GW* 2, 125-126.

is what we would call a skill, though this includes both the general skills we need to cope with the ordinary situations as well as problems that living poses for us, such as the ability to turn a doorknob, as well as the more developed skills that are specific to individuals, such as the ability to play the piano. Such ‘habits’ involve a certain kind of ‘knowing’, but this is not, he points out, a form of conceptual knowledge, as one does not simply memorize a dance and then perform it. Instead he calls a habit a “knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made.”³⁶² This ‘knowledge’ is one bred of familiarity, of a pattern of repeated interaction of the body with the world. It sediments into the body such that when a habit is acquired, the body has assimilated a new meaning. Hence it is the body that ‘understands’ in the acquisition of habit. And “to understand is to experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance.”³⁶³ Habits, then, are a knowledge that the body acquires in order to get into equilibrium with its environment. This knowledge then becomes part of and constitutes the body in the form of a set of habits which exist beneath the physical body in a “phenomenal” or lived body which he calls the “habit body.” Because a habit “has its abode neither in thought nor in the objective body, but in the body as mediator of the world,” the habit body seems to be “a third term between the psychic and the physiological, between the for itself and the in itself”;³⁶⁴ as such, it does not depend on the existence of a complete physical body for its own existence. As evidence for this, Merleau-Ponty turns to the phenomenon of the phantom limb, i.e., a limb that has been amputated but is felt to still exist in its original unity. If the body were simply a kind of machine, as Descartes had maintained, then the phenomenon of the phantom limb would not be possible; a robot, for instance, does not continue to sense or attempt to use a limb that has been removed.

³⁶² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, op. cit., 166.

³⁶³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, op. cit., 167.

³⁶⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, op. cit., 140.

For Merleau-Ponty, much of the significance of the discovery of the habit body lies in the concept of motor intentionality, that is, the basic directedness toward the world of the body in terms of its capacities, i.e., as an incarnated consciousness that “can.” Through the habit body, the body-subject possesses space in a certain manner, so that a virtual space is carved into the space that is given by being organized in terms of our possible projects and activities. Thus every act of perception on the part of the body-subject is already intentionally related to a perceived world through the habit body. If the body is able to do something, such as turn a doorknob or sit in a chair, or type, objects in the world show up as being able to be turned or sat on or typed. The potential actions of the body, by forming an intentional arc towards the world, illuminate the possible actions that can be taken in it. Because this kind of meaningful perception depends on the capacities of the body, the existence of a habit body is necessary for one to have a world at all. With this elucidation of the ways in which the self and world mutually determine one another in and through the habit body, then, Merleau-Ponty returns – albeit in a new and important way – to the theme of the indivisibility of self and world.

So although the concept of the habit body offers a potentially fruitful point of entry for exploring the dynamism at the heart of the continuity between the self and the world, Merleau-Ponty never really enters into the crucial questions one might ask here, namely, the question of how our relation to the world is transformed as we acquire a habit or skill, and, finally, what this experience means. For an extensive treatment of these issues we must turn instead to Nishida’s account of what he calls “pure experience.”

III. Action and Intuition: The Achievement of Pure Experience

Nishida’s metaphysics of “pure experience,” and so his distinctive contribution to both of these questions, is laid out most fully in his first major work, *Inquiry into the Good*. Before

beginning to articulate just what that contribution was, it is of signal importance to distinguish the various ways in which he uses the term *pure experience* in this text. He uses this expression, first, to describe the ontological foundation of reality, which is found in the aboriginal unity of self and world. We are able to experience this unity both in episodes of perception or contemplation that are prior to reflection as well as in the activity of our absorbed coping with things; he also calls this “pure experience.” Subject and object come to be differentiated from out of this original union through ordinary, discursively structured and reflectively self-aware experience. We are able, nonetheless, to recapture that unity by cultivating a mode of activity or way of being in the world which overcomes subject object-dualism in and through what he (again) names “pure experience.” Thus the same term, pure experience, is used to refer to the ontological structure of reality, the ‘always already’ direct experience of it which we have in moments of pre-reflective immediacy, and the highly refined achievement of an experiential and active participation in that same reality. To appreciate the full import of these claims, we will need in what follows to reconstruct these views in extensive detail.

§

In the preface to *Inquiry* Nishida rejects the basic model of most modern epistemology and ontology: a self-subsisting subject and an independent reality from which this subject is detached, which it perceives and knows through mental representations which mediate the divide between these distinct domains, so that in this way it “has” experiences. Instead Nishida views experience as an ontological foundation from out of which the subjects and objects of experience emerge: “For many years I wanted to explain all things on the basis of pure experience as the sole reality [...] Over time I came to realize that it is not that experience exists because there is an individual, but that an individual exists because there is experience. I thus arrived at the idea that experience is more fundamental than individual differences, and in this way I was able to avoid

solipsism.”³⁶⁵ Nishida’s contention here about the status of the individual as an aspect of the world rather than as an entity standing over against it will be gradually and more fully articulated over the course of our account. The other major claim in this passage is the identification of reality with pure experience, which Nishida later equates with direct experience or the phenomena of consciousness: “reality only consists of phenomena of our consciousness, namely, the facts of direct experience.”³⁶⁶ Moreover, direct experience “means to know facts just as they are, to know in accordance with facts by completely relinquishing one’s own fabrications.”³⁶⁷ Despite appearances, he warns us against understanding his position as a form of idealism: “Our world consists of the facts called phenomena of consciousness, and all of the various philosophical and scientific systems are no more than explanations of these facts. Some people might misunderstand “phenomena of consciousness” as indicating that the only existing thing is the mind, which is separated from matter. The gist of my argument is that true reality is neither a phenomenon of consciousness nor a material phenomenon.”³⁶⁸

It might be useful here to compare the quality and immediacy of direct or pure experience with the self-evident certainty and structure of the transcendental-phenomenological sphere in Husserl.³⁶⁹ To attain the certainty of this self-evidence, we are required to first suspend judgment about the existence of the world (since I cannot know whether what appears in consciousness actually exists, as in the case of illusions or hallucinations). And although our ordinary, everyday self has an innate tendency to think according to the natural standpoint, in which things in the world outside the self exist as objects and the self exists as the subject facing them, when we suspend all judgments concerning the relationship between the being of the self and that of things,

³⁶⁵ Nishida Kitarō, *Inquiry into the Good*, trans. Masao Abe and Christopher Ives (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), xxx (hereafter, IG); Nishida Kitarō, *Zen no kenkyū*, NKZ 1, 4.

³⁶⁶ Nishida, IG, 42; NKZ 1, 52.

³⁶⁷ Nishida, IG, 3; NKZ 1, 9.

³⁶⁸ Nishida, IG, 44; NKZ 1, 54.

³⁶⁹ It seems relevant to note here that it was Nishida who first introduced Husserl into Japan.

a stream of immediate, self-evidently certain perception will be disclosed, which like direct or pure experience is prior to the positing of a subject-object relation.

Unlike Husserl, however, Nishida does not hesitate to make claims about the metaphysical status of this stream of direct experience, identifying it – rather than the ‘objective’ entities of the third person standpoint – as the ontological foundation of reality. This foundation is the pre-reflective dimension of the first person point of view, a viewpoint, moreover, which cannot be objectified because it is an untranscendable horizon of being before which all objects appear. This move is reminiscent of the transformative appropriation of transcendental phenomenology by Heidegger. Like Heidegger’s recuperation of pre-objective being, the legitimation of a viewpoint internal to experience endows the appearances with a kind of ontological dignity, returning us to a richer, pre-modern conception of experience and restoring a certain fullness to being.³⁷⁰

In addition to being a description of reality, the term “pure experience” is also used to designate a certain mode of engagement with, and awareness of, this reality. Nishida opens *Inquiry* with an initial depiction of pure experience in this sense:

³⁷⁰ This interpretation of pure experience in terms of the recovery of pre-objective being is confirmed elsewhere by Nishida:

Nature conceived of as an objective reality totally independent of our subjectivity is an abstract concept, not true reality [...] true grass and true trees are grass and trees with living color and forms [...] only when we separate the subjective activity from the living reality can we think of grass and trees as purely objective nature. By taking this idea to the extreme, we arrive at the idea of nature in the strictest sense as construed by scientists. This idea is the most abstract and most removed from the true state of reality (IG, 68; NKZ 1, 82).

Or again:

Gustav Fechner said that one morning, while relaxing in a chair in the Rosenthal in Leipzig, he gazed in the bright sunlight at a spring meadow with fragrant flowers, singing birds, and flitting butterflies and became engrossed in what he called the perspective of the daytime, in which truth is things just as they are, as opposed to the colorless and soundless perspective of night found in the natural sciences [...] since long ago I have had the idea that true reality must be actuality just as it is and that the so-called material world is something conceptualized and abstracted out of it (IG, xxxiii; NKZ 1, 7).

by *pure* I am referring to the state of experience just as it is without the least addition of deliberative discrimination. The moment of seeing a color or hearing a sound, for example, is prior not only to the thought that the color or sound is the activity of an external object or that one is sensing it, but also to the judgment of what the color or sound might be. In this regard, pure experience is identical with direct experience. When one directly experience's one's state of consciousness, there is not yet a subject or an object, and knowing and its object are completely unified.³⁷¹

There is much in this passage that calls for further explanation; we can begin with Nishida's claim that pure experience is identical with "direct" experience. "Direct experience" can be illustrated with the phenomenon of being engrossed in something. Here there is an immediacy in which there is only the pure presence of something to consciousness without an awareness of the self as the subject of consciousness or an awareness of things as objects of consciousness. And this means that in such experiences there is a kind of unity of self and world, knower and known, experiencer and experienced. Although this can be a momentary phenomenon, direct experience is not limited to a single focus of attention; it can also take the form of a perceptual train, so that without engaging in the explicit activity of reflection, we are able to shift our attention while remaining in a state of absorption.³⁷² Examples of this might include watching the passing scenery from the window of a bus, building a model, or solving a math problem. Direct or pure experiences are also a component of the initial perceptual stages of many experiences, such as "the moment of seeing a color or hearing a sound"; these have the same quality of pre-reflective immediacy that is found in the more extensive and structured episodes of direct experience in the previous examples.

Nishida contends that the unity of pure experience is broken up by deliberative discrimination, or judgment. This is first because, according to him, judgments establish and express relations between present moments of consciousness (such as the sensation of redness) and other, past moments of consciousness (such as similar sensations of redness had in the past).

³⁷¹ Nishida, IG, 3-4; NKZ 1, 9.

³⁷² Nishida, IG, 6; NKZ 1, 11.

“For example, when one interprets an auditory sensation to be the sound of a bell, one has merely established the sensation’s position relative to past experiences.”³⁷³ Because judgments involve external relations, they take one away from the present immediacy and unity of pure experience. Second, judgment in the form of reflection on experience transforms a situation in which “the presence of conscious phenomena and our consciousness of them are straightforwardly one and the same, with no interval for the subject to be distinguished from object,”³⁷⁴ into one in which there is a reflective self-awareness of the self as subject of consciousness and the thing or world as object of consciousness. “In direct experience there is only an independent, self-sufficient event, with neither a subject that sees nor an object that is seen. Just like when we become enraptured by exquisite music, forget ourselves and everything around us, and experience the universe as one melodious sound, true reality presents itself in the moment of direct experience. Should the thought arise that the music is the vibration of air or that one is listening to music, at that point one has already separated oneself from true reality because that thought derives from reflection and thinking divorced from the true state of the reality of the music.”³⁷⁵

In short, for pure or direct experience, each perception only contains instances of presence. To take Nishida’s example, when I perceive music, there is only pure presence-of-music, nowhere in this perception does one discover a self-subsisting subject or object. Only subsequently, in reflection, are the self as the perceiving subject of this experience and the music as the perceived object of it reified, so that subject and object, which are actually abstractions from the unified experience of presence-of-music, are taken to be concrete and real. “The reason we distinguish object and act is that we have reflected on ourself, thus objectifying it and

³⁷³ Nishida, IG, 9; NKZ 1, 16.

³⁷⁴ Quoted in Nishitani Keiji, *Nishida Kitarō*, trans. Yamamoto Seisaku, James W. Heisig, and D.S. Clarke (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 97.

³⁷⁵ Nishida, IG, 48; NKZ 1, 59-60.

attributing various acts to its center.”³⁷⁶ In this way, “the distinction between subject and object is a relative form that arises when one has lost the unity of experience.”³⁷⁷

The ordinary constellation of subject as experiencer and object as experienced is a “relative form” of experience, then, and is set in opposition to the unity pure experience, which Nishida characterizes as “the most refined type of experience.”³⁷⁸ This suggests that such an experience is one that can be cultivated. Yet the forms that this cultivation can take and the goal of pure experience that they aim at need not be anything extraordinary: “the standpoint of pure experience [or] the state of oneness of subject and object, a fusion of knowing and willing,” he says, “can be found not only in the fine arts but in all of our disciplined behavior; it is an extremely ordinary phenomenon.”³⁷⁹ He gives as examples of the way in which training in a particular discipline can result in such experiences a musician’s playing of a piece that has been mastered through practice, or a climber’s all out effort at the ascent of a cliff.³⁸⁰ We can, in effect, recapture the unity of pure experience through habituation in such practices because, Yuasa asserts, “as one trains, the movement of the body and mind gradually come into agreement.” As Yuasa goes on to explain further

the body loses its heaviness and becomes unopposed to the mind's functioning. The body qua object is gradually made, as it were, subjective. At the same time, my mind comes to lose its character of being a subject opposed to objects. In this way, the body as object is subjectivized and mind as subject loses its opposition to objects; it gives up being an ego-consciousness. It enters into the state of [...] what may be called “the self without being a self” [...] [In this manner] Nishida claims that the ambiguity between subjectivity and objectivity disappears.³⁸¹

We are now able here to make plain what is only implicit in *Inquiry*, viz., that the development of habits and skills transforms our relation to the world by facilitating a far fuller integration of mind

³⁷⁶ Nishida Kitarō, *Art and Morality*, trans. David A. Dilworth and Valdo H. Viglielmo (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1973), 10; Nishida Kitarō, *Geijitsu to dōtoku*, NKZ 3, 248.

³⁷⁷ Nishida, IG, 31-32; NKZ 1, 42.

³⁷⁸ Nishida, IG, 4; NKZ 1, 9.

³⁷⁹ Nishida, IG, 32; NKZ 1, 43.

³⁸⁰ See Nishida, IG, 6; NKZ 1, 11.

³⁸¹ Yuasa, TB, 72; YYZ 14, 191.

and body, interior and exterior, self and world than that encountered in our everyday experiences of unskilled or unhabituated interactions with things, and that this unity of mind and body, self and world, is an *achievement*.

Yet this recovery of the unity of pure experience does not amount to a simple return to the kind of direct experiences seen in the earlier examples of the initial moments of perception, the contemplation of things, or the absorption in an ordinary task. In speaking of the acquisition of habits and skills which dispose us to respond in optimal ways to the solicitations of particular situations, we are speaking of actions that have become unthinking or unthought through, almost unintentional, yet not for all of that mechanical: “‘Sensitivity’ acquired through discipline is not mere mechanical habit.”³⁸² Nishida attempts to capture this phenomenon in *Inquiry* with the term “intellectual intuition,” a concept he will later reject as too psychological, as failing to convey the active and embodied character of this experience. Much later in his career he will hit upon a more satisfactory expression in the term “acting-intuition.” But already he makes clear with this notion that the recuperation of pure experience in such activity is distinct from this experience in its more pedestrian forms: “Intellectual intuition is just that which deepens and enlarges our state of pure experience.”³⁸³ What this signifies above all, I suggest, is that the skilled activities which embody and enact acting-intuition, unlike our quotidian episodes of direct experience, are characterized by an active (though not in any ordinary sense) and participatory relation to the process of pure experience itself.

James Heisig puts this point briefly and well in summing up the standpoint of acting-intuition: “the idea of a kind of knowing without a knowing subject could not mean a sort of passivity or quietism [...] It had to be experienced as a working in which ones participates fully aware but without setting oneself up in the position of either passive spectator or active controller

³⁸² Nishida, *Art and Morality*, op. cit., 32; *NKZ* 3, 282.

³⁸³ Nishida, *IG*, 32; *NKZ* 1, 42.

of what is wrought.”³⁸⁴ This will mean that as the bond between self and world is strengthened through the acquisition of a behavior pattern that shows itself in increased facility of performance, the ordinary relationship between acting and intuition undergoes a reversal: acting becomes intuitive and intuition becomes active. These are not two completely separate events; rather, they are two dimensions of the same phenomenon, since in this experience acting and intuition, active and passive, mind and body, self and world come together in the immediacy of action. Here my actions take the form of intuitive, prereflective, and spontaneous responses to the changing situation with which I am engaged and into which I am integrated. Moreover, my reception of things is simultaneously active, such that the self is grasped by things; in my acting, there is a kind of self-forgetting, so that I am ‘being acted’ by the world. Here intuition is no longer the simple intuition of sense that is found in ordinary experience, it has become something like a creative intuiting. Yuasa observes that the champion gymnast, the concert pianist, or the consummate actor, for instance, have some experience of this; in their most developed form, Nishida maintains that the performances of such people begins to approach something like inspiration.³⁸⁵ One thinks here of the solo improvisation of the great jazz musician, or the unorthodox and so unexpected but successful movements of a skilled athlete in a game, or, to take Nishida’s own example, “when inspiration arises in a painter and the brush moves spontaneously, a unifying reality is operating behind this complex activity. Its transitions are not unconscious, for they are the development and completion of a single thing [...] from the standpoint of pure experience it is actually the state of oneness of subject and object, a fusion of knowing and willing. In the mutual forgetting of the self and the object, the object does not move the self and the self does not move the object. There is simply one world, one scene.”³⁸⁶ With this reversal of

³⁸⁴ James W. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 53.

³⁸⁵ See Yuasa, TB, 200; *YYZ* 14, 325. See Nishida, IG, 32; *NKZ* 1, 43.

³⁸⁶ Nishida, IG, 32; *NKZ* 1, 43.

acting and intuition, what is objective becomes subjective, and what is subjective, objective. The duality of subject and object are overcome as each ‘loses’ its identity in the unity of acting-intuition.

Nishida can be understood as viewing this experience as an accomplishment, as we noted earlier; more than this, he sees this achievement as a model of what experience in its most authentic form can be. Pure experience, then, must become a goal for us not merely for the sake of attaining virtuosity in our physical engagements with things or in our athletic or aesthetic performances, but because acting-intuition as an existential modality exhibits “a deep grasp of life.”³⁸⁷ This will mean, finally, that the fuller integration of mind and body, of consciousness and thing, self and world in pure experience has great intellectual, moral, and even spiritual significance. Thus “when a scholar achieves a new idea, the moral person a new motive, the artist a new ideal, the religious person a new awakening,”³⁸⁸ there is the same creative intuition and the same self-overcoming present as in other instances of pure experience.

This disclosure of the full significance of acting-intuition as encompassing a range of intellectual, aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual experiences raises questions about how it is that such activities can open us up to episodes of pure experience, since they do not self-evidently involve the kinds of physical training that we have already examined. Nishida himself has little to say about this matter, but it is apparent that we will need to speak in more expansive terms than we have up to now about the possibilities of self-formation, shifting our focus from sensorimotor development to the broader cultivation of human fullness. Although we will not be able to give detailed attention to each of these modes of self-fashioning, we can make some general points concerning this issue. First, each of these forms of engagement, like the other instances of acting-intuition, is developed more completely through a process of habituation (as Aristotle had already

³⁸⁷ Nishida, IG, 34; *NKZ* 1, 45.

³⁸⁸ Nishida, IG, 32; *NKZ* 1, 42.

recognized in the case of the *phronimos*) or through the acquisition of particular skills (as in the example of the scholar or intellectual), or some combination of both (as in the practice of meditation as a form of mental cultivation in East Asian cultures). Second, what all of these practices have in common is that they take us away from the smallness of the self and its concerns towards something much larger and more significant—above all in the shape of our participation in pure experience.

IV. Perception and Expression: The Self-Determination of the Whole

At this point it may be useful to briefly take in the full expanse of what Nishida has claimed thus far. His contention has been that reality is, at its ground, a unity of the subjective and the objective, consciousness and thing, and that we are able to glimpse the nature of this bond through episodes of pure experience. The dissolution of pure experience in periods of self-awareness and reflection and in acts of discrimination and judgment, which naturally arise in the course of ordinary living, accounts for the fluctuation of the subject and object poles of experience between differentiation and unity. Yet it is also possible to us to retrieve, through physical, aesthetic, ethical, and religious practices, the aboriginal unity of pure experience in a fuller and more profound form.

Through this explanatory metaphysical framework, then, Nishida shows that the ontological continuity of self and world takes the form of a connection which is changing and changeable, and so one which can be cultivated or neglected by us. In this regard his position constitutes an independent elaboration of an idea that has been at the center of phenomenology from Husserl through Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, namely, the intertwining, and hence indivisibility, of consciousness and object. In this final section we will focus on the implications of Nishida's particular amplification of this theme for the hermeneutic dimension of

phenomenology. One of the central claims of thinkers in this tradition has been that perception is always interpretive. Whereas the development of this basic hermeneutic insight has focused on the role of the linguistic, historical, and bodily sedimentation present in all perception, Nishida's work makes it possible for us to see the ways in which self-cultivation plays a role in constituting perceptual experience.

Heidegger, Gadamer, and Merleau-Ponty share with Nishida a methodological starting point in a first person standpoint, in the world as it appears to consciousness. But unlike the generalized body-subject of Merleau-Ponty or even the "mineness" [*Jemeinigkeit*] of Dasein—i.e. that it is *I* who is in each case Dasein, Nishida begins with a much more concrete and *individualized* dimension of subjectivity, namely, the overall orientation, sensibility, and virtues of the individual that emerge, not only from out of the public context of goods, commitments, and ideals which define a society, as Heidegger has it, but also from out of the life history of a specific individual. If Heidegger has emphasized the ways in which we are both subjects of and subjected to a larger historical and cultural world already given and made, Nishida shows us in this regard the ways in which we are also subjects of our own projects of self-formation.

The fuller integration of self and world at which such projects aim result in our experiencing a different world, that is, in our experiencing the world in a different way than before. Thus for the experienced and highly skilled mountain climber, the cliff before him takes on a very different appearance from the face it shows to the casual observer. For him its features brim with practical significance, its contours spelling out what the terrain affords and does not afford, soliciting certain actions and discouraging others. Perhaps even more significantly, the artist and the morally mature person, too – to take two of Nishida's other examples – inhabit a different world from those who lack a highly refined aesthetic or ethical sensibility. The artist might be said to have a greater awareness of, and sensitivity to, the many forms that beauty takes, and, as John McDowell observes, more than others, "a kind person knows what it is like to be

confronted with the requirement of kindness.”³⁸⁹ What these examples suggest, then, is that the overall orientation, sensibility, and virtues of the experiencing subject, like the language, history, cultural practices, and lived body with and within which he or she finds himself or herself, can also be determinative for what appears in our experience.

In substantiating this assertion, we can begin by pointing out that these three examples illustrate the fact that not all human beings are equally perceptive, that the same people notice different things or see the same things differently. Yet not every perceptual experience is as valid as any other; some perceptions are better than others because they are richer or more penetrating, because they are more accurate or encompass a wider range of phenomena, that is, because they do justice to what is perceived. Those who are not capable of a certain hospitality to the phenomena, in contrast, are in danger of distorting or even of overlooking it all together, as for example in the case of a developer who fails to notice how her construction will mar the beauty of the landscape, or in the person who cannot see that his friend is troubled. A fundamental question for our claim, then, is the question of what determines a ‘good’ perception.

For some initial guidance we might turn to Adriaan Peperzak, who maintains that a good perceiver must possess some basic epistemological virtues, including an open and attentive stance as well as a humility before what appears, i.e., a posture of allowing things to ‘speak’ for themselves rather than forcing them into preconceived patterns. Such a person would also purify and refine her perceptual capacities through practice, self-apperceptive evaluation and modification of responses, and by maintaining an openness to other modes of perception from other epochs, cultures, and individuals, as well as by critically comparing these various interpretations of experience.³⁹⁰

³⁸⁹ John McDowell, “Virtue And Reason” *The Monist* 62 (1979): 331-50.

³⁹⁰ See Adriaan Peperzak, *Elements of Ethics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 100-108.

Moreover, a genuine hospitality to the phenomena also depends on the ability to sensitively deploy the emotions in perception, because affectivity, too, can disclose certain truths about the world. It should not be difficult to see there are at least some aspects of the world that are only revealed by exercising a certain kind of sensitivity (analogous to a perceptual capacity) that is affective as well as cognitive. For instance, it seems doubtful that a dangerous situation could be understood as dangerous by a pure cognition free of any affective element, because one needs also to *feel* that a situation is dangerous in order to grasp its danger. Or again, there are certainly people who are emotionally insensitive enough that they cannot sense when someone they are talking to is in pain or distress, or, less dramatically, merely uncomfortable. In both cases, a knowledge of how things stand in the world requires the exercise of a particular kind of sensitivity, a sensitivity to danger in the first example, and to other people's emotions in the second.

The ability to exercise the epistemic virtues and an affective sensitivity to particular sorts of things in the world are clearly capacities that admit of greater and lesser degrees, and a very great capacity belongs to the sensibility of a particular sort of person. A highly refined sensitivity to danger or to the psychological situation of other people, then, will not only require the engagement of cognitive and affective faculties, it will also be the adventurer or hunter who has a greater awareness of danger than others, and the psychologist or novelist who has a particularly keen sense of the inner life of those around him.

One becomes a particular sort of person not only by being formed by the upbringing and education that one has received but also by developing certain interests for oneself, not only due to the experiences one has undergone but also through a certain way of appropriating those experiences, not only through the training and skills one has acquired but also by the forming in oneself of a particular mode of consciousness and way of being in the world. My claim is that particular modes of self-formation result in the development of a certain sensibility, and that this,

coupled with the capacity to exercise the epistemic virtues and accurately deploy affectivity as a form of cognition, opens up a fuller experience of the world.

If we return to Nishida's examples, we can see that to the extent a highly developed sensitivity to the aesthetic or moral features of the world is part of the sensibility of an artistic or virtuous person, a wider, richer array of the world's aesthetic and moral phenomena will appear to people who are artistic or virtuous. So, for example, an art critic can see things in a painting or a music critic things in a piece of music that are revealed to him by his affective sensibility that the inexperienced or untrained eye or ear cannot perceive at first glance. We know that there are many cases of criticism that are not merely a matter of interpretation or subjective projection because we ourselves can come to see what there is to be seen (or, what amounts to the same thing, feel what there is to be felt)—something we hadn't seen before, something that, although outside the economy of our interests, we can become responsive to—through the guidance of the critic. This must be so or else criticism in any meaningful sense would not be possible.³⁹¹ In the case of morality, one need only consider the moral blindness of the psychopath to see that it is plausible to maintain that the perception of what is morally salient in a situation requires an affective disposition as well as a concern for, and interest in, what is moral.

We have, out of necessity, ranged so far over such a multiplicity of topics that it may be difficult to get into view the precise relation between the two essential and interrelated claims that have emerged in these final sections, viz., first, that a fuller integration between the self and the world can be achieved in the pure experience of acting-intuition through certain forms of self-cultivation; second, that the being of the perceiver is complicit in that which is perceived, so that this kind of self-cultivation can also result in perceptions that do full justice to what we perceive.

³⁹¹ This general idea is developed at length by Christopher Dustin in "What are Critics For? Objectivity and Aesthetic Value," *Idealistic Studies* 27 (1997): 113-130.

It will be the task of this section to show the way which these two claims intersect in Nishida's theory of expression.

For Nishida, all human activity is, in a certain sense, expressive. This is a claim which must be understood against the background of his attempt to grasp human action from the standpoint of pure experience understood not only as a form of awareness, but also in its other important meaning as a description of the ontological foundation of reality, and so the ground from out of which subjects and objects first emerge. In the essay "Expressive Activity" (1925), Nishida asserts that "not only are what acts and what is acted upon one, but we can think the place of acting to be one with what acts and what is acted upon."³⁹² From the perspective of pure experience, the interaction of subject and object constitute aspects of a unitary event such that the very place of this event must also be included within it. Ten years later, in the essay "The Standpoint of Acting Intuition," he makes more fully explicit the view broadly entailed by this: "The thing is not mutually opposed to the situation, it is within the situation. Natural scientists abstract from the self-determination of such a whole and think the relation of thing and thing [...]. The acting thing is always an acting thing vis-à-vis the whole; indeed, what acts is at the same time enacted."³⁹³ Hence, "the fact that a single event emerges is the fact that the world determines the world itself; the whole determines the whole itself." In short, our activity can be understood in terms of the activity of the world's self-determination. This is a strange and difficult image, yet insofar as self and world are continuous, one can grasp this as a metaphysical possibility—although, as we shall see, a possibility which is realized in its fullest form in the integration of self and world in acting-intuition.

³⁹² Nishida Kitarō, "Expressive Activity" trans. William Haver in *Ontology of Production: Three Essays*, op. cit., 58 (hereafter EA); Nishida Kitarō, "Hyōgen sayō," in *Hataraku mono kara miru mono e*, NKZ 4, 165-166.

³⁹³ Nishida, SAI, 71-72; NKZ 8, 118.

This vision also brings in its train a radical departure from the ordinary way in which consciousness is understood. “We consider our selves or our consciousness to be separated from the world [...] The philosophy of modern subjectivism takes the self, or something called consciousness, as its point of departure and tries to view the world from the self, tries to think from interiority to the transcendental; but never is the self itself, as such, problematized in any profound way. But it is what is called the self or consciousness that is thought as the singular determination of the world that itself determines itself.”³⁹⁴ From the standpoint of pure experience, each manifestation of consciousness is a single point of the world’s self-determination. We are to understand this, according to Nishida, as a unity in dispersal, as “something like Pascal’s infinite sphere without circumference in which everywhere becomes the center.”³⁹⁵ Our action, then, “does not come forth from the depths of the abstract conscious self; in the manner of the unity of subject and object, singularly, it comes from the world that itself determines itself; it comes from the depths of the world that itself determines itself expressively.”³⁹⁶ On this view, consciousness and its activities –including the acts that proceed from it – are part of a much vaster process of *expression*.

To understand why Nishida maintains that the world (or, as he also calls it in the passage quoted earlier, the whole) determines itself through expression, i.e., that this is its *mode* of determination, we need to provide a brief overview of some important revisions he makes in his later work to the original structure of acting and intuition. Initially, Nishida seemed to imply that the sensible objects of intuition in pure experience are prior to the conceptual meaning supplied by judgments, and even goes so far as to claim that pure experience is “devoid of meaning.”³⁹⁷ But he also equivocates here, noting later in the *Inquiry* that “in facts of direct experience, there is

³⁹⁴ Nishida, SAI, 72; NKZ 8, 118.

³⁹⁵ Nishida, SAI, 100; NKZ 8, 157.

³⁹⁶ Nishida, SAI, 91, NKZ 8, 145.

³⁹⁷ Nishida, IG, 8; NKZ 1, 15.

no pure sensation [...] no matter how simple, perception is not at all passive. It necessarily includes active—constructive—elements.³⁹⁸ Much later, he will see these in what he acknowledges as the interpretive nature of perception. All perception is interpretive, he concludes, because the very possibility of meaningful experience relies on language and culture, that is, the given is always given as always already understood.³⁹⁹ Hence he comes to speak about the circuit of intuition and action as one in which “concretely there is no action divorced from understanding, and there is nothing of the understanding apart from action.”⁴⁰⁰ This is because the self always finds itself embedded in the “historical-social world,” and this is “more than mere given data. What is given, is formed.”⁴⁰¹

Nishida emphasizes above all the way in which the given is formed by our activity on and with it. He sees the ontological significance of human activity in its *productive* character. “Human activity is productive activity [...] Activity in the true sense occurs when our behavior, or productive output, has an objective component.” To illustrate this point, he uses the example of carpenters, poets, sculptors, and artists, whose activity is objectively embodied in the buildings and works of art that help compose the human world. Thus, it is not that a person “just acts subjectively; rather, from the objective side, he is also acted upon by the thing.” We are acted upon by the things we have made, they shape who we are and become and give context to our agency. Intuition, then, far from being the mere intake of sensations without meaning, becomes a kind of understanding of an environment which has both been made by us (as well as those who preceded us) and so acts on us in our reception of it, while also being something we can change in

³⁹⁸ Nishida, IG, 47-48; NKZ 1, 58.

³⁹⁹ “We must depend on language even when we construct the concept of the thing [...] We might even say something like the conjunction of thinking and perception depends on the activity of verbal expression. For perception to become the content of thinking, it must be first of all be rendered sensible or meaningful by the activity of verbal expression. When one verbally expresses to oneself that red is red, one acquires citizenship in the world of experience” Nishida, EA, 54; NKZ 4, 160.

⁴⁰⁰ Nishida, SAI, 97; NKZ 8, 152.

⁴⁰¹ Nishida Kitarō, “The Unity of Opposites,” trans. Robert Schinzinger in *Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothingness* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1958), 169-170; Nishida Kitarō, “Zettai mujunteki jikodoitsu,” NKZ 9, 153-154.

our acting on it. Hence we continually move in our being “from the formed towards the forming.”⁴⁰²

As “formed” our being is historical; as “forming,” our actions ‘make’ history—but this also means at the same time that “our intentional action arises from the depths of history”⁴⁰³ such that we are “an organ for the self-expression of historical life.”⁴⁰⁴ This is to say that the historical world, too, determines itself through me insofar as I constitute a point of the world’s self-determination. Through certain modes of intentional activity, then, we both contribute to and are ‘enacted’ by the social environment, culture, and tradition of our world, that is, we *express* it. Our intentional actions are both those of agents and subjects who make their world while also being subjected to and expressing the world they are a part of. In this regard, culture and tradition are enabling conditions for the constitution of subjectivity. Our activity discloses a self, but it simultaneously discloses a world as well, as Heidegger has shown. Hence I am and can be a “Romantic” writer to the degree that I also express the historical context and culture of Romanticism within which find myself.⁴⁰⁵ What Nishida calls “productive” activity both contributes to *and* expresses our cultural and socio-historical world.

Yet this expression is not merely the articulation of a human world. The unbroken ontological continuity of the self with the whole, the claim that “true reality” is neither a phenomenon of consciousness nor a material phenomenon, and the status of the embodied self as both consciousness and thing such that “the actual world is at once subjective and objective,”⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰² Nishida, “The Unity of Opposites,” 169; *NKZ* 9, 153.

⁴⁰³ Nishida, *SAI*, 92; *NKZ* 8, 146.

⁴⁰⁴ Nishida, *LL*, 141; *NKZ* 8, 336.

⁴⁰⁵ “The expressive operation that expressively determines the self itself can be thought as our intentional action; all of our intentional action belongs to expressive activity. This, then, is the fact that the expressive world itself determines itself. What we call our active self is a singularity in the historical world; our intentional action arises from the depths of history,” Nishida (*SAI*, 92; *NKZ* 8, 146).

⁴⁰⁶ Nishida, *SAI*, 75; *NKZ* 8, 122.

allow Nishida to understand human activity as the self-expression of the whole, such that “the physical world is grounded in the expressive world. Nature is within history.”⁴⁰⁷

The self-determining whole or world which expressively determines itself in and through the activity of the individual is, as we have seen, pure experience as that aboriginal unity of self and world as an ontological ground or encompassing whole from out of which subject and object emerge. In the course of ordinary experience, this whole dynamically differentiates itself through human judgment and reflection into self-conscious subject of experience, on the one side, and experienced objects, on the other. Nishida, however, fails to carefully and explicitly distinguish between the nature and significance of expression as the activity of this whole from out of which the subject and object poles of experience develop, and expression as reflecting the restoration of this wholeness in pure experience understood as an achievement in and through acting-intuition. Nishida links expression in this latter sense both to acting-intuition and, as we shall see, to truth.⁴⁰⁸ Since every act is not performed acting-intuitively, every experience not pure, and every expression not an expression of truth, we must make a clear distinction where Nishida does not, namely, between expressive acts which belong to ordinary experience but, seen from the standpoint of pure experience as ontological foundation, also constitute the way in which the whole determines itself, and expressive acts which take the form of acting-intuition and hence constitute the self-determination of the whole in and through the *re-capture* of pure experience.

A brief, but comprehensive, view of the latter form of self-determination appears in nascent form in an obscure passage in Nishida’s essay “Expressive Activity,” written just after *Inquiry*: “The content of the experience of the color or sound that are the objects of our sense perception, seen as direct or unmediated experience” is “nothing other than the spontaneous

⁴⁰⁷ Nishida, SAI, 100; NKZ 8, 157.

⁴⁰⁸ In several places Nishida explicitly equates the activity of expression with the achievement of pure experience. To take only one instance among others: “But when things become expressions of life as things in the historical world, we see the self in the thing, regard the thing as the self, and think of the I and the thing as one” (LL, 145; NKZ 8, 343).

presentation of the experience itself of color, the experience itself of sound. When we speak of “spontaneous presentation” [*jihatsujiten*, 自発自展], a sense of “activity” is already implied, but in this case it is that only color sees color itself, that only sound hears sound itself [...].⁴⁰⁹ The direct experience that Nishida speaks of here is, of course, pure experience. The suggestion here appears to be that, in pure experience, the world apprehends and experiences itself. Later, in “The Standpoint of Active Intuition,” he explicitly describes this process in terms of the self-determination of the whole: “The self-determination of such a world is, as I have already said, simply to see, to hear.”⁴¹⁰

This sweeping vision will find an unintended echo both in its audacity and its attempt to grasp human perception from the standpoint of the whole some forty years later in Merleau-Ponty’s image of the turning of the Flesh (*la chair*) back onto itself: “there is vision, touch, when a certain visible, a certain tangible, turns back upon the whole of the visible, the whole of the tangible, of which it is a part.”⁴¹¹ Whereas Merleau-Ponty proffers this description as an account of experience in general, in the passages above Nishida seems to imply that this is a depiction of experience only in its most cultivated form. Yet given that he has also portrayed ordinary experience in terms of the expressive self-determination of the whole, and inasmuch as he has insisted on the continuity and, at bottom, unity, of self and world, however fluid, we must see that for Nishida that this is a vision which encompasses both ordinary and “pure” experience. The difference between the two would appear to be that in the achievement of pure experience in acting-intuition, the world or the whole apprehends and experiences itself *in a certain way*, that is, this apprehension is somehow a fuller, truer mode of experience. This, in turn, will mean that our account will also need to differentiate between expression as the self-determination of the

⁴⁰⁹ Nishida, EA, 61-62; NKZ 4, 170.

⁴¹⁰ Nishida, SAI, 73; NKZ 8, 120.

⁴¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 139.

whole in acting-intuition and the expressive self-determination of the whole in ordinary experience.

Expression in the former sense can appear, to take three of Nishida's earlier examples, in and *as* athletic, aesthetic, and moral modes of engagement and action. This is perhaps most clearly seen in artistic performances requiring athletic skill, such as those of the professional ballerina or the concert pianist, but even in activity that would seem not to involve this kind of physicality, we find the same process of the coming together of self and other, of consciousness and world. Towards the end of *Inquiry*, Nishida illustrates this point with a portrait of the wider metaphysical import of the link between certain ethical and aesthetic stances and the 'loss' of the self in acting-intuition.

we find that truly good conduct is neither to make objectivity follow subjectivity nor to make subjectivity follow objectivity. We reach the quintessence of good conduct only when subject and object merge, self and things forget each other, and all that exists is the activity of the sole reality of the universe. At that point we can say that things move the self or the self moves things, that Sesshū painted nature or that nature painted itself through Sesshū. There is no fundamental distinction between self and things, for just as the objective world is a reflection of the self, so the self is a reflection of the objective world.⁴¹²

The self-forgetting which Nishida describes resembles, but is not identical with, the way in which episodes of feeling 'self-conscious' become less and less frequent as one's sensorimotor skills develop. Though the manner in which the subjective and the objective come together in this case does not involve the achievement of a greater degree of unity between mind and body, it nevertheless entails a more complete integration of the self with its world; there is a kind of self-overcoming here that makes possible the fuller coordination of the self with others and with the world through a recognition of, and a responsiveness to, the claims which other people and entities make on us. And insofar as the whole apprehends and experiences itself, one might say that there is a presentation of the whole to *itself* so that expression becomes this kind of self-

⁴¹² Nishida, IG, 135; NKZ 1, 156.

presentation in acting-intuition of appropriate ethical and aesthetic responses to what the thing or situation calls for.

What is to the point for our purposes, however, is the discursive (and non-aesthetic) linguistic form such expressions can take. As articulations of the fullest forms of experience, linguistic expression in this sense is so broad as to cover literally anything that can be encountered. Perhaps the most useful way to approach a phenomenon which is so all-encompassing would be to analyze that which lies at the foundations of most experience and linguistic expression, namely, perception. A brief glance here at Aristotle's theory of perception, interestingly enough, can help us make further sense of these issues by way of comparison. In the *De Anima* these large and radical themes come together in a surprisingly coherent fashion. Perception in Aristotle is a complex affair involving active and passive elements in both perceiver and perceived. There is an active discernment, or *hexis*, in perception that attends to and responds to the way that things reach out to and 'speak' to us, such that we can describe perception as an active mode of being acted upon.⁴¹³ This is an encounter which can lead to truth, because things lend themselves to being perceived and articulated in a truthful way, on the one hand, and because our capacity to perceive belongs to the things perceived, on the other. One finds evidence for the claim that things lend themselves to truthful articulation in the conditioning of both the perceiver and the thing perceived by *logos*, so that there is a cooperation and consonance between them (*De Anima*, 426a29-30). The presence of this *logos* in the perceived and the power of perception can account for the always already attuned perception of animals. And like them, at a certain level of perception, we too are always already attuned to things, as for example in the perception of color. This is because our perception was built to perceive color, our power of perception belongs to the things perceived (*De Anima*, II.2).

⁴¹³ The interpretation of perception in Aristotle here follows Christopher Long's reading, which he presented in his 2008 spring semester lecture course on Aristotle at the Pennsylvania State University.

Perception for Aristotle as for Nishida, then, is neither simply an active construction of things from the side of the subject nor a passive reception of things pressed upon us from the side of the object. Rather, for both thinkers it seems possible to imagine a certain kind of perceiver who, cultivating his powers of active discernment in perception, could come, through an active mode of being acted upon, i.e., what Nishida has called acting-intuition, to see things as they are, as they ‘want’ to be seen. This would not be a “view from nowhere” on things; it would be limited, finite, and human; yet this need not mean that perception must inevitably be a purely relative take on the world that misses or misconstrues its objects since, in the unity of subject and object, of consciousness and thing, it becomes possible to see that the perceiver and his capacity to perceive both belong to the world itself.

This account of perception as the cultivation of an active mode of being acted upon enables us to distinguish between those linguistic expressions which articulate such perceptions and other instances of the expression of something in language. The former is expression as the self-determination of the whole in acting-intuition; the latter, what Nishida has called the expressive self-determination of the whole in ordinary experience. The difference here, I contend, is the difference between the expression of something in language and the *presentation* in language of a certain meaning, one which has the potential to cover, distort, or otherwise mislead others, both intentionally and unintentionally, about the thing itself. This, of course, corresponds to what we have been calling ‘non-objective’ language.

With this we have arrived back at the point from which we first set out on this movement through some of the central areas of Nishida’s philosophy. It is clear that what Nishida is aiming to give a philosophical account of is extraordinarily ambitious, but also that the scope of this ambition is matched by Gadamer’s own undertaking. By the end of the essay “Logic and Life,” Nishida’s summation of what the expression of truth comes to sounds very much like something Gadamer could have written:

I think that we can say that truth is the self-expression in logos of reality. It would be a misunderstanding, when I speak of expression, to immediately think of it as subjective. To express is to form, to form through acting in the world of historical reality [...] Nothing can be expressed from the standpoint of mere consciousness. Even something like language is not merely a subjective composition. Although when I speak of expression, one may think of it as a mere object of understanding, historical reality determines itself in expression.⁴¹⁴

In this passage Nishida and Gadamer would seem to differ very little, but what Nishida's thinking can contribute to Gadamer's own philosophical achievement should now be evident. Our analysis has uncovered the way in which Nishida's concepts of pure experience, acting-intuition, and expression can serve as a model of language and expression which encompasses the entire range of linguistic experience – including both truth as well as the various forms of untruth – while also being grounded in the ontological belonging together of self and world. And although in his discussions of *Bildung*, judgment, and taste, Gadamer had elaborated the multiple ways in which the being of the knower is tied to the known, Nishida's work allows us to fill out this insight and display the way in which the being of the one who perceives is implicated in what is perceived and so in what is brought to expression. Though not every experience of dialogical truth will be so closely bound to the question of perception, the importance of perception, not only the perception of what immediately stands in front of one, but also the perception of history, of the significance of one's own tradition, or of the meaning of one's past experience also cannot be denied. All of these are crucial components of the modes of inquiry and advocacy that unfold as we search together for insight into the ethical and political questions and problems we face, and are examples of the way in which the being of the inquirer are determinative of elements essential to a successful inquiry. Hence the embodiment in linguistic expression of a fuller, more authentic mode of the self apprehension of the whole – which can now be identified with what Gadamer has called the doing of the thing itself – will demand the same kind of vigilance in the responsiveness

⁴¹⁴ Nishida, LL, 172 (trans. modified); NKZ 8, 389.

of the self to others and to things and the same coordination of the self with the world that is found in aesthetic and ethical modes of action if our articulations are to aim at, and achieve, truth.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

I. Contributions

This work opened with a presentation and analysis of the problem of widespread resignation about the ability of human reason to uncover truth in ethical and political matters. The comprehensive elucidation and defense of Gadamer's conception of dialogical rationality that followed shows that such skepticism is premature, and perhaps even unjustified. And this is because in this presentation of Gadamer's views we were reminded of just what has been achieved in his work vis-à-vis these problems, namely, an account of rationality as a disposition and a mode of being operative in language and tradition that reaches finite, limited, and partial (and hence always human) truths—but truths nonetheless. What we encounter in Gadamer's work, in sum, is the quiet but splendid possibility of our overcoming what Nietzsche called nihilism, or the belief that there are no truths.

These results have very real and very significant consequences for how we face some of the most pressing philosophical difficulties in ethics and politics in our time. We confront these difficulties time and again in questions about the good—the good life, the good person, the good action, the good law, the good society, and so on. When raised, such questions are often also accompanied by an outright rejection of the right or capacity of anyone to make judgments about such matters that have a claim to truth. Yet although on a theoretical level it has become all too common to spurn such truth claims, on the level of lived, practical experience we implicitly accept the truth or potential truth content of the ethical and political commitments we express as we vote, petition, protest; as we judge or evaluate pundits, speeches, and policies; as we argue

with and attempt to convince one another. What is revealed in this tension between philosophical skepticism and the ethical and political engagements of everyday life is a dimension below theorizing, a domain in which we somehow take ourselves to know certain things about what is good or right or just; it is this arena of understanding, belief, and knowledge that helps make possible a civilized life together. And that which we always already know or could come to know, as Gadamer shows, is something that gives guidance without asserting an absolute status, since it is a form of knowledge which is both made possible and limited by the language through which it is presented. In bringing these forms of truth to explicit theoretical awareness, Gadamer's work can enable us to recover a sense of the legitimacy of our participation in, and even our responsibility and duty to contribute to, the struggles of the wider culture to uncover answers to the great ethical and political questions and problems of the day.

Although the effort to relate issues of skepticism and relativism to Gadamer's claims about the full range and complexity of human rationality and modes of truth is not entirely new—what *is* new is the attempt to show the ways in which this aim depends on a conception of language as essentially disclosive rather than representational and instrumental. This topic, in turn, set in motion many of the wider themes and novel contributions of this dissertation. The first of these was a proposed account of precisely how linguistic disclosure operates. I argued that language discloses when the meanings which belong to words intersects (as we speak or write) with the nascent intelligibility that belongs to things, fully articulating or expressing the meaning of a thing, so that it appears *as* something or other.

Yet despite the centrality of the idea of linguistic disclosure to Gadamer's work, this study appears to be the first sustained analysis of the actual process of disclosure. So although much has been written about the role of language in Gadamer's philosophy, there has been a conspicuous lack of discussion about the actual mechanics of linguistic disclosure. The comparison of disclosure with the structure of metaphor corrects this by clarifying the nature and

structure of linguistic disclosure. Our account of the phenomenon of loss in translation, in addition, exhibited the dynamic of concealment and unconcealment at work here; it also made the case in a way that has not been made before for the conception of language as a disclosive medium. This examination of linguistic disclosure can contribute, too, to contemporary discussions about the nature of language. Outside of what is commonly called continental philosophy, an understanding of language as essentially disclosive rather than fundamentally designative and performative is not widespread, so a new defense of this conception of language can pose a challenge to the reigning consensus.

The closing chapter of this study, finally, attempted to shed new light on a pair of interrelated ideas that were introduced in the third part of *Truth and Method* and taken up in later essays, and that are central for Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics as a whole. The first of these is the notion that the intelligibility of language is particularly suited to completing the intelligibility of things. An answer to the question of why this should be so can be found in Gadamer's assertion that the knowing subject "belongs to" the object of knowledge. That is, this kind of linguistic disclosure would appear to be founded in what Gadamer calls the ontological "belonging together" of subject and object, self and world, such that in the coming to presence of meaning the language we speak can come to be equated with the very language of being.

What was at stake in the rehearsal of the difficulties that this view encountered was the ontology that undergirds or supports the claim of dialogical reason to uncover truth in and through the event of linguistic disclosure. My suggestion that we adopt the kind of dynamic and open-ended conception of the continuity of being found in the work of Nishida enables us to see the manner in which experiential and perceptual truth is made possible by the achievement of a fuller integration of the self with its world. The difference between experience clouded by self-regard, in which the distance between self and other is at its greatest, and an experience in which self and world come together into a kind of harmony, so that action and perception involve the

achievement of “the doing of the thing itself,” also permits us to distinguish in our linguistic expressions between the presentation of meaning and the expression of truth, or the self-presentation of the thing in language.

This comparison of the way in which Gadamer and Nishida overcome ontological and epistemological dualism in the continuity of self and world was also intended to unearth the productive potential that lies in the idea of ontological continuity. The significance of the kinds of self-development exhibited in the athletic and aesthetic practices surveyed, moreover, is not limited to the attainment of fluency in one’s performances, however impressive. Instead, what is at issue here are some of the highest possibilities of the self in its relation to the world. What all of these practices have in common is that they take us away from the smallness of the self and its concerns towards something much larger. In the coming together of self and other, of consciousness and thing, in pure experience, there is a kind of self-overcoming that enables us to think and see from the perspective of others and from the standpoint of things. That is, the cultivation of pure experience makes possible a certain way of being in the world, one in which our actions and perceptions accommodate and are in accord with the situation or the nature of the item which we encounter and respond to. Such a posture involves recognizing the continuity between oneself and the other, and responding in a way that promotes the interests and well-being of both. Acting-intuition is thus a mode of openness that accepts the world on its own terms and allows it show itself to us and to speak in its own voice. We can contrast this with those forms of action and perception characterized by the kinds of self-serving desires that cause us to fail to really see or experience what confronts us, and that interfere with what Gadamer calls the doing of the thing itself.

The parallels drawn in the final chapter between Gadamer’s notion of the truth-event and these insights into the nature of experience at its best formulated in Nishida’s philosophy begin to look less like a faint echo in a distant cultural sphere of an obscure and difficult element of

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and more like an unexpected and exciting confirmation of Gadamer's intentions in a very different –though rich and profound – worldview, when one returns to take a closer look at the poem by Rilke with which he opens *Truth and Method*. This sense is reinforced especially in the second (and final) stanza of this poem, which Gadamer did not include, but which we translate here.

Catch only what you've thrown yourself, all is
 mere skill and little gain;
 but when you're suddenly the catcher of a ball
 thrown by an eternal partner
 with accurate and measured swing
 towards you, to your center, in an arch
 from the great bridgebuilding of God:
 why catching then becomes a power—
 not yours, a world's.⁴¹⁵

And if you perhaps
 possess the strength and courage to throw it back,
 no, more wondrous still: have forgotten courage and strength
 and found you had already thrown... (like the year
 throws birds, the flocks of migrating birds, across the oceans
 from an older warmth to a younger –) then
 that wager is the first moment
 you truly play along
 You don't make your throw easy anymore; you don't
 make it more difficult. A meteor steps
 out of your hands and races into its skies...⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁵ Rilke, quoted in TM, v.

⁴¹⁶ The second stanza in the original German:

Und wenn du gar
 zurückzuwerfen Kraft und Mut besähest,

II. Future Directions

This study has ranged across a multiplicity of large themes, and this means that there remains much that was of necessity left unsaid or unexplored. Among the various possibilities that might be taken up, I suggest that there are at least three significant issues that show substantial potential for further development. Each of these arises from the attempt to marry the close phenomenological description of perception and action more fully to the consequences of taking the hermeneutic turn in philosophical accounts of experience. Each, too, shows the ways in which Gadamer's work opens out on to important themes in the work of the other thinkers we have examined here.

The first of these issues concerns Nishida's account of the self, which involves a more dynamic and fluid conception of the continuity and intertwining of consciousness and thing, self and world, than that found in Gadamer's work. As we have already seen, the density, singularity, and developmental potential of this self means that the manner in which it helps to constitute perceptual experience can vary from individual to individual. The examples we recounted showed that not all people see things in the same way, or even see the same things, that what appears can sometimes depend on who we are and become, so that the richest perceptions are often the result of certain modes of self-formation. The next task will be to work out in fuller

nein, wunderbarer: Mut und Kraft vergäbest
 und schon geworfen hättest.... (wie das Jahr
 die Vögel wirft, die Wandervogelschwärme,
 die eine ältre einer jungen Wärme
 hinüberschleudert über Meere -) erst
 in diesem Wagnis spielst du gültig mit.
 Erleichterst dir den Wurf nicht mehr; erschwerst dir ihn nicht mehr. Aus deinen Händen tritt das
 Meteor und rast in seine Räume...“

(Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt: Insel, 1992), 132).

detail the ways in which this thick and dynamic conception of the subject as a concrete individual situated in a personal history and open to self-shaping complicates the phenomenological thesis of the interlacing and mutual determination of consciousness and object, as well as any account of perception founded on this ontological structure.

One version that this project could take would be to enlarge upon certain hints found in the work of Ricoeur. Ricoeur attributes the capacity to perceive similarity in and through difference and conflict –which is necessary for the creation of metaphor – to the imagination, which simultaneously creates and discovers resemblance in difference. This power of the imagination to both make and find enables it to shatter old categories and establish novel boundaries, a capacity Ricoeur claims is the same one that generates all linguistic classification. For Ricoeur the imagination both orders our experience and disrupts that order through linguistic innovation.

Ricoeur's intriguing suggestion, then, is that the imagination plays a constitutive role in experience. But what is still not clear is exactly how the imagination functions in this regard. A fuller account of the nature of the imagination is needed. If, as the source of all linguistic classification, the imagination is to grasp similarity in and through difference, it must mediate between image and meaning, since the perception of kinship in the variety of sensible appearances is both a construal and an apprehension of meaning. This process of simultaneous creation and discovery involves seeing something "as" something (meaningful) and can be related to the claim of hermeneutic phenomenology that perception is always interpretive. However, the development of this basic hermeneutic insight has focused on the role of the linguistic, historical, bodily, and cultural sedimentation present in all perception. A clarification of the part the imagination plays in constituting perceptual experience would open up an important new dimension of a foundational idea in philosophical hermeneutics and elaborate in a significantly new way the claim – so crucial for Gadamer's thought – that language is disclosive.

A second and related point is that in both the invention of new metaphors and the linguistic ordering of experience, the imagination “creates” what it finds. Ricoeur, unfortunately, had little to say about this paradox in his published work. An explanation of this apparent contradiction would shed light on the schema of overlapping domains of intelligibility found in Gadamer’s account of linguistic disclosure; it would also make possible a fuller account of the role of the imagination in the production of linguistic novelty and thus in the disclosure of truth. Like Gadamer, Ricoeur maintains that in saying something in a novel way, new meanings “come into being” and certain realities “are brought to light.” Gadamer devotes most of his attention to showing how this happens in aesthetic experience and historical understanding. Yet a sustained examination of how the moral imagination, too, half discovers and half invents meaning as it opens up new ways of being in the world (one thinks here of environmentalism or feminism, for example) would bring to reflective awareness the way in which the powers of the imagination are involved in appropriating the normative resources of our tradition, and so contribute significantly to Gadamer’s goal of transforming hermeneutics into practical philosophy.

The third and final proposed research trajectory takes us back to the relation between the philosophies of Gadamer and Nishida. In the final chapter we demonstrated the ways in which Nishida’s thought can contribute to Gadamer’s work; but Gadamer, too, has something important to offer Nishida’s philosophical project. The harmonization of self and world that takes place in perception at its best, we saw, was an important instance of the much broader phenomenon of pure experience, or the coming together and fuller integration of the self with its world. And while the concept of pure experience is central to the ontology of the self and the account of perception that we pursued here, it is also a notion that poses real difficulties for any attempt to bring Nishida’s work together with Heideggerian phenomenology. While there is a certain ambiguity or tension Nishida’s articulation of pure experience, he primarily characterizes pure experience in terms of an experience of pre-reflective, non-linguistic immediacy, a kind of

primeval contact with the world. This runs up against one of the most persuasive and influential claims of hermeneutical phenomenology, viz., that the given is given as always already understood and interpreted, so that our experience is always permeated with what Gadamer calls “linguisticity” [*Sprachlichkeit*]. Nevertheless, I suggest that we can preserve Nishida’s core insights here with a re-reading of pure experience that incorporates this element of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics; hence the third task would be to make good on this claim.

III. Unifying Themes

We turn now to a summation of the unifying themes of this work. Two of Gadamer’s most significant concerns have been first, to oppose the narrowing of our understanding of truth to that which can be displayed by the natural sciences, and second, to demonstrate that hermeneutics is a form of practical philosophy. This study has brought together some of the most important elements from both of these aspects of Gadamer’s work to show the significance of his philosophical hermeneutics for the prospects of reaching truth in ethical and political questions.

We have done this by following what Gadamer has called “the guiding thread” of language. Close and careful attention to the experience of language has shown the limits of the conventional and commonplace understanding of language as an instrument for referring to and representing things. Yet the purpose of our account was not to deny that language can communicate information by referring to things in the world or representing them; it was only to maintain that language is first and foremost that which both makes manifest and conceals. As disclosive, language is a medium to which we belong and through which the presence of the world and things is completed.

A substantial part of this work, then, was devoted to defending an understanding of language as that which conceals and unconceals, laying out the nature and possibilities of

linguistic disclosure and elucidating its relation to experience, reason, and truth. Thus we discovered that language opens up the entirety of our world and the vast array of meanings which belong to it. We witnessed, too, the way in which language allows something new to come to presence in the space between conversation partners. And although the hermeneutic dimension of disclosure is most evident in the revelation of new aspects of the self and the world as our understanding unfolds in front of the text, it also belongs to the experience of language as such, and so is a part of both language as worldview and the language of dialogue. The world and things appear in the language we belong to, and speak to one another, more fully *as* what they are; that is, they are *understood* rather than simply given. Such understandings are always interpretations—not because we never reach the things themselves, in the sense that our understandings are ‘merely’ interpretations that ‘go all the way down,’ but because even though what is presented in language are the things themselves, such presentations only ever amount to partial views of the thing; there always remains more to be understood.

Language is thus less one concern among others which has attracted Gadamer’s attention than it is that which grants us access to many of the large and characteristic themes of Gadamer’s work. For our part, we have seen that an understanding of language as disclosive makes possible the re-animation of sources of normativity which can empower: the prejudices of tradition; the rhetorical articulation of the *sensus communis*; the principles and concepts contained in the great texts of a culture; the knowledge embodied in the human sciences; and the conversation that “happens” to participants in a dialogue.

Tradition and application, common sense and prejudice, rhetoric and dialogue: this is an inventory of the daily life of language and a reminder that the truths which can be uncovered through the linguisticity of understanding are not found apart from the forms of finitude that both make possible and constrain our being together with one another in a human world.

Nonetheless, the recuperation of such a wide area of quotidian linguistic experience can also

restore our sense of the range and breadth of what it means to know; it can begin too, to enable us to recover our confidence in the capacity of ordinary human judgments to uncover truth, even as we must submit such judgments to the questions, probing, and interpretations of others, so that our claims and those of our interlocutors are at stake in the conversation between us. In the best case, what happens in the back and forth of dialogue is a giving way of both sides to a new and shared understanding of the matter at hand.

This return to the ordinary experience of language is a reflection, too, of the broader phenomenological return to pre-objective being and the philosophical promise of lived experience. And like other thinkers in this tradition, Gadamer discovers in the close description of human experience something difficult, elusive, and strange. His phenomenology of understanding shows that the truth reached in dialogue is an event that is neither the expression of a subjective will nor the result of an impersonal process. It is something other, something that transpires in a way that goes beyond the willing and doing of those involved. Hence this philosophical movement towards the mundane and ordinary in the linguisticity of our relation to the world and to one another ultimately takes us into an encounter with what is extraordinary, namely, the ontological ground that binds together mind and world, the intelligibility of language with the meanings held in things.

Such an encounter also makes it possible to draw productive connections between distant traditions, so that we come to see that Gadamer's understanding of truth is more plausible, and less strange and singular, than first supposed. In this regard, our comparative analysis of Gadamer's ontology of belonging with Nishida's ontology of pure experience situated Gadamer's account of language and truth in a new context and provided a fresh standpoint from which to think these difficult and radical ideas, showing them to be consonant both with the capacity for enrichment and with the larger radicality and uncanniness that lies at the heart of human life and action.

Appendix

Gadamer: Three Essays

Reading is Like Translating (1989)

Translated by David W. Johnson and Julia Welz*

A famous phrase of Benedetto Croce goes, "Traduttore traditore." Every translation is like a betrayal. How could a man that was as polyglot as this major Italian aesthetician not know that? This is also something known by every hermeneutician, who are those who have learned all their life to respect the side tones and the over- and undertones of languages, as well by those who look back on a long life. One becomes increasingly sensitive over the years to the quarterly- and half- approximations of real living language that are encountered as translations. One finds them increasingly difficult to bear and, moreover, increasingly difficult to understand.

In any case, it is a hermeneutic precept to think not so much about degrees of translatability as to think about degrees of untranslatability. Where translation takes place, it is necessary to account for what is lost, and perhaps also what is gained. Even with the seemingly hopeless losing business of translation, there is not only more or less loss, there is sometimes a kind of gain, at least a gain in interpretation, an increase in clarity and sometimes of unequivocalness, where this is a gain.

In the linguisticity which is encountered as a text, the original living conversation in which language has its actual existence has been alienated. Already speaking itself is never in truth so perfectly accurate that the right word is always chosen and found. Already in conversation there is much beating around the bush, and the same thing is encountered in the text, where there are the evasions of the empty formulas of trivial rhetoric. In living conversation all of this is covered over and becomes unnoticeable. But if such artless speech is encountered as text

* This is a translation of Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Lesen ist wie Übersetzen," in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 8 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1993), 279-285. Permission to translate and publish these essays as part of this dissertation was granted by Jill Sopper of Mohr Siebeck Verlag on 8/20/12 via email.

and is still translated literally, it has a disastrous effect. In the first place, there is the writing author who, instead of using the appropriate words, slips into empty convention, and this same danger occurs again for the translator who takes the empty and the conventional for that which is really being said. Thus, the message of the text that is always already inaccurate in the original, becomes completely inaccurate in the translation, and that is precisely because one wants to be exact and wants to reproduce every word, even the empty words. It is for the author almost like an education in clarity and conciseness of expression if he as a German writes in English or if he does not succeed in doing so, and, having learnt his lesson, only writes for a translator, that is, for the readers of the future translation. There one will avoid the long-winded empty phrases and the long clauses which are so loved by us and which are instilled in us by the humanist admiration of Cicero. One will avoid, as well, the soulful darkness into which it lures us.

In theoretical-scientific fields, the art of writing also, like living speech, in the end is always aimed at making the other "understand" (to speak with Fichte). Nothing of what the vehicle of living speech bestows can come to the aid of writing. Unless it is a private letter, the writer does not know his readers. He cannot sense where the other person does not come along with him, so he cannot help out where the reader remains unconvinced. What the writer is to achieve in power of persuasion, he must obtain via the rigid signs of writing. The articulation, the modulation, the rhythm of speech, the loud and soft voicings, the stress and mild allusions, and what is the strongest means of persuasion, hesitating, pausing, seeking and finding the word: the result of this process is then like a lucky find in which the listener with an almost joyful startle participates. All of this, in the case of writing, is replaced by nothing but lowly, written signs. So many of us, however, are not really writers, not experts and literary artists, but rather solid academics, researchers who have ventured into the unknown and simply want to report what the unknown looks like and how things happen there.

Everything is required of the translator! One would like to apply the witty words to him

which Friedrich Schlegel once said about the understanding reader who interprets: "To understand someone, one must in the first place be more clever than him, and then just as clever and then also just as stupid. It is not enough that one understands the actual meaning of a confused work better than the author has understood it. One must also know the confusion even up being able to characterize and construct the principles." The latter is the most difficult. One risks being even more stupid than the author when one's own vantage point and clearer insight, to make the ideas of the text one has read speak convincingly without noticing at all how easily one reads in something from one's own point of view. Reading and translating have a distance to overcome. This is the basic hermeneutic fact. Every distance, and not just the distance of time, means much loss and gain for understanding, as I have shown. Sometimes it may seem simpler when the issue is not at all about the overcoming of a temporal distance, but only about the translation from one language to another of contemporary literature. There, the translator puts himself, in truth, in the same danger in which each poet finds himself of being faced with the constant threat of relapsing into so-called colloquial language or into the weak imitation of poetic models. This applies to the translator in both cases, but also to the reader. The stream of human interaction, conversation, and talk continuously offers material to the will to create of the translator and the will to understand of the reader. They can inspire, but they may also confuse us. The translator has to cope with all of this. Texts translated for reading in general disappoint. They lack the breath of the speaker, who breathes on the understanding. The language lacks the volume of the original. Nevertheless, translations therefore are sometimes precisely for this reason real aids to understanding for the person who is an expert in the original. Translations of Greek or Latin authors into French, or German authors into English often have a startling and illuminating unambiguousness. This is surely a gain, isn't it?

Where the issue is about nothing except knowledge, or also only about nothing but the capturing of thought in a text, such enhanced clarity may well be a gain – just as for example

when taking a photograph, zooming in on a poorly visible sculpture in a gloomy cathedral something is gained. With some research books or books for teaching, translating will also not depend so much on the art of writing and thus perhaps on the art of translation, but merely on correctness. Professionals understand each other (when they want to) very easily, and certainly it irritates them more if you use too many (or even beautiful) words, just as in a verbal conversation one annoys by wanting to continue to elaborate on what has already been understood. An anecdote may clarify the matter. It is said about the young Karl Jaspers that one day, when he spoke with a colleague about his first book he heard from him that it was badly written, he replied: "You could not have told me anything more agreeable." So much at that time did Jaspers follow the "passion-for-objectivity" of his great model Max Weber. The Karl Jaspers who matured into a thinker of his own stature wrote then indeed in such a highly artistic and hence individual style that he is hardly translatable.

One can understand that in many sciences English is being more and more generally accepted, so that the researchers write their original work directly in English. There they are of course safe not only from their own "beautiful words," but also from those of the translator. In many fields, such as in shipping, aviation and telecommunications, English has long been standardized in a secure place completely beyond the advantages and disadvantages of the art translation. It is no coincidence that in these fields, things really depend on correct understanding. There it is life-threatening to misunderstand. – But then there is the case of literature. There it is not dangerous to be misunderstood by the translator. However, in literature it is not enough to be understood, either. A poet writes, as every author, for people of the same tongue, and a common mother tongue separates one language from the other. Literature is also not only literary texts, but covers the whole area in which the printed word is supposed to fully replace living speech. The question really is (as opposed to the young Jaspers), whether it is a real preference for a historian or philologist, and even for a philosopher (this is arguable) to write "badly." This certainly

applies to translations. In truth, “style” is more than a dispensable or even suspect decoration. It is a factor that determines readability – and thereby of course also represents for translation the endless task of approximation. It is not a matter of craft-like technique alone. A readable translation, if it is still fairly “reliable,” is already much, almost everything you could wish to have as an author or a translator (or reader). The situation is quite different, however, when it comes to the task of translating real poetic texts. This kind of translation always stands between translating and retelling.

Art overcomes all distances, including temporal distance. Thus the translator of poetic texts stands in what is for him an unconscious contemporary identification with the text, a text which requires of him his own new composition, which should nevertheless reflect the original. It is quite different for the mere reader, whose humanist and historical education (or its shortcomings) awaken for him an awareness of temporal distance. As readers, we are more or less conscious of ourselves, if we are dealing with translations from classical Greek and Latin literature or the history of modern literature. There the texts have already been the object of such efforts for centuries and carry a whole translation literature for at least the last 200 years in their train. In this history we as readers with a historical sense experience how the current literature of the then translator was reflected in the composition of the translations. Such a presence of a whole translation history, which exhibits a variety of translations of the same text, is for a new translator in a certain sense a relief, and yet also a challenge that can hardly be met. The old translation has its patina.

When it comes to literature, the standard of readability cannot suffice anyway. The degrees of untranslatability rise up threateningly, like enormous multi-layered mountains, in which lyric poetry looms as the last mountain range, transfigured by eternal snow. Certainly, too, with the different literary genres the requirements and the criteria for a successful translation differentiate themselves. Take, for example, the reproduction of specific translations, such as

those for plays today. This means that here the stage must come to the rescue with all that which otherwise literature does not itself possess. The translation itself should on the other hand be not only readable but also speakable and suitable for the stage, whether in prose or in verse. About Gundolf's poetically perfected poetic translation of Shakespeare (with assistance from George), which, after Schlegel-Tieck's, almost has to be called a new Germanization, it was said that it was not able to be performed. Some may not even find it readable today. The colors are "faded."

The translation of narratives, have, again, their own requirements. Here hardly any consensus on the goal of a translation is to be expected. Is the goal fidelity to the words or to meaning and form? This applies as well to almost any "elevated" prose. What is the goal? When you think of the great translations in literature, as for example those which brought the English novel to Germany, or the translations of the great Russian novels into the other languages of the world, you can see at once that the loss that inevitably occurs in translation of some of that which gives the text its characteristic qualities, such as the loss of the feeling of intimacy with a people, and of power and strength, hardly matters when compared to the presence of what is said. How the words with which the story is told are chosen is simply not that important. The story depends on something else, namely, on lucidity, on the maintenance of suspense, on spiritual depth, and on the magic of a world. The great art of storytelling is its own miracle, which remains almost intact even in translation. Those knowledgeable about the Russian assure us that the smoothness and readability of the Piper-edition German Dostoevsky translation (by Rahsin) is hardly appropriate to the halting, rough, and heedless style of Dostoyevsky; and yet, if you take Nötzel's or Eliasberg's "better" translation, or the latest one released by the Aufbau-Verlag publishing house - you do not notice the difference as a reader. The barrier of untranslatability here is, apart from special cases such as Gogol, extremely low.

It is thus no coincidence that the shaping of the concept of world literature, which is inseparable from translations, was contemporaneous with the spread of the art of the novel (and

of dramatic literature [*dramatischen Leseliteratur*]). It is the spread of the culture of reading that has made literature into “literature.” So today one must almost say “literature” requires translation—precisely because it is a matter [*Sache*] which belongs to the culture of reading. Actually, the mystery of reading is like a great bridge between languages. At quite different levels, translation and reading seem to be the same hermeneutic achievement. Even the reading of poetic “texts” in one's native language is like a translation, almost like a translation into a foreign language. For it is the transformation of rigid characters into a flowing river of thoughts and images. The mere reading of an original or translated text is in fact already an interpretation of tone and tempo, articulation and modulation, and all that lies in the “inner voice,” and is there for the “inner ear” of the reader. Reading and translating are already interpretation. Both create a new whole text from, and consisting of, sense and sound. Both require a transfer that borders on a creative act. One can venture the paradox: every reader is also partly a translator. Is it not the greater miracle really in the end that one can overcome the distance between letters and living speech at all, even if this occurs “merely” in the same language? Is it so much more to eliminate the distance between two different languages in the reading of translations? It is in any case reading which overcomes this distance between text and speech.

Isn't the verbal communication [*Verständigung*] that occurs between different languages – despite the distance between them – rather more natural? Reading is like a carrying-over [*Übersetzen*] of something from the shore of writing to the other, distant shore of speech. Likewise, the translation of a text is the carrying-over of something from one coast to the other, from one continent to another, from text to text. Translation is both. Hence the sound-forms [*Lautgestalten*] of various tongues are untranslatable. They seem like planets light-years apart from one another. And yet the reader understands his text.

But what about the case of the poem, something which one must not only read and understand, but which one must hear? Here the translators are at their wits end. Or rather, what

they render remains somehow untranslated. Certainly, there are special cases. If a true poet translates the verses of another poet in his own language, these may become a real poem. But then it is almost more his own poem than that of the original author. Are George's Baudelaire translations still really the text "The Flowers of Evil"? Doesn't this translation sound rather like the intimations of a better future? Or consider Rilke's Valéry translations. Where is the brightness and the harshness of the Provence in Rilke's wonderfully tender meditations on "The Graveyard by the Sea"? We should not call these *Nachdichtungen*, i.e., faithful adaptations, but rather *Umdichtungen*, i.e., translations of poetry which change the original poems into different ones. If anything, one could already call the parts of the *Divine Comedy* translated by Stefan George a *Nachdichtung*, an adaptation. On the whole, a true poet will only become able to act as a translator if the poetry he chooses to translate fits with his own poetic work. Only then will he be able to maintain his own tone, even if he translates. His tone is for the true poet his second nature. The result therefore is that if a translator is not a real poet, one who contributes his own poetic equivalents of the original expressions and artfully blends these together into one "poetic" language, the translation always sounds like Latin, that is, artificial and alien. Because no matter how many poetic echoes and no matter how much linguistic beauty from the literature of the target language rings out in the space between the two languages, there is a lack of tone, of τόνος, of the tense string that must vibrate at the words and sounds of the work if it is to be music. How could it be otherwise?

Equivalents have to be found not only for word meanings, but also for the sounds. Of course, no words (no matter how much they correspond to the originals) nor sounds (no matter how attractive) could ever achieve this. Verses are sentences. Yet this does not even explain it sufficiently. They are verses, and the whole is a poem, a chant, a melody—it does not even have to be a recurring melody. It will always be an echo, a sense-sound from a unity and a multiplicity, a hidden harmony, which is stronger than an open one, as Heraclitus knew.

Thus we should admire all translators of poetry who do not completely hide the distance from the original and at the same time bridge it. They are almost like interpreters. But they are more. Interpreters speak between parties. The greatest ambition of the interpreter may just be that an interpretation also remains a pure “speaking between parties” and is quite naturally integrated into the re-reading of the original text and disappears in it. However, the translator’s “co-poetizing” [*mitdichtende*] tracks remain for all of our reading and understanding a firmly grounded arch, a bridge that is accessible from both sides. Translation is a kind of bridge between two languages, such as between two shores in a single country. Over such bridges traffic flows constantly. This constitutes the distinction of the translator. One need not wait for a ferryman to carry one over to the other side. There, however, some will need help finding their way around—even though they remain solitary travelers. Maybe such a one occasionally meets someone who helps him with reading and understanding. Each reading of a poem is every time a translating. “Each poem is a reading of reality, this reading is a translation in which the poem of the poet turns into the poem of the reader,” (Octavio Paz).

The Diversity of Languages and the Understanding of the World (1990)

*Translated by David W. Johnson and Sabine Bobenhausen**

My theme is a subject of the utmost relevance. It is a theme that is basically a political issue *par excellence*, and one concerning which the history of humanity awaits us. This is that the tremendous growth of the distance between the armed and the unarmed has brought about a world in which all live in mutual fear of war, a fear which dominates everything. It is a fear that is felt with good reason. This fear is by no means – as sometimes happens – only provoked by the specific nature of atomic energy. Such unbelievable progress in the logistics and the technology of weapons use has occurred that we can only say: Each uncontrolled test of strength of mankind equals a successful attempt at suicide.

Human beings are very inventive creatures. They have invented war. Among the higher animals of nature, we know of no other such case of war within the same species. We are all familiar with the well-known rituals of submission that signal the end of the struggles that establish a pecking order within a group of animals. This is only one of the things that gives our topic a special urgency: How is it possible for the human race to save itself and develop the spirit of community and the necessary solidarity of the will to live and to survive?

Since a good knowledge of the Bible may no longer be readily presupposed, I will allow myself to begin by quoting a text from the Old Testament. This is the well-known story of the Tower of Babel. In this story it is said that a people that had settled in Mesopotamia resolved to build a tower that would reach Heaven. There it says:

And let us make a name for ourselves, so that we are not scattered over the face of the whole earth. And the Lord went down to regard the city and the tower that the children of men were building. And the Lord said: "Behold, they are one

* This is a translation of Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Die Vielfalt der Sprachen und das Verstehen der Welt," in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 8 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1993), 339-349.

people, and they all have one language. And this is only the beginning of their deeds. Now nothing that they have conceived to do will seem impossible to them. Let us go down and confuse their language so that they no longer understand one another. And the Lord scattered them from there over the whole earth, and they ceased building the city.

Nowadays we are not prepared to simply read a text only in the Old Testament religious context. One must inevitably think that obviously the unity and the solidarity of a common language here actually supports and embodies the unrestrained energies of the will and boundless confidence in one's own call to rule. If we step out of this Old Testament text, we will inevitably ask how things are in our world, a world in which we most certainly do not have linguistic unity, and—as I believe—never will. But then are we actually immune from the temptation to the overconfident exercise of our power? That, in any case, is the reason why the story of the Tower of Babel affects us so?

My task as a philosopher is to clarify the concepts with which we work here. We have to ask what is language, what is world and what 'many' means here, and what 'one.' The Tower of Babel repeats in a cloaked and reverse form the problem of unity and multiplicity. There, as unity is the danger, its overcoming is multiplicity. The story stands completely isolated in the narrative of the first book of Moses. It certainly belongs to our heritage. The Old Testament scholar will know where it comes from, and in any case, it has such a significant background that taking the story up again can hardly be avoided.

I ask my questions quite independently of that story and not with the intention to interpret it. I think it is moving enough that everyone, even with the sensibility of today, can understand it. If we take this story as a starting point, then we want to ask ourselves, in view of the diversity of languages among people: what does the Tower of Babel look like, or what amounts to the same thing, what does it look like in our world? The history of the West has given one answer to this story clearly enough. It lies in the exceptional path of humanity, which in the West has been pursued through the development of science—science, and primarily what we now call “science,”

by which we mainly mean the natural sciences. "Science" is not, for better or worse – perhaps in other ways, but not as science – limited by its dependence on language. That is precisely the tremendous step that mankind had already taken with the emergence of Greek thought, which legitimized, so to speak, *logos*, logic, and thus the necessity of thinking in its ruthless abstraction. Is not mathematics the unified language of modernity? This is the origin of the historical situation in which mankind find itself today. It really is just as it was phrased in the text above. It looks as if anything that we can conceive, we can now carry out. We owe this to the power of abstraction of human beings and their mathematics, which gives them mastery over the power of nature.

If we set out from these considerations, it is quite clear what the languages we speak mean for our humanity. One notes this already at the beginning, as the Greeks, like any living culture, view their language as the obviously "right" one. This is basically true for each language community. Because our understanding of the world is shaped through our mother tongue, somehow one always feels it strange that "horse" is called "Pferd" in another language— somehow this is not right. What this concerns is how the enormous power of abstraction that humanity has accomplished through their languages contains the complete forgetting of language. The Greeks had a single word for all those who could not speak Greek: these were the barbarians, the "Barbaroi." We all know this word not only from the use of our foreign word "barbarian," but also from the techniques of the theater. If you want to stage people babbling, then the people should say "rhubarb" (that was at least, the case in the past, perhaps today it is machines which babble). "Rhubarb" means to say something incomprehensible, something that is not language.

From this starting point of spoken languages the West – and western science – departs on its great journey, which I cannot set out in detail here very clearly. There are two cultural languages through which the ancient world and the history of science were formed and from which the modern age has drawn new power: the Greek language and the Latin language. As cultural languages they dominated the entire ancient *Oikumene*, the inhabited world. As a learned

language, the Latin language dominated until the beginning of the modern era far more than Greek. One generally forgets that even Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" is implicitly a translation from Latin into German. We will see what it means that in modern times national languages had to develop in order for people to say something to each other, and certainly also to understand each other. It was a world historical process in which the language of the medieval scholars and the language of the medieval church finally led to the development of national languages through the translations of the Bible. Since then only in the mathematical sciences and their technological achievements do you encounter a single language that one cannot speak but which all must read.

I paint only a rough picture in order to remind you how it has come about today that among scientists – on whom our drive toward technical perfection is based – more or less the most obvious way of proceeding is to write on the blackboard in what for us are almost unintelligible symbols. This has little to do with language in the sense in which our mother tongue is given to us and grows up together with us, as I tried to make clear with the example of the word "horse." This whole dominant formula of mathematical technique and symbolism has made possible great achievements—that is the situation of our world. This means at the same time we need all of our reason, in order to resist the over-rational application of the enormous potential knowledge and skills which are available to us. This standpoint was the reason why I told the story of the Tower of Babel.

In fact, at first it seems that the connection between the world and human beings which is developed through the growing dominance of nature and society with the help of modern science is a clear precondition for our life, and we all know that science and technology is an indispensable condition for our survival; if it is to succeed at all it must support the huge and swelling number of people on this planet. But it is not merely that human beings with the help of science, as such, would be able to solve the problems of the organization of the peaceful

coexistence between peoples and the preservation of the balance of nature with which we are confronted.

It is evident that it is not mathematics, but the linguistic constitution of human beings which is the foundation of human civilization. The great mystery of language is in fact, what language actually is such that it *happens* between such extremes. Man gives everything its name, as it says in the Old Testament, and from the viewpoint of this story he then, after the Fall, gets caught up in an undertaking against God. What is actually going on with language?

The attempt to assemble a unified language, such as the *Ars combinatoria* which was developed by Leibniz and the mathematicians of the time, led to a tremendous step forward for the future development of mathematics and thus for our technical capacities. Nevertheless, it is clear that a kind of counter-memory [*Gegenerinnerung*] is needed, one which began with the German Romantics:

When no longer numbers and figures
 Are the keys to all God's creatures,
 When those who sing or kiss
 Know more than the greatest wits,
 When the world is given back to life,
 And frees itself from earthly strife,
 When light and shade in unity,
 Create a higher clarity,
 And people see world-history
 In fairy tales and poetry,
 Then all confusion will fly away
 At a single secret word
 (*Translated by Jeremy Adler*)⁴¹⁷

⁴¹⁷ Jeremy Adler, "Organist of the Soul," *Times Literary Supplement* 5089 (October 13, 2000): 3-4.

By drawing up a border against a self-exaggerating Enlightenment, language in its manifold and self-creative universality entered consciousness. Wilhelm von Humboldt was one of the founders of both the philosophy of language and comparative linguistics. The development of linguistics made an object out of language. But thinking lives in the element of speech.

How has this shaped the philosophy of our century? We have in this century, as is known, made a kind of "linguistic turn," a turn to linguisticity. This happened, on the one hand, in England, as one of the most gifted pupils of Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, took a new interest in "ordinary language," in language usage, in the form in which we speak when we communicate with one another, and so on, which was for Russell himself quite incomprehensible.

On the other hand, a corresponding process took place in our German tradition. I mean the transition from Neo-Kantianism to phenomenology and in particular the further development of phenomenology by Husserl to the hermeneutic turn which Heidegger initiated. To have and to use language is the basic condition of human existence, and therefore language has become so dominant and essential that even metaphysics, the doctrine of what being is, has been placed in a new context. Language is a linguistic activity, an event. The word spoken to one is not representable in conceptual symbols, even if what is said as such can be represented in the form of mathematical equations. The word is rather there as something that reaches one. The expressions of Wittgenstein are very similar. He speaks of language pragmatics. That is, language belongs to practice, in human being together-with-one –another and human interchange. Hermeneutics says that language belongs to conversation, that is, language is really only what it is, if it supports the attempt to understand and leads to exchange, speech, and response. It is not propositions and judgments, but questions and answers. As a result, the basic orientation of philosophical thinking about language today has changed. This is a change which leads from monologue to dialogue.

It is no longer only about what is known, which are these permanent outlines of forms, like the species in living nature or in the laws of mechanics and dynamics of modern physics. It is about something else, about understanding, and in this case it is not enough to know what corresponds to our own immediate interests. This is the new step forward in which we find ourselves, that we now suddenly have at our disposal language as a way to think together, not as a statement of facts and situations. If I selected perhaps in an unfortunate form (justified only by the circumstances) the title "The diversity of languages and the understanding of the world," it would be actually more accurate to put it somewhat differently. Firstly, what does "the world" mean? What is this? The Latins called this "the universe." When the German national language gained self-confidence, one said in German "*das All*" or "*das Weltall*," and when with the new humanism in the classical age of Goethe Greek took the place of Latin and came to the fore as the language of learning, the term suddenly became "cosmos." Alexander von Humboldt's famous work actually has this title. So one can learn a great deal from the history of the word "world." I do not think much of etymologies. Mostly they are uncovered by scholars who have nothing better to do than to rebut each other. Therefore, most etymologies have been repeatedly questioned. But in the case of "world" there is hardly any doubt--just think of the English "world"--here the root "wer" is contained in it: "weralt." Consider also "Wergeld" and "Werewolf". All of these words contain 'wer' (who), i.e. human beings. In short, the world is a human world. This is the original meaning in the Germanic and Indo-European languages.

It says something that we have to remember here that it is about understanding the world not only in the sense of, for instance, becoming clear about it by means of a world equation such as that which Heisenberg pondered a few years before his death. It is not about such a form of understanding the world, one which could help unify different physical theories—such as that which perhaps will be achieved in the course of further physical and other kinds of research. It is not about understanding the world in this sense. The world for human beings is first of all

wherein one is and where and what one is in the midst of. Indeed, it's true we say "*auf der Welt sein*" when a new inhabitant of earth is born—as if the world were something completely different from human beings. But we do not see "the world" with this immense distance, as with the physicist who calmly says: "Now, we will put it on the blackboard." Even the expression "put on the blackboard" betrays how little modern science has this notion of understanding, how little at all it has "otherness" in view. "Understanding" does not mean only things, not even the understanding which begins with the first babbling sounds of the infant and the first exchanges between mother and child. We prefer to interpret the title of our lecture thus: understanding is self-understanding within the world. That is the urgent task which the multiplicity of languages has given to us.

What is this being in the world now in which we seek to understand ourselves? The world in this case is certainly not an object. Already in Kant's antinomies, the famous critique of "dogmatic metaphysics" showed that the world as a whole is never a given object and therefore cannot be explained as a given whole by the categories of scientific experience. This is the way it certainly is, and especially for us—and here I take up one of my favorite concepts: the world is there as a horizon. "Horizon" evokes the vivid experience that we all know. The gaze focuses on the infinity of the far distance, and this infinity recedes away from us whatever amount of effort, and every such large movement towards it only opens further new horizons. The world is in this sense for us an infinite space which we are amidst and in which we search for our modest orientation.

But whether we should search for this orientation only by means of progress in the natural sciences and their accumulated experience and by means of the social sciences which follow them—that requires a moment of reflection. The point is now that not only is the world not something given, but likewise so is our being in the middle of the world. The precarious position of the human being between being a creature of the same kind as animals and being a natural

being equipped with a dangerous capacity for thought has set humans apart from the path of instinct by which living creatures find themselves otherwise driven, or better, are subjected to obeying the dictates of nature.

Thus humans are exposed to and thereby placed into a strange freedom. Kant is the great thinker from whom we should have learned the metaphysical meaning of the concept of freedom once and for all. He should have taught us that it was an absurdity, for example, when all sorts of respectable scholars and researchers associated themselves with the uncertainty principle in the twenties, and that it was an absurdity to say that with this we had now come one step closer to the proof of the freedom. If "causality through freedom" were explainable by science, and if one felt responsible for something or not would depend on this, that would surely be a sorry relinquishment of the highest and most personal rights and duties of human beings and would be even worse than drug addiction.

Kant therefore called freedom the "fact of reason of freedom." That is, it inevitably belongs to us as beings who want to understand themselves and in this sense, are rational beings who, where we have the choice, are responsible for their decision. Kant has never claimed that there is ever in reality an action done from a purely free will. He only said that we must think this if we want to live together in our common world and want to build up around us social institutions, like a legal system, moral rules, and the peaceful coexistence of peoples. All this has been founded on the famous categorical imperative in the moral philosophy of Kant.

What then is it really, to come back to our initial question, to understand oneself in the world? It means understanding each other. And to understand ourselves with others, that is to understand the other. And that is meant morally, not logically. It is the most difficult human task of all, especially for us, who live in a world shaped by the monologue of the sciences. The sciences are a single great monologue, and they are proud of it—they can be, in fact. The security, certainty, and controllability which they have introduced shield us against our

weaknesses and against random encroachments of others to a great extent. Nevertheless, there is obviously something else in our world, for all of us, including science and its research, other than such security.

Our task is to learn how to embrace the mystery of our existence in truly appropriate forms, not by using our power of thinking to think ourselves as a being amidst the world which rises up to a kind of world domination. We all must learn that the other sets a primary boundary to our self-love and our own egocentricity. This is a general moral problem. It is also a political problem. In these weeks and months I cannot stress earnestly enough what a difficult thing it is that we must learn, amid the diversity of language cultures and traditions, to achieve genuine solidarity. This will succeed only slowly and arduously. This includes that we use the true productivity of language to communicate with each other, instead of restricting ourselves to only following the structure of rules with which one distinguishes between right and wrong. We believe, however, if we speak, above all that through speaking we and the other become able to understand one another, so that the other can answer in order to confirm or correct me—all of this belongs to a real conversation.

Heidegger once as a young man used an expression, which now has become well-known through the publication of his early lectures: "it worlds." A wonderful coinage! I remember that one of my young friends – he was an expressionist poet and was therefore particularly susceptible to the audacious use of language – full of enthusiasm exclaimed: "Isn't that wonderful!" In fact, with "it worlds," something quite essential has come into language, namely the phenomenon of taking up open horizons, taking up multifold horizons. One who listens to the other, always listens to someone who has his or her own horizon. It is the same between you and I as it is between peoples or between cultural groups and between religious communities. Everywhere, we face the same problem: We must learn that in listening to the other the actual path opens upon which solidarity is built. It is exactly the opposite of what in the story of the Tower of Babel as a

delusional ideal was in the mind of the people. There it was said: "We must make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered across the face of the earth." What kind of name is it in which we want to remain together? It is the name that you have and which allows you, so to speak, no longer to obey any other name.

The important thing for me is to show that we are faced with the task, not of organizing away the diversity of languages through something like rationalization or bureaucratization, but that everyone learn to bridge and fill in the distances and opposing differences between us, and that means that we respect, foster, and protect the other and listen to each other with fresh ears. This is missing far too much in a world in which one relies on experts. And I will not dispute that there are also experts who give an ear to the needs of humanity or society, but not because they are experts, but because they are human beings who pursue an open sense of responsibility to humanity and its fates. But it is likewise necessary to listen properly to the expert.

I place therefore beside the world horizon, into which we live, the language horizon, and that is plural. There are a multitude of horizons, which we should not reduce through any special unifying mechanism. We have translations. Well, this is our literary world. But that means we have to read in order to let someone speak to us. Oral translation is already somewhat more of a conversation. When, as the rector of Leipzig I had to negotiate with the Russians, I learned that it was not important to convince my Russian interlocutors with my own arguments, but to win the interpreter to my side. He had to find the right words to support my undertakings. If he had only translated what I said, I would probably not have had much success.

Interpretation is still just a remnant of living conversation, even if mediated, fissured, broken. One should however not be so foolish as to ask for literal translations. This is true not only for conversation between people of different languages, but also if one must read again one's own text in another language, one will discover: My God, how terribly exactly you treat me, --no one can understand that any longer!

This is what speaking actually is, and this is what hermeneutics serves: that we can develop the possibility of conveying to the other what one really means, and to obtain from him the answer, the counter-word, in the way he means it. I am strongly of the opinion that we should also use and cultivate translation as an aid, but only if we are aware that the new text must be made to speak anew. It must not be covered by the rusted framework of the source language and its rhetoric. Only thus can we reach the other and what he wants to say. Incidentally, this is so not only in translating. In our dealings with people like ourselves it is always a question of taking up what the other actually wants to say, and of seeking and finding common ground in his answer.

Bureaucratization is, as Max Weber has shown, the actual fate of our civilization. That is very true, and its significance is coming to be seen more and more. It shows itself especially within the sphere of the academic world and in its tasks, which, of course, form, with the mass media and the schools and everything associated with them, an inner organic unity. Therefore, it is everywhere necessary to release the creative possibilities of language and to achieve communication.

This cannot be done through mere institutions; it can be done only through living exchange. Therefore, the pluralism in which we live has a truly productive significance. This applies in all areas, for example, in how architectural styles are developed, or clothing fashions, or the world of forms within which we constantly move in literature or art, or somewhere else. Also each poetic work and every work of art, is different again and again, is different in a really challenging way and requires a response that is always new.

This is the standpoint from which I view the task of philosophy in our time. Our pluralistic world in which we find ourselves is like the new Babel. But this pluralistic world contains tasks, and these do not consist so much in rationalized and comprehensive planning, but in the perception of the free space of human interaction and the overcoming of the foreign. Language, too, is not simply what we term so-called newspaper speak, in which everyone notices

that this is no actual language anymore, but only information. This language has its value and necessity only as a shaper of opinions, but it must not replace one's own thinking and the living exchange of conversation.

In view of the all-leveling power of information technology, through which, in the probable future, that which is available to our social life will grow to a quite different extent than has been seen before, language must be cultivated all the more in its inherent possibilities. This includes finding the apt word, and also learning a silence that says much. This whole is called "*being in conversation.*" The true opposite of this is the routine of the debate, when one only reacts to any thesis merely with the question: "Is there not a logical contradiction here?" Among debate-loving peoples, to which we Germans are not exactly destined by talent to belong, that is often a mere technique. We must defend conversation in the possibility of its inner truth against this, and above all, of course, against the subjection to the rules of a mere sham logic that is known as sophistry.

I would like to say that we would have gained a better concept of reason with this approach. This is not something irrational, because reason is certainly not only calculating or drawing logically necessary conclusions. It is on the contrary a more versatile view of reason, just as the saying goes in our language: "Be reasonable and don't argue wildly over the issue!" What does it mean, then, if one is for instance in the middle of an argument that one should be reasonable? It is obviously supposed to mean that one should take up what the other wanted to say, in its positive intentions. When one understands his positive intentions, then the possibility of resolving a dispute can be found at all. All diplomacy essentially consists in the perception of such possibilities.

I want to conclude by saying something about the concept of education [*Bildung*]. One speaks of the members of the educated classes, of times of higher education. One speaks of the class contrast between educated and uneducated, which, through an excessive patenting of

academic quality has been rather dubious and disastrous in our German history and in our society. But does the passing of an examination make one educated? What is education really? Allow me to quote greater figure than myself. It is a word of Hegel: Education [*Bildung*] is to view things from the standpoint of another. In this sense I wish for all of you that your studies will not only help you to obtain real skills, and to obtain certificates, but also that it will help you to become educated, to learn to view things from the standpoint of others.

Home and Language (1992)

*Translated by David W. Johnson and Julia Welz**

One's native country is not just a location that one can choose and change. One can also not forget the mother country. It is, to use a famous word of Schelling, something immemorial.

So life in exile must be accompanied by the thought of the homeland from which one knows that he is excluded—and by the thought of return, even if it is not possible to return at all. The homeland remains unforgotten. Now “home” in our world, which is ever-more mobile, is no longer the same as it was in far more settled times. In those times the thought of being denied a return from exile to one's native country was something which one suffered like a constantly renewed ostracism. Every exile was hard, and so the hope remained alive that the banishment would be repealed and one could return home. So the songs of mourning that the Roman poet Ovid struck up from his place of exile on the Black Sea still move the heart of human beings today.

But what is home for us, this place of original familiarity? Where is it, what would it be, without language? Language belongs above all to the immemoriality of homeland. We know this even from the fleeting experience of travelling. When we return home from a foreign country and foreign language the sudden re-encounter with one's own mother tongue is positively startling; it is truly the whole of the familiar, the manners and customs of an accustomed world, which are suffused with the tones of one's own language.

Certainly anyone who is at home in his mother tongue can learn other languages, and in the end so well that he can in a certain sense also be at home in them. But, however, the crucial point is this: for one who lives in exile the return to his or her own language world is not

* This is a translation of Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Heimat und Sprache,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 8 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1993), 366-372.

something that can be freely chosen. Anyone who has settled in only as a guest in the language of their host country has not lost his home, and the same is true if one lives entirely abroad, if he knows that he can return. But in fact, a homeland is above all a linguistic homeland. The mother tongue keeps something of an immemorial at-homeness for everyone, and this applies also to those who are multilingual, even if they, in brief encounters with their compatriots, hear and speak their native language again. But he who has the fate of living in exile leads a life between the desire to forget and the preservation of memory, between memory and parting, loss and new beginnings, wherever it might be. Life is a making oneself at home [*Einkehr*] in a language. So everyone must seek to make habitable alienation and the alien, and he has to search for this being-at-home in a different language. A break lies here, which is unavoidable and has to heal, if one wants to survive. Healing is indeed not at all, as we so often imagine in our mechanized society, something that the doctor does to somebody. It is always a life-task of the patient himself. If one no longer gets to hear one's own, native language, he must bid farewell to the kind of language which binds people to one another. This is the human background of all exile.

So we feel the weight of the actual question: What can be the return from exile? Must it not be a new break, a second break? Or does it even make the first break like a pain perceptible once again? It is like a lack of dialogue that happens with such a break. Even if one's own homeland, which one has not left, is distorted until it becomes alien, one can live on under the maxim of hope and promise: "Et illud transit." We also experience in Germany now, what such a break is, which so to speak, makes conversation difficult. So the conversation between those living in the West and those living in the East is not easy. I remember how hard it was, even with my own friends who had gone into exile, to resume the conversation again through the emergency bridge of the mail service when the conversation was interrupted by the war. Both partners in a conversation then face the new task of finding a new identity which has continuity—and yet cannot have it. However great the strength of the spirit and heart may be, human beings cannot

bring back time. What we return to is different, and he who comes back is different too. Time has shaped and changed both. For everyone who returns the task is to make oneself at home in a new language, though there is an air of strangeness around everything to which one returns.

The original task of being-in-the-world, namely, of overcoming foreignness, is repeated for everyone. The infant resents the walls of factuality, and in the slow dawn of the exchange of looks, in the first forward groping, in the first babbling of speech-like sounds, and finally in the first words conversation begins. Something of this situation in learning to speak is repeated in truth in every communicative understanding reached through conversation. Language is not what we possess with words and administer, after freely choosing it. It is a giving and taking in which language forms itself. Speech has its meaning in execution and can only be where one approaches the other in order to assure himself or herself of the commonality of experience.

Exactly this is, however, that by which the task of literature is to be measured. Literature wants to bring something to words, for which there must be given no pre-conceived and premade formulas. In an age of increasing regulation, in which a public flood of information pours in from all sides all day like a stupefying wave, the writer's and the poet's finding a place in language that could be expressed by language must appear almost like a return to something completely different and estranged.

The meaning of the expression "literature days" [*Literaturtagen*] is probably nevertheless determined from this. The expression does not claim that one finds poets here, whom one would not find without these days, and they also do not claim that schools of poetry are founded here, the founding of which perhaps, in the history of the development of a high literary level, has not been the worst thing. But now the task of literature is to strengthen the mutual recognition both between the creation and the reception of literature on which all possibilities of cultural production are finally based.

Let us ask ourselves first what a writer actually is. I would say that he is a supplicant in

language. He wants to have his prayers answered by language. He wants to be rewarded by language, so that he succeeds in bringing it to speak anew, so that the written word as such or the read as such is not merely something in the general flood of information, so that we listen to language. Therein lies the specific character of poetic language and of what we call literature in the true sense, that one there listens to language. The claim and possibility of poetry in every form, whether as a poem, whether as a narrative, whether as a scene, is always to be like a dictation which one only has to take in and not subsume in the critical world of experience. The word poetry [*Dichtung*] comes from “*dictare*,” from “dictates,” even if there linger perhaps older, pre-humanistic layers of meaning in the sense of “closing” [*Dichtmachens*]. In any case, what comes and stands out from the writer himself, so that in the end it will be read, is not something one sounds out so that it is thereby communicated to one, but something one listens to which lets itself be seen in its own power to evoke in language. The skill of a writer depends on the one hand on the degree to which he is aware of this, and his success, on the other hand, on making the presence of the kind of being that is evoked in language speak to his reader. It is, therefore, so to speak, an honorary title of the “literature days” that they unite many silent readers and that these days are able to attract public interest only from a great distance. We should not be ashamed or feel low, these days are in the end proof of how much cooperation of every kind belongs to community in our social life. What touches one easily also disappears quickly.

So I would like to conclude by illuminating the relationship between return and literature somewhat more sharply. We must make clear to ourselves that in the era of the industrial revolution and automated communications and the massive spread of information that everyone gets about everything, completely new tasks have sprung up for the writer. He must in a certain sense always return from an exile, if he seeks to escape from the world of always used and utilized words, from the pre-digested words of all opinion-formation and all idioms, and of expected information, which is produced by technology. We will become all the more aware and

conscious of what language is in its true potential and how this task of returning to language is given to literature. This makes all poetry a return from the foreign. I have used the time in my congratulatory speech on the awarding of the Droste Prize to Hilde Domin to express that her poetry is a return to language also for her. It is also the task of life for each one of us to return home from the foreign. The word of the poem goes ahead of us on that occasion.

I might distinguish three steps in which language can unite us all. I refer first to the word used by Paul Celan, “language-grid” [*Sprachgitter*]: language is first of all a grid. It is initiated by the already mentioned process of socialization in the language learning of the infant. In our world, which comes to fruition through socialization and is also polished through linguistic expression, we should remind ourselves of the ingenuity of that early age in which one learns to speak, and we should see in it a model. For here is shown what language can do when it is not constricted too much by the compulsion of rules, but rather when it out-dares itself in the determined attempt to communicate something to the other—as we observe with astonishment again and again in the three-year-old child. There one sees that language is not only a grid that blocks, but also a grid that allows intimate communication to pass through it. It is both, even its blocking reminds us of certain conditions without which reaching the other would not be possible at all. Wittgenstein has said rightly that there cannot be a private language. Language is conversation; a word that does not reach the other is dead. Conversation is with the other, and every word requires in the concrete moment the right and unrepeatable tone, by which it overcomes the other grid [*Gitter*], the grid of otherness, and reaches the other person.

The second function that is connected to this I would call the veil of language. It includes everything which comprises the sphere of ordinary courtesy in avoiding that which is harsh and forceful, which is thoughtless and which shows one’s irritability, and which through a softening process makes living together with others possible at all. This veil of language certainly has a questionable downside, to which the famous words of Talleyrand apply: language is the very best

way to conceal one's thoughts. This is in fact the art of the diplomat. But even this is not only something negative. This art evidently makes it possible to conceal one's thoughts and ultimately succeed in reaching the common ground of agreement and of a peaceful compromise between parties.

The third I would call the flash of language [*Sprachblitz*]. In all of the measured, lucid, and enlightening words that can be exchanged back and forth between people, something can flash. This reminds me of experiences I've often had. If I may be permitted to relate one such experience as it is especially funny: Once, in order to get to know something about the secret of the Dark Continent, I lectured at a university in South Africa for the San people—in English, however. That was the language of instruction there. So I had to do mainly with professors who were Afrikaans, and with assistants already trained by them, who were to gain contact with the philosophy in Europe and then in their turn instruct their own students. There someone asked me if I would like to give a talk to all of the students one day about the task of philosophy. It was an impressive spectacle. The San people are very tall, very beautiful people. So it was a veritable gallery of ebony statues that surrounded me. But they maintained a straight face even when I did everything to reach them. I was desperate. What I could tell them about philosophy, if I did not feel the slightest stirrings of a response? (Later my colleagues told me that unfortunately for them it was always the case that one does not get to experience a reaction). There in the midst of my lecture I was rescued by a thought that occurred to me. I pointed out that Greek philosophy began with Parmenides and that his insight was that there *is* nothing, only being. To this I added: "Please make it clear to yourself. Nothing is no thing." At this moment this went through the rows like wildfire. "Do you understand, do you understand? Nothing is no thing!" It was like language-lightning [*Sprachblitz*] which struck them. It became clear in an instant that being is no thing. This story serves of course more to entertain than to instruct, but it has its didactic side.

In such experiences we have to ask ourselves what can be done in this continent [of Africa] by Europeans. So we ask ourselves even today what it means when our highly-civilized and highly-trained Japanese colleagues come and through a nearly impenetrable language grid pick up our Western philosophy as a result of reading our texts with an amazing knowledge and solid acumen. We would very much like to take this opportunity to learn what they might have to say to us and to our way of thinking from out of their tradition of Confucianism and Shintoism and their traditional religious and ethical values. We stand now just at the beginning of a great developmental process of humanity in which we all are included. We will never be able to achieve the 18th century Enlightenment ideal of eternal peace in the world if we do not succeed in the end in bringing about an actual exchange between foreign cultures and our European culture. What does it mean when they philosophize with us and take up world literature with us (something which most certainly includes the learning of foreign languages—there is no avoiding this)? Translations are only the initial provision of an aid in sensing something of the tone, sound, and meaning of the original. The ubiquity of the visual arts from all cultures, and not least, music, the first cultural language of all humanity, teaches us what is possible when there are no language barriers to hinder us.

But we are here in the German-speaking world, with a shared literature. So I conclude by returning to the point I made about language with the notion of the “flash” of language [*Sprachblitz*]. There is a famous phrase of Heraclitus, with which I am very familiar, because Heidegger had carved it into the door of his hut. It reads in the German: "It is the flash that controls everything." You have to take it very literally. Not as though flash meant fire as an element of nature, such as water, air, and earth—no, flash means flash. But is it not paradoxical that it is the flash which controls? Yes! One should understand it as paradoxical that the flash should control. But then what is meant? I think it is this: that the momentary light of the quivering lightning flash suddenly shows the world in a dazzling clarity. And even when everything sinks

back into deep night, a moment of orientation has been granted to us, and we recognize something of the life of the spirit in it. Even if much falls back into darkness, we are pointed to the path of seeking and questioning, which oscillates back and forth between forgetting and enlightenment.

Finally, then, I come to the last, which I call the crystal of language. We are familiar with the approximate form of this in all languages. This term is not only reminiscent of the “grid” of language. It reminds one of the crystal, whose lattice has a fixed mathematical structure through which the crystal forms itself. I believe it is the same when the flow of speech in poetry achieves a significant form. Just as the crystal begins to spread its fire in its form and in the solidity of its structure when the light falls on it, it is also the linguistic achievement of the poem which approaches the hardness and the solidity and stability of the crystal, and impresses not through a pleasing form but through the illumination of light. A multifaceted sparkle radiates from a poetic structure just as from a crystal. We all of us participate in this, and glimpse something of the truth of the word which stands in such a light.

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