

A Critique of Dialogue in Philosophical Hermeneutics

Hans-Herbert Kögler

The idea of dialogue occupies arguably the most central position in Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer 1960/1989). Dialogue is here not understood merely as the conversation between two subjects about something of common interest in a shared medium of understanding, but rather as the foundational phenomenon within which objects and themes, subjects and perspectives, and common interest and shared understanding are grounded. The foundational character of dialogue derives from the fact that all experience is understood to be linguistically mediated, while language as a medium exists in its true and essential form as dialogue. The strongest support for this approach comes from a phenomenological perspective on understanding, i.e. on what really happens when we understand something, when we make sense of something by interpreting it. Bringing together the encompassing and foundational role of dialogue with its concrete origin in the act of interpretation will yield, as I will show, a post-metaphysical concept of understanding as dialogue. Gadamer's own philosophical-hermeneutic conception of dialogue both suggests and yet misses its full articulation, as our analysis of the idea of dialogue in philosophical hermeneutics, the question of the metaphysical grounds of understanding in language, and the issue of the epistemological significance of dialogue will show.

Key words: dialogue, hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer, language, agency, metaphysics

The Idea of Dialogue in Gadamer's Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is generally known to be concerned with the interpretation of texts, which we can put more systematically as the interpretive understanding of symbolic expressions by a human agent (Schrift 1990; Grondin 1994). The main question is what conditions or processes have to be in place so that someone is able to comprehend adequately what someone else has meant, i.e. what he or she intended to say when uttering (writing or saying) something. Historically this became a methodological issue in the context of the emerging human and social sciences, namely when historically or culturally distant and strange texts (or speech acts, practices, artworks, etc.) constitute the objects of understanding (Schleiermacher 1819/1957; Dilthey 1883/1959; 1910/2004). In these cases, understanding what was said or meant via the symbolic expression clearly involved interpretation, as either the strangeness of the form and assumptions expressed in the texts, and

Hans-Herbert Kögler is Professor and Chair at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies of the University of North Florida.

also the reflexive knowledge that those texts derived from historical and cultural contexts vastly different than our own, required a more explicit and methodological approach. Symbolic expressions by another human subject needed to be approached such that the self-understanding of the other was, as much as possible, respected; it required to reconstruct or even re-live the thoughts or experiences of the other such that the other's perspective could bring itself to bear onto one's own understanding of things—and thus allow the understanding of the other. Hermeneutics as the art of such an interpretive and reflexive understanding understood itself mainly as a methodological discipline, as a scientific support structure for accessing the beliefs and assumptions of the other in order to make sense of them.

For Gadamer, to conceive of interpretive understanding as dialogue—as a dialogue with the text—means to break with such a methodological conception of hermeneutics. Promoting dialogue to the centre stage is, in turn, based on a phenomenological analysis of the process of understanding and interpretation, i.e. an analysis of what really happens when we understand a text (Gadamer 1960/1989). While dialogue now emerges as the overarching medium of understanding, and indeed of human existence, it is important to never lose sight of its phenomenological origin. The *phenomenon* of interpretation involves someone approaching a text, or any symbolic expression of the other, in order to understand it, to make sense of it. Now accessing, or relating to, this sense obviously deals with an entity, a text or symbolic expression that is *about something*. To express something is to say something about something. This aboutness of the text is its intentional orientation, which Gadamer calls 'the thing itself' (*die Sache selbst*). If we are to understand symbolic expressions, we do so by understanding what they say about something. Yet in order to understand the beliefs and assumptions expressed by the other, we have to connect them to our beliefs about the subject matter. Yet in order to do that, we have to bring into play our own beliefs and assumptions, and then compare, adjudicate, revise and transform them as we continue to understand. Interpretation is thus the continuous improvement of our sense of what the other says about something, such that the subject matter becomes clearer. Yet this is (like) dialogue. Interpretation of a text or of the actual speech acts of a present other is dialogical since it is two perspectives about a shared issue that are conjoined in this endeavor.

Gadamer's analysis of the relation between an interpreter and a text is convincingly modelled after the real conversation between two subjects, because as in real dialogue we are aiming to understand what the other says by following his or her thoughts and to engage in an exchange that mutually adjusts and respects the two perspectives: our own and the one of the other. Yet using the actual conversation with the other as a model for textual understanding also illuminates what goes into any real conversation between two actual agents: the dialogue between agents is itself based on a pre-understanding of each one with regard to the relevant subject matter; a successful

dialogue will always transcend the individual perspectives involved and enlarge the views of each participant, whether it leads to a new shared view or whether it brings out irreconcilable differences; and a real dialogue is always *an event* that is based on prior background understandings that help actualise a process that is beyond the subjective control of each of the agents involved. Dialogue thus emerges as an inter- and trans-subjective phenomenon that precedes and transcends the individual agents and their perspectives by establishing a temporal process that lifts them onto the higher and still historically and culturally situated plane of *mutual understanding*.

Dialogue is thus the real agent of interpretation, which accounts for much of the anti-methodological thrust that defines philosophical hermeneutics. Yet I want to emphasise nevertheless the *phenomenological origin* of this concept of understanding because it helps us avoid abandoning the subject entirely, giving up or neglecting the role of reflexive agency in this process. The fact that interpretive understanding approaches a symbolic expression via its relation to the subject matter, to *content*, means that the intentional self is represented in this process. The self finds itself defined by its cultural and historical background understanding and nevertheless understands what is said; it realises the meaning of the text or symbolic expression, and it is thus actualised and enhanced, and not reduced or eliminated, by this process. Furthermore, the process comes only fully into its own when the reflexive interpreter is aware of the conditions that enable her to understand, when she can see herself as situated in an 'effective history' (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) which is both beyond her control and yet shapes her perspective. Indeed, the effective realisation of one's embeddedness in one's context of tradition contributes to an *epistemic humility* towards what the other has to say, as one now understands one's beliefs and assumptions as necessarily situated, limited, and incomplete, thus as always ready for improvement. The resulting 'ethos of openness' is thereby grounded in a non-defeatist self-conception of situated reason, in which I need the other's beliefs and assumption to reach a better and deeper understanding of the issues at stake. The phenomenological grounding of interpretation as dialogue succeeds in retaining the connection to the *interpreter's reflexive self-consciousness* all the while it understands that this consciousness is part of a process that transcends its constrained and situated existence.¹

1 In terms of social theory, I suggest addressing the agency-structure problematic—i.e. that social reality transcends the reality and consciousness of individual agents and yet remains dependent for its reproduction on their acts and intentions—by means of the phenomenological anchoring of the act of understanding, which as such is irreducibly situated in a reflexive self, while this self is situated in trans-subjective contexts and practices, the reflexive analysis of which is the goal of hermeneutic self-understanding. Here the role of dialogue as a medium in which such a reflexive self-understanding can be achieved is at stake.

To insist on the phenomenological origin of hermeneutic experience is crucial since it situates the dialogical principle in the unique intermediary position between a metaphysical and an empirical concept. Dialogue now emerges as a post-metaphysical concept in which the philosophical aim at grasping the totality of being and existence is inseparably conjoined with a reflexive understanding of the contingent and contextual nature of experience.² Dialogue, or the interpretive process of a dialogical happening between the interpreter and the other, is thus both an encompassing fluid structure and yet never to be abstracted from the concrete situated beliefs and experiences of the agents. The dialogical process happens in a historical time and a cultural place, but via its orientation vis-à-vis the subject matter, it brings into play beliefs and perspectives that transcend the *locus particularis*, that go beyond the contextual here and now by addressing claims that pertain to truth and validity. The truth in turn is of this world; it is a productive opening towards the world, towards the dimensions of whatever is discussed, and thus remains grounded in the particular contexts. And yet, by addressing the views of another vis-à-vis something, the interpreter opens herself up to new and different perspectives, potentially reaching a different and transcending vision. A mediation of *the temporal and the ideal*, therefore.

Yet the dialogical event also mediates and thereby transcends the division between *the subjective and the objective*, because the situated subjective view opens itself to what the other has to say, which for Gadamer again means the opening of oneself to the truth. Yet this truth is not anything objective in itself, as it is inconceivable without being disclosed by the situated perspectives which themselves turn out to be the result of previous dialogues and experiences. What is usually considered 'subjective' reveals itself as the shared yet socially evolved perspective that is advanced and improved by the view of the other vis-à-vis something. Therefore, we have here a transformation of our understanding of the subjective and the objective by conceiving the encounter of the interpreter with the text as that of a socially embedded subject with another perspective that is itself socially embedded. The dialogical process thus enables a more 'objective' view (only) in the sense of a more encompassing, reflexive, and critically transformed understanding of something that is socially shared.

2 The first and most prominent use of 'postmetaphysical' is found in Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 1996). However, while Habermas emphasizes the 'post' in 'postmetaphysical', suggesting a stage beyond metaphysics that is now to be occupied by a fallibilistic social theory and science, my use emphasizes equally the metaphysical aspect in 'post-metaphysical', suggesting that the role of philosophical hermeneutics is to be a metaphysics beyond and after metaphysics, that is, it is still a comprehensive doctrine of one's existence and being in the world, however without assuming an essentialist or infallible position vis-à-vis its concrete content and formulation. It aims at the whole, at totality, but not within a developed system, but as an approach that grounds how open-ended and 'dia-logical' experience can be possible.

Finally, the dialogical process also entails the mediation between *the individual and the general*, since the individual interpreter finds him or herself oriented towards something on the basis of previously acquired, culturally shared beliefs and assumptions. What may be considered 'individual' is therefore the perspectival and situated slicing of something larger, more general, commonly shared, of a *sensus communis* that nevertheless only exists by means of the individual acts of understanding. The linguistic mediation of all understanding therefore situates the individual in an open-ended process that advances towards more general truths but that nevertheless does so only on the basis of situated selves.

While we thus derive a foundational and yet post-metaphysical conception of dialogue, as the interpreter is situated in a trans-subjective process of understanding that nonetheless actualises the situated self-understanding of the subject, we have not yet unfolded how exactly the claims advanced by this approach can be substantiated. Indeed, what I introduced as a promising post-metaphysical principle of dialogue in philosophical hermeneutics does indeed so far only promise that dialogue can fulfill this role. Now Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophy advances dialogue to a central position in hermeneutics, but it ultimately fails to articulate the intermediary ontological position of dialogue between metaphysics and experience. As I will show, Gadamer's grounding of interpretation-as-dialogue in a hermeneutic ontology of language leads him to under-develop the dialectical relation between the trans-subjective process of understanding and its individual embodiment in concrete reflexive agents. Accordingly, the grounding of interpretation in such an ontology has problematic consequences with regard to the epistemological function of dialogue. I will thus structure the remainder of my discussion around two related dimensions in hermeneutics, namely, first, the issue of a metaphysical grounding, and, second, the issue of the epistemological problem of understanding.³ My critical reconstruction of Gadamer's approach and its problems is aimed at introducing a post-metaphysical conception of dialogical interpretation that can support our epistemic aims with regard to understanding and interpretation. My critique of Gadamer's conception of dialogue ultimately aims at strengthening the potential of dialogue as an encompassing philosophical idea, as it pushes towards a more contextual, situated, and socially reflexive conception of dialogical interpretation.

3 A third and equally important dimension of philosophical hermeneutics consists in the ethical meaning, scope, and implications of the principle of dialogue. For further analysis, see Kögler (2014a) 'The Crisis of a Hermeneutic Ethic', *Philosophy Today*, as well as the forthcoming (Forthcoming 2014b) 'Ethics and Community', in J. Malpas, H.-J. Gander (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Philosophical Hermeneutics*.

The Metaphysical Grounding of Dialogue

Language is the all-encompassing horizon within which anything that can possibly be experienced can come to light. Language opens up the world to the self, since without language there is no world, no experience (Heidegger 1971; Humboldt 1988). Experience is specifically human by being both immersed into whatever it is that is understood, and yet it is also reflexive, things are *understood* as something. Human experience is both situated in the world—it is, as Heidegger said, from the start *Being-in-the-World*—and yet the world is not merely an environment, a natural habitat, but defines a realm of significance, domains of intentional understanding within which the self naturally moves and acts (Heidegger 1927/1962). Language is the master-medium of human experience because it creates a holistic web that is constantly open towards, and in interaction with, the world. And yet, it uniquely mediates our experience of anything possible by constructing frames of reference—conceptual schemes which are both implicit, taken-for-granted, and potentially reflexive, representable. These interpretive schemes create the specifically human way of finding oneself in a world, by being simultaneously able to reflexively distance oneself, transform and change, and reinvent one's understanding. Language thus does not define merely this or that, but defines us, our experience. It shapes and 'discloses' whatever appears, and so has a universal significance for human understanding: 'Being that can be understood is language.' (Gadamer 1960/1989, 474)

Gadamer attempts to bring out this universal character of language in a variety of ways, including the self-forgetfulness of language when we think and speak (implying that any thought unconsciously draws on language), the uncontrollability of dialogue as the medium in which thoughts are formed (thereby designating concept formation as essential for experience and showing that it depends on language), and the interpreter's dependency on background knowledge (which exists in terms of pre-judgments which are necessarily linguistic which thus makes all interpretation language-dependent) (Kögler 1999). The major thrust of the metaphysical analysis of language is to further ground the phenomenological findings that interpretation happens in a way that supersedes the conceptual framework of subject/object and methodological control. Language is a medium that encompasses both subject and object, the self and the other, and as such promises to provide a new ground for self-understanding. Metaphysically speaking—as we already noted the fluid, open (and therefore also open-ended), and situated nature of language as dialogue—this presents a somewhat groundless ground, a post-metaphysical metaphysics of an essentially temporal, historical and cultural being. It defies ever being captured in a transcendental or universal realm of ideas, forms, God, innate ideas, or a priori structures of any kind. And yet language—the symbolically mediated background understanding that pre-defines how the subject understands 'the thing itself'—

has a transcendental function in Gadamer, since its pre-mediation of meaning is inescapable. And at the same time, the 'transcendental' (since insurmountable) role of language is understood not in a strictly transcendental, namely a Kantian way, i.e. as a necessary constrain of possible experience in the mind of the subject. Rather, language (which exists only in its concretely dialogical mediations in place and time) provides the necessary condition of all experience because it alone allows us, the self, to come into a conscious understanding of being, which means that the merely temporal, momentary, or fleeting event is transformed into a conceptual understanding that captures something as *being what it is*—which always means capturing it in terms of some concept.

Language is intrinsically dia-logical because it is intentionally oriented towards its content which it is and it is not at the same time. The word 'tree' intends to mean the tree and not the idea or the concept of tree, and thereby allows all to understand the tree as a tree. Here all share in a common understanding of the object tree, which is made possible by the linguistically enabled concept 'tree.' Language thus provides humans—which thereby alone become human—with a form or medium that *intends* the object which becomes what it is for the conscious understanding via the conceptual form. This is the birth of the symbolic expression. Something—a symbolic form or item—stands for something else—the designated object, whatever it is—and thereby allows a shared understanding among differently situated interpreters. The fact that we as humans always already exist within a realm of understanding, that fact provides us with a 'world' that we can truly share with others. It is this symbolico-ontological fact on which our shared experience within language is based, and it gives language an unparalleled status in the economy of human experience.

The issue is now to see whether Gadamer was successful in articulating this role of language for human experience. There is no doubt that what we have said is deeply indebted to Gadamer, and yet we must say that Gadamer's specific reflections on language leave room for serious criticisms. Gadamer develops an 'ontology of language' whose function is to provide the new grounding in order to overcome the Cartesian subject/object split, and which promotes language itself to the new master position (Gadamer 1960/1989). There are at least four serious problems that such an approach entails, problems that if not addressed threaten to dispense and lose the immense potential that a hermeneutic conception of language and dialogue may entail.

Language Between Event and Experience

The first of these has to do with a conceptual tendency to disavow the ontological commitment to a true mediation between language as a trans-subjective event and

the *situated experiences of the actual subjects* who understand. As is well known, Gadamer's view on language is strongly influenced by the late Heidegger—and this influence topples unfortunately the also highly present Humboldt. For Humboldt, language is both *ergon* and *energeia*, both structure and act, sedimentation of agency in form as well as active agency in its transformation (Humboldt 1988). For Heidegger, language is 'the house of being,' but as such it is an event that surpasses intentional acts, expressions, or intra-worldly experiences. Rather, language sets frames of reference, in what Heidegger calls 'the history of being,' which provide epochal ontologies of understanding for whole cultures and generations (Heidegger 1977). Gadamer does not accept Heidegger's master-narrative of a forgetfulness of being that requires a return to Pre-Socratic philosophers in order to overcome, bluntly put, Western metaphysical essentialism. But Gadamer overplays in Heideggerian fashion the role of language as trans-subjective happening (*Sprachgeschehen*) versus the situated, reflexive, and intentional subjects as speakers and interpreters. Heidegger clearly rejected, with good reason, a view that makes language merely the instrument of a self-sustained subject, either as a means for subjective expression, objective representation, or intersubjective communication. Language is instead ontologically constitutive by means of its holistic and reflexive mediation of world as such (Heidegger 1971). Yet this insight, which amounts to an understanding of the role of the (symbolically mediated) background for all intentional thought, cannot lead to the conceptual elimination of the subject (Dreyfus 1980; Searle 1983). The intentional and reflexive use of language by subjects against the backdrop of their holistic embeddedness in language and tradition requires reconstruction, not deconstruction. At worst, Gadamer has thrown out the baby of a dialogically situated subjectivity with the Cartesian bathwater of a self-sustained pre-social subject. At best, Gadamer's reinterpretation of the role of language in interpretation provides us with a vast construction site. We need to avoid conceptualising our understanding in tradition as a phenomenon that constitutes nothing but the '*Einrücken in das Überlieferungsgeschehen*', the integration into the *overbearing event* of tradition. Rather, we need to find the sources of situated autonomy and reflexive agency in the tracks and pathways that an overarching and at times overbearing history of ourselves presents us with.

The Metaphysical Reification of Language

The problem of a true mediation of the role of language as encompassing horizon on the one hand, and the active and dialogical challenges of a situated agency on the other hand, also express themselves as *the problem of the metaphysical reification of language*. This means that we now thematise language as that which makes understanding possible, that which 'grounds' it—and now we have created a new transcendental signifier, a new super-noun, a master-concept grounding a new master narrative. Yet this contradicts the hermeneutic turn towards the concrete,

the event (with a small e), the situated encounter between self and other that, however mediated and tied to vast conceptual and historical horizons, nevertheless constitutes the one most insurmountable presence and reality.⁴ The reification problem indicates that what can never be lost or forgotten is the intermediary, relational character of language that really has no entity-existence in itself. Language for Gadamer is missed in its essence if it is identified with forms, rules, grammars, or lexica. The act of bringing something into understanding, the synthetic identification, or symbolic pregnance (Cassirer) of an experience in what it is, is what defines language. This in turn means that language exists as such in its *function of opening*, of providing a mediated yet crucial access to the world. This, however, implies that 'being that can be understood' is not per se language, in that it is not defined as language while being ontologically enabled by language. The *conceptual synthesis* that expresses itself in language vis-à-vis Being, which is always encountered in terms of concrete beings, articulates what the reality of that which is encountered means, but it is not therefore suggesting that this act is itself the total reality. If this distinction is not made, Gadamer faces the charge of *linguistic idealism*. This would mean that the ultimate reality of anything that is, is its linguistic form. But that would imply an analogous problem to Berkeley who held that because everything has to be perceived to be understood as real, everything real, and the only thing real, is perception. Yet being that can be understood in language is being that is articulated as that which presents itself to us in the encounter with (the) being, without being thereby defined as linguistic in turn. It is language-dependent because it can only be articulated in language, but this mediated access to the sharedness of the experiential content does not make further claims about reality. Language functions like a window which makes us see, and which shapes what we see through its form, colour, density, and situation, without us therefore taking all we see to be glass. Gadamer's position is unclear as to how it addresses the issue of linguistic idealism with regard to that which is understood via language but not ontologically constituted as language. The position would need to be advanced towards an internal or hermeneutic realism such that the linguistically mediated nature of understanding does not compel us to the anti-realistic absurdity of claiming that all that is real is linguistic.

The Social Conditions of Dialogue

The third problem relates equally to a certain linguistic idealism in the dialogical ontology of language, albeit this time the idealistic danger is with regard to the *social conditions of dialogue*. In Gadamer's version of philosophical hermeneutics,

4 The phenomenon of understanding encompasses a non-separated, non-alienated subjectivity in the act of understanding something as something, in which I understand X as X—without the 'I' thereby having to be reflexively divided from the fully immersed awareness of the X being X, or its meaning.

tradition which is grounded in language provides the source and medium within which dialogical events actualise and transform its content. Yet since this dialogical actualisation, which consists in the infinite acts of interpretation through which texts and practices are appropriated by the situated agents, is theorised as the truth-oriented opening towards the claims of the text, it appears that the language medium is one in which a harmonious and truth-producing ‘fusion of horizons’ takes place towards the better and transformed insight about the subject matter. The micro-model may here be the successful philosophical seminar discussion of exceedingly difficult texts that leave everyone transformed and elevated. But if such an idealised image of dialogue, however valuable and rewarding, is ontologically promoted to the all-encompassing process of being/understanding, concern is in place. What is missing is the fact that dialogues happen in non-ideal times, places, and situations—if they happen at all. The issue is thus the extent to which a normatively idealised, and in certain contexts attainable, model of dialogical truth-finding is generalised such that the socially existing constraints on dialogical self-understanding fade from perception. Philosophical hermeneutics realises that all understanding involves interpretation, since it is necessarily perspectival, and all interpretation therefore involves application, because the meaning has to be related back to the concrete context in order to make sense. Yet if anyone seriously considers what application to real contexts must mean, the lacunae of a conception of constraints and power that undermine ‘the opening towards the claim of the other’ becomes apparent.

Now ever since Habermas’ famous review of Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, this issue is known (Habermas 1988; Schrift 1990). It has been widely acknowledged that the hermeneutic ontology of language remains incomplete if not accompanied by some conception of the non-dialogical social context. The issue should, however, not be conflated with the issue of how to provide a normative standard that can universally criticise unjust power practices. Gadamer has replied to the normative charge that any so-called universal standard will itself make its claim against the backdrop of tradition—a point vividly brought back to mind in intercultural debates about what counts as right or wrong, as good or bad in certain contexts. This does not mean that ‘anything goes’, but it means that one’s own concrete beliefs and assumptions about the good and just should be made subject to dialogical assessment (as suggested by the epistemic humility above), while the meta-norms of such a dialogical exchange may indeed provide an abstract-formal indication of a set of normative assumptions to which all can (or should) agree. But by leaving the normative issue on the side, what is at stake in the ontological discussion is whether the conceptualisation of the event of understanding as linguistic can be sufficient. It clearly cannot, in my view. What is required instead is a reconceptualisation of what constitutes the *background that grounds all understanding*. This background

encompasses symbolic assumptions and individual perspectives, but also real social practices and institutions (Heidegger 1927/1962; for a critique of Gadamer on this point, see Kögler 1999). Those practices and institutions have a threefold influence of the understanding of ‘the thing itself’ in the allegedly open and truth-oriented dialogue. First, the background is pervasively shaped by deep-seated assumptions and values that generally do not reflect the idealised conditions of dialogue, but the power-hierarchical forms of social organisations and roles. The linguistic mediation here provides the involved agents with an ideological background that due to its symbolic sublimation appears as insight and intuition where formerly power and domination reigned. Second, the actual dialogues in a social setting pre-determine to a large extent who can speak when about what to whom and in what capacity. The dialectical interchange between the tradition as the medium and public sphere in which all share, and the expert leaders who can determine the particular trajectories by occupying the relevant tracks, needs to be unfolded. Third, even if dialogue in its most truth-oriented mode of open exchange may be allowed to happen, the agents who can participate are shaped in their symbolic horizons both via content and via discursive capability to engage the other in a certain way. It would take an additional critical-hermeneutical mode of reflexivity to distance oneself from one’s power-ingrained habits and practices to allow for the possibility of a truly transformative dialogue.

The Dialectic Between Historical Ground and Individual Agency

Finally, Gadamer’s conception of a tradition-based dialogical understanding does not unfold *the dialectic between holistic background and individual agency*, but rather distorts its dynamic towards a one-sided master-narrative of the tradition as subject. The complex notion of a situated pre-understanding that is both grounded in a holistic and encompassing background, and yet dependent on the concrete re-actualisation and innovation via individual interpretations, would have allowed to overcome the stale and misleading alternative between autonomous self-constitution and heteronomous determination. Yet instead of emphasising how both background and foreground mutually re-enforce and shape one another, Gadamer stresses the role of tradition vis-à-vis individual subjectivity:

‘The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgements, constitute the historical reality of his being.*’ (Gadamer 1960/1989, 276-7)

Gadamer is keen to say that self-consciousness—the ‘self-awareness of the individual’—is an overrated concept when it comes to the power of history, which as it were sweeps up individuals in their ‘closed circuits’ such that what

they tacitly assume defines their core more truly than what they explicitly know and think. Yet this late-Heideggerian rendering of prejudices into a trans-subjective power fails to bear out on a phenomenological level. Not only are conscious self-understanding and intuitive background intrinsically conjoined in hermeneutics, so that the playing off one against the other fails to account for the intertwining of conscious revision and unconscious intuition in interpretation that defines the actual hermeneutic experience. It is also ontologically counter-intuitive to assume that history develops, as it were, behind the backs of the subjects via a 'superpower of prejudices' that are, while 'shaping' the judgments of agents, nevertheless beyond their reach.⁵ The true insight here, namely that each individual act draws on a shared and therefore trans-individual *sensus communis*, gets instead overplayed by suggesting the linguistic background constitutes an ontological realm *sui generis*. The conceptually erroneous tendency of the ontology of language is here, again, to separate the phenomenologically accessible sphere of hermeneutic experience, which can never do without the irreducible core of individual *Befindlichkeit*, from the conceptually inferred trans-subjective ground that establishes in thought the possibility of true sharedness. While the sharedness of the pre-understanding is never found in one individual as such, and could never be derived from a mere aggregate notion of many individuals combined, the experience of what it *means* to share something with someone is possible only for the situated and concrete individual. It is this individual, and the dialectic with which it is situated in the larger whole of tradition, that Gadamer's hermeneutics fails to fully articulate.

The Epistemological Significance of Dialogue

Dialogue is the process through which knowledge is gained in interpretation. It thus has an epistemological significance for the human and social sciences, since their claim to existence is based on the possibility of gaining access to their object domain via an understanding of symbolic expressions. Philosophical hermeneutics reconstructs the condition on the basis of which such an access is possible, in which ever way subsequently the meanings or discourses are reconstructed within the respective historical, cultural, and social contexts and disciplinary domains. To be sure, to claim such epistemological significance does not mean to fall back into a transcendental approach that delineates specific universal criteria or rules. Similarly,

5 To clarify, this is not to deny two structural phenomena that transcend the immediate self-reflexive capacities of agents: unintended consequences that cannot be foreseen by agents as well as the structural habitus-formations that due to their meaning-conferring function usually remain 'out of sight' while constituting the subject's vision. Yet what I claim is that the hermeneutic project aims at ultimately reconstructing those dimensions such that they become part of one's social self-understanding, be it retrospect or with social self-reflexivity, or be it with regard to an ethos of openness that is experienced enough to understand the non-finality of one's current views and insights.

the phenomenological insight into the dependency of the interpreting subject on the background rules out any consciously controlled methodology, any step-by-step program that would yield necessarily true and adequate interpretations. Yet despite hermeneutics' anti-methodological thrust, and despite the lack of a separate transcendental realm of a priori forms, the dialogical approach makes a real difference with regard to human-scientific interpretation.

To be sure, Gadamer's approach has always given rise to concerns about a certain ambiguity, namely to either accept the language-ontological concept of interpretation as event and therefore to forego any epistemological or methodological claims to reflexive interpretation, or to accept the project of a human-scientific methodology and therefore to revise or abandon some of the ontological claims regarding interpretation. The truth is that Gadamer seems to oscillate between two approaches: to suggest that his reflection does not entail any concretely methodological consequences, and to suggest that a new and reformed way of understanding emerges from hermeneutics. The two options are both entailed in his work, since after all, Gadamer addresses human-scientific interpreters about their own methodological self-understanding and about what happens with them when they approach the text or symbolic expressions. A major thrust, indeed the core drive of his philosophical hermeneutics, is the overcoming of the spirit of objectivism, which is borrowed from a badly misconstrued ideal of knowledge in the natural sciences. Hermeneutic philosophers before Heidegger and Gadamer, as well as much of the disciplinary self-understanding in the human and social sciences, was defined by the aim to access their object domain in an objective manner such that its internal content or essence reveals itself. In contrast to this methodological self-understanding, dialogue is introduced as a counter-concept, as a reflexive revolution in how we understand what happens when we understand. The model of dialogue is seen to best capture what we actually and always already in some form do when we understand, and therefore interpret and apply. It is therefore indeed a social-ontological event and thus prior to any explicit methodology.

But it is also coherent, I would claim, to suggest that a reflexive self-understanding of this reality of dialogue enhances the dialogical experience, brings it so to speak into its own. True, there is *always*, to some extent and unavoidably, a fusion of horizons happening when an interpreter approaches a text in order to understand it. This is so because every possible understanding of a symbolic expression has to relate within linguistic mediation to the content of what gets expressed; here, beliefs and speech acts interpret themselves mutually: I understand what you say if I understand what you state *about something*. The understanding of symbolic expressions is therefore tied back to the interpreter's linguistically mediated web of beliefs, which means (1) that any interpretation of the other's statements will always

be in relation to my own understanding of the subject matter, (2) the interpretation is influenced by a host of implicit background assumptions since those assumptions always determine how I understand things, and (3) the interpretation of the other's statements is involving a normative dimension vis-à-vis the other's rationality since I can only disclose the other's meaning if I make sense of it, but making sense means that it is coherent and plausible to me. To approach the other, the text, therefore entails a certain anticipation of rational coherence, or a pre-conception of completeness, as Gadamer says.⁶

The principle of dialogue thus serves as a reflexive reminder of what happens structurally when we really get to understand something, when we succeed in making sense of the text or the other's symbolic acts. Yet becoming reflexively aware that this is happening makes us not only wary of chasing after misplaced objectivistic ideals of knowledge and understanding; it also entails a new epistemic ethos of openness, a readiness to interpret the text such that the other's claims and experiences are able to assert themselves against us in order to challenge and change us. Gadamer aptly perceives that unacknowledged prejudices exert their power all the more effectively if they remain undetected, if we are complacent with our interpretations and perspectives which are taken for granted and thus function as undeniable truths. A reflexive awareness of one's dependency on an always particular effective history thus leads to an opening towards the other, to a rejection of dogmatic assumptions, and to the abandonment of objectivist methods which can now be seen to seal us off from a true challenge by the other, instead of leading to objective social facts.

Now these formulations represent the constructive insights of Gadamer's dialogical hermeneutics, without addressing yet the problematic dimensions of his approach to interpretation. As before, we can delineate four areas of concern. We will see that the particular version of language-based truth-understanding falls short of encompassing the full range of hermeneutic experiences to which the humanities and social sciences can lead, without therefore ceasing to have established the broadly dialogical approach as guiding.

6 This 'dialogical recognition of the other' entails equally epistemic and ethical aspects. In order to make sense of the other's statements, I have to approach them as potentially meaningful, which is as rational and coherent; this is a cognitive requirement in order to make sense, because in order to make sense I have to make the other's symbolic expressions coherent, and to do so I have to relate them to my own taken-to-be-true beliefs and assumptions; yet approaching the other in this subject-matter based dialogical manner alone fully recognizes the other as an equal agent that I deem worthy of saying something to me, of having something to say to me—and thus to be an equal relational partner in dialogue. See Kögler (Forthcoming 2014c) 'Dialogue and Community', *Journal of the Philosophy of History*.

Alterity and the Symbolic Violence of Immediate Judgment

The first issue consists in the danger of linking the evaluative assessment of that which is understood, that is the beliefs and perspectives expressed in the text about the subject matter, with the reconstruction of what the other's beliefs and assumptions suggest as the rationally defensible and valid view. The issue can be articulated in a variety of ways, which includes perhaps most importantly the issue of the otherness or alterity of the other. Gadamer is fully aware of the need to respect and interpretively take into account this otherness. Based on one's pre-understanding, this otherness can show itself only as other for us, not as other in itself. It is therefore already dependent on some shared assumptions as we need those to make sense of the other's view at all. Yet the task now is to avoid a facile assimilation that would reduce what is challenging and different, and in the end only accept what is acceptable by our standards. Now we can see that Gadamer not only raises this issue himself as one of respecting alterity, but in addition he also demands that we 'suspend' judgment, that we open ourselves to the other by taking her perspective. Yet the linguistic mediation disallows any pre-linguistic projection into the other's mind or experiential states which therefore means that the other's perspective is always already the other's-perspective-for-us. Now combine this with Gadamer's claim that interpretation is essentially without the control or input of the interpreter—that is, for the very reason just mentioned, always a fusion of horizons, then the other's horizon is always already pre-mediated by the interpreter's own cultural and historical background, and thus never a pure or immediate other. All this is still good, as we can conceive on this basis a to-and-fro movement that may, or may not, lead to a new substantive insight into the subject matter. Gadamer himself, however, also distinguishes understanding as the understanding of (possible) truth, as grasping the truth claims made by the other as plausible and justified. Here it all depends what we can accept as 'plausible' and as 'justified.' Gadamer at times overplays his hand by suggesting that a truth-oriented interpretation succeeds only or most fully if it reaches a new truth about the subject matter. This, however, given that 'the prejudices far more than the judgments' define the 'historical being'—and thus interpretive horizon—of the interpreter, means that the plausibility of what is to be understood will in the end be evaluated by one's own standards or 'prejudices.' Yet this conclusion does not and should not have to follow from the hermeneutic fact of the necessary interpreter-relatedness of the understanding of the other. We can avoid what I would call the *hermeneutic violence of immediate judgment*—namely the symbolic violence of an interpretation that conflates the act of making sense with the act of understanding such that one oneself can accept the other's view as true. In order to do this, we need to conceive of the dialogical process in more robust terms as a continuous process of perspective-taking that allows for a variety of results, one of which can be a new shared truth, but which entails other options such as are alternative ways of understanding an

issue or irreconcilable ways of making sense of X. The strong motion towards a shared truth about X is perhaps motivated by the aim to establish a temporal and yet anti-relativistic concept of truth as an ongoing process. But if it focuses and thus potentially narrows interpretation towards a consensus about the subject matter, it unnecessarily curtails the experiential options that dialogical understanding entails.

Language as Self-Contained Medium

The problem of a harmoniously constructed fusion of perspectives is ultimately, I believe, due to the ontological predominance of language as an essentially self-contained medium. Instead of seeing language as deeply intertwined with the practical and institutional contexts, language for Gadamer provides a kind of immanent transcendence from the merely empirical shackles of our existence. While rejecting Hegel's 'absolute knowledge'—since there is no end of history and no escape from the ongoing interpretations that define our being—Gadamer still maintains the privileging of language as the medium of an absolute spirit that allows for synthesis. Yet the phenomenological analysis of hermeneutic existence does point to the background as a complex compound involving subjective-emotional, social-practical, and symbolic-conceptual strands (Heidegger 1927/1962). We approach meaning usually in a tuned mood within some practical context based on our perspectival beliefs and assumptions. The task of the human sciences is to articulate the experiences and meaning contained in symbolic expressions that themselves have been articulations of such situated human existence. But this means that the full scope of the experiential dimensions should and can come into play. Gadamer's conception of a truth-oriented dialogue that addresses the highly articulate claims in philosophical texts or major artworks needs then to be expanded to include also the everyday, the quotidian cultural and social practices, all the religious, legal, aesthetic etc. expressions in which experience has objectified itself. In all these analyses, the linguistic mediation will continue to be grounding important perspectives, not only because the symbolic conceptual frames do synthesise and texture the fabric of emotional states as much as social settings; but also because the fact of symbolic mediation means that all these states and practices can become the reflexive target of a human and cultural studies that thereby enhance the reflexivity and scope of the otherwise less knowledgeable agents. Because the linguistically mediated background is richer and more than just being linguistic, the focus of dialogical interpretation has to go beyond a conceptually shared truth and include the reconstruction of the actual situations and practices within which agents symbolically express themselves.

The Misplaced Rejection of the Social Sciences

Yet if we have thus expanded the realm of hermeneutic experience, we also now need to re-allow *a pluralism of methodological perspectives* to deal with the different realms.

This is a crucial point that *prima facie* seems to dovetail well with Gadamer's approach to openness. Openness in Gadamer, however, is clearly demarcated as the openness towards the claim that tradition makes on us. When it comes to the alternative view regarding understanding and interpretation, Gadamer's magnanimity gives way to a trenchant critique of objectivistic attitudes in the humanities and social sciences. Gadamer argues that particular methodological approaches entail a non-dialogical objectification of the other, and as such are impermissible (Gadamer 1989; see Kögler 2010). A sociological consciousness that reduces the concrete other to a socially determined case of a structurally pre-existing social context fails to adequately understand the other as a human being. Similarly, a historical consciousness that empathetically understands the other as a unique individual into whom it immerses itself in order to re-live the other's thoughts, abstracts from the intersubjective relation and thus ultimately also objectifies (Gadamer 1989, 358 ff.). In both cases, Gadamer argues that the hermeneutic demand, the claim made by tradition or the other, namely to take the other's claims expressed in the text seriously, is missed. While this move allows Gadamer to make an interesting point regarding the ethical nature of interpretation—as he realises that the dialogical recognition to understand the other always entails an ethical component since I thereby recognise the other as my rational equal—the point is misplaced in the methodological context. Here instead a clearer differentiation between life-worldly attitudes of objectification and human-scientific approaches toward understanding and objectification would have helped. For instance, if a social scientist analyses the social agent in terms of objective social structures—say in terms of a class-based habitué that derives from objective social structures (Bourdieu 1990)—she will take into account, or even causally reconstruct, the impact that empirical factors have on the agent's self-understanding. However, whether this scientific analysis includes a problematic reductionism towards the background, that is whether the agent is turned into nothing but a passive effect of objective social processes or structures—that itself depends on *how* the social scientist conceptualises these factors. Causally analysing the background does not necessarily imply reductionism, but can rather, as in critical social theory, be understood as the reflexive self-objectification that unearths hitherto unacknowledged factors of one's meaning-forming background. Similarly, the empathetic transposition into another individual's real life context, which anyhow is mediated by one's own historical context, must not mean that the other is inadequately psychologised or individualised; it can rather be seen as the opening of the interpreter's to the full biographical existence of another, which now is related back to oneself as an existential claim how to live, as a version and a challenge to realise the good life in one case.⁷

7 I have developed this idea in Kögler, H.-H. (Forthcoming 2014c) 'Dialogue and Community: The Ethical Claim of Tradition', *Journal of the Philosophy of History*.

Dialogue and the Detachment of Writing

The crux of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics as an approach for cultural studies is its ambiguous, and easily misunderstood, conception of dialogical interpretation. The use of an actual conversation between two subjects who are seriously engaged in an exchange suggests that dialogue and hermeneutic experience are indeed grounded in the actual life-contexts of agents. Despite the orientation towards truth claims, which introduces an idealised moment from the start, the emphasis seems nevertheless on the situatedness in an effective history that disavows the hybris of the self-sustained subject and embeds the interpreting self in a real life-context of ongoing interpretations. When Gadamer criticises the objectivism of historicism, he sounds just like it: 'Hence historical research is carried out by *the historical movement of life itself* and cannot be understood teleologically in terms of the object into which it is inquiring.' (Gadamer 1989, 284-5, my italics) Yet Gadamer's version of dialogue is much less than it appears defined by the idea of a real conversation between two flesh-and-blood agents as actualised in merely contextual circumstances. We already saw that Gadamer's conception of dialogue is strictly oriented towards the subject matter, just as much as understanding is always about what the text says. Therefore, understanding 'is not really a relationship between persons, between the reader and the author (who perhaps is quite unknown), but about sharing in what the text shares with us.' (Gadamer 1989, 391) It turns out that what is going on in the *dialogical interpretation between reader and text* is better expressed by the mediating role of *writing*, which at first seems secondary to speech with regard to language:

Certainly, in relation to language, writing seems a secondary phenomenon. The sign language of writing refers to the actual language of speech. But that language is capable of being written is by no means incidental to its nature. Rather, this capacity for being written down is based on the fact that speech itself shares in the pure ideality of the meaning that communicates itself in it. *In writing, the meaning of what is spoken exists purely for itself, completely detached from all emotional elements of expression and communication. A text is not to be understood as an expression of life but with respect to what it says.* Writing is the abstract ideality of language. (Gadamer 1989, 392, my italics)

Gadamer emphasises that writing achieves the detachment from both writer or author and from recipient or reader because 'what is stated in a text must be detached from all contingent factors and grasped in its full ideality, in which alone it has validity.' (Gadamer 1989, 394) The grounding of historical research in 'the movement of life itself' does not mean to anchor and reflexively relate it back to contexts, but to rather unleash the orientation towards the subject matter that sets language free as a shared realm in which everyone can participate: 'What is fixed in writing has raised itself into a public sphere of meaning in which everyone who can

read has an equal share.’ (Gadamer 1989, 392) Yet the hypostatisation of language into a sphere of meaning in and of itself that merely requires to be actualised, but that also is immediately accessible by whoever can read, only repeats the idealistic fallacy of an ideal sphere of communication that is already, without further ado, available in this world. Gadamer’s conception of dialogical interpretation opts out of the struggle for adequate interpretations of our current contexts by means of a transcendent dialogue that catapults its subjects into a freer and purer world of meaning, rising straight up into the ‘abstract ideality of language’.

Bibliography

- Bourdieu, P. (1990) *The Logic of Practice*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Buber, M. (1923/2004) *I and Thou*, New York: Continuum Publishing House.
- Dilthey, W. (1883/1959) *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften (Introduction to the Human Sciences)*, Ges. Schriften I. Stuttgart: Teubner.
- Dilthey, W. (1910/2004) *The Construction of History in the Human Sciences*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dreyfus, H. (1980) 'Holism and hermeneutics', *Review of Metaphysics*, 34 (1), 3–24.
- Dreyfus, H. (1993) *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.
- Foucault, M. (1975/1979) *Discipline and Punish*, New York: Pantheon Books.
- Gadamer, H-G. (1960/1989) *Truth and Method*, (TM) New York: Crossroads.
- Grondin, J. (1994) *Introduction to Hermeneutics*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Habermas, J. (1971) *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Boston: Beacon Press.
- Habermas, J. (1988) *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (1996) *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press
- Hacking, I. (2000) *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Harris, P. (2000) *The Work of the Imagination*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Heidegger, M. (1927/1962) *Being and Time*, New York: Harper and Row.
- Heidegger, M. (1971) *On the Way to Language*, San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Heidegger, M. (1977) *Basic Writings*, San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Heidegger, M. (1999) *Ontology—The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana U.P.
- Herder, J. G. and Rousseau, J-J. (1966) *On the Origin of Language: Two Essays*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Horkheimer, M. and Adorno, T. (1972) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York: Herder and Herder.
- Kögler, Hans-Herbert (1999) *The Power of Dialogue: Critical Hermeneutics after Gadamer and Foucault*, Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Kögler, H-H. (2010) 'Being as Dialogue, or The Ethical Consequences of Interpretation', in J. Malpas and S. Zabala, (eds.) *Consequences of Hermeneutics*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Kögler, H-H. (2014a) 'The Crisis of a Hermeneutic Ethic', *Philosophy Today*, 58 (1), 9-22.
- Kögler, H-H. (Forthcoming 2014b) 'Ethics and Community', in J. Malpas, H.-H. Gander, *The Routledge Companion to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, New York; London: Routledge.
- Kögler, H.-H. (Forthcoming 2014c) 'Dialogue and Community: The Ethical

- Claim of Tradition', *Journal of the Philosophy of History*.
- Kögler, H.-H. and Stueber, K. (eds.) (2000) *Empathy and Agency: The Problem of Understanding in the Human Sciences*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Löwith, K. (1928/2013) *Das Individuum in der Rolle des Mitmenschen*, Freiburg; München: Verlag Karl Alber.
- Mead, G.H. (1934) *Mind, Self, and Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ormiston, G. and Schrift, A. (eds.) (1990) *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur*, Albany: SUNY.
- Ricoeur, P. (1992) *Oneself as Another*, Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Rorty, R. (1991) 'Inquiry as recontextualization. An anti-dualist account of interpretation', in *Objectivity, relativism, and truth, Phil. papers 1*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ruchlak, N. (2004) *Das Gespräch mit dem Anderen*, Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann.
- Schleiermacher, F. (1819/1957) *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, The American Academy of Religion, Atlanta, GE: Scholars Press.
- Schutz, A. (1967) *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Taylor, C. (1985) *Human Agency and Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Von Humboldt, W. (1988) *On Language: The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Winch, P. (1959/1991) *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*, London: Routledge.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953) *Philosophical Investigations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.