

# ‘Just Send Me Word’: the Promise of Dialogue

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This paper specifically concerns an aspect of the central place given to dialogue in Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. Though understanding is presented as the unquestioned achievement of dialogue, there is scant attention to a prior question: ‘What draws us into dialogue in the first place?’ Gadamer’s treatment of dialogical understanding as an event tends to obscure the necessary pre-conditions of its emergence. He correctly assumes that texts, artworks, literature speaks directly to us, even disarm us by their address. Yet, what disposes us to listen? Even if we hear nothing in a dialogical claim, what impels us to listen again or more closely to what might be being said? The paper attempts to answer this question and throw light on this, an obscurer aspect of Gadamer’s thinking. We will argue in the vein of philosophical hermeneutics and seek an answer to the question its approach to dialogical understanding supposes but seems neither to ask nor answer. Our central argument is that within the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics, the importance of dialogical exchange lies not in what is transmitted between interlocutors but in the respective hermeneutic effects of that exchange. In dialogue there is no literal ex-change of ‘hermeneutic content’ between one speaker and another. We shall argue that it is not what is literally exchanged that matters but, rather, what participation in that exchange can unexpectedly bring about within the understanding of each speaker and often contrary to their willing and doing.<sup>1</sup>

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Cicero and Heinrich Kleist had common experiences of the law and the demands of writing. When confronted by uncertainty about what they thought, both deployed different but related tactics. Cicero is famed for the aphorism: ‘When uncertain in thought, start a fight’, the point being that the toing and froing of argument would bring him eventually to an articulation of what, in a certain sense, he already knew but could not quite articulate in verbal form (Harris 1988, 49). Cicero’s experience is common enough: ‘I know what I mean but I don’t know how to say it.’ In a similar manner, Kleist’s tactic was to test what he sensed were his proposals in a conversation with an obviously tolerant sister. In the essay ‘On the Gradual Formation of Thoughts in the Process of Speech’, Kleist describes how after many hours of work, exasperated, he would fail to arrive at a clear articulation of the

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1 This paper is a significant development of the closing section of Davey, N. (Forthcoming 2014) ‘Hermeneutics, Structuralism and Post-Structuralism’, in J. Malpas (ed.), *Handbook to Hermeneutics*, London: Routledge.

subject-matter at hand. And then, he continues: ‘Look what happens: as soon as I talk to my sister – who is sitting and working behind me – about this matter, I (come) to realise what hours of hard thinking had not been able to make clear to me’ (Kleist 1966, 810-814).<sup>2</sup> Taking solace from the likes of Cicero – ‘I believe that many a great orator, when he opened his mouth did not know what he was going to say’ – Kleist acknowledges how initially he would have ‘some vague thoughts connected with what I am looking for’ but it was only when he entered dialogical engagement that his initial ‘hazy imaginations’ were brought into a complete clarity (Kleist 1966, 810-814). The question is how did Kleist come to recognise what he never actually knew as that which he wanted to know?

The cases of both Cicero and Kleist anticipate aspects of Gadamer’s dialogical model of the relation between words and thought. On one level, Cicero and Kleist are involved in the use of words to recover a dimly sensed or anticipated thought that eventually comes to be recognised as ‘exactly that which I was wanting to get at’. However, in an important sense, Gadamer reverses Cicero’s and Kleist’s tactic. It is not really words that dispel cloudy thoughts but, rather, it is the proper marshalling and expression of one’s thoughts that leads to a better clarification of the meanings that are *already* in language. It is thought that recovers the meanings that are antecedent to it in language. The axiom that language precedes individual thought rests at the foundations of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics and is emphatically stated throughout *Truth and Method*. Two key points are pertinent. (1) Kleist’s supposition that there is a system of truths as a pre-given set of possibilities for which the right verbal signs have yet to be found, is judged by Gadamer an abstraction (Gadamer 1989, 417). (2) The horizon of language which precedes thought has both its own ideality of meaning and stock of possible meanings which ‘thought can turn to for its own instruction’ (Gadamer 1989, 429). Thought is conceived of as the process of explicating in words the range of actual and possible meanings that language already holds within itself. This Gadamer describes as ‘the logical achievement of language’ (Gadamer 1989, 428). The ontological priority of language over subjective consciousness is, then, fundamental to articulating how dialogical exchange can give rise to transformative understanding. Gadamer comments that ‘to reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but (a matter of) being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were’ (Gadamer 1989, 379). However, this takes us back to Cicero’s and Kleist’s struggle to articulate what they sensed they thought.

Accepting Gadamer’s caveat that language precedes subjective thought, how does dialogical exchange bring both Cicero and Kleist to recognise the thoughts they

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2 I am grateful to my colleague Dr Cornelia Sollfrank for introducing me to this piece.

dimly anticipated but could not articulate as the thoughts they were searching for? Both affirm that participation in dialogue allows them to recognise and realise the thoughts that they could previously only sense obscurely? Two questions are relevant. (1) Kleist acknowledges that it is only talking to his sister rather than what his sister says that brings him the desired clarification of thought. What then is it about the engaging a play of words with his sister that enables him to re-cognise the thoughts he pursues? (2) Despite the emphasis Gadamer gives to conversation and dialogue, his account of conversation suggests that: 'Understanding is not based on transposing oneself into another person' (Gadamer 1989, 383). It is not a question of 'getting inside another person and reliv(ing) his experiences' (Gadamer 1989, 383). 'Conversation,' he remarks, 'is a process of coming to an understanding' and this 'always includes application' (Gadamer 1989, 385). In other words, it is not just a matter of understanding the words articulated by my dialogical partner but more a question of understanding what those words effect or bring about within my shared horizon of understanding irrespective of what my partner may have intended. This is the basis of our claim made in this paper that in dialogue there is no literal ex-change of 'hermeneutic content' between one speaker and another. It is not what is exchanged that matters but what participation in that exchange can bring about within the understanding of each speaker. Why, then, is it that it is the *words* of the other rather than the other who speaks them that I seek in dialogue?

Gadamer is quite clear that if understanding were a transposition of mental states, understanding would be impossible. Can we ever be sure that what we think we have entered as another's mental state is indeed another mental state rather than one constructed from within our own perspective? If understanding is not a question of grasping the interiority of an *other* but of comprehending the *words* they use, then, why is it that on certain occasions those words directly *speak* to us? Not all human discourse is significant. Michael Oakeshott complains of those bores who use conversation for self-display rather than genuine and risky exchange (Oakeshott 1981, 198). Martin Heidegger notes how everyday talk (*Rede*) peddles second-hand experiences and vacuous opinions whilst Nietzsche also warns of ordinary language as expressing the sentiments of the market place.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, as Buber and Gadamer also know, dialogical exchange can be inspirational and is, as Oakeshott surmises, central to the development of human kind. The question remains: why does a sudden phrase or word pattern suddenly speak to us? Is it because certain words and certain constructions of those words contribute to what

3 On Martin Heidegger's concern for language, see Richardson, J. (1986) *Existential Epistemology*, Oxford: Clarendon, 41-2.

Stefan Rosenzweig described as the selfication of the self?<sup>4</sup> Such a perspective concurs with the ontological priority Gadamer gives to language: the self is not a pre-condition of dialogical exchange but is very much its product. If so, we can re-state our central question, ‘What is the promise of dialogue?’ To propose an answer we need to consider the nature of the hermeneutic *cogito* more carefully.

When Gadamer insists that the hermeneutic *cogito* – my sense of being as a conversant self – is not prior to language but a consequence of dialogical engagement, he is making a fundamental ontological point. After all, is the notion of a cognitive subject at all thinkable as prior to language? Given his commitment to the co-existence of language and thought, Gadamer is led to deny this possibility. However, epistemologically speaking, the occurrence of particular dialogues does indeed pre-suppose the prior existence of hermeneutic agents capable of bringing something to dialogue. Accordingly both Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur insist against their structuralist critics that it makes no sense to ask who is speaking if, as structuralism claims, the semiological function of language provides a system without a subject (Ricoeur 2004, 253). Gadamer makes an additional point: ‘Artificial signs and symbols alike do not ... *acquire* their functional significance from their own content but must be taken as signs or symbols ... Signs only have a function *when they are taken* (by a hermeneutic *cogito* or interpreting subject) as a sign’ (Gadamer 1989, 137). An agency is implied. Gadamer and Ricoeur recognise that in linguistic fields of indeterminate meaning, establishing new or alternative meanings is inconceivable without the intervention of a hermeneutic *cogito*. Ricoeur makes an additional point: in the absence of any final meaning, the process of recovering new meanings from available ones requires some notion of subjective agency. Nevertheless, in all these cases such a *cogito* does not have to be conceived as a transcendental subject (Ricoeur 2004, 244). The hermeneutic *cogito* is, clearly, psychologically prior to any given dialogical engagement: the perspective the *cogito* brings to the exchange arises from precisely from that priority. However, and this is the vital point for philosophical hermeneutics, the hermeneutic *cogito* is not possessed of any logically *a priori* capabilities although it certainly has a set of orientations and concerns shaped by the historical, linguistic and cultural horizons out of which it clearly emerges. We would not have any hermeneutic orientation

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4 ‘The self never consolidates into an identifiable, let alone ultimate shape. Instead it passes through endless configurations of itself ... The “selfication of the self”, as Rosenzweig calls it, proliferates into a continual reconfiguration. Each individual manifestation of such an unfolding sequence of “selfing” is nothing but a transition, leading to another shape of the self that “man” is set to become. Because each individual shape of those configurations remains transient, the non-Nought of man’s essence is drawn out into ever new configurations.’ See Iser, W. (2000) *The Range of Interpretation*, New York: Columbia University Press, 133-4.

were it not for the fact that our being is a *being grounded* in the linguistic and cultural horizons that transcend us collectively. In conclusion, there is no hermeneutic *cogito* prior to the contingencies of history and language and yet the existence of that *cogito* is a pre-condition of the very inter-active engagements it partakes in. As we shall see, each dialogical exchange offers every *cogito* the promise of becoming more itself, the promise of an ever increasing selfication of its particular selfhood.

How might the hermeneutic *cogito* be conceived? Nietzsche argues all that is required is cluster of inter-dependent interests (a horizon or alignment of loosely unified concerns) which *act* together as if they were a subject.

The assumption of one single subject is perhaps unnecessary; perhaps it is just as permissible to assume a multiplicity of subjects, whose interaction and struggle is the basis of our thought and our consciousness in general ... My hypothesis: The subject as multiplicity. (Nietzsche 1968, Section 290)

The sphere of a subject constantly growing or decreasing. (Nietzsche 1968, Section 488)

Gadamer insists, of course, that hermeneutic engagement is dialogical which is another way of saying that it is an inter-active occasion in which one horizon of meaning (the reader's) is re-arranged by exposure to another (the text's). The hermeneutic *cogito* is a certain site of inter-active meanings, values and interests. The horizons of meaning which come to constitute a given subjectivity mean that such a *cogito* embodies a sensitivity and a vulnerability to those given alignments of meaning which embody its primary concerns be they religious, political or existential. These constitute the orientation of its tradition. This is to grant that such a way of life – a given hermeneutic – has its vulnerabilities. Given alignments of concern establish themselves as an interactive subjectivity, a subjectivity that is both subject to other alignments of meaning and capable of subjecting them to its own norms. It can be argued that for such dialogical creatures as ourselves, *being* and *being-human* is essentially being subject to subjectivities of meaning.

Wolfgang Iser offers an insightful account of how such dialogical interaction between 'subjects' can be described in terms of semantic exchange (Iser 2000). His analysis is of value in that it offers an insight into how dialogical exchange can be conceived as transformational for a hermeneutic *cogito*. His account of the inter-active interpretation of subject-matters (*Sachen*) is a crucial prelude to the key argument. The argument offers a clue to our primary enquiry: 'What is it about dialogical exchange that attracts the hermeneutic *cogito*?'

Iser's invocation of the hermeneutic differential reveals the gap between what a subject-matter (primary topic, concern, or concept to be investigated) (a) has been

taken to mean and (b) might yet come to mean. Not only does the process of interpretation open this space, but transformational understanding requires the instabilities of meaning such a space generates. Phenomenologically speaking, subject-matters denote the central pre-occupations of a practice whether political, artistic or academic. Their indeterminacy of meaning dictates that though they can never be fully articulated, they can always be brought to better articulation. Indeed, when subject-matters such as openness, justice, integrity, or transparency acquire normative status in a practice, commitment to them will demand a more comprehensive understanding of what can, by definition, only be partially understood. The range of application subject-matters can sustain will never be known *a priori*. Only subsequent questioning and experience will reveal their hitherto unseen possibilities. Such 'immeasurables' prompt a proliferation of interpretations, 'each of which must give way to another because of its inherent limitations' (Iser 2000, 141). Whereas a philosophical critic like Derrida would contend that it is '*différance*' *per se* that renders any hermeneutic object, text, or subject-matter ungraspable, for Iser it is the process of interpretation itself that forever proliferates fleeting figurations of meaning each of which 'is either modified or cancelled by what is to follow' (Iser 2000, 158). Any attempt of the hermeneutic *cogito* to grasp its object through interpretation thereby only serves to disperse that object once again. However, hermeneutic understanding does not have to be understood as the impossible quest for *the* meaning of a text or artwork. It can also be thought of transformatively, that is, as a process whereby in coming come to think differently (though never definitively) about a text or subject matter, our understanding of that text and/or ourselves 'moves on'. As we shall suggest, the hermeneutic *cogito* is as much an unfolding immeasurable as the subject-matters it strives to understand.

Subject matters which ground the practices of a 'form of life' indicate, as we have suggested, fields of normative vulnerability. Since such subject-matters shape and form our practices, we are clearly sensitive to the implications of any change in their meaning. Such alterations either threaten the interests embodied in them or promise to extend them. The process of interpretation understood as pursuing how an 'immeasurable' at the root of one of our practices might be developed, 'is basically performative in character'. 'It makes something happen, and what arises out of this performance are (other) emergent phenomena', elements in what we might call the selfification process (Iser 2000, 253). Interpretation can induce the appearance of new and unexpected determinations of a subject-matter's meaning. As we shall see, the performative aspect of dialogue plays a significant role in our argument concerning what a dialogical exchange can effect within the understanding of its participants.

Interpretation is performative precisely because it is inter-active. Interpretation is not, in this context, a question of a hermeneutic agent projecting on to an alien subject matter its own perspective. It is, essentially, an inter-action between the horizons of meaning attached to a body of work and those which characterise of the outlook of the reader or spectator. Both horizons of meaning may embrace shared subject-matters but configure them differently according to their grounding orientation. The subject-matter operates as a place-holder between both alignments of meaning, allowing each alignment to be transposed and altered. The connection between vulnerability and transformation becomes clear.

Precisely because of its normative commitment to a subject-matter, a life form will seek out in other and strange alignments of cultural meaning new determinations of its principal meanings (concerns). Interpretive engagement with other literary or historical forms of that subject-matter can generate unexpected determinations of meaning. This 'fission' (rather than fusion) of hermeneutic horizons exposes that life-form to unforeseen re-alignments of its constituent values. It is the position of a subject-matter as a placeholder between two horizons of meaning that allows the alignment of meaning around the subject-matter in one perspective to be infused with counter-part alignments transforming a hermeneutic *cogito's* initial understanding of the subject-matter in question. The transformed horizon has not grasped *the* meaning of the subject-matter but has, as a result of the interaction, acquired a different grasp of it which can, in turn, expose the limitations of previous suppositions concerning it. Its understanding has not achieved closure, but movement. Ricoeur offers a helpful remark at this juncture.

In the essay 'The Question of the Subject: the Challenge of Semiology' Ricoeur argues that: 'Language is no more a foundation than it is an object; it is mediation, a 'milieu' in which and through which the subject posits himself and the world shows itself' (Ricoeur 2004, 250). This throws an informative light on Iser's argument concerning transformative engagement. Ricoeur in his criticism of structuralism's exclusion of the subject from its analysis of *langue* notes that 'what is admirable is that language is organised in such a way that it allows each speaker to appropriate the entire language by designating himself as the *I*' (Ricoeur 2004, 248). At this point our argument turns full circle, returning in a more insightful way to the cases of Cicero and Kleist.

In Iser's terms the 'I' is an 'immeasurable': the ground from which we spring is not fully available to us. This is not a negative conclusion for either Ricoeur or Gadamer. When in language 'the subject posits him or her self as "I"', the entire speech-created world (the life of embodied meaning) also appears. *In principium erat verbum* implies for both thinkers the co-determinacy of both the subject and the speech-created world. Gadamer insists that language is the medium in which

'I' and 'world' meet or manifest their original belonging together (Gadamer 1989, 442). In Gadamer's *Sprachlichkeit* the two are inseparable. As an 'I', the hermeneutic *cogito* is grounded in a formative tradition which lies ahead of it. Both Ricoeur and Gadamer contend that when we speak of ourselves, we do not speak in terms of interior noumenal spaces but in the language of beings *already* related to world they are in. This confirms the mutuality between the language of self and the language of (the speech-created) world. The hermeneutic *cogito* finds itself *already* grounded in collective stories and narratives the being of which extend well beyond its horizons. The grounding of the 'I' in cultural tradition implies that first-person descriptions will always contain an implicit understanding and, hence, relation to third person descriptions of the world. Conversely, and precisely because of that relationality, changes in world descriptions can, in principle, imply changes in self-descriptions. Since *Sprachlichkeit* entails for Gadamer an infinity of potential meaning configurations, it follows that the totality of possible self-descriptions is implicitly held within everything that can be said about the world and, hence, Gadamer's affirmation of the dialogical inseparability 'I' and 'world'. Who I am reveals me to be an endless conversation with the world around me. How such an 'I' or subject grasps itself it will be within a *determinate* set of incomplete self-descriptions. As an 'immeasurable' however, it will seek to extend its self-understanding. The dialogical dimensions of such self-descriptions are critical.

Though incomplete, such descriptions anticipate their completion albeit that such completion might never be fully realised. This touches upon an important aspect of Gadamer's speculative conception of language. The most well known version of this notion involves the idea that all linguistic meaning points beyond itself. This entails the argument that the intelligible meaning of a spoken assertion actually depends upon acquaintance with an extensive horizon of unspoken meaning. A classic formulation of the position appears in *Truth and Method*:

Language ... is speculative in that the finite possibilities of the word are orientated toward the sense intended as toward the infinite.

To say what one means – to make oneself understood – means to hold what is said together with an infinity of what is not said in one unified meaning and to ensure that it is understood in this way. Some one who speaks in this way may well use the most ordinary and common words and still be able to express what is unsaid and is to be said. (Gadamer 1989, 469)

A second version suggests that a fuller sense of what is presently stated can be anticipated in what has yet to be articulated. Gadamer cites the case of sensing what someone with weak powers of expression is struggling to say, anticipating what they are trying to say and then completing their utterance for them. Such an 'anticipation of completeness' is presented by Gadamer as an important feature of

hermeneutic understanding. He speaks of the '*Vollzug des Sprechens*', that is, of the capacity of a 'pointing' word to realise some of the possibilities of meaning inherited from the past which are constantly in play within present experience (Gadamer 2007, 198). Related to these remarks is an additional claim: to understand a thinker or artist is *to think with* him or her even when entering strange territory. Such thinking-with requires an empathy or a 'feel' for the *epistémè* in which that artist lives as well as a knowledge of what concepts within a given life-world can plausibly be embraced in an interpretation of a work. Having an intuitive feel for a way in which an artist or a poet works by no means needs to invoke the psycho-logicistic form of interpretation associated with Wilhelm Dilthey's historical hermeneutics. It has, arguably, much more to do with Wittgenstein's notion of entering a 'form of life', that is, of understanding a pattern of thought sufficiently well so as to know 'how to go on' within it, sensing where it leads, and what it suggests as the next move. Anticipating the inherent logic or rhetoric of a writer is, in other words, not to be associated with possessing 'psychologicistic' gifts but with anticipating where open and inclusive thought patterns are pointing. Here we can make several salient remarks.

Like Heidegger's description of language, our self-understanding is already underway though never conclusive, definitive or closed. Self-understanding is a composite of incomplete stories, broken perspectives, former departures and non-arrivals. Some accounts of selfhood will dominate over others whilst others are not so much forgotten as 'withheld' in our subconscious. Arguably, the sense of self that we have is, indeed, anticipatory, always an indication of what we might plausibly become though we rarely can put our finger on precisely what outcome it will be. In other words, our sense of self is more a sense of possibility, of having a vague feel for where all the different and inconclusive narratives which shape our being could be pointing.

Buber remarks: 'All real living is meeting' (Buber 2011, 17). His statement brings back into focus a central point. 'Understanding is not based on transposing oneself into another person' (Gadamer 1989, 383). It is not a question of 'getting inside another person and reliv(ing) his experiences' (Gadamer 1989, 383). Dialogue is always potentially transformative not just because of the capacity to understand the words used by an other but more because of what the meeting with those words effect, trigger or bring about within my horizon of understanding irrespective of what that other may have intended to say. This is the basis of our claim that in dialogue there is no literal ex-change of 'hermeneutic content' between one speaker and another. It is what participation in that exchange can bring about within the understanding of each speaker that matters. This is the performative element of dialogue mentioned above.

What is it then that I listen out for in the words of the other? From an existential point of view I never enter a dialogue without a set of pre-understandings. Linguistic capacities or the values of an ethically shaping tradition are not the type of pre-understanding that is presently important. The pre-understanding that is important concerns those open, unresolved and dimly sensed anticipations of self which invariably carry unreflectively into our dialogical engagements. Gadamer's phenomenological account of experiencing reality suggests accordingly:

'Reality' always stands in a horizon of desired or feared or, at any rate, still undecided future possibilities. Hence it is always the case that mutually exclusive expectations are aroused, not all of which can be fulfilled. The undecidedness of the future permits such a superfluity of expectations that reality necessarily lags behind them. (Gadamer 1989, 113)

The promise of dialogue and the true gift of the other concerns the emergence of those words from within an exchange which can (albeit transiently) fulfil those dim and half remembered anticipations of completeness that were always, already, formatively at play within our self understanding. It is, in other words, our partial grasp of the unfolding narratives and structures of identity already and always at play within our ever shifting self-understanding that makes us susceptible to those 'turning' words which can suddenly complete and make whole a sequence of meaning that we may have had a dim premonition of but can now properly apprehend.

What is suggestive about the argument is that the recognition is not a recovery or remembrance of a forgotten thought as in the classical Platonic doctrine of *anamnesis*. To the contrary, Gadamer's anticipatory account of *mimesis* concerns recognising in what has come to pass (the completed meaning) the thought we knew previously but only as a dimly felt premonition or inarticulate anticipation. The effect of the words of the other (what they bring about irrespective of the intentions of the speaker or author) lies in their capacity to bring us albeit momentarily to a rare moment of fulfilment in which what was previously only sensed and anticipated as a possible outcome of meaning is now recognised as that outcome fulfilled. *Mimesis* for Gadamer is future-orientated. As a hitherto incomplete narrative is brought to completion, the narrative becomes more strongly what it always was potentially. No wonder, then, that we should hang on the word of the other for in that word (what it brings forth in us) lie new possibilities for self-understanding. As we have previously argued, in a speech-created world a hermeneutic *cogito* will always be exposed to and be vulnerable to alignments of meaning other than its own, configurations of meaning capable of challenging and transforming its initial understanding of itself. This is, arguably, where Derrida completely misunderstood Gadamer's hermeneutic 'good will' (Michelfelder and Palmer 1989, 137). Openness to the other is not

a matter of drawing the other into dialogue on one's own terms alone (the will to power). It concerns a dialogical recognition that in the words of other and in the otherness of the speech-created-world, unrealised determinations of meaning capable of transforming both my self-understanding and my understanding of the world lie in ambush: 'if we understand, we understand differently' (Gadamer 1989, 237). The openness of Gadamerian dialogue is, therefore, not a surreptitious power stratagem as Derrida and Foucault suggest but involves a kenotic attentiveness to the other's *words* as potentially holding a key to unrealised possibilities of understanding within my self-understanding. Because of language, the extent to which I can find myself in the world, and find the world in me, is infinite. The meanings I associate with my own self-descriptions are constantly challenged by variations of those meanings found in texts and artefacts. It is, indeed, in and through language that human beings find, lose and produce themselves. The word is the medium of understanding's movement, a movement discernible only to a subjectivity whose being is rooted in language. The allure and promise of dialogue for the hermeneutic *cogito* lies in the fact that in the *words* of the other resides the possibility of becoming *other* to ourselves; completer, clearer, perhaps even more ourselves.

The claim of this paper has been that from within the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics the importance of dialogical exchange lies not in what is transmitted between interlocutors but in the respective hermeneutic effects of their exchange. In dialogue there is no literal ex-change or transference of 'hermeneutic content' between one speaker and another. We have argued that it is not what is literally exchanged that is of primary importance but what participation in that exchange can unexpectedly achieve within the understanding of each dialogical participant irrespective of what either may have meant to say. The ontological priority of language over subjective consciousness is, as we have suggested, fundamental to articulating how dialogical exchange can give rise to transformative understanding. Such exchanges can both trigger developments within and transform the narrative structures of the understanding already at play within us. Appreciating the hermeneutic effect of the words used within dialogue is key to grasping how transformative understanding can occur. It is in the hermeneutic effect of words that the promise of dialogue lies, a promise which in the experience of Cicero and Kleist could always be redeemed by prompting and engaging us in dialogue.

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