

VI

Gadamer and the Universe of Hermeneutics

1. Back to the Human Sciences

In making language the essence of hermeneutics Gadamer clearly follows the later Heidegger's radicalization of historical thrownness. His aim, however, is to reconcile this radicalization with the young Heidegger's hermeneutical starting point, namely, understanding. Specifically, given that we are situated in a history articulated in linguistic tradition, what are the consequences for human understanding and self-knowledge? These consequences are elaborated in "The Ontological Shift of Hermeneutics Guided by Language," the title of the last third of Gadamer's magnum opus, *Truth and Method*. To understand what this ontological or universal shift in hermeneutics implies, we need to return to the underlying problem this work addresses: the question of the human sciences or of a hermeneutics commensurate with them. To be sure, the problem of methodology in the human sciences was not

unknown to Heidegger. In large part, his familiarity with it came by way of Dilthey and his own neo-Kantian teachers. Yet beginning with his first project, grounded in facticity, he had firmly reduced understanding in the human sciences to a secondary or derivative status. Elevating understanding to the royal road of method ultimately struck him as merely an expression of the befuddlement in which historicism found itself. The attempt to methodologize understanding he considered fundamentally a desperate attempt to discover a "firm foothold," even though that seemed precluded by the historicity that had become pervasive in the nineteenth century. Basically, Heidegger problematized the idea of such a fixed Archimedean point by exposing its metaphysical presuppositions. The idea of a timeless, ultimate basis originated in humanity's flight from its own temporality.¹ The notion that there is an absolute truth thus grows out of the repression or forgetting of one's temporality. Instead of invoking yet again the phantom of an ultimate foundation, Heidegger proposed radically situating oneself within the level of finitude and working through the structure of prejudice as a positive ontological characteristic of understanding in order to perceive our genuine possibilities in our very situatedness. Thus Heidegger overcame historicism's epistemological way of putting the question. What is at issue in understanding is not the phantom of an absolute foundation—that child of positivism and ultimately of metaphysics—but Dasein's increased awareness of the possibilities at its disposal. The quest for universally valid truth undeniably threatens to conceal the reality of understanding and orient it toward a cognitive ideal that it can never in fact realize.

The process of working out his own, hermeneutically more radical position allowed Heidegger, as it were, to get beyond the problem of historicism and its corollary, the methodology of the human sciences, as well. When Gadamer reopens a dialogue with the human sciences, the point is not to develop its "methodology," as might seem to be the case, given the implications of the term hermeneutics in the wake of Dilthey. Rather, the example of the interpretive sciences is meant to demonstrate the untenability of the idea of universally valid knowledge, and thereby to sidestep the historicist way of putting the question. The conflict with historicism, of only marginal interest for Heidegger, becomes for Gadamer the main task.

Seven times between 1936 and 1959 Gadamer held lectures with the title "Introduction to the Human Sciences," where he elaborated a hermeneutics that could do justice to these sciences. He first presented his conclusions to the public during the fifties in important essays on the question of truth in

the human sciences, in the Louvain lectures (1957) on the problem of historical consciousness, and then in his book *Truth and Method* (1960). His work was sparked by the question of how the human sciences should understand themselves vis-à-vis the natural sciences. Gadamer there argued against the idea, fostered by historicism and positivism, that the human sciences had to work out proper methods for themselves before they could attain to the status of science. The hope of doing so, however, had been the focal point for all the methodological efforts of Dilthey, Droysen, and neo-Kantianism. Gadamer places this focus fundamentally in doubt by asking whether the demand for method, considered to be the sole guarantee of validity, is really appropriate with regard to the human sciences. Gadamer takes his first orientation from Helmholtz's Heidelberg lecture of 1862 on the relationship of the natural and human sciences. According to this speech, still worth reading today, the natural sciences derive rules and laws from the collected materials of experience by means of logical induction. The human sciences proceed in a different manner. They arrive at knowledge by employing something like a psychological sense of tact. In this connection Helmholtz speaks of an "artistic induction" stemming from an instinctive sense or tact, for which there are no definable rules. Exaggerating only slightly, one could say that in the first part of *Truth and Method* Helmholtz is Gadamer's main interlocutor. If a book can be understood only by framing the question to which it is an answer, we can say it was Helmholtz's simple question about the way of knowing proper to the human sciences that provided the original impetus for *Truth and Method*. Thus at the beginning of *Truth and Method* Gadamer writes as follows:

The human sciences have no method of their own. Yet one might well ask, with Helmholtz, to what extent method is significant in this case and whether the other logical presuppositions of the human sciences are perhaps not far more important than inductive logic. Helmholtz had indicated this correctly when, in order to do justice to the human sciences, he emphasized memory and authority, and spoke of the psychological tact that here replaced the conscious drawing of inferences. What is the basis of this tact? How is it acquired? Does not what is scientific about the human sciences lie rather here than in their methodology?²

Gadamer concurs with Helmholtz that at bottom the human sciences have far more to do with the practice of tact than with applying any kind of methods. Even though Helmholtz began with the model of the natural sciences—

in the second half of the nineteenth century nothing else was possible—nevertheless in 1862 he rightly grasped the uniqueness of the human sciences, in Gadamer's view. We ought not overlook how provocative is Gadamer's solidarity with Helmholtz: in going back to 1862, and indeed to a *natural scientist*, Gadamer skips over the entire discussion about the methodological uniqueness of the human sciences that had so preoccupied neo-Kantianism as well as such authors as Dilthey, Misch, Rothaker, and Weber at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. The point is that this endlessly drawn-out debate was perhaps far too obsessed with the idea that the human sciences had to produce some kind of method that could be called their own in order to become sciences. To Gadamer it seemed much more appropriate—and here he follows Helmholtz—to trace the human sciences back to something like tact or an unmethodizable “je ne sais quoi.” Helmholtz, not Dilthey,³ thus becomes the silent partner of hermeneutics because he does more justice to the human sciences' specific way of knowing. In this sense *Truth and Method* can be aptly described as a fundamental critique of the obsession with method that typified those concerned with the scientificity of the human sciences.

It is therefore Gadamer's initial thesis that the scientific character of the human sciences “can be understood more easily from the tradition of the concept of *Bildung* than from the modern idea of scientific method,”⁴ This explains why Gadamer recurs to the humanistic tradition at the beginning of *Truth and Method*. It was over the course of this tradition that the concepts were formed which make possible a just assessment of the cognitive claims proper to the human sciences. According to Gadamer, this tradition was still very much alive before Kant, though afterward it was repressed and dominated by a conception of method alien to it. Thus Gadamer must address the question “how this tradition became so impoverished and how the human sciences' claim to knowledge came to be measured by a standard foreign to it—namely the methodical thinking of modern science.”⁵ How did it happen, then, that the humanistic tradition so declined as to be displaced by the increasingly dominant natural sciences and their idea of method? Gadamer answers: through the fateful aestheticization of humanism's basic concepts, especially judgment and taste, which had previously possessed a *cognitive* function. It was Kant's *Critique of Judgment* that in itself or through its successors (Gadamer vacillates somewhat on this question) subjectivized and aestheticized taste and (what amounts to the same thing) denied it any cognitive value. Whatever did not measure up to the standards of the objective

and methodical natural sciences was thereafter considered merely "subjective" and "aesthetic"—that is, excommunicated from the realm of hard knowledge. "In discrediting any kind of theoretical knowledge except that of natural science, [Kant's subjectivization of taste] compelled the human sciences to rely on the methodology of the natural sciences in conceptualizing themselves."⁶ It was in this way that the humanistic tradition in which the human sciences could recognize themselves was surrendered and the way paved for the aestheticization and subjectivization of judgment. As for the loss to the human sciences, "the importance of this cannot be easily overestimated, for what was here surrendered was the element in which philological and historical studies lived, and when they sought to ground themselves methodologically under the name of 'human sciences' side by side with the natural sciences, it was the only possible source of their full self-knowledge."⁷

For understanding the composition of *Truth and Method*, too, the importance of this historical process cannot be easily overestimated. For it is here, with Kant and his successors, that the artwork and aesthetics in general are subsumed into the observation of the work. That is to say, in the very description of how the humanistic tradition's fundamental grounds were subjectivized and aestheticized, the *basic issue* of the self-conception of the human sciences never entirely dropped out of sight. Gadamer keeps a firm grip on this issue when he submits the process that produced a completely new, specifically *aesthetical* consciousness to a devastating critique. The heart of the initial section of *Truth and Method* thus consists in a "Critique of the Abstraction Inherent in Aesthetic Consciousness."⁸ For *Truth and Method*, the path through aesthetics amounts to a *detour*, as it were. For all the positive insights into art that *Truth and Method* offers, its opening chapters offer less an aesthetic than an anti-aesthetic. The creation of an autonomous aesthetics is therefore nothing but an abstraction which—to use the early Heidegger's terms—needs to be destroyed or relativized in order for us to better understand the kind of knowing that occurs in the human sciences.

2. The Overcoming of Historicist Hermeneutics

The second part of *Truth and Method* deals with recuperating the hermeneutic specificity of the human sciences, and it is here that Gadamer's "hermeneutics of the human sciences," as he systematically terms it,⁹ is to be found. The first section considers the history of hermeneutics during the nineteenth century in order to review the aporias of historicism. The most

basic among them consists in the fact that historicism, while recognizing the universal historicity of all human knowledge, nevertheless aims at something like absolute knowledge. Dilthey, in particular, found it impossible to reconcile his discovery of the historicity of all life with his epistemological efforts to ground the human sciences methodologically. Not until after Husserl reevaluated the life-world and Heidegger developed the more fundamental hermeneutics of facticity did it become possible to overcome historicism's obsession with epistemological foundations. Starting with the ground they had prepared, Gadamer elaborates the "Elements of a Theory of Hermeneutic Experience" in the systematic second part of his magnum opus.

He begins with Heidegger's discovery of the ontological structure of the hermeneutic circle. Ontological here means, as so often with Gadamer, universal. The circle is universal because every act of understanding is conditioned by its motivation or prejudices. Prejudices or fore-understandings, Gadamer writes, should be considered almost like transcendental "conditions of understanding." Our historicity is not a restriction but the very principle of understanding. We understand and strive for truth because we are led on by expectations of meaning. Thus Gadamer provocatively titles the first section of *Truth and Method's* systematic second part "The Elevation of the Historicity of Understanding to the Status of a Hermeneutic Principle." According to Gadamer, historicism's delusion consisted in trying to displace our prejudices with methods in order to make something like certainty and objectivity possible in the human sciences. Deriving from the Enlightenment, this struggle was itself motivated by a nineteenth-century prejudice, the belief that objectivity could be achieved only by precluding the operation of situated subjectivity in understanding. Historicism was overcome by applying it to itself, as it were, since historicism itself had taught that every doctrine can be understood only against the backdrop of its time. This insight could be applied reflexively to historicism itself. As soon as the scientific ideal of knowledge was revealed, with Heidegger's help, to be dependent on metaphysics, a more appropriate understanding became possible—one that takes into account the ontological fore-structure of understanding in defining the objectivity proper to the human sciences.

There can be no question of merely setting aside one's prejudices; the object is, rather, to recognize and work them out interpretively. Thus Gadamer allies his position with Heidegger's idea that the very first task of interpretation consists in self-critique: working out one's own fore-projections so that the subject matter to be understood can affirm its own validity

in regard to them. Since the understanding can often be misled by erroneous fore-conceptions, and since this danger can never be wholly avoided, interpreters must endeavor to develop appropriate interpretive initiatives from within their own situation: "Working out appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed 'by the things' themselves, is the constant task of understanding."¹⁰ This quotation does not fit the typical picture of Gadamer. His hermeneutic position is usually taken to be something for which there seems to be plentiful evidence: namely, that given the prejudice structure of understanding, there can never be any "confirmation by the things themselves." But it is easy to show that his hermeneutics is quite misunderstood when taken thus. Even if Gadamer's utterances are not always perfectly consistent, his "rehabilitation" of prejudices still warns us to be critically "aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings."¹¹ On the other hand, Gadamer does not fall into the positivist extreme of calling for a negation of the prejudice structure of understanding in order to let the thing speak for itself without being obfuscated by subjectivity. A reflexively critical understanding of the kind contended for will be concerned "not merely to form anticipatory ideas, but to make them conscious, so as to monitor them and thus acquire right understanding from the things themselves."¹² This is what Gadamer finds in Heidegger: the mean between the positivist dissolution of the self and Nietzsche's universal perspectivism. The question is only how one is to come by the "appropriate" fore-projections that permit the "thing itself" to speak.

Thus everything comes down to the "question of genuine critique in hermeneutics."¹³ How, insofar as we can become conscious of them, can we distinguish the right prejudices from the wrong ones, the fore-conceptions that lead to misunderstanding? Is there a criterion for doing so? According to Gadamer, this yearning for a criterion that would certify objectivity once and for all is at best a vestige of historicism. Even if there is no such criterion at hand, however, there are indicators. In this regard, *Truth and Method* emphasizes the productivity of temporal distance. In investigating the past, we are often able to recognize interpretive approaches that have proved themselves. The inability to discern them, for instance, is what makes for problems in evaluating contemporary art. It is almost impossible for critics to distinguish the really valuable artistic efforts of their own time. Thanks to historical distance such judgments become somewhat more certain, and this is what accounts for what might be called the fruitfulness of historical dis-

tance. In 1960 Gadamer identified this productivity as the solution to the "critical" task of hermeneutics: "It is only temporal distance that can solve the question of critique in hermeneutics, namely how to distinguish the *true* prejudices, by which we *understand*, from the *false* ones, by which we *misunderstand*."¹⁴

However, this solution was somewhat one-sided, for the question arises whether temporal distance always proves to be so productive. A Heideggerian like Gadamer knows full well that history very often has a concealing effect, and interpretive approaches often block access to the very things they mean to reveal. At times it is precisely getting over and beyond historically influential interpretations that proves to be hermeneutically fruitful.¹⁵ Moreover, temporal distance offers virtually no help when it comes to overcoming the provincial temporality of the present. In any case, Gadamer has himself recently discerned the one-sidedness of his views in this respect. When *Truth and Method* appeared in the fifth, *Gesammelte Werke* edition of 1986, he revised the above passage and replaced "it is only" with "often." The text now reads: "Often temporal distance can solve the question of genuine critique in hermeneutics." Even if the problem persists unresolved, Gadamer's revision nicely illustrates a distinctive characteristic of hermeneutics, namely, that it remains continually ready to alter its opinion when better insight comes along.

3. Effective History as Principle

Gadamer's far-reaching demand for a new kind of understanding in the human sciences, one that concerns itself with subject matter, is elucidated in his elaboration of historically effected consciousness. Since the nineteenth century, history of effect or influence has referred to the study of a given work's interpretations—that is, the history of its reception. Such study has shown that works call forth different interpretations at different times, and must do so. We can say, then, that developing a consciousness of historical effect parallels becoming aware of one's own hermeneutic situation and the productivity of temporal distance. By historically effected consciousness, however, Gadamer means something much more basic. For him it has the status of a "principle"¹⁶ from which virtually his whole hermeneutics can be deduced.

Beyond its relevance to conceptualizing the discipline of literary criticism, the principle of effective history expresses the mandate that one's own situ-

atedness be raised to consciousness in order to "monitor" the way it deals with texts or traditions. This is the interpretation of one's own fore-understanding that Heidegger calls for. Perhaps even more emphatically than Heidegger, however, Gadamer recognizes that this task can never be completed or fulfilled.¹⁷ Effective history is never entirely under our power or at our disposal. We are more subject to history than it can be subjected to consciousness. Whenever we understand, history effects the horizon, never susceptible of ultimate clarification, of everything that can appear meaningful and worth inquiring into. Thus effective history acquires the function of authorizing and affecting each individual act of understanding—even, of course, where its effects are denied. Subsequent to *Truth and Method* Gadamer formulated the principle in this memorable aphorism: "wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein ist mehr Sein als Bewußtsein"—historically effected consciousness is more being than consciousness.¹⁸ History interpenetrates our "substance" in such a way that we cannot ultimately clarify it or distance ourselves from it.

This insight into the fact that we are conditioned by effective history finds immediate application in Gadamer's dispute with historicism and modern methodological consciousness. Historicism hoped to escape historical conditionedness by distancing itself from the determining effects of history. According to historicism, the historian needs to develop a sense of history emancipated from its conditionedness, thereby making objective historiography possible. Gadamer shows, by contrast, that the power of effective history is not diminished by the recognition of it.¹⁹ Historical consciousness as it emerged in the nineteenth century was not such a radical innovation that it precluded history's subterranean effect on all understanding. History is at work even where we imagine ourselves superior to it (so much so that even historicism was oblivious to its own positivist roots). It is history that determines the background of our values, cognitions, and even our critical judgments. "That is why," says Gadamer, "the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being."²⁰

Thus the concept of historically effected consciousness proves to be subtly ambiguous. On one hand, it means that present-day consciousness is itself shaped—indeed, constituted—by history. Our consciousness is thus "effected" by history.²¹ On the other hand, the concept suggests that becoming conscious of being so effected is a task always still to be undertaken. Further, the consciousness of being effected itself has two meanings: first, it is a call for the elucidation of our historicity in the sense of working out our

hermeneutic situation, but also and more fundamentally it involves the awareness of the limits placed on any such enlightenment. In the latter form, historically effected consciousness is the most unequivocal philosophical expression of the consciousness of one's own finitude. The recognition of human limits, however, does not paralyze reflection. On the contrary, what was actually restrictive was historicism's attempt to align understanding with a metaphysically conditioned ideal of knowledge. Historically effected consciousness promises, rather, a heightening of reflection. Gadamer's hermeneutics of finitude is designed to provide this reflection—that is, to demonstrate the universal and specifically *hermeneutical* character of our experience of the world.

4. Understanding as Questioning and Therefore

Application

After establishing the principle of effective history, *Truth and Method* takes on the task of recovering the "basic phenomenon of hermeneutics" that had gotten lost in the nineteenth-century detour into method. The main impetus of this recovery comes from the problem of application.²² Pre-Heideggerian hermeneutics had viewed application as something subsequent to hermeneutic understanding. The proper goal of understanding was thought to be purely epistemic, even noetic. The object was to understand an unfamiliar meaning as such. The application of what was so understood occurred at best *ex post facto* in such disciplines as jurisprudence, where a law is applied to an individual case, or theology, for example in the homiletic elucidation of a particular passage of Scripture. According to Gadamer, however, application is anything but after-the-fact. He follows Heidegger's intuition that understanding always includes self-understanding—indeed, self-encounter. Understanding, then, involves something like applying a meaning to our situation, to the questions we want answered. It is not the case that there is first a pure, objective understanding of meaning, to which special significance accrues when it is subsequently applied to our questions. We always take ourselves along whenever we understand, so much so that for Gadamer understanding and application are indivisibly fused. This can best be seen by means of a negative example, non-understanding. Whenever we cannot understand a text, the reason is that it says nothing to *us* or has nothing to say. So there is nothing to be surprised or complain about if understanding occurs differently from one period to another, or even from one individual to another.

Motivated by the particular questions of the moment, understanding is not just reproductive but, because it involves application, always also a productive activity.²³ So much is understanding co-determined by the individual effective-historical situation that it seems inappropriate to speak of progress in interpretation or (with Schleiermacher) of understanding better over the course of history. If we acknowledge the productive element of application in every successful interpretation, it is enough to say, in Gadamer's well-known dictum, that we "understand differently" if we understand at all.²⁴

Application does not need to be undertaken consciously in order to occur. It, too, is impelled by effective history. Understanding or, what is the same, application is less an action of autonomous subjectivity than "participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated."²⁵ To understand a text from the past means to translate it into our situation, to hear in it an answer to the questions of our time. Historicism's error was to have made objectivity dependent on eliminating the interpreting subject and its situatedness, for truth—here understood as the disclosure of meaning (*aletheia*)—occurs only in the process of effective-historical application.

Gadamer's depiction of understanding as participating in an occurrence of tradition means that subjectivity is not completely in control of what in particular strikes it as being sense or nonsense. As the young Heidegger observed, we discern the interpretive dispositions of our time more as custom and habit than as something we perform intentionally. Effective history is "mehr Sein als Bewußtsein," more being than consciousness—or, in Hegelian terms, more substance than subjectivity. Thus we belong to history more than it belongs to us. This historicity of application precludes talk of a zero point when understanding has not yet begun. Understanding is the continuation of a dialogue that precedes us and has always already begun.²⁶ Thrown into certain interpretive dispositions, we carry on the conversation. Thus in each new encounter with meaning we take over and modify the views of what makes sense that have been passed down from tradition and are present in us.

In this way the hermeneutics of application belongs, as Gadamer indicates, to the dialectic of question and answer. To understand something means to have related it to ourselves in such a way that we discover in it an answer to our own questions—but "our own" in a way that these questions, too, are assimilated into a tradition and metamorphosed by it. Every act of understanding, even self-understanding, is motivated, stimulated by questions that

determine in advance the sight lines of understanding. A text is given voice only by reason of the questions that are put to it today. There is no interpretation, no understanding, that does not answer specific questions that prescribe a specific orientation. Unmotivated questions of the kind that positivism desiderates would pertain to no one and consequently be of no cognitive interest. The point is not to exclude the anticipations of meaning implicit in our questions but to foreground them so that the texts that we are trying to understand can answer them all the more clearly. Thus successful understanding can be described as the effective-historical concretion of the dialectic of question and answer. It is precisely here that we can see the philosophical import of historically effected consciousness. Gadamer himself calls attention to it at the end of the second part of *Truth and Method*, before he goes on to extend the significance of hermeneutics beyond the boundaries of the human sciences: "The dialectic of question and answer . . . now permits us to state more exactly what kind of consciousness historically effected consciousness is. For the dialectic of question and answer that we demonstrated makes understanding appear to be a reciprocal relationship of the same kind as conversation." Understanding is here defined as a relationship and, more exactly, as dialogue. In terms of its form, understanding is less like grasping a content, a noetic meaning, than like engaging in a dialogue—the "dialogue that we are," Gadamer adds, in an allusion to Hölderlin.²⁷

Significantly, it is historically effected consciousness that occurs in the form of dialogue. Consciousness loses the autonomy and self-possession accorded it by the tradition of idealism and reflective philosophy from which Gadamer here distances himself. The task of the final section of *Truth and Method* is to demonstrate that our verbal experience of the world universally takes the form not of isolated consciousness but of hermeneutic dialogue as realized in the dialectic of question and answer.

5. Language as Dialogue

*We are endeavoring to approach the
mystery of language by beginning with
the conversation that we are.*

Gadamer, Truth and Method

Gadamer's hermeneutics of language is the most misunderstood aspect of his philosophy. The aphorism "Being that can be understood is language" has

seemed to justify accusing his philosophy of—or, according to another school of thought, celebrating it for—reducing all being to language. Readers have also objected to the occasional moments of vague diction in the final section of *Truth and Method*, which is sometimes lacking in precise conceptual distinctions. Thus we detect a certain resignation when distinguished students of Gadamer such as Walter Schulz believe they have discovered that for Gadamer everything collapses into an all-embracing synonymy: “History, language, dialogue, and game—all of these, and this is the decisive thing, are interchangeable quantities.”²⁸ The question, then, is *why* language and dialogue can become so. Against whom is Gadamer’s foregrounding of the dialogical nature of language directed? Clearly it is directed against the propositional logic that dominates Western philosophy. The point is to call into question philosophy’s traditional fixation on the theoretical *logos apophantikos*—that is, the demonstrative proposition, which is “theoretical in that it abstracts from everything that is not explicitly expressed.”²⁹ To restrict language to what is thus theoretically explicit narrows it artificially. Like Heidegger, Gadamer considers the “construction of logic on the basis of the proposition” to be one of the “most fateful decisions of Western culture.”³⁰ To reverse this decision is the primary intent of Gadamer’s hermeneutics of dialogue. Its simplest insight can be expressed thus: “Language is most itself not in propositions but in dialogue.”³¹ Against propositional logic, in which the sentence consists in a self-sufficient unity of meaning, hermeneutics reminds us that a proposition can never be prescinded from the context of motivation—that is, the dialogue—in which it is embedded and which is the only place it has any meaning. Ultimately a proposition is just an abstraction that is never really encountered in a living language. Thus Gadamer asks, “Are there such things as pure propositions? When and where?”³²

The privileging of method is clearly connected to the privileging of propositions in Western and especially modern consciousness, for the idea of method draws its power from the fact that certain objects and processes can be experimentally isolated and thereby controlled.³³ Such isolation does violence to language, however. Specifically, understanding what is said cannot be reduced to a cognizing subject’s intellectual comprehension of an objectivizable, isolable content; understanding results just as much from belonging to an ongoing, changing tradition—that is, to a dialogue in the context of which everything that is said becomes meaningful and logical for us. In his observations on language, Gadamer brings to a climax the objections against modernity’s privileging of method which he had first problematized in the

context of the human sciences. This privilege is perfectly obvious because method promises the domination of things that it has isolated, made repeatable and reusable, and thus put at our disposal. It is an open question, however, whether such isolation ever succeeds in the case of language or of one's own understanding. Do we understand if and to the extent that we control? Isn't this a case of finitude explaining itself away? The hermeneut answers that we understand, rather, because something speaks to us from a tradition to which we—more or less loosely—belong.

Against the primacy of propositional logic, which conceives—or, rather, misconceives—understanding as something at our disposal, Gadamer elaborates a logic of question and answer that understands understanding as participation—participation in meaning, a tradition, and ultimately a dialogue. In this dialogue there are no statements, only questions and answers that call forth new questions in turn. "There are no propositions which can be understood exclusively with respect to the content that they present, if one wants to understand them in their truth. . . . Every proposition has presuppositions that it does not express. Only those who think with these presuppositions can really assess the truth of a proposition. I maintain, then, that the ultimate logical form of the presuppositions that motivate every proposition is the *question*."³⁴ Here we come to the heart of hermeneutic philosophy—namely, as Gadamer expresses it, "the hermeneutic ur-phenomenon, that there is no possible statement that cannot be understood as the answer to a question, and can only be understood thus."³⁵

To formulate this phenomenon we have frequently referred to the ancient and perhaps antiquated doctrine of the *verbum interius*: the "inner word" that is never spoken but nevertheless resounds in everything that is said. In the third part of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer takes this Stoic and Augustinian doctrine as the single piece of evidence that Western forgetfulness of language never quite became total.³⁶ His seldom noticed rehabilitation of this doctrine cannot be constructed as a regression into naive mentalism; instead, it is a hermeneutic critique of propositional logic and its corollary, the domination of method. To be sure, this doctrine suggests, bluntly put, that the words we use cannot themselves exhaust what we have "in mind"—that is, the dialogue that we are. The inner word "behind" what is said refers to none other than this dialogue, this rootedness of language in our questioning and to us questionable existence, a dialogue which no propositions can wholly capture: "What is stated is not everything. The unsaid is what first makes what is stated into a word that can reach us."³⁷

It must be emphasized once again, however, that this is intended to be a hermeneutic theory of *language*, not some mysticism of ineffability. Precisely in order to view language rightly, rather than overlook it or peer behind it, we need to acknowledge what never is but always remains to be said, the inner dialogue. To affirm this means that the hermeneutics of language takes the end point of language (or, better, of propositions) as its starting point: "Of course, the idea that understanding is in principle linguistic cannot be taken to mean that all our experience of the world occurs only as language and in language."³⁸ This statement should warn us once and for all against hasty interpretations that saddle Gadamer with the basic thesis of language ontology: everything that is must be expressible in propositional form.

If, however, Gadamer can maintain that understanding is *in principle* linguistic, it is because language embodies the sole means for carrying out the conversation that we are and that we hope to convey to each other. It is for this reason that hermeneutics permits itself an aphorism such as "Being that can be understood is language." The emphasis should be on the "can." Understanding, itself always linguistically formed and dealing with things verbal, must be capable of engaging the whole content of language in order to arrive at the being that language helps bring to expression. The essential linguisticity of understanding expresses itself less in our statements than in our search for the language to say what we have on our minds and hearts. For hermeneutics, it is less constitutive that understanding is expressed in language—which is true but trivial—than that it lives in the unending process of "summoning the word" and the search for a sharable language. Indeed, understanding is to be conceived *as* this process, for this process—the corresponding realization of the inner word—is what grounds the universality of hermeneutics.³⁹

6. The Universality of the Hermeneutic Universe

The claim characteristic of hermeneutics, that understanding is universal, has occasioned a good deal of discussion and debate. Is it to be understood as a claim for the universal validity of Gadamer's philosophy? If so, how can it be reconciled with the fundamental thesis of hermeneutics: the historicity of all understanding?

We should notice first in this regard that in Gadamer's usage the word *universality* is especially polysemic. If we confine ourselves literally to *Truth and Method*, we find a number of highly various candidates for universality. The

title of the book's last section refers to a "universal aspect of hermeneutics," leaving it open whether hermeneutics here refers to philosophical hermeneutics (say, that of Gadamer), or understanding, or else language viewed hermeneutically. All three possibilities are genuinely possible and defensible. Gadamer speaks de facto of the "universality" of the "linguisticity of understanding,"⁴⁹ of a "universal hermeneutic" concerned with the general relationship of man to the world,⁴¹ as well as of broadening hermeneutics into a "universal inquiry."⁴² Often we meet with general titles like that of his 1966 essay, "The Universality of the Hermeneutic Problem," or the "hermeneutic dimension."⁴³ It would be hard to contend that the wide-ranging controversies about universality have shed much light on the question. Gadamer notoriously does not put much stock in clarifying his concepts precisely, thus refusing to pay tribute to the trend toward propositional logic that parcels out language in fixed units of meaning.

A few guideposts are necessary to trace out the universality of the dimension that Gadamer has in mind. At the outset we need to remark that what is at issue is more the universality of a "dimension" than of a philosophy—namely, Gadamer's—as Habermas's talk of the "universal claim of hermeneutics" seems to suggest. Never has Gadamer himself claimed universal validity for his position: "hermeneutic" philosophy . . . does not understand itself to be an 'absolute' position."⁴⁴ In fact, precisely in the name of insuperable historicity, Gadamer characterizes transcendental philosophy's claim to be absolute, for example, as philosophy's misunderstanding of itself.⁴⁵ It is not for nothing that the final paragraphs of *Truth and Method* allude to the maxim of Plato's *Symposium*: None of the gods philosophizes. We philosophize not because we possess the absolute truth but because we do not. Itself a function of finitude, philosophy has to be mindful of its own finitude. It is just when we think we have acquired definitive knowledge that we most need to keep our universal finitude in mind.⁴⁶

Within the framework of *Truth and Method*, the "universal aspect" of hermeneutics has at least one meaning that is easily explained. It indicates that traditional hermeneutics—that of the *human sciences*—has been superseded in the direction of a philosophical hermeneutics that accords the "hermeneutic phenomenon" its full breadth. For philosophy, this universality means that hermeneutic inquiry cannot be limited to the ancillary problem of devising a methodology for the human sciences. The quest for understanding and language is not merely a methodological problem but a fundamental characteristic of human facticity. Emphasizing the "universal

aspect" of hermeneutics, then, opposes confining hermeneutics to the human sciences: "Hermeneutics is in this way a universal aspect of philosophy and *not just* the methodological basis of the so-called human sciences."⁴⁷ The whole of Gadamer's philosophical, emphatically *speculative* efforts are directed toward broadening the horizon of hermeneutics so far beyond the human sciences narrowly conceived that it becomes a central occupation of philosophy. It is precisely this that is meant by *broadening* hermeneutics to become the universal inquiry of philosophy and by the "Ontological Turn of Hermeneutics," as the title of the third section of *Truth and Method* phrases it. In this final part, Gadamer turns hermeneutic inquiry away from and beyond the hermeneutics of the human sciences, the subject of the first two parts, and toward the greater universality, that of the ontological or philosophical dimension.

How can we speak of the universality of a hermeneutic dimension or experience without investing this philosophy with a claim to absoluteness? It is easy to be misled by the word universality. Consequently it is important to follow the suggestions in various of Gadamer's texts that the real basis for the talk about universality in *Truth and Method* should be sought in the semantic field of the word "universe." Accordingly, we can take the claim that language and understanding are universal to mean that they constitute our universe—that is, the element or the totality in which we live as finite beings. Thus Gadamer alludes, apparently just in passing, to the biologist von Uexküll's contrast between a "universe of life" and the "world of physics."⁴⁸ Gadamer also appeals to Leibniz's notion that the monad is a universe in the sense that it can reflect the entire world within itself. In the context of *Truth and Method* the conception of the *universe* or the universality of language and understanding is directed against the thesis that any given language is limited because there are many different languages. In fact it may seem that reason itself is limited insofar as it is circumscribed within a specific language. But that is not the case, Gadamer counters, because it is a distinctive characteristic of language that it can give expression to *everything*. It is in this sphere that we can best understand the "universality of language," that is, the fact that language can keep pace with the boundlessness of reason.⁴⁹

This dimension of language is universal and forms the universe in that all understanding and human existence occur within it. This does not mean, of course, that an expression for everything already exists in language. The universality of language consists not in creating what is to be said but rather in that language can always be sought. The universal dimension of hermeneu-

tics is therefore that of the inner word, the dialogue from which every expression receives its life. To be sure, we do find completely precise, communicative words. Yet these words are, as it were, nothing but the visible terminus signaling the interminable desire for further understanding and language. What is hermeneutically significant about language in this respect is the dimension of inner dialogue, the fact that what we say always means more than is actually expressed: "A meaning, an intention always goes above and beyond what is actually captured in language, in words that reach others. An insatiable yearning for the right word—that is what constitutes the genuine life and nature of language."⁵⁰

In this yearning our finitude reveals itself. No ultimate self-possession is guaranteed to us, in word or concept. We live in and from a dialogue that can never end because no words can grasp what we are or state how we should understand ourselves. Through this finitude is expressed our human consciousness of death, which—speechlessly seeking speech—strives against its own end. Thus Gadamer shows that there is a close connection between the interminability of our search for the right word and "the fact that our own existence is situated in time and before death."⁵¹

In the inner word, in the drive to understanding and language that constitutes the universe of our finitude, is rooted the universality of hermeneutic philosophizing. Can there be anything more universal for philosophy than finitude? The contemporary philosophy that concerns itself with the universality of the finitude revealed in our ceaseless endeavor to understand and say what we understand erects its claim to universality on this very basis. This claim does not express itself in definitively grounded propositions, however. For a philosophy of finitude, that would be a contradiction. Instead, hermeneutic philosophy advocates the self-interpretation of facticity and, in the sure knowledge that none of the gods philosophizes, tries to give full cognizance to finitude as the universal horizon within which everything makes sense for us.

VII

Hermeneutics in Dialogue

*The possibility that the other person
may be right is the soul of hermeneutics.
Gadamer, July 9, 1989, Heidelberg
Colloquium*

If anything is universal in philosophical hermeneutics, it is probably the recognition of one's own finitude, the consciousness that actual speech does not suffice to exhaust the inner conversation that impels us toward understanding. Gadamer ties the universality of the hermeneutic process to the fact that understanding depends on this ongoing conversation: "That a conversation occurs, no matter when or where or with whom, wherever something comes to language, whether this is another person, a thing, a word, a flame (Gottfried Benn)—this is what constitutes the universality of hermeneutic experience."¹ Only in conversation, only in confrontation with another's thought that could also come to dwell within us, can we hope to get beyond the limits of our present horizon. For this reason philosophical hermeneutics recognizes no principle higher than dialogue.

Gadamer's philosophy presents what is probably the most recent original