MICHAEL N. FORSTER

Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Critical Appraisal

I would like in this article to sketch a critical appraisal of Gadamer's "hermeneutics" in its function as a hermeneutics in the traditional sense of the word: a theory of interpretation, or of how we achieve understanding of texts, discourse, etc. (By contrast, I shall bracket out the more metaphysical-ontological and political-cultural aspects of Gadamer's position.) Presenting this assessment feels a little like playing Shakespeare's Brutus: "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears; I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him." However, my purpose will not be *quite* so negative – perhaps rather to praise Gadamer a bit and *then* bury him. Accordingly, this article will have the following structure: I will begin by indicating what seem to me the main virtues of Gadamer's hermeneutics; I will then go on to discuss what strike me as its main vices.

I

One important virtue of Gadamer's hermeneutics is simply that it kept hermeneutics alive as a discipline, and especially as a philosophical discipline, into the twentieth century. Had it not been for Gadamer, following the discipline's great heydey in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Germany – with theorists such as Ernesti, Herder, Friedrich Schlegel, Ast, Schleiermacher, Boeckh, and Dilthey – it might well have fallen into neglect there. In order to see how impoverishing this would have been, one need only look at Anglophone philosophy, which has basically failed to develop a hermeneutics altogether (despite containing a few approaches that *purport* to do something of the sort, such as Donald Davidson's theory of "radical interpretation," with its high level of abstraction, its dubious philosophical assumptions, and its lack of any serious grounding in, or even potential usefulness for, the actual practice of interpretation as it occurs in such challenging cases as those dealt with by classicists, anthropologists, and literary theorists).

Another important virtue of Gadamer's hermeneutics is that it upholds a certain principle that had already played a fundamental role in the hermeneutics of Herder, Schleiermacher, and Boeckh, but which has continued to be controversial since their time: the principle that all understanding and thought is fundamentally linguistic. This principle is by no means self-evidently true. And it must be said that unlike at least some of its earlier representatives – especially Herder – who recognized that fact and accordingly worked hard to try to justify and defend it,[1] Gadamer merely assumes it dogmatically. Still, I believe that the doctrine *does* turn out to be true in the end, and that Gadamer therefore at least deserves credit for having had a sound intuition to that effect and worked in accordance with it.

Another important virtue of Gadamer's hermeneutics lies in his espousal – along with Heidegger and Bultmann – of a version of the doctrine that linguistic understanding always essentially rests on "pre-understanding [*Vorverständnis*]," i.e. (roughly) a certain perceptual and affective orientation to

[1] See on this M.N. Forster, *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

the world. It seems to me that this principle is probably correct in some form. The main source of theoretical resistance to it, especially in Anglophone philosophy, is a position originally due to Frege and Wittgenstein: an anti-psychologism about meaning which denies that such psychological states or processes play any essential role in semantic understanding, on the grounds that semantic understanding instead consists purely in grasping a quasi-Platonic sense (Frege) or in possessing external linguistic competence (later Wittgenstein).[2] However, I think that one should in fact be quite skeptical about such anti-psychologism,[3] and that Gadamer is therefore on strong ground here. His achievement in this area is again fairly modest, in that he basically just takes over this principle of pre-understanding from Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Moreover, Heidegger's own version of it was in its turn less original than has sometimes been thought, largely deriving from predecessors such as Herder.[4] Still, this is another case in which Gadamer at least deserves credit for upholding a sound and important philosophical intuition.

Another important virtue of Gadamer's hermeneutics lies in its recognition that pre-understanding and understanding are pervasive in human mental life – involved in every aspect of our relation to ourselves and the world. This is again an insight that Gadamer owes to Heidegger's *Being and Time*. And Heidegger again in his turn owes it to predecessors such as Herder. Still, it is a very important insight, and Gadamer again deserves credit for upholding it.

Another important virtue of Gadamer's hermeneutics lies in his perception of the deep *historicity* of all pre-understanding and understanding – their deep variability over the course of history (and one should add: between cultures) – together with his recognition of the deep challenge for interpretation that this constitutes. Gadamer articulates this insight much more clearly than Heidegger had done (at least in *Being and Time*).[5] It is not a new insight; for example, this was already one of Herder's central themes in the eighteenth century.[6] But it remains controversial among philosophers even today (for instance, much Anglophone philosophy – including the work of Donald Davidson – is devoted to combating it). I believe that this insight is quite correct, though, and that Gadamer therefore deserves credit for upholding it.

Two additional virtues of Gadamer's hermeneutics are perhaps less fundamental, but nonetheless significant: In *Truth and Method* he characterizes interpretation as always involving a corrigible *Entwurf* of meaning – or, as one might gloss that: a corrigible *hypothesis* of meaning.[7] This seems to me a fruitful way to think about interpretation. The idea is not entirely original – in particular, this was in fact a large part of what Schleiermacher meant when he characterized all interpretation as essentially involving "divination" (cf. French *deviner*, to conjecture, to guess). But it remains important, and Gadamer deserves credit for espousing it.

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2 Gadamer would no doubt himself reject the characterization of his theory of pre-understanding as "psychologistic," on the grounds that pre-understanding is not something so subjective but instead a feature of an ontologically deeper Husserlian "life-world" or Heideggerian *Dasein*, or what not. Indeed, at one point he himself expresses sympathy with a form of anti-psychologism, namely Husserl's (H.-G. Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* [Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1993], 2:197). However, it could plausibly be argued that Fregean-Wittgensteinian anti-psychologism conflicts not only with holding run-of-the-mill psychological processes (such as having sensations) to be internal to meaning and understanding, but also with holding Gadamerian pre-understanding to be internal to them.

3 For more details about this, see Forster, *After Herder*, esp. "Herder's Importance as a Philosopher." The unattractiveness of Frege's quasi-Platonist version of anti-psychologism is perhaps obvious enough. Concerning the later Wittgenstein's more naturalistic version of it, while his arguments that psychological states and processes are never *sufficient* for semantic understanding are very strong, his arguments that they are never *necessary* are far weaker.

4 In particular, Heidegger's principle is similar to a quasi-empiricist principle in the philosophy of language that was already developed by Herder, to the effect that all conceptual understanding is rooted in perceptual and/or affective sensations. For further discussion of this, see my "Hermeneutics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Continental Philosophy*, ed. B. Leiter and M. Rosen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 59-60; reprinted in M.N. Forster, *German Philosophy of Language from Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 308-9.

5 See e.g. H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* [henceforth: WM] (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1990), 4, 314.

6 See Forster, *After Herder*.

7 WM, 271-2.

Finally, Gadamer's emphasis in *Truth and Method* on the important role played in interpretation by recovering, critiquing, and adjusting one's interpretation in light of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* that lies behind it (i.e. roughly, the chain of interpretations that lead from the text to one's own interpretation of it) also seems to me fruitful.[8] This technique is a sort of counterpart to – and was probably inspired by – a technique that was developed by classical philologists in the nineteenth century: recovering and critically appraising a text's historical chain of transmission as a means to establishing a reliable version of the text.

So much by way of praising Gadamer.

II

I turn now to the more negative side of my assessment (the "burial"). I shall present my criticisms roughly in order of increasing severity (i.e. beginning with the milder ones, then proceeding to the more severe ones).

My first criticism, or rather set of criticisms, concerns the account that Gadamer gives in *Truth and Method* of "Romantic" hermeneutics, by which he especially means the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher.

One relatively minor problem here is that Gadamer's predominantly polemical stance towards "Romantic" hermeneutics in the book tends to obscure some important continuities between it and his own version of hermeneutics. For example, his very ideal of developing a general hermeneutics, or theory of interpretation, comes from Schleiermacher. And so too does his principle that all understanding and thought is fundamentally linguistic in nature. Gadamer did not, I think, mean to deny any of this. Indeed, he himself opens Part 3 of the book, where he develops his principle of the fundamentally linguistic nature of all understanding and thought, by quoting Schleiermacher's commitment to the same principle.[9] But the deep continuities in question deserve to be much more clearly emphasized than they are in the book. In fairness to Gadamer, he tends to do this in some of his later work, especially "Text and Interpretation" (1983).[10]

Another fairly mild criticism concerns Gadamer's claim that Schleiermacher's hermeneutics mainly emphasizes "psychological" interpretation, and is only secondarily interested in "grammatical" (or linguistic) interpretation.[11] As other critics have already pointed out (notably Manfred Frank), it is more accurate to say that both sorts, or aspects, of interpretation were equally important for Schleiermacher, and received approximately equal attention from him.[12]

Another weakness in Gadamer's account of "Romantic" hermeneutics concerns his interpretation of Schleiermacher's "psychological" interpretation, and of the "divinatory" method that predominates in it. Gadamer interprets these as fundamentally consisting in a sort of psychological self-projection by the interpreter onto the author or his text, a projection of psychological features of his own that he shares with the author, and indeed with all people.[13] There is *something* to this reading of Schleiermacher; as Gadamer notes, Schleiermacher does say that psychological interpretation and divination rest on the fact that everyone carries a certain "minimum" of everyone else in himself. But that is a vague claim, and could indeed be almost platitudinous; after all, interpretation surely at least requires that we assume that, like us, the people whom we interpret entertain *meanings*. The crucial question is really whether Schleiermacher also envisages such a projection of more substantial common ground, for example specific concepts. And in fact, he is strongly *opposed* to this – identifying this as a deep sort of prejudice that vitiates good interpretation. Accordingly, the mainstay of "divi-

8 See esp. WM, 305 ff.

9 WM, 387.

10 *Gesammelte Werke*, 2:330 ff.

11 WM, 190.

12 For some more details on this, see Forster, "Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics: Some Problems and Solutions," in *After Herder*.

13 WM, 193; cf. 316.

nation" as Schleiermacher conceives it actually turns out to be something quite different from psychological self-projection. What exactly? Essentially, it is a procedure of fallible, corrigible hypothesizing scrupulously grounded in, but also reaching well beyond, the limited empirical evidence that is available (e.g. hypothesizing that starts from the limited number of known occurrences of a word and infers from these to the general rule for use that governs them, or that starts from the limited amount of known behavior of an author and infers from this to his general psychological traits).[14]

Another weakness of Gadamer's account of "Romantic" hermeneutics in *Truth and Method* lies in his claim that it is not concerned with historical distance (unlike his own hermeneutics, which is).[15] This strikes me as a serious misinterpretation. Certainly, Schleiermacher's immediate predecessors in the discipline – especially, Ernesti, Herder, and Friedrich Schlegel (e.g. in his *Philosophy of Philology* [1797]) – had all been *obsessed* with historical (and to a certain extent also cultural) distance as a challenge for the interpreter. Moreover, Schleiermacher is often deeply preoccupied with it as well – for example, in his classic essay "On the Different Methods of Translation" from 1813. It is true that Schleiermacher's hermeneutics lectures contain certain principles which might seem to suggest a contrary position – in particular, a principle that historical contextualization is not part of interpretation proper, and a principle that the individuality or distinctiveness of the author that constitutes the greatest challenge for interpretation is not limited to cases involving historical distance. However, these principles do not in fact imply a lack of concern with historical distance, for the following reasons. When Schleiermacher denies that historical contextualization belongs within interpretation proper, his point is not that interpretation can dispense with it, but instead the very opposite: that it is a precondition, a *conditio sine qua non*, of anything deserving the name of interpretation taking place at all.[16] And when he insists that the problem of the author's individuality or distinctiveness is not restricted to cases of historical distance, he does not mean to deny that it is *complicated* by historical distance (on the contrary, as his 1813 essay makes clear, he believes that it typically *is*). In fairness to Gadamer, though, he seems to correct himself on this whole issue shortly after *Truth and Method* in the essay "On the Problem of Self-Understanding" (1962), where he maintains that "Romantic" hermeneutics generally and Schleiermacher's version of it in particular *were* concerned with historical distance as a challenge to interpretation after all.[17]

Finally, in *Truth and Method* Gadamer also ascribes to "Romantic" hermeneutics a fusion of understanding [*intelligere*] and explication [*explicare*], of which he himself approves (and which forms a sort of bridge towards his own additional fusion of both of these with application [*applicare*]).[18] Such an ascription seems to me broadly defensible where Schleiermacher's version of "Romantic" hermeneutics is concerned. However, Gadamer's specific form of the ascription is inexact in a way that obscures a weakness in Schleiermacher's position and thereby also in his own. Explication is a matter of re-expressing or explaining someone's meaning "in one's own words" (as we sometimes loosely put it) – i.e. *linguistically*, in language that *differs* from the author's, and with a meaning that in some degree *diverges* from that explained, for example because it says something a bit different or something more (just try reading one of Eduard Fränkel's several-page explications of a line from Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* as a mere repetition of the line's meaning!).[19] Now Gadamer's reason for ascribing a fusion of understanding and explication to "Romantic" hermeneutics is his – quite correct – attribution to "Romantic" hermeneutics of the principle that all understanding rests on language.[20]

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14 For some more details on this, see Forster, "Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics: Some Problems and Solutions."

15 WM, 295, 301, 314.

16 For more on this, see Forster, "Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics: Some Problems and Solutions."

17 H.-G. Gadamer, "On the Problem of Self-Understanding," in his *Kleine Schriften* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1967), 1:72.

18 WM, 312, 392; cf. *Gesammelte Werke*, 2:19.

19 Cf. WM, 477: "The explicating word is the word of the explicator – it is not the language and lexicon of the text explicated."

20 See WM, 392: "Language [is] the universal medium in which understanding itself completes itself. The mode of completion of understanding is explication."

But that principle does not by itself imply a fusion of understanding with explication (in the sense of the latter word just stated). It does imply that understanding always involves some sort of *linguistic* re-articulation (at least tacitly). But it does not imply either that this re-articulation is in *different language* from what the author said or that it *diverges in meaning* from what the author said, since it could quite well be *identical* to what the author said in both of these respects. (Consider, for example, what happens when one native speaker of English understands another who has told him, "It's a sunny day today." Even a skilled classicist who reads and understands a Greek text will normally do so in virtue of his competence in the *Greek*; it is only the neophyte in learning Greek who constantly re-articulates or explains everything to himself in his own modern language.)[21] Schleiermacher's commitment to a fusion of understanding with explication only results from that principle because he espouses an additional principle as well: a principle that understanding is always ineliminably *individual*, or idiosyncratic.[22] However, unlike the principle that all understanding is grounded in language, this extreme principle of individuality is not *consistently* Schleiermacher's position (for example, he does not hold it in his 1813 essay on translation). Moreover, it seems philosophically quite implausible (for example, is it really *never* the case that two native speakers of English understand the same by "It's a sunny day today"?).[23] The upshot of all this is that Schleiermacher's fusion of understanding and explication has a significantly different basis, and is considerably less plausible, than Gadamer implies, and that Gadamer's appropriation of this fusion from Schleiermacher therefore founds his own hermeneutical house on sand.

In sum, Gadamer's characterization of "Romantic" hermeneutics is rather misleading, and as a result, so is his picture of its relation to his own hermeneutics as well. Moreover, in at least one case (namely, that just discussed) his mischaracterization threatens to undermine a fundamental position of his own.

III

A further area of weakness in Gadamer's hermeneutics concerns art. How exactly is Part 1 of *Truth and Method* (on art) supposed to cohere with Parts 2 and 3 (on interpretation)? More specifically, how exactly are we supposed to conceive the relation between, on the one hand, the expression of meaning by such (at least apparently) non-linguistic arts as painting and instrumental music and, on the other hand, the important role that is played in understanding by language (in the usual sense of the term "language")? This question is obviously of vital importance for the theory of art. But it is also vitally important for hermeneutics. Certain possible answers to it would undermine a conception of hermeneutics like Gadamer's, with its fundamental principles of the linguistic nature of all understanding and the consequent linguistic orientation of all interpretation.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century hermeneutic theorists had developed a range of mutually incompatible positions concerning this question, including the following four: (1) The early Herder, who was already committed to the essentially linguistic nature of all meaning and thought, had implied that such non-linguistic arts as painting and instrumental music do not express meanings or thoughts at all, but are instead merely sensuous in character. (2) In a later phase of his career, Herder had developed the much more attractive position that despite the essentially linguistic nature of all meaning and thought, such "non-linguistic" arts (we need scare-quotes here now) often do express meanings and thoughts, and consequently require interpretation, *and they are able to do so in virtue of the artist's linguistic competence, which delimits the meanings and thoughts in question*. (3) The mature Hegel re-

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21 Donald Davidson sometimes makes a similar error to the one that Gadamer makes here. See on this my "On the Very Idea of Denying the Existence of Radically Different Conceptual Schemes," *Inquiry*, 41/2 (1998), n. 28.

22 Gadamer is aware that this additional principle plays a role here, but he tends to present it as a sort of further complication of the situation that for "Romantic" hermeneutics all understanding is explication (see WM, 392; cf. *Gesammelte Werke*, 2:331), whereas my point is that without this principle "Romantic" hermeneutics would not be committed to all understanding being explication.

23 For more on this, see Forster, "Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics: Some Problems and Solutions."

jected both of these sorts of limitation of meaning and thought to language (in the usual sense of the term), instead holding that in certain cases non-linguistic arts (for Hegel, the prime examples were ancient architecture and sculpture) can express meanings and thoughts which transcend the artist's linguistic competence (though not the expressive power of language *tout court*, since, according to Hegel, history subsequently does develop linguistic means for expressing them). (4) The later Dilthey espoused an even more radical version of Hegel's position, holding that in some cases non-linguistic arts express meanings and thoughts which transcend the expressive capacities of language altogether (Dilthey's central example was instrumental music).

However, it is also a striking fact that each of these thinkers was torn on this whole issue (at least over the course of his career). So too were other hermeneutic theorists from the period, including Schleiermacher (who in his late *Aesthetics* lectures started out with a version of position (1) but then shifted to vacillating between positions (2) and (3)).

This chaotic situation is arguably less a symptom of the ineptitude of the theorists in question than of the genuine philosophical difficulty of the issue involved, which constitutes one of the most important bits of "unfinished business" in pre-Gadamerian hermeneutics.[24]

Where does Gadamer stand on this important question? The disappointing answer, it seems to me, is that at least in *Truth and Method*, like his predecessors, he is deeply inconsistent about it. To his credit, he always unequivocally rejects position (1), the denial that non-linguistic arts ever express meanings and thoughts (no thinking person today whose artistic horizon extends beyond twentieth-century abstract painting and atonal music to include in addition such things as medieval and early modern religious painting and church music could be seriously tempted to defend position (1)). But where does he stand in relation to the other available positions? In *Truth and Method* he seems to vacillate between all of them. Sometimes he seems to opt for the later Herder's position (2), the position that this sort of art does sometimes express meanings and thoughts but always in a way that is grounded in and bounded by the artist's linguistic competence. In particular, his fundamental principle in the later parts of *Truth and Method* that all understanding is fundamentally linguistic seems to commit him to this position;[25] and there are also explicit remarks in the book that seem to do so.[26] On the other hand, there are other passages in the book where he instead seems to hold a version of the Hegelian position (3), the position that such art sometimes expresses meanings and thoughts which transcend the artist's linguistic capacity, though never the expressive capacity of language *tout court*.[27] Finally, compounding this inconsistency even further, there are also passages near the beginning of the book in which he seems to espouse a version of the later Dilthey's position (4), the position that such art sometimes expresses meanings and thoughts which transcend the expressive capacity of language *tout court*.[28]

In fairness to Gadamer, he reduces this confusion somewhat in his later essays on art – especially, "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics" (1964), "On the Silence of the Picture" (1965), "Art and Imitation" (1967), and "The Actuality of the Beautiful" (1974). In these essays he at least seems to eliminate *one* possible version of position (2), namely by holding unequivocally that some paintings (in particular, still-lifes and modern abstract paintings) express meanings which transcend, and resist capture in, "sounds" or "words."[29] He also seems to reject the Hegelian position (3) unequivocally.[30] This considerably reduces the spectrum of vacillations, but it still leaves a vacillation between a *second* possible version of position (2) and a version of Dilthey's position (4). This can be seen by reflecting on Gadamer's growing tendency in these later essays to use such locutions as "language of art [*Sprache der*

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24 Concerning this issue, see several of the essays in Forster, *After Herder*. Also Forster, "Hegel and Some (Near-)Contemporaries: Narrow or Broad Expressivism?" in *German Philosophy of Language*.

25 See esp. WM, 383, 387 ff.

26 See e.g. WM, 86-7, 402, 405, 480.

27 See e.g. WM, 402-6; cf. *Gesammelte Werke*, 8:4-5.

28 See e.g. WM, 2-3; cf. *Gesammelte Werke*, 8:388.

29 See e.g. *Gesammelte Werke*, 8:26, 315-17.

30 See e.g. ibid., 123-4, 127-8.

der Kunst]."[31] This tendency is obviously motivated by a desire to reconcile his view that such art is meaningful and hence susceptible to understanding with his fundamental principle that all understanding is linguistic. But does he consider the "language of art" in question to be *literally* a "language" in the *usual sense* of the term (which would leave him holding an *alternative* version of position (2))? Or does he instead merely consider it to be "language" in some metaphorical or extended sense of the term, only "sounds" and "words" counting literally as "language" in the usual sense (this would leave him holding a version of position (4))? If the former were his position, then his original principle of the fundamentally linguistic nature of all understanding would be straightforwardly upheld; if the latter were his position, then that principle would have been quietly but dramatically revised, namely to include not only "language" in the usual sense but also "language" in the relevant metaphorical or extended sense. It remains quite unclear which of these two positions Gadamer really holds.

Also, whichever of them it is, one might reasonably still ask what is supposed to *justify* choosing it – rather than the alternative option, the now excluded first version of position (2), or position (3). For Gadamer offers little if any illumination on this score.

IV

I turn now to what is perhaps the most serious weakness in Gadamer's hermeneutics. It seems fair to say that practitioners and theorists of interpretation alike have traditionally assumed that texts and discourse have an original meaning which is independent of whatever interpretations may have occurred subsequently, and which it is the interpreter's task to recapture. As Gadamer emphasizes, such an assumption is also fundamental to "Romantic" hermeneutics, as it culminates in Schleiermacher.[32] On the basis of this assumption, "Romantic" hermeneutics developed the position that because concepts, beliefs, and so forth vary from age to age, culture to culture, and even individual to individual within a single age and culture, recapturing the original meaning requires that the interpreter resist constant temptations to assimilate the concepts, beliefs, and so on expressed by a text or discourse to his own (or to others with which he happens to be especially familiar). In particular, he must not assume that what is expressed will turn out to be true by his own lights or to use the same concepts as he uses. Instead, he needs to employ a set of scrupulous interpretive methods in order to arrive at an accurate understanding (for example, careful scrutiny of the various passages in which a particular word occurs for the purpose of discerning the rule that governs its use and hence its meaning). Gadamer *rejects* the assumption in question, however. Instead, he conceives meaning as something that only arises in the interaction between texts or discourse and an indefinitely expanding and changing interpretive tradition. Consequently, he denies that interpretation should seek to recapture an original meaning, and instead holds that it needs to incorporate an orientation to distinctive features of the interpreter's own outlook and to the distinctive application that he envisages making of the text or discourse involved.

Now it seems fair to say that the assumption in question here is not only traditional but also very intuitive, and that Gadamer's rejection of it is highly counterintuitive. So the burden of proof in the dispute falls on him. What arguments does he provide? It seems to me that they are quite numerous and diverse, indeed that they constitute a sort of "scatter-shot" case. Let me therefore attempt to distinguish and assess them.[33]

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31 This tendency already begins in "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics" (1964) (*Kleine Schriften*, 2:1 ff.). It reaches a sort of peak in "The Actuality of the Beautiful" (1974) (*Gesammelte Werke*, 8:94, 129-30, 138, 142).

32 Manfred Frank's attempt in *Das individuelle Allgemeine* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977) to argue otherwise – to find in Schleiermacher an anticipation of Gadamer's own alternative position – is unconvincing. For more on this subject, see Forster, "Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics: Some Problems and Solutions."

33 In upholding the traditional assumption against Gadamer's contrary position in what follows, I will be in broad sympathy with the approach taken by Axel Bühler and Peter Tepe, for example in their "Kognitive und aneignende Interpretation in der Hermeneutik," *Jahrbuch der Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf* (2007/8).

A central part of Gadamer's case in effect consists of a family of exhortations that we should assimilate interpretation, in the sense of achieving *understanding* of texts, discourse, etc., to various other sorts of activities from which, prima facie at least, and I want to suggest also in fact, it is crucially different. These include: *explicating* or *applying* a text, discourse, etc.; *translating* it into another language; *conversation* aimed at achieving agreement; *legal "interpretation"*; and *re-presenting* a work of (theatrical or musical) art.[34] Let us briefly consider each of these in turn. Prima facie at least, achieving understanding of a text or discourse is something quite different and quite separable both from explicating it and from applying it. For example, if a mother tells her son to finish his food, he does not normally need to explicate her instruction in order to understand it; and when Hitler tells me in *Mein Kampf* how inferior certain races are, I do not need to apply this message in order to understand it. Moreover, as we saw earlier, the reasons that Schleiermacher and Gadamer give for a sort of fusion of understanding with explication are not cogent ones; and Gadamer's case for a further fusion of both of these with application seems even less so. Again, prima facie at least, understanding a text or discourse is something quite different and quite separable from translating it, i.e. re-expressing it in another language (consider again the mother's instruction to her son, for example). Again, prima facie at least, legal "interpretation" (as it is practiced by the U.S. Supreme Court in relation to the U.S. Constitution, for instance) is roughly a process of either interpreting *or re-interpreting* laws in such a way that they will best fit both with intervening legal thinking and with current circumstances in order to produce optimal outcomes for current society. It therefore constitutes something very different from, and need play no part in, the sort of straightforward interpretation of the original meaning of the same laws that a legal historian might engage in, for example. Gadamer attempts to forestall this sort of objection.[35] But his attempt is far from convincing. It largely consists in sliding illicitly from the trivial truth that if we currently interpret past laws we must have a reason for doing so to the far-from-trivial proposition that this reason must involve adapting the meaning we ascribe to the laws to current circumstances. In order to see that this slide is illicit, one only needs to observe that the reason we have for interpreting them might consist in curiosity about their original meaning. Again, prima facie at least, re-presenting a play or a piece of music, in the manner of a theater-director or a conductor for example, is something very different from, and need play no part in, undertaking to discover its original meaning or conception, in the manner of a literary scholar or a historian of music for example (even if the former activity is often preceded and prepared for by the latter). In the end, indeed, these Gadamerian exhortations hardly even amount to real arguments. Rather, they are just invitations to a nest of serious confusions and should be firmly refused.

Gadamer does also offer several somewhat more substantial arguments, however. These saliently include the following four:

(a) Both in the case of art and in the case of linguistic texts and discourse more generally, interpretations change over time, and these changing interpretations are internal to the meaning of the art, text, or discourse in question, so that there is, after all, no such thing as an original meaning independent of these changing interpretations.[36]

(b) The original meaning of artistic and linguistic forms of expression from the past is always strictly speaking unknowable by us due to the essential role that is played in all understanding by a historically specific type of "pre-understanding" or "prejudice" which we can never entirely escape.[37]

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34 See esp. WM, 183-4, 312-15, 330 ff., 374-5, 383-9, 388-93.

35 WM, 330 ff.

36 See e.g. WM, 70 ff., 124, 128-9, 345-6, 391-2. Note that this position is far more radical than, and indeed inconsistent with, the attractive position, with which it could easily be confused, that successive interpretations undertaken from different historical vantage points often succeed in illuminating more and more aspects of the original meaning of a piece of art, text, or discourse.

37 See e.g. WM, 250 ff., 298, 306-7 (and more generally 270-312); also *Gesammelte Werke*, 2:475, 8:377.

(c) The original meaning is something "dead," something no longer of any possible interest to us.[38]
(d) *All* knowledge is historically relative, so interpretive knowledge is so in particular.[39]

But how convincing are these arguments? A first point to note about them is that arguments (a)–(c) seem to be inconsistent with each other: argument (a) says that there is no such thing as an "original meaning," whereas arguments (b) and (c) imply that there is (but that it is unknowable and "dead"); argument (b) says that it is unknowable, whereas argument (c) implies that it is knowable (but "dead," of no possible interest to us) (for if one could not know it, how could one know that it is "dead," of no possible interest to us?).[40]

Moreover, the arguments face plenty of additional problems severally. So let us now briefly consider each of them in turn.

Argument (a) – concerning changing interpretations – runs into two main problems. First, Gadamer actually fails to provide a real argument for his counterintuitive conclusion that subsequent (re-)interpretations are internal to an author's meaning here (that conclusion merely amounts to an "and" rather than a "therefore," as it were). He does occasionally emphasize in this connection not only that (re-)interpretations actually occur, but also that authors sometimes expect and even welcome this. However, even with this additional premise, the argument simply fails to lead to its conclusion.[41] Second, and perhaps even worse, Gadamer's argument is implicitly incoherent. Consider the case of texts, for example. To say that interpretations of a text change over time is presumably to say, roughly, that the author of a text T meant such and such by it, that there then arose an interpretation of it I_1 which meant something a bit different from that, that there then arose a further interpretation of it I_2 which meant something a bit different again, and so on. In other words, the very

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38 See e.g. WM, 172; *Gesammelte Werke*, 8:377. Gadamer sometimes in this connection alludes to Nietzsche's famous argument along similar lines in *The Use and Disadvantage of History for Life* (see e.g. WM, 309; *Gesammelte Werke*, 4:326, 8:377; *Kleine Schriften*, 1:103). Indeed, his debt to Nietzsche here is probably greater than he lets on – being downplayed by him, not so much from a wish to seem more original than he is (he is often generous in crediting influences, for example Hegel and Heidegger), but rather from embarrassment over Nietzsche's association with Nazism.

39 See e.g. WM, 203-4, 234 ff., 240-6 (though contrast 105); cf. *Gesammelte Werke*, 2:416-17; *Kleine Schriften*, 3:259 (though contrast 1:111). Gadamer associates this position above all with Dilthey, who according to Gadamer tries to combine the good side of a relativistic philosophy of life with the incompatible bad side of a Cartesian positivism. Here again, though, Gadamer is probably also quietly indebted to Nietzsche (cf. the preceding note), namely in this case to Nietzsche's perspectivism (notice, for example, Gadamer's use of Nietzsche's term "Perspektive" to articulate this position at *Gesammelte Werke*, 2:416-17). Anglophone interpreters have tended, very misleadingly, to deny or at least downplay this whole relativistic aspect of Gadamer's position, no doubt largely because of relativism's unpopularity among philosophers in the Anglophone world (see, for instance, several of the articles in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. R.J. Dostal [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002]).

40 Gadamer could possibly try to cope with this problem of inconsistency by recasting these three arguments in the consistent form: there is no such thing as an "original meaning" . . . ; moreover, even if there were, we could not know it . . . ; and furthermore, even if we could know it, it could not be of any possible interest to us . . . Cf. Gorgias's treatise *Concerning Nature or What is Not*: there is nothing; even if there were, one could not know about it; and even if one could know about it, one could not communicate that knowledge to anyone else. However, I shall not here pursue the question of how successful such a recasting might be.

41 Gadamer's "Who am I and Who are you?" (1986) (*Gesammelte Werke*, 9:383 ff.) contains one of his more extended discussions of an author who, according to Gadamer, dissuades his readers from seeking out his own meaning and instead encourages them to develop their own interpretations of his works: Celan. (See esp. 9:432-3.) However, even assuming that Gadamer's report of Celan's attitude is accurate, many problems arise here: (1) Is this not a rather unusual attitude for an author to take? Also, (2) why should we not see it merely as a sign that this particular author is concerned to provoke some reaction other than accurate understanding (as when a psychologist pronounces a string of words to a patient not in order to elicit understanding of them but as part of a word-association exercise, for example)? Moreover, (3) even if the author denied having any such different intention and instead insisted that he was aiming at accurate understanding, why could this not merely be a sign that he had a misguided conception of the nature of accurate understanding and what it requires? (Note that Gadamer is especially ill placed to dismiss such a possibility, since a large part of the thrust of his position in the essay under discussion and elsewhere is that authors have no *authority* when it comes to assessing their own intentions and meanings. In other words, Gadamer himself especially emphasizes that authors are fallible and corrigible on such matters.)

notion of changing interpretations *presupposes* an original meaning (indeed, a whole *series* of original meanings: one belonging to the text itself, and then one belonging to each of its subsequent interpretations).[42]

Argument (b) – concerning pre-understanding – again runs into two problems. First, Gadamer's assumption that pre-understanding is internal to understanding and that it is always historically specific in an epistemically insurmountable way is questionable to begin with. One objection to it that Anglophone philosophers are likely to find attractive is that the conception that pre-understanding is internal to understanding violates an anti-psychologistic insight about meaning and understanding that we owe to Frege and Wittgenstein. However, as I have already mentioned, such anti-psychologism in fact seems quite dubious on reflection, so it is not on *this* ground that I would question Gadamer's assumption. Nor would I question its implication that pre-understandings are historically specific (that too seems correct). Rather, I would suggest that what is really wrong with it is its implication that such historical specificity is epistemically insurmountable, that it is impossible to abstract from one's own specific pre-understanding and recapture that of an historical Other. Indeed, I would suggest that, properly interpreted, Herder's conception that *Einfühlung* ("feeling one's way in") plays an essential role in the interpretation of texts from the past already quite rightly pointed towards an ability we possess to perform just this sort of imaginative feat, and towards the vital contribution that exercising this ability makes to our achievement of an exact understanding of past texts' original meanings.[43] Second, Gadamer's argument also runs into a serious epistemological problem. For if one were always locked into a modifying pre-understanding, as he supposes, then how could one ever come to know, as he purports to, that other perspectives undergoing modification exist?[44] Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, this sort of epistemological problem would eventually lead to a *conceptual* one as well: a problem about whether in that case it would even make *sense* to speak of such perspectives.[45]

Argument (c) – concerning an original meaning inevitably being "dead," of no possible interest to us – is one of the weakest parts of Gadamer's case. Far from inevitably being "dead," of no possible interest to us, the original meanings of texts and discourse from the past (or from contemporary Others) can be of *great* interest to us, and for *many* different reasons (several of which had already been noted by Gadamer's predecessors). One reason (which Herder and Dilthey had already noted) is simply that the discovery of such meanings and of the views they articulate satisfies our intellectual curiosity and enriches our experience. Another reason (again already important to Herder) is that it expresses our respect and sympathy for Others and thereby also tends to promote the same

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42 Gadamer's strange suggestion at certain points that the interpreter's contribution always gets reabsorbed into the meaning and so vanishes (WM, 402, 404, 476-7) is a symptom of this incoherence in his position. What he is *really* trying to say here is that there both is and is not a re-interpretation involved, but he masks this contradiction from himself and his readers by casting it (roughly) in the less transparently self-contradictory form of a process of precipitation followed by reabsorption.

43 See on this Forster, "Herder's Importance as a Philosopher," in *After Herder*. It should also be noted that even if it were true that an exact understanding of historical (or cultural) Others is always impossible – as Schleiermacher normally held concerning *all* other people, though for a different reason than Gadamer's (namely, the alleged necessity of psychological individuality) – it would still be attractive to espouse the recapturing of an original meaning as an *ideal* at which interpretation should *aim* – as Schleiermacher in effect did.

44 In a formulation of his position that perhaps especially invites this sort of objection, Gadamer writes that "the discovery of the historical horizon is always already a fusion of horizons" (*Gesammelte Werke*, 2:475). My brief statement of the objection here is meant to be suggestive rather than probative. For a fuller statement of an objection of this sort against a relevantly similar position of Wittgenstein's, see M.N. Forster, *Wittgenstein on the Arbitrariness of Grammar* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 168-72.

45 See ibid., esp. 169-83. The argument is complicated, so I shall not go into it here. It does not rest on an easy appeal to a dubious verificationism. Rather, it turns on the fact that our pre-theoretical concept of meaning is ambiguous as between implying that any meaning must be expressible from our own perspective and not doing so, and that the epistemological problem in question here would undercut the reasons we have for resolving that conceptual ambiguity in the latter direction and provide a reason for resolving it in the former direction instead.

attitudes among our contemporaries. Another reason (again already important to Herder) is that it promises to acquaint us with concepts, beliefs, values, techniques, and so on which can help us to improve our own in various ways. Another reason (again already important to Herder) is that it makes an essential contribution to our *self*-understanding, both by enabling us to see our own perspective in a comparative light and by enabling us to understand how it arose. And no doubt there are further good reasons as well.[46]

Finally, argument (d) – concerning relativism – is unconvincing as well. One problem with it is simply that general relativism is at best a very controversial position and that Gadamer offers no real argument for it. Another problem is that while certain forms of general relativism may at least be coherent, it is far from clear that Gadamer's is. Consider the well-known objection that the thesis of relativism seems to run into self-contradiction in connection with the awkward question of whether the thesis is *itself* of merely relative validity. Gadamer touches on this objection at various points, but his answers to it are naive and unconvincing. In one place he concedes that a self-contradiction arises here, but responds that this merely shows the weakness of the sort of "reflection" that reveals this and objects to it![47] In another place he argues, a little more subtly, that the thesis of relativism is not "propositional" but merely something of which one has "consciousness," so that it and its own subject-matter are "not at all on the same logical level."[48] But surely, the alleged circumstance that what is involved here is merely a consciousness that relativism is true, rather than, say, an explicit assertion that it is true, would not diminish either the fact or the unacceptability of the self-contradiction one whit. Yet another problem with Gadamer's argument is that, contrary to his evident wish to claim that meaning's relativity to interpretations makes it distinctive in comparison with other subject-matters, such as those dealt with by the natural sciences, and consequently resistant to the sorts of methods that can legitimately be used in connection with other subject-matters, in particular the "positivist," or objectivity-presupposing, methods of the natural sciences, this argument would leave meaning *no less (if also no more) objective than anything else.*

In short, it seems to me that Gadamer fails to provide any good argument at all for his very counterintuitive position. The position is therefore in all probability false. Moreover, if it *is* false, then it is so in a way that is likely to prove baneful for interpretive practice. For it actively encourages (as allegedly inevitable and hence appropriate) just the sort of assimilation of the meanings and thoughts of (historical, cultural, and individual) Others to the interpreter's own that it was one of the most important achievements of earlier theorists of hermeneutics such as Herder and Schleiermacher to identify as a constant temptation and to outlaw.[49] In short, besides being mistaken, Gadamer's position is also harmful for interpretive practice.[50]

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46 Insofar as Nietzsche's case from *The Use and Disadvantage of History for Life* lies behind Gadamer's argument here (as I suggested in an earlier note), a fuller response might also include some further points of a different character – for example, concerning the lamentable twentieth-century results of the attempt to enliven German culture by sacrificing scrupulous human science in favor of new mythologies.

47 WM, 350.

48 WM, 452.

49 As Dagfinn Føllesdal pointed out to me at the conference at which this article was first presented, while Gadamer's own interpretive work, for example in ancient philosophy, tends to avoid this lamentable consequence, normally being scrupulous (and therefore arguably inconsistent with his hermeneutic theory), the interpretive work of some of his students well illustrates the danger described here.

50 Similar points apply to conceptions championed by recent Anglophone philosophers – for example, Donald Davidson – that it is necessary to use "charity" in interpretation, i.e. to maximize the recovery from the text or discourse interpreted of one's own beliefs, values, and hence also concepts. There has indeed been a sort of largely accidental but nonetheless very unfortunate conspiracy between recent German and recent Anglophone philosophy of interpretation in this area, converging on similarly misguided and corrupting philosophical conclusions (albeit starting from very different philosophical assumptions and arguments). For a critique of Davidson's conception of the need for "charity" in interpretation, see Forster, "On the Very Idea of Denying the Existence of Radically Different Conceptual Schemes."

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To conclude: Gadamer's hermeneutics has a number of notable virtues, including simply keeping the discipline of hermeneutics alive as part of philosophy in the twentieth century and upholding the principle that all understanding and thought is fundamentally linguistic in nature. But it also has a number of serious vices. Among these are a misleading characterization of "Romantic" hermeneutics and of its relation to Gadamer's own hermeneutics; a failure to make progress on the important question of the relation between (apparently) non-linguistic art and language; and especially a misguided and indeed corrupting attack on the traditional assumption that interpretation has the task of recapturing an author's original meaning.[51]

[51] I would like to thank Professor Riccardo Dottori, the University of Rome Tor Vergata, and the Italian Institute of German Studies for inviting me to participate in the conference "50 Years *Truth and Method*" in Rome at which an earlier version of this article was first presented. I would also like to thank the other participants in the conference, including Günter Abel, Axel Bühler, and Dagfinn Føllesdal, for stimulating exchanges relating to it.