

Gadamer Contra Excess:

Resurrecting the Virtue of Measure

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Those who have read Gadamer properly will immediately acknowledge that to enquire after the original authorial intent (*Absicht*) behind his decision to introduce *Wahrheit und Methode* (as well as the English translation, *Truth and Method*) with an untitled Rilke poem from 1900, is to betray every hermeneutical insight Gadamer sought to convey. There is, though, clearly more than mere aesthetic whim involved here, even if Gadamer, with his refined poetic sensibility, were perfectly entitled to such indulgence. The poem introduces Gadamer's subtle but definite answer to the charge that hermeneutics, with its denial of truth *sub specie aeternitates*, lays us open to the endlessness of an interpretative wasteland. One of the most unpalatable ideas of the contemporary world—and the twentieth century gave us far too many ideas that are unpalatable—is the disintegration of a commonly shared world view as well as the metaphysical foundations upon which philosophy used to be based. Aesthetics was modernity's last resort, and since that too has gone,¹ we seem bound for the infernal swamp of relativism. Add to that the confrontation with other traditions, and we find a hitherto unparalleled crisis in the West: the combined weight of the Other and the past makes it impossible to live in the present. One of Gadamer's most under-appreciated contributions is the sense of

¹ See, for example, Jean Baudrillard, "Transaesthetics," in *The Transparency of Evil* (London: Verso, 1993), 14-25.

measure that he introduced to counter the paralysis of the totalizing critique of deconstruction.

But before we continue, the poem:

Catch only what you've thrown yourself,
but when you're suddenly the catcher of a ball
thrown by an eternal partner
with accurate and measured swing
towards you, to your center, in an arch
from the great bridgebuilding of God:
why catching then becomes a power—
not yours, a world's.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Couched in poetic language, Rilke comfortably decenters the autonomous acting subject well before it became *de rigueur* in poststructuralist circles. The poem describes the old adage that one retains something worth having—be it love or meaning—only by releasing one's iron grip on it. It is a popular theme in philosophy, and surprisingly enough, it turns up in no less a place than in Descartes' *Meditations*. The *Meditations* deal with a great deal more than mere proof of the existence of the speaking subject. It is a tale of a journey: a journey of an alienated spirit returning home to its beneficent Creator. At first, the subject is tense and anxious—there is something surprisingly Dantesque about Descartes' initial position. Descartes speaks of the terror of being caught in a dark, self-deceptive dream world where nothing is real, nobody can be trusted, and madness is always a present danger. He sometimes feels as if he has “all of a sudden fallen into very deep water” where he “can neither make certain the setting of [his] feet on the bottom, nor can [he] swim and so support [himself] on the surface.”²

² René Descartes, *Philosophical Works of Descartes Vol I: Meditations*, translated by Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 149. [AT 7:24]

Descartes continues, however, and finds that he is completely dependent upon a beneficent God, whom he trusts will not deceive him, but show him Truth. Only when Descartes surrenders to God, is his doubt laid to rest. Contrary to popular belief, it is only with this insight that Descartes finds peace, not simply with the Cogito: “[Now] I can set aside all doubts of these past days as hyperbolic and ridiculous. . . . [B]ecause God is in no wise a deceiver, it follows that I am not deceived in this.”³ This is Descartes’ true Archimedean point: he has found a rock in an otherwise endless sea.

Needless to say, postmodern philosophy is devoted to an escape from that rock, a rock that, after the linguistic turn, seems more like a burden than a solid foundation. After Derrida we know that any claim to apodictic truth hides a history of suppression of other truths, and that any attempt to ground a text in a set of stable signifiers is bound to fail. Not surprisingly, this fact has quickly acquired a political dimension. For quite some time now, the release from metaphysics and Grand Narratives has been celebrated in the humanities as the prime theme in contemporary thought.

Terry Eagleton writes in this respect:

We are now in the process of wakening from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and fetish of the totality, into the laidback (‘joyful’ as Nietzsche would say) pluralism of the postmodern, that heterogeneous range of lifestyles and language games which has renounced the nostalgic urge to totalize and legitimate itself. . . . Science and philosophy must jettison their grandiose metaphysical claims and view themselves more modestly as just another set of narratives.⁴

But Descartes’ epistemological anxiety arose with reason and, once roused, it never disappeared entirely. Literary critics like Eagleton and Stanley Cavell appear to be the main beneficiaries of the endless play of signifiers. One may well be waxing lyrical about the death of

³ Ibid., 199. [AT 7:90]

⁴ Terry Eagleton, “Awakening from Modernity,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 February 1987, 2.

the author in a harmless, fashionable ‘lit-crit’ context, but any serious reader of Nietzsche will know that late modernity is not just about joyful language games; the release from the Grand Narratives is accompanied by a grave sense of nihilism.

At first sight, philosophical hermeneutics appear to be part of the problem of relativism. From its inception in Biblical hermeneutics, the sheer number of possibilities offered by a great text has proven to be bewildering. For the hermeneutician, with his insistence that human understanding is always culturally and historically situated, truth is more than the mere correspondence of mental states to an objective reality. It is not a state of affairs awaiting discovery and demanding representation either; there is always an active element in any hermeneutic endeavor. Gadamer writes that “understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well.”⁵ Truth is more of an event than the mere discovery of fact and it always happens between a community of inquirers in dialogue with one another rather than by a single thinking subject. Gadamer, who after all defends a quasi-Hegelian model of freedom, sees understanding as “a process of communication.”⁶ From a transcendental viewpoint, however, philosophical hermeneutics could be seen as lacking rigor and point: it is not a technique or method, it does not fit into a school, programme or project, and it does not even lend itself to conversion into a technique of criticism. It has even lost the subject specific demarcation. After hermeneutics became philosophical, it no longer refers to the techniques and interpretative rules employed within a specific discipline such as jurisprudence or theology. Not only that, it appears to be part of a now thoroughly established tradition that

⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 331.

⁶ H-G. Gadamer, *Vernunft in Zeitalter der Wissenschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1976), 110.

dismisses even the attempt to find some permanent, a-historical matrix to which we can appeal in order to answer questions such as the nature of reason, truth, knowledge, beauty and goodness.

To many, hermeneutics' insistence upon placing every question within a linguistic framework and a set of historically conditioned concerns and practices seems to be further proof that philosophy itself has managed to reduce itself to its own exegesis. Gadamer's description of how every act of writing or speech exceeds what is actually expressed, sounds suspiciously (and ironically) close to deconstruction. He writes: "Every word carries with it the unsaid; every speech brings a totality of meaning into play without being able to express it totally."⁷ In other words, every utterance means more than is explicitly stated.

At first, this may seem like just another excuse for postmodern trickery, or bluntly put, full-blown relativism. This was indeed what Emilio Betti feared, known for his defense of an objectivist hermeneutics. In Betti's view, Gadamer's position

...tend[s] toward the confounding of interpretation and meaning-inference (*Sinngebung*) and the removing of the canon of the object, with the consequence of putting into doubt the objectivity of the results of the interpretive procedures in all the human sciences. It is my [Betti's] opinion, that it is our duty as guardians and practitioners of the study of history to protect this kind of objectivity, and to provide evidence of the epistemological condition of its possibility.⁸

And later:

The obvious difficulty with the hermeneutic method proposed by Gadamer seems to lay, for me, in that it enables a substantive agreement between text and reader—i.e. between the apparently easily accessible meaning of a text and the subjective conception of the reader—to be

⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 454.

⁸ Emilio Betti, "Hermeneutics as the General Methodology of the *Geisteswissenschaften*," in *The Hermeneutic Tradition from Ast to Ricoeur*, edited by Gail Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 177.

formed without, however, guaranteeing the correctness of the understanding; for that it would be necessary that the understanding arrived at corresponded fully to the meaning underlying the text as an objectivation of mind. Only then would the objectivity of the result be guaranteed on the basis of a reliable process of interpretation.⁹

E. D. Hirsch seems to agree:

The interpreter's primary task is to reproduce in himself the author's 'logic,' his attitudes, his cultural givens, in short, his world. Even though the process of verification is highly complex and difficult, the ultimate verification principle is very simple—the imaginative reconstruction of the speaking subject.¹⁰

The eternal fear of relativism may well account for the persistence of metaphysical fictions even now in our thoroughly postmodern times. Despite the toughest deconstructive efforts and the most severe erasure of the author and subject, contemporary thought still clings stubbornly to its metaphysical certainties. Consider the strange, untimely return of a hard-nosed, quasi-positivist insistence on the correspondence theory of truth, and a renewed faith in the messianic character of empirical science, as can be seen in the popular writings of Richard Dawkins, and the more academic objections to 'postmodernism' in the works of Daniel Dennett.

Rather than merely repeat the usual poststructuralist arguments that we all know so well by now, it would serve us better to reconsider the legitimacy of the problem of relativism. It is, after all, one of the most ancient of philosophical problems, a problem that has perhaps been left latent for too long in high continental circles. Even there though, there is at present a move away from Nietzsche towards Kant. The high priest that oversaw the funeral of

⁹ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁰ E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 242.

the Grand Narrative, Jean-Francois Lyotard, turned in his final years not to *les petit recits* (the little narratives), but to Kant.

One has to ask, however, whether relativism is truly (sic) the ever-present danger that philosophers everywhere seem to fear. After all, at least on the physical level, we have been used to the idea that motion itself is meaningless except when it is between two physical systems or material bodies moving relatively to each other, at least since 1905.¹¹ The word “relative” implies a relationship: all that relativism really entails is the interdependence of facts, where the intelligibility of a particular fact depends on its relationship to other facts. To our sophisticated age, this hardly seems threatening, and Gadamer himself has shown that relativism is only a problem when truth is measured according to untenable absolutist standards of objectivity, and is in fact self-refuting:

That the thesis of skepticism or relativism refutes itself to the extent that it claims to be true is an irrefutable argument. But what does it achieve? The reflective argument that proves successful here rebounds against the arguer, for it renders the truth value of reflection suspect. It is not the reality of skepticism or of truth-dissolving relativism but the truth claim of all formal argument that is affected.¹²

Although Gadamer holds that the self-refuting nature of relativism is merely formal, it is possible to restate this in terms that are almost infantile in its obviousness: the moment a speaker makes the proposition that ‘all truth is relative’, he or she is making a truth claim with universal validity. A variation of this is of course the famous Cretan liar paradox: if a Cretan were to make the statement that all Cretans are liars, there would be at least one Cretan who would fall right back into making a true statement. Truth will win out, it seems. So much has been said about the failure of language, the play of signifiers and shifts in meaning, that it is often forgotten

¹¹ The year of publication of Einstein’s special theory of relativity.

¹² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 339.

how hard it truly is to end up in a situation where there is not at least some degree of understanding between the participating conversational parties, a fact that Gadamer underscores with his notion of dialogue and Habermas with his theory of communicative action.

Our fortune in being able to be understood extends to the realms beyond intersubjectivity. Heidegger reminds us that we are *not* fundamentally shut off from reality and that we never were. Instead, our most basic, fundamental, primitive and unavoidable relation with the world is a very intimate one where we have immediate access to things, and an intimate relationship with the things in the world. It is perhaps for this reason that Nietzsche reacted so violently against Kant's lament that it was a scandal that no one has ever succeeded in proving the existence of the external world by retorting that the true scandal was that we thought of the world as something whose existence had to be *proven*. Our being-in-the-world is ineluctable: as the Latin word *ineluctabilis*—from *in-* meaning 'not' and *eluctari* 'to struggle out of'—indicates, we can never hope to 'struggle out of' our situation. This is perhaps our problem: it is not our estrangement from the world that renders us anxious today, but the fact that we are so intimately bound up with it that we have lost a healthy sense of perspective. And contemporary philosophy never allows us to forget this fact.

It is as Wordsworth said, 'the world is too much with us.'¹³

It is Descartes that provides us with a clue as to what really bothers us in this awkward age. His Kierkegaardian leap is a response to an epistemological anxiety attack, which can best be described as the lack of *measure*. That is, the experience where the

¹³ W. Wordsworth, "The World is Too Much With Us," in *The Norton Anthology of English Poetry*, edited by Ferguson, Salter and Saltworthy (New York: W. W. Norton and Company), 735.

thinking subject is exposed to wave upon endless wave of information that threatens to become meaningless in the absence of some transcendental gold standard against which he can measure the *value* of what he has received. Although this problem resembles the problem of relativism, there is a subtle difference. Relativism is an epistemological problem. Derived from the old French *relatif*, through Latin *relativus*, the epistemological position of relativism states that there is no fixed or independent standard of meaning or value, and that it can only be established in relation to something else and will change according to circumstances or context. The mere existence of a plurality of interpretations is thus no problem, as long as one's capacity for judgment provides one with the means to make meaningful links and establish firm qualitative hierarchies with respect to the plethora of possibilities.

Measurelessness is the absence of those means. It occurs when the situation does not provide enough for the struggling subject to deal with the world. It is not that truth is relative; it is rather that the self becomes so overwhelmed by the mass of information and perspectival options that confront it, that it becomes impossible to draw any significant links between instances of information. As a result, there is no conceptual framework that can form the essential background for meaningful experience.

It could be argued that measurelessness is *the* problem of the late modern era: we suffer today not from too little truth, but from a surfeit of it. The world is too generous to bear comfortable living, an insight that Nietzsche already began to explore, notably in the third *Untimely Meditation*. It is, however, that famous passage from *The Gay Science*, so often cited as Nietzsche's ultimate description of nihilism that truly describes the problem of measurelessness:

In the Horizon of the Infinite—We have left the land and gone aboard ship! We have broken down the bridge behind us—nay more, the land behind us! Well little ship, look out! Besides thee is the ocean; it is true that it does not always roar, and sometimes it spreads out like silk and gold and a gentle reverie. But times will come when thou wilt feel that it is infinite, and that there is nothing more frightful than infinity. Oh the poor bird that felt itself free, and now strikes against the walls of the cage! Alas, if homesickness for the land should attack thee, as if there had been more *freedom* there—and there is no land any longer!¹⁴

This experience can almost be described as a perpetual prephenomenal experience, that is, the state that exists before an array of information is drawn together by the legislating mind in order to form a phenomenon. This disturbing experience can also be described in physical terms. Descartes certainly does so. The spectre of madness threatens wherever there is no fixed point or standard that allows one at least a preliminary grip upon the world. It is not an accident that Descartes describes this in terms of being overpowered by the sea: in his description there is just too much sea and too little man to allow for a meaningful encounter.

It was a very Greek fear. Although all cultures apply principles of differentiation, categorization, and ordering, the citizens of Hellas in particular appeared to have abhorred being presented with an unmanageable reality in particular. When they did not write tragedies about it, they classified it and broke it down into manageable bits. Without such differentiation, man would be lost in the chaos of shifting impressions. As S. K. Lange renders it, “man can adapt himself somehow to anything his imagination can cope with, but he cannot deal with Chaos. Because his characteristic function and highest asset is conception, his greatest fright is to

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, edited by Brian Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 119, section 124.

meet what he cannot construe—the uncanny, as it is popularly called.”¹⁵

It is a fear that has become far too apparent of late. Being lost in the sea of shifting impressions is precisely what threatens in our awkward age. The march into the twentieth century has proven to be one long funeral march: the death of God, the death of the author, and the various deaths of the subject. And it has now become a bit much: the gimmicks of poststructuralism have lost their novelty value, and we run the risk of becoming lost in a poststructuralist sea.

In contrast to the more extreme example of textual politics in the form of deconstruction, the staid, upright world of Hans-Georg Gadamer never gave the impression of a passing academic fad. His insights were far too sensible and far too practical for that. Like Isaiah Berlin’s pluralism, Gadamer’s hermeneutics were always too *respectable* to be dismissed, even by the most hard-lined logical positivist. All the same, Gadamer’s central insights are as radical as any of his French colleagues. He is simply more polite about it, and he appears to have a healthy Teutonic seriousness that serves as a useful antidote to the Gallic playfulness. His hermeneutics can be described as deconstruction turning the other cheek. Gadamer’s thought leaves room for, if not exactly an Archimedean point of departure, then at least an awareness that the endless play of interpretation needs to be curbed and steered towards justifiable limitation. (No one expects solid ground anymore.) Four of his major concepts bear testimony to this: his rehabilitation of prejudice (or *Vorurteil*), the celebrated hermeneutical circle, tradition, and perhaps most of all, the notion of horizon.

Ever since Heidegger elevated hermeneutics to a central philosophical concern, the *act* of understanding, whereby a neutral

¹⁵ Susanne K. Lange, *Philosophy in a New Key: Studies in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 76.

subject either constitutes an objective world (idealism) or discovers a mind-independent reality of objective facts (realism), has gradually become seen as an *event*. In this, the interpreter and text, or in traditional epistemological language, subject and object, mutually determine each other. Taking his cue from Heidegger, Gadamer too rejects the modernist view of the text as *object*. Putting it more modestly than Derrida's "*il n'ya pas hors de text*" (there is nothing outside the text), Gadamer holds that there is no interpretation degree zero. In different terms: there is no foundational, or uninterpreted source of meaning prior to interpretation.

Since no text exists in an uninterpreted state, meaning presents itself before technique has even begun to seek it out. Heidegger, of course, famously referred to this as the 'fore-structure' of understanding. The 'fore' in this context refers to that interpretative tendency, unique to *Dasein*, which comes *be-fore* every and any propositional statement, and is often obscured by such statement. Jean Grondin believes that Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity is in fact a hermeneutics of everything that is at work behind statements. "It is an interpretation of *Dasein*'s care structure, which expresses itself before and behind every judgement and which has its most elemental manifestation in understanding."¹⁶ This form of understanding abandons its purely epistemic character, still upheld by Dilthey and Droysen, who held understanding to be an autonomous process that grounded the historical sciences of man. Now, understanding precedes *intelligere*; it happens even before method becomes a question.

The rejection of method and objectivity does not, however, imply that understanding, or interpretation can ever be completely

¹⁶ Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 93.

subjective or subject to whim. As reluctant as Gadamer generally is to prescribe—he holds that all he really does is to describe what already happens¹⁷—he distinguishes between better and worse interpretations, and Larmore, commenting on Gadamer, seems to think that if objectivity as an ideal does not allow for realization, it should at least be *approximated* as a regulative ideal. He writes:

Although we must recognize that the ideal that at least epistemologically we can completely neutralize the force of tradition by subjecting all of our beliefs to critical examination will not be realized, we do not have reason to discard that ideal as one worth pursuing as far as possible.¹⁸

No reader is ever autonomous enough to impose meaning arbitrarily upon a text. An interpreter is inevitably situated within a shared tradition that inculcates the reader with interests and prejudices that, importantly for our purposes, direct and constrain the understanding of any text or event. When one understands something, it happens in a way that is shaped by a set of prior commitments to conceptual and linguistic frameworks that raise specific expectations about the object of understanding. By the “essential prejudgement-ladenness of all understanding”¹⁹ Gadamer refers less to a number of explicitly held beliefs, than to a set of *inexplicit*, largely practical assumptions and precommitments present under the surface of every event of understanding. It is impossible to escape this ‘prejudice-laden’ aspect of understanding. As David Weberman points out, even the best attempts at critical scrutinizing are always a piecemeal affair.²⁰ One can only analyze a certain belief in terms of another. Furthermore, our prejudgments

¹⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 512.

¹⁸ Charles Larmore, “Tradition, Objectivity and Hermeneutics,” in *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, edited by Bryce Wachterhauser (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1986), 151.

¹⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 270.

²⁰ D. Weberman, “A New Defense of Gadamer’s Hermeneutics,” in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LX, No. 1 (2000): 276-77.

are so deeply intertwined with our understanding that we are unable to find an Archimedean point of neutrality. This is why Gadamer holds that ‘the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being’.²¹

This may well have been the individual’s saving grace. Rather than see prejudice simply as something to overcome, however, as was the case during the Enlightenment—Gadamer famously referred to this attitude as the Enlightenment’s “prejudice against prejudice”²²—these inevitable *Vorurteile* are life-enhancing limits upon one’s range of vision, upon what one could possibly understand in a text or event. Prejudgments open up as well as constrain, and can be said to open up in the very act of constraining. Prejudgments are what prevent every interpretation from happening at once. What has hitherto been under-theorized is the way in which prejudicial constraints make understanding possible. Prejudgments cull and select, they draw the limits that make a world possible. Had the mind truly been the *tabula rasa* that Locke proposed, it would never have been able to make sense of the world it encounters; it would simply have presented itself in the form of massive information overload. Rather than being swamped with a plethora of possible interpretations all at once, the reader’s *Vorurteile* directs him to particular meanings, while others remain latent, sometimes for life. It is this feature of human existence that renders understanding of a timeless world possible for *Dasein* as *Sein-Zur-Tode*. Textual possibilities are endless; *Dasein* is not.

Prejudice can for our purposes be compared with a parliamentarian whip, that member of a legislative body with the duty of disciplining his party and ensuring that its members are

²¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 278.

²² *Ibid.*, 273.

present in their places at a particular time, such as when a vote or division may be expected. This modern word derives its meaning from the hunt: the huntsman with the duty to whip in the hounds is called the whipper-in. Prejudice serves a similar purpose. Upon encountering the text, prejudice tames and disciplines and limits the endless dispersal of possibilities to a manageable few, so that meaning can become possible. Prejudice keeps the reader roped to the land so that he does not get lost in the Cartesian sea. In other words, prejudice removes the sense of the *arbitrary*. Without this, no meaning would be possible, since not even preliminary standards would be available that would allow one to measure the value of newly received information. In the hermeneutical context, the operation of the hermeneutical circle can be described as the removal of the sense of the arbitrary, and the becoming-meaningful of the new in the existing framework. For this reason, the hermeneutic circle is never vicious—it refers to the intrinsically circular structure of a temporal existence where present concerns are necessarily shaped by past presuppositions. Such presuppositions are of course never formed by a solitary subject: who one is, is necessarily shaped by a communal tradition. Tradition (*Überlieferung*) refers to the transmission of knowledge, beliefs, opinions, doctrines, customs and practices from generation to generation, either by word of mouth or by letter, as Derrida has emphasized. The word ‘tradition’—coming from Latin *trans*, meaning “across” and *dare*, “to give”—informs us that all that we have as objects of study we owe to past authority.

Needless to say, as the ever-ready deconstructivist would point out, all criteria for evaluation are subject to revision. True, but in order to do that, one needs a place to stand, a standard, or frame of reference against which the revision can be done, if only for a preciously short time. Even scientific observation is only possible in

the context of particular theoretical presuppositions. This goes for something as basic as ordinary visual observation too; it is inevitably as theory-laden as any other act of interpretation. According to the most radical version of this view, no theory can ever be said to be tested, since the evidence will always presuppose the very theory it is supposed to test. The view is too extreme to abolish the possibility of experiment entirely, but the fact remains that no scientific sense would ever be made, had scientific knowledge merely been a question of accumulation.

A tradition is more than simply a blunt collection of texts from the past. Just as history is not simply an encyclopedic collection of the past, tradition already suggests some sort of culling: the selecting of what is considered better or superior over that which is less valuable, and may be allowed to be forgotten. As such, tradition is more than mere long-standing habit; it is what is considered valuable enough to keep. The existence of tradition is the first instance of hermeneutical *mercy*: it demarcates the field open to interpretation so that the latecomer in history does not have to study *all* that has been produced in *Geisteswissenschaftliches* history; he can limit himself only to what is considered worth the effort. Tradition is not simply rigidly authoritative as Habermas seems to think, but forms the background against which a new experience is experienced *as new*. This is the strangest aspect to the Gadamer/Derrida debate of 1981: the refusal of Derrida to acknowledge the similarity between his own work and that of Gadamer, when what the two thinkers share are so much more important than the technical points upon which they differ. It could be argued, for example, that *difference* operates not only between signifiers, but everywhere something new is introduced. Every new reading acquires its meaning initially by (at first, at least) *not* being part of the tradition.

There is a double paradox involved in the Enlightenment rejection of the notion of tradition. In the first instance, just as the Cretan universalist of our earlier example found himself ‘falling back’ into the habit of truth-telling, so sooner rather than later the Enlightenment rationalist found himself in the *tradition* of rejecting tradition. Hence the objectivist school of historiography that played such a prominent role in the nineteenth century. There is a second sense in which the rejection of tradition is self-defeating: it is only by engaging with tradition that tradition can be rejected. And every engagement with tradition adds to that tradition. It is thanks to the existence of a literary, scientific, and hermeneutical tradition that texts exist as possibilities for study.

The fear so often expressed about Gadamer’s conservatism, that he is far too comfortable with the notion of authority, can easily be allayed by looking at an oft neglected aspect of his well-known notion, the “fusion of horizons.” Most of his more radical readers seem to think that a ‘fusion’ with an alien horizon is always complete, an all-encompassing final structure that would leave nothing outside itself. Emmanuel Levinas refers to this as a “totality.”²³ However, Gadamer’s horizon is no totality. That would be to reiterate the historicist ideal of the *reconstruction* of the past independently of the interpreter’s context. Historicism (*Historismus*) actually makes access to the past impossible. Like a latter-day alchemist that labors day and night to burn away any hint of impurity from the precious ore, so the latter-day historicist seeks to isolate a certain core truth about the past and cleanse it of all prejudice, perspective or anachronism. In this way, it no longer allows the reader to open him- or herself to be in dialogue with the past. Gadamer writes:

²³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, translated by Alphonse Lingis (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 27.

Understanding the word of tradition always requires that the reconstructed question merges with the question that tradition is for us. If the 'historical' question emerges by itself, it means that the question no longer arises as question. It results from the cessation of understanding—a detour into which we get stuck. . . . Only in an inauthentic sense can we talk about questions one does not pose oneself—e.g. questions that are outdated or empty. We understand how certain questions came to be asked in particular historical circumstances.²⁴

As we have seen, our inevitable presuppositions or prejudices form a horizon, which can be described as a range of vision that describes everything visible from a particular vantage point. A horizon is an open limit, which changes as soon as the vantage point of perception is shifted. All human experience happens within such open limits, and where concerns overlap, horizons fuse. This is when we catch what is thrown by an eternal partner, and the world makes sense. Against the notion of a self-contained work and original meaning, Gadamer proceeded from an analysis of the aesthetic experience to a reevaluation of the type of understanding involved in the human sciences and ultimately in every form of human experience expressed by language.

According to Gadamer, meaning is the space or opening in which whatever calls for understanding makes its appearance as the matter of thinking. And this matter (*Sache*) appears in the form of a question. "In the comic confusion between question and answer that Plato describes, there is the profound recognition of the priority of the question in all knowledge and discourse that really reveals something of an object."²⁵ After Gadamer, understanding becomes the event in which one encounters the other in its otherness, not as an object from a different place and another time, but as that which resists the grasp of knowledge and requires one to loosen one's hold

²⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 385.

²⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1980), 153.

or to open one's fist.²⁶ The other is that which refuses to be objectified. It is possible to read the other ethically, as a person (as with Buber and Levinas), or contemplatively, as the subject matter of an inquiry (like Derrida with the question of language), or politically, as in judging his performance as an actor (Arendt), or even therapeutically when one tries to reconstruct a dream (Lacan and Freud). In all these cases the refusal of the other to be contained in the prepared conceptual apparatus is always there. At the same time familiarization is attempted, "self-estrangement takes place."²⁷

Understanding is more than mere repetition, let alone duplication of past intentions: Gadamer is at pains to emphasize that understanding is mediation. Even the most determined attempt to grasp the past in itself is always the mediation of past meaning into the contemporary context. As such, something is always *left behind*. Even the most well-intentioned interpreter with the most accessible text can never capture its essence in its entirety. As much as text and interpreter can converge, they are never fully identical: perfect linguistic competence is but a utopian ideal. Understanding is an experience, and experience is always experience of limits and refusal. Nothing displays the futility of the utopian dream of complete linguistic competence better than the attempt to communicate experience. Experiencing or "undergoing" an event differs from being in possession of something. Experience is therefore always also the experience of measure: you can ultimately only catch what you have thrown yourself, or understand that which your pre-judgments have determined. Humans can only understand so much, say so much. Horizons may fuse, but with every fusion,

²⁶ It is no accident that the name of the literary figure that wanted to hold all the knowledge of the world in his hand, translates as *Faust* ('fist').

²⁷ Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic*, 266.

there is always a re-fusal, a remainder beyond the said, something beyond the grasp of even the most well-intentioned interpreter.

The world unfolds itself in a measured way, and humans experience the world measure for measure.