GADAMER’S ONTOLOGY

AN EXAMINATION OF THE ONTOLOGICAL POSITION
ON WHICH HANS-GEORG GADAMER’S VIEWS RELY,
AND OF ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE VIEWS OF
HEIDEGGER, PLATO AND HEGEL

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INTRODUCTION

Hans-Georg Gadamer's writings about philosophical hermeneutics have been very influential in many different fields of academic inquiry. His impact has been particularly large in theology\(^1\), aesthetics\(^2\), literary criticism\(^3\) and sociology\(^4\) and but he has also had a significant impact in political philosophy\(^5\), jurisprudence\(^6\), the philosophy of science\(^7\), ancient philosophy\(^8\) and the history of thought\(^9\). In all these areas, his anti-foundationalist stance, with its emphasis on the contingent interpretations of historically placed individuals and on the necessity of their application of what they understand to their concrete lived situation, has not only been controversial, but has found many supporters. This thesis is devoted to examining the ontological thoughts on which his hermeneutics is grounded.

Habermas and Hirsch

One of the reasons why I consider this investigation necessary is that Gadamer has become best known for his engagements in two debates that are peripheral to his own thinking, while I shall argue that if his position is defensible then it has a great deal to contribute to the discussion of many of the most central issues in modern thought. I therefore intend to look at the ontological issues that are basic to Gadamer’s thought, and not to deal in any depth with either his debate with Habermas concerning

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\(^2\) See for example CROWThER (1983), MACKENZIE (1986) and McCORMICK (1990).
\(^9\) See for example IBBETT (1987).
the possibility of social critique\(^1\), or his debate with Betti and Hirsch concerning textual interpretation\(^2\). For those who are familiar with one or both of these debates, it should be easy to see where my discussions are relevant to the questions at issue. In brief, I think that Habermas missed the element of critique in Gadamer’s notion of the appropriation of tradition (although I shall point to some genuine problems that remain in connection with this), and that Hirsch overlooked both Gadamer’s distinction between the mere assimilation to prejudices and genuine understanding, and his notion of the ideality of texts (although again, as we shall see, there are other more genuine problems here).

**Other Literature on Gadamer**

To say that Gadamer is mostly familiar through these debates is not, however, to deny that there is an extensive literature on other aspects of his thought. In particular, his ideas are very often used in explicating the positions of a remarkably wide range of other thinkers\(^3\), especially Heidegger’s. Nonetheless, examinations of

\(^1\) I shall also refrain from laboriously listing the primary literature of this debate: Habermas’ original criticism is to be found in HABERMAS (1968). The reader may, however, find it useful if I cite the location of some of the most effective discussions: KISIEL (1970), RICOEUR (1973 and 1981a), BLEICHER (1980), HOW (1980 and 1985), BERNSTEIN (1983b), GIURLANDA (1986), HEKMAN (1986), BEINER (1989), MARGOLIS (1990b), NICHOLSON (1991), SCHEIBLER (1991), and SOFFER (1992).

\(^2\) See BETTI (1962), of which a full translation is provided in BLEICHER (1980), and HIRSCH (1965). For further discussion of these criticisms, see SEEBOHM (1972), ARTHUR (1977), GARRETT (1978), HOY (1978), LLEWELYN (1985, pp. 99-114), AMBROSIO (1986b), WACHTERHAUSER (1986) and L. SCHMIDT (1987, Chs. 3, 4 & 5). For a good summary of these critiques of Gadamer that seem to approach his thought from both sides, and for a careful exposition of how he can retain a position which is neither uncritically conservative nor vacuously relativist, see WARNKE (1987).

\(^3\) Points of contact have been found between Gadamer’s thought and the aesthetics of Baumgarten (DAVEY 1989), Collingwood (HOGAN 1987, FELL 1991), and Danto (NUYEN 1989), and the theology of Jacob Boehme (PASLICK 1985), Rudolf Bultmann (OMMEN 1984), Austin Farrer (BIGGER 1992), Hans Küng (O’COLLINS 1977), Bernard Lonergan (LAWRENCE 1972 and 1980), and John Henry Newman (P. SCHMIDT 1992). He has also been compared to many other figures in the tradition including both familiar thinkers such as Kant (NUYEN 1993), Nietzsche (MITSCHERLING 1989a, DAVEY 1990), Husserl and Kripke (NUYEN 1990), Louis Althusser (HEKMAN 1983), Winch and Von Wright (HOWARD 1982) and Roland Barthes (RISSER 1991), and more exotic characters such as Chu Hsi (BERTHRONG 1990), Josiah Royce (CORRINGTON 1984), James D. Collins (MARSH 1982), Pavel Florenskij (CHERNYAK 1988), Mikhail Bakhtin (SULLIVAN 1989, pp. 182-188) and Erik Erikson (WALLULIS 1990).
his position on its own merits are still comparatively rare, and it is to this relatively sparse literature that I hope to contribute.

I shall begin this introduction with a very brief overview of the mechanism of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, in order to introduce some key terms, and to offer some explanation as to why his work has found such a diverse field of influence. I shall then explain why an examination of his ontology is required, and summarise the structure of the thesis.

**1 : Gadamer’s Hermeneutics – an Overview**

Gadamer, as we shall see, privileges language itself, as the relation between language users and the things they talk about, over the two terms it relates – us and the world. Language, he says, is *play*. We shall see exactly what he means by this in Chapters 1 and 4. For now, all we need to know is that it is the play of language that gives rise to our understanding of the world. This understanding has the same structure as our understanding of texts. The nature of understanding relevant to the interpretation of texts (hermeneutics) is thus central to Gadamer’s ontology.

**The ‘Fusion of Horizons’**

Gadamer argues that when we try to understand a text, we always start by guessing what it is likely to be saying on the basis of various pre-judgements about it; these pre-judgements, or *prejudices* (the word has no immediate negative connotations for Gadamer), arise from our cultural and traditional upbringing, and our habitual classification of the text in question. On the basis of these prejudices, we are able to attach meanings to parts of the text. We then have two possibilities: if we dislike what we take the text to be saying, we may simply write it off as wrong, choose to ignore it, and stick with our initial set of prejudices; in this case we may well attribute to its author a point of view that is clearly wrong (if not absurd). The
other possibility is the one in which Gadamer is really interested. Here we acknowledge that the text is written from a different standpoint – it has its own horizon (set of historically determined prejudices) just as we have ours. Hence we put our own prejudices at risk, and project a horizon for the text. This projected horizon will develop as we try to understand the individual parts of the text in terms of our developing picture of the meaning of the whole. We will find in developing this horizon for the text that the prejudices from which we come to take it to be written clash with our own. At this point we do not write off the text’s viewpoint as wrong, but rather try to find a common language – a way in which we can take the text to be saying something that we can consider to be right. In order to do this, it may well be necessary to revise some prejudices of our own. This process of bringing prejudices into open conflict in order to find a common ground is called a fusion of horizons.

**Application**

In order for this to work, Gadamer needs to explain that understanding itself has a threefold structure. In order to understand, we must not only be able to understand the words (construe the grammar of the sentences, etc.), we must also interpret them (take them to have some kind of overall meaning) and then apply them to our own situation. This means that we have to hear what the text says as said to us personally, and be prepared to revise our own viewpoint in the light of what the text tells us. In this activity of understanding lies the possibility of an experience of truth. Gadamer uses the word ‘truth’ in an unfamiliar sense, as we shall see. For now, suffice it to say that truth is something that occurs when somebody is brought to revise their prejudices in a fusion of horizons.
Truth, Language and Tradition

This event of truth (which also occurs paradigmatically in the experiencing of an artwork in its genuine cultural context) is stronger when the prejudices to be revised are more deeply rooted. For this reason, Gadamer favours encounters with texts written from very different horizons. In particular, he claims that historical distance from the text increases the likelihood of a fusion of horizons being productive. In this way he justifies his enthusiasm for hermeneutic readings of Plato and Aristotle. These examinations have a further relevance, however. Since our horizons are themselves determined by our being situated within a culture which has developed historically, the best way to assess the worth of our prejudices is to trace the history of their development. This line of thought leads Gadamer to trace the history of language and understanding from the classics through medieval theology to the Enlightenment.

2: This Thesis and its Aims

Gadamer’s thought presents us with a picture of our involvement in the world which, if it is accurate, has great significance in every area of human inquiry, since he claims that the ‘hermeneutic problem’ is truly universal\(^1\). He also draws illustrations and examples from an enormously diverse range of fields and concerns, within all of which his ideas have, as I have said, been enthusiastically discussed. But, as a few commentators have pointed out\(^2\), all his ideas ultimately arise from his ontological commitments, which in turn have a great deal to do with Heidegger’s highly controversial philosophy. My aim is to examine the ontology that lies behind the various comments about art, literature, law and science that have been so influential,

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\(^1\) PETERS (1974) is one commentator who insists that Gadamer’s claims need to be taken into account in conducting any kind of philosophical inquiry.

\(^2\) Those who have argued for the necessity of an examination such as that undertaken in this thesis include PASLICK (1985, p. 418), AMBROSIO (1986b), PAGE (1991) and CARPENTER (1994).
and in doing so not only to reveal exactly how much of Heidegger’s thought is still at work in Gadamer’s, but also to present an organised reconstruction of Gadamer’s own position in order to show where its strengths and weaknesses lie.

**Understanding Gadamer’s Position**

It may appear that I am not over-critical in my approach to Gadamer’s texts, but I feel that there are good reasons for this. It is important to take up Gadamer’s writings on their own terms, and not to impose onto them a framework of questioning into which they do not fit and then to criticise them for producing implausible answers. If we are to understand Gadamer’s account of understanding, we must see if we can successfully apply his ideas to our understanding of his texts: it is his contention that we cannot adequately understand anything unless we let it have a claim over us by assuming it to have a very good point that is basically right. As Bernasconi (1986) explains it:

“Whereas for some a reading of a text is not to be counted as philosophical unless it issues in specific criticisms directed against identifiable arguments, for Gadamer there has simply been no encounter with the text unless we find ourselves claimed by what is said there.” (p.6)

But, as I hope to show, that does not preclude the possibility of critique, and I aim to effect a fusion of horizons with Gadamer that will both be helpful to readers of this thesis and be not uncritical of Gadamer’s position.

**The conclusions**

This thesis, then, offers only tentative conclusions, since it seems to me that one of Gadamer’s most important and valuable insights is that the openness required in the ongoing process of learning and revising our beliefs has an intrinsic value which is lost in all attempts to defend a position against all opposition. However, I can briefly summarise the leading insight of this thesis thus: in his ‘overcoming of subjectivity’, Gadamer seems to want to retain the notion of a subject, and, while this is entirely consistent within his complex and subtle system of explanations, there
remains a nagging doubt that the whole structure rests on a notion of identity in which Gadamer is trying to have it both ways at once. Precisely what I mean by this will have to become clear as the thesis unfolds, but I should say now that it remains unclear to me whether or not there are any binding reasons why Gadamer’s move should not be a permissible one.

**The Structure of the Thesis**

The thesis as a whole will also demonstrate how Gadamer’s works are linked together, and how dependent his own position is on his appropriations of other thinkers’ ideas. The structure of the thesis is partly designed to demonstrate this very point. In Section One I try to examine Gadamer’s position entirely on its own merits; from this we discover not only that there are many points that then have no foundation or defence in his writings, but also that the position at which he arrives entails the necessity of a return to the eminent texts of the tradition in order to be able to practice philosophy at all. That is why the second section of the thesis traces his appropriation of tradition in order to explicate the actual foundations of Gadamer’s thought and to fulfil this hermeneutic requirement.

**Section One**

I shall start out with an overview of Gadamer’s writings, explaining how his ontological and metaphysical views are scattered through his various texts on hermeneutics and other subjects (Chapter One). This will lead to the worry that Gadamer is trying to unite a finitist and a transcendental perspective. In Chapter Two I shall look at the way his thought is founded in his view of human finitude, and in Chapter Three I shall examine how a broader viewpoint is introduced and assess his overcoming of the subject/object distinction. By Chapter Four I shall have built up a clear enough picture of his ontological position in general to embark on a close
analysis of his notion of language and the mechanism of its ontologically generative effect.

Section Two

Having laid out my understanding of Gadamer’s ontology in Section One, I shall move on to considering its relationship to other positions in the history of philosophy: Gadamer is very conscious of his historical position, as his theory demands that he should be. In Chapter Five I shall examine the extent to which the justification for his ontological position is left to be done by his references to Heidegger, and take a look at the extent to which Heidegger’s arguments can support him. It will emerge that Gadamer’s Heideggerianism is tempered by absolutist instincts that are entirely alien to Heidegger. These arise, it will appear, from Gadamer’s insistence on the productive possibilities of dialectic: the next chapter is therefore devoted to tracing Gadamer’s appropriation of themes from Plato and Hegel.

My readings of writers other than Gadamer

I should note here that there is no space in this thesis to develop defensible readings of Heidegger, Plato and Hegel. It has been necessary, however, to lay out provisional readings of their positions for the purposes of comparison. I have attempted, therefore, to present plausible interpretations that themselves have a Gadamerian flavour to them, but still return to the original texts and avoid those points of Gadamer’s readings that are especially controversial. In this way I hope to show what Gadamer himself gets from his readings of these texts, and how he develops that inheritance. The readings that I present here must, however, remain undefended for the most part, both for reasons of space, and so as to be able to present these thinkers as Gadamer encounters them.
The final chapter

In the final chapter I shall review Gadamer’s position, and examine the arguments that can be given in its support. I shall attempt to extricate distinct lines of reasoning from his overall picture, but it will turn out that the whole is too intricately entwined with a complex network of reliance on allusion for this to be very productive. I shall conclude by summing up Gadamer’s original contribution to ontological thinking, and summarising the strengths and weaknesses of his account.
SECTION ONE

CHAPTER ONE

A SCATTERED ONTOLOGY

Gadamer’s Texts

i: “Truth and Method”

Gadamer has never written a single systematic work setting out his views about ontology. The nearest thing we have to such a work is the third division of *Wahrheit und Methode* (*Truth and Method*), in which he explains how his concept of hermeneutics has universal significance, and provides a conception of language which can be seen as taking a central ontological role. This section is, of course, heavily reliant on the two sections which precede it, in which Gadamer rehearses the nature of truth in art and the human sciences, and reviews the history of hermeneutics with a view to establishing a pre-eminent importance for human activities other than the investigation of natural science.

ii: Other Ontological Works

In addition to the ontological doctrines scattered throughout *Wahrheit und Methode*, there are further observations on the theme to be found in most of Gadamer’s other writings. Several essays which he wrote during the fifties and sixties which were collected in his *Kleine Schriften* give us important further insights into his views. In particular, the essays “Was ist Wahrheit?” (What is Truth?, 1994b), “Mensch und Sprache” (Man and Language, in 3) and “Die Natur der Sache und die Sprache der Dinge” (The Nature of the Matter and the Language of the Things, also in 3) have ontological themes; the collection of his more recent work entitled *Lob der Theorie* (Praise of Theory, 15) also contains some relevant pieces. But perhaps some of his most important work on ontology – at least some of the only work he has done
directly on that topic – is to be found in his book about Hegel (*Hegels Dialektik*, 2), which in turn often relies on his copious writings about Plato. I shall be arguing that it is in the Platonic studies that the real key to Gadamer’s thought (the doctrine of the one and the many and the notion of ideality) is to be found.

iii : Other Works

If these are the works in which we should start looking in order to settle the question of Gadamer’s ontological thought, however, they are certainly not the whole story. The analysis of play on which Gadamer bases his comments about aesthetics is, as we shall see, of crucial importance. And in addition to his substantial body of work on aesthetics there are ontological comments scattered throughout his writings about the ancient Greeks, about politics, science and society, the history of philosophy, and the poetry of Rilke, Celan, Hölderlin, Goethe and George.

**Ontology**

In examining all of these texts in the hope of establishing a coherent overall picture of Gadamer’s ontology, we must start with a clear conception of what it is that he means by ‘ontology’. In particular, we must beware of the Quinean notion of ontology with which we are probably familiar. In asking what Gadamer’s ontological commitments are, I am not asking over what domain his bound variables range. Nor am I explicating the domains of being that Gadamer wants to differentiate from one another. When Gadamer talks of ‘ontology’, he is referring to a whole field of inquiry about what it *means* to be. In particular, as we shall see, his notion of ontology is heavily indebted to Heidegger’s notion of ‘fundamental ontology’; although we must not start by assuming that his notion of ontology is simply the same as Heidegger’s was at any stage.

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1 As explained in QUINE (1953), pp. 12-19.
1: THE LAYOUT AND PROJECT OF WAHRHEIT UND METHODE

The first place to look for Gadamer’s comments on the ontological significance of language – the very heart, as we shall see, of his ontological picture – is in Wahrheit und Methode. Even there, however, we find anything but a systematic exposition¹. Before we can go straight to his comments on this topic itself (in Part Three, section 3 – right at the end of the book), we must carry out a brief overview of Gadamer’s aim in the book as a whole, and a summary of his uses of the notion of ontology.

A: The Foreword and Introduction

In the introduction to the book, we are told that Gadamer aims to correct false thinking about the nature of science, and to establish the universal significance of hermeneutics in such a way as to distinguish a kind of truth paradigmatically found in the ‘human sciences’ (Geisteswissenschaften), and to demonstrate that it has this kind of importance:

It’s not just that historical tradition and the natural order of life form the unity of the world in which we live as men – a truly hermeneutic universe is formed by the way in which we experience one another, historical traditions, and the natural given facts of our existence and our world; we are not confined in this hermeneutic universe as if behind insurmountable barriers, but we are opened to it. (WM p. XXX, 1 p. xiv)

On this basis, he recommends a critical re-examination of the tradition which has moulded our thoughts and concepts. Already at this stage, we see that the nature of the universe to which we are opened by hermeneutics is somehow to be understood in terms of the way we experience things. And yet subjective experience is not allowed to be an ontological foundation: that Gadamer also simultaneously conceives of a

more external ‘foundation’ is made clear in his foreword to the second edition, where he writes:

What stands in question is not what we do, not what we ought to do, but what happens to us beyond our wanting and doing. (WM p. XVI, 1 p. xvi)

His project is a *philosophical* and *ontological* hermeneutics, then, in that it asks ‘How is understanding possible?’, rather than just asking ‘How should we go about trying to understand things?’, as some previous practitioners of ‘hermeneutics’ had done.

It seems, then, that the distinction that marks out what is ontological is not one between what has objective existence in itself regardless of our presence on the one hand, and what we merely make up on the other. On the contrary, as we shall see, what we make up can (according to Gadamer) itself enhance the *being* of what we understand. What has being is not really to be understood in contrast with what does not exist at all: it is rather that the kind of being things have depends on the way in which we encounter them. If anything is to be said not to have being at all within Gadamer’s understanding of ontology, it is whatever we never encounter in any way – specifically, it is what is never brought into language. Thus already we see that the strange interplay between an individual’s subjective viewpoint and a communal world that includes a culture and tradition to which each individual will be said to ‘belong’ is somehow to be resolved by reference to language.

**B : Part One**

i : ‘The Transcending of the Aesthetic Dimension’

Given, then, that Gadamer’s aim is to examine the hermeneutic nature of truth in the human sciences, and to align it with an ontology of our common linguistic experience, it comes as a surprise that the first third of his book deals with the experience of art. The reason for this is actually quite simple – Gadamer sees the experience of art as a central (if not *the* central) form of our experience of the world.
But he does not tell us this immediately. Instead, he analyses various key concepts from the humanist tradition which will help him in explaining how he comes to this conclusion. He argues that although there was something right in the humanist conceptions of *Bildung* (culture, cultivation, education), *sensus communis* (common sense, sense of community), judgement and taste, they provided the background of subjectification of experience of society and culture that lay behind Kant’s philosophy.

**ii : Art, Truth and Experience**

Next, he argues that the effect of Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft* was to create a notion of ‘art’ that separated artworks from their natural context of significance. He calls this process *aesthetic differentiation*, and argues that what is natural for art is to be a locus of truth. This claim is discussed with reference to Greek mythology, and to the way in which it was taken as natural that poetry was the primary way in which people oriented themselves within a world. Gadamer’s aim here is to show how truth is grounded in a particular kind of experience. In order to see what this can mean, we need to distinguish the kind of ‘truth’ of which he is talking: he is not referring to the correctness of propositions or their correspondence with facts. He says remarkably

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1. WEINSHEIMER (1985 and 1991a) sees *Bildung* as foundational in Gadamer’s project, a reading perhaps influenced by RORTY’s conclusion (1980 pp. 357-372) that hermeneutics cannot leave us with any philosophical task other then continuing a conversation in the hope of achieving ‘edification’ (Rorty’s translation of *Bildung*). Weinsheimer’s claim relates to Gadamer’s discussion of self-alienation and becoming at-home in the mediation of particular and universal, and so his reading of *Bildung* moves some way from Rorty’s and comes closer to the true basis of Gadamer’s account. WARNKE (1987) also accords a central role to *Bildung*, and also carefully differentiates it from Rorty’s ‘edification’, identifying it instead with what I have called ‘openness’: for Gadamer’s clearest discussion of how he regards the issue see his essay “‘Der Mensch und seine Hand im heutigen Zivilisationsprozeß” in LT (I shall consider it briefly in Chapter Seven). For a discussion of how Gadamer’s view is to be distinguished from Rorty’s, see MITSCHERLING (1987 and 1989b).

2. Some light is thrown on the disconnected nature of this section by Jean GRONDIN’s consideration (1990b) of an earlier manuscript draft, which shows that Gadamer’s original concern here was not so much with art at all as with examining a contention of Helmholtz concerning the emphatic methods of the humanities in general: this, of course, remained a guiding theme of the completed work.
little about this kind of truth anywhere in his writings\(^1\). He is talking instead of the kind of truth which we encounter when we experience something as true, by virtue of its changing our opinions or our way of looking at the world in general. The kind of experience he is talking about is similarly not just a casual experience or a living through of a sequence of events (*Erlebnis*), which he likens to merely standing in front of an artwork removed from its context of significance. It is rather the sort of experience that one can *undergo*, and by which one is changed (*Erfahrung*). Hence, he argues, it is always experience of being confronted by one’s limitations, which gives one the opportunity of overcoming those limitations. This allows him to assert that since this kind of experience has the necessary negative element of confronting one’s limitations it is always ‘experience of human finitude’ (*WM* p.339, 1 p. 320).

Gadamer sets up this distinction with regard to art, showing how our received idea of ‘experiencing’ (*erleben*) a work of art, by merely standing in front of it, is related to a much deeper experience:

> The aesthetic experience (*Erlebnis*) is not just one kind of experience alongside others, but represents the essential nature of experience (*Erlebnis*) in general. ... It seems that aesthetic experience becomes almost the very definition of the work of art; but that means that an artwork has the power to pluck whoever is experiencing it (*den Erlebenden*) forcibly out of the context of his life, and yet to refer him back at the same time to the whole of his existence. ... An aesthetic experience (*Erlebnis*) always contains the experiential encounter (*Erfahrung*) of an infinite whole. Its significance is infinite, precisely because it does not go along with other experiences (*mit anderen*) into the unity of an open progression of accumulated experience (*Erfahrungsfortgang*), but rather represents the whole directly. (*WM* p. 66, 1 p. 63)

This experience of being removed briefly from the context of one's everyday life by some experience that one undergoes (such as that of an artwork) which simultaneously brings the whole of one’s life to appear in a new light, is what Gadamer means by the ‘event of truth’.

\(^1\) BERNSTEIN (1982) provides an interesting discussion (pp. 835-8) of the elusive nature of Gadamer’s account of truth. I have attempted to reconstruct his positive doctrine on the matter in the next chapter: further discussion can be found in all the essays in WACHTERHAUSER (ed 1994).
iii : Play, Ontology and World

From here Gadamer moves with little explanation to examine the concept of play (Spiel), and at once he entitles it as the ‘clue to ontological explanation’. This is the first mention of ontology in the book, yet this title is the only mention of ontology in the section that it heads. The analysis of play is deep, difficult, and compelling – I shall return to the details of it shortly – and its ultimate purpose seems to be to introduce two key structures in Gadamer’s later ontological analysis. The first is the idea of an aimless to-and-fro motion guiding the activities of people who submit to it, and being transformed into a structure through its being understood as a meaningful whole. The second is the idea of a medium of transmitted significance cancelling itself out in the transmission of its content. Gadamer then draws what he calls aesthetic and hermeneutical ‘consequences’ from this analysis, and it is here that the notion of ontology really comes into play. He starts by considering images (Bilden), and here we at last find one of the rare passages that helps us to orient ourselves within the overall drift of his argument:

>'Ontology, on its first appearance in the text of *Wahrheit und Methode*, is linked with a viewpoint which covers both art and history. This provides us with the explanation for why the first two sections of the book concern art and history respectively, and the third concerns ontology. The thesis towards which he is driving is that the kind of knowledge or truth that occurs in the experience of art and also in the appropriation of historical tradition is responsible for orienting us within the world of significance that we inhabit. Gadamer always uses the word ‘*Welt*’ to refer to this world of significance, and never to refer to the physical planet, or to the physical universe.'
iv : The ‘Increase in Being’

He now establishes an ontological significance for art, by arguing that it brings this world of significance more explicitly into being for us by representing it in a certain way:

The world that appears in the play of representation does not stand like a copy alongside the real world, but is this world itself in the intensified truth of its being. (WM p. 130, 1 p. 121)

He spells this idea out in more detail, and the overall picture of his position may well be made clearer by a more extensive quotation:

Conversely, the fact that the image has a reality of its own means that the original comes to be represented in the representation. In that representation, it itself presents itself. That does not have to mean that it is directly dependent on this representation in order to appear. It can also present itself as what it is in other ways. But if it presents itself in this way, this is no longer just a fortuitous process, but belongs to its own being. Every such representation is a process of being, and also goes to make up the order of being of what is represented. Through the representation it experiences, as it were, an increase in being. (WM p. 133, 1 p. 124)

The idea is that art can, through this particular kind of experience that it enables us to have, bring the world into being for us in a variety of different ways. Just as an encounter with an artwork can change a person’s perception of the world, so the world can be characterised in art in a variety of ways, and gain significance accordingly. It seems at this stage that ‘being’ is to be equated with significance for us.

C : Part Two

In the second part of the book, this is now applied to the human sciences and to the appropriation of history, by means of an examination of the history of hermeneutics. The justification for this is that the appropriation of history always involves interpretation of texts and of events, and that the human sciences are those areas of inquiry that aim to give significance to human behaviour (and hence, we might assume, alter its mode of being) by interpreting it in various ways. The first section of this part is a chronological rehearsal of the changes in the concept of hermeneutics from the Protestant Reformation, through Schleiermacher and Dilthey to
Heidegger; it has methodological significance, but is only important to Gadamer’s ontology by virtue of its ultimate appropriation of Heidegger’s use of the notion of hermeneutics.

**The Fusion of Horizons**

Gadamer then builds his analysis of hermeneutics on this Heideggerian foundation, introducing the notions of prejudice and horizon. He argues that because human experience is essentially finite it relies on the ‘prejudices’ (habits of understanding) that it has acquired through its contact with historical tradition, and that since this is inescapable, it is worthwhile for us to rehabilitate the notion of the *authority* of tradition against the rationalism introduced in the Enlightenment. This is not to say that we must just accept blindly whatever the tradition tells us, but that we should be aware of the effects of history and tradition on our own beliefs, and on our sub-cognitive conceptual assumptions. The attempt to use our own reason without any recourse to tradition can only leave us with the prejudices we happen to have acquired from that tradition. Only by questioning the tradition itself, in particular by consulting texts written a long time ago (which are more likely to be based on a very different set of prejudices), can we bring our own prejudices into question, and so revise them. We can only do this if we are truly open to the claim of the texts we encounter to tell us something – we must not just understand, but interpret the message in such a way that it is applied to our own situation. Again, this does not just mean submitting and accepting anything the text says. But when we are truly open in the appropriate way, it becomes possible for our prejudices to be confirmed and/or disconfirmed in a ‘fusion’ of our own horizon of prejudices with that of the text. When this happens we undergo an experience (*Erfahrung*) of truth. Hence truth – the finite truth which it is possible for us actually to attain in this kind of experience, rather than the ideal of
absolute truth – occurs in the questioning of tradition, and is therefore based in the
dialectical relationship of question and answer. These concepts will be explained in
more detail in the rest of Section One.

D: Part Three

i: The Structure of the Whole Book Revealed

Hence we see that truth, like being, is to be taken as meaningful only within
our finite perspective: yet, as we shall see, it is nonetheless supposed to be binding
and objective (sachlich). But these two analyses – one of the ontological function of
the play of art and its transformation into a structure in giving heightened being to
what it represents, the other of the dependence of truth on an experience gained from
questioning tradition – are as yet not obviously related. The third part of Wahrheit und
Methode uses an analysis of language – in particular, of the development of the
concept of language itself – to show how the two earlier analyses in fact go together
to give us a coherent picture of our position in the world. That this is the structure of
the argument in the book is, however, nowhere made explicit in the book itself, and
this may be the cause of many misunderstandings of Gadamer’s ideas. Where the
overall picture is not clear, it is easier to quote passages out of context.

ii: Language and World

After tracing the emergence of the concept of language as such, and showing
how our thinking about language has affected its unreflective use, Gadamer moves on
to his ontological thesis. In his discussion of experience, he argued that experience is
always experience of human finitude; now he argues that language, being finite,
expresses that finitude, but allows us to make infinite use of it, and that language is
therefore the medium of our experience of the world. He thus arrives at this position:

Language is not just part of the equipment that is given to someone who is in the world, but the
very fact that people have a world at all is founded on it and presented in it. For man, the world
is there as world, as it is there (has existence, Dasein) for no other living thing within the world. But this existence of the world is linguistically constituted. ... [L]anguage, for its part, maintains no independent existence over against the world that comes to language within it. Not only is the world ‘world’ only insofar as it comes to language – language only has its authentic existence in the world’s presenting itself within it. Thus the original humanity of language means at the same time the original linguisticality of human being-in-the-world. (WM p. 419, 1 p. 401)

The actual mechanism of this ontological view of language (which displays the structure that Gadamer elsewhere refers to as ‘ideality’) will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four. For now, my purpose is to show the structure of Gadamer’s magnum opus. The book is ontological in intent, showing the importance of accumulated corrective experience in art, history, and life in general to arise from the crucial founding role played by language and by the linguistic historical tradition to which each of us belongs.

iii : Ontology

This summary displays clearly for us for the first time what Gadamer means by ‘ontology’. He is not interested in disputes about whether or not ‘there are’ universals, numbers, fictional characters, properties and relations, causes, probabilities, minds, photons or anything else. His ideas about ontology could give us an interesting general approach for tackling these sorts of questions, but that is not Gadamer’s concern. He is concerned with ontology because he is concerned with our finitude and with the apparent infinity of the world. Ontology is about being, and being is about the relations between us and the world: Gadamer’s claim is that those relations are entirely linguistic in nature.

Gadamer does not just confuse metaphysics or ontology with epistemology here; he rather considers these to be indistinguishable. ‘Epistemology’ (or ‘Erkenntnistheorie’) is the study of how an individual, isolated subject can have knowledge about a world beyond the confines of its consciousness. Gadamer disputes the possibility of there being such an isolated subject; as we shall see in Chapter
Three, he considers the very possibility of this kind of subjectivity (a word he tries to avoid, although, as we shall see, he has a clear notion of an individual person) to depend on the previous presence of society, culture and language\(^1\). As a result of this, he cannot talk of ontology in the sense of ‘what there is’ in abstraction from our social and cultural presence and input. Instead, he talks of what there is as what has come into language\(^2\); in doing this, he investigates the nature of the link between us and the world that he maintains is a prerequisite for the presence of both us as selves and the world as world.

**2 : GADAMER’S OTHER WRITINGS**

Gadamer’s other writings centre around three major topics, and the hermeneutical principles and ontological foundations established in *Wahrheit und Methode* appear afresh in the new light cast by each of them. Firstly there are exegetical texts (‘hermeneutical studies’), principally concerning the works of Plato, Aristotle, Hegel and Heidegger\(^3\). Then there are essays on aesthetics and on the social and ontological significance of art; in this category I also include the works of (hermeneutical) literary criticism on the poetry of Rilke, Celan, Hölderlin, Goethe and

\(^1\) Hence epistemology itself is not rendered impossible, or even unimportant, but just dependent on prior hermeneutical insights. As RICOEUR (1981b) has it, ‘“Philosophical hermeneutics is not an anti-epistemology, but a reflection on the non-epistemological conditions of epistemology.”’ (pp. 188-9) ROCKMORE (1990a) takes issue with Gadamer’s talk of ‘overcoming epistemology’ on these grounds, but Gadamer uses Heidegger’s phrase only to indicate that he no longer takes the image of an isolated subject trying to access a predetermined world as foundational.

\(^2\) It is partly this conception of ontology that has misled critics such as E.D. HIRSCH (1965), who tried to understand Gadamer whilst holding on to the belief that ‘a determinate entity has this characteristic: it is what it is and not another thing’ (p. 492). For Gadamer, entities are determinate only insofar as they come determinately into language and discourse, and he believes that language (and the way that things come into it) can change slightly with its every worthwhile use. Hence Hirsch’s assumption that a text can only have a determinate meaning if there is just one way in which it should always be understood is made false not by Gadamer’s theory of literature, but by his ontology.

\(^3\) For example *PdE, HD, IG* and *HW*, as well as numerous articles. Available in English are 2, 4, 8, 11 and 13, 1970c, 1981a, 1983d, and 1985a and 1989.
George\textsuperscript{1}. Finally there are essays about the practical and political significance of his hermeneutic philosophy\textsuperscript{2}.

\textit{A: The Hermeneutical Studies}

The exegetical texts offer us many insights into the workings of Gadamer’s ontology. As we shall see in Section Two, Gadamer’s thought has a very close relationship with that of the historical thinkers whose insights he appropriates. His views on hermeneutics lead him to try to learn from the texts of the past rather than just seeing them in their historical context. Thus he searches for the insights that made Plato and Hegel construct their metaphysical edifices, and tries to salvage what was right about their thought from out of the context of what now seem to have been unworkable prejudices.

\textit{i: Dialogue}

What impresses him most in the thought of both Plato and Hegel is dialectic. Yet he does not want to subscribe to the metaphysical systems that either associates with it. Plato considers dialectic to be the only way in which imperfect living minds can truly recollect the Platonic forms. Hegel, similarly, sees the dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis as the structure of the Idea, and believes that the Concept (which is what is real) comes to absolute Spirit through the process of (Hegel’s) philosophical science. Gadamer wants to keep the idea that the interchange of ideas between partners genuinely involved in conversation is a fundamental structure of reality; he therefore talks of dialogue, and distinguishes various kinds of dialogue so as to be able to say that in genuine open dialogue an event of truth can occur. In his

\textsuperscript{1}Principally \textit{AS}, \textit{WI} and \textit{P}, and, again, many other essays. In English there are 9 and 14, as well as 1972b, 1980b, 1982c, 1982d, and 1983a.

discussions of Hegel and Plato, Gadamer relates his notion of dialogue (which is central to his ontological conception of language) to their metaphysical ideas. As we shall see later, it is often in what might seem to be their most bizarre metaphysical flights of fancy (such as Hegel’s doctrine of the ‘inverted world’) that Gadamer finds what he takes to be a sensible ontology.

**ii : Temporal Distance**

Gadamer’s return to these texts has a greater significance than this, however. It is, as we have seen, Gadamer’s belief that an event of truth can only occur in the open questioning of tradition. In this context, he says that classical texts have a particular significance. They are classics not because they were written at a particular time, nor because they are accorded a normative value, but because they have survived as historical, value being found in them by each succeeding generation.

The classical is a truly historical category, precisely through being more than a concept of an epoch or of a historical style and yet not claiming to be a suprahistorical notion of value. It does not designate a quality that is to be awarded to specific historical phenomena, but rather a distinguished mode of being historical itself, the historical execution of that preservation which – in its always being put to the proof anew – lets something true be. (WM p. 271, 1 p. 255)

Gadamer thinks that because they have survived through the ages and found meanings for people with very different sets of prejudices, classical texts always have something true to say to us. This is an extension of his notion of temporal distance, a notion connected with the hermeneutical fusion of horizons. When two horizons of prejudices meet openly, there is a clash of prejudices, and some are called into question. But where there is no temporal distance between the two horizons – as in a conversation – this will only happen to a limited extent, as there will be an overwhelming background of shared prejudices. In the case of a text, the clash will be more productive if the temporal distance between text and interpreter is greater.

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1 MACKENZIE (1986) suggests that this is also why forged works of art are more convincing to contemporaries of the forger than they are to later generations.
For this reason, Gadamer makes great use of his classical scholarship by showing how the thought of Plato and Aristotle has shaped our Western encounter with the world, and hence how it itself now has ontological significance for us.

Section Two of this thesis will look in detail at Gadamer’s encounters with and appropriations of these thinkers from the tradition, in order to see how the insights he puts forward are gleaned from his experiences of fusing his horizon with those of Plato, Hegel, and Heidegger.

**B : The Relevance of Aesthetics**

The texts on aesthetics are of crucial importance for Gadamer’s understanding of language. As we shall see in Chapter Four, the concept of play, and of its transformation into a structure, is used as the basis for Gadamer’s understanding of how meaning is possible: in Chapter Six we shall see how the same concept can be taken to underlie his whole ontology. It is in the works on aesthetics that this concept of play is worked out in detail. It is linked with the further discussions of such concepts as festival, ec-stasis, mimesis⁴, symbol and allegory into a subtle and rich picture.

**i : Ideality and Ec-stasis in Festivals**

We saw in outline in the above summary of *Wahrheit und Methode* how the notion of play is related to Gadamer’s ontology. In *Die Aktualität des Schönen (The Relevance of the Beautiful)* Gadamer introduces the related notion of *festival*, which is useful in introducing two of the ideas that I take to be most basic to his philosophy: ideality and ec-stasis.

⁴ For an examination of Gadamer’s use of ‘mimesis’ and ‘festival’, in comparison with that of Ricoeur and Derrida, see SCHWEIKER (1988).
Ideality

The structure of ideality, which, I shall be arguing, is Gadamer’s concept of identity (and the place where I contend he tries to ‘have it both ways at once’), is displayed in its simplest form in the recurrence of a festival. Gadamer’s brief comment on this in WM illustrates this best:

A festival only is while it’s being celebrated. That certainly doesn’t mean to say that it’s of a subjective nature and only has its being in the subjectivity of the people who celebrate it. On the contrary, the festival is celebrated because it is there. (WM p. 118, 1 p. 110)

Here we see that Gadamer wants to say that, although there is a single festival which is ‘there’, it is only ‘there’ on the specific and separate particular occasions when it is celebrated. Thus Gadamer takes both the subjectivist standpoint that he here denies and the idea of the festival’s objective existence on its own account to be correct, and conjoins them by using each to limit the other.

Ideality in texts

Having said that Gadamer turns to hermeneutics because he takes textual interpretation to be to some extent paradigmatic for understanding, I ought to say briefly what his notion of textuality actually is: this too is understood in terms of this structure of ideality. A text is a single, distinct entity that ‘is there’ on its own account, yet it only really has being when it is ‘brought back to life’ by being read and understood. Thus Gadamer is able to claim that although a text remains a single entity, every understanding of it is different since each interpreter will have a different horizon, and will consequently project a different horizon for the text. Consequently, Gadamer is not in a position to take the author’s interpretation of a text as privileged or canonical in any way, which, as we shall see in Chapter Three, causes certain problems with regard to his actual practices of discussing his own texts.
**Ec-stasis**

In the discussion of ideality in the recurrence of festivals, as elsewhere, Gadamer conjoins the subjective and objective viewpoints by appealing to ‘ec-stasis’, an idea that he takes form Heidegger and continues to regard in terms of temporality. A festival is said to have its own autonomous temporality (as is an artwork or a dialectical conversation), which demands the individuals celebrating it to submit to it and tarry with it, thus (somehow) transcending the limits of their subjectivity. The claim is that by the communal participation of many individuals, something bigger than all of them comes to be instantiated, which ‘takes over’ directing the activity of each participant (i.e. each is consumed in ‘the festival itself’).

**ii : Communality in Art and Language**

I shall be discussing these concepts in more depth in Chapter Three, but it is already clear how the notion of community is central to Gadamer’s explanation of ontology: for the use of language in genuine dialogue is said to involve this same ecstasis in the overcoming of one’s own horizon of prejudices. Language is seen as something that is not only ontologically primary, but also in between people, and therefore communal. The play of language is like the guiding structure of a game or of a festival, and by fulfilling the time it takes up it cancels out our awareness of it and lets what it talks about be truly present for us.

We can see from this that Gadamer’s view of the ontological and truth-giving value of art is not as elitist as it might at first seem. We shall see in Chapter Three that it is not only the classical artworks of the cultural tradition that can produce the event of truth¹, but anything that opens people’s horizons by means of this kind of communal fulfilling of time. It is not the literary or snobbish aspect of theatre-going

¹ This point is emphasised by MITSCHERLING (1989b) in the light of the distinction between Bildung (cultivation/ ‘edification’) and Kultur (high culture).
that makes drama important for Gadamer, but its festive character, which one might expect to find as easily in a pantomime as in a play by Shakespeare or Goethe\(^1\).

The analogies between the experience of art and the communal workings of language are central to Gadamer’s understanding. The comments about art must be read for their ontological significance, since they go to support the idea that a work of art can bring about an increase in being. This idea is then linked by analogy with the way in which language brings about all being.

**C : Practical Philosophy**

**i : Theory and Theoria**

Gadamer does have a theory, but not in the conventional sense. We cannot take his ‘theory of hermeneutics’ and just work out what its consequences are for practical action. He has sought to describe in a compelling way how language relates us to the world. This is ‘theory’ because it is compelling, not because it is organised and methodical. The reason why he uses the word in this way is, as we might predict, because he has traced it back to its Greek origins, claiming that

*Theoria* is ... an attitude – a state and a position that one can keep oneself in. It is ‘being-with-it’ in the lovely double sense that doesn’t just mean presence, but also means that the person present is ‘completely with it’. (*LT* p.44, 1990b p.96)

Gadamer’s comments about the universal nature of hermeneutics are supposed to be read in the light of this idea of theory without method. They are theoretical (in the ordinary sense), in that they do not directly prescribe any practical activity – it is not a method for interpretation or anything of the kind, as Gadamer repeatedly insists. But they are theoretical (in Gadamer’s Greek sense) firstly because we can all see the insights and the truth in them and so bear witness to that truth, and secondly because they therefore demand a certain practical and communal participation from us. For

\(^1\) See his essay “Über die Festlichkeit des Theaters” in *KS2* pp. 170-177, 9 pp. 57-65.
Gadamer, theory is the ‘highest form of practice’, because a certain moral attitude
(‘openness’) is a necessary prerequisite of all genuine learning and understanding.

**ii : An Ethical Ontology**

Gadamer identifies this openness and practical wisdom required for genuine
understanding with Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis*; this gives Aristotle’s ethics a very
important role to play in Gadamer’s overall picture, which, as I hope to show, aims to
be a unified one. I shall be looking briefly in the final chapter at the way in which the
notions of *prohairesis*, *ethos*, and *phronesis* have a unifying position in Gadamer’s
account: Gadamer’s descriptive, phenomenological approach to understanding
contains an ineliminable reference to a normative thought about what is required for
genuine inquiry. For Gadamer, this in turn arises from his reflections on finitude: as
finite language users, we are never in a position of absolute knowing. Gadamer takes
this to imply that we each have a duty to keep learning, to move closer towards
knowledge and towards genuine communal agreement that is guided by the nature of
‘the things themselves’ (*die Sachen selbst*), even though the possibility of completely
achieving this knowledge is ruled out in principle. This raises the important question
of where this duty comes from and why we should bother to do anything other than
stick with the prejudices we happen to have. Gadamer’s ultimate answer to this is, I
think, that as human beings we have to make a choice, and to choose the good is to
choose the quest for unity and hence for understanding and solidarity. I shall put this
normative element to one side for the bulk of the thesis, in order to see if any non-
moral justification of Gadamer’s ontology can be reached. The failure of this
enterprise will raise, in the final chapter, the question of possible justifications for
resting ontological claims on ethical ones.
Language mediates not only between us and texts and artworks in the tradition, but also, as we have seen, between us and the world. The way that the world comes into language is also not fixed, in exactly the same way as the meaning of a text is not fixed. Being itself (being that can be understood, at any rate) changes from time to time and from place to place. Since we are finite, we initially have access only to the tradition about the world in which we have grown up. That is what provides the prejudices or pre-judgements that we always already have, and that allow us to make sense of the world in which we find ourselves. As we are necessarily finite, the only way in which we can transcend this narrow perspective is by acknowledging its finitude and narrowness and so opening ourselves to questioning, and questioning the prejudices that we happen to have. When we question tradition (possibly also, when we question the world itself through experiments, although Gadamer is usually silent on this topic), the things that we question about – the subject matter or topics of our questions – themselves dictate the ways in which they can be spoken about. This is analogous to the fact that a text dictates what may be said about it – there are right and wrong interpretations, and even if there are an infinite number of possible interpretations, they are all in some sense there in the text. Thus in spite of his emphasis on the finitude of individuals, Gadamer does also appeal to a more universal, objective standpoint, which he wants to limit with the limited possibility of our approaching it.

For this reason Ó MURCHADHA (1992) proposes the interesting idea of replacing the metaphor of a philosophical system of claims built on foundational axioms with the metaphor of a ship which carries all of the important interrelations within it but is perpetually adrift and hence lacking in foundations. This raises the question, which is very interesting for a philosophy such as Gadamer’s, of where the ship is trying to go, and why. If all truth is relative to the interrelations on board the ship, then it seems that there is no reason for the ship to attempt to go anywhere at all. Gadamer, however, would want to say that the ship can and should navigate by the stars, plotting a course in imitation of the beauty and perfection observed there, towards an ideal port in which it could never hope to dock. What I mean by this should become clear as we go on, especially in the discussions of the phrase ‘immer unterwegs’.
Thus Gadamer can assert that all the things (Sachen, a word about which I shall be saying a good deal more in Chapter Three) that we talk about have a language or way of talking of their own, and present themselves by coming into language. It is their activity not ours that guides open conversations about them, and allows those conversing to reach a common language and substantive agreement about them. Language represents things, to be sure, but this is better expressed, according to Gadamer, by saying that things self-represent themselves by coming into language. When we understand, because we are finite, we can only sometimes and in a limited way (when we are open and aware of our limitations) see the way in which whatever we are talking about represents itself in language. To the extent that we do understand, we experience (undergo a formative experience of) an event of truth. That kind of truth, Gadamer wants to say, is all the truth that there is to be found: although we can and should aim to find out what is objectively and ultimately true (which would, perhaps, be how all possible topics of conversation could possibly self-represent themselves in language), there is in fact no possibility of finding such a thing. Because we are finite, we are ‘always on the way’ (immer unterwegs). Hence his two central ontological theses are:

1) **Being is self-representation**, and

2) **Understanding is always something that happens.**

These are the insights with which he concludes WM (p. 459, I p. 441), and they have brought us to the end of this introductory summary of Gadamer's ontological position. In the next two chapters I shall look at this tension I have observed between two perspectives, explaining and examining the central concepts

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'Some considerable attention has also been paid in the literature to the very last sentence of WM, which claims that dialogue can ‘guarantee truth’: this use of ‘truth’ seems different from Gadamer’s normal uses and, I shall claim, illustrates his desire to appeal simultaneously to a finite personal perspective and to a transcendent one.
involved in more depth. Then in Chapter Four I shall analyse his concept of language in detail.
CHAPTER TWO

FINITE UNDERSTANDING AND TRUTH

In this chapter we shall look closely at Gadamer’s account of understanding and truth. In order to do this, we shall first have to see precisely how his notion of ‘belongingness’ to tradition is supposed to work, and this will be explained in terms of human finitude. First of all, however, we must look at a problem raised by the notion of finitude.

1: GADAMER’S CLAIM TO UNIVERSALITY

A: The ‘Paradox’

Gadamer places strong emphasis on the necessary limitations of our knowledge and understanding, and argues that it is only through our linguistic intercourse with one another that any broader perspective can be reached. Yet even this perspective of intersubjective communication cannot, he believes, achieve absolute knowledge. There are therefore no universal or ultimate truths, since there can be no ultimate arbiter between claims to truth. This immediately presents Gadamer with a problem: if there are no universal truths, how can he be in a position to maintain the truth of this apparently universal claim? Gadamer refuses to side-step this problem by dropping the claim to universality: he insists that the ‘hermeneutical problem’ is entirely universal in scope, and that as a result of this universality, no other universal claims can be validly maintained.

i: How the Paradox Works

We can bring this paradox into sharper focus by seeing why Gadamer maintains that the ‘hermeneutical problem’ prevents universal truths. His contention is

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1 This problem with Gadamer’s account has been pressed by many commentators, starting with the very earliest: see for example H. KUHN (1961) pp. 384-5
based on two supposedly self-evident ideas: first, that the meaning of every truth claim depends in part on the situation in which it is maintained and understood, and secondly that anyone who puts forward a truth claim is prompted by the contingent historico-traditional prejudices that they happen to have. These two are not wholly distinct, as we shall see shortly. But they do seem to have important consequences when applied to themselves, since it should be the case that our understanding of them will depend on the situation in which they are put forward, and that Gadamer’s proposal of them will have to be the result of his contingent historical horizon. That means that if their truth is relative to their meaning, then they cannot be true in every situation (as their meaning is supposed to change); why then should they be true for us, and how can they be true universally? Similarly, if they stem from merely contingent prejudices, how can they be supposed to hold for people with different prejudices? I think that Gadamer can wriggle out of this paradox if we accept some of his other ideas: but his escape route is not immediately obvious.

### ii: A First Solution

Gadamer’s initial solution when confronted with this problem is puzzling: he claims (WM p. 424, 1 p. 407) that his statement of the universality of hermeneutics is ‘not at all on the same logical level’ as the statements whose universality he takes hermeneutics to limit. Soffer (1992), for one, finds this deeply unsatisfactory, and it is easy to see why: it sounds as though Gadamer is trying to use something resembling Russell’s theory of types to disallow the paradox of self-reference on logical principles. If Gadamer is trying to claim, however, that his own discourse belongs to some kind of metalanguage that can overlook an object language that includes (apparently) virtually everything else we can say or claim to know, and that his metalanguage is sufficiently distinct to avoid the problems that he raises within it for
the object language, then this claim seems preposterous. It cannot be the case that Gadamer’s discourse becomes privileged simply by virtue of the claims it makes about the rest of our discourse. Following Gadamer’s principle of the Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit (anticipation of completeness/perfection – see page 59), we should therefore assume that this is not actually what Gadamer means by this, and we should look at his other comments on this matter to see if we can guess what he does mean.

**B : The Dialectic of Question and Answer**

**i : Meaning and Questioning**

Another proposed ‘way out’ of the paradox (the one favoured by GRONDIN (1991)) is suggested in Gadamer’s essay on “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem”, where he offers this as the fundamentally universal aspect of the problem:

> There is no statement that cannot be understood as an answer to a question, and they can only be understood in that way. (**KS1** p.107, 3 p. 11)

Gadamer’s account of meaning is like this: the meaning of all statements, or at least the way in which they will be understood (which he takes to be constitutive of their meaning), is dependent on the context of questioning in which they are framed and offered. If every statement can only be understood as the answer to a question, then its truth will depend not only on whether or not it ‘corresponds with the facts’ in some sense, but also on two further factors: whether it is the right answer to that question, and whether it was the right question in the first place. This notion of the ‘right question’ may seem strange, but, as Gadamer points out, there is a regress of

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1 This shift away from the reference of individual words to an insistence on understanding in a context on the basis of questions arising from a historical background raises the question of the identity of what is being talked about on any occasion. MARTLAND (1986) suggests that Gadamer is committed to quantifying over what QUINE (1969, p. 23) calls “twilight half-entities to which the identity concept does not apply”. I believe that Gadamer would think of the identity of what is spoken of (the Sache selbst) as something that is only potentially reached in the attaining of a mutual understanding in the fusion of horizons: it is therefore not a ‘criterion’ that one can ‘apply’ beforehand. I shall have a good deal more to say about this, especially about identity at the start of Chapter Three.
questions here. Questions themselves arise out of the previous sequence of questions that made that particular difficulty come to light.

ii: An Answer to the Paradox?

If this is the fundamentally universal hermeneutic phenomenon, is it a way out of the paradox? It is hard to see how it could be, as all it has established is that all statements depend for their meaningfulness and truth on the questions to which they are offered as answers. This must surely also be so of Gadamer’s statement that this is the case. What, then, is the question to which Gadamer offers this as an answer? In the actual case of the passage I quoted above, he is asking something like ‘What are the preconditions of knowledge that are not made explicit by scientific method?’ It may well, of course, be the case that there is a context of questioning based on traditional prejudices that scientific method does not make explicit\(^1\). But if he is right, must there not also be a background of questioning that Gadamer fails to make explicit, which renders his own hermeneutical suggestions contingent and relative in a similar way? This background would lie behind his explicit questions such as ‘What makes understanding possible?’, prompting him to ask them, and quite possibly also leading him down blind alleys consisting of mistaken lines of questioning. So long as Gadamer sticks with the apparent subjectivism of his insistence on finitude, he cannot escape from this problem. If there is only finite understanding, and if that means that all meaning and truth are relative to that finite understanding, then it will be impossible to say both truly and universally that that finite understanding cannot achieve absolute knowledge of truth and meaning, since to say so can only have only contingent and relative value.

\(^1\) For an exciting extension of Gadamer’s approach to truth in the natural sciences instead of just the human sciences, art, history and everyday life, see DAVEY (1993), who argues that science has itself to a large extent given up its claim to define all truth in propositions taken in abstraction from their context, and has become a dialogue that probes its own boundaries.
C: Gadamer's Solution and the ‘Ideality’ Perspective

This shows us that Gadamer is forced, precisely by the radical nature of his insistence on finitude, to make an appeal to some enduring aspect of reality that is not radically relative. The clue comes from Soffer’s critique of just this point (1992 p. 236), when she observes that Gadamer requires a distinction between being true and being held true. He says that he accepts that his hermeneutic propositions will not always be believed and accepted, and indeed that they will change their meaning, but that that will not alter their truth (WM p. 504-5, p. 483). Two points arise from this: first, Gadamer does not see truth as something that is relative to meaning; secondly, his talk of ‘logical levels’ refers to a strange ontological doctrine that he sometimes calls ‘ideality’.

i: Truth and Meaning

We shall see in what Gadamer’s positive account of truth consists at the end of this chapter (page 66). But I must note here that he does not see truth as a property of statements, propositions, assertions, or any other such entities. Thus, when I assumed above in my statement of the paradox that ‘truth must be relative to meaning’, I allowed Gadamer an escape route. We can see that Gadamer must hold that truth can remain where meaning alters¹, just by noticing that he thinks that the meaning of his statement of the hermeneutic problem will alter with its interpretation by people with different prejudices, but that it will remain true. In fact, saying that he holds that ‘it’ will remain true is slightly misleading; what he thinks is that it will retain the potential to help people who encounter it to undergo an experience of truth. For Gadamer, truth (at least when viewed in the normal way) can only be truth that is available to our

¹ This also shows why Gadamer does not, as KESTENBAUM (1992) believes, see ‘meaning on the model of truth’: see my comments in DAWSON (forthcoming). Further discussion and evidence concerning the contrast between Gadamer’s hermeneutics and a realist approach can be found in CONNOLLY and KEUTNER (1988).
finite understanding: hence it cannot be absolute, nor can it be a property of anything outside of our understanding. Instead, then, truth must be something that happens to our finite understanding. That means that it does not consist in any relation to any independently constituted external reality. So Gadamer’s statement of the problem of interpretation can give rise to events of truth for all sorts of different people, without his having to claim that it is true in any universal or absolute sense.

ii : Ideality

Nevertheless, he does claim a little more than this, and we can only see why and how he does by looking at how he can claim that, in spite of changing its meaning with each new interpretation, his claim remains the same claim, and his texts remain the same texts. We shall save the detailed analysis of this account for the beginning of the next chapter, for this is where Gadamer brings in his appeal to a broader perspective. For now it is sufficient to remember the nature of that appeal. Gadamer seems to think that it is possible to appeal to another kind of truth, over and above the events of truth that take place whenever something valuable is understood, but that this ‘higher’ truth still does not have any being beyond its instantiation in those individual instances when it is perceived. He never makes this thought entirely explicit with regard to truth, and I am working here by analogy with other areas of his thought; I shall not defend my reasons for employing this kind of analogy until I draw together all the considerations from Section Two of the thesis in the final chapter, but I take it to be justified on the grounds that Gadamer aims for a harmonically beautiful and hence enlightening unity of dialectical thought. My suggestion here is that this distinguishing between two levels of truth is both consistent with other areas of Gadamer’s thinking, and is the only sensible way of understanding his talk of ‘different logical levels’. If we follow this suggestion we must take him to claim that
whenever anyone understands the hermeneutical problem properly (i.e. in such a way that it has an effect on them), they will come to see it as having a particular value for them, and that the ‘universal truth’ of his hermeneutical considerations consists only in this. This reading is also borne out by his contention at the very end of WM that a programme of discussion and questioning can ‘guarantee truth’, which cannot be consistent with the view of truth Gadamer outlines elsewhere, unless the structure of ideality can be applied to the concept of truth.

 iii: The Plausibility of Universality

This abstract defence will only become clear when we have fully discussed the concepts to which it appeals. What is important now is to see that in spite of the apparent paradox it implies, Gadamer is able to make his claim that understanding is necessarily historically contingent remarkably plausible. He does this by appealing to our intuition that our understanding depends on what we want to know: this is the relevance of the ‘dialectic of question and answer’. If all of our knowledge depends on what we are trying to find out, we should ask why we are asking the questions that we ask, since the value of the knowledge we attain as a result seems to be linked to it. But what is the nature of this link? Why must the answer to a question remain tied to the question instead of standing alone and being a true or false statement? Gadamer’s answer to this is complex, and derives from his Heideggerian background. But we can understand the basis of his thought here if we consider that any question only permits a limited range of answers, and necessarily excludes certain approaches to the problem to which it contributes. If it is possible even only to restrict knowledge by asking the wrong questions, it is still important to ask where the questions arise from. Gadamer’s answer is that they can only arise from a previous context of questioning, and that there is no ‘first’ question that sets off the chain. Instead, he thinks, we inherit
the whole context that underlies our questioning, and hence our understanding, from the tradition in which we grow up. If this is right, it is clear how understanding and knowledge must be importantly relative to the historical situation in which they take place: it also seems fair to think that even if Gadamer’s statement of this thought is itself historically conditioned and the result of traditional lines of questioning, it may nonetheless embody an insight into what is always the case. For this to be plausible, though, tradition and prejudice must, on his account, be able to bear the weight of setting up all of our questioning, and hence all of our knowledge.

2 : TRADITION AND PREJUDICES

A : What is a Prejudice?

i : The Negative Connotations

A prejudice against prejudice

Gadamer’s criticism of the ‘Enlightenment’ is not as radical some such critiques have attempted to be¹. He does not reject the ideals of rationality and reason, nor does he trace the ‘wrong turning’ of Enlightenment thought back to ancient history. His concern is instead with the historical period known as the German Enlightenment, and with the emergence of the empiricist natural scientific paradigm. Out of this generalised movement of thought, Gadamer identifies the emergence of a ‘prejudice against prejudices’: he uses this term to refer to the general trend of turning away from the authority of tradition as a source of truth, and towards what can be established by observation and reason alone.

¹ e.g. HORKHEIMER & ADORNO (1947). Of course, when Gadamer talks of ‘the Enlightenment’ and of its ‘prejudice against prejudice’ he is outlining one train of thought that became influential and not, as L. PALMER (1993) appears to think, trying to generalise and sum up the whole social and philosophical movement that is known by that name: hence his discussions of Herder, Vico and Rousseau as important precursors of the romantic movement.
Prejudiced thought

There have been commentators, especially those with a feminist or otherwise political agenda, who have been unable to accept that Gadamer’s invocation of a ‘prejudice against prejudice’ does not entail a simple reliance on and endorsement of social prejudice, perhaps against minority or marginalised groups. But his argument is corrective rather than positive and (for the most part) descriptive rather than normative; his rehabilitation of prejudice does not just allow prejudices to rule our thought, but rather points out that there is a danger that our thought will, of its own accord, be ruled by prejudice unless we do something positive about it. Hence his use of the term does also appeal to the negative connotations of the word: he wants to remind us that our normal, unreflective mode of understanding relies entirely on inherited prejudgements, and is likely to be unjust for that reason. But he wants to be able to extend the notion beyond this negative connotation. He thinks that reason cannot be separated from its starting point and carried out in pure abstraction, and he thinks that its starting point is always in prejudice; he therefore finds it constructive to accord a positive role to prejudices in developing reason and understanding away from the unreflective prejudice that is the concern of the political thinkers who have attacked him.

The basis of understanding

But why does he stick with the term ‘prejudice’ here, instead of moving on to some other notion that captures better the increased ethical value of the rational insights attained? There are two reasons for this: firstly, Gadamer sees the two phenomena as essentially continuous with one another; secondly, he holds that it is impossible to reach any understanding that is absolutely right or cannot be improved by further reflection. Hence whatever we believe is always prejudiced in that it merits
further investigation, and it can always serve as a ‘prejudice’ in the sense of a pre-understanding on which that investigation can be based. Thus although the term always retains the negative connotation of ‘may be unjust’, it also always carries a positive possibility of grounding an investigation that may remove or mitigate the injustice.

ii: Are Prejudices Cognitive?

Heidegger’s ‘fore-structure of understanding’

Gadamer has been criticised for failing adequately to distinguish between conscious beliefs, subconscious beliefs, preconceptions, hypotheses and bias arising from conceptualisation\(^1\). He includes all of these within his blanket term Vorurteil (prejudice). He sets up his concept of Vorurteil in discussing Heidegger’s distinction between Vorhabe, Vorsicht, and Vorgriff:

> An understanding led by methodical consciousness will have to make the effort not just to follow its anticipations through, but to make them conscious in order to control them and thus to obtain the correct genuine understanding from out of the issue in question. This is what Heidegger meant when he demanded that the scientific theme should be ‘secured’ in the working out of the Vorhabe, Vorsicht and Vorgriff from out of the issues themselves. ... Such a recognition that all understanding is essentially prejudiced first brings the point of the hermeneutical problem into sharp focus. (WM p. 254, 1 p. 239)

In Sein und Zeit (Being and Time), these terms are introduced as founding the possibility of all conceptualisation: Vorhabe is an involvement in a totality of relations to things (the ‘ready-to-hand’) with which we deal, Vorsicht is a first approach towards understanding some involvement that looks to interpret it in a particular way, and Vorgriff is a first conceptualisation that introduces what we deal with to us as something\(^2\). All of these are clearly pre-cognitive; but they sit oddly with Gadamer’s account for just that reason, as they are also explicitly pre-linguistic.

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\(^1\) By DREYFUS (1980), and then later by MADDOX (1983) and KESTENBAUM (1992). For further discussion see DAWSON (forthcoming).

\(^2\) HEIDEGGER 1927 p. 151
Prejudices arise from tradition

Nevertheless, the nature of ‘prejudices’ on Gadamer’s account can be shown, I think, by looking at his contention that it is not possible to make all of our prejudices explicit at once. If prejudices were just beliefs, it would be possible, in principle at least, to list them, cross-reference them and compare them. What prevents this from being possible is that any belief we wrote down would have been conditioned by the framework of questioning in which it is meaningful for us. If we wrote down those questions, the same problem would recur for them. Ultimately we shall not reach an abstract question, but a set of questions about the personal concerns of the questioner, which will arise from contingent features of the questioner and the circumstances of his or her life. These circumstances have inevitably come about through a series of historical accidents, which is why the questions that press us to inquire and so to come to hold beliefs are ultimately grounded in the way we relate to these historical accidents.

Habitual conceptualisation

Now, it is possible to understand Gadamer’s thought here entirely in terms of beliefs and questions, and so I shall be working with that simple reading for most of this chapter. But we could take it that the notion of ‘prejudice’ includes not just

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1 PAGE (1991) points out that Gadamer never actually argues for this: why, he asks, should we not be able to make all of our relevant prejudices sufficiently explicit in any particular interpretative situation to be able to ‘overtake’ our historical conditionedness and achieve truth? He talks of the ‘dogma of finitude’, of which it must certainly appear that Gadamer is guilty. Yet although finitude does have a foundational role in Gadamer’s account he does also think, as we shall see, that we can indeed ‘overtake’ our finitude and achieve truth and understanding in an ec-static participation in a fusion of horizons. That is not to say that there is nothing problematic about Gadamer’s account, but it does seem right that, as individuals, we are inherently limited, and that any sensible explanation of understanding should take that into account before explaining how we can overcome those limitations to achieve understanding and/or truth. In saying this I take no stand on the possible parallel that WEINSHEIMER (1985 pp. 40-59) draws between Gadamer’s notion of radical finitude and demonstrations of the inherent incompleteness of knowledge by such people as Tarski and Gödel. These methodical derivations of the incompleteness of the methods they employ do seem to lend some support to Gadamer’s suggestion that method is not a unique route to some complete truth about our world.

2 Even on this reading, I think that POLET (1994) is wrong when he says that “In order to suspend a prejudice, one must be aware of it” (p. 177): the suspension of prejudices need not be conscious, but
beliefs, but also what Dewey would call ‘habits’ – i.e. sub-cognitive conditions of experience. This reading is, I think, actually more plausible in the light of Gadamer’s Heideggerian inheritance. For Gadamer, understanding is not just a way for a subject to appropriate the world consciously. Understanding (in one sense), is (as Heidegger had convinced Gadamer) “Dasein”’s fundamental mode of being-in-the-world (see page 126). Understanding as we normally think of it is, for Heidegger, dependent on the ‘fore-structure’ that Gadamer quotes: this must be in some sense ‘linguistic’ on Gadamer’s account, since he thinks that all being derives from language (more on Gadamer’s broad sense of ‘language’ in Chapter Four). But it need not be cognitive – Gadamer makes it clear that the prejudices by means of which we understand the world consist of everything that we acquire from the tradition into which we are (to use another Heideggerian term) ‘thrown’. That includes all of our linguistic ability, and therefore our habitual conceptualisation as well as our conscious beliefs. If we follow Gadamer’s use of Heidegger’s distinction, it makes more sense to think that he sees sub-cognitive inter-involvement in the world as somehow ‘linguistic’ (in a very weak sense) than to think that he reads Heidegger’s account of conceptualisation as referring to cognitive beliefs.

Sub-linguistic inheritance

Even if we read Gadamer in this way, there remains another point here, which Wallulis (1984) has pointed out. There are clearly some elements of our behaviour that seem to be both inherited in the sort of way that Gadamer describes and very plainly non-linguistic: bodily habits and mannerisms might be examples. It may be that these play a role in our accessing and conceptualising or understanding of the world, since actual practical interaction is to be presupposed. To some extent, this comes automatically with the correct attitude of openness – of all prejudices being at risk – that allows a fusion of horizons to occur. What prejudices were in play beforehand becomes clear only with hindsight, from the insight gained in the fusion of horizons.
point will be cleared up by our discussion in Chapter Four: Gadamer’s concept of ‘language’ really is very broad. But no matter how broad it is, it seems right that there may be physical behaviour that directly influences our understanding and falls outside it, in which case this is certainly a feature of reality that seems to be missed in Gadamer’s reduction of ‘being that can be understood’ to language.

**B : What is a Horizon?**

There are some important distinctions that we need to keep in mind in order to understand Gadamer’s account of understanding correctly: one of the most important is his tripartite distinction between possible degrees of openness to correction. This distinction appears in Gadamer’s discussion of modes of experience between an ‘I’ and a ‘thou’ in conversation ([WM pp. 340-344, 1 pp. 320-325](#)). The first two modes are essentially prejudiced, and the third is the mode in which Gadamer thinks all genuine understanding must take place. We shall see how the distinction works by looking at Gadamer’s notion of the ‘fusion of horizons’ (*Horizontverschmelzung*).

**i : Horizons and Prejudices**

The metaphor of the horizon is not of course original to Gadamer, but its Nietzschean and Husserlian roots are probably more confusing that enlightening in explicating Gadamer’s notion. Gadamer thinks of a horizon in two basic ways: he does not just think of it as a limit to what can be seen from any one place, but also invokes the idea that a horizon is something one can have or fail to have. Someone who has a horizon is aware of her own position and is looking outwards, surveying the surrounding area that is within reach. Someone who doesn’t is continuing unreflectively with her local concerns, ‘looking down at her feet’ as it were. Gadamer applies the metaphor to the structure of understanding, and, as we have seen, he thinks that the place where an individual is at any one time (in terms of understanding)
consists of prejudices. Hence he thinks of a horizon as a viewpoint that consists of prejudices and looks around within certain limits, at the possibility of changing those prejudices and so moving around within the cognitive landscape.

ii: Obtaining a Horizon

Prejudiced understanding, in the pejorative sense, arises from a failure to ‘place oneself’ within a horizon. Where there is no horizon, whatever prejudices happen to have been inherited will prevail. To say this is not, of course, to say that all understanding that arises in this way will be wrong: it may be that some very useful prejudices have been inherited which happen to give right answers. But this is never, for Gadamer, genuine understanding, even though it must be the foundation of all understanding. It can be constructive, then, only if it is a first step towards something else. The crucial factor that moves understanding to the next level is the recognition of one’s own limits – of the horizon within which one stands. In the discussion of a conversation, this is cast in terms of recognising the interests of the other. No longer do I just try to understand something or someone as a means to my own ends: in recognising my limits I can acknowledge that what I am trying to understand has a different perspective. But this is only half of the story, since I can still only understand the fact of the other’s perspective from within my own prejudiced viewpoint. This is the case where I imagine that I can reconstruct the other’s point of view for myself and come to a complete understanding of them. Once I think I have achieved that, I can only see them through that model, and I’m forever anticipating what they will say and using it to confirm my first impression. In this instance I have a horizon, but my understanding is still prejudiced in the pejorative sense. I try to assimilate the other to my own understanding, instead of shifting my own position towards meeting the claim that is being made over me. How can we get past this level?
iii : Projecting a Horizon

A less prejudiced understanding can, on Gadamer’s account, be achieved by a ‘hermeneutical’ approach. First of all, it is important to admit that the person whose views I am trying to understand may know better that I do. I must acknowledge that I cannot just stick with my initial understanding of their point of view if I want to be able to gain the insight that I believe them to have. But as I have nowhere to start but with that initial understanding it is necessary to question them further, or to go back to what they have written, and to see where it conflicts with that understanding. In revising my understanding of their position, I will come to be able to see what prejudices form the horizon from which they are looking\(^1\). This may also involve other hermeneutic techniques such as situating their thinking in its historical context or comparing what they are saying now with other things they have said. These techniques do not, however, allow me completely to recapture or reconstruct their point of view. If I think that they do, I shall ultimately be content to rest at the prejudiced stage of understanding. In order to avoid that I must keep on questioning and improving my projection of their horizon: this process can have no end, since to cease questioning is always to rest with prejudice.

We can certainly see the ethical value in this openness and refusal to label and pigeon-hole people’s points of view. But how can it actually help us to achieve understanding? Isn’t the very idea of achieving understanding ruled out in principle by the contention that if we stop inquiring we have stopped with prejudices and not

\(^{1}\) It is this ‘projecting of a horizon’ for a text, an early stage of the hermeneutic process, that HIRSCH (1965) missed when he asked “How can an interpreter fuse two perspectives – his own and that of the text – unless he has somehow appropriated the original perspective and amalgamated it with his own? How can a fusion take place unless the things to be fused are made actual, which is to say, unless the original sense of the text has been understood?” (p. 497). The distinction between *Verstehen* (initial pre-understanding) and *Verständigung* (genuine understanding – see p.6) solves this problem.
with genuine understanding? In order to avoid this consequence, Gadamer is forced to introduce the notion of a rather strange kind of event.

iv : The Fusion of Horizons

This event can only come about if I put myself and my own views sufficiently at risk. If I do that, however, it is possible that the horizon that I have projected for the person I am trying to understand may come to look more appealing in some respects than my own. If that happens, I can shift my position towards theirs. I can also perhaps see that they have some prejudices that I absolutely cannot accept, or can see good reasons for rejecting, and can therefore shift their projected horizon a little closer to my own. If we read ‘prejudices’ as beliefs, we can understand this as allowing the other person to correct a belief of mine, and also correcting a belief of theirs. If this process continues (and Gadamer certainly does not think that this event can take place spontaneously, instantaneously or without considerable effort), the two horizons may come together and so ‘fuse’\textsuperscript{1}. When this happens, Gadamer talks of the two interlocutors ‘finding a common language’, and hence coming to a substantive agreement. Once we have cleared out of the way all the contingent prejudices that lead us to disagree, we come to see the same matter in the same way, and therefore agree about it. This is then to be characterised as an ‘event of truth’, since the agreement is supposed to make the issue that was being discussed appear obvious and enlightening.

The ‘logos’ of the Sache selbst

There are a number of potential misunderstandings of the fusion of horizons that need to be cleared up, and some difficult thoughts needed in order to achieve this.

\textsuperscript{1} ROSEN (1987) believes that Gadamer’s analysis of the ‘fusion of horizons’ is ‘erroneous’, apparently on the grounds that it does not give sufficient credit to the genius of the author (a point that Gadamer argues at length in the first section of \textbf{WM}), and he claims that Gadamer’s own interpretations are not consistent with it. He then goes on to assimilate Gadamer’s position to Derrida’s, all of which suggests that he has not fully understood Gadamer’s thesis of the ideality of the text.
When two people move their horizons towards each other, something beyond either of them comes into play. This will become clearer in the next chapter, but we must introduce here something beyond the individualist perspective in terms of which the discussion has proceeded so far. Each partner in the discussion has no access to the actual horizon of the other. Hence each is shifting her own horizon towards a horizon she has herself projected. Gadamer has two problems here: what guides them to actually move towards one another’s real positions, and how do they know that they have achieved a fusion when they in fact arrive in the same place? In order to solve this, Gadamer appeals to his notion of ec-stasis. The partners surrender their own subjectivity to the guiding hand of the conversation itself¹, which, by virtue of the nature of the topic they are discussing, will lead them to converge on an enlightening insight into the essential nature of that topic. They will know that they have arrived just because it will be an enlightening (einleuchtend) experience: the truth will ‘shine through’. And this experience will free each of them from the shackles of her individual subjectivity in such a way that she actually can see that she has entered into the very same horizon as the other – with respect to just the issue under discussion, of course.

These two rather strange ideas – the ‘guiding hand’ of the thing under discussion itself and the enlightening event of fusion – are very important to Gadamer’s account of understanding and truth. They seem, however, somewhat mystical to say the least. That appearance will not altogether be removed by my

¹ We shall see how important it is for understanding Gadamer’s position that we distinguish the special kind of conversation that has this power, where both partners are open in the right way and submit to the discussion of the topic at hand (Gadamer sometimes calls this an ‘authentic’, ‘fundamental’ or just a ‘proper’ conversation (eigenliche Gespräch) 1975 p. 345, WM p. 361, 1 p. 345), from ordinary prejudice-based language use. MISGELD (1977) argues that Gadamer does not make this distinction forcefully enough to warrant his ontological and universal claims for hermeneutics, since the ‘fundamental’ conversation is still understood too much on the model of an ordinary conversation (p. 333):. Misgeld is seeking a middle ground between Gadamer and Habermas, and does not suggest what further distinction might justify such a move, nor explain why he takes such a move to be unworkable, beyond saying that Gadamer has placed too much emphasis on a single aspect of conversation.
discussion in the next chapter of the double appeal to finite and transcendent perspectives, but that is still the best way I have found so far to understand Gadamer’s thinking.

**C: What is Tradition?**

One further difficulty remains before I can move on to discuss Gadamer’s account of understanding and truth. We have seen that prejudicial judgement is overcome by a fusion of horizons: to this there is the very obvious objection that if a mere conversation is supposed to be able to remove prejudices this seems to take no account at all of the prejudices that the participants in the conversation inevitably share. Gadamer thinks that there is just no way of getting around this, and that ultimately all events of truth remain relative to the conversations that produce them. But he thinks that we can listen to the authority of the tradition to which we belong and that somehow that will be able to help us revise some of our prejudices rather than merely reinforcing the prejudices we received from that tradition in the first place.

**i: Belongingness (Zugehörigkeit)**

Gadamer says that we ‘belong’ to tradition: this just means that all of our language and all of our ideas and questions arise, ultimately, from the past. Historical factors are responsible for the development of language, the creation of classic artworks and eminent texts, and the emergence of the stories we tell and are told about life and history. Thus there is nothing we can do or say which can effect a radical break from tradition, at least not if we hope to be understood. Our understanding must always start from our traditional prejudices, and it has only further traditional factors to turn to and to appeal to. Even if somebody invents something entirely *ex nihilo*, they can only explain it by using the language and concepts of the tradition to which
they belong. To say this is not actually to say very much, especially as Gadamer thinks that the limits of a tradition can be easily overstepped, but he also thinks that the realisation of this point, and the acknowledgement that we ‘belong to tradition’ is the key to achieving the openness that he takes to be required for understanding.

ii : Appropriation

Given, then, that we only have tradition to appeal to, how can a questioning of tradition help us to overcome or improve the prejudices that the tradition has given us? In order to understand this we must see that the tradition cannot be thought of as a single uniform kind of entity. What the tradition has handed down differs for each of us, albeit not very much. Here we again see how Gadamer is forced to appeal to something larger than an individual’s perspective in order to have a general concept of ‘tradition’. Once again, he does this in terms of the structure of ‘ideality’: the tradition only exists in its being appropriated and preserved by those who inherit it, yet they all belong to it rather than vice versa. Thus what the tradition has handed down to one individual is not all that that individual could get, and it is certainly not to be identified with the tradition. It is always open to us to look and see what we have appropriated from the tradition, to look for other parts of the tradition that we can take up, and to keep on looking for new texts to which to turn1. Thus although Gadamer refers mostly to the European tradition deriving from the Ancient Greeks, his account is by no means limited to that. ‘Tradition’ is a term broad enough to encompass any influences from the past, or even from elsewhere, to which we can turn in our quest for understanding. It is after all not an isolated unitary tradition to which we belong,

1 Hence our appropriation of tradition is not to be a blind acceptance or rejection of any of it, nor a mere preservation of the past. MITSCHERLING (1989a) argues that the element of application means that tradition is appropriated in such a way as to open new possibilities for the future: he compares this with Nietzsche’s notion of monumental history.
but a diverse one which has influenced us and can influence us in a large variety of ways.

### iii : Authority

What does Gadamer mean, then, by saying that we should accept the authority of tradition, if not that we should blindly follow our prejudices? He sees this on the analogy of submitting to a conversation: just as we cannot hope to understand what someone is saying properly unless we accept that they might know better, we can’t approach tradition with the idea that it is all in the past, or that it can only be understood historically. Gadamer hears the word ‘authority’ in terms of being ‘authoritative’ rather than ‘authoritarian’. To be sure, the past has given us an ideology that may well not be a constructive one, but it is still the only place to look for ideas that may be authoritative enough to help us overcome that ideology. Hence we should look for texts with which we can fuse our horizon, in order to allow them to say something of direct practical relevance to our present situation. If we gain insights from them, then that will be because there were certain points on which we found them authoritative: this is the sense in which Gadamer applies the word ‘authority’ to tradition.

### iv : Temporal Distance

The answer to our question, then, lies in the distance that separates the prejudices that the tradition happens to have given us from the prejudices that lie behind those parts of tradition that we question. Hence it can be admitted that talking to one another is not likely to produce much truth since we all share such a vast

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1 Authoritative parts of tradition, classical and eminent texts, only remain such as long as succeeding generations continue to find value in them: there are certainly parts of our tradition that are misleading, ideological or destructive, but on Gadamer’s account it is up to us to find their prejudices unenlightening and so avoid handing them on down as authoritative: thus MÄRKUS (1988) is wrong to think that on Gadamer’s account we can neither find value in historical items we discover afresh nor reject distorting elements in the tradition to which we belong.
background of prejudices, but it can now be suggested that looking at texts from long ago or far away\(^1\) may provide sufficiently different horizons from our own to be able to move our own horizons further and discover new truths. We can think of this very powerfully in terms of a landscape of possible positions with respect to an issue. Every possible horizon has a place in that landscape. If you and I discuss the matter we can only move along the axis that joins my horizon to yours. If the truth of the matter does not lie on that axis, we can still experience a fairly enlightening fusion of horizons by finding a common language. But we need a perspective that lies the other side of the truth, which may need to be quite different from either of our viewpoints. Since the only other viewpoints that there are to consider are to be found within what Gadamer calls ‘tradition’ (the whole of the recorded past of the world), that is where we should look. As we shall see next, it may not be right to think of the truth of the matter as being, on Gadamer’s account, a specific point on this landscape; but perhaps the only problem here is that we have no way of knowing when we have arrived there.

3 : UNDERSTANDING AND TRUTH

A : Understanding

i : Minimal and Genuine Understanding

As we have seen in looking at prejudices, Gadamer draws a distinction between the kind of basic understanding that can be achieved by assimilating new information to prejudices, and a more genuine kind of understanding for which this basic understanding is a pre-requisite and a starting-point. It will help here to look at the German words that Gadamer uses. ‘Verstehen’ is used of minimal understanding

\(^1\) Generally speaking Gadamer’s emphasis is on temporal rather than physical distance, but in 1992 and in *EE* he does talk about the need to look at cultures other than our own. Hence although GRAESER (1993) has a point when he charges Gadamer with bias towards German Romanticism and classical antiquity (p. 185), Gadamer has made some effort to remedy this.
such as the construal of a sentence or the assimilation of new information to our prejudices. It is also used to mean ‘an understanding’ in the sense of somebody’s attempt to understand something, and is sometimes used as a generic term for understanding in general. The faculty of understanding is sometimes also called ‘das Verstehen’, but is usually called ‘der Verstand’. ‘Das Verständnis’ is used to mean a fuller appreciation of an issue or of somebody’s point of view, but the actual understanding that is achieved in the fusion of horizons is called ‘die Verständigung’, which means the ‘coming to an understanding with one another’. It is important to keep this kind of understanding distinct from the minimal kind, since in Gadamer’s analysis of the threefold structure of understanding (in the full sense) the first of the three elements is itself understanding (in the minimal sense).

### ii: Interpretation and Application

The threefold structure of understanding is drawn from Gadamer’s refusal to acknowledge the traditional hermeneutical distinction between the processes of construing, interpreting and applying texts: he claims that genuine understanding always involves all three of these. In fact, this whole account works on two levels. Firstly, it is true that *any* understanding involves all three of these in a minimal way: in order to be able to assimilate something to my prejudices I must construe the language, interpret it by taking it to be saying one thing rather than another, and apply it by assimilating it to one prejudice rather than another. This kind of understanding, which on its own remains prejudiced because it happens only once and acknowledges no possibility of what is understood being right or valuable, then also forms the first of the same three elements in genuine understanding. For genuine understanding, these three elements are no less inseparable: but interpretation is now a positive and conscious process, involving the application of the hermeneutic circle, and application
means allowing the claim of the text to be held up against one’s own opinions and prejudices, so that a fusion of horizons can take place. Only by making this distinction clearly can we save Gadamer from the charge of ambiguity that has been brought by Shusterman (1990) and others: if we fail to make the distinction, we may fall into the same trap as Márkus (1988), who offers an example of a prejudiced interpretation of tradition (by Diogenes Laertius) as a counter-example to Gadamer’s whole account.

iii : The Ethical Element

In the notion of application, and in the requirement of openness, we see that Gadamer’s account of understanding, essentially descriptive as it may be, contains a normative element: understanding, we are told, always has this structure, but we can make better or worse use of it. This normative element involves both of the features that Gadamer thinks are required for a philosophical ethics (1993a): Kant’s exhortation not to treat the other as a means to one’s own ends and Aristotle’s idea that practical wisdom involves trying to make the right choice in a particular concrete situation. These ideas are, as we shall eventually see, linked by means of Plato’s ideas about *logos* and *ergon* and about the idea of the good (see p. 161 & the first part of Chapter Seven). They manifest themselves in the mechanism of Gadamer’s account of understanding in his requirement of openness. This openness, he says, consists of an anticipation of perfection (*Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit*): if we are really to understand what somebody is trying to say we must not only assume that what they are saying is coherent, grammatical, a complete thought, etc. (which we shall have to

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1 Several critics have been confused by Gadamer’s claim that his account is a descriptive one: HINMAN (1980) takes this claim to imply that all understanding must always lead to truth, or at least that we cannot influence whether we approach events of truth or not. Von BORMANN’s charge of ambiguity (1969) was made on similar grounds. Gadamer does draw a normative distinction between sticking with one’s contingent prejudices and engaging in open inquiry: whether he makes this distinction clearly enough, and whether he is able to show satisfactorily how a finite understanding is capable of being open in the right way, remain open questions.
assume in order to achieve even minimal understanding\(^1\), but also that they are actually right, even if we disagree with them. This requirement shows that the fusion of horizons really is supposed to involve substantive agreement, and not just the finding of common terminology. To be open is to be open to the claim that a different point of view holds against what we already think. Again, this need not entail mere acquiescence: the event of truth comes from a mixture of the interpreter’s original horizon with the new one, not just from the new one. But the projecting of a horizon will not take place if the interpreter is allowed to assume in the first instance that the claims in the text may just be wrong.

iv : **Awareness of the Effectiveness of History**

Gadamer’s phrase ‘*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*’ has, perhaps unsurprisingly, invited many different translations and interpretations. Translations differ mostly because it is such an unwieldy expression, and interpretations differ because it is used in two interrelated but distinct senses. In the first of these it simply means being aware or conscious of the way in which one’s own beliefs and prejudices are, like everything else, effected by history. Hence in these contexts ‘awareness of the effectiveness of history’ might be appropriate. But it is also used to stand for the kind of consciousness that has this awareness and acts with the right sort of hermeneutical openness as a result\(^2\). In this more reified and more normative use of the term any reasonably artificial sounding noun phrase such as ‘effective-historical consciousness’ will suffice to stand for the concept.

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\(^1\) To this extent the anticipation of perfection is similar to the ‘principle of charity’ that DAVIDSON (1984) makes use of. For a detailed comparison of Gadamer and Davidson on truth, see STUEBER (1994).

\(^2\) RICOEUR (1981a p. 244) points to Gadamer’s use of the openness that comes with *Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein* as the basis of the possibility of proper, critical understanding, and acknowledges that it is the basis for his own notion of ‘distanciation’ on which he bases his ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’.
Motives to inquire

The link between these two uses is interesting, since it is very much open for us to ask why being aware of the effectiveness of history should lead one to have and behave with effective-historical consciousness in this more ethical sense. Is it not possible to be fully aware of one’s own contingency and yet to have no desire to alter it, either because the idea of changing one set of prejudices for another seems futile, or because one simply does not have the inclination to improve oneself? Gadamer struggles to answer this question, but in the end only two of the things he says seem to help him. One is his claim that it is a natural inclination of human beings to inquire and to attempt to improve themselves: this may be true, but it is very difficult to support, and very easy to find or invent potential counter-examples. The other is his contention that to see that something is questionable is already to question it (WM p. 357, 1 p. 338): hence it would follow that once we see that our beliefs have only historical roots and are therefore questionable we would be automatically questioning them in the right sort of way. This claim also seems rather thin: it is, after all, possible to see that something is questionable without having any interest in finding out the answer to the question.

B : Truth

i : Truth without Criteria

By now we have a reasonably clear idea of what Gadamer’s notion of truth is going to look like. Again, a distinction is at work between two levels of truth: the ultimate appeal to a truth that is worth working towards remains puzzling, but we have seen that the basic notion is of an event of truth that occurs in an open conversation. This now needs to be compared with other popular ideas about truth, in

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1 See his essay in VZW & 5 on the natural inclination of human beings to philosophy.
the hope that we can resolve the question of what kind of truth Gadamer thinks can be
guaranteed, and how.

One thing we must notice at once about the enlightening event of truth is that
Gadamer provides no criteria by which it might be possible to determine when such
an event has in fact taken place. This appears to be deliberate, which many people
have found puzzling and frustrating. Lawrence Schmidt (1987) suggests that the
einleuchtende Ansicht der Sache selbst (the enlightening view onto the issue in
question itself) that is achieved in the fusion of horizons is itself a criterion of truth,
and that it will always provide the same binding truth within any historical epoch.
This seems to be closer to Thomas Kuhn’s notion of paradigms (1962) than to
Gadamer’s account (although the two are, of course, very similar). Gadamer does not
think, and has no reason to think, that the same results will be produced in any two
conversations, and he cannot think that the truths reached are ever binding since he
insists we must always keep on openly inquiring. Indeed, criteria as such seem to be
antithetical to Gadamer’s programme: Madison (1988b pp. 25-35) tries to argue that it
is possible to stick with Gadamer’s ‘phenomenological’ project and still to stipulate
criteria for correct interpretation so that conflicts can be resolved by reference to

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1 For example, in reply to WARNKE’s explanation (1985) of how Gadamer’s notion tries to rescue
truth from Rorty’s defeatist solution of giving up the quest for truth altogether, ROTHBERG (1986)
complains that Gadamer’s notion of truth does not in fact give us any worthwhile conception of validity
in hermeneutical understanding, as it gives us no criteria with which to rescue ourselves from
relativism. Again, while many, like THISELTON (1992) have simply been frustrated that there is no
way of deciding between interpretations or of drawing direct moral consequences from Gadamer’s
meta-ethics, SOFFER (1992) states that ‘To empty a position of positive criteria of truth would require
the complete abandonment of the language of truth and its cognates’ (p. 246). This seems in some way
to be what Gadamer does, since he abandons entirely the conventional notion of truth and replaces it
with an entirely different notion that seems nonetheless still to be closely related to our everyday talk of
encountering truth. FAIRFIELD (1993) points out that a criterion of truth may often be needed but is
not a concern of Gadamer’s (since he deals with ontology rather than methodology), and proposes that
we augment Gadamer’s account with William James’ pragmatist criterion of ‘success’ as determining
truth. The two approaches are certainly close enough in spirit to make this feasible, and in his earliest
work Gadamer does talk about something a little like success (‘having disposal over things’, Verfügen
über, PdE p. 20, 11 pp. 25-26). But Gadamer comes to see the aim of dominating our environment as
itself a suspect one, and hence ceases to see any situations in which it is desirable for us to have this
kind of criterion of truth.
impartial standards. But it is precisely Gadamer’s point that only dialogue can resolve this kind of dispute by approaching mutual understanding and a fusion of horizons. The appeal to ‘criteria’, unless they are agreed upon, only reinforces the prejudices of the party introducing the criteria. Even if they are agreed upon they must always be questionable, and for Gadamer it is highly likely that there is truth to be gained from each viewpoint in the dispute that may be entirely lost by ruling in favour of one side or the other on the basis of criteria.

ii : Truth as Event and Truth as Correspondence

It is clear, then, that Gadamer has utterly abandoned the notion of truth as correspondence with independently decided facts. This is the case largely because he rejects the linguistic priority of statements as bearers of truth and falsity. Still, even if we take it that a statement is only meaningful in a full context of utterance, questioning and understanding, could it not be that some such contextual utterances succeed in corresponding to reality where others fail? In a way, Gadamer does preserve a vestige of what is right about this suggestion. Since it is the issues under discussion themselves that guide conversations towards the event of truth, the event of truth must take place nearer in the cognitive landscape to the truth about the issue in question than the original position of either interlocutor. If we allow the truth about the issue to be determinate and to have a definite attainable position in the cognitive landscape, then it will be possible for events of truth to happen at exactly that location, and hence genuinely to correspond to the truth of the matter (even if it may not be possible for the interlocutors to know that this has happened).

Apophansis

But in fact it is not clear that Gadamer would want to attribute a definite position in the cognitive landscape to the truth about any issue. This is because he
sees truth as being an event in which things present themselves (this thought is derived from Heidegger’s analysis of the Greek verb ‘apophainesthai’). If truth is thought of as *apophansis*, then it involves an ineliminable reference to the person or people to whom the things present themselves. Furthermore, it is suggested that whenever things present themselves they simultaneously conceal themselves in some way as well (see Chapter Five, p. 146). Hence it seems that the position of the truth on the cognitive landscape is not simple: it seems itself to be relative to the conversations within which it presents itself, and it seems to be inherently slippery even there. With a notion like this, I think it is more helpful to abandon the correspondence intuition altogether than to try to twist Gadamer’s account to fit in with it.

### iii : Truth as Event and Truth as Coherence

Could it be argued, then, that in going back to tradition in the hope of correcting our prejudices what we are looking for is a completely coherent set of prejudices which will form an ideal horizon that will not shift in its encounter with other horizons? Certainly there are hints of similarity between Gadamer’s version of truth and a coherence theory: if the fusion of horizons involves coming to see that some foreign prejudices sit better with the rest of my prejudices than those that I presently have, then the event of truth would seem to be essentially an increase in coherence. But is this the actual mechanism of the fusion of horizons? In a coherence theory there could be no room for talk of the conversation being guided by the action or self-presentation of the actual issue under discussion: instead a conversation would lead to an event of truth by finding the most coherent subset of the conjoined beliefs of the interlocutors. But Gadamer certainly holds that in a genuinely open conversation something other than the subjectivity of the interlocutors ‘takes over’, and leads them towards a fusion of horizons, and that this is the very thing they are
talking about. Furthermore the truth, once they reach it, shines forth and presents itself as true in a way that seems to be more than a mere fitting in with what they already believed. Finally, a coherence theory usually holds that there can be a unique set of maximally coherent beliefs which are the truth, and that any other set of beliefs is not sufficiently coherent to count: this might agree with Gadamer’s view that as finite knowers we are always on the way to knowledge but can never completely achieve it, but it seems that Gadamer’s view is that there could be no set of beliefs that would count anyway. His reason for holding this is his account of the basis of meaning in questioning: remember, the beliefs cannot just stand alone, but always depend on the context in which they are held or offered, and this is also somehow supposed to mean that even when they are true they retain an element of ‘concealing’ or falsity. We shall not be able to examine this idea properly until Chapter Five, since it appears to be Heidegger’s rather than Gadamer’s.

iv : Truth as Warranted Assertibility

Perhaps, then, Gadamer’s notion of truth can be aligned with Dewey’s pragmatist idea of warranted assertibility\(^1\). The question here must depend on the nature of the warrant required. If it is a social or conventional warrant, then this seems to be the complete opposite of Gadamer’s account: for the prevailing social prejudices will be the principal source of such a warrant, and will therefore inevitably become the embodiment of truth. Gadamer absolutely rejects this idea, but still thinks of truth as remaining open and relative to conversations. For Gadamer to see truth as warranted assertibility he would have to think of the warrant as the self-presentation of the issue in question itself in the event of truth. But even such an event provides only a provisional warrant, since the insight gained from one conversation is only a

\(^1\) For a detailed comparison between the thought of Dewey and Gadamer, see GILMOUR (1987), who argues that the clash between Dewey’s ‘evolutionary naturalism’ and Gadamer’s insistence on the primacy of cultural tradition emerges most clearly in the detail of Dewey’s theory of art.
beginning in the next one. If I discuss a matter with one person and we agree on the truth of it, I cannot then take that truth as binding in my next conversation, since that will prevent me from listening to the point of view of the other person and fusing my horizon with hers.

v: Gadamer’s Account

Gadamer’s account of truth has emerged in the course of this chapter: it is an event that takes place in the fusion of horizons. We can identify two elements to this thought, one that arises from the lines of thought we have already considered and one that points ahead to the next chapter. From the point of view of the individual whose horizon is fused, the event of truth appears like a revelation that a particular set of his prejudices were either wrong, limiting, contingent on her upbringing in tradition, or just not the only possible prejudices. Thus it is an experience of her own finitude. If this were all there were to it, it would be a rather thin account of truth: but in fact there is also an appeal here to a wider perspective as well. Sometimes, the event of truth is not so much the overturning of a prejudice as the finding in someone else’s words or in a work of art a structure in which one can recognise oneself: this would be the experience of thinking “That sums it up” or “That perfectly expresses something in my own experience”. Here there is a further element of communal participation in some structure that does not belong to the subject, in which the subject finds self-recognition. This experience is a part of the event of truth and, as we shall see, the basis of Gadamer’s appeal to a wider perspective.

vi: Guaranteeing Truth

If truth were just an event that took place in individual conversations and remained relative to the individuals’ experiences, how could Gadamer say that what is not achieved by the tool of method must be achieved instead, and it really can be too, by a discipline of questioning and research, which guarantees truth (WM p. 465, 1 p. 447)?
Could he just mean that the discipline guarantees the repeated achievement of insight, which will nonetheless remain provisional? This might be an adequate reading of Gadamer, since his central concern here is just his ethical one of recommending openness, reflection and dialogue against the methodical application of dogmatic theory. Yet if my analogy between this area of his thought and other areas can hold, I would suggest that it is possible that this sentence contains a reference to his slightly stronger notion of truth. This would be ‘the truth’ towards which we aim in our discussions, and it would have the structure of ideality. That would mean that it existed only in its instantiation in concrete conversations, but it would also mean that those conversations surpassed themselves in belonging to it, and that in aiming towards it they could really be guided by it’s own activity1.

This idea will appear again in the next chapter, where it will hopefully make a little more sense. This chapter has demonstrated that on Gadamer’s finitist approach truth remains relative to the conversations of individuals, and appears in their fusion of horizons. We have seen how Gadamer’s account looks from the perspective of a finite individual, and noticed along the way that he seems to require a broader picture in a number of instances. This need now becomes pressing when we ask what Gadamer means by saying that his view incorporates an ‘overcoming of subjectivity’. If the account could work from the point of view of a finite individual, why could we not call that individual a subject? Gadamer’s account is interesting because of the way he integrates two apparently opposed perspectives, and the next chapter must examine how he does it.

1 HOY (1978, p. 71) discusses Gadamer’s contention that Aristotle’s notion of natural law as natural and binding but still changeable has an application to the hermeneutical problem (WM pp. 302-3, 1 pp. 284-5), and argues that it explains his notion of binding but changeable truth. Hoy also suggests that it may provide a way out of the paradox of universality. This is yet another model of the structure of ideality that I am about to explain: if it is a valid structure it would seem to offer Gadamer a way out of more or less anything!
CHAPTER THREE

PLAY AND SUBJECTIVITY

We have seen that Gadamer tries to explain understanding and truth from the point of view of a finite individual, and that he stresses the impossibility of making claims that appeal to any transcendent perspective on the grounds of our finitude. On the face of it, this might seem similar to an empiricist approach, or even to an extreme verificationism. But Gadamer claims that these views are wrong because they give primacy to ‘epistemology’, which he thinks of as the idea of an initially isolated subject trying to understand and make sense of a world of objects that is set over against him\(^1\). Gadamer’s denial of this picture is interesting, and this chapter is devoted to examining how it works, and how it relates to his insistence on finitude. I shall argue that Gadamer does retain a notion of subjectivity, but that he does not see the subject as initially isolated. In order to explain this, I shall first have to make much clearer my understanding of Gadamer’s notion of ideality, and explain how I think it takes the place of an account of identity.

1 : IDEALITY AND IDENTITY

A : Ideality

‘Ideality’ is a word that Gadamer uses occasionally in a specific part of his philosophy – his account of textuality – that I intend to purloin and to apply to a structure that he does not himself name, but which recurs in all the most important areas of his thought. I hope to show that the similarity is strong enough to justify this

\(^1\) Gadamer’s ‘overcoming of epistemology’ is not supposed just to be the result of the hermeneutic circle as ROCKMORE (1990a) seems to think, nor does he think he has brought philosophy to a close. It is the dependence on language of all comprehensible being which forces us to move away from the model of an individual subject trying to get to know a world of objects: as language is necessarily both shared and a faculty of each individual, the task of learning or achieving knowledge is one that we can only undertake together, in dialogue.
transference. In any case, I take my clue from Gadamer’s assertion that ideality is the structure that provides the identity of texts, and ask whether it can provide a more general account of identity. This account then seems to be remarkably similar to Gadamer’s actual accounts with their peculiar double perspective.

1: Textuality

Gadamer introduces the notion of ideality in discussing how no actual reading of a text can capture the idea of the text itself that everyone who reads it has: he compares this with watching a film of a book one has read, or hearing a particular reading of a poem that one knows. In these instances one has imaginatively reconstructed the text in such a way that one has a sense of the whole, so that any particular interpretation always jars against one’s idea of the ideal whole of which it is an instance. An example will help to lay out the structure to which he appeals: we can take one that ought to illustrate Gadamer’s basic thought about texts clearly by considering four different productions of Hamlet. One is a fairly straight production in modern dress for which the title of the play has been changed, one is performed entirely in mime with the sequence of events somewhat altered, one has been translated into Japanese, and one is a new electronic interactive version in which the audience have the power to choose the ending. What, if anything, makes all of these productions of Hamlet? To deny that any one of them counts as Hamlet seems arbitrary, and loses something that we clearly want to say the four pieces have in common. But they in fact have nothing in common other than their common reference to Shakespeare’s play: how does Shakespeare’s play exist as an individual entity? It is not embodied in any text, the original manuscript or any of the original folio or quarto versions, nor can there be any performance, past or present that could claim to ‘be’ the play itself. Yet there is clearly nothing else the play can be, other than or beyond all of
the texts and performances of it that there are, have been and will be. This is the thought that leads Gadamer to talk of ideality as a binding identity that does not go beyond its different instances.

**Separate meaning**

He also extends this idea by separating the content of what is said in any situation, as a whole message, from its delivery on a particular occasion in a particular context. This distinction seems at odds with the notion of meaning outlined in the last chapter, since it now seems that ‘a meaning’ is being separated from the individual context of questioning which was supposed to give rise to meaning. When Gadamer discusses the various ways in which writing can be a communication, he concludes like this (I quote extensively in order to show Gadamer’s own idea of ideality as opposed to the use I shall make of it):

All these forms of the written structure accomplish this separation from the original speech act and do not primarily refer back to the speaker but rather to what is meant by him. The written structure, in all forms, presupposes a particular mode of ideality.

I know no other word for this fact than the one introduced by Plato. This word can also be employed for the mode of being of mathematics without implying Plato’s metaphysical doctrine of ideas. “Ideality” befits not only the written structure but also original speaking and hearing insofar as their content can be separated from the concrete speech act and can be reproduced. The ideal-identical shows itself in the fact that such ‘reproduction’ is possible and can more or less be adequate. The same holds for reading. Only because the text is there for us in pure ideality is it possible to say that someone reads aloud well or poorly. A text which is read aloud well is a text which is read aloud with understanding and is accordingly intelligible. A text which is read aloud poorly is intelligible to no one. (1985b p. 247, translated by Anthony J. Steinbock)

Here he talks of the ‘ideal-identical’, and says that the text itself is ‘there for us’ in pure ideality. He also says that this structure applies equally to the separation of the sense of what somebody says from their actual uttering of it, and that it can be applied elsewhere. How exactly does this structure work?

**A simple reading**

We could understand this as just an explanation of how an individual must hold the content of what is being said to him in his mind during the period of time in
which it is being said. Thus it is necessary to gain an understanding of the whole of a text in order to understand its parts properly, and this means retaining a memory of what has gone before and an idea of what is to come. Similarly, when somebody is speaking it is necessary to have an idea of the whole of what they are saying by remembering the words they have used already and projecting those they are about to use, in order to understand them. In this way the hermeneutic circle itself, the mediation of parts and wholes, requires the ‘ideality’ of the whole, since the whole needs to be in some way held present in the imagination.

A more complex reading

But Gadamer seems to be saying that the text is also to be separated from its author, what is said from the person who says it, and that in having the structure of ‘ideality’ it develops an identity of its own. This is supposed to be a whole that remains somehow ‘self-identical’ not just through the time span in which it presents itself, but also through all sorts of different interpretations and reproductions, including those of the person producing it. ‘Self-identical’ here clearly cannot mean ‘unchanging’ however, since Gadamer tells us that the meaning of a text or an utterance can change with each different interpretation, and yet that it can still remain the same text or utterance. We now see that even this changing meaning is supposed to retain an ‘ideal identity’. It is both relative to understanding and constant in spite of this change.

Textuality as ideality

The crucial factor that allows talk of ideality to posit an unchanging entity is that in every finite, unique event of understanding there is a common reference to a structure that is being understood. Every understanding claims to be an understanding of the same text, and hence aims towards the same text. That means that the same text
is borne in mind in each case. On this level it is reasonably plausible that a single text is present in all its various finite interpretations. But Gadamer claims that the text itself which is ideal in this way is also binding and can be understood correctly and incorrectly, better and worse. The ideal text itself participates in the events of understanding that refer to it\(^1\): we can understand this by thinking of occasions where we try to read the text in line with the interpretation we have projected for it and are (as Gadamer says) ‘pulled up short by it’ because it contradicts our reading. The ideal text may exist only in the interpretations of those who read it, but it can ‘bite back’. This gives us a first picture of the structure that I want to say is the frequently recurring notion of identity in Gadamer’s work: many finite events contain a reference to a single entity which, as a result, takes on a being of its own without extending beyond those finite events, and then comes to regulate the events themselves.

\section*{ii : Author Intention}

\textbf{A problem with Gadamer}

Before moving on to look at the application of this idea to areas other than textuality, it is worth considering the implications for the status of the author. Gadamer explicitly separates the ideal text from the psychology of its creator, and says that the author’s interpretation of a text is not privileged:

the artist who sets up a structure is not its authorised interpreter. He does not in principle have any precedence in authority over someone who merely assimilates it. Insofar as he reflects about his own work he is his own reader. (\textit{WM} p.181, 1 p. 170).

Yet in the foreword to the second edition of \textit{WM} we find him saying things like

\footnote{Gadamer actually expresses this thought by talking of the text addressing its reader as I might address you: DiCENSO (1990) criticises this whole view of textuality on this basis as a ‘personification’ of the text, which he thinks unnecessarily reintroduces a subjectivism that had been avoided by seeing truth as disclosure (self-presentation). Gadamer needs to see conversation as the basic model of language in order to be able to say that it can present ontology in between people, rather than confronting a subject with it. Thus Gadamer’s motivation for seeing a text on the model of a participant in conversation is precisely his desire to avoid this kind of subjectivity.}
A “technique” of understanding, as the older hermeneutics wanted to be, was not part of my intention. ... Nor was it my intention to investigate the theoretical underpinnings of work in the human sciences... (WM p. XVI, 1 p. xvi, my emphasis)

If his denial of the superiority of the author’s interpretation has any value, then it seems that these comments must be irrelevant. I do not think that Gadamer can easily be rescued from this charge, but he might try to defend himself on the grounds that he only said this about artistic creations, and that he was specifically rejecting only the ‘aesthetics of genius’. But there are two points that tell against this: firstly, he says that what separates the text from its author – its ideality – is the same for any utterance; secondly, he takes artistic productions as paradigmatic sources of truth, and certainly aims his own work to be another such source of truth. There are some interesting (if not always pellucid) distinctions that he draws between artistic creations and normal discourse, which we shall examine in looking at his notion of ‘total mediation’ (see p. 119). But it is not entirely clear that they can help Gadamer reassert himself as a privileged interpreter of his own texts.

Texts and conversations

Yet Gadamer sees written texts as artificially ‘cut off’ from their authors and therefore in need of ‘reawakening into discourse’. In a conversation, he certainly thinks that we can go back and correct someone’s understanding of what we have said: dialogue depends on this kind of give and take. But if I address a speech to you in a conversation what it means is just as much what you understand by it as what I understand by it. You have to project a horizon for me, and you will understand my speech within that horizon: if I project a horizon for you that includes what I see as a projection of my horizon that I think fails to match my horizon, then I can say so in the hope of clarifying what prejudices each of us has and what prejudices each of us thinks the other has, thus moving us nearer to a fusion of horizons. But that action alone will not alter the ideal meaning of my first speech. If, as a result of my
comments, you alter your interpretation of my first speech, or if I alter my interpretation, and we then come to discuss its interpretation, then its meaning can be altered by having those interpretations imposed on it: but this is a further step beyond my original correction or clarification. The meaning of what I have said is not altered by my merely saying something else. If this is right, then we can say that an author can discuss her own texts and so clarify and change their meaning, but that the status of her discussion is no different from that of any other commentator.

**Context and interpretation**

But even this picture, which seems to capture Gadamer’s basic intuition about the separation from the author implied in the ideality of a text, does not seem to fit happily with some of his comments about Platonic dialogue. There he says that in a conversation it is possible to bring certain ideas into play and to retract them, to put speeches forward and to reinterpret them or take them back again. When Gadamer says this he is arguing against taking what is said in Plato’s dialogues out of its dialogical context. This brings the tension in Gadamer’s insistence on both the context dependence of meaning and its ideality into sharp focus. Plato’s texts, as ideal, are open to all interpretations, but support some better than others. But what is said in them is still tied to its context, and can only be understood by comparing the parts of each dialogue with the whole, and each dialogue with the whole corpus and the indirect tradition. It seems, then, that we must say that both the parts and the whole each have ideal-identity, since what is said in any part of the corpus is just as independent of its expression as the whole corpus is. But the ideal parts are still to be understood only in the context of the ideal whole, if they are to be understood correctly. This gives us a clue to what Gadamer is doing with his comments about his own intentions. His original text must inevitably, he thinks, stand alone as an ideal
text, but he can still add commentary about it to the corpus of his writings, and so alter its meaning by affecting future possible interpretations.

### iii : Ideality and Context-Nesting

Only now can we see how to resolve the tension between the context-dependence and the ideality of meaning. Any statement does have, on Gadamer’s account, an ideal identity: but what it means will always depend on the context in which it is understood. Its ideality, then, consists precisely in the fact that it can be understood in many different contexts, applied to many different questions, and hence take on many different meanings. For an isolated statement this seems unproblematic; to talk of its ideality is simply to assert that we nonetheless think of it as ‘the same statement’ in all these contexts. When the statement is offered in a specific context within a text or a larger dialogic framework, though, there is also the question of how to understand that framework as a whole. Here the statement has to be understood in that context, which will limit the range of meanings it can have; but we can now talk of the ideality of the text as a whole, since the whole text can be interpreted in many different ways, depending on the context in which it is understood, and to which it is applied. What the whole text means will still remain relative to its concrete interpretation and application on any one occasion, but it remains the same text because each interpreter allows it, as *that* text, to be binding. We can go on in this way to talk of the ideal-identical structure of the whole corpus of a writer’s work, of a whole school of thought or a whole historical epoch. Each of these things has an ideal-identity, by virtue of which they can be interpreted differently according to the context to which they are applied.
**B : Universals and Identity**

Ideality explains the identity of texts in terms of the subsumption of particular events of interpretation under a universal to which they all refer. How can this notion be compared with more familiar accounts of identity and universals? The first thing we must notice is that Gadamer follows Heidegger in his rejection of the idea of a substance and its accidents or a particular and its properties. This means that his problem is not that of how many particulars can have the same property, nor that of how one particular can instantiate many properties. Instead, Gadamer holds that things present themselves within language in a variety of different ways, and that it is a false question to ask which is the one true description of things: hence we can happily apply many descriptions to something that we take to be a single thing. And indeed, this is where the notion of ideality comes in, for what we take to be a single thing on a number of separate occasions in conversation becomes binding as a single thing in those conversations as a result, and can lead our conversations towards the truth about itself.

**I : Identity**

This can give some help with one or two traditional problems about identity. If the identity of Theseus’ ship consists in its coming into language as such within many conversations, and if it remains the same entity over time as a result of the role it plays within a traditional network of ideas, then there will be no problem about all the parts of it being replaced. It may seem silly, even on Gadamer’s account, to say that an axe is the very one that beheaded Mary Queen of Scots even though both its blade and its shaft have been replaced, but Gadamer’s account does at least reveal the basis on which somebody could make that claim. Gadamer can also happily dismiss thought experiments about emeralds being ‘grue’ rather than green on the grounds that such an
idea is antithetical to the nature of language, as there could be no element of agreement in which it could be based. Yet it all seems a little too easy; are we just to let ourselves ignore questions of actual physical persistence over time and fall back on mere opinion and intended reference alone? Language is supposed to be bound to our finite but intersubjective viewpoint, and yet to be able to bring a whole world of supposedly real and binding universals into being. How can this be?

**ii: Universals**

Gadamer finds some justification for his simultaneous appeal to finite particularity and binding universality in the thought expressed in Plato’s *Parmenides* that one is always at the same time many and many are always at the same time one. I shall look at this more closely in Chapter Six, but we need to see how it relates to a problem about universals. We saw with respect to texts that on Gadamer’s account one text or utterance (which has ‘ideal-identity’) can have many meanings depending on its context and interpretation, but that it can also belong as a part to a larger unity; and the parts of any unity of meaningfulness can be taken out of their context and applied as answers to different questions, thus demonstrating their own ideal-identity. Gadamer refers us in the passage I quoted at the start of this chapter to Plato and to mathematics, so he clearly has a link with Plato’s problem in mind. Nor is it just texts that acquire a potentially plural significance and an ideal-identity in their being interpreted and discussed. We can read this as an ontological claim: anything that comes into language may do so in a variety of ways. As soon as we deal with something as a single thing in different ways in different contexts it acquires an ideal-identity: if we take it in a larger context, then that context will produce a binding interpretation of the thing in question.
An example

Hence we can think of a hand, for example, in many different ways, and so the idea of a hand attains ideality and hence identity. This says nothing directly about particular hands, but does explain their identity as hands: that is how those things present themselves in language. Putting it this way allows us to include in our concept of ‘hand’ the hands of clocks and card games, and forbids us from drawing a sharp distinction between direct and metaphorical usage. But in a larger context, such as the study of human biology or of how to play golf, hands take on a specific significance, and must be interpreted in the light of the whole context. Although there is nothing, then, that has identity as a hand beyond or outside of our discourse about hands, within that discourse certain things become hands in various contexts, and are then binding with respect to what can be said about them. We must note that when Gadamer talks about a ‘universal’ (Allgemeine) he has in mind a broader context that gives a specific meaning to what is under consideration, and not anything analogous to a Platonic form of general term. The ideal-identity that the idea of a hand has by virtue of the way things come into language is sufficient (on Gadamer’s account) to explain how many particulars are all correctly called ‘hands’: but they require a universal context in which to become meaningful as hands in any particular way.

iii: Personal Identity and Subjectivity

If this is Gadamer’s general account of identity, can it be applied to the identity of people in order to resolve Gadamer’s apparent difficulty with the status of subjects? It certainly does not seem right to say that people only have being insofar as they come into language, and that they are people because they can be spoken of in many different ways but present a binding truth about themselves within a larger context. This will not help us explain Gadamer’s references to individuals and his
placing of ontology in a language that is ‘in between people’ in conversation. But the structure of ideality does still apply here. Gadamer resists the hypostatising of the subject as an unchanging entity that underlies all of a person’s ideas and perceptions in the same way that he rejects the notion of a substance and its accidents or a thing and its properties:

Today, when we say “subject”, we no longer notice that we have in mind a special case of something which underlies, of something permanent as opposed to something which changes, a special case of substance, namely, the case of consciousness in which all its representations, all its “ideas” change and nevertheless “it itself” remains, and insofar as this is the case, is self-consciousness. (1985b pp. 242-3, translated by Anthony J. Steinbock).

Gadamer rejects the model of a continuous, self-identical subject cut off in a world of objects. Instead, he sees conversation and dialogue as primary, and as giving rise to our conceptions of ourselves. There is no special reason on his account (as on Parfit’s account, 1984) why any common element of personality or memory should persist throughout a person’s life, other than the fact that they belong to tradition in a unique way which initially determines their horizon. But we necessarily treat one another and ourselves as continuous people in conversation in order to be able to relate to one another at all. So in nearly all of the wider contexts within which we come into language, we appear as individual people, and must share our experiences as though we were continuous subjects. This removes the difficulty with talking about what an individual person does or thinks, whilst at the same time asserting that in fact our image of ourselves as isolated subjects is an illusion and that, as people, we are the products of the language that we speak to one another. We must now look at the experiences that Gadamer points to that show us how we can sometimes lose or drop our illusion of subjectivity and become more genuinely (or at least more obviously) participants in an original communality, where we come into language first as a part of a wider context that does not treat us as individual subjects.
A: Gadamer’s Account of Time

Time is very important to Gadamer, as it was to Heidegger before him. Unlike Heidegger, however, he does not claim directly that all being is essentially temporal; this idea rather drifts over from Heidegger’s thought into Gadamer’s. There is a lot of emphasis on the role of tradition, as we have seen, and experiences of truth are directly tied to the appropriation, preservation and re-application of traditional insights.

i: Empty Time

But Gadamer also has a more direct account of time, which is of central importance to our understanding of how subjects can access the world in some way that is entirely different from accessing it as subjects. This account is all about how an individual person experiences the passing of time. Gadamer suggests that we can draw a distinction between two fundamentally different ways of experiencing the passing of time (AS pp. 55-6, 9 pp. 41-2). The normal way of experiencing time is as ‘empty’. What Gadamer means by this is that in the normal course of events we have certain things to do, and we have to find the time in which to do them. The time is there, as it were, waiting to be filled up with our projects and pastimes. When we experience time as empty, we either have to decide what we are going to do in it, or, if we are doing something we have to do and which we find tedious, we have to make the time pass. In contrast to this, there is another way of experiencing time – as ‘ful-filled’ (erfüllt). This is the kind of experience of time that releases a subject from its subjectivity.
When our time is ful-filled, that means that we are caught up in something that is going on. Furthermore, we are not just enjoying whatever it is, but it absorbs us to such an extent that we are entirely unaware of our everyday concerns, and, while our time remains ful-filled, concentrate all our being into whatever it is that absorbs us. In this kind of situation we are open to experience, since we are no longer just closed off within ourselves, but have become genuinely a part of something bigger. The discussion of time is very useful for our understanding which situations these are. They are situations in which we do not ‘have something to do’ and we do not ‘wonder what to do’. Instead, we do not notice the time passing at all, and, when we return from the bigger experience to our everyday concerns, we do not really know for how long we have been caught up in it. Gadamer’s examples of this kind of experience are: being very involved in playing a game, watching a play, reading a good book, celebrating a festival or conducting an interesting conversation. I shall now look briefly at the structure that is common to these, in order to see how he genuinely takes the individual person to be, first and foremost, part of something bigger.

**B : Ec-stasis in Festival, Theory, and Art**

Gadamer talks of a ‘standing-outside-oneself’ or *ec-stasis*. This word is reminiscent of the way in which we might say that someone who was in a particular kind of trance or religious fervour was ‘ecstatic’, and this idea is very closely connected with what Gadamer wants to say. He makes it clear, however, that to be ecstatic in this way is not just to be out of one’s mind or disconnected from reality. As he puts it,

Being outside oneself is in truth the positive possibility of being wholly with something nearby. This kind of being with-it has the character of self-forgetfulness .... But self-forgetfulness is here anything other than a primitive condition, for it arises from a turning towards the thing in question, which the onlooker produces as his own positive achievement. (*WM* p. 119, 1 p. 111)
The two principal ways in which he illustrates this phenomenon, apart from his analysis of play which I shall come to shortly, are through the discussions of festivals and of theory.

i: Festivals

Gadamer is interested in festivals because they represent ‘communality’ (Gemeinsamkeit). When a festival is celebrated, there is something that everyone celebrating it experiences together; the celebration takes each individual away from her individuality and makes her a part of the play of the festival itself. The festival, of course, has ideal-identity, as I mentioned in Chapter One. But there is also the further point that when a community celebrates a festival the festival itself takes over and fulfils the time of each individual, so that each individual is ‘outside herself’ in this special ecstatic way simply by being a part of something that is communal. This communality is a new element in the structure of ideality. Not only is a festival ‘really there’ in spite of having no being beyond its individual celebrations, it also guides the activity of those who participate in it.

ii: Theoria

Now, Gadamer claims that what happens in a festival is importantly like what the Greeks understood by the term theoría. He distinguishes this from the modern notion of theory, arguing that theory was originally a practical activity, and that we ought to revive a sense of ‘theory’ which means ‘indulging in the activity of seeking knowledge for its own sake’. He explains the ec-static structure of the Greek notion in this passage:

As we know, theoros means someone who participates in an embassy to a festival. Participants in such a festival-embassy have no other qualification or function than to be there. Thus the theoros is a spectator in the true sense of the word, who takes part in the ceremonial acts by being there, and from this rightfully derives his sacral honour (such as his inviolability).

In the same way, Greek metaphysics still apprehends the essence of theoría and nous as a pure being there alongside what there really is, and even in our eyes the ability to conduct oneself theoretically is defined by being able to forget one’s own ends with regard to something
one is considering. But *theoria* is not primarily to be thought of as a behaviour of subjectivity, or as a self-determination of the subject, but rather with respect to what it’s looking at. *Theoria* is a genuine participation, not an activity, but a suffering (*pathos*), namely that of enraptured involvement in the spectacle. ([WM](p. 118, p. 111))

From this passage we see that Gadamer’s concept of theory is just this very process of being-outside-oneself in order to share or participate fully in some event that goes on as a result of many people’s similar participation. Participating in something communal allows a subject to become absorbed into something bigger than herself – to lose herself in the ‘play’ that is made up by the communal movement as a whole. This can be described as ‘theory’ when this ec-stasis takes the form of a witnessing: we can also be ec-statically involved in dialogue or investigation, and ‘bear witness’ to events of truth as a result. This, indeed, is what Gadamer sees as productive in natural science: what he dislikes is the emphasis on method1. Where methods are followed blindly, a large quantity of uninteresting results are produced, but where a common experience is witnessed, or where knowledge is pursued with no view to its application, but simply for the sake of indulging in the activity of pursuing it, valuable truths are more likely to be found.

iii: Experience from Art

In particular, truth is to be found in the experiencing of great artworks. I discussed this experience briefly in Chapter One; we can now see how it relates to other central themes in Gadamer’s writings. In an artwork (the term ‘artwork’ is restricted to artworks that have retained sufficient potential relevance to have this effect on people2), something presents itself in such a way that people can share in a communal experience of truth in encountering the artwork. It is perhaps helpful here

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1 Gadamer is far from being ‘anti-science’, but rather thinks, as [KELLY](1987) points out, that science has a responsibility to look towards practically determined goals instead of merely doing whatever it finds itself able to do.
2 And, indeed, the term can be extended to anything with the right kind of relevance and significance for people, be it decoration, occasional poetry, religious icons, or anything else that is transformed into a structure and so becomes a locus of truth. For an interesting discussion of this point see [BECKER](1962).
to think more of dramatic or musical performances than of the plastic arts. Gadamer certainly thinks that architecture and painting work in a similar way, but he thinks that the way in which we are used to encountering paintings and sculptures, arranged in galleries, abstracts them from their context of relevance and hence, generally speaking, prevents them from having their true impact as works of art by removing their claim to truth. In all art, Gadamer claims, what is important is what is said; this does not just mean the ‘content’ that is expressed in the work, but what the work tells particular individuals, how it affects people. In the case of the performing arts, this is a communal experience, much like the experience of a festival: a work of art fulfils the time of someone who is experiencing it properly in much the same way as a festival does. This ec-stasis in the experience of art requires us to ‘tarry (verweilen) with’ artworks if we want them to be able to tell us anything. *Theoria* is also involved in art, because in order for a work of art really to exist as such it has to be completed through its being experienced by an audience. The piece of music does not exist until it is played, nor the play until it is performed (again, they have ideal-identity). Similarly, a book does not really exist as a communication until it is read, nor does a painting really depict anything until somebody looks at it. Thus art needs an audience that can share in it, participate in it¹, and so complete it by experiencing what it has to say. Finally, it is important to realise that this ‘what it has to say’ is unique to that work of art – there is no other way in which the same thing could be said – and also depends to a large extent on the horizon of the audience that shares in it.

¹ As WACHTERHAUSER (1986) points out, this stress on participation is an important part of the reason why, for Gadamer, interpretation always involves application and the alteration of what is interpreted. A text or artwork does not create meaning by itself: the participation of the interpreter is required.
C : Play, Games and Plays

i : Ec-stasis in Play

This idea of ecstatic involvement in something bigger is also found in Gadamer’s notion of play: the players are said to ‘lose themselves’ in the play (or the game). The everyday concerns of the players become forgotten as they are wholly absorbed in pursuing the temporary ends provided by the game. The game therefore entirely dominates them, and provides the motivation for all of their actions. It is the play, not the players, that is supposed to be in control. Gadamer pays no attention to the fact that games can be won or lost. What guides a player’s actions is not her desire to win the game; at least, that is not the element that is essential to Gadamer’s analysis. What he concentrates on is the structure or movement of the game which emerges as a result of players’ making choices from a restricted range of possible actions. The rules of the game are important only because they allow participation in the sense of subordinating one’s own ends to the ends provided within a larger structure. It is because play requires participation that it is important for Gadamer that the players take the game seriously, and really try to achieve the goals that the game provides them with.

ii : Representation and Symbols

Gadamer characterises play as ‘a pure representation of itself’ (ein reines Sichselbstdarstellen) (WM p. 100, 1 p. 94). What does this mean? Gadamer explains his notion of representation in various ways, but most clearly in AS in terms of the notion of a symbol. A symbol, he explains, is not just an icon that conventionally refers to some abstract idea. As usual, he traces the word to its classical origins. A symbol (συµβολον in Greek), he tells us, was originally what was called in Latin a tessera hospitalis, or an object that was broken in two by a host on the departure of
his guest, to whom he would present half (AS pp. 41-2, 9 p. 31; cf. WM p. 68). These two halves were then kept by the descendants of each as symbols of the bond between the two families, so that if a member of one should visit a member of the other bearing his half of the symbol he would be recognised as a friend. From this etymological study, Gadamer concludes that a symbol is more than a mere representation, but that it is actually the only possible means of presentation of what it represents, and that it actually makes that thing itself present (i.e. in this case the bond which thereby takes on an ideal-identity, not the families themselves). He illustrates this by talking of the religious use of symbolism as the visible presentation of the divine (WM p. 69, 1 p. 66). When a symbol is used or presented, it makes something else present that otherwise could not be made present at all. That is Gadamer’s paradigm instance of representation.

iii : Play as Self-representation

This notion of representation is extended to any case where something is recognised (and thus made present to someone) through something else. The performing of any task in this way comes to be seen as representing the abstract notion of the task. Gadamer extends the idea to play in this way:

One can say: the performance of a task ‘represents it’. This is an especially appropriate way of speaking when it is a question of play, for here the fulfilment of the task does not point out any purposive context. The game is really confined to representing itself. Thus its mode of being is self-representation. (WM p. 103, 1 p. 97)

Gadamer’s minimal notion of play is not concerned with human activity. He argues that there is no interesting distinction to be drawn between literal and metaphorical uses of the word, and that its primary sense is the one found in phrases such as ‘the play of light’ or ‘the play of the waves’ of a repetitive to-and-fro motion that exhibits freedom of movement within limits but is not goal-directed (and hence seems to happen ‘entirely for its own sake’). He illustrates this in the sphere of human play by
saying that one must always play with something or somebody that responds in an ordered but unpredictable way to one’s actions. In this way there is a to-and-fro movement between the activity of one player and that of the other, or between the activity of the sole player and that of the ball or pack of cards with which she is playing. The word ‘play’ is used to refer to the whole context of playing, not to what an individual does1. This whole structure of movement has ideal-identity: the game that is being played can be made present in no other way than through the actions that go to make up the free movement of the play. The play also serves no purpose beyond its own artificial ends: there is no reason why people (or waves, or light) play, they just submit to it for its own sake. The subjectivity of the players is again suspended here as a result of their participation in a larger movement2. Hence the play presents itself, in the same way that a text presents its meaning or a symbol presents what it symbolises. Play has the same structure, but presents nothing but itself3.

iv : The Transformation into a Structure

In the case of play, though, there are two distinct levels on which ec-static participation can give rise to ideal-identical structures. The players take part in a game, which as a result presents itself as a game and guides the actions of the players. But it can represent itself not only to the players who are themselves a part of it, but also to a third party who observes the whole movement of play. Here Gadamer plays on a third sense of the German word Spiel which is also shared by our word ‘play’. In a dramatic production, the actors play their parts in such a way that they are caught up

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1 For a discussion of Gadamer’s notion of play, and of HUIZINGA’s analysis (1970) of the social basis in play on which Gadamer draws, see BYRUM (1975).
2 DETSCH (1985) discusses the contrast between Gadamer’s overcoming of subjectivity through the notion of play and Rilke’s resort to the imagery of play in the face of nihilism and meaninglessness.
3 There is perhaps a small confusion here arising from the fact that ‘play’ and ‘game’ are the same word in German (Spiel), although the two words can be used with very much the same sense even in English. Perhaps when Gadamer says that the play represents itself we would find it clearer to think of the play representing the game.
in being a part of the play that the responsive movements of the whole cast go to represent. In this instance, however, the play represents itself not just to those involved in it, but also (and more directly) to the audience who are also caught up in the play, and who also get the additional opportunity of interpreting it as a meaningful whole. This interpretation of the self-representation of the play as a meaningful whole is called the transformation of the play into a structure. As we shall see in the next chapter, this idea also has great relevance to Gadamer’s notion of meaning: but it is not easy to determine how this new level of structure fits in with our previous observations about ideality. Is it just the same idea on a higher level, as we observed before that it would recur in the case of a whole text as against a single sentence, or of a historical epoch as against the work of a writer that belonged to it? This would be one acceptable reading. But it seems that in the case of play transformed into structure there is a double interpretation. The play represents itself, and also, through being perceived as a meaningful whole, presents its audience with an experience which may potentially be an experience of truth. Gadamer in fact generalises this to all art: a structure is perceived, and, in its being taken as a whole, it goes beyond presenting mere play and gains a possibility of truth.

v: Summary

We can now clearly see the structure that Gadamer is invoking over and over again. People participate together in a communal experience by submitting their own subjectivity to a wider structure that emerges as a result of their participation, and guides (by limiting rather than by dictating) the actions of all who participate in it.1 That structure might be a text, an utterance, a festival, a game, an artwork, knowledge in general or being itself. The participants might become interpreters, celebrants,

1 This anti-metaphysical insistence on the primacy of conversation, tradition and participation over the individual subject has even been applied back (MADISON 1988a) to such traditional metaphysical problems as that of the identity of mind and body.
witnesses, players, scientists or just people as a result of their participation. In each case the structure is the same. The structure not only guides but also represents. It can point either just to itself, in the case of a game, or beyond itself to something else, in the case of an artwork. Language is one such structure, and its representation can, as we shall see in the next chapter, be of either kind. Gadamer will argue, apparently paradoxically again, that it is when language represents nothing beyond itself that it has the greatest power of communicating truth. Before moving on to look at language, however, it is necessary to clear up exactly how ideality enables Gadamer to talk of objectivity and to avoid sinking into relativism.

3 : OBJECTIVITY AND RELATIVISM

A : The Ideality of the World

i : The World Bites Back

If the identity of things is linked to language rather than to their physical persistence, what are we to think of the world itself? Is it still ‘out there’, or has it been swallowed entirely into language, leaving us with a kind of intersubjective idealism? If the latter is the case, how is it still possible to be wrong about the world, and could we all be wrong about it? Gadamer actually takes the world to be the common soil, trodden by none and recognised by all, that binds together all who speak with one another. ... This in no way disputes the fact that the world can also be without man, and perhaps will be. That lies in the very intended sense in which every single view of the world that is constituted by human language lives. In every view of the world, the being-in-itself of the world is intended. It is the whole to which linguistically schematised experience is referred. The manifoldness of such views of the world signifies no relativisation of the ‘world’. It is rather that what the world itself is is nothing different from the views in which it emerges. (WM pp. 422-3, 1 pp. 404-6)

1 GRONDIN (1990a) tries to defend Gadamer from the charge of relativism on the grounds that if we are able to refrain from looking beyond our finite points of view the issue does not arise, as a transcendent viewpoint is required before relativism looks threatening. This point no longer tells so obviously in Gadamer’s favour once the possibility of a binding ideality comes into play, although I think it remains basically right that ideality does not provide the sort of transcendent viewpoint that would make relativism a real threat.
Here we can see clearly that the structure I have called ‘ideality’ is to be applied to the world itself. Gadamer explains that the world is not the ‘object’ of language, but is brought into being within language, even though it comes into language in such a way that we recognise its externality. A distinction that will be made later in discussing Heidegger will be useful here: there is a difference between being an external object that is independently fully determined in its being, and being encountered within our intersubjective language as resisting us. The world can ‘bite back’ in two different ways. Either there is a particular way that the world itself is and we can find out whether we are right or wrong about it in any situation by experiment, or we can find that within our linguistic conception of the world we are driven towards certain descriptions that seem right rather than others that we have reason to reject. The difference is that in the second case there is no need to posit either an ‘object’ or externality or a ‘subject’ or potentially isolated internality; instead we can fall back on what we always talk about anyway.

**ii : The World as Essence**

Gadamer sees himself as returning to an older, Greek, notion of world ‘in-itself’ (*kath’ auto*), based on the notion of essence. It is easier to see essence as linguistic than to see the identity of particulars as linguistic. Essence can be fundamentally related to concepts: the world of which Gadamer talks is made up of such conceptual essences. The modern notion of a world ‘in-itself’ Gadamer assimilates to the attempt to dominate nature, arguing that we try to find not the essences of things but instead how we can control and manipulate them. He does not deny the insights of science, nor does he deny that they are useful or that our society

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1 DOSTAL (1987) explains how this notion of ‘world’ saves us from Rortean nihilist pragmatism; if the world is what we are talking about, and our talking really is guided by a world that ‘bites back’, some kind of real reference is at work. Individual words may not have individual references, but that does not mean that our talk is ‘just talk’ or that we cannot refer to things and to the world.
depends on them. Instead he claims that we find ourselves alienated from the world
around us, because whereas we naturally inhabit a world of things that are essentially
related to their significance for us, we are now forced to live in a world where science
dictates how things are to be seen on the basis of its attempts to manipulate things for
its own ends. Again, there is a Heideggerian idea here of ‘letting things be’; there is
also a Hegelian idea about self-alienation and about being at home in the world. These
will be raised again in Section Two. For now, we must face the question of how
Gadamer’s linguistic-essentialist world can support a notion of objectivity1.

B : Objectivity

When Gadamer talks of objectivity, the word he uses is not *Objektivität* but
*Sachlichkeit*. This is the noun from the adjective *sachlich* which he uses most
frequently in the context of what is reached by two conversation partners in a fusion
of horizons. They reach not only a common language, but also a *sachliche
Verständigung* – a substantive agreement or mutual understanding about what is under
discussion. This thing that they agree about is the *Sache* which, obviously, is the noun
from which *sachlich* is derived. It is clear that there is a subtle interrelation of key
concepts in Gadamer’s thought here that cannot happily be captured in English
translation.

i : The Translation of *Sache*

German has four words that can be translated by the two English words ‘thing’
and ‘object’: *Ding, Objekt, Gegenstand* and *Sache*. *Sache* is not equivalent to either of
our words, yet one of them usually has to be used to translate it. *Sachen* normally
means ‘things’ in the sense of personal affairs, as in ‘I’ll just get my things together’,
but this is clearly not the sense in which we are interested. The word was originally

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1 For an alternative reading of Gadamer’s notion of objectivity see GUEN (1989).
used to mean a law-suit, or what was being disputed in a legal case. We can most clearly see the sense in which it is used by following how the meaning has developed from this legal sense. *Sache* is still used to mean the kind of ‘cause’ that one can support or fight for. In both cases there is an abstract conception of how things are and of how they should be, that allows people to take sides and to support or reject these conceptions. From here, the word *Sache* has developed to a much more general meaning of the ‘topic under discussion’ or the ‘thing that is talked about’, but the etymological considerations allow us to distinguish what kind of a ‘thing’ we must think of here.

*Sache* as ‘object’, ‘proposition’ and ‘fact’

We must notice that when Gadamer talks of *die Sachen selbst* as the things we talk about, and says that they themselves guide our conversation, he cannot possibly just mean the physical or real abstract objects that are the referents of the words we use. If he meant that, he would not use the word Sachen: indeed, he explicitly rejects this notion of objectivity (although he is quite happy to think of language making present the essences of things through our referring to them). Another possible reading, which might be suggested by a few of the contexts in which Gadamer uses the word *Sache*, is as ‘proposition’. This reading is only really suggested by the thought that a proposition is what two people disagree about. But their disagreement is never, for Gadamer, about the truth value of a single string of words referring to a single possible state of affairs. Yet what is at issue – the *Sache* – must have at least a flavour of the idea of the ‘facts of the matter’, which is how Robert Wallace chose to render the word in his recent translation of *PdE* (11). This captures the meaning well, so long as we bear in mind the linguistic nature of facts. The word *Sache* is of course also the root of the German word for ‘fact’ (*Tatsache*), which carries the connotation
that the case at issue has been resolved. For Gadamer, however, because we are finite and ‘always on the way’, the case at issue is never resolved – hence his abundant use of Sache and his avoidance of Tatsache. In discussing what is at issue we always aim to correspond to the shared world to which we always refer, but we must settle for the facts as they can be displayed and disputed in language, which Gadamer thinks must remain relative to individual conversations that discuss them.

ii : Objectivity and Impartiality

Gadamer sees language itself, however, as carrying in it a kind of objectivity. If we listen to the ‘logos’ (again, this involves a particular way of being open rather than a capacity for formal reasoning, although there could be connections and similarities between the two) it will guide us to fuse our horizons in a way that is enlightening; why is this experience of truth that brings two standpoints together a form of objectivity? Gadamer’s notion of ‘objectivity’ is Sachlichkeit. Now that we know that when Gadamer talks of a Sache as whatever is under discussion, that he is interested not in the referents of the propositions that go to make up the dialogue but in whatever issue it is that divides the two parties who disagree, we can ask how this allows him to use Sachlichkeit as a notion of objectivity.

Being divisive

When something is sachlich it is relevant and substantive in that it is capable of dividing people’s opinions. When people reach a substantive agreement, or (perhaps a better if more tedious translation) come to a mutual understanding with one another about that facts of the matter that divides them, they get a view on the issue that separated them that allows them to see one another’s points of view. This process, note, does not actually necessarily require that either of them surrenders their position

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1 As DAVEY (1990) notes, this notion allows Gadamer to avoid a Nietzschean perspectivism by invoking the inter-subjectivity of language: Davey claims that there is no firm identity criterion for the Sache selbst: I shall be showing in Chapter Four how it can be seen as having ideal-identity.
or changes their opinion. It merely means that it becomes possible for their prejudices to clash productively, since each partner in the conversation becomes able to start projecting a horizon for the other. So it seems that *sachlich* means, at root, ‘potentially divisive’, and applies to issues. *Sachlichkeit*, then, is the property of an abstract issue that allows it to give rise to disagreements. How does it come about that the best translation of this word is generally recognised to be ‘objectivity’ in the majority of contexts?

**Being impartial**

We must distinguish the senses in which we use the word ‘objectivity’ in English before we can see what it is that Gadamer wants to preserve. There is a second sense of ‘objective’ that does not need to imply ‘independent of all subjects’: that is the sense in which an issue can be viewed objectively. In this sense, it means ‘not coloured by the contingent views of any interested party’. When we use the word in this sense, we think of the view of a third party or of an impartial referee, rather than of a view that belongs to nobody at all. A disinterested party can see clearly what is at issue between two people, and what interests and fore-judgements of each give rise to the dispute. Here is the sense of *Sachlichkeit*, and in this sense we can see how the word still carries the echo of its legal etymology.

**iii : Topics as Arbitrators**

Gadamer, of course, does not refer to third parties. He thinks that this kind of objectivity can be obtained between two parties, when the logos of the issue itself is allowed to guide the conversation\(^1\). This requires an openness on the part of those

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\(^1\) This reading of ‘*Sache selbst*’ has also an ineliminable ethical moment: it is our practical orientation towards objectivity that is opposed to our clinging to our own views in order to prove ourselves right. WALSH (1986) discusses in this context the relationship between Gadamer’s understanding of the phrase ‘*Sache selbst*’ and those of Hegel and Heidegger.
conversing\(^1\). They need not – indeed cannot – put aside their prejudices, but they can acknowledge that all of their beliefs and prejudices are ‘up for grabs’ since they have no firm foundation\(^2\). If they do this, Gadamer says, then the issue itself that divided the two people will guide their conversation towards a situation in which they each experience an enlightening truth. Hence the thought seems to be that if two people (or, of course, a person and a text) engage in a conversation about any topic, taking sides on an issue but without being attached to any viewpoint, then the reconciliation towards which they will be able to converge will produce the kind of objectivity that a third party can provide in direct disputes about people’s interests.

**C: Relativism**

To say that truth, meaning, and the world itself are relative to language as it appears in finite conversations does not, of course, mean that the contents of one conversation are radically discontinuous in terms of meaning and truth with those of another. All it means is that there is no absolutely binding norm of meaning and truth that cannot be altered within any conversation. The account that Gadamer offers of traditional prejudices and of their revision within a fusion of horizons demonstrates how there can be continuity between the various conversations in which any individual indulges, and we have seen in this chapter how this need not commit us to viewing individuals as isolated or unchanging subjects. If the world is a world of essences, and essences develop with the concepts of language, there is a clear sense in

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\(^1\) This openness, which is clearly related to ec-stasis, has been described by BRUNS (1988) as the openness of tragic experience: since we have left our comfortable prejudices, our position is precarious (we have put ourselves ‘at risk’), and that is why Gadamer is able to talk of hermeneutics as ‘learning through suffering’ (WM p. 339, 1 p. 320)

\(^2\) CORRADI FIUMARA (1990 pp. 28-40) criticises Gadamer for analysing openness as questioning, preferring to construe it as ‘listening’: her idea is that a question casts what is questioned into a distorting framework. Gadamer is well aware of this, of course, but sees it as inevitable: how is it possible, he will ask, to listen and understand without having a framework of questions in mind? In fact, Gadamer provides a structure (the hermeneutic circle, anticipation of perfection and fusion of horizons) that Corradi Fiumara would see, were she to hear him out, is remarkably similar to her notion of listening.
which things come to be by ‘coming into language’. This view is not a shallow idealist one: reality is not ultimately dependent on minds, and it is acknowledged that whatever physical matter there is persists regardless of our contribution to its being. It is not realist either, if realism is taken to assert the independent existence of natural kinds, things in themselves, or objects bearing properties: yet it is certainly realist about essences as the self-presentation of things in language. If it contains a kind of relativism, it is not a kind that allows for arbitrary interpretation, and it is not a relativism to either individuals, times or places: conversations depend on the horizons that are brought to them and differ for that reason, but they are guided by language, as the self-presentation of the world, towards enlightening events of truth.

i : ‘Always on the Way’

This leaves us with one unanswered question: could there, even in principle, be a point at which all horizons, if fully expressed in open dialogue, would fuse, and if there were, would this be an ideal ultimate truth of the kind that Peirce envisaged? Gadamer thinks not, because he sees it as essential to the openness of our inquiry that we are ‘always on the way’. This is not to say that we are even on the way to any specific goal. Each individual conversation points towards something, and aims to capture a truth about it: the structure of ideality has shown us that the things that we can talk about are themselves constituted in their identity through their being pointed to in this way, and that this gives them the power to guide the very conversations that give them their identity. Because of this we could never ‘get there’, since if something were to be completely captured in a conversation it would be impossible for future conversations about it to be open and it would lose the identity it gains from the changeability of its ideality. When he speaks of interpretation, Gadamer contrasts

1 WACHTERHAUSER (1994) sees Gadamer’s thesis of the potential inter-containment of linguistic perspectives on reality as a form of realism.
pointing towards something definite that could be captured with pointing in a general direction:

It is important that all indication and interpretation does not point at a target but only in a direction – into open space that can be filled out in various ways. (KS2 pp. 10-11, p. 68)

Interpretation is, on Gadamer’s account, a part of all understanding and a central element of genuine understanding. Hence our understanding of the world is as interpretative as our understanding of texts. This ‘open space’, then, towards which we point, must be reality itself on Gadamer’s account.

ii : The Remaining Questions

How plausible is this? It certainly fits nicely with Gadamer’s use of ideality as identity. The identity of something is not absolute and consists only in the changing individual apprehensions of it, thus in our attempts to tie it down we must always be on the way. Yet the open space of possible future apprehensions of what we are chasing can be binding for us, since we are heading in that direction rather than another. David Ingram (1984) and Gary Madison (1992) have both identified this teleological element in Gadamer’s notion of truth as the feature that raises it above Rortean or Derridean relativism. But two questions remain: can Gadamer get away with having it both ways like this, and if he can why should we head in one direction rather than another in our inquiries, or indeed inquire at all? Gadamer would answer the first question by a complex appeal to Platonic and Hegelian dialectic, which I shall examine in Section Two. Ultimately, though, his answer to the second question is an ethical one: our temptation to follow his exhortations to the examined life might be greater if we accept some of his observations about our self-alienation in modern society, but it seems we are still left with the problem that we ultimately belong to this self-alienating society, and cannot escape it just by questioning it.
CHAPTER FOUR

LANGUAGE

Gadamer’s central tenet about language is that it is the ‘Mitte’ in which or through which we are joined to the world, and out of which both ourselves and the world come to have being. Mitte has been variously translated: the medium, the centre, the mid-point. What the word really means in its normal use is simply ‘the middle’. Gadamer’s contention is not just that language is in the middle between us and the world, a claim that would hardly be contentious. He is claiming that language ‘is the middle’, and that this characterisation of language gives us a licence to see it as ontologically foundational. Our task in this chapter is to make sense of this, and to see how it fits with the rest of what Gadamer has to say.

1: LANGUAGE AS THE MARK OF OUR COMMON HUMANITY

A: A First Look

i: The Middle

We can start with two sample quotations which illustrate how this ‘middle’ that is language engulfs first us and then the world, and so brings both into being.

With reference to us, Gadamer holds that:

language is the true middle of human being, if one sees it only in the domain that it alone fills out, the domain of human being-with-one-another, the domain of coming to an understanding, of ever newly growing agreement, that is as indispensable to human life as the air that we breathe. (KS1 p. 100, 3 p. 68)

And with reference to the world:

With language it is not the case that what is to be designated is known in advance of all designation. In linguistic reference to the world, what is under discussion is rather itself first articulated through the linguistic constitution of our Being-in-the-world. (HD p. 96, 2 p. 115)

It is in language, then, that the world we inhabit, our links with one another, and our very selves are constituted. Any investigation into Gadamer’s ontology, then, must make very clear what he understands by the term ‘language’ (Sprache). It would be
against Gadamer’s principles to give a simple definition. Like any concept, the concept of language is alive and ranges over many senses: nowhere is it more alive than in Gadamer’s work, where many things are said of language not all of which are obviously compatible. Certainly it would be ludicrous to attempt to reduce all of Gadamer’s comments about language to any central characterisation. Instead, we must look at the various central themes in order to build up a picture of the conception of language with which he works.

ii : The Various Characterisations

There are three central ways in which Gadamer sees language, which need to be distinguished so that we can see clearly the way in which they need to be taken together. Language is seen as the ability to make present in conversation what is not actually present, as the play which leads on the progression of a conversation and as the social structure which is changed by every genuine dialogue. In spite of his emphasis on the role of the understanding rather than the production of language, he does believe that there is an ‘inner word’ of thought, a ‘conversation of the soul with itself’ which is linguistic without taking place in any particular language, and involves a succession of thoughts that need not be temporal; this is supposed to be incarnated imperfectly in the outer word of spoken language. He also indulges in the apparent mysticism of talking about there being only one word, which is more or less imperfectly expressed in conversation, and yet holds that language is fundamentally metaphorical, an idea which seems to presuppose a more atomistic account. This relationship can only be clarified by looking at the various levels of the ideal-identity of language.

We can examine the ability of language to make things present and its general structure of play first: the third picture of language, as a changing social structure,
involves its binding ideality, so we must then pause to look at exactly how the notion of ideality can be applied to language before moving on to consider the talk of metaphor and the holism implied in the ‘one word’, and to see how the play of language gets transformed into a structure and so becomes able to produce events of truth in proper conversations.

**B : Language as Making Present**

We need to get clear about these three views of language one at a time. First, we have the thought that language is distinguished by the making present of what is not actually present. Gadamer draws this distinction:

> What is language? Where does language go beyond the kind of understanding that we see in say ants or bees, which is silent but successful? Aristotle saw the deciding factor: a creature that has language is distinguished by distance over against whatever happens to be present. For language makes present. Choice of action, in the sense of the choice of means to a given end, is found in the holding present of remote objectives, which, over and above that, also captures the uniting norms in which human action unfolds as social. (*VZW* p. 62, 5 pp. 75-6)

This ‘holding present’ is the feature of language that is supposed to set us apart from the animals, and give us a *world* within which to live as opposed to a mere environment. We can use ‘language’ to make present what is not actually present. The ‘world’ then is distinguished from the environment in that it is a world of abstractions and generalisations which does not change for us just because we move around in it. This is something quite different from the mere realisation that the physical environment itself does not change as we move around in it. It seems to be reasonably obvious that most higher animals must be capable of realising that their movements do not correspond to changes in the environment in which they move. Still, Gadamer’s claim is that they stand irrevocably bound to the immediate area of their surroundings since they have no language with which to make anything else present.
i: Animals’ Memory

This is a problematic claim. Must it not be the case that a dog can in some way make present to itself its master or its food bowl by thinking about them when they are not actually present to the dog? How else could a dog search for its master or attempt to get back home to its food bowl? We know that what is present to a dog depends more on the sense of smell than on that of sight, and it therefore seems that we might explain how, say, a bitch on heat some half a mile away can be literally present to a dog. But still a dog seems to have a representational capacity that allows it to remember and picture people and things that are not and could not be present even in this way. Take a dog who every day goes to sit by the gravestone of its dead master; there are many recorded occasions of dogs behaving in this way. The dead master can in no way be present to the dog; the dog cannot see or smell him. Yet he knows him to be there because, we must presume, he remembers watching him being put into the ground. Thus we should say that he must be making present to himself someone who is not actually present. Must not Gadamer then say that this dog has language, and is not that absurd?

ii: Communal Making Present

This kind of example can perhaps be overcome by limiting what is to be meant in this context by ‘making present’. An animal whose behaviour reveals its awareness of things, people and situations that are not immediately present in its environment can always be shown to be relying on memory impressions of actual present situations. The gravestone, we could perhaps say at the very most, serves as a kind of symbol for the dog that keeps its memory alive. In language we have a further capacity over and above this, and it is this capacity that sets us apart. The crucial point is that language gives us the ability to make things that are not present present to one
another in conversation. This includes not just physical things that are not present but also hypothetical situations and generalised abstractions. The crucial point, though, is that we make all of these things present to one another without their actually being physically presented to us at all, whereas the dog can only symbolise things and remember things for itself.

iii : Words and Symbols

Yet although this ability to make present is distinctively human, it is not unique to language. In this rather verbose passage, Gadamer tries to distinguish language from other distinctively human ways of making a world present to one another:

And why should one follow the ancient thinker in seeing such a decisive position in the ‘words’? After all, they are not the only symbolisations through which man is distinguished from all animals. He can also discover himself in the tools, monuments and emblems that he creates and forms around him. The word is not the only symbolising activity. Thus Ernst Cassirer was once able to suggest that culture should be defined as the universe of symbolisation, the symbolic universe. It is true that being able to take up ‘distance’ belongs to all forms of symbolisation, just as it does to the word. That is how the word effected recognition of oneself in another, and recognition with others of what – in what goes to contribute, in the aim, in what is just – is affirmed by everyone, even if it is hard and demanding for each individual to concede something or to renounce something. But there is no question but that men, wherever they have impressed their design onto things, do also recognise themselves in the utensil and in the structure. In the word, to be sure, the all-embracing empire of spirit, as it were, seems to be reached – it is able there wholly to come to its self insofar as everything can become assimilated into our wordifying (in unser Verworten). Thus the word is the utmost heightening of mankind’s possible forming of its world and its fate, the great final syllable of which is called death and the hope, God. (LT pp. 19-20, 1982b p. 185)

Our humanity, for Gadamer, arises from the fact that the paradigm of our experience is not, as it remains for animals, that of an environment acted in by an individual. Our paradigm experience is rather in what we make common through symbols, tools, monuments, emblems and language. What is distinctive about language, we now find, is that it ‘reaches the all-embracing empire of spirit’. We shall see what Gadamer is getting at here when we discuss Hegel (pp. 188 & 199). But it remains unclear here whether language is to be thought of as being able to make more things present than the other kinds of symbolisation, or as making different kinds of things present, or
even as just a complex system that is continuous with symbolisation. In another somewhat confusing passage, we find the distinction we need, and a mention of the systems of common animal symbolisations that may have been worrying us:

Language and the use of tools differentiate man from the other animal life forms. But language is more for him than a mere tool or a mere sign system for the purpose of communication. Meanwhile we know something about animal languages, as we tend to call them. We observe, without understanding it, that the dolphins have their own means of communication. We know something about the language of the bees. Morse telegraphy is also a means of communication and nothing else¹. But the possibility that language represents for us humans and that we all perceive, surpasses that of a tool and of the use of tools. Language signifies memory. But Mnemosýne is the mother of all the muses, the donor of art. Whatever its origin was or its social function might be today, art, whether picture, word, sound, or song, ultimately signifies a mode of self-encounter, in which we come to bear our own selves in mind. In the word as in the picture, in the rock carving as in the earliest song, and still just as much in the refined and mediated forms of later literature, the world as a whole, the whole of our world experience, has become present.²

Two elements of linguistic and non-linguistic making-present, then, distinguish our world from the animals’ environment. First there is the fact that we can symbolise things not only to ourselves but to one another. This is the element that distinguishes our human world from that of the dog who waits by his master’s grave. Yet animals, in their ‘warning cries and mating calls’ as Gadamer calls them at another point (LT p. 15, 1982b p. 183), can also do this to a limited extent. What they cannot do is remember by means of a common communication of this kind. Memory here is not like the dog’s memory, but is held in common between people in their shared tradition. Language is what distinguishes humans in their holding things and events present in common memory.

¹I must confess I find Gadamer’s use of Morse Code as an example here in the same breath as animal communication utterly bizarre. My guess is that he either wants to suggest that the actual telegraphic transmission of Morse sequences does not itself display the required flexibility, or that the way the sequences represent words for us is entirely conventional and involves no hermeneutic element. Even if one of these is right, Morse has little in common with the animal languages which are certainly not so highly codified and, while they may not involve memory or symbolic making-present, must rely wholly on the hermeneutic situation of the animals in their environment. And moreover, of course, Morse Code is language first anyway before it is encoded and therefore belongs absolutely to our human world of representations.

A further distinction

If this is to be the distinguishing feature of language, it seems that monuments and symbols, if not themselves language in the fullest sense, must nevertheless be continuous with it and perhaps dependent upon it, as they clearly fall within this definition. Yet there is one element that Gadamer sees as central to language that they clearly lack: monuments and symbols are fixed and signify only in a very limited way. Language on the other hand, while it is certainly finite, is infinitely flexible and expressive. So Gadamer distinguishes language as play.

C: Language as play

i: The Language Game

We have seen that Gadamer explains the overcoming of subjectivity in terms of play. In fact, he sees language itself as a form of play. What does this mean? It does have certain things in common with Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘language games’ (Sprachspiele, 1953); indeed, Gadamer sometimes uses a similar phrase himself:

So it is in linguistic games (sprachliche Spiele) that we rise as learners – and when do we cease to be that? – to understanding of the world. Thus we may recall here our findings about the essence of play, according to which the behaviour of the players may not be understood as a behaviour of subjectivity; it is rather the play that plays, in that it incorporates the players into itself and so itself becomes the authentic subjectum of the movement of play. And so discourse does not correspond here to a game with language or to those contents of practical experience of the world or of tradition that speak to us, but rather to the play of language itself, which speaks to us, suggests and retracts, asks and fulfils itself in the answer. (WM p. 464, 1 p. 446)

The emphasis in Gadamer’s account is rather different from Wittgenstein’s, however. As David Linge (1976, pp. xxxiii-xl) points out, Wittgenstein sees language games as essentially separate from one another. Words have their use in one language game at a time, each language game belonging to a particular form of life which gives rise to it.

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1 There are other points of contact between the two thinkers: NUYEN (1990) compares the emphasis each places on a communal life-world as the arbiter of non-foundational truth. SMITH (1979 p. 302) argues that Gadamer follows through the consequences of the thoughts expressed in WITTGENSTEIN (1953) more fully than Wittgenstein himself does. For a thorough and illuminating comparison of Gadamer’s position with that of both the early and the late Wittgenstein, see RICOEUR (1981b) pp. 213-220.
For Gadamer, the play of language means that language games are much more fluid than this, interacting with one another to such an extent that even in view of the many different languages that people speak it makes sense to talk of a single play of language: perhaps we might say that there is just one language game.

**ii : Conversation-Directing Play**

The purpose of this way of speaking is to show that the overcoming of subjectivity described in Chapter Three is accomplished most fully in language. We have seen how language is to be seen first and foremost as conversation, not as the expression of an individual. We have also seen how the notion of free play within set limits can operate. It is by this mechanism that language can itself lead on a conversation. When two people genuinely discuss a topic, each is constrained within a limited range of things that can follow on from the conversation so far, yet they are free within this range to play with the language and to allow the language to play with them, and so to express themselves and the topic they are discussing and to find new insights in overcoming their prejudices. All of this is by now familiar.

**iii : Play that is Addressed as Discourse**

But how is it that this play of language comes to have meaning? Gadamer is insistent that language goes beyond the conventions on which it relies. Whenever something is said, on Gadamer’s account, much more is communicated than what is explicitly expressed in the grammatical combination of the particular words that are used. To analyse statements on this basis in the hope of being able to find their meaning is always, Gadamer assures us, to miss out on most of what is communicated. The reason for this is the fact that what is said is only meaningful because it is a ‘form of address’ (*Anrede*)¹, and its meaning is therefore constituted

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¹see his essay “Was ist Wahrheit?” in *KS1* (1994b).
almost entirely by the way in which it is understood. This demonstrates that language itself, too, has ideal-identity; there are finite situations (conversations), and individual utterances, that point beyond themselves to something to which they alone give rise (meaning), which then becomes self-identical through all its various contexts, and so becomes binding within each of them. But it is not clear exactly how this structure is to be applied here: is it just language itself that is ideal-identical, or is it meaning or the Sache under discussion that has this structure? If it is language, is the structure of ideality the same as it is for texts or festivals, or is language special?

2: THE IDEALITY OF LANGUAGE

I am going to argue that on Gadamer’s account thought, meaning and language all display the structure of ideality in ways different from one another. In looking at each in turn we shall be able to build up a thorough picture of the notion of language with which Gadamer works. As we saw in Chapter Three (p. 75ff), each ideal-identical structure is binding within a context which can itself be a further ideal-identical structure at a higher level: we find this same hierarchical nesting of contexts as we move from thoughts through utterances and conversations to language as a whole.

A: The Ideality of Thought

Gadamer talks of the ‘inner word’ of thought, and of the ‘conversation of the soul with itself’. He is most explicit on this topic in his discussion of Augustine¹, and of the Christian doctrine of incarnation: he lays special emphasis on the doctrine arising from the beginning of John’s gospel, which holds that the Word of God is incarnated in Jesus Christ. This is compared with the way in which the Word of the

¹ Jean GRONDIN this whole question to be central to Gadamer’s thought, and explains it in a most enlightening way (e.g. 1990b, pp. 542-4, 1991, 1994).
gospel is incarnated in the *kerygma*, the preaching of the gospel in many different places at many different times. This in turn is compared with the way in which the inner word of thought is incarnated in the outer word of language and dialogue.

### i: The Inner Word

Gadamer also talks in this connection about the possibility of learning foreign languages. Language is normally so immediate on Gadamer’s account that the words of one’s mother tongue are not easily separated from the things that they bring into being for us. But the fact that it is possible to ‘live in’ another language, and to master a foreign language to the extent that it seems just as natural, signifies to Gadamer that thought itself is not tied to any particular language. He definitely still takes thought to be *linguistic*, however, insofar as he holds that all experience and perception is experience or perception of something *as* something, and hence that there can be no non-conceptual experience. This would seem to commit him to a kind of ‘language of thought hypothesis’. But he could not be further from Fodor’s idea (1976) of potentially shareable ‘Mentalese’ sentences. Certainly he takes it that one and the same thought can be expressed by the same thinker in more than one language: but the thought will be altered by its re-expression, whilst retaining its identity. Furthermore, the thought cannot exist without being incarnated into *some* language: ‘Mentalese’ on this account *always has to be* translated into a real language, which makes it importantly different from all other languages. But this ideal-identity of what someone thinks allows us to talk of a thought being imperfectly expressed. The thought is binding in spite of its failure to extend beyond the specific instances of its ‘incarnation’ in real language.

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¹ For a thorough analysis of the interesting way in which Gadamer uses the notion of incarnation to illustrate our ability to mediate between a finite language to which we belong and an infinite realm of sense to which we use it to point, see JOHNSON (1993).
ii : The Dialogue of the Soul with Itself

This is not the whole of Gadamer’s story about private thoughts. He also talks of the ‘dialogue of the soul with itself’, an expression which encapsulates the acknowledgement that thinking proceeds from one thought to the next, and that this need not involve any complete linguistic articulation. Gadamer argues that this is not a temporal succession of thoughts at all: this might lead us to suppose that it must be a logical one. But it need not be that either: Gadamer thinks that any original idea that someone has must always have the structure of a question (“What if...?”): from this he extrapolates to the idea that all thinking may consist of questions and questions that arise in answer to those questions. This means that the dialectic of question and answer, on which Gadamer based his account of meaning, is contained in the process of thinking. Gadamer does see this as a kind of logical progression, but one that contains numerous suppositions and contradictions, and very few deductions: we can call it a logical progression purely to emphasise that it need not be a temporal one.

iii : Two Levels of Linguisticality

Does this second conception of thinking not contradict the first? If there can be a non-linguistic, non-temporal dialogue within somebody’s ‘soul’, how can it be claimed that thoughts do not extend beyond their particular expressions in language? We might argue that the questions and answers of the dialogue cannot be brought forward by being made conscious or communicated until they are incarnated in language. But there does still seem to be at least a fairly large area of unclarity in Gadamer’s thought here. When we experience things as things, is this a linguistic phenomenon? It does not have to involve a particular language, and yet Gadamer insists that

Linguisticality is so fully enclosed within thinking about things that it is an abstraction to think of the system of truths as a pre-given system of possibilities of being to which signs might be
appointed, which a subject that understood in terms of these signs could apply. (WM p. 394, 1 p. 377)

Similarly, we can ask whether the unincarnated dialogue of the soul with itself must not be in some way linguistic if it is to involve questions and answers that reply to them. Again the question of the capability of animals springs to mind: can an animal indulge in the unincarnated dialogue? Is an animal able to think but just condemned to forget its thought because it has no shared language in which to clothe it? These are issues on which Gadamer gives no guidance: it seems sensible, however, to draw a distinction between a minimal sense of ‘language’, in which perceptions and unincarnated ‘dialogue’ is allowed to count as linguistic, and a stronger sense of ‘language’ in which they are not.

B : The Ideality of Meaning

The point about the kerygma is that the event of Christ’s incarnation is supposed to be restaged in the faithful acceptance of the proclamation of the gospel by each new individual. Thus the kerygma itself attains an ideal-identity (as do the Word of God and the gospel) that is bindingly embodied in each individual preaching. This is taken as a model for the identity of what somebody means, which can not only be imperfectly expressed, but also imperfectly understood. This suggests that the ideality of meaning consists in its being potentially understood differently: this thought comes out most clearly, therefore, in Gadamer’s discussion of the hermeneutic act.

In interpreting a text, one is obviously trying to understand what the author meant to say: we have seen that Gadamer distinguishes this from what the author now claims she meant to say. But although he denies the privilege of the author as interpreter he does think that it is meaningful to talk about ‘what somebody means’ as a separate entity from what they actually say or seem to say. This separation is not just the result of the possibility that they could have expressed themselves differently, but
rather reflects the fact that understanding involves application. ‘What somebody means’ is different for each new interpreter since it involves an essential element of what that person has to say to me. Yet it remains the same meaning since each person who reinterprets it is aiming to reconstruct what the same person was trying to say on the same occasion. Of course, all of these ‘same’s invoke ideal-identity: hence the meaning of the text or utterance does not exist beyond the various particular interpretations of it, and it is altered by each of them, yet it is nonetheless binding over each.

C : The Ideality of a Language

The identity of a language itself is revealed in the way that it ‘resonates’ in everything that is said in it. Gadamer uses this expression to show how what is said is understood in terms of what could have been said but was not. The thought is that since language is always used in a specific context of questioning, and is always addressed to someone, the possibilities raised by that context go to define the way in which what is said gets understood. Hence everything that is said by one person to another (or to a group or any potential audience) contains a reference not just to what is talked about, but to the whole structure of the language that speaker and audience share. Since any individual dialogue picks out certain possibilities of language rather than others it brings the whole language to life within it. This structure allows talk of the ideality of a language, since that language will be different in each dialogue (a different subset of the language will be shared by the interlocutors, and different possibilities of that language will be appealed to): the language has no existence outside of the occasions on which it is used, and yet it is the binding possibilities of that language that are invoked. Gadamer does not talk much at this level of a single language, but I feel that it needs to be included in order to distinguish this level of
ideality clearly from the next. The reason he does not talk about the identity of individual languages is that he is much more interested in the possibility of communication between different languages, and the overlaps between languages that allow talk of language as a whole.

**D : The Ideality of Language as a Whole**

**i : A Broad View of Language**

Gadamer also applies the ideality schema to the whole of language, by calling the whole of language ‘das Wort’ and referring us to the beginning of John’s gospel. By this he means to pick out the entire linguistic tradition to which we belong and by which we are addressed. Language takes its identity simply from the fact that we attempt to understand one another, to interpret things around us, and to find meanings for ourselves that can be relevant to our own situation. We are always interpreting, and each interpretation invokes the hermeneutical structure of language as a whole. If this is Gadamer’s ultimate definition of language as a whole, then it is clearly a very broad conception indeed. It can include the habits of thought and pre-conceptual reasoning that we have looked at, and it must include the symbolisations and other forms of communication that we said should belong to a weak reading of ‘linguisticality’¹. With such a broad conception of language the fear expressed by Bradley (1977), that language may not be such a universal structure of understanding as Gadamer takes it to be, must be ill-founded. Language, in its broadest sense, just is the ideal-identity that guides all instances of understanding.

**ii : Holism**

To refer to this very broad structure as ‘one word’ clearly implies a very strong holism. Gadamer takes all language to be intimately inter-related: individual

¹ COOK (1986) suggests that the silent acquisition of non-articulated meaning in reading (as analysed by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty) may need to be included as well.
utterances are not only dependent for their meaning on the context in which they occur, but also ‘resonate’ with the whole of the rest of language. There are two claims involved here: one is that the framework of questioning that underlies all meaning makes any statement comprehensible only in contrast with a range of other possible things that could have been said but were not. Here we already see that there will be important context-related difficulties concerning the possibility of two people sharing a thought. They can both appeal to the same (ideal-identical) thought, but it will mean different things to each of them unless they are in the process of successfully fusing their horizons. But Gadamer actually endorses a stronger holism than this, which arises from the other sense of his claim that all of language resonates in each word. In order to see how it works, we must look briefly at his ideas about metaphor and conceptual history.

**iii: Metaphor**

It might be supposed that talk of metaphor could not be consistent with such a holist account of language, as it presumably presupposes the idea that a word has an original, ‘normal’ referent that can be isolated from its other senses and from the rest of language. Gadamer, however, views metaphor not as an extension or decoration of normal language use, but as its basic mode of operation. Because of his emphasis on understanding he is able to say that anything that is addressed by one person to another can result in attempts to understand it as saying something in that context. The way in which content is transmitted depends to some extent on the words used, but never depends on their being used in a conventional or entirely predictable way. This presupposes the existence of conventional meanings for words only insofar as some kind of appeal to a shared understanding of *something* must be required for

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1 For other arguments to the effect that continual change and the lack of any reliably re-identifiable constant object does not itself preclude the possibility of meaningfulness, interpretation, better and worse interpretations, or an inhabitable world, see the work of Joseph MARGOLIS, especially (1990a).
communication; but it allows that communication can greatly surpass the actual literal conventional meanings of the strings of words used in every case (see pp. 115ff). When Gadamer refers to this possibility as the ‘fundamental metaphoricality of language’ (WM p. 407, 1 p. 389) he is himself using the word ‘metaphor’ metaphorically. He does not mean that individual words are always being applied in realms to which they do not conventionally apply, but that the kind of understanding that we need in order to grasp the point of a metaphor is in fact used in all communication.

iv : The History of Concepts

This thought leads Gadamer to practice his own brand of conceptual analysis: he does not look for the necessary and sufficient conditions by means of which we can determine whether or not some potential instance falls within a concept, but instead looks at the history of all the various ways in which a concept has been used, and examines the metaphorical extensions of the concept that we find in contemporary everyday usage. His aim is to broaden, not to pin down, the domains over which language ranges, so as to increase its expressive power not by making it wholly unambiguous but by making it evocative and suggestive. This is consistent with his rejection of the ideal of modelling philosophy on natural scientific method. What he sees himself doing as a philosopher is not conducting methodical research that could lead to potentially useful results, but continuing an ongoing inquiry into truth for its own sake and questioning tradition in order to reveal the historical contingency of our contemporary prejudices.

v : The One Word

Thus Gadamer’s talk of the ‘one word’ that is language, far from being incompatible with Gadamer’s notion of metaphor, is derived from it. Just as each
word can range over a potentially infinitely broad domain of possible meanings depending on the context in which it is used, the tone of voice with which it is uttered and the contrasts that it is used to draw, so language as a whole can range over a literally infinite domain of possible meanings and insights by being stretched and extended in precisely this way. Just as a word has ideal-identity that allows it to be different on each occasion of its use, so language has ‘virtuality’ which allows it to encapsulate the whole of being. As Gadamer puts it,

Language is in truth the one word whose virtuality opens up to us the infinity of speaking further and of speaking with one another, and the freedom of what ‘is said’ and of what ‘can be said’. (KS4 p. 93, 1 p. 498)

I shall show at the end of Chapter Six how this metaphor of language as one all-encompassing word is the very root of Gadamer’s ontology, taking the place of ‘Being’ in Heidegger, ‘the Good’ in Plato and ‘Spirit’ in Hegel.

3 : TOTAL MEDIATION AND COMMUNICATION

A : Total Mediation

Gadamer uses the phrase ‘total mediation’ to describe the way in which we notice what somebody says rather than the language with which they say it. We listen to the content, and not to the form; thus even though the form is necessary to communicate the concept it ‘cancels itself out’ once the content has been understood. This is possible because we belong to language and live in it, and do not therefore need to analyse the grammar and syntax of what is said to us in order to understand it. The question now arises as to whether total mediation applies only to the most immediate forms of understanding or whether it still applies at higher levels.

i : Total Mediation by Prejudices

The claim that we belong to language to such an extent that we notice only the content and not the form of what is said to us presumably works first and foremost at
the level that I distinguished at the end of Chapter Two (p. 57) as ‘minimal understanding’. That means that if we stick with the prejudices we have inherited from tradition, they enable us to perform the basic hermeneutic task of seeing a context of questioning in which a limited range of things might be said, and of deciding which of them is nearest to actually being said. Hence I might think that when I ask you if I can borrow your car you might say “yes” or “no”: I will then be able to construe any sentence that begins, for example, “I’d love to but...” as saying “no” before you’ve even completed it.

**ii: Total Mediation in a Proper Conversation**

But can this total mediation also work on the higher level where we are caught up in a genuinely open conversation (see p. 53n)? Clearly it cannot work in the same way, since that precludes our being open to one another’s point of view. Yet it remains the case that communication is not ultimately dependent on the particular grammar and syntax that is used, so much as on the use of contrasts that arise within the context of the discussion. Thus a fusion of horizons is only brought closer when the questions that are in play in the discussion can be understood more similarly from within the two horizons. The event of truth occurs when a common language is found, which means that a common question is being asked about the same thing and understood in the same way, so that the same answer recommends itself in an enlightening way. It might not be immediately obvious why this should necessitate actual agreement (i.e. the same answer) as well as just a common understanding of the question. In fact, there is more to this new level of total mediation than a mere common questioning: it is not just that one person can see past the form of the other’s expression to their meaning, but it is now also the case that what they are talking about (the *Sache selbst*) presents itself clearly without being hindered by the
mediation of the language in which it is described. Gadamer links this level of ‘total mediation’ with what he calls the ‘transformation into a structure’, which we must look at more closely.

**B : Transformation into a Structure**

As we have seen, Gadamer explains how play gets transformed into a structure by talking about a play – a dramatic production. Here, he says, the actors are engaged in play which the audience perceives as a structured whole. What the actors do is given its significance and its structure by that fact that it is to be perceived as a whole that is understood as meaningful. The very being of the play which guides their actions is supposed to be completely transformed by this, and to become a meaningful vehicle of insight and truth. Gadamer says that life itself can sometimes be understood in this way, when we think of it as comic or tragic, or see a sequence of events as a story that has some significance for us. This transformation into a structure is then described as the ‘raising up [Aufhebung, see p. 170] of reality into its truth’ (WM p. 108, 1 p. 102). What a play or another artwork depicts, or what we otherwise perceive as a structured, meaningful whole, undergoes an ‘increase in being’. We gain an insight by recognising ourselves in the structure, and by seeing how it applies to our own situation.

**i : Structure in Proper Conversations**

We can apply this to Gadamer’s notion of language, and see that the moment of application that is crucial to the fusion of horizons in a proper conversation is to be understood as involving this same self-recognition in the ‘structure’ of what is being said. ‘Structure’ here does not refer to the form or the syntax of what is said, but to the fact that it is taken as a whole and assumed to be meaningful by the person who can then come to recognise something of relevance to themselves in it as a result. This in
turn shows us how total mediation is to work in a proper conversation. The Sache that guides the discussion does so because each participant looks at it as a meaningful structure, and, as the viewpoints at play move closer as more central questions are found, each person comes to recognise the personal significance that that structure has for them. It is this moment of self-recognition that makes the event of truth an enlightening one: once the horizons are fused, both partners can see something true about themselves. This is more than a mere overturning of prejudices: by its being the source of such self-recognition, the Sache selbst has undergone an increase in being. This means that it has attained such clarity for the people who have discussed it that they are in a position to bring a much better initial insight to future conversations about it. By the repetition of this process, the way in which the tradition as a whole comes to regard the thing in question can move on, and people’s initial prejudices can start to be informed by the new insights.

ii : The Development of Language

Because language is primarily meaningful in a proper conversation – a situation where the play of language is continuously transformed into structure as it progresses, through the participants’ interpretations of themselves and of one another, and which therefore moves towards the event of truth in the fusion of horizons – its meanings are altered by individual proper conversations which move the play of language in new directions. Gadamer says that

everywhere that communication happens, not only is language used but language is formed (VZW p. 11, 5 p. 4)

and that as a result

Language is the trace of finitude, not because there is a multiplicity of ways in which human language is built, but because every single language is constantly forming itself and improving itself, the more it brings its experience of the world to language. (WM p. 433, 1 p. 415)
Thus the transformation into a structure is responsible for the ongoing development of language and thus for the continual state of flux which is the play of language itself.

Language as play both is and is not structured, as Gadamer explains:

Play is structure – this thesis means that, in spite of its dependence on being played, it is a meaningful whole which can be repeatedly represented as such and understood in its sense. But structure is also play – and this in spite of its ideal unity – because it only attains its full being on the occasions when it gets played. It is the belonging together of both sides that we have to stress ... (WM p. 111, 1 p. 105)

In thinking of language as play, we should replace ‘the occasions when it gets played’ (Gadamer is actually talking about a dramatic play or musical work here) with ‘the occasions when it (language) is used’ – most importantly, when it is understood in a fundamental conversation, rather than merely uttered or written.

**iii: Artworks and the Absence of Total Mediation**

There is some confusion in the relationship between the transformation into a structure and the total mediation of the thing itself in the event of truth, which is brought about by Gadamer’s assertion that in artworks (which are the paradigms of structure) total mediation is absent. Gadamer’s central example of a structure that does not exhibit total mediation is a lyric poem, in which the sense cannot be separated from the sound of the words and the rhythm of the verse. Such a poem is said to present itself as a whole in which form and content are united, which is therefore untranslatable and expresses no truth that could be separated from the very words in which it is expressed. Lyric poetry is sometimes seen as an exception in this respect and sometimes as a typical example of all artworks: but whichever it is, it presents us with a distinction between the total mediation of truth in artworks and their meaningful structure. The transformation into structure, then, cannot just be identified with the direct communication of personal significance that gives the artwork an increase in being. Instead, structure must be thought of as the ideal-identity of the artwork, or of whatever is significant, which then allows for the possibility of
direct personal communication. Hence the structure of a lyric poem has this kind of identity, and does allow for direct personal communication: it is an exception only in that the communication is, in this case, dependent on the form, and thus does not fit with Gadamer’s description of ‘total mediation’. This allows us to see why the lyric poem is also a good example of an artwork in this respect: an artwork communicates directly and personally in the same way that a fundamental conversation does, but the form of an artwork cannot usually be altered while the communication is preserved.

**C : The Ideality of the ‘Sache Selbst’**

But what is communicated in this direct and personal way, even if it cannot always be separated from the contingent form of a particular artwork, itself has ideal-identity: it is embodied completely in the various insights that people have about it, and is changed by each of them, yet it takes on a being of its own as a result and is binding for each insight as it itself guides and produces those insights. The ideality of language, on all levels, arises from the ideality of the world itself, of the things that are talked about in language.

**Dialectic**

But this ideal-identity is still puzzling: how can it be that something can become self-identical precisely through being different on each occasion that it comes into being? Gadamer approaches this problem through the work of Plato and Hegel, and I hope that in Section Two I shall be able to lay out some of his ideas, which are quite complex, more clearly than I have been able to in relation only to his own positive thought. Our discussions of ideality and language should enable us to see what is meant by the dialectic of the one and the indeterminate two (Plato) and the identity of identity and difference (Hegel). For now I shall conclude Section One by observing that this dialectical contradiction is at the root of Gadamer’s ontology. As
we have seen, Gadamer holds that being is the self-presentation of the world within language, and that although it can thereby attain self-identity and binding structure it does not go beyond our finite understanding of it. He also thinks that we are ‘always on the way’ in our inquiries into truth and being, and that any insights we do capture must always remain open. This whole fundamental idea is clearly revealed in what Gadamer has to say about knowledge. Here he follows Socrates’ profession of ignorance and makes it into a paradoxically positive claim: to know is to know that you do not know. Gadamer says that it is awareness of our lack of ultimate knowledge that must drive us to seek knowledge, and that

Knowledge always means precisely taking contraries together. (WM p. 347, 1 p. 328)

Gadamer takes a number of opposites together in the very foundations of his philosophy, and we need to look at his concept of dialectic to see whether he has any good reasons for according a positive value to these apparent contradictions. This can only be done by examining Gadamer’s use of the thinking of Heidegger, Plato and Hegel.
SECTION TWO
CHAPTER FIVE
HEIDEGGER

1: GADAMER’S HEIDEGGERIAN DIMENSION

A: Gadamer’s Appropriation of Tradition

Having seen how Gadamer’s system works, our task is now to identify Gadamer’s original contribution, and to see exactly how his ontological ideas are related to those of the thinkers that are his most important influences. Gadamer draws widely on many writers from all parts of the Greco-European philosophical tradition. Nearly always, there are specific insights that he finds telling (from his horizon) within a given writer’s work, and he shows how those insights (which are not usually central to the thinking of the writer in question) were an advance within the thinking of their own time, and how they affected thought that came after them. He then absorbs the insights into his own line of argument, distinguishing them from those of the writer’s prejudices that he rejects. Very often these prejudices are found most explicitly in the very areas of someone’s thought where Gadamer discovers the insights that he wants to keep: they exist as tensions between the writer’s insight and his appropriation of tradition. There is no space here to look in detail at Gadamer’s account of the effective history of writers such as Augustine\(^1\), Aquinas, Nicholas of Cusa\(^2\), Vico\(^3\), Kant\(^4\), Schiller\(^5\), Schleiermacher\(^6\), Dilthey\(^1\), Husserl\(^2\) or Collingwood\(^3\).

\(^1\) See GRONDIN (1994).
\(^3\) See SCHAEFFER (1987).
\(^4\) See VELKLEY (1981) and MAKKREEL (1986).
His interpretations of these people have often been criticised, partly because it is not always obvious that Gadamer’s criticisms involve not only the rejection of their prejudices but also the adoption of insights from the very passages that he criticises, and partly because the insights that he retains often seem to have more to do with Heidegger than with the thinkers from which he ostensibly draws them. Instead of looking in detail at these thinkers, however, I think it is more important that I lay out how Gadamer’s ontology rests on his appropriation of three central thinkers: Plato, Hegel and Heidegger. I shall take these thinkers not in chronological order, but in the order of their apparent importance for Gadamer’s thinking. For this reason we must turn now to Heidegger, whose influence is undoubtedly the strongest single drive behind the development of philosophical hermeneutics.

i : Gadamer and Heidegger

Gadamer describes his first encounters with Heidegger as a revelation. He says that he was ‘Heideggered’ along with many others who experienced his lectures at the time. The power of Heidegger’s presence, and the passion of his love affair with thinking, clearly left a very deep impression on Gadamer, who never misses an opportunity to tell his readers about Heidegger’s style, personality and effect on those around him. Before he ever met Heidegger, however, Gadamer was a classicist with a love of Plato and Aristotle. His reading of classical Greek philosophy undoubtedly enabled him to follow Heidegger’s own return to the roots of Western culture with great depth and clarity of understanding. He picked up Heidegger’s entire program along with his interpretation of the Greeks, and, as he himself says, continued on the paths of thinking along which Heidegger had started out. Heidegger’s influence has

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already been evident in several places in Section One where it proved impossible to explain Gadamer’s own thought without referring to him\(^1\).

### ii : Plato and Hegel

But Gadamer’s love of Plato, in particular, never entirely succumbed to Heidegger’s influence. Not only was Gadamer unhappy with Heidegger’s reading of Plato, but he found in Plato’s Socrates a voice that spoke directly to him and had some insights that he felt were valid and important for modern philosophy. The Socratic dialectic remained of enormous importance to him: so much so in fact that he could not agree with Heidegger’s analysis of the history of progressive forgetfulness of Being. Hegel, whom Heidegger took to be the last great metaphysician, and hence to be farthest from the path towards to meaning of being, is also of great importance to Gadamer as a champion of dialectic. As we shall see, Gadamer finds many Hegelian insights preserved in Heidegger’s position, but allows himself to acknowledge their Hegelian origin without the restraint of trying to escape from the ‘language of metaphysics’.

This chapter, then, is to trace out Heidegger’s position and to examine Gadamer’s appropriation of it. The next chapter will move on to the Platonic and then to the Hegelian elements of Gadamer’s thought. This will leave us with an insight into what Gadamer's own contribution to our understanding of ontology consists in, which will in turn allow us to see how that contribution forms the basis for philosophical hermeneutics and underlies its influence.

### B : Logic

At the end of the last chapter we looked briefly at Gadamer’s mode of argument: I explained there (p. 114) how he looks at the history of the concepts we

\(^1\) As BERNASCONI (1986) puts it, “we constantly find ourselves forced to turn back to Heidegger to fill certain lacunae in his presentation, particularly in respect of the explication of concepts.” (p. 3).
use and at the possible range of their extension in order to see where our thoughts are contingent and limiting. His style seems vague to a reader who is used to analytic philosophy as he does not aim to prove or demonstrate what he says, but rather hopes to evoke enlightening experiences that lead his readers to see the truth in what he says. This is not unconnected with the apparent disregard for conventional logic shown by his embracing of a dialectic of contradictions. Why, we wonder, does he not try either to show us the formal validity of his arguments, or to avoid contradictions in his thought? Why does he claim that rhetoric is more fundamental than logic? Why, in short, does he appear to claim that what is true can also be false, and that pretty much anything can be true if experienced in the right way?

i : Heidegger and Logic

This attitude towards logic is one element in Gadamer’s thought that, while it is often developed in a Platonic or Hegelian way, is indisputably Heideggerian in origin. It may seem to be a general trend in what is known as ‘continental philosophy’, and many different writers have evolved away from the rigours of logical exposition as a result of different influences. In Gadamer’s case, however, the reference is always to Heidegger, who famously commented that

In the technical interpretation of thinking, being is abandoned as the element of thinking. ‘Logic’ is the sanctioning of this interpretation that began with the sophists and Plato. Thinking is judged by a criterion that is not appropriate to it. This judgement is like a process that tries to assess the nature and worth of a fish according to how long it is able to live on dry land.  

Gadamer refers in this connection (HW p. 107, 13 p. 126) to the lectures on logic that Heidegger gave during his time at Marburg in the 1920s. As it happens, these lectures are also a useful way in to Heidegger’s thought.

\[1\] HEIDEGGER (1967) pp. 146-7
In the introduction to the last such lecture course that Heidegger gave, in the summer of 1928, he argued that as logic is supposed to be a description of the laws that thought follows it presupposes the answers to a number of fundamental questions. He says that the true science of logic, and any scientific application of logic, must be philosophical in nature, since it must consider not just the traditional characterisation of thought but the importance of thinking as such, and hence of ourselves, the beings who think, for the beings that are thought about. Any other kind of logic merely presupposes that beings in general can be treated according to the patterns that we traditionally happen to believe apply to our thought. Heidegger claims that the only way that we can approach the question of how thought is bound by rules, why it should be so bound, and how, if at all, it preserves truth, is through a consideration of its fundamental essence as a mode of being of Dasein. (Heidegger uses the German word ‘Dasein’, which normally means ‘existence’, and literally means ‘the-being-there’, to denote our relationship to the world in which we exist. We ‘are there’ in that, for us, there is a world of significance in which we behave in certain appropriate ways. Heidegger then sometimes, especially in his earlier work, uses the word ‘Dasein’ as though it was a name for each individual human being.)

Since logic is required to be philosophical in this way, any investigation of logic must ask about a series of issues that probes gradually deeper towards fundamental ontology. We must ask first about the law-following and axiomatic nature of thought, which will lead us to the question of what the nature of truth is. A consideration of what can be true – initially, a proposition, which consists of a relationship of concepts – will lead us to ask about what concepts are, how they are
formed, and how they relate to the beings they aim to capture. This will in turn lead us to a consideration of what beings are in general and what marks off ourselves as a special kind of being that is able to capture all kinds of beings in concepts. We must ask what is the ground or basis of our conceptualisation, what lies behind all the beings to which we relate that allows us to relate to them in the way that we do. Asking this will bring us to two fundamental questions: ‘what is being, by virtue of which all beings are?’, and ‘what is this human freedom that is able to follow rules, to conceptualise beings and relate them to one another in ways that may be true of false?’.

2 : A READING OF HEIDEGGER’S THOUGHT

A : The Ontological Difference

Of these questions, the question of the meaning of being is the one that is Heidegger’s lifelong principal concern; the other turns out in his writings to be derivable from it. In this introduction (the remainder of these lectures on ‘logic’ go on to discuss Leibniz’ metaphysics at length, and are therefore of less interest to us here), Heidegger has this to say about the ‘ontological difference’, as he came to call it:

Philosophy seeks to conceptualise being, not this or that entity. Only, what do we mean then by being as distinct from entities? How is it with the being of a thing that is present at hand? A stone, for example: a certain colour, hardness, lustre, spatial form, weight, size, – that belongs to it as this entity; all things of this kind it ‘is’, it is such and such. But how is it with its being – its being-present-at-hand and its being-such? The stone’s being-present is not itself present in it like its colour, hardness, and so on. The stone owns something on the basis of which I say that it is present, even when I am not directly considering it, even when I myself am not. And what I mean by my self is also an entity. Is that entity also in being when I am not? Obviously not – ‘I’ belong to it. But there are not two things – the entity of the stone and of the I. But the entity that

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1 This thesis does not allow space for a very thorough or completely defended reading of Heidegger’s immensely subtle and complex thinking. What I offer here is an overview that will allow us to get Gadamer’s Heideggerian inheritance into a clear perspective. I cannot deny that Gadamer’s work has been of great help to me in my attempts to understand Heidegger, and it is inevitable that my reading of Heidegger will sound distinctly Gadamerian as a result. What concerns me, however, is not to establish whether Gadamer understands Heidegger correctly, but to see more accurately how he himself understands the thoughts he takes over from Heidegger, and so to see clearly where he goes beyond him.
can say ‘I’ is certainly such that it delivers up its being and is answerable to itself for this being.¹

Is there any substance to this distinction? What is it that Heidegger is trying to get at? In trying to understand Heidegger’s distinction there are a few traps we must be careful not to fall into. Firstly, this passage can be read as though Heidegger were reverting to a traditional substratum or substance ontology. Once we strip away all the properties of the stone, what is left on account of which it is able to have those properties? The traditional answer is that these properties are merely the contingent form of an underlying substratum or substance which subsists in this case as a stone. But Heidegger reads the passages in Aristotle on which this idea is ultimately based rather differently. It makes no sense, he argues, to talk of a substratum which in some sense subsists in abstraction from the properties it has. That is not what Heidegger means, then, by saying that the stone’s being is not one of its properties, but rather is the ground underlying those properties. Nor, as this passage makes clear but others do not, is he heading for a quasi-idealist doctrine in which the stone’s being is somehow dependent on human Dasein. Heidegger’s puzzle is precisely this: there is clearly one sense in which the being of entities is related to us, since they cannot be the entities that they are for us without our conceptualisation of them and our familiarity with them; yet there is clearly another sense in which their being is nothing to do with us at all, since we are in no doubt that they would be in no way changed by our absence.

i: Two Kinds of Being: a Simple Understanding of the Distinction

Does this puzzle arise only because Heidegger has missed a simple distinction? Could it be that we can acknowledge that entities’ being the entities that they are for us depends on our input, while insisting that their being the entities that they are per se does not? This distinction is actually one that is at the centre of

¹ HEIDEGGER (1978) pp.16-17
Heidegger’s thought. His question concerns the second kind of being – being per se, being that things have, but that is nothing to do with us. What, Heidegger asks, can this mean? Clearly, this kind of being is not itself an entity, but it is nevertheless that on the basis of which everything that is is. Heidegger is then faced with a problem, because this kind of being has nothing to do with us, and there is therefore nothing more that can be said about it. The interesting question then must be: what is the relationship between this kind of being, which has nothing to do with us, and the kind of being with which we are in fact familiar, the being of entities as they present themselves to us and as we are familiar with them?

ii : Being ‘Gives’ Beings

Again at this point there is a trap which we must avoid. Heidegger’s talk of being is not to be equated with Kant’s talk (1781, A252 B307) of a noumenon (although the relationship between the two doctrines is certainly an interesting and intricate one). The important distinction is this: Kant’s noumenon just is whatever it is, and we can never have any access to it at all; there is then a phenomenal world in which we live, and which is all that is real, and the relationship between the two is beyond our reach. Heidegger, on the other hand, claims about being that ‘it gives’. This phrase is of course the German phrase es gibt, which normally just means ‘there is’. But Heidegger enjoyed using the full capabilities of the German language and saw in this phrase an expression of a way to approach the problem of being. Why does German say ‘it gives’ where English says ‘there is’? Heidegger takes the ‘it’ to be being per se, and claims that it is in the nature of this being to give itself to us.

1 Incidentally, this English expression makes Heidegger’s use of ‘being there’ (Dasein) as the special distinguishing feature of human existence that much more difficult for an English speaker to understand properly.
This is a peculiar claim. To try to clarify it, Heidegger gives a name to this giving: the ‘clearing’ in being. Provisionally, the clearing can be understood as the fact that we exist, or, more precisely, the fact that there is an entity that takes an interest in other entities and in being in general. The clearing is, we might say, something for being to give itself to. Thus although we have nothing to do with the being of entities per se, our presence casts light onto being in such a way that they can present themselves to us as the entities with whose being we are familiar. Thus our role is that of an entity that ‘delivers up its being’ by being concerned about being, and hence allows things to be in the full sense. We are concerned with our own being first and foremost, and thus with being as such and so with the being of entities in general.

**i : Heidegger’s Explanation of the ‘Clearing’**

It will be useful to look more closely at the structure that this clearing in being is supposed to have by examining the passage in which Heidegger introduces it:

> Und dennoch: über das Seiende hinaus, aber nicht von ihm weg, sondern vor ihm her, geschieht noch ein Ereignis. Inmitten des Seienden im Ganzen west eine offene Stelle. Eine Lichtung ist. Sie ist, vom Seienden her gedacht, seiender als das Seiende. Diese offene Mitte ist daher nicht vom Seienden umschlossen, sondern die lichtende Mitte selbst umkreist wie das Nichts, das wir kaum kennen, alles Seiende. ¹

> And yet: beyond what is, not away from it, however, but in front of it, one more event happens. In the midst of what is as a whole an open place resides. A clearing is. It is, thought of here from what is, beinger than what is. Hence this open middle is not surrounded by what is, but the clearing middle itself encircles everything that is, like the nothing of which we are scarcely aware.

**Expressions for ‘being’**

This is a very difficult passage and we must work through it very carefully. At the start, there is just *das Seiende*, that which is. This is distinguished in Heidegger’s writings from at least three other expressions, all of which are most naturally rendered into English as ‘being’. *Das Sein* tends to be reserved for what I have been referring to

¹ HEIDEGGER (1950) p.41
as being per se, Seiendes and das Seiende both mean ‘that which is’ in general, and ein Seiendes means an entity. Within that which is, then, there is a clearing: or rather, a clearing is, because of course saying ‘there is’ would be ‘es gibt’ and Heidegger does not want that phrase here.

Essencing

We have to start, it seems, with das Seiende in order to see how it is that das Sein ‘gives’ it. The clearing within das Seiende is an event. The clearing ‘wesen’: wesen is a neologism. I have translated it with ‘to reside’, because that is one sense that the archaic verb used to have when it existed. But Heidegger means something rather more active than a mere residing, and is playing on the fact that Wesen is the usual noun for essence (ein Wesen is a living creature). The clearing ‘essences’, perhaps, but no English neologism seems quite to capture the force of the German.

Comparing being

Heidegger then explains how the clearing looks if we ‘think from’ that which is. Here he is playing on his distinction between being (das Sein) and that which is (das Seinende): we are considering the point of view of what ‘it gives’, rather than that of the ‘it’ that does the giving (which itself is not anything at all). From the point of view of what ‘it gives’ (of what there is), then, the clearing is seiender than this very same ‘what there is’ whose point of view we are considering. ‘Seiender’ means ‘beinger’; it is the comparative form of the present indicative participle of the verb to be. Participles are, of course, adjectives, but it is not normal for their comparative and superlative forms to be used, since the meaning is not clear even when we are not dealing with the verb to be. Still, the simple participle presumably describes something as being in the process or in the action of being. The comparative, then, we must suppose, here says that the clearing is more in the action or process of being than
is ‘that which is’, within which it is a clearing. This would seem to point to the idea that what has being for us more genuinely has being, or is more completely in the act of being, than the mere ‘whatever there is’ that I called ‘being per se’.

ii : The Clearing and the Nothing

Finally, we are told that this clearing within what is, which is beinger than what is, is not surrounded by what is (within which it is nonetheless a clearing), but rather itself encircles everything that is. Hence everything that is is within the clearing within what is. Here we have apparently an utter confusion of mixed metaphors. The ‘clearing’ is beyond, in front of and all around that within which it is a clearing. The clue to what this means lies in Heidegger’s comparing the clearing within what is to ‘the nothing of which we are scarcely aware’. What the clearing and the nothing have in common is that they both encircle everything that is. ‘The nothing’ is Heidegger’s name for non-being; we are scarcely aware of it because we are Dasein, and as such we are being-in-the-world. The nothing must be either what is not in-the-world, precisely what we do not encounter, or it must be what simply is not a part of being per se at all. In Sein und Zeit we encounter the nothing only as our ownmost possibility of not being, when, in a state of Angst, we authentically face up to death. But the nothing, whichever way we understand it, is something we cannot imagine, something we can only name as such and gesture towards, since it is either that which has no reality for us or that which has no being at all.

iii : Being and Nothing

In this similarity between the clearing and the nothing we can see how Heidegger’s picture of being works. Being itself is not; it is neither in the clearing nor is it part of the nothing, but it gives. When it gives, there is something, and everything that is is given by being. But it can only give because there is somebody to give to:
there is an entity that cares about being, namely Dasein. The presence of Dasein is the clearing: being gives to Dasein a realm of possibility. The clearing is what it does give, and the nothing is what it does not give. In fact, Heidegger holds that these are not just separate, but that they are always present together. When anything has being – when it is, when it is a particular thing or when it is a particular way – this fact involves immediately a reference to other possibilities, since it implies the negation of its contrary. That something is only means anything because it rules out the possibility that it is not, that something is a particular thing means that it is nothing else, and that something is one way means that it is not another way.

**Negation**

This constant presence of negation in being works on two levels. Firstly, in a general way, not-being surrounds everything that is, and hence the nothing is less being than what is, in the same way that the clearing is more being than what is, while both consist only of what is and contain everything that is. We must suppose that some things are beyond our reach, belong to the nothing and never come into the clearing at all. As Heidegger puts it, some things are concealed because they ‘refuse themselves’. But in a more specific sense, everything within the clearing that reveals itself to Dasein is at the same time also concealed. Heidegger calls this concealing ‘dissembling’. When something is not dissembling, when it reveals itself, Heidegger talks of it as coming into ‘the open’, but he always reminds us that when anything does this it at the same time conceals other things or other aspects of itself. In the essay from which I quoted, this relationship appears as the constant struggle between world (the self-revealing) and earth (the self-concealing).
Truth as *aletheia*

Heidegger ties this constant presence of negation in with his continued investigation into the meaning of the Greek word for truth, \(\alpha\lambda\nu\theta\varepsilon\iota\alpha\) (*aletheia*). He draws attention to the privative ‘a-’ prefix; the word literally means un-forgottenness\(^1\). Hence he takes truth to be un-concealing. As we saw, whenever anything reveals itself or becomes un-concealed (i.e. whenever anything is true) it at the same time conceals. This moment of concealing is, for Heidegger, an essential part of all truth. When things within the clearing ‘come into the open’ and so reveal themselves as true, they are at the same time concealed and concealing\(^2\).

iv : Care

So the picture we end up with is this\(^3\). Being, or ‘it’, is itself nothing. But it is capable of ‘giving’, provided that there is something that cares to which it can give.

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\(^1\) Heidegger is not alone in his returning to the Greek origin of ‘truth’. His interpretation as ‘un-concealedness’, however, which appears in his earliest writings with little explanation, is somewhat at odds with the explanation offered by the Russian platonist Florenskij. Florenskij examines the Greek, Latin, Russian and Sanskrit notions of truth, and has this to say about the Greek word:

The word \(\alpha\lambda\nu\theta\varepsilon\iota\alpha\ldots\) is formed from the negative particle α (α *privatum*) and \(\lambda\eta\theta\omega\zeta\). Dorian \(\lambda\alpha\theta\omega\zeta\). The latter word, from the root *ladho*, is from the same root as the verb \(\lambda\alpha\theta\omega\), Ionian \(\lambda\eta\theta\omega\), and \(\lambda\alpha\nu\theta\alpha\nu\omega\) – to pass over, to slip away, to remain imperceptible, to remain uncertain; in the middle voice, this verb acquires the meaning memoria labor, to let something slip from one’s memory, to lose something from one’s memory (i.e. from consciousness in general), to forget. (FLORENSKIJ 1914, pp.17-18)

Florenskij seems to go into more depth and detail here than Heidegger, and reaches the view that the Greeks meant ‘not forgotten’ or ‘borne firmly in mind’ by ‘true’, rather than Heidegger’s ‘un-concealed’. The consequences he draws are therefore rather different. Heidegger’s tendency to read into Greek words the ‘world’ that he supposes went with them is not always the most reliable and sturdy base for an ontology. That does not, of course, mean that his insights are not valuable in spite of their basis in tenuous etymology. For a comparison of Gadamer and Florenskij see CHERNYAK (1988).

\(^2\) VATTIMO (1988, p.117) explains this well in terms of Heidegger’s hermeneutic analysis of *Dasein* in *Sein und Zeit*. There, things appear as tools, ready-to-hand within *Dasein’s* projects, and so can only appear at all by being drawn into a whole network of references and significance. Vattimo identifies this with Heidegger’s later talk of an *Ereignis* (event of appropriation) in which things present themselves, thus explaining why any revealing (self-presentation), as it is always an appropriation into a wider context (an hence an ‘expropriation’ – *Ent-eignung*), is also a concealing of what is appropriated within the rest of the referential context.

\(^3\) AMBROSIO (1986a) offers a rather different (although not incompatible) reading of this essay and of the ontological difference, placing emphasis on Heidegger’s notion of *Ereignis*, the event of appropriation in which man and Being belong together. Ambrosio aligns this with Gadamer’s idea of the virtuality of language: his argument is that Gadamer diverges from Heidegger because his concern is ultimately not with Heidegger’s question of the meaning of Being but more originally with the nature of understanding, and he points out that they crucially share a linking of truth with the freedom given
However, we cannot talk in this way, since to say ‘there is something that cares’, is to presuppose the being of beings, which is just what we must avoid here. So instead Heidegger talks of a clearing in being. This is the same thing as the presence of a being that cares about being, but it avoids talking about the presence of any actual entity. The care is needed, and that is the clearing; the actual entity that cares is not itself needed at this stage. The clearing, then, provides a space to which being can give beings. But at the same time as it gives them, it conceals them.

v: The Nearness of Being

The story with which we started was simple. There is a sense of ‘being’ in which things have whatever being they have, and our presence or absence is irrelevant. Why, then, does Heidegger find that once he introduces us into the picture it becomes so immensely complicated? He talks of being as what is simplest and most immediate. Yet, he says, because of its very simplicity it is hidden from us behind a veil of complications that arises from our everyday dealings with the world. What seems to be most immediate, our everyday activity, in fact rests on being, which is therefore in fact closer to us but to which we are blinded. The task of philosophy, as Heidegger sees it, is to dig behind the complications and to follow a path towards uncovering being in its simplicity and immediacy. The clash that arises here between the simple relationship between being and ourselves on the one hand and our complex understanding on the other has to do with the clash between an infinite perspective and a finite one.

by the Ereignis (the ‘giving’ of Being by ‘it’) or by the virtuality of the ‘one word’. His argument lends support to my thesis that Gadamer’s ontology is crucially influenced by his emphasis on understanding, since he claims that the question within which the whole of Gadamer’s ontology is to be understood is a question of understanding rather than of being.
C : Finitude

We have seen that we, as Dasein, constitute a caring clearing in being to which being gives itself. All entities are within this clearing, which is itself more actively being than the being in which it is a clearing. What is less than being is ‘the nothing’, ‘of which we are scarcely aware’. When we do become aware of the nothing it is only as a limit to our own being. But that discovery, that our own being is necessarily limited, is of great importance for Heidegger, and is an aspect of his thought that remains absolutely central for Gadamer. Heidegger’s thinking about our finitude is closely connected in his early thought with his characterisation of the nature of our being-in-the-world. As his thought developed, his thinking about both finitude and the world changed away from its initial close relationship to the situation of an individual human being.

i : Authenticity

In Sein und Zeit, he talks about two possible ways of being for Dasein: authentic and inauthentic. For the most part, we are ‘fallen’ into inauthenticity, which means that we live our lives according to a popular image of ourselves, making choices by considering what ‘one does in this kind of situation’, and wasting time with idle talk. Authenticity is then characterised as the recognition of one’s finitude. This occurs in a particular mood (Angst), when our day to day concerns recede and we are brought face to face with nothingness, and with the certainty of death: for each one of us, ‘my own’ death. Heidegger considers it possible to hold on to this recognition (‘resolutely’) and to live life authentically, resisting the constant pull towards inauthentic being. He then has this to say about the relationship between our finitude and our ontological role as care (the term ‘clearing’ came later: the equivalent at this stage of Heidegger’s thought is Dasein’s care):
Care is being towards death. We have defined fore-running resoluteness as authentic being towards the possibility characterised by the downright impossibility of Dasein. In such a sense Dasein exists authentically towards its end wholly as that entity which can be ‘thrown into death’. It does not have an end at which it just ceases, but it exists finitely. The authentic future, which is primarily brought into time by the temporality that makes out the sense of fore-running resoluteness, thereby unmasks itself as finite.¹

It is because of his recognition that Dasein exists finitely that Heidegger links the notion of being to that of time. Time is something that Heidegger does not see as a part of the ‘being per se’ within which Dasein’s care provides a clearing. He therefore looks at time not as though it were something objective which we must calculate, but as the basis of our experience and so of genuine being. We are temporally finite – we exist for a limited period of time, and so temporality – our relationship to past and future – is the basis of genuine being. Dasein is finitely related to both a past and a future; Heidegger calls this relationship ‘thrown projection’. We are ‘thrown’ into the world, because each of us necessarily has a position in it – at a particular place and a particular time, within a particular nation and culture – that she did not choose for herself. We then ‘project’ ourselves into the future because we are always caught up in plans and projects which relate us more immediately to the future than to the present or past. In the normal case, when we are living inauthentically, we simply accept the world into which we are thrown and allow it and its past to project our future for us. But authentic being recognises its finitude and becomes being-towards-death. The experience of facing one’s ‘ownmost possibility of not being’ allows one (somehow) to take responsibility for one’s situation and therefore to be genuinely responsible for one’s own future.

**ii : Authenticity and Ontology: the Double Meaning of ‘Care’**

What is not entirely clear in Sein und Zeit is the ontological significance of authenticity. As we just saw, Heidegger makes the claim that ‘care is being-towards-

¹ HEIDEGGER (1927), p.329
death’. This seems to suggest that only when Dasein is authentic (i.e. when it resolutely faces death) is it in a position to be-in-the-world properly and to be what Heidegger was later to call a clearing in being. To be sure, inauthentic Dasein has a pre-understanding of being, which is what makes it Dasein at all. This pre-understanding must also form the basis of ontological inquiry; but while Dasein remains with that pre-understanding, and does not inquire resolutely and authentically as a result of facing its own death, its concern with being remains an ontic one. That means that it is pre-ontological, still caught up in everyday concerns and in das Man, the shallow public following of what ‘one does’. Such an ontic regard for being is still being-in-the-world as thrown projection. It still encounters things in the world first and foremost within its projects as ready to hand (as tools and equipment) rather than as present at hand (as mere formed matter). ‘Care’ is also defined as just this immediate structure which is as much a characteristic of inauthentic Dasein as it is of authenticity. Heidegger does explicitly say that we are to understand ‘care’ as having a double meaning. But saying that care is also resolute being-towards-death seems to be identifying authenticity with Dasein’s factual structure.

iii: Recognition of Finitude

It seems that Heidegger wants to think of Dasein’s involvement in the world on two levels, both of which have an essentially similar ontological function and structure, but of which one is somehow deeper than the other. The only way in which it can be ‘deeper’ is this: we are finite, Heidegger claims, whether we know it or not, and our finitude gives a particular temporal structure to our caring about being. But if we are properly aware of our finitude, if, that is, we have had a particular formative experience of our own limit, then our relationship with being is in a position to take

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1 ibid. pp. 192-3
2 ibid. p. 199
on a deeper significance for us. Hence authenticity is not a moral requirement in Sein und Zeit, nor is it a mystical state that we can achieve which will in any way set us apart from others who have not achieved it. The role it plays is rather that of a prerequisite of the kind of inquiry – ontological inquiry – that Heidegger wants to carry out. We cannot properly question about being unless we have experienced our own finitude in a sufficiently deep way: that is Heidegger’s claim.

D : The Struggle of World and Earth

In Sein und Zeit, at least, our acceptance of Heidegger’s thinking about finitude depends on our having undergone a particular kind of experience, towards which he can lead us, but which he cannot actually make us undergo. As his thinking progressed, so did his notion of being-in-the-world. We must now trace the changes that took place in his notion of ‘world’; doing so will allow us to see how and why he moved away from propositional philosophical language towards more poetic expression, and will also show us the ultimate significance of the ontological difference.

i : Sein und Zeit: Being-in-the-World

In Sein und Zeit, Dasein and being-in-the-world are interdefined very closely. Dasein, as well as being the entity that cares, the entity whose being is an issue for it, is also defined as the entity that has being-in-the-world (in-der-Welt-sein), as distinct from merely being an entity that is encountered within the world (auf der Welt). The world, meanwhile, is defined only as the place where Dasein is. This is prevented from being a wholly uninformative circle of unexplained terms by Heidegger’s analysis of the structure of Dasein’s ‘being-in’ as such. In the end, this is founded on his analysis of temporality and care as thrown projection. Thus the world depends for its true being on the ontological inquiry of authentic Dasein. But authenticity places
too much emphasis on the individual and on her separation from, and attempts to reject, the society of others; it does not show how being alongside others is a primordial and founding mode of being for Dasein. So Heidegger dropped the notions of an individual’s authenticity, resoluteness and being-towards-death, and merged them into the general notion of being on the way towards being, towards genuine ontological inquiry. What is actually required of an individual here remains the same, but the talk must now avoid quantifying over individual people, as it were. Hence Heidegger now says that Dasein (in general, rather than anything we could think of as a specific Dasein) is continually wandering and falling into error. Das Irre – erring, wandering – is now allied to the concealing element in all truth.

ii : World and Earth: the ‘Rift’

In these middle-period writings, such as “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes”\(^1\) from which I quoted earlier, the world is ‘the self-revealing’ – the context in which Dasein lives, the ‘there’ that comes into the clearing, the domain of ‘being-in as such’ – while the earth is characterised as the self-concealing, upon which the world must be set back, but which constantly juts through it. The two are supposed to be in continual struggle against one another, a struggle that sets each of the competitors up in the fullness of its being. Heidegger calls this ‘the rift’. Once again, we must take a step back, and a deep breath, and see what sense we can make of this.

To be a work of art, Heidegger tells us, is to set up a world. By this we can take it that he means that a work of art sets up a whole context of significance for all those to whom it remains relevant and powerful and thus casts life into a new light. Heidegger insists that this is better thought of not as the mere gaining of a new perspective on what was already there, but rather ‘in reverse’, as the way in which all

\(^1\) in HEIDEGGER (1950)
world comes to be such in the first place. He then explains that in a work of art (he is actually talking about a Greek temple)

the rock comes to bear and rest and so first becomes rock; metals come to glint and shimmer, colours to shine, the tone to sound, the word to say. All this comes forth as the work sets itself back into the massiveness and heaviness of stone, into the firmness and suppleness of wood, into the hardness and lustre of ore, into the shining and darkening of colour, into the sound of the tone, and into the naming power of the word.

That into which the work sets itself back and which it lets come forth in this setting back of itself we called the earth. It is that which comes forth and shelters. The earth is the effortlessly indefatigable, compacted to nothing.¹

So, as a first approximation, ‘earth’, the ‘self-concealing’, is to be understood as the raw material out of which works of art, which give our lives the worldly significance that they have, are fashioned. These raw materials are brought to our attention by the work of art in such a way that they become significant for us and so come more truly into being as raw materials as well as as a work of art. It might be thought, then, that we can understand ‘earth’ as physical reality and ‘world’ as our interpretation of it or our giving meaning to it. As a first approximation this could be further from the mark, but it definitely is not quite the distinction that Heidegger has in mind.

**Earth and physicality**

We cannot identify earth with physicality for two reasons. Firstly, it is not what Heidegger says: it is not sound waves or air particles but tones that are the raw material of music; it is not paper and ink but words that are the raw material of poetry. Secondly, it would not fit with Heidegger’s conception of being: before or outside the clearing there can be no physicality, only ‘being’ (which of course itself has no being – it is not an entity). Physicality is just one way in which things reveal themselves within the clearing – as ‘present at hand’. So the picture cannot be that ‘earth’ is the physical reality that *Dasein* then finds and gives meaning to as world. But nevertheless it *is* physicality, as physicality is revealed to *Dasein* within the clearing (which, of course, on Heidegger’s picture, is all that physicality can be). What is

¹ HEIDEGGER (1950), p.35
physical is what appears to us as having its own nature that is not transparent to us, that is not immediately significant for us and hence ‘conceals itself’ from us. That is the ‘earth’ onto which our world of significance must be set back, and which we find constantly juts through the world, drawing our attention to the fact that it is based on an alien and non-transparent physicality. The idea of the objective independence and ‘external’ reality of the world arises from the way in which we encounter it as ‘biting back’, as resisting our attempts to dominate it and concealing its real nature from us.

**F : The Rift, the Difference and the Mystery**

**i : Language and Poetry**

This tension between world and earth, the ‘rift’, eventually comes to be identified with the ontological difference. Here I can come full circle in my exposition of Heidegger, whilst moving on to the concept of world in his later thinking. His later thought notoriously becomes extremely obscure, and his philosophical insights become buried in essays that seem to be poetical reactions to works of poetry. The reason for this is his increasing discomfort with propositional thought in general. He came to the conclusion that the unjustified assumption that entities can be fitted comfortably into the forms of our thought as we immediately find them infects not only logic but the whole of language. Language captures things in concepts, and then forms these concepts into propositions. But this conceptualising is always a concealing as much as it is a revealing. Entities themselves elude complete capture.

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1 My use of the word ‘physicality’ in this paragraph is problematic. I have used it because I think it conveys most clearly to a contemporary English speaking philosopher the idea with which I am dealing. However, Heidegger actually identifies the Greek word φύσις from which our word ‘physical’ is derived, with world rather than with earth. This is the result of his analysis of what the Greeks actually intended by their concept of nature, from which our modern version of their word has diverged considerably.

2 For a fascinating discussion of this mode of philosophising and its relation to the basis of Gadamer’s ontology see Paslick (1985), who shows up the relationship between Heidegger’s use of poetic imagery and Gadamer’s fundamental insistence on the truth of artworks and their importance in conveying our traditional horizons.
within the clearing. For this reason, the power of language in an ontological investigation lies not in its precise usage and logical stringency, but in its evocative power and its poetic ability to open up realms of insight beyond what can be captured in propositions. A statement is rigid: it says one thing, and shuts off other things. For this reason it can never be the true embodiment of a rift or tension. But the rift between the world as we understand it ontically in our everyday fallenness and the mysterious, self-concealing earth on which the world rests and which represents to us the closed off but ever-present and immediate realm of undiscriminated, giving being, is what all ontological inquiry must aim to capture. The earth (the ‘effortlessly indefatigable, compacted to nothing’) can be equated with what we earlier called ‘being per se’, which is not itself an entity, but which ‘gives’ all entities: but ‘earth’ describes this being not as it is (we are only ever ‘on the way’ to that) but as we encounter its resistance. The world is its counterpart, the context of our lives, which is also not itself an entity, but, instead of being, ‘worlds’. It is the struggle of these two that produces the entities with which we are familiar, amongst which we are thrown and among which we project our lives. But this kind of rift or tension, Heidegger came to believe, can only be set up in the tensions of an artwork, of a poem that explicitly conceals itself at the same time as it reveals. Hence he came to the conclusion that the founding essence of all language is the ontological language of poetry.

1 COOK (1986) reads these later texts as involving a thorough ‘linguistic turn’ which she suggests is comparable to Gadamer’s. It is true that Heidegger eventually takes all being to occur in language, but his emphasis on poetry and his rejection of propositional ‘metaphysical’ language are not to be found in Gadamer.

2 A good discussion of Heidegger’s rejection of statements, its embodiment in Gadamer’s dialogical account of meaning and truth, and how it affects Gadamer’s reading of Plato, can be found in DAVEY (1991).

3 Heidegger’s later ‘poetics’ raise interesting political questions which show up especially clearly in contrast with Gadamer. For a discussion of Heidegger’s refusal to retract and atone for his Nazism in the light of his silence about both the work and the direct confrontation of Paul Celan, see FÓTI (1990).
ii : Beyond Intelligibility: the ‘Fourfold’

This attempt to gesture towards rifts, tensions and struggles without capturing them and tying them down, this approach on a path towards being that aims to preserve the mystery that arises from our struggle to capture and dominate being and to escape our finitude, leads Heidegger towards more and more plural descriptions of the world. In the end he becomes dissatisfied not only with his own earlier concepts of Dasein and the ontological difference (which becomes just ‘the Difference’ and then ‘the Mystery’), but also with his opposition of world and earth. He finally characterises the world as a ‘fourfold’ in which mortals dwell, which consists of the earth, the sky, godliness and mortality. Even in his latest thought he preserves something like a notion of authenticity, requiring that we should accept our mortality and so let the sky be what it is and save the earth by not trying to dominate it\(^1\). The path towards being retains the requirement that we let beings be as they are in the mystery that is their being.

3 : GADAMER'S HEIDEGGERIANISM

Now that we have a reading of Heidegger in front of us, it is much easier to see how Gadamer’s thought is founded on unmistakably Heideggerian premises, yet moves beyond and away from several of Heidegger’s central themes. We have seen that Heidegger’s position can be read as remaining reasonably consistent throughout his work, but that the tensions between a finite individualist perspective and the wider perspective of ‘being’ push him towards a more and more mystical consideration, and indeed use, of language. The reason for this is that our finite perspectives of involvement within the world must, for Heidegger, always clash with the mysterious ground of ‘being’ on which our world must be based. The inter-relationship between

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\(^1\) See HEIDEGGER (1959)
our finite perspectives and the self-concealing ‘earth’ that resists our attempts to master it necessarily goes beyond what can be expressed in propositional language, which is suitable only for our ontic concerns and does not lead us on a path towards being. Language only goes back to its own roots and becomes authentically on the way towards being, where it is openly poetic and gestures and evokes rather than trying to state. It would appear from my analysis in Section One that this problem ought to persist for Gadamer, yet he is optimistic about the possibility of ‘ordinary language philosophy’. We must see exactly what Gadamer keeps and what he loses from Heidegger’s account in order to see whether this optimism can be justified.

A: What Gadamer Keeps

i: The ‘Increase in Being’ and the Ontological Difference

Gadamer may not retain Heidegger’s extreme emphasis on the importance of the priority of the question of being, but it is clear that something like Heidegger’s ontological difference is still at play in his thought. When Gadamer talks of ‘being that can be understood’, and distinguishes this from what has not come into language, he acknowledges that our linguistic input makes no material difference to reality. Yet he says that what we encounter in artworks or otherwise ec-statically participate in undergoes an ‘increase in being’ as a result, and ties the genuine being and the identity of everything to the occasions on which it is discussed in proper conversations. This move presupposes a distinction between this genuine being, which we might align with the being that Heidegger says things have within the open of the clearing, and a broader sense of being that Gadamer cannot refuse to acknowledge.
Self-presentation

Furthermore, since Gadamer identifies being with ‘self-presentation’ there is also a thought not unlike Heidegger’s use of the idea that ‘it gives’. This has moved a little further from its Heideggerian origin, since we can quite consistently read the self-presentation of a *Sache* in language as requiring no more than the ideal-identity of what presents itself. But in the notion of the virtuality of language and the ‘one word’ that is imperfectly incarnated in its finite uses in discourse we see something that does seem to mirror Heidegger’s broader notion of the being that gives. If this parallel is valid, it seems that Gadamer’s ontology is more thoroughly linguistic than Heidegger’s, since he ties even being itself to ‘language’, albeit in a very broad sense.

**ii : Always On-the-Way**

Gadamer’s idea that because we are finite we can never arrive at any incontrovertible truths, or capture the whole picture about the world or the entirety of the ‘single word’ of language, is directly derived from Heidegger’s use of the word ‘unterwegs’ (‘on the way’, ‘underway’). Heidegger talked of following paths of thinking, and Gadamer retains this metaphor, taking it to imply the impossibility of arrival at an end to any of the paths. For Heidegger, this was more a matter of emphasis and metaphor: it is not clear that he used the phrase with quite the sense of justifiably aiming for an unattainable goal that it has for Gadamer. But the idea that an authentic thinking is aware of its limitations and does not pretend to have achieved any complete insight is clearly Heideggerian in origin, and ties in with Heidegger’s critique of positivism throughout his career.

**Revealing/concealing**

Connected with this, and with its basis in an insistence on finitude, is the idea that all truth contains an element of falsity within it. For Heidegger this
revealing/concealing structure of the clearing can, as we have seen, be cashed out in terms of the inter-relation of the all-encircling clearing and the equally all-encircling nothing. Gadamer avoids such mysticism, but retains the idea, which requires us to look for a more comprehensible reading of it. But Gadamer does not appear to stop either at the idea that saying any one thing leaves unsaid all the possible productive alternatives to it, or at the idea that contexts of questioning predecide the possible acceptable answers and shut off possible avenues of truth in the process. Heidegger’s idea was clearly that any truth is, in itself, to an extent also false, and Gadamer seems to want to retain a very similar conception. An event of truth is enlightening, but its result remains a prejudice once it is incorporated into an individual’s horizon. Larger intersubjective truths are available insofar as we can communally participate in them, but even these are necessarily limited, as there is no question of their being able to correspond to the actual position of the Sache that guides them. Here Gadamer seems to be clinging to a Heideggerian thought with little justification. If a Sache can come into language in proper conversations and, in doing so, can attain an ideal-identity that allows it to be binding and to guide those conversations, why should it not be possible for a conversation to reach the point where the agreement coincides with the very ideal-identical position of the Sache itself? But in fact Gadamer’s account of ideality, correctly understood, shows why this is not a valid charge. This is precisely what does happen in every proper conversation, but the nature of ideal-identity is such that the actual truth about the Sache really is different for every conversation: its identity consists precisely in its continual change and difference from itself, and hence there is no fixed ideal-identical position for us to reach. This is not a Heideggerian thought at all, but a Hegelian one, as we shall see shortly, so Gadamer uses Hegel to justify his Heideggerian conclusion, after he has shed Heidegger’s own justification.
Gadamer does not retain any of Heidegger’s distinctions between world and earth. But he does think that the objectivity of the world consists in our encountering it as resisting us, an idea that we find in Heidegger’s introduction of the term ‘earth’. Here again Gadamer’s view seems to rely on a notion of ideal-identity: the very identity of the world we all share arises from its appearance as resisting and objective to each of us, and from our shared participation in it that allows it to be binding for us. This ties what we would normally think of as an entirely external physicality to the finite encounter of resistance in the same way that Heidegger does, but it again explains the idea differently and cashes it out in different terms. This avoids the impulse that pushed Heidegger to ever greater obscurity in his poetic invocation of the mystery and the fourfold, but it may run into new problems of its own.

B : What Gadamer Rejects

There are three important elements of Heidegger’s thought that we can distinguish as having been removed from Gadamer’s position: a distinction between a clearing in being and the arrival of language, the importance of an experience of finitude for ontological inquiry, and the essential role played by the rift between being and beings.

i : Language and the Clearing

Heidegger does not directly identify language as the source of the clearing in being: care, or the presence of an entity for which being is an issue, is what makes the difference on his account. Language is a further event within the clearing that allows thinks to be laid out in the open, to reveal and conceal themselves. Gadamer merges these two stages together: this presumably amounts to the contention that being can only be an issue for a linguistic entity. Such a contention does not seem unreasonable.
if we accept that non-linguistic animals are not capable of wondering what things essentially are (as opposed to wondering which things are where), or what they themselves are. We could make this trivially true by defining processes of thinking and wondering as linguistic, or by defining language broadly enough to encompass any such processes: indeed on one level this is what Gadamer does with his broad metaphorical understanding of ‘language’. Gadamer’s claim may also be stronger than this, however, since he accepts another Heideggerian proposition – that we are separated from the animals by an enormous gulf that makes us more like angels. For Gadamer, this gulf is simply language itself. He is clear that animal languages cannot count, as they do not enable animals to exist historically and preserve traditions of common memory. So his claim is that being is only an issue for historical, intersubjective, linguistic beings.

**Ordinary language and the infinity of language**

If we accept that claim, then this move certainly seems to remove a difficulty from Heidegger’s account. Heidegger was able to think that language had been corrupted by metaphysics and therefore moved us away from a primordial encounter with being. For Gadamer, however, it is literally impossible for us to have any access to being whatsoever except through language, since genuine being only occurs where things come into language. This was also true in a way for the later Heidegger, but he held onto a distinction between poetry and ordinary language that does not operate in the same way for Gadamer. Gadamer does not confuse poetry and ordinary language, showing how poetry removes the total mediation of ordinary language and forces us to look at the words themselves and to hear their sound alongside their meaning. But Gadamer insists that ordinary language is capable of revealing to us all the being that could ever be revealed. This is not to say that poems can be translated into ordinary
language, but only that it does make sense to cast our interpretations of them into ordinary language. What makes the possibilities of ordinary language infinite for Gadamer is precisely the hermeneutic element that pervades all being. We live in language and cannot think without it, and therefore we extend language and make full use of its metaphorical structure, borrowing ideas from wherever we need them, in order to express in our ordinary language any thought that we want someone to understand. Because these messages are basically addressed to specific people or groups of people we can aim towards the horizon of the people we are addressing, and if they are genuinely open and apply our claim to themselves, they always stand a good chance of understanding. All of this moves away from Heidegger, and it removes the need to remain with poetry. Our language may well bear unexamined metaphysical prejudices, but Gadamer thinks that the only way to examine them is to keep questioning other texts, older texts and texts from different cultures, in order to see how those prejudices have developed and what they prevent us from seeing. Thus Gadamer’s difference from Heidegger here is essentially negative – he takes it to be impossible and hopeless to attempt to stand outside of the language of the metaphysical tradition ‘all in one go’ – but it has the positive consequence that we see ordinary language as a much more powerful tool.

1 KISIEL (1969) argues that Gadamer’s and Heidegger’s views of language can be seen as similar in that they are ‘in accord in the conviction in the inexhaustible wealth of language’ (p.381), but this doesn’t alter the fact that Heidegger sees the need to look for a ‘changed relationship to the source’ of natural language in his poetic expression while Gadamer is convinced that we can always just extend the language available to us, without altering it. There has been much debate about the significance of this ‘correction’ of Heidegger as LAMMI (1991) called it: HABERMAS (1981) and VATTIMO (1988) both called it an ‘urbanisation’ for opposite reasons – SCHEIBLER (1991) has discussed their arguments and concluded that this urbanisation must be read as having a positive significance for both linguistic ontology and the possibility of social critique. A similar view is expressed by BERNASCONI (1986).

2 BERNSTEIN (1985) points out that Gadamer here adopts a much more optimistic view of the role of philosophy in reinstating man’s responsibility for his own humanity. Although VATTIMO (1988) interprets this as the source of his ‘urbanisation’ of Heidegger, and asks how we can return to Heidegger’s more critical return to the tradition, it would seem fair to argue that we are in a more constructive position if we can look for value in tradition for ourselves rather than merely constantly trying to negate the past: as we have seen, this need not make us conservative or uncritical.
Heidegger’s emphasis in *Sein und Zeit* on an individual’s experience of finitude is not altogether lost in Gadamer’s account, but is quite radically altered. As we have seen (p. 20), Gadamer claims that all experience is experience of human finitude, and that this kind of experience is a necessary prerequisite of truth and the advance of understanding. So in a sense, experience of finitude is still required for ontological investigation. But Heidegger, at least where this thought is clearly presented in *Sein und Zeit*, talks of a specific experience: the Angst-provoked encounter with death as Dasein’s ownmost possibility of not being. This separates off authentic Dasein, which can inquire ontologically, from fallen Dasein which does not. Gadamer retains no such distinction. Yet he does have a parallel notion with the emphasis more on openness to experience than on experience itself: ontological inquiry requires for Gadamer not an authentic awareness of temporality, but consciousness of the effectiveness of history (*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*). These are not quite the same thing, but the comparison does reveal the reason for the hitherto mysterious link in Gadamer’s thought between being aware of the temporal, historical, finite nature of human being and being open to experience. Gadamer rejects Heidegger’s analysis of the particular experience that leads to being towards death, but this leaves him with no good reason to retain, as he does, the connection between awareness of finitude and historicity on the one hand and an impulse towards open questioning and the broadening of one’s horizons on the other.

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1 Johnson (1984) argues that in his notion of experience Gadamer has captured what Kierkegaard described as ‘repetition’ and Heidegger as ‘rehabilitation’, and that he has surpassed both writers in showing how a reading of experience that is both dialectical and finite can give philosophy a positive, non-metaphysical task.

2 Dostal (1994) takes it that Gadamer’s analysis of ec-stasis and *theoria* as involving an element of *Verweilen* (tarrying), while it may have been taken from Heidegger’s lectures on Aristotle, is in sharp contrast to Heidegger’s ‘momentary’ experience of truth, thus explaining Gadamer’s notion of truth in terms of the distinction from Heidegger I have outlined in this paragraph.
Historicity and authenticity

Of course, Gadamer is explicit about the need to interpret his term in two different ways: both are Heideggerian, although neither of them is quite parallel to Heidegger’s notion\(^1\), and it is still not entirely clear how they are connected. Heidegger’s authenticity, as being-towards-death, is more than a mere awareness of the historicity on which he also insists. But it does have the normative flavour of Gadamer’s term, and is meant to form the basis of ontological inquiry. It seems that Gadamer wants to link historicity with the result of Heidegger’s experiential account of authenticity, but to bypass the experience itself that formed the ground for it on Heidegger’s account. Once again, we shall see him filling in the gap with elements from another thinker, in this case Aristotle. He casts Aristotelian ethics in the light of Heideggerian finitude, looking at *phronesis* as an ability to do right that is linked to a finite concrete situation. This gulf within Gadamer’s central notion will not be bridged until my final chapter.

**iii : Tensions and Rifts**

Perhaps the most important difference between the two thinkers from the Heideggerian point of view is that Gadamer leaves aside what we have seen is Heidegger’s central and abiding concern, the driving force behind his later work. This is the inevitability of struggle and tension in the ontological difference. Heidegger does not just think that we are not in a position to use our language to approach being: he thinks that the very world in which we live and everything that has being for us is set up only through its being involved in a life-giving struggle with the underlying being that is not an entity and that hides itself from our grasp by being too close to us. That is why art is so important to Heidegger: only there, away from the dominating

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\(^1\) SEREQUEBERHAN (1987) thinks that Gadamer’s notion of *Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein* captures the later Heidegger’s idea of *Denken* as ‘meditative’ thinking that is always on-the-way.
pretensions of propositional thought, can this struggle itself be set up and preserved as it really is. Art is also important for Gadamer, but only in that it provides a communal, festive experience which can lead to an experience of truth. For Heidegger, the role of art is much more immediately ontological, and the experiential element of truth is separate from it. Gadamer’s thinking has missed this element of struggle, and hence from a Heideggerian perspective cannot be on the right path towards ontological inquiry. Gadamer offers us no reason to think that Heidegger’s fundamental analysis of being as a struggle was itself mistaken. But he simplifies Heidegger’s picture considerably, by moving language to the centre of the ontological stage, and in doing so he loses the tensions that gave rise to Heidegger’s talk of the rift and later of the fourfold.

The path ahead

Has Gadamer simply misunderstood Heidegger, or taken up a simplified reading of his work, failing to grasp its depth of insight? Or has he rather deliberately corrected Heidegger’s work by simplifying it, mixing it with other influences, reading him through the eyes of older writers? In the last two chapters we can examine these questions. First we must see how Plato and Hegel have shaped Gadamer’s position, and pulled him away from Heideggerianism. Then we must finally ask how securely Gadamer’s ontology stands up on the support it gains from itself and from the systems of Heidegger, Plato and Hegel: we shall find that he requires further support from Aristotle’s ethics. We can then see what Gadamer’s original contribution has been, and what lessons we can learn from his successes and failures.

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1 VATTIMO (1988, Chapter 7) argues that the truth in art is different for Heidegger from the use Gadamer makes of it. His suggestion is that Heidegger would not agree with Gadamer’s distinguishing of Erfahrung as the more genuine form of truth-giving artistic experience, since he instead rests the relation between art and truth on its foundation on ‘earth’ and hence its relation to nature. This allows him to read Heidegger as ultimately nihilist in a way that Gadamer is supposed not to be, as a result of his ethical emphasis on understanding and linguistic belonging.
CHAPTER SIX

PLATO AND HEGEL

We have seen that Gadamer’s ontology is a variation of Heidegger’s which rejects the need to move away from the language of metaphysics and insists that the clearing in being is coincident with language. These modifications of Heidegger’s position are, I shall be arguing, drawn largely from Gadamer’s reading of Plato and Hegel. He disagrees with Heidegger about the comparative importance of Plato and Aristotle. Heidegger saw Plato as the start of the ‘forgetfulness of being’ that he took to characterise the history of western metaphysics, and saw in Aristotle’s critique of Plato a glance back towards the ‘intimacy with being’ of the pre-Socratics such as Heraclitus and Anaximander. Gadamer rejects this charge, reading Plato as though his central insights already contained a distinctly Heideggerian flavour¹.

Hegel’s dialectic, as Gadamer plausibly suggests, is based both on Platonic dialectic and, ultimately, on the eleatic dialectic of Zeno and Parmenides. Our principal sources for both of these kinds of dialectic are Plato’s dialogues, which can display clearly the dialectical ideals which Gadamer cherishes and so can set up our inquiry into his use of Hegelian dialectic.

1: SOCRATES AND PLATO

Plato is not the earliest philosopher with whom Gadamer is concerned. He has written several pieces about the pre-Socratics, especially Parmenides. Nor is it really the case that Gadamer’s classical scholarship concentrates on Plato at the expense of

¹ SMITH (1981) makes this point, arguing that Gadamer finds Heidegger’s structure of the revealing/concealing nature of the ‘clearing in being’ in Plato’s dialogic writing as well as in his dialectic of the one and the many: DAVEY (1991) argues that Gadamer could not have read Plato the way he does without his Heideggerian view of truth and meaning. Nonetheless, as VELKLEY (1985) puts it, “Gadamer’s deep immersion in Platonic thought is the source of a genuine rift between himself and Heidegger”, since Gadamer takes Plato’s idea of the Good as a definite goal or target at which we aim when we are ‘on the way’ (unterwegs) whereas Heidegger had no such goal.
Aristotle. Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis* is of vital importance to his practical philosophy, as we shall see in Chapter Seven. But it is in Plato, or more specifically in the character of Plato’s Socrates, that Gadamer finds the principal inspiration for his ideas about dialogue. Gadamer’s doctoral thesis was about Plato’s theory of love, and his first published book (*PdE*) was a Heideggerian reading of Plato’s *Philebus.*

Gadamer’s idea of dialogue is not, however, simply drawn from the Socratic method of ελεγχος (*elenchus*) that appears in the early dialogues. Gadamer sees continuities more than he sees major developmental changes throughout Plato’s work, but the dialogues that are of most interest to him are those of the later period. In particular, apart from the *Philebus,* Gadamer comes back again and again to themes from the *Parmenides,* the *Sophist,* the *Timaeus* and the *seventh letter.* His interest is in the theory of dialectic, the development of that theory that we find in Hegel, and the possibility that this theory gives us for overcoming transcendentalism and subjectivity by means of a blending of ontology and hermeneutics. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how Gadamer sees this link, and how his readings of Plato and Hegel support and complement his reading of Heidegger.

**A : Platonism**

From what we have seen already in this thesis it is clear that Gadamer is far from being what is commonly called a platonist. A platonist (in whatever realm her platonism may apply) is a realist about the separate, metaphysical existence of some class of entities such as numbers or universals. This kind of platonism is a following of Plato’s theory of forms, yet it is far from being a literal appropriation of that theory. Plato’s forms, after all, even as they are commonly understood, are not just universals. They supposedly cannot be captured by any collective definition or characterisation, but are the inhabitants of a realm of being beyond our own, each self-sufficient and
unique, with which we are said to have direct acquaintance before our birth and after our death, and in which the imperfect shadowy beings of our world somehow ‘participate’. They are not just the set of all things that have a particular property, nor just the paradigms of properties that real things have. They are more real than reality, which is an imperfect imitation of them. Platonism, then, need not be any kind of thesis about universals, since Plato’s doctrine is not only open to various interpretations (as we shall see, Gadamer disputes this ‘transcendent’ understanding of the forms\(^1\)), but is also closely tied to many other ideas that are suggested and discussed in his dialogues.

### i: Socrates and Sophistry

Gadamer’s interest in Plato does not initially arise from the theory of forms. He is much more interested in the motivation behind the development of the theory, a motivation that goes right back to the historical Socrates, even though we have no reason to suppose that Socrates himself developed the theory. Socrates spent his life in conversation with people, trying to find out what they believed and whether their beliefs could be supported in any way. He seems to have been under the impression that his examining people in this way would be to their benefit as well as his own. So he had at least this much in common with a group of people called ‘sophists’ who charged people money to teach them how to develop the qualities that could make them successful (\(\alpha ρετη / arete\)). It may be, of course, that he had a great deal more in common with them than that, since when the sophists fell out of favour after the fall of the thirty tyrants, Socrates was tried and put to death as a sophist for ‘corrupting the young’. Gadamer contends that the whole reason that Plato started writing the

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\(^1\) His fascinating debate with Nicholas White (1988c & WHITE 1988) illustrates this well. Gadamer argues that the attempt to construe Plato’s dialogues as having any relevance to “the modern epistemological contrast between idealism or conceptualism and realism” is, Gadamer says, to impose questions onto Plato’s texts to which they give no answers. *Episteme*, Gadamer tells us, had not then been separated into the knowledge of a subject and the truth of the reality examined by that subject.
dialogues was simply to clear Socrates’ name and absolve him from this charge: this is very plausible when we look at dialogues like the *Apology* and the *Crito*.

**ii : Elenchus and Eristic**

The sophists, according to Plato’s dialogues, were in the habit of using a technique called εριστικὸς (eristic, disputatious). They would get their pupil or interlocutor to say something, and would then refute them by using word-play and trickery to show that their belief was self-contradictory. Socrates’ technique of *elenchus* was extremely similar: he would get his interlocutor to say something, would discuss the implications with them, and would show them that their beliefs were self-contradictory, leaving them puzzled and unsure of their beliefs. Given this similarity, it is not surprising that Socrates was mistaken for a sophist. What Plato had to show, then, in order to clear Socrates of this charge, was that *elenchus* is something more than mere word-play and trickery that aims to refute an opponent.

**iii : The Claim to Objectivity**

Plato tried to show that whereas *eristic* can be used to refute any proposition at all, allowing the sophists to claim that they could refute anybody in an argument, *elenchus* finds only real contradictions and only reduces people to απορία (aporia, confusion) when their beliefs really are self-contradictory, allowing Socrates to claim that he too is in the dark and is genuinely inquiring into the truth with his interlocutors. Socrates claimed that he knew nothing: that was the ground on which Plato defended him, because, knowing nothing, he didn’t claim to teach, and didn’t charge money. Plato, however, unlike Socrates, had to make a further claim in order to give this practice a firm justification and to show it to be more worthwhile that *eristic*: he had to claim that there is a way that things really are independently of
anybody’s belief about them, and that elenchus or some development of it is in principle capable of moving us closer to finding out that truth.

There are two elements to this claim: the first gives rise to the theory of forms, and is the claim that there is an objective, independent truth; the second is the one that interests Gadamer more, and that is the claim that conversation can be useful and productive.

_B : The Ethics of Dialogue_

_i : The Flight into the Logoi_

Gadamer often returns to the following passage in the _Phaedo_, in which Socrates explains how he gave up on observational science as a route to truth, and decided to turn instead, as a ‘second best bet’ to examining words and analysing concepts:

...I was afraid that by looking towards the things and attempting to grasp them with my eyes and with each of my senses my soul might have been altogether blinded. So it seemed to me to be necessary to flee for refuge into reasonings (logoi, εις τους λόγους), to consider there the truth of the things that are. But perhaps in this way I am comparing things that are not alike: for I do not altogether concede that what is looked for in reasonings is considered more in images than what is looked for in actions (ἐν ἔργοις). So, anyhow, I began like this, on each occasion laying down reasoning which I would judge to be the strongest, then setting down those things, concerning both cause and everything else, which would seem to me to be in harmony with it as true, and those which would not as not true.1

Gadamer refers to this passage as Socrates’ “flight into the logoi”. The translation of ‘logoi’ here is contentious: I have used ‘reasonings’ because it seems to cover both possible interpretations most happily. ‘Logos’ is a word that has had many different

1 PLATO, _Phaedo_ 99e2 – 100a7
interpretations applied to it. Its most familiar meaning to modern classicists is that which it has acquired through its parentage of our word ‘logic’: it is taken to mean what is rational, a line of reasoning or a theory. Gadamer, however, following Heidegger, goes back to an older meaning of the word, pointing out its relationship to the verb λεγειν (legein, to say). Heidegger traces this back still further, suggesting that legein originally meant to lay out or to allow to lie before us, but Gadamer is content to stay with the uncontentious connection between logos and saying. He claims an equivalence between logos and the German word ‘Wort’, but we must beware of claiming that he says that logos just means a word, since he often uses Wort in the wider sense of a saying, phrase or utterance. The crucial point for Gadamer is that logos is something that is said, as opposed to something that is observed.

The method of hypothesis

A more conventional reading of this passage from the Phaedo is to take it as an example of Socrates’ so-called ‘method of hypothesis’. This demands that we take ‘logos’ to mean ‘reasoning’ in a way that need not be tied to saying. Under this interpretation the best translation of ‘logoi’ (and the most common translation in English editions) is as ‘theories’. This then makes Socrates say that when he gave up on observation as a means of investigation he took instead to proposing theories, to reasoning in the abstract and to making a priori deductions about the world. This does not seem to accord with his practice, however. Under Gadamer’s interpretation, Socrates took to language, and especially to discussion and conversation, starting from any saying that looks plausible and working out what we must say in order to be consistent with it. For Gadamer, this ‘method of hypothesis’ is no prototype of scientific theorising, but rather evidence that discussion is a more powerful investigative tool than observation. In PdE (p.54, 11 p. 68) Gadamer talks of this
method as a twofold process. First of all something is said, and tested against the already agreed facts of the matter; only then, when it seems to be a reasonable thing to say, can we really investigate its ground, following up its consequences in the hope of achieving recollection of the form.

ii: Logos and Ergon

Logos is frequently contrasted with another Greek word, εργον (ergon, doing, work); indeed, the contrast appears in this passage. Plato does more with this contrast between saying and doing than merely privileging of saying over doing. The earlier dialogues, such as the Charmides, the Lysis and especially the Laches, show us how important it was to Plato that good words and truth in discussion could only come from someone who was also a good man: deeds and words need to be in harmony with one another. Thus here in the Phaedo, where Socrates apparently turns away from doing and towards saying, he is not abandoning doing altogether. The whole purpose of his turning towards the logoi is in order to find out how to behave well. His quest to find the good was not being helped by his observations; in turning to Anaxagoras he thought he had found a way in which the Good could be used to explain natural phenomena, but the thesis had turned out to be shallow. He therefore looks for good things to say, and accepts only what accords with them: in doing so he is striving not only for an intellectual appreciation of the truth but a practical ability to do right. And his method, engaging individual people who claim to know things in dialogue, is practical. We must remember that Plato’s principal aim in writing the dialogues, at least at first, was to vindicate Socrates from the charge of sophism; he did this by showing Socrates to be a better man – more honest, more courageous and less hubristic – as well as a clearer thinker, than the sophists. This linking of word and deed lies behind Plato’s development and the methods that he employs.
In the early dialogues, Socrates always reduces his interlocutor to *aporia*. Gadamer takes this to be constructive, to be the first step on the way to dialectic. In the later dialogues, dialectic becomes the method by which the forms can be recollected. By then, it has gone beyond *elenchus*. It is no longer an individual’s actual belief that is examined, but always a series of agreed ‘hypotheses’. Very often, as in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, the method of *dihairesis* is used, whereby a series of distinctions is drawn in order to draw up a taxonomy of the field under discussion that can be used in directing the dialogue. Ultimately, though, the purpose of dialectic in all the dialogues remains the moral improvement of the interlocutors, the quest for the Good, and the means of this improvement remains *anamnesis* (the ‘recollection’ of the forms, with which we are supposed to be in intimate contact when we are not alive).

**2 : GADAMER’S READING OF PLATO**

The clue to Gadamer’s reading of Plato is to be found in the continuity that he sees between Plato’s thought and Aristotle’s. He contends that Aristotle never really ceased to be a platonist, and that to say this calls into question what platonism consists in. He sees two connections between Plato’s ‘idea of the Good’ and Aristotle, which he believes to stand up in spite of Aristotle’s critique of Plato’s ‘idea’. Firstly, he thinks that Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis* as practical wisdom embodies Socrates’ actual practice in Plato’s dialogues of aiming towards the Good in his conversations. This is illustrated by reference to Aristotle’s use of aiming in archery as a comparison for the orientation given by *phronesis* (IG pp. 95-6, 8 pp. 163-4, cf. ARISTOTLE
Nichomachean Ethics 1094 a 23). But he also thinks that Plato’s forms (with the exception of the idea of the Good) need not be thought of as transcendent at all, and that the ‘participation’ relation is for the most part just that of genus and species, as examined by dihairesis. Both thinkers can then be seen to have held a theory of universalia in rebus. The only difference between them, Gadamer maintains, is that where Aristotle took a natural or physical model of this relation, Plato used a numerical one. This contention is based on Gadamer’s reconstruction from the evidence in the dialogues of the doctrine of ideal numbers, of which we know from the indirect tradition of Plato’s thought. Gadamer then suggests that Plato’s ‘idea of the Good’ is equivalent to the *eidos* towards which Aristotle holds that natural organisms develop teleologically. He thinks that this Aristotelian idea has its roots in the structure of Plato’s theory of forms, and that Aristotle’s criticisms of Plato’s theory of forms are aimed only against the transcendent misconception of them.

**A: Different Kinds of Forms**

Gadamer distinguishes three different kinds of forms in Plato. Firstly there are the ordinary forms, which are just the genuses to which the particulars belong. These include both the simpler ethical forms, such as piety and temperance, and the various mundane ‘forms’ of objects and artefacts that are discussed in Book 10 of the *Republic* (596b). Gadamer sees no difficulty in this kind of belonging, and maintains that Plato saw no difficulty here either, his real problem being with the relationship between ideal numbers. Gadamer claims that the apparently self-critical passage in the *Parmenides* (131a – 135c) shows not that Plato came later to see a difficulty with his transcendent forms in their separation and participation, but that Plato was always interested in the intimate relationship between *chorismos* (separation) and *methexis*

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1 FIGAL (1992) discusses this ethical intersection of Plato and Aristotle in more depth than I have space to, although I shall return to the topic briefly in the final chapter.
(participation). Gadamer does not believe that Plato ever thought it possible to have one without the other. Hence the relations between genus and species may not be something that we can see immediately without reflection, and it is possible to be deceived about these relations, but they are nonetheless immanent and, with due reflection, completely accessible (through anamnesis and dihairesis). In the case of the mundane forms, this process will just be the learning of a techne (art or craft). For the other forms, however, we have to turn towards the Good.

**B: The Idea of the Good**

Gadamer thinks that the Good is the only ‘form’ that is really transcendent, pointing out that Plato’s talk of the Good is clearly distinguished from that of the other forms:

That Plato only uses the expression ἴδεα (idea), and never ἐιδος (eidos), for the ἀγαθόν (agathon, good), surely has something to do with it. ... But the feminine form ἴδεα is also more strongly evocative of the ‘looking on’ of ‘looking’ than of the ‘appearance’, and so in ἴδεα του ἀγαθου (idea of the Good) we have not so much a looking on to the good as a looking out towards the good, as is shown by the numerous turns of phrase such as αποβλεπειν προς [to look away (from sensible particulars) towards (the idea of the Good and the unity of the universal)], etc. ([IG] pp. 20-21, 8 pp. 27-28)

Thus Gadamer sees the Good as a transcendent goal towards which we can turn, but which we cannot reach. We have seen before how frequently this schema occurs in his own thought (pp. 97, 146): here, however, in his application of it to Plato, we can begin to see how it becomes the glue that binds the various parts of his philosophy together.

**i: The Good and the One**

He identifies the idea of the Good with the ‘one’ in Plato’s doctrine of ideal numbers, attempting to reconstruct this doctrine (which is only reported by the indirect tradition) from the evidence available in the dialogues. He sees this doctrine as arising out of eleatic dialectic and Pythagorean numerology. The element of eleatic dialectic is beautifully displayed in the second part of the Parmenides, where
Parmenides considers the question of whether there can be either a unity or a plurality. He concludes that either assumption leads to a contradiction. In fact, he concludes that

... whether the one is or is not, both it and the other things, with respect to themselves and to one another, are and are not and appear and do not appear to be all things in all ways.¹

We see from this that there is to be an inherent contradictoriness in the notion of number.

ii: The One and the Many

Gadamer takes Aristotle’s talk of a one and an indeterminate two (Metaphysics A6) to be a reference to Plato’s doctrine of ideal number, supposedly recounted in his lost lecture ‘On the Good’. The thought is, then, that indivisible unity is impossible, and so one is always at the same time two (or many), while in being taken together as two, two things come to have a certain unity, hence two (or any number) is also one. This is reflected in the fact that the two can be arrived at from the one in two contradictory ways: by doubling and by division. It also emerges as the separation of one thing from everything it is not, which then emerges as an indeterminate (unlimited, apeiron) second thing, so that the identification of one thing always involves identifying two things (what it is and what it isn’t). Gadamer finds in this the implication that although any one thing can be clearly characterised, everything cannot be clearly characterised at once, since within each characterisation there is a simultaneous lapse of everything that is not characterised into indeterminacy. He relates this notion to Heidegger’s notion of the revealing/concealing nature of truth, and to his insistence on human finitude:

Is the Platonic lecture on the Good not also supposed to have included calculation of the essential uncompletness of the dialectical discursus? If Plato is seeking to determine by this means what he deduces from the two principles of the one and the indeterminate duality, there is plainly also a moment of indeterminacy within this thought. This seems to me to be the sense in

¹ PLATO, Parmenides 166b8-9
saying that one of the two determining moments is precisely indeterminacy. A system of relations certainly can be constituted in such a way that while each individual relation that can be given in it can indeed be brought into the expressiveness of being raised and posited, a simultaneous being posited and being present of all the relations is nonetheless fundamentally impossible. (KS3 pp. 48-9, 4 p. 154)

**iii : The Transcendence of the Good**

Gadamer points out that Aristotle also associates this with the Pythagorean identification of being with number. Plato, however, unlike the Pythagoreans, distinguished the ideal geometrical forms from the figures that are actually drawn as examples in the discussion of geometrical problems. The forms that are thought of on the numerical model are transcendent in this way. But that gives us a clear model of what *methexis* is to be like: things can participate in forms in the same way that a drawing of a triangle can be triangular. The idea of the Good (which illuminates all of these forms in thought) is then not to be thought of as somehow doubly transcendent, but is instead identified with the one (out of which all numbers are made), and hence also with being (as we shall see, p. 185), and with unity in general. Gadamer says that:

The idea of the good, as the unity of something uniform, appears as the condition of everything that is consistently ordered... (IG p. 22, 8 p. 31)

**C : Beauty and Number**

The third kind of form that Gadamer wants to distinguish also takes its structure from this doctrine of number. Certain forms – those most closely related to the Good – are supposed to share its structure, being the unity of the multiplicity of their instances and at the same time wholly present in each instance, rather than merely being genuses of particulars. Gadamer takes it that it is these that are referred to in the passage in the *Sophist* (253a) where the discussion is about how the forms combine together, and some are said to be like ‘vowels’.
i : Beauty, Measure and Proportion

Gadamer takes the beautiful to be ‘that which is superfluous to life and yet needs no justification beyond itself’, and this is clearly his understanding of Plato’s form of the beautiful. The beautiful is supposed to be one of the ‘mathematical’ forms, along with measure and proportion: it is Philebus 64c-65a that leads Gadamer to connect these three. These three forms, by having the structure of number rather than that of a genus, are supposed to be able to guide us towards recollection of all the forms.

ii : The Beautiful as Immanent and Transcendent

As number, these forms have unity as well as multiplicity. The beautiful and proportioned things we see around us completely display this perfect unity, and so the form of beauty is completely present in every instance of it, and therefore cannot be transcendent. But as unity, the form of the beautiful is really the same as the idea of the Good. The beautiful is therefore that aspect of the idea of the Good that shows itself to us, and, as a manifest unity, turns us towards the search for the Good. In this way the form of the beautiful, by showing us the possibility of order and unity in phenomena, allows us access to all of the other forms; for the idea of the Good is said in the Republic (book 6, 508d) to light up the noetic world of all of the other forms, in the same way that the sun lights up the phenomenal world\(^1\). This is because the turn away from the phenomenal world towards the noetic world is precisely the search for the unified concepts that lie behind the familiar things.

\(^1\) This is another place where a ‘criterion of truth’ has been identified in Gadamer’s account. AMBROSIO (1987b) in fact offers a very plausible reading of Gadamer on this basis, suggesting that science can be based in the ‘discipline of dialogue’, and he is good enough to retract his use of the word ‘criterion’ in a footnote.
But now it seems that Gadamer sees *anamnesis*, the arrival at knowledge via the ‘recollection’ of the forms, as relying not so much on our ‘looking away’ into pure ideas (as Plato usually insists) as on our perception of beauty¹. He seems to want to say that the beautiful is wholly present in beautiful things, and that this allows us the direct perception of one form, which gives us access to the form of the good and so illuminates the whole still realm of thoughts. He says that

What distinguishes the beautiful from the good is obviously that it represents itself to us of itself, that it makes itself immediately clear in its being. This gives it the most important ontological function there can be, namely that of mediating between idea and appearance. That is the very metaphysical crux of Platonism, ... The idea of the beautiful is truly present, whole and undivided, in what is beautiful. (*WM* p. 456, 1 p. 438)

and that

...every instance of the beautiful is always an experience of some solitary, unique beautiful thing, of which we gain experience every time we rise above our bodies, souls, institutions and discoveries, without that having to involve any ‘looking away’ (*apidein*). (*KS3* p. 34, 4 p. 134)

If there is a ‘special property’ that the beautiful has by virtue of being a sum rather than a mere genus, then it is only that it can be both unity and multiplicity. Hence regularity and elegance in individual phenomena point us to look towards unity in all things. The ‘looking away’ from the phenomenal ‘cave-shadows’ does not involve actually looking away from them, but rather seeking the true unity that they represent rather than dwelling on their particularity: hence this ‘looking away’ is not literally looking away from them, but rather perceiving their elegance and beauty and looking for their unity. Gadamer thinks that the beautiful leads us to look for *anamnesis* as the recovery of the unitary forms or essences of things, and so sets up dialectical inquiry.

As we saw in Chapter Three (p. 91), Gadamer sees the world as made up of the essences of things as they present themselves in our concepts and our language: the

¹ RISSER (1986 and 1994) plausibly generalises this to show how Gadamer’s whole account of understanding can be read as a demythologisation of *anamnesis*: in order for something to be understood it must, on Gadamer’s account, be brought back to the freshness of an address between an I and a thou, yet it is altered by its being brought back in this way without losing its universal identity.
thought he gets from Plato is that it is beautiful things, things which manifestly have value of their own on account of their perfect unity, that lead us to inquire, to question tradition and to conduct proper conversations about the essences of things that can lead us to events of truth.

**D: The ‘Logos’**

Just as the forms can be aligned with our concepts, so the *logos* itself is supposed to have this same numerically modelled structure. Gadamer thinks that it has unity as the whole of discourse: this can be read as either the whole historical entirety of everything that is ever said or the whole of what one or two people are trying to say in a discussion at any one time. In fact Gadamer intends it to be both of these, and also further unities at other levels (unities of a life’s work, a single sentence, a gesture, a historical epoch, etc.). We can see from this how his entire philosophy of language is derived from the dialectical relationship between one (as the whole of *logos* and as the Good towards which we aim) and the many (which is the same as the one, and is all the variety of individual words, letters, phrases, statements, speeches, books and so forth). Only in heading towards the unattainable goal of the unity of the whole of *logos* can we throw any light on its individual elements.

**3: ABSOLUTE SPIRIT IN HEGEL’S DIALECTIC**

Hegel does see his dialectic as deriving from Plato, and especially from the *Parmenides*; but it has become much more wide-ranging, and a great deal more systematic, than it ever was for Plato. Gadamer thinks that Hegel has misread Plato, in that he attributes a positive element to Plato’s dialectic in the wrong place, taking a passage in the *Sophist* (259b5) to say that we must see how things can be contradictory in one and the same respect, when the passage in fact says that when we find a contradiction we must distinguish the respects in which the predicates are true.
of the subject. Yet Gadamer ultimately thinks that Hegel’s dialectic does carry on the
spirit (if I may use that word here) of Plato’s, and that Plato’s dialectic did have a
(different) positive and constructive sense. We must clarify how Hegel’s system fits
together, so that we can see how his dialectic is to be understood in its own terms.

A: ‘Aufhebung’

Hegel’s dialectic, like Gadamer’s hermeneutics, is of course supposed to be
much more than a mere method. For Hegel, dialectic is the internal necessity of the
concept, which is in turn absolute Spirit: hence dialectic is ultimately the structure of
all of reality. It is because he sees dialectic as the structure of all of reality that he uses
the ‘method’ of dialectic throughout all of his work, showing how each stage of his
argument implies its opposite, and how these two contradictories are united and raised
to a higher level of truth in their union. This is the process of Aufhebung, a word that
cannot be translated into English for the simple reason that it is used simultaneously
in two conflicting senses. It means both a ‘cancelling out’ and a ‘raising up’: I shall
leave it in German in order to preserve these senses, as I do not think they can be
captured by such words as ‘sublation’, ‘transcension’, ‘suspension’ or ‘cancellation’,
though for simplicity’s sake I shall sometimes use the word ‘synthesis’ (which Hegel
himself sometimes uses, and is also standardly used to translate Aufhebung in order to
show its relationship to thesis and antithesis).

B: Hegel’s Books and their Relation to One Another

Gadamer draws attention to the fact that the only two works that Hegel himself
actually published as books are the Phänomenologie des Geistes (1807) and the
Wissenschaft der Logik (1812). He therefore takes these to be the best starting point

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1 AMBROSIO (1987a) shows in detail how Gadamer reads Hegel’s dialectic as the ‘reflection in
thought’ of Platonic dialogue and is therefore able, by emphasising the priority of the question, to read
Hegel’s concept of experience as the negative experience of finitude that always leaves us open to
further experience.
for understanding Hegel’s system. Essentially the same system is repeated and completed in the later *Encyklopädie* (1817), but the ontological doctrines from the earlier books there remain more or less intact. At every stage of Hegel’s system there are sets of three things: something determinate as it at first appears (thesis), its opposite that it somehow implies and on which it depends (antithesis), and the union of the two, preserved in their contradictoriness by being cancelled out, and so raised to a higher level (synthesis). The synthesis which is the result of this process of *Aufhebung* then forms the thesis at the next level. The very highest level, then, the ultimate synthesis of everything Hegel discusses in his work, is ‘Absolute Spirit’. Spirit is the synthesis of logic and nature, and the *Encyklopädie* moves through this whole dialectic in its three volumes. The *Wissenschaft der Logik* is entirely devoted to Logic as the thesis of this dialectical movement. In these works, however, Hegel only considers the movement of the concept in and for itself. The dialectical steps he takes are not those of a consciousness that is considering the matter, but are supposed to be absolutely necessary of themselves. Before thought can embark on the dialectic of the *Logik*, then, it must have already achieved the level of the pure concept, and gone beyond the point where its own concerns intrude into the pattern of thought. The *Phänomenologie* is the dialectical movement of consciousness towards this realisation of the absolute concept, which the *Logik* presupposes. But it is not to be seen as a mere introduction: the dialectical movement of consciousness is itself a part of the science of the structure of spirit, and is linked with Volume 2 of the *Logik*, which concerns the *Aufhebung* of subjective concepts and their objective antithesis into the pure idea. In the *Logik*, though, this passage shows how, quite apart from all consciousness, this dialectical movement is necessary, and re-establishes the starting point in the dialectic of being and nothing.
C : The Movement of Dialectic

The highest level of all, then – absolute Spirit – is the synthesis of the absolute idea (logic) and nature. The absolute idea is the synthesis of being and essence; being is the synthesis of quality and quantity into measure; essence is the synthesis of ground and appearance in actuality, and the subdivisions continue. But one cannot construct a simple hierarchy of Hegel’s concepts. It is not the case that the third element, the synthesis, of one dialectical movement always just becomes the thesis in the next. More often, thesis, antithesis and synthesis are each identified with another whole movement (rather than just the synthesis of that movement). Hence there is always progression underway within each element of each movement. What we have, then, is not a hierarchy, but a flow, which we can look at on a broader or narrower scale, but which always shows similar movement at every level.

D : Dialectic and the Absolute

But what is the mechanism of this Aufhebung? How exactly is it that the movement through the thesis to its antithesis and beyond both to their synthesis, on whatever scale, is supposed to occur? Why should we not take the arrival at a contradiction to entail the rejection of our premise, rather than trying to preserve the two contradictory propositions in their contradictoriness and to ‘pass beyond them’ to a higher level of contemplation? Of course, the answer will be slightly different, depending on whether we have the Phänomenologie or the Logik in mind. In the Phänomenologie, consciousness is supposed to arrive at a position (e.g. to confront a this/now/here as external reality), find its position problematic (recognise the underlying universal), and move to the opposite opinion (think instead that the reality is within itself) thereby going beyond both opinions to achieve a higher level of self-
awareness (sense-certainty of the essence of the thing). In the *Logik* the movement of the concept follows the same sequence without the suggestion that it is a path that any particular individual consciousness might follow. In both cases it seems that the *Aufhebung* follows immediately on the arrival at the antithesis. We reach a contradiction, and therefore immediately see both elements in a broader perspective. Logical notions conflict and this shows how they build upon one another. Why should this happen? In a way, of course, this Hegelian idea includes the intuition that a contradiction must be rejected. The two elements are said to cancel out. But in doing so they are said to be preserved in their contradictoriness within the broader picture. But here the presence of this broader picture seems to be presupposed. In the absence of the projected progression of a Hegelian system, two contradictories meeting in this way simply cancel out: they leave *aporia*, confusion, and nothing more. It appears, then, that it can only be Hegel’s conception of absolute Spirit as the ultimate broad picture that can lead us on through the dialectical movements at all. If that is true then dialectic will only work within the entire system that Hegel erects, and it will be impossible to make use of the method without embracing Hegel’s conclusions.

**4: GADAMER’S READING OF HEGEL**

Gadamer wants to mix Hegelian insights with an insistence on human finitude, and on the impossibility of an all-embracing perspective such as that of absolute Spirit. Before we go on to look at the precise nature of the Hegelian insights of which he approves, then, we should see how he can conceive of Hegelian dialectic without

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1 HEGEL (1807), pp.23-32
2 I shall not be examining all of the important points of contact between Gadamer and Hegel. Examples of others can be found in ROCKMORE (1990b) who points out that Hegel’s absolute idealism can itself be read as a form of hermeneutics in virtue of the discussion of part/whole relations in the introduction to the *Phänomenologie*, and in FETZ (1979) who traces the origins of Gadamer’s notion of experience from the same introduction on through Heidegger’s discussions.
depending on the teleological force of absolute Spirit. Here our examination of Gadamer’s reading of Plato will be of use to us.

**A: The One and the Indeterminate Two**

Gadamer reads Hegel’s dialectic as taking place in terms of determinacy and indeterminacy, and he aligns these thoughts with Plato’s dialectic of the one and the many. In the first step of the dialectical movement, then, something is singled out as determinate; it is taken as a one. This happens, presumably, whenever we single out anything or any concept as an object of investigation; it is therefore a sensible starting point for a universal characterisation of the movement of logic. But in isolating something in this way, we cannot possibly just have picked out one thing: for the only way in which we can identify this thing is by differentiating it from everything that it is not. Thus as soon as we identify one thing we have two things before us – a definite one and an indefinite many. The indefinite many now seems to be the negation of the definite one, so Gadamer aligns these with Hegel’s thesis and antithesis. But the whole point of Plato’s dialectic of the one and the indeterminate two was that unity is always also plurality and *vice versa*. Thus now that we have these two things (thesis and antithesis, the definite one and the indeterminate many) they can and must be taken together again as one thing. The thesis and antithesis are unified into one pair of mutually exclusive realms of being. This is how the third stage of Hegelian dialectic, the *Aufhebung*, is to be understood in terms of Platonic dialectic.

**B: Digression: a Comparison with Derrida**

It is still far from clear, though, how this third stage, in which we see the unity in our distinguished plurality, can be thought of as leading to a ‘higher level’ or as continuing a progressive movement at all. To see how Gadamer understands this, a brief comparison with Derrida’s position will be helpful.
i : Derrida and the Play of Signifiers

Derrida, of course, is also keen on the idea that any positive conception always somehow implies and depends on its opposite. His claim (1967) is that as a result there can be no positive meaning but only a ‘play of signifiers’, and that pairs of opposing concepts stand in mutually dependent relationships of ‘différance’ in which neither is prior to the other and they can be seen as neither identical to one another nor different from one another. Here it seems that Derrida follows the same broad path as Hegel, but refuses to acknowledge any progression in the relationship. Thesis and antithesis belong together in a kind of synthesis that preserves their contradictoriness, but completely fails to go beyond the original thesis and antithesis themselves. They are left in a fruitless interplay: Derrida thinks that to privilege either one or to claim to have progressed into a synthesis is to buy into the ‘metaphysics of presence’: he is a thoroughgoing anti-foundationalist. He thinks not only that there is no base of solid and indisputable intuitions on which we can build (a belief shared by Hegel) but also that there is no teleological given such as absolute Spirit towards which our thinking can lead us. There is no ‘unsignifying signified’.

ii : Play and Structure

In many ways, then, Gadamer’s project appears to be very similar to Derrida’s here. He sees value in Hegel’s dialectic, and he rejects both foundations and ultimate all-inclusive infinite end-points. But for Gadamer the play of signifiers has a much more positive significance than it does for Derrida, because he sees it as a play of signifiers that is transformed into structure by our attempts to understand unities in it1. It is precisely because we are finite language users amidst an infinite play of signifiers, Gadamer would say, that hermeneutics is the only universal feature of

1 A detailed examination of Derrida’s and Gadamer’s notions of play (which, however, entirely overlooks Gadamer’s notion of the transformation of play into a structure) is to be found in HANS (1980)
reality. For it is precisely hermeneutics – a finite observer’s repeated attempts to understand – that allows the ‘différance’ relation between opposing mutually dependent concepts to progress beyond a mere meaningless interplay and to become something much more like an Aufhebung in Hegel’s sense. These structures are then somehow to be able to acquire a binding ideal-identity.

iii: The Gadamer-Derrida ‘Encounter’

It is instructive to look at the dialogue between Gadamer and Derrida on this point¹. The debate itself produced no fruitful understanding between the two thinkers, who seem to have been talking somewhat at cross-purposes, but the imagery that they used in rebuffing one another is quite telling for our explanation of Gadamer’s relationship to Hegel. Derrida’s accusation was that Gadamer’s appeal to the finite understanding of an effective-historical consciousness was just an instance of what Nietzsche would have called ‘the will to power’². We might read Derrida as saying that Gadamer’s seeing a possible productive third stage of dialectic arising out of contradiction is mere wishful thinking and that in fact such progressions just are not available to us. But Gadamer responds by introducing the term ‘good-will to power’; here we cannot help but hear an echo of his Platonic claims about the idea of the Good. We can turn towards the Good (or seek events of truth in striving for elegance and unity), and in doing so we can attain fusions of horizons. Gadamer modifies Hegel, then, in two directions at once: with a Heideggerian insistence on finitude and historicity that removes the absolute that Hegel uses to lead on the dialectical flow, and with a Platonic (or pseudo-platonic) teleological reading of the one/many relation

¹ In TI. Further commentary on the debate can be found in DAVIES (1990), WRIGHT (1990), FROMAN (1991), MADISON (1991), and all the essays in MICHELFELDER & PALMER (eds) and SILVERMAN & IHDE (eds).
² For a good, critical return to Nietzsche that sets out from this debate and examines Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche in detail in order to settle the various charges of relativism and dogmatism, see SCHRIFT (1990).
which he uses in its place. This may become clearer if we look at two instances of
Hegelian texts that Gadamer actually discusses.

**C : The ‘Determinations of Reflection’**

Hegel talks (1812) of identity and difference as the ‘determinations of
reflection’. Together, they are *aufhebt* into ‘contradiction’ which, as we have seen,
comes as close as anything does to forming a foundation of Hegel’s system. Gadamer
compares these to Plato’s ‘vowel’ forms of beauty and proportion: he also picks up on
Hegel’s puzzlingly oxymoronic talk of the identity of identity and difference. This is
something we must look at carefully, given Gadamer’s peculiar ideas about ideal-
identity, which I have argued are foundational to his own ideas.

**i : Identity and Difference**

Clearly, talk of ‘the identity of identity and difference’ cannot mean that
identity and difference are just the same thing, so that if any two things are the same
thing then that means they are different things, and if two things are different that
means that they are actually the same. The plain absurdity of such a reading should
push us to look for a more plausible understanding of the phrase. One possible idea is
that identity and difference are very closely related or mutually dependent: the
differentiation of something as self-identical is the same process as its differentiation
apart from all the things that it is not. But *must* the self-identity of something involve
any reference to other things from which it is distinguished? What of the self-identity
of the whole universe, or of absolute Spirit? Another possibility is to think the same
thought in modal terms: identity is then seen as differentiation from other non-
fulfilled possibilities.
ii : The One and the Many

This gets even more confusing when we reflect that if identity and difference are to be taken as identical, then it follows that they must also be different. Here the logical doublethink to which we are driven becomes reminiscent of Plato’s *Parmenides*, and it is this similarity that leads Gadamer to think of identity and difference in terms of Plato’s treatment of one and many. All we have to do to make the analogy work is to equate unity and self-identity. Just as one thing is also many things when it is divided, and can be combined as one of many into a greater whole, so anything that is self-identical must have many different aspects and so be different from itself, and must be capable of different identification within a larger context. If two things are different they can be regarded within a larger, selfsame, context, or they can be seen to contain identical elements by virtue of which they become comparable, and so can be seen to be different. On this reading the ‘identity’ of identity and difference is the same as the unity of one and many: just as one and many can be taken as either a unity or a plurality, so identity and difference can be seen as either identical or different.

iii : Ideality

Does this shed any light of Gadamer’s notion of ideal-identity? There we have a single, self-identical thing that consists only in its many, different, instantiations, and, without going beyond those instances, becomes binding for them as a unity. This seems strange because it says that the identity of something consists precisely in the difference of the instances that go to make it up. If we read identity and difference as standing in this peculiar relationship modelled on the one and the many, we are driven to envisage a whole hierarchy of ideas in which the identity of anything is given by the participation of people at that particular level in the hierarchy. Not only is this
particular production bound by the ideal-identity of *Hamlet* as a work (which it goes to set up), but this particular performance goes to set up the binding ideal-identity of the production, and *Hamlet* itself can contribute to the ideal-identity of Renaissance literature, by the standards of which it can then be judged. But is it right to say that in each case the identity is itself produced by the differences between its instances? Evidently not: we can quite clearly distinguish the differences at one level between individual performances or productions from the identities they produce at the higher levels of productions and works respectively. This shows clearly how identity and difference can be compatible and fit together, without our needing to resort to confusing talk of the identity and/or difference between identity and difference themselves.

**iv : Beauty and Proportion**

Gadamer identifies these ‘determinations of reflection’ with Plato’s forms of beauty and proportion, the mediators between ordinary general terms and the idea of the Good. There are two similarities we can bring out quite clearly: both are to be understood in terms of this one/many dialectic, and both play a similar mediating role between finitude and the absolute. Beauty, measure and proportion were to be understood as the forms that were simultaneously one and many in a special sense: they were at the same time both perfect unity, like the Good, and also completely present in their many instances, like the other forms. Identity and difference share this special kind of mediation between one and many: perhaps this means we should align the quest for unity with the search for the identities of things. We would then see that our finite understanding, which is ‘always on the way’, is similarly moved by beauty (as the mediation between plurality and unity) and by wondering about identity: both lead us to seek out events of truth.
**D: The Inverted World**

Gadamer’s essay on Hegel’s *Verkehrte Welt* (in **HD**) is the key to understanding how ideality applies to the world itself. He not only interprets Hegel in terms of Plato, but also explains how Hegel’s whole project was based in Kant’s. The chapter on ‘Force and the Understanding’ (in HEGEL (1807)), Gadamer claims, is Hegel’s version of Kant’s synthesis of apperception in the transcendental deduction¹, and the ‘inverted world’ is the final stage of the unity of consciousness and self-consciousness, the demonstration that what Kant calls the ‘noumenon’ must itself be an aspect of Spirit.

**i: Hegel’s Critique of Kant**

Gadamer shows how Hegel is able to begin from the same basic starting-point as Descartes in discussing consciousness and self-consciousness, and yet not to be left with a problematic division between consciousness and the external world. This problematic division persisted in Kant’s system, since Kant needed to distinguish the phenomenal world in which everything we can perceive and understand takes place from a noumenal world that underlies it. But Hegel incorporates this noumenal world into Spirit as a ‘still realm of laws’, which ultimately consists in an interplay of forces that cannot be isolated from one another. Gadamer takes his cue from this idea of an interplay of forces, and interprets Hegel’s intention in this chapter as showing how this interplay relies for its reality on its being transformed into a structure.²

¹ KANT (1781) B130-169
² His reading is, of course, contentious. For a different reading, apparently based on the assumption that Hegel is inconsistent and incoherent and that he lies about his intentions (which I must confess I find a great deal less convincing than Gadamer’s, if not actually incomprehensible), see GRAM (1979)’s review of **HD**.
ii : Hegel on the Inverted World

As we have seen, Gadamer takes the world to be the ideal-identity that is bindingly objective for all the viewpoints onto the world and conversations about the world that refer to it and presuppose it, but does not extend beyond those viewpoints and conversations. He finds support for this in Hegel’s somewhat obscure discussion of the ‘inverted world’ in the *Phänomenologie*. Hegel discusses the concept only briefly (for four paragraphs at the end of the chapter), but it does hold a key position in his exposition of the relationship between consciousness and objective reality. He introduces it like this:

Through this principle [of the identity of identity and difference] the first supersensible world, the tranquil realm of laws, the immediate copy of the perceived world, is inverted into its opposite; the law was, in general, that which remains the same as itself, like its differences, but now it has been settled that, on the contrary, they are both the opposite of themselves: what is the same as itself is instead repelled from itself, and what is not the same as itself instead poses as what is. In fact the difference is only the inner, or difference in itself, under this definition where what is the same is different from itself and what is different is the same as itself. This second supersensible world is in this way the inverted world and indeed as one side of it is already present in the first supersensible world it is the inversion of this first world. The inner is thus completed as appearance. For the first supersensible world was only the immediate raising of the perceived world into the universal element; it had its necessary counterpart in this, which still retains for itself the principle of change and of alteration; the first realm of laws lacked that, but obtains it as the inverted world.¹

This is Hegel’s attempt to overcome the difficulty of maintaining that the phenomenal world contains the whole of reality but rests in some mysterious way on a noumenal world-in-itself, as Kant had held: as we can see, he bases the progression in the identity that is found between the identical and the different.

iii : The First Supersensible World

First, he distinguishes a perceived world from the reality that underlies it. In doing this, he isolates the spatial and temporal properties necessary for a consciousness that perceives, and he argues that some basic level of self-awareness is necessary. What he here refers to as the ‘supersensible world’ is not, however, noumenal or beyond our grasp, but is a world whose existence consciousness must

¹ HEGEL (1807), pp. 88-9
assume in order to make sense of the perceived world. The perceived world is full of change, and is seen to contain many particular instances of universal phenomena. Hegel therefore suggests that the supersensible world is at first thought of as a ‘still realm’ of laws. We still aim to capture much the same idea in modern science: if the whole activity of the universe could be summed up in one interrelated set of mathematical equations, then that constant set of relations would be a ‘still realm of laws’. It is important to notice that Hegel does not assume here that it is possible to isolate any individual law from the whole of this realm: for any one force that we observe we can always ask ‘what set it in motion?’ to which the answer is always a further force. Thus the still realm consists of an interplay of forces, rather than just a set of individual forces.

iv: The Second Supersensible World

Even though these laws are supposed to describe the changes in the universe, they themselves remain constant, hence this supersensible world that they comprise is not able to move and change of itself. Why does this thought push Hegel to posit a second, inverted supersensible world? The world that Hegel describes is not inverted in just this one respect: it is not just particular and moving as opposed to general and fixed. He gives examples of all kinds of contraries in order to demonstrate that he has in mind what we might now call an ‘Alice-behind-the-looking-glass’ world. Whatever is sweet in one world is sour in the other, north becomes south, black white and positive negative. Hence the inverted world is the exact opposite or counterpart of the positive world in every respect: it is the result of the ‘identity’ of identity and difference, the logical opposite of the first world that is in fact that very same world. Here identity and difference are not taken on different levels, as we suggested Gadamer should take them, but brought directly into conflict. Hegel insists that the
inverted world is the very same as the supersensible world, and that the latter has no reality until it contains its inversion within it. He is careful to explain that we must not think of this world as another sensuous or perceptible world, or of the inverted world as another world that is as close to the perceptible world as the first supersensible world was but is distinct from it. The inverted world, then, is the negative moment, the antithesis, of a dialectical movement that achieves Aufhebung in the world which is formed by the arrival at full self-consciousness and the appearance of the concept. The reality of the external world is the concept: and concepts, of course, depend on their being distinguished from their opposites.

v : Satire

In Gadamer’s essay on the inverted world, he draws our attention to the possibility of satire, and of the use of topsy-turvy inversions to bring out the reality of what is inverted: in such satire the inverted world is not supposed to be separate or distinct from the real world, but instead shows up an aspect that is already contained in reality¹. There are two clear motivations for Gadamer’s drawing our attention to this passage in Hegel. Firstly, the co-presence in reality of what is apparently the opposite of reality can provide a basis for the thought that all revealing is simultaneously concealing (or the thought that one is always also many). Secondly, the play of forces that goes to make up the first supersensible world can be seen as being transformed into structure precisely thorough its being inverted. It is inverted when it is conceptualised since concepts involve distinctions: this is a linguistic process on Gadamer’s broad account of language, and it is in language that we approach the play of forces as a meaningful whole and so transform it into a structure. His use of this idea also makes it clearer how the ideality of the world is to be

¹ SMITH (1979) takes this as a prime example of Gadamer’s reliance on ordinary language: Gadamer draws these conclusions by looking at how the phrase “Das ist eine verkehrte Welt” is used in ordinary German.
understood. The reason the reality of the play of forces that is binding in our investigations of nature cannot extend beyond our discoveries and conversations about it is that as an abstractly posited still realm of ‘laws’ it lacks animation and contact with the contingencies of the world in which we live. As a lifeless interplay, it needs to be transformed into structure before it can take on any meaningfulness, or any genuine being.

5: INTER-RELATIONS: HEIDEGGER, PLATO, HEGEL, GADAMER

A: Being, Nothing and the Good

i: Being and Nothing in Hegel

Hegel begins the Logik with the dialectical synthesis of being and nothing in becoming. In many ways, this passage in the Logik is the equivalent of the inverted world passage in the Phänomenologie: the difference, of course, is that we are no longer considering the matter from the point of view of one consciousness, but from that of Spirit as a whole, and the movement of the concept itself. As we have seen, for Hegel, the movement from being into its opposite, nothing, demands the union of the two in the concept of becoming because the whole movement is only one step of a further dialectical movement, which is in turn part of another, the whole system being held up by its ultimate arrival in absolute Spirit. Hegel says that a philosophical starting point must be a dialectical one in order to avoid importing unjustified presuppositions, but this criterion itself is drawn only from Hegel’s entire absolutist structure.

ii: Hegel and Plato

Gadamer has another way of understanding the union of being and nothing in becoming, however, which we can see clearly in summarising our analyses of his readings of Plato and Heidegger. We need to focus on the ‘play of forces’ or ‘still
realm’, Hegel’s ‘first supersensible world’, which Gadamer takes to be transformed into structure by language in order to bring the world with which we are familiar to being. As a still realm, this ‘play’ has one important property, which is evident in Hegel’s account of it: unity. It is the universal, in that it is a generalisation, an abstraction away from the particular instances we actually encounter. It is also, if we are prepared to allow that it is the goal after which science has been chasing, the ideal of unity, of unified explanation of all phenomena (even though, of course, any actual explanation must be particular). If we think of this in terms of Plato, we can see that it is analogous to the idea of the Good, which was also thought of as pure unity.

iii : Plato and Heidegger

In distinguishing the one as the unattainable goal and as the giver of all unity, Gadamer has also explicated Heidegger’s ontological difference in a remarkably perspicuous fashion. For while all of the other forms are immanent, and hence are amongst the things that are, the idea of the Good is transcendent, and hence is not itself an entity. The one cannot have being and cannot not have being, as Plato’s Parmenides demonstrates. That is because, Gadamer will say, it is precisely the ‘Being’ that Heidegger was looking for, that is not itself an entity but is nonetheless responsible for the being of all beings. The idea of the Good does not have being – it is entirely beyond our reach and it is hence nothing.

iv : Being and Nothing in Heidegger

If we also try to align this being itself with Hegel’s notion of being, its relationship to nothing becomes very interesting. For Heidegger it is also the case that the nothing is the essential counterpart of being. But insofar as being itself, before the clearing is given, is concerned, it means nothing to say that it includes the nothing. It is only when it gives a clearing, when care is present, i.e. when we come on the scene,
that ‘the nothing’ really comes to play its role in Heidegger’s system. For the nothing, like the clearing, is said to ‘encircle everything that is’: the nothing and the clearing are on the same ontological level, as it were, and are both ‘given’ by the ‘it’ that ‘gives’. The nothing here is just what is beyond the reach of care, what we have no kind of access to.

**v : How Heidegger and Plato Modify Hegel**

But this negation carries over in Heidegger’s account into the clearing itself, into the truth of the things that are. The clearing occurs in just such a way that it preserves the rift, the tension between being and not being, between being for us and belonging to the nothing. That is why Heidegger’s clearing has the structure of revealing/concealing. Now, Gadamer’s understanding of this Heideggerian ontology can be brought in line with his Hegelian studies quite neatly. If the ‘it’ that ‘gives’, being itself, is precisely the untransformed play of forces, and if the clearing in being is to be thought of as being identical to language, then clearly the clearing itself is the same as the transformation into structure of the play of forces, for which language was taken to be responsible. Like the account from Platonic dialectic, Heidegger’s account preserves the movement from unattainable perfect unity through its opposition to ultimate negation to their union in our imperfect world, without needing to have recourse to a teleological absolute. The advantage of the Heideggerian account is that in the clearing the tension in the relationship between being and not being, positivity and negativity, is preserved precisely in the goal-free ontological movement that gives rise to being. So for Heidegger the ideal realm of unity that Plato called ‘the Good’ can never be separated from the mixture of particular instances that is reality, nor is it desirable that it should be: even in truth there in an essential element of untruth, of error, of concealing. Of course, this preservation of the tension of two contradictory
forces is also an element of Hegel’s dialectic. Gadamer wants to use Heidegger and Plato to preserve the positive preservation of the tension between contradictories, while losing the dialectical progression towards the absolute, and to keep hold of the teleological structure of dialectic whilst relinquishing the possibility of achieving its goal.

**B : Gadamer**

**i : A New Goal for Heidegger**

But this line of thought is true to neither Plato, Hegel, nor even Heidegger. For Heidegger, the idea of being ‘on the way’ was concerned with following a path of thinking: it seemed to be a path that didn’t really lead anywhere in particular at all. It followed a few blind alleys (*Holzwegen*), and turned back on itself occasionally, but it never seemed to have any particular clear goal in mind. For Heidegger thinking of the goal was not constructive; following the path of thinking was more important, and the goals would become clear only as and when they were reached. For Gadamer, however, this notion of being ‘on the way’ has come to stand for our human finitude, and for the impossibility of our ever actually reaching a transcendent goal. On this model, we can be heading down well signposted paths to clearly defined goals – unity, freedom, a right interpretation, an ultimate truth, a totally explanatory scientific theory. We shall just make more progress if we acknowledge the impossibility of our ever reaching the goals in question. Gadamer thinks that if we assume the paths we are on lead to the goals we seek we shall never look at other possible paths which might take us nearer. The assumption on which this rests is that none of the paths can ever actually go all the way. Thus, as John Caputo has put it (1987, p. 95), Gadamer has created a conservative version of Heidegger, keeping his emphasis on finitude but losing his radical critique of metaphysics: in doing so, he has almost reinstated the
metaphysical goals that Heidegger rejected, only keeping them at arm’s length by insisting that finitude prevents us from attaining them.

ii : The One Word

Gadamer emphasises this difference from Heidegger by aligning this fundamental given (the Good, the one, being or Spirit) with language. His talk of the ‘one word’ that we can never completely capture and that must therefore be incarnated into finite, articulated dialogue, plays very much the same role. The one word, or the *logos*, contains the *Sachen* themselves, and, as it is never captured by our ideas and conversations, is encountered as ‘biting back’. The question remains why we should make the attempt to aim towards capturing the essences of the *Sachen* in this one word, rather than just treading water alongside Derrida in the sea of mutually interdependent signifiers.
CHAPTER SEVEN

AN ETHICAL ONTOLOGY?

Three tasks remain for this final chapter. First I shall try to show how all the elements of Gadamer’s thought fit together and can come quite close to being presented in the form of an argument. Section One of the thesis reviewed the ontological strands of his thinking and attempted to fit them together, but one important element was still missing: we could not see why, on Gadamer’s account, we should ever bother to inquire into anything or to head in the direction of any of the goals that he showed were impossible for us ever to reach. I shall now supply the missing element, which I have ignored so far on the grounds that it is not obviously related to ontology. This is Gadamer’s practical philosophy, based on a fusion of Aristotle’s ethics with Kant’s: I shall show that his ontology only really makes sense if viewed from a practical, ethical standpoint. This should not be too surprising, now that we have seen Gadamer’s Platonic reflections about logos and ergon, and his insistence that theory is always a practical task.

Having laid out the presuppositions of Gadamer’s thought and shown how his practical and ontological comments derive from them, our second task will be to pick out those elements of this argument that constitute Gadamer’s own contribution. This seems to be necessary, as so many central elements of his thought have been seen to be directly and explicitly derivative from the work of other thinkers.

Finally, we must examine his ideas to see where their strengths and weaknesses actually lie: this will involve drawing together all the doubts and criticisms that have surfaced during our discussion, and assessing the damage they do in the light of the positive contribution that Gadamer’s thought can make.
1: GADAMER’S ARGUMENT IN TERMS OF ARISTOTLE’S ETHICS

Gadamer’s practical thought is meta-ethical in that it discusses the possibility of using rules or criteria for judging how we ought to behave: his verdict is that any system of ethical rules will turn out to give us tyrannically counter-intuitive demands in some situations. He therefore rejects all the standard ethical theories, yet he does not embrace ethical relativism. Instead, he reminds us that Kant’s ethics always remains on the level of personal judgement, and shows us how we can use what Aristotle\textsuperscript{1} called \textit{phronesis} (practical wisdom) to aim our activity in the direction of a categorical imperative that will itself have a binding ideal-identity arising from our appeal to it\textsuperscript{2}. The similarity to his thought in other areas should by now be obvious, but I shall spell out the movement of his practical thought in order to summarise the pattern of his thought as a whole along the way.

A: Prohairesis

Gadamer refers to the notion of \textit{prohairesis} (choice) as a fundamental determination of the human condition. The starting point of his practical philosophy, and the basis for his whole appeal to ‘the Good’, is the notion that we are always in a situation where we have to make a choice of some kind. His reason for this is that we are ‘finite’.

\textsuperscript{1} A detailed examination of Gadamer’s use of the Aristotelian distinctions between \textit{prohairesis}, \textit{phronesis}, \textit{praxis} and \textit{techne} can be found in DUNNE (1985)
\textsuperscript{2} Good summaries and discussions of this meta-ethics and its relation to Kant and Aristotle can be found in SCHUCHMAN (1979), KELLY (1988) and SMITH (1988). FOSTER (1991) actually tries to build a whole practical normative theory on the basis of Gadamer’s comments in \textbf{KSI} (1993a), but unfortunately he didn’t have the chance to read the many further enlightening comments that Gadamer makes in \textbf{EE}, \textbf{LT} and \textbf{VG}. 

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i : Two Premises

Finitude

If we were to attempt to express Gadamer’s ontology as an argument, we would have to see the ‘dogma of finitude’ (as Page (1991) called it) as a first premise. This does not need to include the thought that there is no way in which we can use abstractions or successfully overcome our finitude, but even without this extension it is a claim that contradicts some philosophical positions. The form in which we need it is that which states that we can only be aware of a finite number of things at any one time. In other words, we cannot think everything at once, and we cannot make everything present at once. The premise does need to be strong enough to rule out the possibility of progressively laying down all possible thoughts and opinions and then claiming to have them all present at once.

Holism

This premise is also tied up with a second premise, which lays down a fairly strong holism. If it were possible to be aware of everything that was relevant to any topic under consideration, then the premise of finitude would be useless to us. This second premise therefore needs to hold that all topics are potentially interconnected in unpredictable ways. Anything can be relevant to anything. There is no restriction concerning what things can be thought together, and no limit to the effects that any new thought can have.

ii : Why We Must Choose

Given these two premises, it follows that each person must, at any one time, select certain combinations of things of which to be aware. This immediately runs us into the question of whether conscious selection can be, or needs to be, involved at this level. That we do necessarily think one thing rather than another at any one time
is uncontentious, but to call that fact ‘choice’ is less so. We can be selective beings without being beings that choose. It is at this point that language first enters the argument, along with the suggestion that we are ‘always already’ situated within a language and a culture that presents us with possibilities. I shall examine this premise fully a little later. Here all that is needed is that we have possible courses of action available to us. This introduces a whole new dimension to the argument, and the first two premises need to be re-applied at this level. We cannot perform all possible actions at once, and we cannot know what the consequences of our actions will be (as all actions are potentially interconnected in unpredictable ways). From these new versions of the premises it does follow that in any situation we must choose a course of action, and that we are never in a position to make a completely informed choice\textsuperscript{1}.

\textit{B : The Choosing of the Good}

From here, Gadamer moves to say that because we are in a position where we have to choose, we always want to make the right choice. This claim is very difficult to support, but the argument does appear to rest on it.

\textit{I : The Socratic Denial of Acrasia}

It seems not unfair to say that in his ethical insistence on examining our lives and indulging in open, personal conversations, Gadamer really wants to be Socrates more than anybody else. It is perhaps not unsurprising, then, to find him making the leap from saying that we have to choose to saying that we are bound to want to choose right. In Plato’s dialogues, Socrates often puts forward a similar claim, usually in a similarly undefended way. That one should desire what will harm oneself, or that one should choose against one’s better judgement (\textit{acrasia}, weakness of will), is written

\textsuperscript{1} CHEN (1987) explains the necessity of seeing Gadamer’s practical intention of setting up the individual’s choice against the domination of method-driven technology as fundamental to his thought as a whole.
off as an impossibility: to our modern minds this seems indefensible. For Socrates, ‘good’ in this context is usually simply linked to what is beneficial to oneself. In making a choice then, it is assumed that we must make the choice most beneficial to ourselves, or at least that we must want to. Quite apart from weakness of will, though, there might be many reasons why this would not be the case: it rules out many possible actions that are self-sacrificing, suicidal, masochistic or just petulant. This is a serious flaw in Gadamer’s account, even though he does not simply embrace the denial of akrasia in Socrates’ terms. Gadamer looks on a larger scale, and refers to the general tendency of our choices, rather than any one particular choice. In order to do this, he has to introduce a second order of choosing: we want our particular choices to tend towards the Good (now understood in Plato’s different, more general sense). But this still leaves room for a different second order choice. It certainly seems possible for somebody, perhaps disillusioned with life or disadvantaged by society, to choose to make all of his choices as evil as possible, and to cause as much harm as he can. But if one person could do this, what prevents it from being generally the case that people choose evil just as much as they choose good? Gadamer is remarkably over-optimistic about human nature here, which seems both surprising and worrying in the light of his unavoidable contact with people who seemed consciously to have chosen evil during the second World War.

ii: The Good as Unity and Elegance

If we allow Gadamer his optimism (which I think we should not) the question arises as to the nature of ‘the Good’ towards which we all direct our choices. As we have seen, Gadamer derives this idea from Plato, and thinks that its teleological spirit persists into Aristotle’s ethics. He adopts Plato’s supposed numerical understanding of it, taking it to be transcendent unity. In the confusion of phenomena and situations
within which we live, this unity is supposed to manifest itself as proportion, elegance, beauty and perhaps also ‘truth’. We can take this to mean that we aim towards a coherence in our beliefs and actions: if we could attain complete coherence, there would be a clear sense in which we would have attained ‘unity’. By the premise of finitude, however, such complete coherence is impossible: we are therefore stuck with seeking elegance and beauty in the finite choices we make.

iii : The Quest for the Right Understanding

The value of the beautiful

As the manifestation of the Good, what is beautiful is said to have an intrinsic value of its own that requires no justification of any kind. This is backed up only by the consideration that we tend to value beautiful things without asking why. Gadamer takes our values as a given: it is this tendency to value beauty for its own sake that gives us the tendency to direct our choices towards the Good (as elegance, coherence and order) rather than towards evil (which would presumably correspond to ugliness, chaos and disorder). Thus his optimism about human nature can be derived from a belief that we value elegance (provided that we accept his equation of unity with the Good, and the argument that elegance is the only possible finite manifestation of unity). This must be marked down as a fourth premise. If we also accept that we shall tend, in the absence of full information, to choose according to our values, it will follow that we shall tend to make the most elegant choice. None of this saves Gadamer from the difficulty he will face when confronted with somebody who values ugliness, disorder and chaos for its own sake.

The claim of the right choice

Gadamer goes beyond the relativism of choosing according to the values one happens to have, however. When we make a choice we take to be right, we make a
claim to objectivity. Such a claim appeals to a binding fact about what is right in that situation: this fact may be appealed to by others, and can attain a binding ideal-identity if enough people appeal to it. This ethical version of ideality shows up the problem with ideality very clearly: one person’s appeal is clearly not sufficient, and everybody’s appeal is clearly not necessary, which leaves an open question as to how many are required for a binding reality to be created. If we grant Gadamer’s answer, that an appeal can become part of a tradition which is then available for future appropriation as soon as it gets appropriated by someone else and passed on or written down, it still remains unclear how much appropriation is required to keep the ideal-identity alive. Is it enough if I alone agree with something somebody once wrote, or must there be many new appropriations giving the idea currency? If so, how many?

**C: Cultivation of Body and Soul**

Leaving this problem aside for a moment, the argument continues with an appeal to a kind of mental sense that allows us to divine ‘the right course of action’ (i.e. the one that heads towards elegance) in each situation. This is described by analogy with our ordinary senses and our cultural use of them. This step merely takes our orientation towards unity together with the finite, uninformed nature of our choice, and explains how our choice can be correctly oriented.

**i: The Claim of Taste**

Gadamer argues that when somebody has good taste they not only choose beautiful and elegant things, but make choices that become binding on others. Taste makes a claim to be right. In this instance we can see how ‘good taste’, as an ideal-identity, develops: norms arise out of the claims of individuals without any rules being needed. Standards of good taste are not conventions; they are less codified than any convention. They leave room for disagreement, but also for openness to
correction. There is no such thing as ‘good taste’ in itself beyond the claims that people make as to the tastefulness of their own decisions. Yet taste can be better or worse, and claims about taste can be judged by an ever-changing but no less binding standard.

**ii : The Cultivation of Taste**

That the standard is binding is shown by the fact that it is possible to improve one’s taste, to cultivate it. This process of Bildung depends upon turning away from questions of utility, and spending time developing a sense for which things have intrinsic value apart from all questions of their usefulness. That one can develop a sense for this is supposed to demonstrate that the value of beautiful things does not arise merely from their giving pleasure (they could, after all, be justified as useful on the grounds that they give pleasure). Kitsch, which is familiar and undemanding, is able to give us pleasure; but Gadamer’s idea of the beautiful is connected with his idea of true art which tells us the truth and confronts us with ourselves. Cultivated taste is the quality we need to be able to tarry with works of art in such a way that we can gain a powerful experience of self-recognition from them. This is used as an analogy for what Gadamer wants to say about practical wisdom.

**iii : Phronesis: the Cultivation of the Faculty of Choice**

Gadamer says that it is not just the senses, but also the mind that must be cultivated. Just as we can develop a gebildete (cultivated) taste for what is beautiful, we can also develop a similarly cultivated sense of what is right and wrong, which will be able to guide our choices in concrete situations. This is the ethical principle that Gadamer prefers to the application of rules\(^1\). What our phronesis (this faculty of

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\(^1\) POLET (1994) praises Gadamer for showing the human necessity of *prohairesis* that looks towards ends in asking about the Good, the therefore relates to the ‘universal’ through *phronesis*, and for showing that the scientific emphasis on means must be subordinated to this. WACHTERHAUSER
practical wisdom) leads us to choose may be quite different in similar situations, but it still includes an appeal to a universal, binding norm. That norm is set up precisely by people’s phronetic ethical behaviour, and it attains binding ideal-identity as a result. Thus in choosing a course of action a person appeals to the objective rightness of their choice, and we can assess their appeal as justified or otherwise by looking at the norms of people’s actions. These norms must be those set up by the cultivated phronetic actions of those who are directing their choices towards the (elegant) Good.

This presents Gadamer with a problem, which Richard Bernstein (1982, p.841) has pointed out, since he thinks that modern technical society alienates us from this very ‘universal’ by preventing us from engaging in meaningful dialogue. Phronesis needs to be cultivated, and our technical society, which Gadamer does not think we can change or escape from, leads us away from that cultivation. Yet he recommends phronesis to us, so he must clearly consider it a possibility in any kind of society. The problem Bernstein is pointing at here is that the ideal-identity of the norms to which phronesis appeals seems to require a tendency within society to act phronetically. If that tendency is absent, the norms seem to be relying on the appeals of the elite few that have cultivated themselves in the right way. This is the same problem that we identified with ideality earlier, and it is going to be the root of the severest problem with Gadamer’s account.

D: Ethos and Solidarity

i: ‘Always Already’

The linguistic community

What is clear is that the cultivation of our sense of right and wrong must be a social, or at least an intersubjective, phenomenon. An individual’s opinion is

(1988) discusses the way in which competition between differing social opinions is to be resolved on moral grounds through phronesis.
worthless without the appeal to the universal norm that it supposedly goes some way towards creating. This social aspect is new to our argument, and it involves the introduction of a new premise. So far we have argued that we must tend to chose the most beautiful course of action, but only if our sense or practical wisdom is cultivated. The new premise is that cultivation, like any reference to a universal, presupposes always already belonging to a linguistic cultural community. Gadamer provides no defence of this claim, so it is worth looking at some apparent counter-examples. ‘Always already’ (immer schon) was a favourite phrase of Heidegger’s, which he applied to the nature of Dasein’s being-in-the-world. Gadamer uses it to say that all thinking about nature and our situation in it can only be undertaken by somebody has who already acquired some presuppositions simply by living her life.

Unsocialised people

We might ask, then, about children who have grown up in isolation from society, or about hermits who have abandoned it. Wild children have always been the subject of myths and mystery, and are not regarded as normal children. If they can think and inquire about their position in life, they can only do so in a way that is meaningful to anybody else once they have become socialised at least to the extent of acquiring a language. A hermit who abandons society cannot also abandon the language within which she lives. These considerations push us to agree with Gadamer’s view that it is language to which we always already belong.

The inclusiveness of belonging

Perhaps a more telling question asks whether it really matters to a philosopher that she always already belongs to a language and a culture. Might it not be possible for a philosopher to make explicit and to question the presuppositions she always already has, and so to overcome them and render them irrelevant? A negative answer
to this question can be understood in two ways: as implying relativism or as enabling a diversification of historical and traditional research. To make it imply relativism we actually need a further premise that Gadamer does not supply: that the presuppositions we have always already gained from our language and culture are radically incommensurable with those of other languages and cultures. For Gadamer this is not the case: we belong to language and culture in such a way that we can potentially extend our background prejudices to encompass any insight. What we cannot do is make all of our inheritance explicit at once or all together. His conclusion, then, is not that ethical behaviour and the truth about the world are both relative to languages and cultures, but that claims about ethics or about truth only have validity in the context of the background of language and culture that we always already share.

**ii : Claims Become Binding: or do they?**

To say that a claim that is appropriated and appealed to over and over again attains its own identity and becomes binding therefore includes a reference to a linguistic community within which this happens. It does not involve a naïve relativism to linguistic communities, since the community under discussion embraces the whole of world tradition. Yet there remains a tension here between the local and the global, which emerges when we look a little further into Gadamer’s practical philosophy. Gadamer bemoans our lack of the right *ethos* (habits of thought) to promote *phronesis* within our society. These habits are the ethical equivalent of ‘prejudices’: they apply to the cultivation of the moral mind rather than of the cognitive ‘senses’. Just as prejudices enable language (as we saw in Chapter Four) to preserve traditional memories in between people in conversation, so our practical habits or *ethos* establish
ethical norms between people in a similar way\(^1\). Neither claim is a simple idealist one, since they go beyond individual consciousnesses and preserve objectivity. They are both more like Hegelian idealism, since they seem to appeal, in the form of ‘language’, to something very like Hegelian ‘Geist’ (Spirit), denying only that it can ever be absolute. But if Spirit cannot be absolute, it is very hard to see how anything can really be universal: if the identity of more or less anything is established only by the linguistic habits that people share, how can anything be universal when there are clearly no such habits that are shared by everybody in the whole of world history? It is possible to take the claim beyond the local level, arguing that habits and prejudices can be extended and fused with others and can potentially approach and assimilate any alien viewpoint. But again we are stuck with a question of exactly what is then required: how many people need to agree, how wide must the consensus spread? It still seems to be entirely possible for very similar disagreements to take place in, say, Germany and China, and for the side of the argument that is (‘objectively’) right in Germany to be wrong in China and vice versa. Perhaps Gadamer can solve this difficulty by appealing to the possibility of dialogue between the disputants of the two different cultures. If the identity of the thing under discussion consists only in its coming into language, it cannot be ‘the same thing’ that comes into language in binding but opposite ways in German and Chinese. They can only be talking about the same thing once they find a common language in which to discuss it, since the identity of what is spoken of derives only from reference to it.

\(^1\) There is some disagreement as to the practical upshot of Gadamer’s appeal to ethos: BERNSTEIN (1983) sees Gadamer’s embracing of the practical end of radicalising phronesis in society in order to set up free validating dialogues as closing the gap between his position and that of Habermas by providing an analogue to Habermas’ notion of the ‘ideal speech situation’. BEINER (1989), on the other hand, thinks that the emphasis placed by the notion of phronesis on individual situations and on the mere guiding hand of ethos restores a more universal ethical insight that rejects general rules against Habermas’ modernist theorising.
iii : Participation and Freedom

Gadamer follows Hegel in saying that the principle of the freedom of all is absolute and irrevocable, even though it can clearly only have ideal-identity on his account. He also follows Hegel to some extent in his understanding of the notion of freedom: to be free is to escape the alienation of modern specialised, technical society, and to come to be able to ‘identify with the universal’ by recognising oneself in one’s own work\(^1\). What Gadamer therefore thinks we need but lack in modern society is ‘solidarity’: by this he means a genuine communication that can allow our concerns to be properly shared and to become real and binding in such a way that an ethos can develop within which each person’s faculty of phronesis can be cultivated. Only in this way can it be possible for an individual to find a way of genuinely contributing to the social ‘universal’ through her work, by finding her own concerns reflected in the general solidarity in which she participates. All of this is quite vague, and difficult to pin down to any definite meaning or set of recommendations. I have left it to one side throughout this thesis in order to focus on the specifically ontological aspects of Gadamer’s work; we can now see, however, that all of these ideas are in fact relevant to Gadamer’s view of ontology. Being, for Gadamer, involves self-presentation within a shared language, and therefore presupposes at least a minimal level of community. The consequence is that if our technology and specialised labour has alienated us from a full participation in community, we shall lose touch with genuine being. It will become harder to indulge in genuine conversations that are guided by the self-presentation of what is discussed, and more and more normal to allow ourselves to be guided by the ossified prejudices that our technical and specialised tradition equips us with.

\(^1\) KIERANS (1986, p.127) thinks that Gadamer’s are “perhaps the most useful of contemporary attempts to explicate the Hegelian texts” with regard to the problem of freedom, and praises Gadamer for finding a middle ground between Marxist subjectivism and the divine absolute.
I shall continue to refrain from any in-depth examination of this social critique, as there are just too many possible ways of interpreting such notions as ‘alienation’ and such a broad critique of ‘technology’ and the ‘division of labour’. What is relevant, and emerges from the whole of this section, is that Gadamer’s practical comments about modern society are very closely interwoven with his ideas about philosophy itself and its aims and purposes. His hortative insistence on turning towards the Good, towards elegance and unity, and so indulging in questioning dialogue with tradition, arises initially from the relationship he sees between human finitude (understood as prohairesis) and the possibility of cultivating a faculty of right-judgement (phronesis) that can make binding claims by heading towards the Good.

2 : GADAMER’S ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

A : A New Appropriation of the Philosophical Tradition

We have seen that Gadamer’s ideas about ontology are largely traceable to elements of the work of Heidegger, Plato and Hegel. The attempt to isolate elements of his ontology that have no such roots would not be an especially productive one. If there are a few entirely original thoughts (the account of time, perhaps, or the coining of the phrase ‘Wirkungsgeschichte’) it is never impossible to find their inspiration in the classics of philosophy. Gadamer himself would not only freely admit that his thought is entirely derivative, but would see this as a great advantage for his position. The words of past writers can stand, he thinks, as witnesses to the views that he expresses. What his genuinely original contribution consists in is the particular combination and emphasis that he brings to those traditional ideas that he appropriates. This manifests itself in two ways: firstly there is the particular set of
texts on which he concentrates, finding links and bridges between writers who are often placed in opposition to one another, and reading more obscure texts alongside the popular ones; but there is also his capacity to find new and revealing interpretations of these writers. Gadamer’s readings of the philosophical tradition are rarely orthodox or conventional. He refuses to take passages out of their context within the whole movement of a writer’s thought and that of the generation in which he wrote: this enables him to provide powerful suggestions about the general motives that lay behind various lines of thought. If as a result his accounts are not always very well supported by quotation and reference, he makes up for this flaw by the vividness of his reconstructions. These can easily be disputed by those who are experts on individual thinkers. But the thoughts that Gadamer picks out as relevant and effective, and that he combines into a picture that he builds up for himself, go together to form an account of our place in the world that as a whole is sufficiently original to provide a valuable contribution to philosophy, and that is still capable of breathing fresh air into debates between relativists, objectivists, deconstructivists and critical theorists.

**B : Language Comes to the Fore**

We can look briefly at two areas of Gadamer’s thought where his originality does shine through more than his appropriation. The first of these is his emphasis on language. As he himself would be the first to point out, there has been a general trend towards the increasing recognition of the importance of language throughout twentieth century philosophy not only on the continent, but also within the Anglo-American tradition. Gadamer’s own emphasis on language derives largely from the late Heidegger, but, as we saw in Chapter Five, he introduces one crucial difference from Heidegger’s account. Language is still the embodiment of tradition, but that no longer makes it a prejudicial force that keeps us from reaching insights about being.
Instead, its prejudices give us the power to investigate being. Gadamer achieves this move by taking on a much more inclusive understanding of ‘language’. He allows himself to use the term (like all his other terms) in a variety of ways, playing with all of the available senses. This gives him the flexibility he needs to align language with the origin of being, ideal unity and absolute Spirit, and yet still to talk about individual instances of address and metaphorical movement. It gives him so much flexibility that it is very difficult to tie him down to any definite, positive claims, and very easy for him to rebuff any criticisms by appealing to new nuances of the words he has used. He has made his philosophy unfalsifiable to a large extent, but he directly denies that that strips it of meaning and value. Just as Heidegger wrote in a thoroughly unfalsifiable poetic style and wanted his reader only to follow the paths of his thought and to derive insights of their own, so Gadamer wants us to follow his rhetoric and find value in it for ourselves. His philosophy is an improvement on Heidegger in terms of comprehensibility, but it retains its flexibility and its appeal to practical rather than methodical reason. The fact that it is unfalsifiable certainly precludes it from making any claims to being definitive or deductively compelling. There are no reasons why we have to accept what Gadamer says. Nevertheless, much of what he says is both compelling and convincing, and it is meaningful if we choose to look in it for meanings that are relevant to ourselves.

C: The Rehabilitation of Rhetoric

Another fairly original element in Gadamer’s thought is his urging of the alliance of hermeneutics and rhetoric, on the grounds that in the process of coming to a mutual understanding the power of expressive speech is a great deal more important than logical analysis. This might well make us worry that the process is by definition open to abuse. If rhetoric is to be the factor that leads us towards the only truths that
are available to us, must we not surrender ourselves not only to sophistry, but to all sorts of quite deliberate manipulations? How exactly is rhetoric to be separated from propaganda, manipulation or duplicity? Gadamer’s argument is that rhetoric is, whether we like it or not, the means by which we come by the vast majority of our beliefs: if most of our beliefs are infected with ideology and false consciousness, our only recourse is to conversation and the questioning of distant traditions. But even within that conversation and that questioning, rhetoric will still be the force that leads us towards insights and experiences of truth. The rehabilitation of rhetoric amounts to little more than the acknowledgement that our logic and science are themselves propagated only by means of rhetoric. There is very little that can be securely deduced \textit{a priori} without the introduction of some axioms that have not themselves been so deduced. Ultimately, therefore, any argument rests on presuppositions which can only have been either inherited, taken on trust, or chosen entirely arbitrarily. This means that rhetoric must be an element in all securing of agreement between people. That is why Gadamer recommends that we either put aside all of our personal and political concerns and question openly together about whatever subjects interest us, or we turn instead to alien texts that express a very different point of view. Gadamer does not himself think that the alienation he detects in our society is anybody’s fault, or is the result of any ideological conspiracy of misinformation or of restricted information. But his advocating of dialogue with tradition allows even for this possibility.

\textbf{3: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES}

\textbf{A: The Weaknesses of Gadamer’s Account}

Gadamer’s ontology depends on our acceptance of his notion of ideal-identity: if there cannot be something binding that consists only of people’s (ec-static) participation in it, or reference to it, then Gadamer’s entire system will crumble.
Because it ties being to people’s participation in this way, it also needs a solid reason why people can, should, and will participate in the right way. What they must participate in is the use of ‘language’, understood in a sense as broad and vague as the championing of metaphor as the basis of communication might lead us to expect. If this basis of argument in metaphor and rhetoric is considered unsatisfactory, we are unlikely to find anything valuable in Gadamer’s work.

**i : Trouble with Perspectives**

Gadamer looks for, and finds, the same structure in many different areas of inquiry. Because he wants to tie everything into the finite understanding of language users and yet to retain notions of binding objectivity, he claims that people can participate in communication in such a way that they dissolve into something bigger. This claim allows him to say many useful things: the identity of the world, of ethical norms, of artworks, of linguistic claims, of language itself, of all kinds of structure and of the play that underlies it can be objective and binding and yet not have to extend beyond the finite understanding of those who participate in creating it. He thinks in terms of the image that he takes from Aquinas of a mirror that nowhere extends beyond the image of the thing it reflects.

**Objectivism and relativism**

But doesn’t this make it all too easy? Such a repeatable schema allows us to run blindfold down what might only be a very thin wire between objectivism and relativism. If the aim is to allow objectivity as a result of people’s participation, is there not always a danger of falling into saying that the identity of things and the truth about them is relative to what we say about them? Can we really scramble out of this by saying that there is always a further court of appeal in the examination of more different traditions? Could it not happen that we examined all the relevant texts in all
the traditions there have ever actually been, and still didn’t find the right answer to our question? To say this is possible is to acknowledge a truth or reality beyond all references in discussion and tradition: to say it is impossible must be to relativise the truth about things to human traditions. The latter is Gadamer’s choice, with the qualification that the traditions are commensurable. But he balances in this position only by claiming that when disagreement occurs we are not really talking about the same thing: the identity of what we talk about arises only from our agreement about it (that is why coming to agree about something always involves ‘finding a common language’). The fact that things only have this ideal-identity prevents the truth about them from being relative: something cannot come into language in two ways that are so different that no agreement about it can be reached, because if it does it is two different things. We are lifted back onto the high-wire by ideality once again. I believe that this precarious position may well be tenable, but staying there certainly requires considerable skill.

**Ideality at too many levels**

Another worry about ideality arises from the fact that Gadamer needs to use the same structure at every level. The very simplest form of participation or communication, be it a word, a gesture, or a message that is understood, takes its identity and so its meaning only from the participation of the speaker and audience in attempting to understand it. This basic mutual understanding is a prerequisite for more complex forms of understanding that might be involved with the encounter with art, with communal celebration or with an inquiry into truth. The artwork, the festival and the very truth that is sought will themselves then have the same structure, thus standing on at least a double layer of participation. If we then attempt, say, to understand a number of artworks in terms of a genre or period, to generalise about
festivals or to classify investigations, the entities we shall create, such as ‘the
Enlightenment’ or ‘moral philosophy’ must introduce a third level of participation,
and probably need to rest on many different kinds of ideality. If there is a problem
with the number of people who need to participate and the extent of their
participation, this difficulty will be compounded to such an extent that the existence
of really complex entities will be very doubtful. This could be said just to reflect the
greater level of disagreement about more complex entities, but it must be noted that
Gadamer’s account makes this disagreement directly detrimental to the very being of
the entities that are disputed.

Too much understanding

Gadamer might be able to find a more comfortable position if he were not so
insistent on the universality of understanding. It is to a finite language-user’s
understanding that he ultimately appeals for the basis of meaning and truth. He has
very little to say about the production of meaning, about speaking, writing or other
attempts to communicate. When he does discuss it, he usually attempts to think of it in
terms of the speaker’s understanding of her own words: even where he talks of the
incarnation of the inner word in the outer word and acknowledges that the inner word
of thought is never perfectly captured in language, he sees the incarnation as the result
of an internal dialogue in which things become questionable and are understood as
questions. Thus it is the speaker’s understanding participation in a process of
questioning that allows her to speak, just as it is the listener’s participation in a similar
process that allows her to understand. The process of questioning itself acquires ideal-
identity from this participation, as does the meaning of what is said: but that meaning
therefore remains tied to understanding and has no being of its own. This emphasis on
understanding can be viewed as distinctly one-sided. Other commentators, such as
Donald Davidson (1991) for example, have stressed the importance of finding a balance between the three poles of the production of meaning, meaning itself, and the understanding of meaning\(^1\), and a fuller consideration of these other elements might produce different insights from those reached by Gadamer.

**ii : The Normative Basis**

Another possible worry about Gadamer’s ontology concerns its grounding in ethics. The surrendering of all attempts to find a perspective or viewpoint for being itself that is not tied to our understanding of it leaves us with the danger that our own input becomes too important in our account of reality. Can we be so anthropocentric as to think that the norms of our behaviour can affect the being of reality without embracing a risibly self-centred and hubristic arrogance? Of course, it is not clear that Gadamer goes quite this far. But our participation in talking about the world clearly is required for its reality on his account, and our incentives to participate in this way can only be moral ones. Of course, in one sense he can get away with saying that we *always already do* participate in talking about lots of things and so in setting up their identity. But things that are more complex, or that have less immediate relevance to our everyday shared circumstances, require our participation in proper conversations about them in order for our views to coincide sufficiently to establish their ideal-identity. Before we shall want to do that, there must be a sufficiently positive *ethos* within our tradition for us to be able to cultivate our *phronesis* to the point where we want to direct all our choices towards the Good, since only if we do that will we want to find the unity of things’ ideal-identity and so want to question one another and tradition about the truth of things.

\(^{1}\) FELL (1991) points out that Collingwood talked of a similar three-term process of dialogical transmission, involving not only the text and the audience but also the artist, in the third volume of *Principles of Art*. 
Simplicity and complexity

The consequence of this ethical basis of being is that reality is only as complex as we want to make it. If we stick with what is simplest we shall not raise ourselves above an animal environment, but shall instead really live in a world in which only the things with which we are most immediately concerned for our survival have any being. The more we participate, the further we move into a more complex, abstract world, in which we can come to have more and more possibilities at our disposal, and can come to find self-recognition in more and more complex forms of universal. If Gadamer is right, it follows that we have the choice of whether or not to participate in his vision of reality and so bestow ideal-identity upon it. If we choose not to, must that constitute stopping short of it and sticking with a more prejudiced, immediate and simplistic view of reality, or could we go beyond it to find new levels of participation in a more developed and empowering world? The intuition that this choice can scarcely be ours to make must tell to some extent against the accuracy of Gadamer’s picture.

How ethical is Gadamer’s ethics? Elitism and Nazism

Gadamer’s idea of the cultivation of an ethical sense, and his insistence that *phronesis* is both needed for truth-finding discussions and hard to come by in our modern technical *ethos* of specialisation and individualism, makes us wonder whether truth may not wind up being the privilege of the few. Schott (1991) brings the serious charge that Gadamer’s account leaves socially marginalised groups no opportunity to participate in the conversations that go to make up reality. This is a point worthy of some careful reflection, especially given Gadamer’s close association with Heidegger.
who never renounced his Nazism. For Gadamer, reality lives in language, which is moved on by fundamental conversations and the establishing of eminent texts in the tradition: in order to be a part of either of these processes, one must be aware of the effect of history on one’s own position, and of its continuing effectiveness. To be aware in this way is already also to have a particular kind of consciousness that not everybody has, to be aiming to find out the unity of truth (the Good) and hence to have a cultivated faculty of *phronesis*. This means that the people who shape the reality of our world are open minded, and familiar with tradition. Those who are not given certain advantages by society, however, such as a good education and a fair hearing in all situations, are unlikely to be familiar with tradition, and cannot afford to be open-minded if they want to press their case for being included in the processes of society. If Gadamer is right, then the very disadvantages that lead to or result from their exclusion prevent them from having any possible contribution to make to the way the world is. As a description of the way in which this kind of repression can work and perpetuate itself, the idea that reality itself is constituted in the conversation of the privileged few may not be inaccurate; but as an ethical foundation that urges us to perpetuate the situation and to find solidarity in our participation in *tradition*, it creates an inevitable risk that traditionally marginalised groups will stay that way. This risk surfaced in Heidegger (and, arguably, formed the background of his Nazism) when he linked the authenticity of an individual with the destiny of a historical people: Gadamer does not explicitly do this. But it may be that there are no foreign or ancient traditions to which we can turn that do not marginalise women or endorse the hatred of ‘foreigners’. As we move closer to a global society, it may well be that we need fresh ideas that simply cannot be found by questioning any tradition. Gadamer’s

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1 SULLIVAN (1989) defends Gadamer against any political connection with Nazism, showing his Plato studies to be directed against it (as Gadamer himself claims in *PL*), but SCHWARZSCHILD (1987) offers an acerbic denunciation of Gadamer’s latent anti-semitism.
traditionalism, then, leaves him open to the charge that he thinks reality not only does but ought to preserve and promote the privilege of the traditionally privileged.

**iii : Trouble with Metaphors**

Gadamer uses metaphor freely, playing with the full natural ranges of meanings of the words he uses. He claims that language itself is our best witness to the truth of the phenomena of the world in which we live, and that looking at the ways in which language actually does present things to us can provide us with the best insights into their nature. This free-play that he allows himself leads him to mix metaphors in ways that can often be more confusing than helpful. The fact that he is not as guilty of this as Heidegger should not blind us to the fact that his metaphorical philosophy is far from unambiguous. We can take one example to illustrate the problem: Gadamer uses images or mirrors and reflection in several areas of his philosophy. Sometimes these are taken from Hegel’s use of the word ‘reflection’, sometimes from medieval theology. He frequently modifies in various ways the associations we would normally have with mirrors: sometimes mirrors ‘completely’ reflect their object so as to present it anew, sometimes the object is not complete until reflected, and sometimes the mirror does not extend beyond the image reflected in it. These images are often helpful in communicating the thought that is immediately under discussion: but when we look at Gadamer’s thought as a whole, they become quite confusing. No term is used in a stable or definite sense, which results in the impossibility of tying Gadamer down to any definite, falsifiable claims. Any time that we disagree with him, he will say that we should make the effort to find a way of understanding what he has said that will give us an insight into the truth of what he is talking about. Such a slippery thinker is always subject to the suspicion that he is also somewhat shallow: the difficulty Gadamer has in rebuffing this charge is precisely the
same as the difficulty Plato had in distinguishing Socrates from the sophists. Gadamer wants to be Socrates, but doesn’t want the metaphysical realism of Plato’s defence.

**The bias of metaphor**

Another difficulty with the metaphorical expression of Gadamer’s thought is that it inevitably plays on the associations he happens to have for the words he uses. That his own horizon is encapsulated in his texts is, of course, inevitable, but it has laid him open to charges of bias in his ontological thinking. For example, Schott (1991) claims that Gadamer’s analysis of play favours specifically masculine attitudes to games and playing, and that as a result his goal of becoming ‘at home’ in the world involves a masculine home in which women will remain marginalised. Where a thinker relies so heavily on the personal communication by rhetoric and metaphor of the point of view he suggests, such bias is inevitable, but it is still inevitably a problem. Gadamer’s thought is, as this thesis demonstrates, extremely difficult to separate from its mode of expression. If the metaphor of play were abandoned and altered, could the insights of Gadamer’s work survive? Would a different metaphor be able to provide us with different, fairer insights? Of course, the possibility remains that the metaphor might be useful in making the insights fairer, and that a comparative, empirical study of men’s and women’s attitudes to play could have philosophical consequences that might be of interest.

**B: The Strengths of Gadamer’s Account**

Gadamer’s philosophy is far from perfect, and its slippery use of metaphor, its appeals to rhetoric rather than logic, and its lack of methodological rigour make it difficult either to support or criticise. In spite of this, however, it is my opinion that it is a valuable contribution to many fields of inquiry, so I shall conclude with a few
comments about the advantages that come with allowing ourselves this kind of freedom of thought.

**i : Practical Advantages**

**The ethics of tolerance and listening**

It may be the case that Gadamer takes reality to be constituted in tradition and conversation, and that this marginalises those who are traditionally excluded: but there is still a valuable lesson to be learned from his idea that in order to find any truth we have to listen to what other people have to say and accept that they are likely to have a valid point. Once we can be honest about the inevitability of our prejudice, we can more easily keep listening to and really understanding other viewpoints. So long as we imagine we can find an unprejudiced, fair and objective set of factual beliefs, we run the risk of shutting out unlikely sounding opinions and views that fail to match our more firmly held prejudices. Whatever the status of the ethical basis of Gadamer’s thought, of his optimism about human nature or his potential elitism, his description of how supposed ‘facts’ gain currency within society by being agreed within eminent texts of the tradition and the searching conversations of the privileged few is quite convincing. If it is accurate, then the only way in which marginalised groups can come to contribute their fair share to setting up the realities of our world is through persisting in their attempts to join in the discourse. They need to find a voice with which to speak to, rather than against, the prevailing prejudices, and so to shift the horizons of those who marginalise them towards their own. Gadamer has shown us a possible technology with which to make the attempt, and all he demands of us is that the stronger members of society use the stability of their position to enable them to have the tolerance to listen to the others¹, so that those whose voices are ignored can

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¹ See his essay on the history of the concept of tolerance in *LT*. 

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become included in the conversation. There is much more hope for progress in, for example, feminist thinking, if feminist writers can find their own ways of asking their most fundamental questions and so draw others into their debates rather than merely attacking thinking that is prejudiced against them and will therefore ignore their comments.  

The philosophical value of openness

Even if we are doubtful about the ontological world-constituting properties of open conversation, as philosophers we would do well to be aware of our own limitations. Gadamer constantly urges us to be open-minded in understanding. A philosopher who disagrees with another has two options: he can attack the point of view expressed, pressing his own viewpoint and labelling his opponent in order to write off her point of view, or he can try to find a way of understanding what she is saying that would bring him close to agreement. The former approach will produce no progress of any kind, while the latter will begin a conversation that is likely to be of value to both. As a method of doing philosophy, the kind of open dialogue that Gadamer recommends is undoubtedly much more productive than the all too common approach of looking for one’s opponent’s logical mistakes.

1 BUKER (1990) falls straight into this trap when she insists that hermeneutics should be left in a void unless it takes to championing the feminist cause and works towards political change. It may well be that hermeneutics can help here, but that need not be an essential part of it. WARNKE (1994) is right to acknowledge that feminists cannot just ignore the effective history of tradition and cannot reject tradition outright and wholesale, even if it is systematically biased against their viewpoint. She tries to show how Gadamer anticipates some strands of feminist thought, and how it might be possible for feminists to engage more productively in dialogue with tradition and so reduce their tendency to be marginalised.

2 SULLIVAN (1989) distinguishes two kinds of rationality: ‘founded rationality’ is the kind that always demands deductive proof from first principles, while ‘discourse rationality’ is the kind that allows conversation and listening to produce productive understanding: he proposes that Gadamer’s early identification of ethics and dialectic constitutes a political vote for the latter.
The choice of a starting point

It may be that the obvious place to start an inquiry into the nature of the universe and our place in it is with the assumption that its existence is entirely independent of our description of it, and that we should therefore keep investigating until we find the perfect description that matches it exactly. But that assumption is of course a traditional one; in fact it is a fairly young one that has only found such favour since the Enlightenment. Gadamer always points out that the seed of this assumption was sown by Plato, but he reads Plato with quite a different emphasis and in doing so exhibits the alternatives to this assumption. If there are many forms of individualist or theist idealism that fall to obvious objections, that does not mean that scientific and common-sense realism are the only other metaphysical starting points available. Similarly, Gadamer presents us with an alternative to the empiricist assumption that all knowledge must come directly through the senses, by claiming that we can surrender our individual subjectivity to a flow or play of language, and so participate in the knowledge that is carried within tradition and transmitted by rhetoric, rather than just passively looking onto a silent universe. His arguments from these starting points may be lacking in clarity and rigour, but they are less at fault in this respect than those of many other writers who advocate similar theses, and they make up for it in vividness and rhetorical power. The options that Gadamer explores are well worth exploring, and his metaphorical style is to some extent justified by the content of his philosophy of language.

A solution to the problems of solipsism and objectivity?

The clear contribution that he makes arises to a large extent from his optimism about human nature. Questions about the relative importance (political as well as
ontological) of individuals’ viewpoints and more objective, all-encompassing perspectives tend to be discussed without any reference to an intermediary level. Gadamer stresses community and human relationships as having an importance even at the very deepest levels of inquiry. He can do this because he refuses to be paranoid about the possibility of others’ ill-intent, and determines always to make the effort to include alien opinions. When he talks of alienation in modern society, he perhaps has in mind the suspicious fear that it instils in us that this kind of trust might lay us open to abuse. The way to avoid such abuse is, he says, not to trust nobody and to stick with what is safe, but to keep questioning as many different people as possible, to trust everybody and so to avoid being taken in or taken over by any one distorted viewpoint. This attitude is one that will bring us together and make talk of solidarity meaningful, whereas mistrust can only drive us apart, which can in turn only lead to further distortion and into the real danger of relativism without communication. Although Gadamer never makes it clear how much participation he takes to be required to set up the community we need to reduce this alienation, it is clear that discussion between people, even if only a few people, can make a big difference. Gadamer’s favourite image from Aristotle is appropriate here: a fleeing army does not stop all at once, but gradually more and more soldiers notice they are no longer being pursued until eventually the whole army comes to a halt. There is no cut-off point, and so we do not need to look for any specific number of people who need to participate in order to create binding realities. That we can cultivate ourselves in such a way as to improve the realities that we bring about for ourselves is Gadamer’s hope. Whether or not we accept the ontological views on which he rests that hope and so come to participate in it must remain our choice, as there are no compelling logical reasons why we should accept his account.
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HD Hegels Dialektik, 1971
HW Heideggers Wege, 1983
IG “Die Idee des Guten zwischen Plato und Aristoteles”, 1978
LT Lob der Theorie, 1983
P Poetica, 1977
PdE Platos dialektische Ethik, 1968
PL Philosophische Lehrjahre, 1977
TI Text und Interpretation, 1984
VG Über die Verborgenheit der Gesundheit, 1993
VZW Vernunft im Zeitalter der Wissenschaft, 1976
WI Wer bin Ich und wer bist du?, 1973
WM Wahrheit und Methode, 1975
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