

Nicholas Davey

Unquiet Understanding

Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics

UNQUIET UNDERSTANDING

SUNY series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy

Dennis J. Schmidt, editor

Unquiet Understanding

Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics

Nicholas Davey

State University of New York Press

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

© 2006 State University of New York

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. No part of this book may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means including electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission in writing of the publisher.

For information, address State University of New York Press,
194 Washington Avenue, Suite 305, Albany, NY 12210-2384

Production by Kelli Williams
Marketing by Michael Campochiaro

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Davey, Nicholas, 1950-

Unquiet understanding : Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics / Nicholas Davey.
p. cm. — (SUNY series in contemporary continental philosophy)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7914-6841-8 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-7914-6841-0 (hardcover)

ISBN-13: 978-0-7914-6842-5 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 0-7914-6842-9 (pbk.)

1. Gadamar, Hans Georg, 1900- 2. Hermeneutics. I. Title. II. Series.
B3248.G34D38 2006
121'.686092—dc22

2005033879

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Experience as a whole is not something that anyone can
be spared.

—Hans-Georg Gadamer

For Angelica,

d. 9 September 1990

Death is “voice robbing” (Hesiod)

Contents

Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xvii
Chapter One: <i>Philosophical Hermeneutics: Navigating the Approaches</i>	1
Introduction	1
Eleven Theses on Philosophical Hermeneutics	3
Thesis One: Hermeneutical Understanding Requires Difference	5
Thesis Two: Philosophical Hermeneutics Promotes a Philosophy of Experience	5
Thesis Three: Philosophical Hermeneutics Entails a Commitment to Hermeneutic Realism	6
Thesis Four: Philosophical Hermeneutics Seeks Otherness within the Historical	7
Thesis Five: Philosophical Hermeneutics Reinterprets Transcendence	8
Thesis Six: Philosophical Hermeneutics Entails an Ethical Disposition	9
Thesis Seven: Hermeneutic Understanding Redeems the Negativity of Its Constituting Differential	12
Thesis Eight: Philosophical Hermeneutics Affirms an Ontology of the In-between	15
Thesis Nine: Philosophical Hermeneutics Is a Philosophical Practice Rather Than a Philosophical Method	17
Thesis Ten: Philosophical Hermeneutics Is a Negative Hermeneutics	27

Thesis Eleven: Philosophical Hermeneutics Looks upon Linguistic Being as a “Mysterium ”	27
Conclusion: Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Question of Openness	31
Chapter Two: <i>Philosophical Hermeneutics and Bildung</i>	37
Introduction	37
<i>Bildung</i> as a Transformative and Formative Process	42
<i>Bildung</i> and Tradition	50
<i>Bildung</i> and the Question of Essence	54
<i>Bildung</i> and the In-between	58
<i>Bildung</i> and Hermeneutical Practice	66
<i>Bildung</i> and Subject Matter (<i>Die Sache selbst</i>)	69
<i>Sachen</i> as a Totality of Meaning	75
<i>Die Sachen</i> and Negative Dialectics	79
<i>Die Sachen</i> and Plato’s Forms	83
<i>Sachen</i> , Cultural Communities, and <i>Cortesia</i>	87
“ <i>Bildung</i> ” and the Question of Nihilism	91
Conclusion	106
Chapter Three: <i>Intimations of Meaning: Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Defense of Speculative Understanding</i>	109
What Is Speculative Thinking?	113
The Formal Elements of Speculative Thought	114
The Speculative Motion of Hermeneutic Experience	116
The Defense of Speculative Understanding	128
The Speculative and the Humanistic	129
Speculative Insight and the “Unfounding” of Experience	131
Language and the Dialectic of Speculative Experience	137
Nietzsche, Philosophical Hermeneutics, Language, and the Market Place.	144
<i>Entr’acte</i>	161
Chapter Four: <i>Understanding’s Disquiet</i>	171
The Wantonness of Understanding	171
Four Responses to Deconstructive Criticism	176
Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Question of Alterity	179

CONTENTS

ix

Nihilism and the Life of Understanding	182
Dialogue and Dialectic	189
Language, Ideas, and <i>Sachen</i>	194
Keeping the Word in Play	197
Choice Words	207
The Poise of the In-between	214
The Giving Word	216
Language and <i>Withoutness</i>	219
Language Negation and Affirmation: A Résumé	222
The Open and the Empty	225
Understanding and the Disquieting of the Self	230
Di-ologue and Di-stance	237
Afterword	248
Notes	253
Bibliography	275
Index	285

This page intentionally left blank.

Preface

Bless thee, Bottom! Bless thee! Thou art translated!
—Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

If there can be no last word in philosophical hermeneutics, there can be no first. The question is how and where to join a continuing “conversation.” Gadamer’s hermeneutics has evolved in large part as a response to provocative questions concerning the finitude and subjectivity of understanding in the work of Dilthey and Heidegger. The character of that response is far from settled. The *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Gadamer’s *Werke* continues to unfold. This essay seeks to answer some of the key questions prompted by Gadamer’s hermeneutics and to contribute to its discussion of the relationship between language and understanding. This is not an essay on Gadamer per se. Though he may have coined the term *philosophical hermeneutics*, what is at play within the movement of thought it represents far exceeds his authorship. This essay endeavors to critically engage with and draw out the practical and ethical implications of philosophical hermeneutics. It concentrates on the question of what happens to us when we “understand.” The concern with the “event” of understanding is reflected in two of the essay’s principal themes, translation and transcendence. How does the act of translating the strange and the foreign into a more familiar idiom effect a moment of transcendence in which we come to understand ourselves differently? How does the work of hermeneutics *work*?

Philosophical hermeneutics is not always its own best advocate. Gadamer’s written style may reflect the twists and turns of conversation but it obscures a philosophical articulation of what underpins its dynamics. His defense of intuitive insight (speculative understanding) could not be more laudable within the humanities but his philosophical articulation of its

nature is in some respects not as strong as it might be. Gadamer's re-accommodation of "tradition" within philosophical debate is of great consequence but its poignancy has been lost in the debates about Gadamer's alleged conservatism. Central to a dialogical notion of tradition is the idea of a continuity of intellectual conflict. This implies that tradition is not opposed to modernity but is one of its principal drivers. The evidence for a more radicalized conception of tradition within philosophical hermeneutics is plain, yet rarely is it discussed. Likewise, the critical thrust of Gadamer's approach to the finitude of linguistic meaning has been obscured by deconstructive critiques of hermeneutics. Far from being opposed to deconstruction, philosophical hermeneutics requires it. Without difference and without language's endless deferral of meaning, the achievement of new understanding would not be possible. Philosophical hermeneutics contends that the vitality of understanding actually depends on difference. This essay will argue that philosophical hermeneutics has a provocative character more radical than is often supposed.

To elicit the subversive character of philosophical hermeneutics, the essay adopts an "Anglo-Saxon" style. Eleven theses about the nature of philosophical hermeneutics are proposed. The strategem may seem insensitive to Gadamer's critique of reducing philosophy to "statements." Yet his work needlessly assumes a ready opposition between the meaning of an assertion residing in what is actually stated as opposed to lying in what it invokes or brings to mind. Gadamer is, of course, overwhelmingly concerned with the latter and has, accordingly, expressed an understandable hostility toward the analytic tradition of philosophy.¹ Nevertheless, such "prejudice" blinds Gadamer to what for the purposes of this essay is the key purpose of precise philosophical statement. The quest for linguistic exactitude is not indicative of having succumbed to the illusion that the complexities of experience or the intricacies of a philosophical commitment can be definitively "stated." To the contrary, the quest for precision can express a sensitivity to the "poetic charge" of the statement. The precise philosophical statement can share the same strategic purpose as Nietzsche's aphoristic "arrows" (*Pfeile*): to transport the reader as speedily, as efficiently, and with as much clarity of mind as possible to what is at issue, namely, the unspoken subject-matter. Precision of statement can correctly align the reader with such subject matter, not appropriate it.

Chapter 1 forwards eleven theses concerning the substantive nature and character of philosophical hermeneutics: philosophical hermeneutics (1) requires difference, (2) promotes a philosophy of experience, (3) entails a commitment to hermeneutic realism, (4) seeks otherness

within the historical, (5) reinterprets transcendence, (6) entails an ethical disposition, (7) redeems the negativity of its constituting differential, (8) affirms an ontology of the in-between, (9) is a philosophical practice rather than a philosophical method, (10) constitutes a negative hermeneutics, and (11) recognizes the *mysterium* of linguistic being. Each thesis charts the different philosophical commitments of philosophical hermeneutics to better triangulate its nature. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 explore the different aspects of these theses in order to draw closer to what the experience of understanding entails.

The pivotal thesis embedded in all the others is thesis five: philosophical hermeneutics reinterprets transcendence. Philosophical hermeneutics is an antimetaphysical philosophy. Gadamer contends that “there’s no such thing anymore as a metaphysics that believes it has a truth that withstands everything.”² For Gadamer, postmetaphysical philosophy becomes “a knowing that is . . . restricted and circumscribed by limits. This . . . is why we have [philosophical] hermeneutics.”³ Gadamer follows Heidegger in thinking that the renunciation of metaphysical philosophy initiates a “return to being” but, “[W]e never know what being is . . . it always seems to be a *topos*, an unattainable place that never becomes (fully) accessible.” Being only presents itself to us as *Ereignis* (event), as an appearing, relative to us, through time. The argument retrieves the notion of transcendence: “Every *Ereignis* is basically ungraspable. . . . *Ereignis* remains incomprehensible because being is precisely transcendence.”⁴ Being is transcendence because as *Ereignis* being is the process of appearing within time so that every appearance points beyond itself in the double sense of pointing to what has already appeared and to what has yet to appear. As Gadamer grasps understanding as an event of being, transcendence is integral to understanding. The reappropriation of transcendence as the process of understanding is the philosophical move that initiates the central reflections of this essay. If understanding is a process, what are its formal ontological features? Chapter 2 uses the theme of *Bildung* to explore the ontological drivers of transcendence within understanding. If understanding involves transcendence, how do the dynamics of transcendence manifest themselves within hermeneutic consciousness? Chapter 3 considers the nature of speculative insight in order to examine the dynamics of transcendence within the subjective dimensions of understanding. If understanding involves transcendence and if transcendence involves an awareness of the limits of understanding, how does a consciousness of such limits affect the nature of hermeneutic practice? Chapter 4 focuses on Gadamer’s philosophy of language and will reveal the disruptive consequences of transcendence within hermeneutic understanding.

Further elucidating the theses laid out in chapter 1, chapter 2 examines the principal ontological actualities that form and sustain hermeneutic consciousness. Tradition is identified as a continuity of conflicts and understanding is examined as transformative and formative *Bildungs*-process. Gadamer's approach to *Bildung* is not an apologetics for bourgeois education but an outline of a hermeneutic ontology. Because it grasps understanding as an event, it proposes that understanding does not merely interpret the world but changes it. The ontological actualities underwriting understanding deprive hermeneutic consciousness of any certainty of interpretation. What they reveal is the ever-present difficulty of residing within "the quietness of a single interpretation."⁵ Hermeneutic practice is indeed difficult but therein lies its vitality.

Whereas chapter 2 addresses the ontological objectivities that shape the possibility of understanding, chapter 3 considers how hermeneutic consciousness grasps those objectivities. If understanding is an event, how is it experienced by hermeneutic consciousness? Chapter 3 occasions a detailed discussion of "speculative understanding" and of how understanding entails a moment of transcendence. Philosophical hermeneutics makes important claims about the specific nature of literary and aesthetic understanding and its role in the formation of an interpreting subject's sense of self. Though philosophical hermeneutics possesses the conceptual means to discuss the matter, Gadamer does not explicitly address the experiential dynamics of what happens to a subject when addressed by an artwork. Chapter 3 demonstrates that reflection on the nature of speculative understanding can successfully address this question. However, the discussion of speculative understanding reveals that Gadamer overplays its integrative aspect. Speculative understanding also sets hermeneutic consciousness at a distance from itself and disrupts what it thought it understood. The themes of difficulty, distance, and difference appropriately dominate chapter 4 of the essay, where the unease and disquiet of understanding will be explored.

Chapter 3 substantiates a major claim of this essay: philosophical hermeneutics embodies a significant critique of both Nietzsche's philosophy of language and nihilism. Philosophical hermeneutics offers a sustained defense of "speculative" insight. This entails the view that the world (is) *world* only insofar as it comes into language. This does not reduce the world to words or assume that the world can be put into words. To the contrary, it supposes that the power of the well-chosen word lies in its ability to sound out and to resonate the unspoken world of meaning it is woven into. For Gadamer intense experience is not beyond words. It sets us

the task of finding the right words. This places him at odds with Nietzsche who is wary of how the common framework of language sullies and contaminates profound experience. Gadamer's case for speculative understanding stands on his conviction that experience itself seeks and finds words that endeavor to express its content. In other words, for its case to stand, philosophical hermeneutics must demonstrate that Nietzsche's skepticism about language is ill-founded. Chapter 3 contends that philosophical hermeneutics reveals Nietzsche's attempt to isolate intense experience from the contamination of the linguistic market place to be a pretentious sham and to be in conflict with his advocacy of a wilfully individualistic philosophy of becoming. Philosophical hermeneutics demonstrates that the ability to "become more" does indeed depend upon a willingness to enter the marketplace of language.

Dialogical engagement is not necessarily easy or comfortable. It requires a willingness to be subject to the address of the other and to place one's self-understanding before the other's claims. Chapter 4 proposes that the difficulty of understanding and of becoming-difficult-to-onself is a primary concern of philosophical hermeneutics. Deconstructive critics of philosophical hermeneutics regard it as being in serious philosophical difficulty. This essay will argue that such critics are right but for the wrong reasons. What are perceived as the weaknesses of philosophical hermeneutics—its inability to arrive at a final interpretation and to achieve a *Letztbegründung* for its operation—are indeed its strengths. Chapter 4 offers a critical meditation upon Hamacher's claim that "understanding is in want of understanding" and claims that his fundamental confusion between *logos* as word and *logos* as reason not only brings forth central points about the formal character of philosophical hermeneutics but establishes in a clear and decisive manner the nature of its case against nihilism. Linguistic difference, deferral, and temporal postponement do not disrupt the possibility of philosophical hermeneutics. To the contrary, they maintain the vitality of the "word," animate its dialectic, and preserve the possibility of renewed hermeneutic insight and transcendence. This essay argues that the importance of philosophical hermeneutics resides in a formidable double claim that strikes at the heart of both traditional philosophy and deconstruction. To seek control over the fluid nature of linguistic meaning with rigid conceptual regimes or to despair of such fluidity because it frustrates hope for stable meaning, is to succumb to nihilism. Both are indicative of a failure to see that understanding and the hermeneutic translation and transcendence it affords depend upon the vital instability of the "word."

In addition to Gadamer's work, the essay discusses Wolfgang Iser's interpretation theory. Iser offers valuable insights into the nature of interpretative practice. Whereas Gadamer reflects for the most part upon how the ontological foundations of understanding impose finitude upon its claims, Iser extends Gadamer's position by showing how the practice of interpretation both generates and is driven by the conditions of its own incompleteness. This essay contends that distance, and difference are not detrimental to hermeneutic endeavor as deconstruction supposes but are constitutive of hermeneutic consciousness itself. The essay also refers to the work of such contemporary theologians as Oliver Davies and Daphne Hampson. The pertinence of their arguments lies not in their religious but in their ethical content. Theology and philosophical hermeneutics share a common concern with *application* and the issues of *practice*. This essay argues that philosophical hermeneutics does not constitute a "philosophical position" but a philosophical dis-position. It is a practice of disposing or orientating oneself toward the other and the different with the consequence of experiencing a dis-positioning of one's initial expectancies. The theme of difficulty is once more invoked. If philosophical hermeneutics is a practice of attentiveness, then like all reflective and spiritual disciplines it inhabits and articulates a tense space, the space of being in between. Openness to the other requires a particular refinement: the skill of being critically distant while remaining involved, attentive, and caring. Hermeneutic practice is indeed difficult. It involves the testing discipline of not residing in the quietness of a single interpretation. Maintaining an outward openness to the multiple voices of the other upholds an inward openness to the possibility of translation and transcendence upon which the furtherance of understanding depends.

Acknowledgments

My thanks to the University of Dundee for the period of research leave (2002–2003) that enabled me to write the initial draft of this book. A great intellectual debt is owed to all those who took part in the Heidelberg Hermeneutics Seminar (1989–2002). For tutoring me in the ways of the unspoken, I owe so much to Barbara, Cecily, and Felix. I am grateful to Dorothea Franck and Karin Hiscock for the openings their conversations enabled. I offer heartfelt thanks to my teachers, especially to Prof. Gordon Leff of the University of York.

This page intentionally left blank.

CHAPTER ONE

Philosophical Hermeneutics

Navigating the Approaches

INTRODUCTION

Philosophical hermeneutics is not a traditional theory of interpretation. It does not seek to establish a generally acceptable method for the reading of obscure and difficult texts. Philosophical hermeneutics is, much rather, an interpretation of interpretation, a prolonged meditation upon what “happens” to us within “hermeneutic experience” when we are challenged by texts and artworks, ancient and modern. Though it eschews formal methodologies of reading, it does not privilege subjective responses to a text. Philosophical hermeneutics is *philosophical* in that it strives to discern objectivities within the subjective voice. It reflects on the historical and cultural preconditions of individual hermeneutic experience and seeks to discern in it something of the predicament, character, and mode of being of those who “undergo” such experience. And yet the philosophical within philosophical hermeneutics remains *hermeneutical* for it is not concerned with the abstract nature of such objectivities but with how they manifest themselves and are encountered within the particularities of experience and their ramifications.

Nietzsche observed that one is never finished with profound experience.¹ Similarly, good conversations have no end. Their insights open unexpected avenues of experience and can initiate a review of what has been previously understood. Their sense is slow to unfold. Not everything said may be meant and not everything meant need be said. With patient reflection and comparison, their insights alter and accrue an unexpected critical efficacy. Over time, a telling conversation reveals more of itself. Its

specific manner of handling a subject matter is gradually disclosed, its guiding presuppositions emerge and the applicability of its insights to other areas of concern becomes clearer. It is in the nature of conversation that its self-understanding changes. Conversation shows how an experience of change is part of understanding and demonstrates that, like itself, understanding has no end. The achievement of understanding is and will always remain difficult. It is a task, the object of a practice.

Philosophical hermeneutics is not just *about* conversation. In its operation it exhibits something of the disclosive, summative, and anticipatory *dynamics* of conversation. These dynamics are clearly displayed in Gadamer's approach to the nature of interpretation. Reflection upon what Gadamer explicitly states about interpretation and its preconditions *discloses* that his implicit and understated ambition is to find a response to the challenge nihilism makes to the possibility of meaning. This disclosure prompts, in turn, a *summative* reappraisal of philosophical hermeneutics as a subtle and sanguine reply to Nietzsche's *Interpretationsphilosophie*. The reply, in its turn, duly *anticipates* a critical response to poststructuralist critiques of hermeneutics inspired by Nietzsche. Furthermore, that response proceeds to intimate how hermeneutics might transcend Gadamer's own conception of the discipline. From the perspective of the dynamics of conversation, philosophical hermeneutics is true to itself as a philosophical disposition. Its dialogical stance exposes it to processes of change in self-understanding which are characteristic of conversation itself. For philosophical hermeneutics it is more important to remain loyal to an *experience* of language as opposed to the formal claims of philosophical method. This gently re-poses an ancient question that we shall reflect on in this essay. Is the proper stress of philosophical reflection to fall upon matters academic or upon finding an appropriate response to the complexities of human experience?

Philosophical hermeneutics has been the subject of much misunderstanding. For some readers Gadamer's interest in ancient philosophy, historiography, and intellectual tradition lends a conservative profile to his thought. His attempt to rethink tradition and *Bildung* (cultural and educative formation) has brought the inevitable accusation of reactionary purpose.² In the opinion of some critics, his preoccupation with the nature of interpretation points to a fixation with meaning, with its sameness, and with its decoding.³ His critique of objectivist methodologies suggests to other commentators that his thought is a scant apology for both relativism and romantic irrationalism. Such accusations are misleading misunderstandings and they detract from the radical character of philosophical

hermeneutics.⁴ Our strategic purpose is to reevaluate these cardinal elements of Gadamer's thought and to uncover the poignancy of an underrated and undervalued philosophical disposition.

The integrity of any hermeneutical essay would be compromised were it to claim to be *the* interpretation of Gadamer's thought. For this essay, it is more a question of where the proper stress of interpretation should fall. We shall contend that just as Gadamer's thinking has the ability to force a radical change in our understanding of experience, so it also has important implications for appreciating both the *philosophical* elements in hermeneutics and the *hermeneutic* aspects of philosophy. An important qualification is necessary.

Nietzsche implied that philosophers should submit themselves to the laws they postulate.⁵ Gadamer should not be exempted from this maxim. Since Gadamer insisted that the meaning and significance of a body of thought extend beyond what its author may have intended, it is not inconsistent for an essay devoted to philosophical hermeneutics to strive to go beyond what Gadamer actually states about philosophical hermeneutics. What is articulated in this essay as philosophical hermeneutics is not restricted to Gadamer's explicit definition. The eleven theses presented below derive from what Gadamer has written but they have a philosophical reach that stretches beyond what he initially envisaged.⁶

ELEVEN THESES ON PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

Philosophical hermeneutics betokens a reflective practice. While it addresses hermeneutic questions of aesthetic, historical, and philosophical understanding, it reflects philosophically on the ethical dimensions of interpretative practice: how to orientate oneself toward and how to interact with the claims of the other be it a text, a person, or a remote historical horizon? Practices are, however, informed by the received historical labyrinths of working traditions. They cannot in consequence be definitively articulated. Though the practice of philosophical hermeneutics cannot be conceptually captured, its nature can be discerned among the spectrum of philosophical refractions that a variety of interpretative perspectives bring to light. This essay argues that as a practice, philosophical hermeneutics is more a constellation of philosophical outlooks than a specific philosophical system or method. The character of these outlooks becomes more apparent when juxtaposed against one another. We shall, accordingly, present eleven theses concerning

philosophical hermeneutics with the purpose of bringing more of its implicit nature to light.

It is entirely appropriate that “the approaches” to philosophical hermeneutics be *navigated* in this way. A reflective practice that is linguistic in nature always knows, in Gadamer’s phrase, more than it thinks it knows. The words and concepts deployed in communicative practices are invariably shaped by complexities of historically formed meaning and insight. It is a key axiom of Gadamer’s thought that words have a *speculative* nature that reflects something of the etymological horizons that transcend their particular usage. In many practices acquaintance with such networks of meaning is more *tacit* than reflective. The strategic aim of philosophical hermeneutics is to promote hermeneutic encounters that prompt our interpretative horizons to disclose their *speculative* nature. To this end, the practice of philosophical hermeneutics pursues dialogue and dialectical encounter with the other. It seeks a disciplined openness to the strange and foreign. It encourages a creative tension between the assumptions and expectancies of our own horizon and those that are different. In the fine-tuning of such differences, our interpretative horizons can be induced to reveal more of their speculative nature. Philosophical hermeneutics is, therefore, not a practice of analyzing texts per se but a means of bringing something *unexpected* about, a way of inducing interpretative interactions that not only expose us to the unusual and unanticipated but which also place the assumptions of our customary horizons at risk. The following eleven theses attempt to bring forth something of the speculative nature of philosophical hermeneutics itself.

The following theses are not in a form characteristic of philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer does not engage his readers in prolonged philosophical argument or analysis but prefers instead to approach his subject matter discursively. He is intent on exploring what happens to us in our dialogical engagement with a text. It is, however, a grotesque underestimation of Gadamer’s texts to suppose that because of the absence of such analysis they lack serious philosophical foundation. To the contrary, the philosophical insights that drive Gadamer’s thought are embedded within and to some extent derive from the practice of hermeneutic engagement. In order to draw out and clarify the insights that guide the practice of philosophical hermeneutics, it is necessary to translate that practice into a more formal language. Translation can distort an original text but precisely because it renders a text differently, it can clarify what is in an original. The formulation of these theses offers an overview of the conceptual territory that philosophical hermeneutics occupies and reveals the broad conceptual commitments that

inform the way philosophical hermeneutics discusses specific issues. Philosophical hermeneutics has not always been its own best advocate. For all its conviviality, Gadamer's discursive style can seem rambling and indecisive. There is good reason, therefore, to articulate the specific philosophical commitments that underlie its operation. The intention is not to abuse the intricacies of hermeneutic practice, nor to force the complexities of hermeneutic experience into words and concepts. It is not even to translate such experience into a linguistic medium. To the contrary, the aim of such articulation is to use words in a way *appropriate* to deepening our sense of what underwrites and is implied by such experience. In this context, philosophical reflection is indeed the proper handmaid of experience. The theses to be presented are as follows.

Thesis One: Hermeneutical Understanding Requires Difference

Philosophical hermeneutics does not suppose that understanding occurs when a reader's grasp of a text is the *same* as its author's. To the contrary, understanding requires and perpetuates a mode of differentiation (the hermeneutic differential), which sustains understanding as an enduring *task*. A misleading emphasis has too often been placed upon the role of *sameness* in philosophical hermeneutics.⁷ Within the broad spectrum of what the term *understanding* can mean, it cannot be denied that understanding the *same* as another is vital in the operation of mathematical or navigational skills. However, the specific stress which philosophical hermeneutics gives to understanding concerns those revelatory moments of realization when it becomes apparent that the other *does not* think the *same* as me or that I can no longer think the *same* as I did about a person or a text. Acknowledging difference in the other permits me to become different to myself. Were philosophical hermeneutics to stress but *sameness*, neither could it concern itself with understanding as a transformative experiential processes, which it clearly does, nor could it be the philosophy of learning and becoming (*Bildungsphilosophie*) which it manifestly is.

Thesis Two: Philosophical Hermeneutics Promotes a Philosophy of Experience

Gadamer's rejection of methodology challenges received, regulatory frameworks of institutional knowledge. He reinvokes the value of experientially acquired wisdom (*paideia*). Philosophical hermeneutics endeavors to show

that what is learned from experience extends beyond the strictures of formalized method. It offers a gentle (but pointed) reminder that philosophy is more than a love of formalized knowledge. Philosophy participates in a dialectic of shared experience and refines a *sense* of the communal, of belonging to something larger than oneself.

Dwelling on the experience of interpretation, philosophical hermeneutics concerns itself with an interpretation of experience. As encounters with texts (and others) are *lived*, learning from experience derives not just from that which is encountered but from the character of the encounter itself. Acquiring a sense for the weakness of hasty judgments or for the vulnerability of initial interpretations requires long exposure to the experience of interpretation. No one method teaches such skill, tact, or wisdom. The value of both receptiveness and attentiveness is not learned as an item of information. Rather, their value is made manifest in the practice of such virtues. Understanding their value exhibits the fact that within interpretative practice, one has become *skilled* in their application.

Though the insights of a practitioner—"knowing" how to find one's way about within an endeavor—are a consequence of "experience," they nevertheless fall outside the strictures of "method." In cultural horizons where objectivist scientific paradigms tend to monopolize evaluations of what counts as knowledge, two outcomes are apparent. First: no heed need be given to the lessons of experience. Those who are preoccupied with method and with the credentials of truth claims incline to the judgment that such lessons are both relative and subjective. Devaluing the insights of practice unfortunately encourages those who defend method to be forgetful of the practical insights guiding and locating their own interests. Philosophical hermeneutics openly exposes the nihilism within the shrewish methodological preoccupations of much modern philosophy but, more important, it strives to articulate what method neglects, that is, the wider, more complex, dimensions of human encounter, experience, and learning.

Thesis Three: Philosophical Hermeneutics Entails a Commitment to Hermeneutic Realism

What is learned from experience derives not just from the object encountered but from the character of the encounter itself. This permits philosophical hermeneutics to concern itself with a great deal more than an individual's (subjective) assimilation of a text. It is not what an individual imposes on a text that interests philosophical hermeneutics but

the nature of that which imposes itself on the reader by virtue of her encounter with the text.

Engaging with a text can check or frustrate a reader's presuppositions and reveal the inadequacy of previous understandings. Being so thwarted can expose a reader to the extent of his or her previous oversights. These experiences are not sought out but a reader *risks* them in the encounter with a text. Such experiences acquire an important status within philosophical hermeneutics. They become individual experiences of *finitude* in which the *real* limits of human understanding are encountered. Philosophical hermeneutics attempts to discern in what we do (interpretation) the real character of our being. It seeks an encounter with the real and is, therefore, plainly committed to a form of hermeneutic realism. As we shall see, this commitment underwrites Gadamer's response to the challenge of Nietzsche's nihilism. Furthermore, the realistic quest in philosophy and literature acknowledges the actuality of human suffering. Philosophical hermeneutics is no exception: the inescapable negativity of experience—*pathei mathos*—is truly educative.

Thesis Four: Philosophical Hermeneutics Seeks Otherness within the Historical

Philosophical hermeneutics and the historical stance that informs it, strive to do justice to the integrity of the world lying beyond the self.⁸ It does not seek to assimilate the historical other within its own horizon, nor to become fully immersed in the other's "form of life." To translate (subsume) the other into one's own voice renders the strange familiar and converts what ought to be a *dia*-logue into a monologue. To suspend one's own horizons and be translated into the other's "form of life" renounces (albeit temporarily) one's own way of "knowing how to go on." Neither assimilation nor immersion constitutes what philosophical hermeneutics conceives of as understanding. Assimilation of the other within one's own horizon preserves rather than challenges the presuppositions of one's initial perspective. Immersion within the monologue of the other also makes dialogue impossible. The renunciation of one's own horizon for that of the other surrenders the ground upon which other can be encountered as *other*. By neutralizing the provocation of the other, assimilation and immersion diminish the likelihood of those disruptive experiences of limit which are integral to the possibility of understanding as philosophical hermeneutics conceives of it. Recognizing the integrity of the other is therefore fundamental to philosophical hermeneutics. *It is not sameness—neither rendering the other the same as ourselves*

nor becoming the same as the other—but difference that is vital for philosophical hermeneutics. It is difference that preserves the reality of alternative possibilities that are not our own.

Hermeneutic realism entails a commitment and a willingness to surrender to the undeniable reality of finitude, to limit-experiences, and to the possibility of horizons of meaning that are presently not our own. Philosophical hermeneutics is not, in other words, an antiquarian body of thought. To restore and, indeed, to strengthen the “living voice” of an ancient text so that it becomes less obscure and “more itself,” is not to become prone to a false historical objectivism that pursues the past in and for its own sake. Nor is it to succumb to a romantic flight from the present. It is, to the contrary, to uphold and sharpen the difference between present and past horizons. It is, indeed, to preserve the possibility of an encounter with those ways of thinking and seeing that offer answers that *question* those we give to the problems which preoccupy us.

Thesis Five: Philosophical Hermeneutics Reinterprets Transcendence

Transcendence is integral to what philosophical hermeneutics grasps as the “experience” of understanding. Hermeneutic encounters with the different, with finitude, and with limit, suggest that understanding involves an experience of transcendence. Understanding is the process of coming to understand that when we understand, we understand differently.⁹ Understanding is not only dependent upon but makes a difference. The difference between what we once understood and now understand is itself understood. As a result, our understanding of ourselves, of our past, and of the world we find ourselves in, acquires new coordinates and reconfigures itself accordingly. When we understand ourselves differently, we have “moved on.” Transcendence does not betoken surpassing the range or grasp of human experience. It does not concern what lies beyond experience but what lies within it or, much rather, it has to do with experiencing those fundamental shifts within passages of experience that can quite transform how such passages are understood.¹⁰ Hermeneutic transcendence involves the transforming experience of coming knowingly to see, to think, and to feel differently. Philosophical hermeneutics recognizes that movement and transcendence is the life of understanding or of what Gadamer sometimes *pace* Hegel calls *Geist*.¹¹

Thesis Six: Philosophical Hermeneutics Entails an Ethical Disposition

For philosophical hermeneutics, hermeneutic experience is inseparable from an ethical recognition of the other and otherness. The other's *assertive* demand for recognition (Hegel) is not the issue. The recognition that philosophical hermeneutics demands is that a subject acknowledge that its *self-consciousness* is profoundly dependent upon what lies outside it, that is, upon the *otherness* of different language horizons, of different cultures and persons.

With its roots in the philosophy of consciousness, philosophical hermeneutics seems at first sight to lack an ethical orientation. Its stress upon the individual nature of hermeneutic experience suggests a romantic subject-centered thought preoccupied with the inwardness of experience but not with the joys and pains of ethical involvement. On closer inspection, a rich vein of ethical thinking becomes discernible. Philosophical hermeneutics de-centers subjective experience and brings the subject to an awareness of its profound dependence upon cultural realities that are not of its own making. The argument is that it is not strictly speaking *I* who understand. Whatever I understand, I come to understand through the mediation of another. It is the other who (in the form of a person, text, or painting) brings me to understand something. The event of understanding is not an individual achievement but presupposes an ethical encounter with an other. The event of understanding also depends upon that which transcends the understanding subject, namely, the hermeneutic community in which the subject participates and through which the subject is socialized. Yet socialization within an interpretive horizon is not merely a condition of hermeneutic experience: the event of hermeneutic experience also *socializes*. That understanding is something more than an individual achievement is sustained by the following points.

All understanding is dependent upon a prior acquisition of linguistic practices. All understanding is dependent upon a prior acquisition of linguistic practices and horizons of meaning, which guide our initial conceptions of self and world. The extent of our initial dependence upon such fore-understandings (*Vorverständnisse*) is for the most part overlooked. Such "forgetfulness" is not inappropriate. Most human practices are orientated initially toward the achievement of practical ends rather than historical or reflective awareness. It is often only

when an individual or community encounters otherness in the form of practices different from its own that the nature of its background assumptions becomes apparent.

Hermeneutic understanding requires an encounter with the other. The reflective reappropriation of our guiding and defining fore-understandings needs engagement with the other. The contrast between our perspective and that of the other allows the other to be *other* while the relation between the perspective of the other and that of our own, reveals our perspective to be distinctively our own. Understanding is, then, not to be appraised as an individual achievement. It is facilitated by what is not of the individual's making (the background assumptions of a cultural practice) and any conscious repossession of those assumptions is dependent upon an encounter with the other which in large part remains in the other's gift.

Understanding involves negotiation and agreeing to differ knowingly. Understanding does not fall exclusively within the provenance of the subjective since it is a *social* achievement. Philosophical hermeneutics labors not only against the subjectivism of its romantic heritage but also against those theories which regard the attainment of understanding as the achievement of a *consensus* (Habermas) that, having overcome disturbances within a dialogue, permits one to "go on" (Wittgenstein) within its framework of assumptions. Yet achieving an *entente* or "arriving at an understanding" by no means implies an unqualified agreeing with the other. It can involve an *agreeing to differ* based upon a mutual, sympathetic dialogical awareness and tolerance of difference. Within philosophical hermeneutics, the *relation* of difference preserves a crucial "dialecticity"¹² of encounter. For those involved, the encounter with difference opens the possibility of a mutual transformation of the initial understanding each party brings to the encounter. On the one hand, strengthening the integrity of the other preserves the reality of alternative possibilities that are not *my* own. On the other hand, developing my own understanding offers the other alternative possibilities that are not immediately hers.¹³ It is the dialecticity of the hermeneutic encounter, rather than the wills of the participants, that achieves a fundamental shift in how different parties understand themselves and each other.

Understanding is not, then, a purely individual achievement. It emerges from that unpredictable dialecticity of encounter between the linguistic and cultural horizons of individuals. Indeed, the event of understanding opens us to, manifests our dependence and reveals the

extent of participation within “supra-individual ontological realities” that are not of our making.¹⁴ By virtue of this and contrary to its conservative reputation, philosophical hermeneutics attributes a socializing influence to acknowledgments of difference.

Now, the conservative dimension of philosophical hermeneutics’ ethical comportment falls discernibly within Heideggerian orthodoxy. When an encounter with the other exposes the dependence of an individual or community upon its overlooked fore-understandings, a reflective *reappropriation* of those enabling assumptions (tradition) becomes possible. In revealing the understandings upon which the individual or community rests, the other enables that individual or community to return to itself, that is, to knowingly “bind itself” to the mode of existence that such exposure has brought to light.¹⁵ Heidegger remarks,

It is the temple (art) work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being. . . . Only from and in this expanse does the nation first *return* to itself for the fulfillment of its vocation.¹⁶

As Vattimo points out, it is difficult to separate Heidegger’s aesthetics of disclosure from a Hegelian notion of *Geborgenheit* (founding).¹⁷ However, the particular emphasis which philosophical hermeneutics gives to difference enables its ethical orientation to pass beyond the conservatism of Heidegger’s account of cultural consolidation and belonging.

The *socializing* aspect of hermeneutic experience is twofold. First, the encounter with the other sharpens loyalty to the exposed assumptions within one’s tradition. Second, because that exposure reveals my dependence on the other for opening me to the reality of alternative possibilities that are not my own, it also binds me to that which is different and which does not immediately spring from within my horizon. I am indebted to the other for revealing to me what is strange in me. The other holds the key to me becoming other to myself. In effect, the other demonstrates to me that “*Je est un autre monde*” and that it is in such otherness that I can glimpse a hitherto unseen self. Hermeneutic experience involves an ethical revelation of the extent to which I can become bound to that which is both different from and stands at the limit of my horizon.

If communities are bound by the shared needs and the occupation of a common space, hermeneutic encounters (especially those which are stressful) plainly have the capacity to bind together those who undergo them more closely. It is beyond question that our capacity to understand “more,” to become different to ourselves, depends upon an encounter with the other. In short, the ability to understand “more” rests not just upon a recognition of what initially lies within a native horizon but also upon an acknowledgment of that which stands at the limit of that horizon. Here philosophical hermeneutics ceases to be conservative and moves toward the constructive. *The hermeneutic encounter grounds a civility among those who have come to know what it is to become different to themselves and who realize, as a consequence, that they are indeed mutually dependent upon each other for expanding the possibilities within their understanding.* Such individuals know that their ability to understand and become “more” does not depend exclusively upon a recognition of what is entailed *within* their horizon but also upon a recognition of that otherness which challenges their horizons from outside. The locus of such a civility is not to be found within the landscape of a common history or language but in the border terrains of shared hermeneutical encounters. Philosophical hermeneutics indicates, then, how participation in the hermeneutical experience of becoming different to oneself can engender a hermeneutic civility that *transcends* the initial horizons of birth and custom. Philosophical hermeneutics clearly surpasses the conservatism of Heidegger’s cultural orthodoxy. As we shall see, acknowledgment of an ethical dependence upon the other and the different enables philosophical hermeneutics to give a far from trite sense to the notion that understanding *civilizes*. That hermeneutic experience has the potential to draw one into a civility of difference strengthens the ethical insight that *understanding is far from being an individual achievement.*

Thesis Seven: Hermeneutic Understanding Redeems the Negativity of Its Constituting Differential

While avoiding the pitfalls of a systematized Hegelian dialectic, philosophical hermeneutics claims that understanding is driven by “the power of the negative.” The negative perimeters of hermeneutic understanding are fourfold.

1. Hermeneutic encounters reveal the “negativity of experience”: a hermeneutic experience worthy of the name *disrupts* the expectancies one has of an artwork or text so that one is forced to think again.¹⁸

2. Hermeneutic understanding is finite. It is limited by both its time and its horizon. The determinate historical location of any understanding prevents it from being able to claim completeness.
3. Understanding is perspectival. It presents but one of several other logically possible points of view of its subject matter.
4. No act of understanding is complete. No hermeneutic encounter can exhaust its subject matter.

Two views of negativity can be discerned within these perimeters. First, negation is portrayed as the due punishment for that hermeneutic hubris which forgets that all understanding is dependent upon unstated horizons of meaning. Any claim to be the definitive interpretation, to be “whole” and complete, is subject to negation, that is, to the risk of being exposed as a particular expression of a more complex “whole” or nexus of other understandings. Second, the “power of the negative” is associated with an ineliminable space or with a hermeneutical differential, which, though it drives understanding toward completion, continually defers the possibility of its attainment.

That the “power of the negative” is inherent within hermeneutic operations is established by the following. Philosophical hermeneutics perceives that such inherited subject matters as truth, beauty, justice, etc. would lie dormant were they not kept “functional.”¹⁹ Understanding must translate a subject matter from the register in which it has been historically received into one that enables it to operate in a contemporary manner. Wolfgang Iser argues that this “fashioning” of a subject matter exposes a difference between “what is to be interpreted and the register into which it is to be translated.”²⁰ Interpretation opens an ineliminable space between registers. While this space or hermeneutic differential incites and drives further interpretation, it also prevents understanding from ever completing its task. In short, the negativity that inspires and brings understanding to its task—the recognition of the difference between the received register of a subject matter and the one it must be translated into—is also that negativity which prevents understanding from fulfilling its task. Yet the negative aspects of hermeneutic understanding are redeemed by the positivity residing within them. That which prevents understanding from completing its task also lures it into further efforts, thereby keeping its task open. It is not openness per se which matters. In sustaining that openness, understanding’s vulnerability to the serendipitous challenge of the other and the unexpected is