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Understanding as Dialogue : Gadamer

If one were asked to put in a nut-shell Hans-Georg Gadamer's contribution to (Continental) philosophy, one would have to say that it lies in the development of a philosophical hermeneutics. But this would only invite the further question: what is hermeneutics? Following Gadamer's own practice, the answer to this question would have to draw back on the long history of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics used to be - and for some still is or should be - a discipline that offered guidelines (rules, canons, precepts) for the correct interpretation of texts. As long as texts, or discourse in general, presented no challenge to interpretation, there was really no need for such an auxiliary discipline. The immediate context and meaning of the texts were evident in themselves and did not require the interplay or "mediation" of any hermeneutic reflection. It is only when difficulties, ambiguities, or inconsistencies arise or a temporal distance needs to be bridged, that one requires a hermeneutical mediation. In ancient times, this mediating function of hermeneutics was etymologically associated with the mediator-god Hermes - although the etymological link between the name Hermes and the Greek word *hermeneuein* (which stands for mediation, interpretation, explanation, understanding, translation) has been cast into doubt by recent research, but this new discovery perhaps only casts doubt on the reliability of etymological insights themselves. But the "hermetic" element in hermeneutics is worth pondering, for that which we seek to understand is always something that also resists understanding, that retains an intriguing, incomprehensible element.

Traditional hermeneutics, then, understood itself as a mediating tool that could help sort out the meaning of texts or traditions which weren't evident by themselves or any more. Small wonder that traditional hermeneutics was mostly preoccupied with religious or sacred texts whose meaning was or had become uncertain and ambiguous. How could they not be since they used a corporal, physical language to express spiritual realities? This distinction between body and spirit consequently became one of the favorite metaphors of the hermeneutic tradition. To understand the meaning of a text was to understand its spirit, to leap from the bodily, literal sense to the spirit or thought behind it. Such a practice equated hermeneutics with the deciphering of allegorical meaning and interpretation. For allegorical interpretation, a literal text actually

aims at something different from what it is openly stating (*allo agoreuein*); through a physical language, it points to something higher, spiritual.

The most basic definition of hermeneutics offered by the entire tradition was that it consisted in the “art of understanding”. It is in this sense that Friedrich Schleiermacher, the influential Protestant theologian of the early 19th Century and one of the founder of the idea of a universal hermeneutics, spoke of hermeneutics as a “*Kunstlehre des Verstehens*,” an art of understanding, but he was thus only summing up the main purpose of the hermeneutic discipline from its inception as an *ars interpretandi*. The German term *Kunstlehre* used by the tradition in which Schleiermacher stands is however a tricky one and probably has no equivalent in any other language. It is clearly the German translation of the Latin word *ars* as in “art of comprehending”, but *Kunst* would already suffice to translate *ars*. *Kunstlehre* adds a theoretical, doctrinal, but also a more technical element to the mere notion of *Kunst* or art. Literally, *Kunstlehre* would be the doctrine of an art. This sounds cumbersome, since it seems to imply that there is no art (in this case no artful understanding) without a doctrine of this art. But is this really the case? Can one only practice an art if one also has a doctrine of how this art functions? Therein lies Gadamer’s modest question - and challenge - to the hermeneutical tradition of modernity.

Let's see how this applies to the case in point, the art of understanding that is hermeneutics. Is there such a thing as a *Kunstlehre*, say, a “methodology” of understanding? That would be a useful tool indeed and would certainly respond to a wide-spread desideratum in this disoriented world of ours in which we are thrown into without acquiring any secure grasp on things and just try to cope as best we can, among other things through understanding. For the question: how are we to understand? is universal enough and certainly isn’t restricted to the commerce with sacred texts. As Hans Blumenberg argued in his 1981 book on *The Readability of the World*, in modern times the entire universe came to be seen as a text with some meaning (the “book of nature”), but this also became true of our own lives. The probably recent question of the meaning of life presupposes that life has been “hermeneuticized,” that it can be interpreted, deciphered, acquire deeper meaning, and so on. The answer to the question “how are we to understand ourselves?” would certainly provide much-needed orientation. This also explains why so many techniques of understanding are offered by so many “specialists” of understanding in all walks of life, but also on the more general issue of “the meaning of it all”. This leads to the proliferation of what one could call the “how-to” books: how to become rich, how to write a philosophical dissertation, how to talk in public, how to become a good teacher, how to be a good lover, etc. The how-to

literature is immense and probably boundless. One could say that all these techniques of understanding profess to offer a hermeneutical *Kunstlehre*, the doctrine of an art.

The basic, simple question of Gadamer - and all basic questions are simple - is whether hermeneutics can be such a technical discipline, whether this very idea of a *Kunstlehre* in the case of understanding is not a delusion after all. He asks, in other words, if this idea of an understanding-technique is not a distortion of what understanding (and its art) is all about. But what is understanding? one must ask. There is a now natural tendency to construe understanding as something that has to do with knowledge, that is theoretical, epistemological, even mental. For this theoretical, epistemological behaviour there would be a science or a doctrine that could produce rules, guidelines, principles, etc. To be sure, many of these guidelines are quite useful and fundamental indeed (avoid contradiction, seek clarity, make sure what you assert corresponds to the texts or the author's intention, etc.), but the fundamental question is whether understanding is properly understood when it is perceived in such a theoretical, epistemological mood.

But how is then understanding to be understood? In his major work *Truth and Method* (1960), Gadamer answers somewhat enigmatically that he follows his teacher Heidegger when he takes understanding to be the “basic motion” of our existence, of what we are as “*Da-sein*”, that is, as beings who are thrown into existence without any certainty, other than death. This means that understanding is not some theoretical posture we can adopt when we try to grasp something; it is something we “are” and “do” all the time. In Heideggerian terms, it is already the essential point of the “there” in the being-there of “*da*”-*sein*. That is, we are “there” precisely in the motion or mould of understanding. We always have an understanding of this there, our capacities and incapacities, of our possibilities and impossibilities in being in this world. And this understanding is always a troubled or concerned one. It suffers namely from a basic insecurity: itself. This is why this understanding is always a “projective” affair. Whether we are fully aware of it or not, we project, that is, we anticipate events in light of certain possibilities of existence which make up our “understanding”, our understanding selves.

Heidegger stressed the pre-theoretical dimension of this understanding by relying on the idiomatic German expression “*sich auf etwas verstehen*” which means as much as to “know how”, to be able to cope with something, to be up to it. For instance, a skillful writer is not someone who understands the rules of writing, but someone who is up to it, who “can” do it. The same holds for a good cook, an apt lover, a devoted teacher, but perhaps also for a good doctor

or a good friend. Understanding is here less a matter of knowing this or that but of being able to do or to be. The English verb “to cope” is often used in this context, but one has to see that it perhaps also misses an important point. For understanding is not only a possibility, an ability, but at the same time an impossibility, an inability. This can already be heard in the expression “to be up to it”: taken literally, it also means that we have to rise up to something that is taller than us, beyond us. To be up to it, to be capable of it, thus implies, in a paradoxical way, that one is at the same time *not* up to it. The ability of understanding - which we “are” - masks a sheer inability, that of understanding itself. If one is asked, say, can you write an Encyclopedia article on philosophical hermeneutics? (or a term paper on a similarly narrow subject), one can tentatively answer “well, yes, I can”, but this also entails: basically, I cannot, this is too much for me, and I can only offer to do my best, and that can never be enough. Understanding can never be fully sure of the understanding it is staking out. Understanding is as much a possibility as an impossibility. We strive to understand because, at a basic level, we don't understand at all. This is the predicament of human finitude. Understanding is the paradoxical art of being able to do something of which we are basically incapable: understanding. The understanding that “nevertheless” happens and on which we thrive should not for that matter necessarily be viewed as a treachery or deceit, but rather as a surprise, like the joy, but also the eery feeling that shines on the face of a child when it suddenly finds out it can ride a bicycle even though it is still perilously swinging to and fro.

Human understanding therefore always implies an element of self-understanding. It is always a possibility of our own self that is played out when something is understood. But this notion should not be confused with the idealistic and sovereign notion of self-consciousness. It is crucial to note that Gadamer does not borrow this notion of self-understanding from Hegel's idea of a transparent self-consciousness, but from the dialectical theology of Rudolf Bultmann (compare Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Ges. Werke*, II, p. 75, 121, 406). Theological self-understanding, according to Bultmann, marks less the achievement than the failure at understanding one's self. But this inability of understanding turns out to be the way in which adequate understanding sets in. The self-understanding implied in every understanding is the very opposite of a self-possession.

The philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer can be seen to a large extent as the philosophical unfolding of this basic insight into the finitude of human understanding. As a hermeneutics, it is also an art of understanding, but its critical point lies in the proper understanding of the notion of “art” that is

involved here. For this art is anything but a *Kunstlehre*, a doctrine for which there would be secure rules, guidelines, canons, etc. There are indeed such guidelines, as we have seen, and some of the best minds of the hermeneutical tradition have devoted their acumen to these canons, but the exclusive focus on absolutely secure guidelines might also hide a misunderstanding, a delusion of what understanding is. Gadamer's hermeneutics is thus a permanent transcendence of the simple “how-to”, “technical” approach to understanding, that is prevalent in so many spheres of life, even in politics and in ethics. The wisdom of this approach is that understanding is more a matter of a *know-how* than a theoretical *know-that*, but mere technical rules always arrive too late in the event of understanding. They have a desperation written on them that beckons their origin in the ideal of a science consisting of methods.

So Gadamer's basic idea is rather simple: a *Kunstlehre* or mere technique of understanding is a misunderstanding of what happens in understanding as the basic motion of our existence. The art of understanding is not a matter of method, it is, rather, an “art”, yet an art in which we encounter truth. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is an effort to sort out this hermeneutical experience of truth which is rooted in our finitude and to free it from the exclusive claim that the idea of method makes on the notion of truth. According to this methodical dream, truth 1) results from the proper following of a transparent set of rules, 2) is independent from the observer, 3) can be objectively verified by some criteria, and 4) be stated in formulas or laws, in the best of cases in mathematical phraseology. The restriction of truth to what obeys these criteria was perhaps an understanding necessity at the outset of modernity, in the works of Bacon and Descartes, in order to free scientific and philosophical knowledge from the straitjacket of tradition. Furthermore, these criteria may very well account for the success and mastery of the knowledge of nature, but now that we stand at the other end of modernity, it could also be the case that these truth-securing criteria tend to cover up the basic experience of truth which can be described as an event of understanding that presupposes an essential impossibility of understanding. Heidegger drew on the Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, to think this experience of truth as an “unconcealedness” (reading the “a” in *aletheia* as a negating, a lifting of the veil of forgetfulness, *lethè*), but this concealment still carries the mark of the basic concealment that is the lot of our finitude in time. Gadamer asks: is not the quest for methodic security actually a fleeing away from this finitude? Does not true wisdom emerge from the acknowledgment of one's own finitude, as demonstrated by the example of Socrates' knowing ignorance?

In the three major parts and fields of his magnum opus of 1960, *Truth*

and Method, Gadamer will strive to reconquer this understanding of truth and save it from the deformation the notion of method with its obsession with security inflicts upon it. The three sections are devoted to art, history and language. That the *starting point* of Gadamer's work is the domain of art should not be surprising, since we have seen that hermeneutics can be characterized as the "art" of understanding. But what is art and can one speak of an identical meaning in both cases, the art of understanding and the broad field of the arts in plural that provide material for our arts centers, arts museums and arts section in the newspaper? There is perhaps more similarity to the basic notion of "art" hinted at here than meets the eye. For the art involved is in both cases a matter of ability, to some extent of "knowledge", but in any event an instance of truth which cannot be accounted for by the idea of method. But isn't it the case that art relinquishes any claim to truth by establishing its autonomy independently of the requirements of science, even to the extent of defining itself in opposition to the reign of science (arts - even the 'liberal arts' - as opposed to science)? This alleged autonomy of art above any truth claim will be the first victim of Gadamer's attack on the dominion exerted by the modern idea of method. Surely, art prospered as it became autonomous, but it did so at the expense of its truth claim. The splendid isolation of the aesthetic, Gadamer will argue, was in effect imposed upon it by the presuppositions of methodical science in the 19th century. Since science and method were responsible for the entire domain of truth, art could only defend its legitimacy by concentrating on purely aesthetic features that had nothing or little to do with knowledge or truth. At best truth was a form of "expression", and the expression of some genius, of some creator of beauty and aesthetic feelings. For Gadamer, this amounts to a tacitly scientific distortion of the aesthetic experience which is at its core an encounter of truth. It can also be called a hermeneutical truth, because the truth which addresses us in the art experience can never be fully grasped. What Gadamer describes here is a truth which is experienced like an event of meaning that takes us into its play, as it were, and in which we are only participants. In the art experience, we are not independent subjects standing in front of aesthetic objects (only as tourists can we come to feel this to be the case). Art, true art involves our entire being, leads us to rethink our world, rediscover it, not through some aesthetic coloration, but the world as it stands and as it can only be revealed by an art experience. When confronted with a work of art, something overcomes us, strikes us, discloses some truth about the world, yet we cannot perfectly say what it is. Yet, it is convincing, and much more so in fact than a mere truth statement that could be objectively verified and isolated.

Indeed, why is it then that an art work can be more convincing than a

philosophical or scientific argument? A novel, an opera, a poem, a film leave an imprint on us and remain in our memory in a way that no arguments can equal. The names of Proust, Rimbaud, Beethoven, Goya, even Plato or Augustine will immediately awaken something in us, they will speak to us, unfolding an infinite world of experience. This also means, of course, that we learn something from them, but what it is cannot be reduced to a specific message, expression or argument. It even suffices to evoke their names to know what I am talking about. Why is this so? The work of art does not really argue, but it makes sense, it opens our eyes. Everyone understands the sublimity that is meant when one evokes, say, the name of Mozart or hums along one of his arie. But then again, who can explain it? At best, one should play it, and some attempt to. The most appropriate thing one can say is perhaps that some failures are not as bad as others. But the only point is this: art *speaks* (which could be one way to translate the title of Gadamer's 1993 volume on aesthetics in his Collected Works edition: *Kunst als Aussage*); it addresses us and makes us see in a way no other medium can even hope to approximate.

What is experienced in a work of art - and which can be called truth since it reveals something that is there, something that is astoundingly adequate - is according to Gadamer at its root also a self-encounter, an encounter with oneself. This is a precious indicative of the truth experience art can help us rediscover. We are always intimately concerned by the truth which occurs in a piece of art. An art work with no truth is one that doesn't speak to us, and many clearly don't, for whatever reasons. This hint is important because it runs counter to the prevailing model of truth heralded by science for which truth is something that is independent from the observer, where our subjectivity does not come into play. While this type of truth might be applicable in some spheres where apodictic certainty is construable, in mathematics, for instance, or in the knowledge of mathematicized nature (whether there is such a thing is unimportant here; what counts is that it can be constructed), it is clearly out of place in the realm of art and in questions that pertain to meaning and understanding, where our own questioning selves are at stake.

Gadamer's enterprise, however, is not just to safeguard the truth experience of art from the trivialization imposed upon it by the dominion of methodical knowledge. It is far more ambitious than that and indeed quite subversive. In effect, one could say that he draws on the aesthetic experience in order to rethink the entire experience of truth in such a way that it will force any reader to even reconsider the epistemological model that allegedly obtains in science. Indeed, recent developments in the theory of science (in the wake of Thomas S. Kuhn's ground-breaking work) that tend to highlight the rhetorical

and aesthetic elements in science can be seen as corroborating the universality of the hermeneutic experience. But Gadamer is far too prudent, too modest, to address the domain of exact science directly, claiming it is foreign to his experience. This is why he focuses in the central part of his work on the sciences that are most familiar to him, the *Geisteswissenschaften* or the human sciences, as one might call them, before attempting to establish the universality of hermeneutic experience on the common ground of understanding, the element of linguisticity. But since he raises a universality claim for the insights of hermeneutics, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the harder sciences must themselves be understood more hermeneutically. But this has to be seen as a *consequence of Truth and Method*, one that belongs not so much to its stated theses as to its impact, the productive work of its historical reception (or *Wirkungsgeschichte*). In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer is at the beginning only concerned with the deformation exerted by the model of methodic science on the aesthetic experience and the truth claim of the humanities.

The transition from the aesthetic to the humanities is also quite natural for Gadamer's argument. It is because the humanities themselves tend to be seen as a mere aesthetic pursuit if measured by the standards of the knowledge in the sciences. This is the tacit presupposition behind the general view of the humanities as "soft" sciences. This entails that "real" knowledge can only be obtained through methodical inquiry. According to this leading prejudice, it can be perhaps a useful distraction to read poetry, listen to music, learn foreign languages, study theology, or get acquainted with history, women studies, and the like, but in these fields, one can get away with saying almost anything one wants. There are hardly any cogent means of verification as in the hard sciences. In short, these pursuits are at best 'aesthetic', and must relinquish the serious matter of truth to the real sciences. In this situation, if the humanities want to avoid the aesthetic trivialization of their truth claim, their only alternative would be to "get real"; that is, to adopt the norms of methodical science, to seek, for instance, general laws and regularities, "statistics", as it were, of the historical world. According to Gadamer, this has been the constant temptation of the humanities for the last two centuries as they sought a methodology - a *Kunstlehre* - that would enable them to share equal footing, if not equal funding, with the exact sciences. According to a conception Gadamer associates with Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), who transformed the impetus he received from his long-time study of Schleiermacher into a philosophical program, hermeneutics could be understood as the *Kunstlehre* or methodical foundation that would set out rules that would assure the scientific status of the humanities or *Geisteswissenschaften*. The knowledge attained through these

methodical means would be independent from the observer, tradition and the prejudices of the time and yield secure, definitive knowledge. A positivistic, but mostly pathetic ideal, Gadamer will argue, because it fails to do justice to the way in which truth actually takes place in the humanities.

Truth, Gadamer counters, has perhaps much more to do with the belongingness to tradition than the methodical ideal and its dream of a zero-point of knowledge would allow us to believe. He will subtly turn the tables on the methodical ideal by arguing that this ideal, if applied uncritically, suffers itself from an unacknowledged prejudice, the prejudice against prejudices. As concerned, questioning and self-questioning beings, we always understand out of some anticipations, as Heidegger contended, but these anticipations continuously change as they apply to ever new situations and challenges. Our understanding feeds on two sources: first, the tradition that bequeaths us the anticipations through which we try to come to grips with our world and ourselves, but also the present situation that requires a response, an adaptation of our understanding. Understanding as a means of orienting oneself in a basically disoriented world is rooted in the constant tension between the work of tradition and the demands of the present situation.

This is an insight Aristotle deemed fundamental for the very constitution of the field of ethics. Moral knowledge comes to us from tradition, but has to be applied in a given situation that always concerns us directly; thus, it can never be the affair of some mathematical-cosmological knowledge that one could pursue (and apply) regardless of one's concrete concerns and situation. To claim that this "concernedness" of ethical knowledge hampers the stringency of its truth claim would be to miss the point of what ethical knowledge is and has to be in the first place. Besides the limited realm of mathematical cognition, which has to do with what always remains the same and can thus be taught (the term "mathematics" comes from the Greek *mathemata*, that which is "learnable"), there is according to Aristotle "another mode of knowledge" which is less a matter of theoretical knowledge than of "experience". "Experience" here does not allude to the type of experiment a scientist can create (and therefore recreate) in a laboratory (this is yet another seduction of modern science), but to the insight that belongs to the very "practice" of our temporal and situated lives. For this unescapably temporal existence, there are no rules, but the experience and truths that belong to it, and can be shared, need to be safeguarded against the scientific illusion that there could be a methodical mastery of this experience, some type of firm knowledge and know-how that only science could secure. This kind of human knowledge Aristotle called "practical" because it belongs to the very praxis and experience of our lives. He

linked it to the “ethical” dimension in the widest possible sense. Gadamer will seize on this idea and recommend it to the hermeneutics of the humanities, hoping to rekindle a more adequate conception of what understanding is. To measure the achievements of understanding according to the criteria of methodical science would be to miss entirely what truth is about in this field.

It is also important that this insistence on the weight of tradition should not be seen as a form of “traditionalism”, although this misunderstanding is perhaps unavoidable in a world which is so prone to quick labels, name-tags and “isms”. Pointing to tradition as a source of understanding does not mean that one favors tradition over critical or argumentative inquiry, but simply that one can never fully account for the sources and grounds of one’s beliefs. The tradition (or *Wirkungsgeschichte*) Gadamer refers to is not a specific tradition (say, a conservative one), but the hidden or unnoticed tradition that supports us. It is first and foremost an acknowledgment of the finitude and therefore of the modesty and necessary openness of our knowledge. It is certainly a noble task to examine critically all the grounds of our knowledge, but in a age governed and blinded by the quick-fixes of technology and the constant availability of information it is also urgent to be reminded that this reflection can never be total nor totally self-transparent. The illusion of complete self-transparency through reflection can be a very uncritical and naive ideal indeed. Gadamer does not want to call into question the merits of methodical science. That could indeed be reactionary. He only wants to correct a self-misunderstanding of understanding which is predicated on methodical science alone. This is why, as he asserts in his important “self-presentation” (*Ges. Werke*, vol. II, p. 498; translated by Richard Palmer in the Library of Living Philosophers volume on Gadamer, 1997), the hermeneutics of understanding had perhaps “less to learn from the theory of modern science than from older, now forgotten traditions” like the traditions of practical philosophy and rhetoric”. “Less to learn” entails that there is also plenty to be gained from the methodology of modern science, and that its critical insights should not be lost or neglected, but that one should not be blinded by the mystification it induces in its universal claim on truth. It is this universalism that Gadamer calls into question because it rests on premisses he deems incompatible with the finitude, situatedness and concernedness of human knowledge.

Gadamer's insistence on the situatedness of understanding, then, is not a defense of tradition, but a philosophical recognition of human finitude, one that is destined to sharpen a critical awareness of the limits of one’s timid understanding. This acknowledgment of finitude, as an act of modesty on the part of our self-understanding, leads to an openness to refutation and to other

perspectives. An understanding attuned to its own shortcomings will necessarily be dialogical. In his later writings, Gadamer often repeated the phrase that the soul of hermeneutics lies in the recognition that the other might be right. It is only if one accepts this that one can hope to learn anything. Gadamer's hermeneutics is thus a philosophical justification for the unescapable frailty of our own understanding. To argue that one's truth claim is valid because it rests on a stringent method could also be a way to close oneself off from the truth that emerges in dialogue, in the encounter with others and other traditions than our own.

This dialogical dimension of our understanding will form the focus of the last section of *Truth and Method*, the general theory of the latent linguisticity of our understanding that will establish the universality of philosophical hermeneutics. The transition from the hermeneutics of the humanities to the broader theme of language will be provided by the dialectic of question and answer. Its fundamental insight is that no statement can be understood unless it is understood as an answer to a question. Every statement emerges out of a motivation, a situation, an urgency that one needs to understand if one wants to get at the truth of what is said. To put it in other terms, for philosophical hermeneutics, there is no such thing as a first word, for every word is itself an answer to a situation, a question or a preceding set of questions. But there is also nothing like a last word either. Any utterance invites a reception, an understanding response. This dialectics of question and answer makes up the fundamental "linguisticity" of our understanding. To seek to understand is to seek for words that can be heard as answers to questions we can also ask. The failure to find such words is not a refutation, but a confirmation of a hermeneutics that recognizes in the failure to understand the very beginning of understanding.

The paradigm for this dialogical understanding of language can be seen this time in the Socratic-Platonic tradition. True wisdom starts with the insight that one knows that one knows nothing. The philosophy derived from this basic insight could only be expressed in dialogical form, in the Platonic dialogues. Gadamer, who has been a Plato-scholar his entire life, from the time of his habilitation thesis on *Plato's Dialectical Ethics* published in 1931, to say nothing of his unpublished Doctoral dissertation of 1922 on *The Essence of Pleasure in Plato's Dialogues*, up to the 7th Volume of his Collected Works Edition under the title *Plato in Dialogue*, published in 1991, will draw far-reaching hermeneutical consequences from this dialogical nature of human understanding. Without needing to state it explicitly, it is with this insight that he will part with Heidegger. To be sure, he basically followed in the

footsteps of his mentor in the first two sections of his work when he stressed the truth-event of art and the rootedness of understanding in situated and open anticipations. But in the third section, he will tacitly break with Heidegger's understanding of Plato as a foundationalist thinker who subjugated the totality of being to the authority of the idea or the concept and thus inaugurated the era of metaphysics and its forgetfulness of the temporality of being. What Heidegger himself "forgot", according to Gadamer, was that Plato wrote in dialogues and that he was a pupil of Socrates. It is the history of metaphysics that made Plato into a metaphysician, but Heidegger, of all people, ought to have known that the history of metaphysics mastered the art of covering up its own origins. It is in later works that Gadamer fully developed this opposition to Heidegger's negative reading of Plato, but the opposition had been simmering for some time.

The conception of language defended in *Truth and Method* still sounds very Heideggerian. In 1959, as Gadamer was finishing his masterwork, Heidegger had just published his book, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (On the Road to Language), in which he sought in language, and more specifically in the language of poetry, the privileged manifestation of the dwelling of Being. This is a conception which could rightly be seen as the *terminus ad quem* of his entire philosophy, driven by a quest for Being. Gadamer also spoke in this mold about the "ontological turn of hermeneutics following the lead of language", but the Heideggerian overtones might hide more important dissimilarities. Gadamer's emphasis is less on the revelation of Being that occurs in language than on the dialogical nature of our understanding: to speak is to seek understanding, and to understand is to seek words. Language lives in this dialogical interplay, in the dialectics of question and answer, as one can express it if one wants to follow the still somewhat epistemological model suggested by the hermeneutics of the human sciences. Again, this understanding of language is directed against the seduction of methodical science, which conceives of language as a theoretical set of statements on matters of facts that are verifiable independently from the utterer, tradition and history. This technical construction of language conceives of language as a tool or an instrument that would enable us to master the world. It finds its fulfillment in the dream of an ideal language that could be constructed from scratch and which would be thoroughly logical (and lives on today in the research on artificial intelligence, which in effect seeks to understand or, worse still, replace intelligence through a *Kunstlehre*). But is this still language, Gadamer asks, a language we can share and understand, or just another technical dream? Language, Gadamer will argue, is less a tool or an instrument which stands at the disposal of our constructing

minds than the true element, horizon and mode of realization (*Vollzug*) of our understanding and our being-in-this-world, as Heidegger would put it. Gadamer also followed the lead of Heidegger when he appeared to sum up his thesis on the hermeneutical nature of language by coining the much-cited, much-maligned and often misunderstood adage: “*Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache*” - “Being that can be understood is language”. Gadamer does not mean by this that the entirety of Being can be reduced to language, nor does he mean that there is no non-linguistic understanding. He means that being that is understood is, as long as it is understood, one that seeks language, that it is on the way to language. But this language is not something that can be stated once and for all, it is especially not the language of propositions that so galvanizes contemporary thinking on language, it is the search for language that one can hear in any utterance, a quest that is never fully satisfied.

This dialogical understanding of language which breaks with the focus on propositional language and propositional logic could even find some support in the Augustinian notion of the “process” character of language, which understands language (albeit in an originally theological, christological context) as the exterior profering of an inner word which one can always hear and strive to understand, but which, for us humans, can never be fully uttered. In more down to earth terms, the intention of what is said always exceeds what is and can be said. What is uttered is, as it were, the point of the iceberg, the part of language that one *hears*, but not all one *listens* to or for when words resound in one’s inner ear. The finitude of our understanding is also the finitude of the words we use. They are able to convey our intentions, our situation, our distress, but at the very same time, they are all too aware that they cannot. The capacity of language and understanding goes hand in hand with their understanding incapacity. Words are never up to what words ought to say (*vouloir-dire*). This eloquent inability is perhaps their finest ability. For a hermeneutics rooted in this dialogical intelligence of language, there is no such thing as a last word.

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