

Jean Grondin: Artikel "Hermeneutik" (Hist. WB der Rhetorik)

Paru dans le *Dictionnary of the History of Ideas* 2005

ARTICLE : HERMENEUTICS

Traditionally understood as the art of interpretation (*ars hermeneutica*) that provided rules for the interpretation of sacred texts, hermeneutics today serves to characterize a broad current in contemporary continental philosophy that deals with the issues of interpretation and stresses the historical and linguistic nature of our world-experience. Since this characterization is also valid for contemporary thinking as a whole, the boundaries of hermeneutics are difficult to delineate with pinpoint accuracy. In contemporary thought, it is mostly associated with the thinking of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), who situates himself in the hermeneutic tradition of thinkers such as Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). All three authors unfolded a distinct philosophical understanding of hermeneutics (i.e. interpretation theory), that drew on the more ancient tradition of hermeneutics. Since their thinking is a radicalization of and reaction to this older conception, it is with it that one must start.

1. Traditional Hermeneutics : the art of interpretation of sacred texts.

Originally, hermeneutics was developed as an auxiliary discipline in the fields that deal with the interpretation of canonical texts, i.e. texts that contain authoritative meaning such as sacred texts or judicial documents. Hermeneutic rules were especially required when one was confronted with ambiguous passages (*ambigua*) of Scripture. Some of the most influential treatises in this regard were Augustine's *De doctrina christiana* (427) and Melanchton's *Rhetorics* (1519). Since most of these rules had to do with the nature of language, the major thinkers of the hermeneutic tradition, up until the 19th century, borrowed their guidelines from the then still very lively tradition of rhetorics, e.g. the requirement that ambiguous passages should be understood out of their context, a rule that later gave rise to the notion of a « hermeneutical circle » according to which the parts of a text should be comprehended out of the whole in which they stand (say, the whole of a book and its intent [*scopus*], of a literary genre, of the work and life of an author). Supplying such rules, hermeneutics enjoyed a normative or regulatory function for the interpretation of canonical texts. A specific hermeneutics was developed for Holy Scripture (*hermeneutica sacra*), for Law (*hermeneutica juris*) and classical texts (*hermeneutica profana*).

The German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is a foremost example of this tradition, but also an author that points to a more

philosophical understanding of hermeneutics, and in at least two ways. 1) At the beginning of his lectures on hermeneutics, that were published posthumously by his pupil Friedrich Lücke in 1838, he famously bemoans that there are only many special hermeneutics and that hermeneutics does not yet exist as a general or universal discipline, i.e. as an art (*Kunst, Kunstlehre*) of understanding itself that would establish binding rules for *all forms* of interpretation. 2) Schleiermacher further laments that hermeneutics has hitherto only consisted of a vague collection of dislocated guidelines. Hermeneutical rules, he urges (*Hermeneutik und Kritik*, ed. M. Frank, Suhrkamp : Frankfurt, 1977, 84) should become « more methodical » (*mehr Methode*). A more rigorous methodology of understanding could enable the interpreter to understand the authors as good or even better than they understood themselves, claims Schleiermacher in a well-known dictum.

2. *Dilthey : Hermeneutics as the methodological basis of the human sciences.* Most familiar with the thinking and life of Schleiermacher, of whom he was the biographer, Dilthey devoted his life-work to the challenge of a foundation of the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). Whereas the exact sciences have already received, in the wake of Kant's *Critique of pure reason*, a philosophical foundation and a methodology guaranteeing the validity of their knowledge, the human sciences still lacked such a reflection. Under the motto of a « Critique of historical reason », Dilthey sought for a logical, epistemological and methodological foundation for the human sciences. Without such a foundation, their own scientific legitimacy could be called into question : is everything in the human sciences merely subjective, historically relative, and, as we tend to say, but with a touch of derision, a mere matter of interpretation? If these areas of our knowledge are to entertain any scientific credibility, Dilthey argued, they need to rest on a sound methodology.

In some of his later texts (most notably in his essay on « The Rise of Hermeneutics » of 1900), Dilthey sought such a methodical basis for the humanities in hermeneutics, the old discipline of text interpretation that could receive renewed actuality in light of this new challenge. His argument was almost syllogistic : all human sciences are sciences of interpretation, the traditional discipline of interpretation is hermeneutics; therefore hermeneutics could serve as the bedrock of all human sciences. Hermeneutics could thus be called upon to fulfil a need that arises out of the emergence of historical conscience and threatens the validity of historical knowledge. Even if it remains largely programmatic in his later texts, the idea that hermeneutics could serve as a *universal foundation* of the human sciences bestowed upon hermeneutics a philosophical relevance and visibility that it never really

enjoyed before Dilthey. Up to this day, important thinkers such as Emilio Betti and E. D. Hirsch look upon hermeneutics to deliver a methodical foundation for the truth claim of the humanities and the literary disciplines. According to them, a hermeneutics that would relinquish this task would miss the point about what hermeneutics is all about.

But there was an idea in Dilthey's program that carried the bulk of the hermeneutic tradition in a rather different direction. It is the insight that the understanding developed in the humanities is nothing but the unfolding of a quest of understanding that characterizes human and historical life as such. Life articulates itself, Dilthey says, in manifold forms of expression (*Ausdruck*) that our understanding seeks to penetrate by recreating the inner life-experience (*Erlebnis*) out of which they sprang. Dilthey's far-reaching intuition is that interpretation and understanding are not processes that occur simply in the human sciences, they are constitutive of our quest for orientation. The notion that historical life is as such hermeneutical, i.e. interpretatory to the core was, of course, only buttressed by Nietzsche's contemporaneous reflections on the interpretatory nature of our world-experience. « There are no facts, only interpretations », wrote Nietzsche. This first glimpse of the potential *universality* of the « hermeneutic universe » appeared to call into question Dilthey's dream of a methodical foundation of the human sciences, but it raised a new hermeneutics task.

3. *Heidegger's Hermeneutics of Existence*. Seizing upon this idea that life is intrinsically interpretatory, the early Heidegger spoke of a « hermeneutical intuition » as early as 1919. It is his teacher Husserl who had reinstated the urgency and legitimacy of primal « intuition » in philosophy. But Heidegger revealed himself a reader of Dilthey when he stressed that every intuition is hermeneutical. That meant for him that it is always motivated and replete with anticipations and expectations. Understanding is not a cognitive inquiry that the human sciences would methodically refine, it is our primary means of orientation in the world. It is this primary level of « facticity » that interests Heidegger. Our factual life is involved in this world (« being there » : *Dasein*, a he would later put it) by ways of understanding. Relying here on the German expression *sich auf etwas verstehen*, which means « to know one's way about », « to be able », Heidegger puts a new twist on the notion of understanding when he views it less as an intellectual undertaking than as an ability. It is more akin to a « know-how », and it always involves a possibility *of myself*: the verb form *sich verstehen* (to understand oneself) is reflective in German. « Understanding » is not primarily the reconstruction of the meaning of an expression (as in classical hermeneutics and Dilthey), it always entails

the projecting, and self-projecting, of a possibility of my own existence. There is no understanding without projection or anticipations.

We are factually (*faktisch*) thrown into existence as finite beings, in a world which we will never fully master. Chronically insecure about anything, yet tormentingly sure of its mortality, human facticity seeks ways to cope, to make do. This anxiety for one's own being is for Heidegger the sting of understanding. Because we are overwhelmed by existence, confronted with our mortality, we project ourselves in ways of intelligibility and reason, that help us keep things in check for a while. Every mode of understanding is related to this concernedness of our facticity or our « being there » (*Dasein*) in this overwhelming world. A momentous shift in the focus of hermeneutics has silently taken place in the work of Heidegger : hermeneutics is less concerned with texts or a certain type of science, as was the case in the entire previous history of hermeneutics, but with existence itself and its quest of understanding.

It is this dramatic notion of hermeneutics and understanding that the early Heidegger first developed in his early lecture course on the « hermeneutics of facticity » (1923), that has only been recently published and plays an important role in contemporary discussions of hermeneutics. The title « hermeneutics of facticity » is to be understood in the two directions of the genitive (subjective and objective). There is, first, a hermeneutics that intrinsically belongs to facticity itself (*genitivus subjectivus*) : facticity is hermeneutical because it is 1) capable of interpretation, 2) desperately in need of it, and 3) always already trives on some interpretations that are more or less explicit, but that can be spelled out (Heidegger, *Ontology - Hermeneutics of Facticity*, p. 11). This leads, secondly, to the more philosophical meaning of the program of a hermeneutics of facticity following the lines of a *genitivus objectivus* : it is precisely with this hermeneutic condition that a hermeneutical theory is concerned with. Its intention is however by no means merely theoretical. Its purpose is, on the contrary, to contribute to a self-awakening of facticity or *Dasein* : it hopes to « make it accessible to itself » by « hunting down the alienation from itself with which it is smitten » (*ibid.*)

This rising program was carried over in Heidegger's main work *Being and Time* (1927), but with some slight modifications (Grondin 2003). While it remained obvious that human facticity is forgetful of itself and its interpretatory nature, and possibilities, the focus shifted to the question of Being as such. The primary theme of hermeneutics was less the immediate facticity of our Being in this world, than the fact that the presuppositions of the understanding of Being remain hidden in a tradition that needs to be reopened (or « destroyed », as Heidegger puts it). Such a hermeneutics still

aims at a self-awakening of existence, but it does so by promising to sort out the fundamental structures of our understanding of being.

These structures, the rest of the work will argue, are temporal in nature (hence the title « Being and Time ») and have everything to do with the inauthentic or authentic carrying through of our existence. Heidegger's later philosophy, while relinquishing the notion of hermeneutics as such, will nevertheless radicalize this idea by claiming that our understanding of being is brought about by the event of an overbearing history of being that commands all our interpretations. Postmodern readings of Heidegger (Foucault, Vattimo, Rorty, Derrida) drew relativistic conclusions out of this shift of hermeneutics towards the history of being. Hence, the tendency, in recent debates, to amalgamate hermeneutics and postmodernism. It is a tendency that the hermeneutics of Gadamer both seems to encourage and to combat. An apparent inconsistency that we must now try to understand.

4. *Gadamer's Hermeneutics of the Event of Understanding.* Hans-Georg Gadamer's project is strongly influenced by Heidegger, but, in his masterpiece *Truth and Method* (1960), his starting-point is undoubtedly provided by Dilthey's hermeneutical inquiry on the methodology of the human sciences (a notion of hermeneutics Heidegger had dismissed as derivative from the vantage-point of his more radical hermeneutics of existence). While taking anew the dialogue with the human sciences and the open question of their claim to truth, Gadamer calls into question the premise of Dilthey according to which the experience of truth in the humanities depends on method. In seeking a methodological foundation that alone could guarantee their scientific or objective status, Dilthey subjected, Gadamer argues, the humanities to the model of the exact sciences. He would thus have forfeited the specificity of the humanities, where the involvement of the interpreter in what he or she understands is constitutive of the experience of meaning : the texts that we interpret are texts that say something to us and that are always understood, in some way, out of our questions and « prejudices ». The implication of the interpreter in the « event » of meaning, as Gadamer likes to put it, can only be deemed detrimental from the model of objectivity heralded by the natural sciences. Instead of relying on this methodological notion of objectivity, the human sciences would do well to understand their contribution to knowledge out of the somewhat forgotten tradition of humanism and the importance it bestowed upon the notion of *Bildung* (formation and education) : the humanities do not seek to master an object that stands at a distance (as is the case with the exact sciences), their aim is to develop and form the human

spirit. The truth one experiences in the encounter with major texts and history is one that transforms us, taking us up in the event of meaning itself.

Gadamer finds the most revealing model for this type of understanding in the experience of art since we are always involved, absorbed, as it were, by the presentation of an art-work, which Gadamer understands as the revelation of the truth or the essence of something : a play reveals something about the meaning of existence, just as a portrait reveals the true essence of someone. Yet, it is a truth-experience in which we partake in that it can only unfold through a process of interpretation. This notion of interpretation plays, of course, a crucial role for Gadamer and hermeneutics generally, but in the case of Gadamer, it is to be understood, first and foremost, out of the arts we call the « arts of interpretation » or the « performative arts » : just as piece of music must be *interpreted* by the violonist (i.e. never arbitrarily, but with a leeway that has to be filled by the virtuosity of interpretation), a theater play by the actors or the ballet by the dancers, a book must be interpreted through the process of reading and a picture must be contemplated by the eye of the beholder. It is only in this presentation (*Darstellung* or *Vollzug*) of a meaning *to* someone, a performance which is always an interpretation, that meaning comes to be realized. One notices here that « interpretation » refers as well a) to the interpretation of a work of art by the performers as b) to the « spectators » who attend the performance and cannot but also « interpret » the piece.

The difference between the two forms of « interpretation » is less important for Gadamer than the fact that the experience of meaning, and the truth experience it brings out, essentially requires the productive implication of the interpreter. The same holds, according to Gadamer, for the interpretation of a text or a historical event, even in the « scientific » context of the human sciences. The major point here is that interpretation is not the simple recreation of a meaning that always remains the same and can be methodically verified, nor, for that matter, the subjective, and potentially relativistic, bestowing of meaning upon an objective reality (because the reality to be understood can only be reached through a renewed attempt of understanding). In other words : to claim that interpretation is relativistic on the grounds that it implies the subjectivity of the interpreter is to miss the point of what the humanities and the experience of meaning are all about.

The objectivistic model of the exact sciences is ill-equipped to do justice to this experience of meaning. Distance, methodical verification and independence from the observer, Gadamer concludes, are not the sole conditions of knowledge. When we understand, we do not only, nor primarily follow a methodical procedure, we are « taken up », as the art experience

illustrates, by the meaning that « seizes » us, as it were. The instrumental sounding idea of procedure is somewhat suspect for Gadamer : understanding is more of an event than a procedure. « Understanding and Event » is indeed one of the original titles Gadamer thought about for his major work, before settling on « Truth and method », that underlines the very same point : truth is not only a matter of method and can never be entirely detached from our concerns.

But these concerns come to us from a tradition and a history that are more often than not opaque to consciousness. Every understanding stands in the stream of a *Wirkungsgeschichte* or « effective history », in which the horizons of the past and the present coalesce. Understanding thus entails a « fusion of horizons », between the past and the present, i.e. between the interpreter, with all the history silently at work in his understanding, and his or her object. This fusion is not to be viewed as an autonomous operation of subjectivity, but as an event of tradition (*Überlieferungsgeschehen*) in the course of which a meaning from the past is somehow *applied* to the present.

This leads *Truth and Method* to suggest that the best model for the humanities was perhaps offered by disciplines that had been traditionally preoccupied with the questions of interpretation such as juridical and theological hermeneutics, insofar as the meaning that is to be understood in these fields is one that has to be *applied* to a given situation : in the same way a judge has to creatively apply a text of law to a particular case and in which a preacher has to apply a text of Scripture to the situation of his congregation, every act of understanding, Gadamer contends, involves an effort of « application » of what is understood to the present. Gadamer does not mean by this that one first has to understand a meaning, of a text or a historical event, and then apply it to a given situation by bestowing new « relevance » upon it. His idea is rather that every understanding is at its root an application of meaning, where our experience and background are brought to bear. This « application » is, by no means, a conscious procedure. It always happens in the course of understanding to the extent that interpretation brings into play the situation and « prejudices » of the interpreter, that are less « his » or « hers » than the ones carved by the effective history in which we all stand.

Gadamer expands on this idea by comparing understanding to a process of *translation*. « I understand something » means that I can translate it into my own words, thus applying it to my situation. Any meaning I can relate to is one that is translated into a meaning I can articulate. It is not only important to underline the obvious fact that translation always implies an act of interpretation (a translator is also called in English an *intepreter*), but even more so to stress that this interpretation is by no means arbitrary : it is binded

by the meaning it seeks to render, but it can only do so by translating it into a language where it can speak anew. What occurs in the process of translation is thus a fusion of horizons between the foreign meaning and its interpretation-translation in a new language, horizon and situation, where the meaning resonates.

Truth and Method draws on this insight to highlight the fundamentally *linguistic* nature of understanding. Understanding is always an act of developing something into words, and I only understand, Gadamer argues, to the extent that I seek (and find) words to express this understanding. Understanding is not a process that could be separated from its linguistic unfolding : to think, to understand, is to seek words for that which strives to be understood. There is a crucial fusion between the process of interpretation and its linguistic formulation. It will not be the only fusion of horizons that will interest Gadamer in his hermeneutics of language. His thesis goes indeed even further : not only is the process (*Vollzug*) of interpreting (*interpretare*) linguistically-oriented, what it seeks to understand (the *interpretandum*) is also language. Language also determines the object (*Gegenstand*) of understanding itself. Any reality I have access to is linguistically framed.

In its last radicality, there occurs a fusion between the « process » of understanding and its « object », in the sense that no object (*Gegenstand*) can be separated from the attempt (*Vollzug*) to understand it. Gadamer's famous phrase to express this fusion between the object and the process of understanding itself is : « Being that can be understood is language ». This simple, yet enigmatic dictum can be read in two quite different directions : it can mean, and in light of Gadamer's unmistakable stress on the historical nature of understanding seems to mean, that every experience of Being is mediated by language, and thus by a historical and cultural horizon (negatively put : « there is no experience of Being without an historical understanding or language »). This would seem to draw Gadamer into the « relativistic camp ». It is striking to note however that Gadamer always resisted this merely relativistic appropriation of his thought. That is because his thesis on the linguistic nature of understanding also goes in another direction. It is not only the case that « Being » is always appropriated by language or some language. In this case, the stress would lay on the instrumental aspect of language that would somehow « color » Being. Gadamer sees in this an instrumental and very modern understanding of language.

This has been overlooked by postmodern readers of Gadamer, but in his dictum « Being that can be understood is language », the stress can also be put on Being itself. What Gadamer hopes to say by this is that the effort of

understanding is, in a way, ordained to the language of the things themselves. A difficult and unpalatable notion for postmodernism, to be sure, but one that is essential to Gadamer's hermeneutics : language is not only the subjective, say, contingent translation of meaning, it is also the event by which Being itself comes to light. Our language is not only « our » language, it is also the language of Being itself, the way in which Being presents itself in our understanding. This is why, when one speaks and interprets, one cannot say everything one fancies. One is binded by something like the language of the thing. What is this language? Difficult to say since we can only approach it through *our* language, and the language of tradition, but it is nevertheless the instance that resists too unilateral or too violent readings of this Being. Is it this language of Being which I seek to understand, and to the extent that understanding succeeds, a fusion of horizons has happened, a fusion between Being and understanding, an event I do not master, but in which I partake.

5. *Gadamer and his critics. Betti, Habermas, Ricoeur, Vattimo, Rorty and Derrida.* The history of hermeneutics after Gadamer can be read as a history of the debates provoked by *Truth and Method* (even though this perspective does not do justice to major figures of the hermeneutical tradition, such as Paul Ricoeur who, to a large extent, developed their hermeneutical perspectives independently from Gadamer). It can only be presented in a very sketchy manner in what follows.

1) *E. Betti and E. D. Hirsch.* Some of the first responses to Gadamer were sparked by the methodological notion of hermeneutics that prevailed in the tradition of Dilthey. After all, it had been the dominant conception of hermeneutics until Gadamer (with the sole, albeit very peculiar exception of Heidegger's « hermeneutics of existence », that had left behind the older hermeneutic tradition which had been concerned with text interpretation and the human sciences). Since Gadamer, in spite of his Heideggerian roots, took his starting-point in Dilthey's inquiry on the truth claim of the humanities, he was often seen, and criticized, from this tradition. Emilio Betti, the Italian jurist who had published a voluminous *General Theory of Interpretation* (in Italian) in 1955, which was intended as a methodical foundation of the humanities in the Dilthey tradition, vigorously criticized, in 1962, Gadamer's seeming rejection of the methodological paradigm. If Gadamer's own « method » for the humanities consisted in saying that one just has to follow one's own prejudices, it had to be condemned as a perversion of the very idea of hermeneutics. Betti, who was followed in this regard by E. D. Hirsch in America, opposed the idea that interpretation always entails an essential element of application to the present, an idea he deemed relativistic. Surely,

texts do acquire different meanings or relevance in the course of their reception, but one has to distinguish the actuality or significance (*Bedeutsamkeit*) thus garnered from the original meaning (*Bedeutung*) of the texts, i.e. the meaning of the text in the mind of its author (*mens auctoris*), which remains the focus of hermeneutics.

2) *Habermas and the Critique of Ideologies*. Coming from the Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas hailed, for his part, this element of application in understanding, claiming that knowledge is always guided by some interests. This hermeneutical insight, he believed, could help free the social sciences, spearheaded by psychoanalysis and the critique of ideology, from an all too objectivistic understanding of knowledge and science. Hermeneutics teaches us, he argued, that our understanding and practices are always motivated and linguistically articulated. It is Gadamer's too strong reliance on tradition and the importance of authority in understanding that Habermas opposed. He faulted it for being « conservative », a devastating argument in the climate of the time, to be sure, but Habermas' lasting point is that language can also transcend its own limits, following an idea that he discovered in Gadamer, but turned against him : when Gadamer said that our experience of the world was linguistical, he also stressed, for Habermas, that is what « porous », i.e. that it could, to some extent, overcome its own limitations (by seeking better expressions or dissolving its own rigidity) and was thus open to any meaning that could be understood. Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel drew from this self-transcendence of language the important notion of a linguistic or communicative rationality, that is laden with universalistic assumptions that can form the basis of an ethical theory.

3) *Paul Ricoeur* tried to build a bridge – a most hermeneutical task and virtue in itself - between Habermas and Gadamer, by claiming both authors had stressed different, but complementary elements in the tension that is inherent to understanding : whereas Gadamer underlined the belongingness of the interpreter to his object and his tradition, Habermas took heed of the reflective distance toward it. Understanding, viewed as application, does not only have to appropriate naively its subject matter, it can stand at a critical distance from it – a distance that is already given by the fact that the *interpretandum* is an objectified text, for instance. This notion of a hermeneutics that seeks to decipher objectifications came mainly from Dilthey, but Ricoeur used it in a productive manner in his decisive confrontations with psychoanalysis (Freud) and structuralism (Lévi-Strauss). He linked them to a « hermeneutics of suspicion », that is most useful, and indeed essential, he argued, in that it can help us get rid of superstition and false understanding. But such a hermeneutics can only be conducted in the hope of a better and more critical

understanding of understanding. A « hermeneutics of trust » thus remains the ultimate focus of his work : the meaning we seek to understand is one that helps us better understand our world and ourselves. We interpret because we are open to the truths that can be gained from the objectivations of meaning in the grand myths, texts and narratives of mankind, in which the temporal and tragic aspects of our human condition are expressed. Ricoeur drew far-reaching ethical conclusions from this hermeneutics of trust that has learned from the school of suspicion.

4) *Postmodernism (Vattimo and Rorty)*. Betti, Hirsch, Habermas (and, to a certain extent, Ricoeur) all faulted Gadamer and hermeneutics for being, in some form or other, too « relativistic » (that is, too reliant on tradition). Postmodernism went, to some degree, in an opposite direction : it welcomed Gadamer's alleged « relativism », but only believed it did not go far enough. Gadamer would have been somewhat inconsequential in not acknowledging fully the relativistic consequences of his hermeneutics. To understand this shift in the hermeneutical debates (Gadamer too relativistic for some, not enough for others), it is important to observe that authors such as Heidegger (especially the later Heidegger) and Nietzsche play a paramount role for postmodernist thinkers (by comparison, Betti, Hirsch, Habermas and Ricoeur were all rather hostile to Heidegger and Nietzsche). One thinks, in this regard, of the Nietzsche who said that there are no facts, only interpretations, or of the Heidegger who claimed that our understanding was framed by the history of Being. The postmodernists lumped this nietzschean-heideggerian outlook together with Gadamer's 1) seeming critique of scientific objectivity, 2) his stress on the prejudices of interpretation and 3) his insistence on the linguistic nature of understanding. Stressing these elements, that could be radicalized from a nietzschean-heideggerian backdrop, hermeneutics, they believed, jettisoned the idea of an objective truth. There is no such thing given the interpretatory and linguistic nature of our experience. This led Gianni Vattimo to « nihilistic » consequences (we don't believe in objective truth anymore, only in the virtues of tolerance and charity) and Richard Rorty to a renewed form of pragmatism : some interpretations are more useful or amenable than others, but none can *per se* be claimed to be « closer » to the Truth. In the name of tolerance and mutual understanding, one has to accept the plurality of interpretations, it is only the notion that there is only one valid one that is harmful.

5) *Derrida's Deconstruction*. Derrida can also be seen in the « postmodern » tradition, since he too depends heavily on the later Heidegger and Nietzsche, stresses the linguistical nature of our experience and also urges a « deconstructive » attitude toward tradition, and more specifically the tradition

of metaphysics that governs our thinking, an attitude that Paul Ricoeur would surely, and rightly, classify in the « hermeneutics of suspicion ». But his deconstruction does not directly take the direction of the pragmatist tradition of Rorty or the nihilism of Vattimo. Despite the Heideggerian origins of his notion of deconstruction and his pan-linguisticism, Derrida does not identify himself with the tradition of hermeneutics either. His « deconstruction » is indeed distrustful of any form of hermeneutics, and for a systematic reason : every understanding, he contends, would involve or hide a form of « appropriation » of the other and its otherness. In his discussion with Gadamer in 1981, he challenged Gadamer's rather commonplace assumption that understanding implies the good will to understand the other. What about this will? asked Derrida. Is it not chained to the will to dominate that is emblematic of our metaphysical and Western philosophical tradition? Hence Derrida's mistrust of the hermeneutical drive to understand (and thus perhaps violently absorb) the other and of the hermeneutic claim to universality. Gadamer was touched by this criticism to the extent that he claimed that understanding implied some form of application, which can indeed be read as a form of appropriation. This is perhaps the reason why, in his later writings, he more readily underlined the open nature of the hermeneutical experience. « The soul of hermeneutics », he then said, « is that the other can be right ».

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