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**Gadamer's Hermeneutic Holism**

A Dissertation Presented

by

**Peter Erik Fristedt**

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

in

**Philosophy**

Stony Brook University

**May 2008**

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Abstract of the Dissertation  
**Gadamer's Hermeneutic Holism**

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**Doctor of Philosophy**

in

**Philosophy**

Stony Brook University

**2008**

This dissertation uses the resources of philosophical hermeneutics to address problems that arise in holistic accounts of meaning. Holism holds that meaning is context-dependent, where 'context' is typically construed as one's total theory of the world. Such a view makes communication difficult between total theories that differ even slightly, as slight differences within a total theory translate into global theory difference. The question the dissertation asks is whether one can retain a holistic view of meaning while avoiding such problematic consequences. I begin by considering Quine's and Davidson's versions of holism, arguing that the consequences of holism are in part due to the tendency of holists to think of total theories as consisting of sets of interconnected statements. I find an alternative to this view in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, and devote the middle three chapters of the dissertation to outlining his philosophy of interpretation. Total theories—worldviews—are for Gadamer networks of interrelated beliefs and questions. For the interpreter, questions open up the distinction between the being of the thing in question and its presentation in an interpretation. This distinction is in play in all interpretation, but it also collapses in all interpretation: the object of

interpretation is always encountered as both distinct and non-distinct from the way in which it is understood. Interpretations directly access the object, but they do not do so exhaustively—they always capture an “aspect of the thing itself.” The consequences for meaning are that in a worldview I understand things that I understand to transcend that worldview. Indeed, content for Gadamer just is the presentation in an interpretation of a thing that transcends that interpretation. But if that is the case, then content cannot be strongly determined by the particular total theory that is its context. On this view, content is dependent, not on individual contexts, but on the potentially infinite number of contexts in which the thing itself can be interpreted. Since no single context determines content exhaustively, there need be no global communication failure between worldviews—and some of the worries about holism are alleviated.

For My Parents

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## INTRODUCTION

What happens when people talk to each other? There are lots of ways for people to make verbal utterances—they can complain, beg, argue, chatter. But typically when we say that two people are ‘talking to each other,’ we mean that they are talking *about something*—they are having a conversation about a particular subject matter. If this is what happens, we might want to ask how it is possible for me to understand what it is you are saying about this subject matter. How can I be sure that I have understood you? We are all familiar with the phenomenon of ‘talking past one another’—i.e. when two people appear to be having a conversation, but in fact neither really understands what the other is saying. And that we sometimes misunderstand each other ought not to come as a surprise—we are not the same person, after all, and our beliefs differ about a number of topics. But is it possible that we not just misunderstand each other, but *systematically* misunderstand each other? If Smith comes from a society of secular scientists, and Jones from a society of religious fundamentalists, will there be much they can agree on? It may be that Jones does not know particle physics, and thus will not be able to understand Smith when she holds forth on the Large Hadron Collider. And Smith, dismissive of religion in general, may be prohibited from seeing Jones’s beliefs as addressing basic questions about the place of humankind in the universe. Yet another possibility presents itself. Let’s say that this fraught conversation does in fact turn to the topic of religion. Given how differently Smith and Jones understand religion, can they really be said to be talking about the same thing? To Smith, religion is the product of gullible, superstitious minds, and contains doctrines that are plain false, if not nonsensical. To Jones, it is a source of wonder, reverence, and the deepest truths available to us. Do we really want to say that “religion” means the same thing for Smith and Jones? But if it does not *mean* the same thing, it is not clear that they are *talking about* the same thing. And in that case, they are surely not *disagreeing* about religion. We seem to have gone from the run of the mill case of misunderstanding of a topic to something rather more drastic—the breakdown in understanding between people with apparently broadly different views of things. What has happened?

The encounter we have described is one that is paradigmatic for discussions of what has come to be called semantic holism. Semantic holism is the position that the meaning of a sentence is dependent upon its relation to the rest of the sentences in a total theory of the world. Another way of putting it is to say that individual sentences do not have meaning outside of a *very* broad context—an individual sentence taken out of its total theory does not mean what it does within it. Hence the breakdown in understanding between Smith and Jones: what Smith says about any given thing is a function of her entire web of beliefs; Jones, whose web of beliefs is different, thus understands what Smith says differently than Smith does. Only if Jones could somehow have access to everything Smith believes could she understand some particular statement of Smith's. Meaning, on this picture, becomes *relative* to the total theory in which it occurs.

We may go one step further: if we combine the view that meaning is holistic with the claim that what our words refer to is a function of what they mean (i.e., that meaning determines reference), then we get not only the relativity of meaning, but the relativity of reference—and thereby the relativity of *truth*. Consider Smith and Jones above with their two different conceptions of “religion”: if meaning determines reference, it turns out that Smith and Jones are actually referring to different things. What their words mean is a function of their total theory of the world, and what their words refer to is a function of what they mean—thus reference too becomes relative to one's total theory of the world. And assuming for the moment that our words refer to *what there is*, then what there is will also depend on one's total theory of the world. And finally, if one takes truth to consist in the reference of our sentences to what there is, it seems that on this view truth, like meaning and reference, is also relative to total theory.

This dual claim—that truth and meaning are relative to webs of belief, conceptual schemes, total theories, or worldviews—will occupy us in this dissertation. Now, the perhaps obvious question is why anyone would hold that truth and meaning are relative in the first place. A major reason is arguably that the alternative seems to involve a commitment to a long since suspect metaphysics. If truth and meaning are not relative to scheme, that surely means they must in some sense be ‘absolute.’ But over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the idea that things like truth and meaning could be absolute has come to sound increasingly old-fashioned. After Nietzsche, after Heidegger, after Quine and Putnam, the idea that there is something other than what is seen from one perspective or another has become less and less believable. Nietzsche parsed his phrase “God is dead” by saying that it meant that the idea of the Christian God had become unbelievable; and as is well known, for Nietzsche the death of God also meant the end of truth as an unquestioned ideal of human life. And if we take as our philosophical starting point our finite and limited human position amidst things, it seems that we can only preserve something like truth if we insist on its relativity: it is unclear how we could come to know truths that transcend us, as absolute truths are would seem to do.

In spite of all this, I would argue that the idea that truth and meaning are relative to context is as unsatisfying as the claim that they are not. This, of course, leaves us in a bind. Surely, truth and meaning are either relative, or they are not. What I hope to show in this dissertation, however, is that truth and meaning must, paradoxically, be thought *both* as relative and irrelative.

It is the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer that has led me to this conclusion; what follows will largely be devoted to offering a reading of Gadamer that attempts to establish this insight as central to his philosophy. Gadamer is a thinker who takes seriously both the situatedness of human beings in traditions and historical epochs *and* the human movement of transcendence out of situation. He does not think that we *actually* transcend our situatedness, that we attain some God's eye view of things—that would make his position metaphysical, when it is, at its basis, *hermeneutical*. Rather, he thinks that in our situatedness we understand things that we must take as transcending us. He asks what it is for human beings to understand the world, and concludes by saying that to understand is in part to have certain inescapable presuppositions and expectations about the world. First and foremost among these is that the world as I understand it can in principle be understood not just by me, but by differently situated others as well.

We just noted that Gadamer's position is hermeneutical. What does this mean? Hermeneutics for Gadamer is the view that our encounter with things occurs fundamentally via linguistically mediated interpretations. In line with other thinkers in the German tradition of thinking about language,<sup>1</sup> Gadamer rejects the view that language is a tool that humans use in communicating or expressing pre-existing, non-linguistic thoughts. Thought occurs as language. Gadamer takes this position further, and argues that language is a medium in which the interpretation and the world are revealed to 'belong together.' Everything that we understand in our world is linguistically mediated, and we are able to understand it only because it is thus mediated. The interpreter and the world are not subject and object—they are not two poles between which there opens up an unbridgeable abyss. Instead, the interpreter is always *in* the world, and the world always stands revealed as the world it is in the interpreter's interpretations. Hermeneutics is an anti-metaphysical position: it asserts that the world is not the way it is independently of our view of it. It furthermore claims that it is specifically language that allows us to have a world at all, and that reveals the world to us as it is. This is in a nutshell what marks Gadamer's position as hermeneutical: the world is primarily something we understand, and to understand it is to interpret it as though it were a text.

The title of this dissertation is *Gadamer's Hermeneutic Holism*; we have said a little bit about hermeneutics and holism, but what exactly is hermeneutic holism? Hermeneutics is holistic because the linguistic mediation that allows us to

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<sup>1</sup> As traced by Cristina Lafont in *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutics*.

understand things always occurs against the backdrop of the interpreter's network of pre-judgments about the world. Every interpreter belongs to some tradition, to some group to whom content has been handed down by previous instantiations of that group. The interpreter's tradition imbues her with a set of background beliefs about the world. It is against that set that interpreters come to understand anything new that they come across. The total theory within which individual sentences have meaning is for Gadamer called a *worldview*—it is a view of the world, of everything that is. Gadamer insists, though, that this holistic, linguistically constituted view of the world does not prevent the human interpreter from understanding what is said by people with different worldviews. That is, his holism does not prevent him from affirming that mutual understanding across worldviews is possible. Not only that: he also claims that no human is in principle incapable of understanding what any other human has to say about the world. The question becomes why Gadamer holds this to be the case—what justifies his confidence in inter-worldview communication? If we can show that Gadamer's holism is consistent with his insistence that inter-worldview communication is possible, we will have shown that holism of the strong kind that denies such communication does not inevitably follow, as it is sometimes thought to, from adopting holism simpliciter.

While I will spend most of the following discussion focusing on Gadamer, I will begin in Chapter 1 with a look at recent discussions of and arguments for holism in the work of Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore, W.V.O. Quine, and Donald Davidson. This chapter will set up the problem of holism in greater detail, and show what is at stake in it. Fodor and Lepore provide the jumping off point with their book, *Holism: A Shopper's Guide*. Quine will show us some of what have become the standard arguments for accepting holism and for concluding that the relativity of meaning and reference go hand in hand with it. The discussion of Davidson will introduce some criticisms of these relativistic conclusions. It will also give us some of the tools that we will later use in addressing Gadamer's views of understanding and interpretation.

In chapters 2-4 I look in detail at Gadamer's hermeneutics, primarily with reference to *Truth and Method*, but also taking into consideration a number of his shorter works. I show how his position is holistic, and highlight what I take to be the important elements in his hermeneutics: his view that understanding is truth-directed, his semantics of the question, and his notion of the world. These elements will provide us with the resources for grappling with the question of holism: what kind of holism does Gadamerian hermeneutics support? How is he able to avoid the kind of *strong* holism that would prevent understanding across worldviews?

Chapter 2 begins this look at Gadamerian holism by surveying the elements of Gadamer's hermeneutics. These include the hermeneutic circle, the fore-conception of completeness, the notion of prejudices, historically effected consciousness, the fusion of horizons, and the logic of question and answer. I

conclude that understanding for Gadamer fundamentally involves taking the other's words as claims to truth, and that means understanding them as answers to questions that I find questionable myself.

In Chapter 3 I go on to unpack Gadamer's notion of the world, and the corollary notion of a worldview. We here also introduce the crucial distinction between being and presentation. This distinction will form the basis of our analysis of Gadamer's view of the object of interpretation in Chapter 4. The discussion of world is important because in discussions of holism what is at stake is often what the difference is between different views of the world. We thus want to know what this world is that there are different views of. Gadamer provides us with a compelling answer, and one that will help us to show that meaning and truth are not simply relative to worldview.

In Chapter 4, I explicitly raise the question of what truth is for Gadamer. I do this by first looking at how he conceives of the object of interpretation, or what he calls the *Sache*. The object of interpretation, it turns out, is both distinct and non-distinct from its interpretation—it is a paradox, but for Gadamer, a *true* paradox. I argue that this paradoxical notion of the object of understanding is the key both to Gadamer's hermeneutics and (in Chapter 5) to answering the question of what kind of holism Gadamer's hermeneutic holism is. I finish Chapter 4 by looking at Gadamer's claim that truth is an event. He is committed to this claim because of his view that truth occurs as a mediation between an interpreter's background beliefs and the text (or text analogue) that she is interpreting. Truth is thus irreducibly historical and relative. But as we hope to have shown with our analysis of the object of interpretation, truth is also irreducibly irrelative.

The task in Chapter 5 becomes to show what the consequences of this paradoxical view of the object of interpretation are for holism. The question we ask ourselves is how Gadamer is able to avoid strong holism—that is, the claim that the meaning of a given element in a semantic system is strongly dependent on its place in just that particular semantic system. We conclude that, given the nature of the object of interpretation, no semantic system can be taken to strongly determine the meanings of its elements. We finish this chapter by asking the question of how much two people need to agree on in order to be able to understand each other. The holism that we have teased out of Gadamer is here put to the test: is he able to account for the possibility of mutual understanding between people with different views of the world while remaining a holist?

Overall, my aim is to show how Gadamer gives us a way of thinking about truth and meaning that preserves some of our intuitions about them as irrelative, while not biting the metaphysical bullet and rejecting their relativity. In viewing human beings first and foremost as *interpreters*, his hermeneutics locates us within traditions and worldviews—i.e. within semantic boundaries—that we nevertheless always already transcend. If we don't transcend them metaphysically, we *do* transcend them from our own point of view. I will try to illuminate this rather odd sounding proposition in the pages to come.

## CHAPTER 1: HOLISM IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

### 1.1 — Holism and Semantic Wholes

#### 1.

Much recent discussion of semantic holism has crystallized in and around Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore's book, *Holism: A Shopper's Guide*. By addressing the arguments in favor of semantic holism of a number of recent philosophers of mind and language, the authors identify the concept of semantic holism, indicate some of its more troublesome consequences, and try to show that the various arguments for semantic holism don't work. In all of this they have been influential in shaping the debate about holism that has continued since the book came out in the early '90s. The argumentative strategies against Fodor and Lepore for the most part have involved denying that holism has quite the negative consequences they take it to have, or that their attempted refutations of arguments for holism fail; but no one has really departed from the basic picture they present of the nature of holistically structured semantic wholes.

Let's begin by looking at the ways in which Fodor and Lepore characterize holism, and at what they take its consequences to be. We will follow this sketch with a look at what is left out of account in this way of conceiving of holism. What will interest me here are not the various arguments that have been advanced for or against semantic holism, but rather the ways in which the parties to this particular dispute have characterized *the phenomenon of the semantic whole*. Holism would seem to imply that there is such a phenomenon, and the sorts of entities of which holism is typically predicated — theories, languages, webs of belief, etc. — could, if holism is true of them, arguably be described as 'semantic wholes.' I will argue that the way such wholes have been characterized in the discussions of holism leaves untouched a number of important and interesting questions regarding what it is for something to be a semantic whole.

In Chapter 1 of *Holism: A Shopper's Guide*, Fodor and Lepore define "holistic properties" as "properties such that, if anything has them, then *lots* of other things must have them too."<sup>1</sup> They cite natural numbers as examples of things with

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<sup>1</sup> Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore, *Holism: A Shopper's Guide*, 2.

holistic properties: if there is one number, there is necessarily an infinite series of them. Accordingly, *semantic* holism is the claim that if something has meaning or content, then there must be lots of other things with meaning or content. Given such a definition, we might want to ask for a specification of the rather vague “lots,” and we might also want to know if that’s *all* there is to holism, a position receiving quite a bit of attention of late. Needless to say, Fodor and Lepore elaborate on this definition, but as we will see, it is significant that they choose at this point to *define* holism in terms of multiplicity, that is to say, simply as a property that inheres in *collections* of things.

We will now consider this definition of holistic properties in light of the definition Fodor and Lepore give of semantic holism in the Preface:

... holism about meaning ... [is] the doctrine that only whole languages or whole theories or whole belief systems *really* have meanings, so that the meanings of smaller units — words, sentences, hypotheses, predictions, discourses, dialogues, texts, thoughts, and the like — are merely derivative.<sup>2</sup>

Here semantic holism is defined in terms of the whole: the meaning of any single belief in a belief system is derived from the meaning of the whole system. Setting aside for a moment the question of whether it makes sense to speak of a belief system as “meaning” anything, it is clear that this picture of how meaning works differs from the definition of a holistic property mentioned above. There, holistic properties are said necessarily to be exhibited by a lot of things; it goes unmentioned how such a multiplicity hangs together, or what the semantic relation might be between the element and the whole to which it belongs. In the preface, on the other hand, this relation is specified, and the element is said to be semantically ‘derived’ from the whole. So we have a two-part account of holism: on the one hand, holism is the claim that single sentences (e.g.), or even pairs of sentences, cannot by themselves have meaning or content, but must belong to a collection of other meaningful sentences; and on the other hand, holism is the claim that the meaning of a sentence depends upon the meaning of the theory to which it belongs. The slack between these two definitions is between the whole as an entity with its own semantic properties, and the individual element in a collection of mutually dependent elements as exhibiting holistic properties by virtue of being a member of that collection. The first definition locates meaning at the level of the theory, the second locates it primarily at the level of the sentence — even if it says that a sentence cannot be meaningful unless there are other

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, x.

meaningful sentences. Fodor and Lepore do not pick up this slack.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, for the most part they leave the second characterization of semantic holism, semantic holism as the semantic superseding of the whole over the parts, out of account when arguing against holism. Below I will try to show that this characterization, while problematic, opens up a promising direction in the discussion of semantic holism.

First, however, let's consider Fodor and Lepore's characterization of holism as a certain relation between the parts of a semantic whole. In characterizing the various arguments for semantic holism, Fodor and Lepore make use of the notion of an "anatomic property." An anatomic property is a property something has if, necessarily, it is exhibited by at least one other thing.<sup>4</sup> Semantic properties are generally agreed by holists and non-holists alike to be anatomic. The reason for this is that it is hard to imagine that only one sentence, for example, could be meaningful. Take the sentence (S), "The N-train rarely runs on time." If semantic properties could be exhibited by just one thing (could be "punctate," in Fodor and Lepore's language), then it ought to be possible for (S) to have a meaning even while nothing else does. But that seems *prima facie* implausible. Surely the very possibility of uttering a sentence like (S) depends upon the possibility of uttering other sentences, for example "Some trains that are not the N-train frequently run on time," or "The N train left a short while ago." Or take the belief that (P) "George was a C student at Yale." Is it possible for someone only to believe that (P)? On the contrary, it seems that in order to believe that (P), one must also have such other beliefs as "Yale is a university," "C is a grade worse than B or A but better than D or F," "George is human," etc.

So it is reasonable to hold that if there is one meaningful sentence, there are at least a few others, or that if I have one belief, I must also have at least a handful of connected beliefs. And if I can't have a given belief without also having certain other beliefs, then it seems to follow that the *content* of any one of those beliefs depends upon the content of every other connected belief (or, *mutatis mutandis*,

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<sup>3</sup> Jane Heal argues that Fodor and Lepore's characterization of holism (as asserting that the meaning of the part is derivative of the meaning of the whole) is not obviously connected (or at least does not obviously follow from) the claim that individual symbols (e.g.) cannot have meaning on their own, but must belong to a collection of symbols. If the latter claim is true, it is equally compatible with the view that the meaning of the whole is dependent on the meaning of the parts, or that there is a two-way, mutual dependence between whole and part. She proposes ignoring the former claim, as Fodor and Lepore's argument against holism may be adequately assessed without it. I suggest instead that we keep it in view, for reasons that will become clear below. (See Heal, "Semantic Holism: Still a Good Buy," 325-339.)

<sup>4</sup> Fodor and Lepore, *Holism: A Shopper's Guide*, 1.

the meaning of any given sentence depends upon the meaning of every other connected sentence). Consider (S) “The N-train rarely runs on time” again. If meaning is anatomic, then I can’t understand the meaning of (S) unless there are other sentences that I understand, such as “The N is a subway line in New York City,” “For a train to ‘run’ is for it to move along the tracks,” etc. The meaning of (S) thus depends on the meanings of these other (and yet other) sentences. The problem is that, ever since Quine’s rejection of a principled distinction between analytic and synthetic sentences in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” it has been conceded by many philosophers that there is no non-arbitrary way of drawing a distinction between those additional sentences one would need to understand in order to understand the meaning of a given sentence, and those one can dispense with. That is to say, there is no non-arbitrary way of drawing the line that would determine which sentences are “connected” to a particular sentence, and which are not. Absent such a criterion, we are led from the plausible claim that I can’t understand just one sentence to the perhaps counterintuitive conclusion that the meaning of every sentence I understand depends on the meaning of every other sentence I understand. And as Fodor and Lepore illustrate, the consequences of this (holistic) position are problematic, to say the least.

Fodor and Lepore’s list of the problematic consequences of semantic holism is long.<sup>5</sup> For one, semantic holism seems to entail that gradual language learning is impossible. If holism is true, in order for me to understand a single word or sentence in the language to be learned I would have to understand every word or sentence in it; I would thus only be able to learn the language in one fell swoop. Another apparent consequence of holism is the “instability of content,”<sup>6</sup> or the idea that a word cannot mean the same thing in one theory or web of beliefs as it does in another unless the two webs are identical in all respects. Any single difference between two webs (say Bob and Bill are identical in belief systems, except Bob believes that Oswald killed Kennedy, while Bill believes that the C.I.A. killed Kennedy) will translate into global web difference, since the meaning of every belief is determined by its connection to every other belief. Yet another consequence of holism is incommensurability, or the claim that two different scientific theories (or cultures, or languages) cannot refer to the same things unless they share identical ontologies. Fodor and Lepore’s example is that of the apparent identity of reference between ancient Greek and modern astronomic theories. Surely both theories, however different in the details, refer to the same things, viz., stars? From holism it would follow, rather, that since any single entity posited by a theory is intelligible only in its relation to all the other entities posited by the theory, the Greeks, having no black holes, general

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<sup>5</sup> They discuss these consequences on pp. 11-17, of *Holism: A Shopper’s Guide*.

<sup>6</sup> See Eric Lormand, “How to Be a Meaning Holist,” 55-56.

relativity, nebulae, or, for that matter, neutrons, quarks, or helium, can not really be said to have been talking about the “same” things we talk about when we talk about “stars.” What they had was a theory of *astron* — *not* a theory of stars. An incommensurabilist holism thus denies that there is such a thing as scientific progress, or the idea that current theories are more correct than older, discarded theories. A last consequence of holism, according to Fodor and Lepore, is the impossibility of “sciences of the intentional” like psychology, sociology, and economics. Such sciences purport to disclose laws governing belief-centered behavior that hold for groups of humans; but if no two people share the same beliefs, there can be no laws that explain the behavior of more than one person in terms of belief.

Progress in science, language learning, mutual understanding — all begin to seem next to impossible if one accepts semantic holism. Fodor and Lepore don’t leave it at this would-be reductio, though, since there are plenty of people who accept (a least some of) these consequences with open arms as proof that intentional explanation may confidently be left to folk psychology. Instead, Fodor and Lepore try to show that none of the arguments offered for holism thus far are any good.

As mentioned above, we will not delve into these arguments here. We will instead look at the basic picture of holistically structured semantic wholes that we get from Fodor and Lepore. A semantic whole is a collection of elements like beliefs or sentences; these elements depend for their meaning on their connection to every other element in the whole. On one construal, it is the whole that is the primary bearer of meaning, and the elements have their meaning derivatively. On another, the focus is upon the meaning of the element as a product of its connections to other elements. In addition to this basic picture, there are two key metaphors that Fodor and Lepore cite as common in describing semantic wholes. Wholes are sometimes described as *networks*, and they are sometimes described as *systems*. The latter is the metaphor of choice in functional role semantics, which Fodor and Lepore say is influenced by Wittgenstein’s notion that the meaning of a word is equivalent to its use, or to its *role* in a language-game.<sup>7</sup> In a system, the parts serve specialized functions that are indispensable to the functioning of the system itself. This way of understanding a language or theory is compatible with Fodor and Lepore’s twin characterizations of semantic holism: something cannot be a functional part of a system unless there are (many) other functional parts, and a functional part is what it is because of the role it plays in just the system in which it functions. The problematic consequences of holism would also seem to follow when the whole is characterized as a system: in order

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<sup>7</sup> See Fodor and Lepore’s “Précis” of *Holism: A Shopper’s Guide in Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.

for two sentences or words to mean the same thing in two different systems, they must play the same role, i.e. relate to the system, and thus to every other element in the system, identically. The ‘same’ word or sentence belonging to two different systems will thus not *really* be the same.

The second metaphor Fodor and Lepore cite as common in describing semantic wholes has it that

A theory is a sort of network, in which the statements are the nodes and the semantically salient relations among the statements are the paths. The meaning of a statement *is* its position in the network and is hence defined with respect to the totality of the nodes and paths....<sup>8</sup>

If a theory is a network, then, as opposed to what happens in a system, individual sentences don’t necessarily have ‘roles.’ Rather, they are defined purely differentially in relation to the rest of the sentences in the theory. Here the metaphor is consistent with Fodor and Lepore’s characterization of semantic wholes as collections of elements bearing holistic properties, but not necessarily with their characterization of them as the primary bearers of meaning. If the meaning of a sentence is reducible to its position in a network, then there cannot be just one meaningful sentence. However, the network itself need not have some telos above and beyond its mere being as an interconnected totality, and therefore need not be thought of as having some meaning beyond that of the interconnected elements. Regardless, the problematic consequences of holism follow when one adopts the metaphor of the semantic whole as network. As Fodor and Lepore point out, if holism is true and a theory is a network, the change of any single sentence or inferential connection will alter the meaning of every sentence in the theory.

Both metaphors thus express the basic picture of semantic wholes as presented by Fodor and Lepore. Sentences belong to bodies or collections of sentences; the meaning of any given sentence depends upon its relation to the rest of the sentences in the body or collection. Many philosophers writing about semantic holism through the late ‘90s and early 2000s have followed Fodor and Lepore in this characterization. Eric Lormand, for example, says that “[m]eaning holists hold, roughly, that each representation in a linguistic or mental system depends semantically on every other representation in the system.”<sup>9</sup> Eric Margolis and Stephen Laurence characterize semantic holism as the position that “the content of a given type of symbol in a system of representation depends upon its relation

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<sup>8</sup> Fodor and Lepore, *Holism: A Shopper’s Guide*, 42.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

to most other types of symbols in the system.”<sup>10</sup> Henry Jackman says that semantic holism is “the doctrine that the meanings of one’s sentences or the contents of one’s beliefs are a function of (are determined by) their relation to all of one’s other sentences and beliefs.”<sup>11</sup> And finally James O. Young sums up semantic holism as the claim that “no sentence in a total theory is completely understood unless all are.”<sup>12</sup>

## 2.

So what’s wrong with this picture? We do well to remind ourselves that Fodor and Lepore are not defending semantic holism, but critiquing it. Nevertheless, they are careful not to present a straw man, and the version of semantic holism they provide us with has at least not been roundly dismissed by proponents of holism. The problem, I will suggest, is that Fodor and Lepore (and many others participating in the broader conversation about holism) do not consider adequately one of the fundamental relationships at play in any collection of semantic elements said to bear a holistic structure. That relationship is the connection between whole and part. Not, it should be understood, between any single part and all the rest of the parts *of* the whole, but rather between the part and the whole *qua* whole. Fodor and Lepore do of course mention one possible way in which part and whole may be related (the meaning of the part is derived from the meaning of the whole), and the relationship between part and whole is always hovering in the background of the argument, at least in the discussion of functional role semantics. But for the most part, Fodor and Lepore think of semantic wholes as collections of interconnected sentences or beliefs; that is, they think of them as multiplicities or totalities, and not as wholes bearing a relation to the elements in them that supersedes that of the sum of the parts to the individual parts themselves. Viewing semantic wholes as totalities not only opens the door to many of the problems faced by holistic accounts of meaning; it also leaves unanswered a litany of interesting questions about semantic wholes. These are questions that are suggested by the very idea of a semantic whole, but which cannot be answered within the framework of the discussion of semantic holism as heretofore conducted. These discussions of semantic holism have rested on the question of how words and sentences are supposed to relate to each other in semantic wholes. We instead want to ask two questions: What is the relation of

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<sup>10</sup> Eric Margolis and Stephen Laurence, “Multiple Meanings and the Stability of Content,” 255.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Jackman, “Moderate Holism and the Instability Thesis,” 361.

<sup>12</sup> James O. Young, “Holism and Meaning,” 309.

the element to the whole (and not just to the rest of the elements in the whole)? And, What is it to be a semantic whole?

Fodor and Lepore, as mentioned above, do give us one way of thinking the relation between whole and part: the meaning of the part is “derivative” of the meaning of the whole, and it is the whole which “*really* has meaning.” In their ensuing discussion of contemporary holists, Fodor and Lepore more or less leave this characterization to one side. But let’s look at what such a picture of semantic holism might entail. It would seem that if it is the whole and not the parts that “really” has meaning, then a consistent holism would require that there be an infinite regress of wholes<sup>13</sup>: for the whole to be meaningful, it would need to belong to a larger collection of wholes, which would itself have to belong to some further collection, and so on. Setting the problem of the regress aside for a moment, is there anything to this characterization? Is there a way in which we may say that the whole *does* have a meaning of which the meanings of the parts are derivative? In at least one way we may answer this question affirmatively. If the whole in question is a theory, for example, then the parts, the individual statements, will mean what they mean at least partly because of the *kind* of whole they help comprise. They will be meaningful *as* elements of a theory. Similarly, the sentences of a language will be meaningful *as* elements that comprise a language; the practices in a culture will be meaningful *as* elements comprising a culture; and so on. In this way, the whole does have a determinate meaning, and the parts (at least partly) depend upon that meaning to be the parts that they are. But of course, the whole is individuated not just by the class of wholes to which it belongs, but by the particular whole which it is. So French and English are both natural languages, and sentences in French and English mean what they mean in part because they are elements in a natural language; but, each is also a singular language, distinguishable from all other members of the class, Natural Languages. So we would not want to say (and to be sure, for their part Fodor and Lepore do not claim) that the relation of derivation from whole to part is the *only* relation that the parts bear to the whole. But neither is it the case that the nature of the whole is determined *strictly* by the sum total of parts within it. The kind of whole in question will go some way toward determining the meaning of the parts.

What, though, about the problem of the infinite regress? It should be noted that the regress is still a problem for the holist who holds that there is a two-way relation of semantic dependency between whole and part (and not just the one-way relation that seems to be expressed in the notion of the derivation of the part from the whole): if the whole as such can be said to have *any determinate meaning whatsoever*, then a consistent holism requires that that whole belong to a

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<sup>13</sup> Lorenzo Simpson pointed out this apparent consequence in comments on this chapter.

further collection of wholes. The reason is that such a meaning is exactly the sort of thing that holists, *ex hypothesi*, claim can only be accounted for by semantic holism. I will not be able fully to address the problem of the regress here,<sup>14</sup> but I will begin to suggest a way in which the regress can be avoided. Once again, the regress occurs for he who claims both that meaning is not atomistic (there cannot be just one meaningful thing) and that the whole has some meaning from which the meaning of the parts is (perhaps only partially) derived. That whole, say a theory, must then belong to some larger group of wholes, in this case, a body of different theories, which itself must belong to a larger group of wholes, and so on. Let's try to spell out that "and so on." What whole would the larger group of theories belong to? Let's say it belongs to the set, Theories. Where would the regress go from here? What larger whole might the set of theories belong to? Perhaps we could say "semantic wholes," or "constellations of meaning," or even "epochs of Being." And then? It becomes hard to imagine the larger and larger wholes that are supposed to make this regress possible. I will suggest, instead, that the regress *stops* at what we might want to call, with Gadamer, a "worldview." Worldviews are semantic contexts, but as *worldviews* they intend something singular: there is only one world. However, such a whole, in order to avoid the regress, would have to be meaningful in such a way that it would not require a further whole to make it meaningful. And while an elaboration of this will have to wait, it will be my contention that Gadamer's account of the notion of the world shows us that a worldview is a semantic context that is, in a sense, 'ultimate'—while worldviews can change, they never change into anything other than worldviews, and worldviews are not made meaningful because they are elements in some even broader worldview. And yet, they contain elements whose meaning is in part dependent upon their status *as* elements in a worldview. For now, however, it will be enough to say that, while a strong derivation thesis ought probably to be ruled out, we wish to hold on to the notion that the whole (theory, language, culture, web of beliefs, etc.) has a meaning of its own, in addition to the various (interdependent) meanings of the parts.

Why do questions like the two above—about the relation between part and whole, and about the being of semantic wholes—matter? For one, I suggest that understanding them will point us in a direction beyond the troublesome consequences of holism. It may be that by viewing wholes not just as collections of interrelated beliefs, but as systems whose elements are related not only to each other and to the system itself, but to a "world" beyond both, we will be able to view such systems as allowing for the freedom of the systematized elements to relate to other systems without massive damage to content; in other words, it may be that to be an element in a semantic system is to be open to the possibility of relating to any other possible semantic system in a way that does not completely

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<sup>14</sup> We will have to wait until Chapter 3, and our discussion of Gadamer's notion of the world, to justify this claim.

efface the identity of that element. In this way, we'd be able to be holists without the side effects. But more than that, the questions noted above occupy a space of inquiry created by the notion of the semantic whole. To understand the relationship at the heart of semantic holism, i.e. that between the meaning of the individual element and the meaning of every other element in the whole, it is essential that one also understand the nature of that whole, and the nature of the relation between it and the elements that comprise it.

## 1.2 — Quine and the Emergence of Holism

We will now follow in Fodor and Lepore's footsteps for a little while. First, I will look at some of W. V. O. Quine's writings, with a view to understanding the philosophical origination of semantic holism; then, after a consideration of the scope of Quinean holism, I will move into a discussion of Donald Davidson, a holist who is nevertheless critical of some of holism's conceptual trappings. The aim in both sections will be to develop a better understanding of some of the founding arguments for semantic holism.

### 1.

One way of viewing Quine's achievement in the philosophy of language is as turning attention away from the confirmation conditions and meanings of individual sentences and toward those of the bodies in which sentences occur: languages, theories, systems of belief.<sup>15</sup> In this respect at least, this transition aligned the philosophy of language with the contextualist tradition in continental philosophy, which had begun with Hegel, and found proponents in Humboldt, Nietzsche, Saussure, Heidegger, and the later Husserl, among others.<sup>16</sup> It also moved the philosophy of language away from reductionism, whereby only those statements are meaningful which can be directly verified by experience, or built up from statements that are thus verified. Quine's reasons for turning his

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<sup>15</sup> We shall henceforth occasionally call such bodies "conceptual schemes," in accordance with Quine's periodic usage.

<sup>16</sup> And of course, in the philosophy of language itself, Wittgenstein had sown the seeds of this transition in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

attention upon conceptual schemes and away from individual sentences have to do with the failure of the philosophy of language to account for the basic distinction fuelling reductionism, or that between analytic and synthetic statements. We will here outline Quine's attack on the analytic/synthetic distinction, but our main interest will be in the nature of these conceptual schemes that Quine's analysis has yielded. I will attempt to indicate how Quine's *model* of conceptual schemes, in both its earlier and later incarnations, leads to some of the problems of semantic holism. Essentially, this model is a presupposition in Quine's arguments for holism, and as such deserves careful scrutiny. I will finish by looking at how the question of the instability of content relates to Quine's characterization of conceptual schemes. The argument here will lead us into our discussion of Davidson.

The argument against the analytic/synthetic distinction in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" is meant to show the reasonableness of what is known variously as "confirmation holism" and the "Quine/Duhem thesis." This has it that, as Quine says, "our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually, but as a corporate body."<sup>17</sup> Analytic statements are traditionally thought of as true by virtue of meaning, or true by definition, or true because the predicate term is 'contained' in the subject term. The classic example is "All bachelors are unmarried men." Synthetic statements, on the other hand, are said to be true because of the facts, or because of how the world is. "The cat is on the mat" would presumably be such a statement, as would "7+5=12," at least according to Kant. Quine argues that the notion of analyticity depends on the notion of synonymy, or sameness of meaning. In analytic statements, the subject term is said to 'mean the same as' the predicate term. Quine, however, finds himself unable to make sense of synonymy without reference to the notion of analyticity. He thus is unable to discover what it is for two words or phrases to 'mean the same thing,' and that leaves him without a way of deciding whether a given statement is true because of what the words in it mean, or because of the way the world is. Take a putatively "analytic" statement, like "All bachelors are unmarried men." What justifies us in saying that it *can't* be the case that there is a married bachelor? Perhaps it is just the case that, up until now, we have only ever known of bachelors who are also unmarried, and unmarried men who are also bachelors. We might imagine a man who separates from his wife, and while waiting on the divorce proceedings moves to a distant city. There he makes new friends, and tells none of them about his marital status. He becomes known for spending nights at home smoking a pipe, listening to lounge music, and reading Hemingway. His new friends refer to him as a bachelor. Are they wrong? If they were to find out that he remains married, would they be wrong to continue to refer to him as a bachelor? What would justify us in saying that 'bachelor' *just means*

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<sup>17</sup> W.V.O. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, 41.

‘unmarried man,’ rather than that it just happens to be a fact that most bachelors are unmarried men, while some, the pipe-smoking, lounge-music-listening, Hemingway-reading ones who live far away from their estranged wives, may turn out to be married? Without a way of saying what makes an analytic sentence analytic, Quine rejects the notion of analyticity. As he says in a slightly different context, “we have made no general experimental sense of a distinction between what goes into a native’s learning to apply an expression and what goes into his learning supplementary matters about the objects concerned.”<sup>18</sup> That is to say, what we take to be learning the meaning of a term really involves learning facts about its referent.

Quine diagnoses the problem that has led to this untenable distinction between analytic and synthetic statements as the tendency to believe that it is individual statements that are confirmed or disconfirmed by experience. He argues that if one believes that it is individual statements that are thus (dis)confirmed, it makes sense to suppose that there are some statements that are confirmed only because of what they mean, while other statements are confirmed based both on what they mean and on how the world is. The emptiness of the distinction between meaning and fact is for Quine a sign that it is not individual statements at all that are (dis)confirmed by experience, but entire theories, or collections of statements. He thus proposes that we cease viewing individual statements in this way, and switch the focus of our epistemologies to bodies of interlinked statements.

Thus far we have been discussing Quine’s argument for confirmation holism. Where does his semantic holism fit in? As Fodor and Lepore point out, the standard interpretation of “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” has it that semantic holism follows from confirmation holism plus verificationism, or the claim that the meaning of a statement is the way in which it is shown to be true:

The [Quine/Duhem] thesis says that confirmation is holistic; that is, that every statement in a theory (partially) determines the level of confirmation of every other statement in the theory. Verificationism says that the meaning of a statement is determined by its confirmation relations. The invited holistic inference is that every statement in a theory partially determines the meaning of every other statement.<sup>19</sup>

Fodor and Lepore don’t think this argument works, but I will assume that the argument from confirmation holism and verificationism to semantic holism is valid, and will instead focus on how Quine thinks these epistemic-semantic wholes function. In terms of the above argument for semantic holism, I will try to

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<sup>18</sup> Quine, *Word and Object*, 38.

<sup>19</sup> Fodor and Lepore, *Holism: A Shopper’s Guide*, 41-2.

show that the first premise is faulty: it assumes, incorrectly, that theories are to be understood primarily as sets of interconnected statements.

Quine states his vision of how language relates to the world in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” and expands upon it in later writings. Here is the vision from “Two Dogmas,” quoted at length:

The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges. Or, to change the figure, total science is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience. A conflict with experience at the periphery occasions readjustments in the interior of the field. Truth values have to be distributed over some of our statements. Reevaluation of some statements entails reevaluation of others, because of their logical interconnections — the logical laws being in turn simply certain further statements of the system, certain further elements of the field. Having reevaluated one statement we must reevaluate some others, which may be statements logically connected with the first or may be the statements of logical connections themselves. But the total field is so underdetermined by its boundary conditions, experience, that there is much latitude of choice as to what statements to reevaluate in the light of any single contrary experience. No particular experiences are linked with any particular statements in the interior of the field, except indirectly through considerations of equilibrium affecting the field as a whole.<sup>20</sup>

This “vast verbal structure”<sup>21</sup> is surely transpersonal: very few of us have intimate knowledge of both the outer reaches of speculation in astrophysics and the minutiae of the history of Provençal troubadours, yet both sets of discourses seem to be the kinds of things Quine takes to be caught up in this giant web. The web has a “center,” consisting of logical truths, and a “periphery” consisting of statements that seem to capture individual experiences. Note that Quine is careful not to sneak the analytic/synthetic distinction in the back door by way of this new center/periphery distinction: central beliefs are just those that we are less likely to abandon, given how many other beliefs they affect. So the law of non-contradiction, while in principle abandonable, props up so many other beliefs that

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<sup>20</sup> Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, 42-3.

<sup>21</sup> Quine, *Word and Object*, 12.

it would take a lot to shake it.<sup>22</sup> The belief that Smith's car is parked on 41<sup>st</sup> Street, on the other hand, is easily abandoned when I see it on Ditmars Blvd. But both the law of non-contradiction and the belief that Smith's car is parked on 41<sup>st</sup> Street may be revised — or retained. Because there is no analytic/synthetic distinction in this picture, it is not the case that the statement "Smith's car is parked on 41<sup>st</sup> Street" can only be verified by an experience of seeing Smith's car on 41<sup>st</sup> Street.<sup>23</sup> And because statements are confirmed as part of a corporate body, it can't be the case that, on its own, the experience of seeing Smith's car on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street will disconfirm a belief about where her car is parked. Other beliefs come into play: my belief in the reliability of my senses, my belief in the reliability of my memory (there are other cars like Smith's in this neighborhood, but I am able to identify hers by remembering the license plate number), my belief that Smith owns a car, etc. If I want to retain my belief about where Smith's car is parked, I can always "plead hallucination," as Quine says, thus suspending my belief in the general accuracy of my senses.

So for Quine, at least in "Two Dogmas," both central and peripheral beliefs can in principle either be abandoned or retained. The caveat is that in order to make such belief-alterations, adjustments must be made in the rest of the system. Using the above example, if I plead hallucination, I introduce the belief that I sometimes hallucinate, and thus cannot in general trust my senses. This affects the system insofar as my belief that my senses were to be trusted backed up a whole range of other beliefs. All of those beliefs must now be adjusted accordingly.

We will get clearer on the details of Quine's theory of theories if we look at his discussion of the indeterminacy of translation in *Word and Object*. Indeterminacy of translation is the idea that given the totality of speech

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<sup>22</sup> In his later writings, Quine gives up the idea that the logical truths are subject to revision in the face of recalcitrant data. In *Pursuit of Truth* he argues that when a given theory is faced with an observation that is contrary to the observations it implies, the method of theory revision can be thought of as going through the sentences in the theory one by one, suspending them, and determining whether their suspension results in a theory that now implies the new observation. If it does, the suspended sentence may be confidently abandoned. But, he argues, since a given theory logically implies its observation sentences without the truths of logic being statements in the theory, if those truths are provisionally suspended then the theory will still imply an observation sentence that is falsified by the counter-observation. The truths of logic therefore cannot be revised in the face of recalcitrant data. But there is disagreement as to whether Quine has succeeded in his argument here: see Richard Creath, "Quine on the Intelligibility and Relevance of Analyticity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Quine*, 59.

<sup>23</sup> The idea that observation sentences like this can be held on to come what may is also revised in Quine's later writings. See below.

dispositions of a speaker of a language as evidence, it is possible to produce two “translation manuals,” that will guide in translating that language into one’s own, that fit the evidence but are themselves mutually incompatible. Quine concocts the famous “Gavagai” thought experiment to illustrate this point. We are asked to imagine a linguist discovering a previously unknown tribe, and attempting to translate their utterances. A rabbit appears, and a member of the tribe says ‘Gavagai.’ As a first stab, the linguist translates ‘Gavagai’ as ‘Rabbit.’ No matter how certain the linguist becomes of the accuracy of this translation, Quine argues that a fellow linguist could decide to translate ‘Gavagai’ as ‘rabbit stage’ instead, and that there would be absolutely no way of deciding which was the ‘correct’ translation. No further evidence will be able to decide between these two options, as every time one points at a rabbit, one points at a rabbit stage, and vice versa.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, to go from knowledge of how native sentences correlate with common experiences of the scene available to both native and linguist, to knowledge of everything else that the native talks about, the linguist has to make certain hypotheses—which Quine calls “analytic” hypotheses—about the meanings of all those utterances not correlated to direct sensory stimulation. Such hypotheses will conform to the linguist’s “domestic apparatus of objective reference,”<sup>25</sup> since the linguist translates *into her own language*. Now, we might describe the apparatus of objective reference of English as picking out objects and saying things about them, while some other language might have an apparatus that picks out temporal stages, but not the objects that we would take to subtend such stages. Two linguists, each operating within her own language to produce a translation manual, will come up with a manual that totally fits all the possible evidence, but projects radically different apparati of objective reference onto the native tongue.

Quine concludes from this thought experiment that meaning is relative to the conceptual scheme (i.e. translation manual) used to translate the native language: there is no meaning that the translation captures that is a “correct” translation of the “same” meaning in that language. If there were, there might be a way of

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<sup>24</sup> “Evidence” for Quine means behavioral evidence: evidence of the speaker’s behavior qua speaker available to someone who doesn’t speak the language. This is not the place to go into a discussion of Quine’s behaviorism, but I will say that he thinks that in the end, behavioral evidence is all the evidence there is when learning a language. The language of the adult is unknown to the child, who must somehow piece it together. Quine thinks the only way the child can do this is to observe the adult’s behavior in making utterances in the presence of environmental cues.

<sup>25</sup> Quine, *Word and Object*, 70.

deciding between translation manuals, but based on the evidence of what the natives affirm or deny no such way is forthcoming. Quine says that “there is not even...an objective matter to be right or wrong about”<sup>26</sup> when it comes to translating other languages. Translation always occurs from ‘within’ some language, so *any* translation of another language into that tongue will involve talking about things in just the way they may be talked about in it.

What the indeterminacy of translation argument amounts to is a way of showing how conceptual schemes (*ceteris paribus*, languages) relate to evidence; thus, the ‘Gavagai’ thought experiment may be seen as a way of illustrating the holistic claims made at the end of “Two Dogmas of Empiricism.” Translation manuals, like the web of beliefs, are “under-determined” by the evidence. They also have the same center-periphery structure, with what Quine calls “observation sentences” butting up against experience in the form of stimulation from without. The apparatus of objective reference may be seen as sitting at the “center” of the conceptual scheme that the manual instantiates. And, finally, the indeterminacy of translation shows that meaning cannot reside in the individual sentence. If meaning resided in the sentence, then the meaning of that sentence could be discovered independently of knowing the rest of the language. The indeterminacy experiment shows that this cannot happen, since we only arrive at the meaning of a particular sentence *after* fitting it into a system of analytic hypotheses (i.e., into our translation manual). And since the translation manual guides us in understanding most of the sentences in the object language, we may conclude that meaning is holistic.

On this picture, there are in fact sentences whose meaning is individual, and not dependent on the whole, but they are of a special sort. These are the “occasion” and “observation” sentences to which a speaker assents nearly automatically. “Gavagai” is such a sentence, and Quine claims that the linguist can be relatively certain that “Rabbit” translates it—“Rabbit” itself taken as an observation sentence and not a referential term. Speakers assent to such sentences so readily because they are connected directly to sensory stimulation: the retina registers the change in light that occurs when a rabbit passes before it, and speakers learn to associate such a stimulation with certain sentences. Occasion sentences are those that individuals, but not necessarily the group, assent to in the presence of sensory stimuli, while observation sentences command the assent of anyone within the linguistic community. In *Pursuit of Truth*,<sup>27</sup> Quine says that such sentences can be taken up into theories and invested with the particular theory’s ontology, but insofar as the sentence is a response to stimulation, it may be taken to have a “stimulus meaning” that is more or less accurately captured by

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>27</sup> See Quine, *Pursuit of Truth*, 6 ff.

its translation into a foreign language. From that perspective Quine claims such sentences are not subject to the holistic forces pervading the rest of the language. As he says in “Epistemology Naturalized,” “The observation sentence, situated at the periphery of the body scientific, is the minimal verifiable aggregate; it has an empirical content all its own and wears it on its sleeve.”<sup>28</sup>

## 2.

We now have before us Quine’s picture of conceptual schemes. We have noted the purported argument for semantic holism in “Two Dogmas,” namely that confirmation holism + verificationism = semantic holism.<sup>29</sup> Let us now look into the extent of Quine’s semantic holism, and the degree to which his model of conceptual schemes (as networks of interconnected sentences, some of which are peripheral and more likely to be revised in the face of recalcitrant data, others of which are central and likely to be revised only as part of a more thoroughgoing change in theory) leads to some of semantic holism’s problematic consequences.

First, let it be noted that the later Quine describes his holism as “moderate.” By this he means that what is in play in observation of a scientific sort is not necessarily one’s entire theory of the world (as seemed to be the case in “Two Dogmas”), but only certain relevant *parts* of one’s theory of the world. As he says in *Pursuit of Truth*,

Holism in this moderate sense is an obvious but vital correction of the naïve conception of scientific sentences as endowed each with its own separable empirical content. Content is shared, even by mathematics insofar as it gets applied.

The key phrase here is “insofar as it gets applied.” The semantic whole Quine envisions consists not of the sum total of one’s beliefs, but only of whatever beliefs are actually at work in the particular bit of theorizing one is engaged in at the moment. This makes him sound like a molecularist rather than a holist, but ‘holism’ is the word Quine uses. We might ask, however, whether Quine is justified in thus calling himself a moderate holist, given his rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction in “Two Dogmas.” We have seen that Fodor and Lepore argue that the line in the sand between molecularism and holism is the

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<sup>28</sup> Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, 89.

<sup>29</sup> Quine explicitly affirms a version of this formulation in “Epistemology Naturalized,” namely confirmation holism + verificationism = indeterminacy of translation. (See *Ontological Relativity*, 80-81.)

analytic/synthetic distinction: a molecularist can say that given the meaning of the sentences in question, there will be multitudes of other sentences in one's total theory that will remain unaffected by revisions in the original sentences. But the holist, having rejected a principled distinction between analytic and synthetic sentences, has no such option. Using the example of mathematics, from the failure of the analytic/synthetic distinction we would conclude that one cannot draw a line between one's use of mathematics in a theory that one is currently testing, and one's use of it in all those other theories that one subscribes to but has temporarily tabled. The meaning of mathematical terms in a given theory is thus subject to their use in *all* of one's theories. To be sure, the later Quine holds that there *are* "analytic" sentences of a sort: those learned to be true "outright" by all of the members of a linguistic community.<sup>30</sup> But if the analytic/synthetic distinction remains unprincipled, then even sentences like these are open to abandonment or revision; and indeed, it is not difficult to imagine ways in which such sentences might be abandoned.<sup>31</sup>

Whether Quine is a strong or a moderate holist, I would like to argue that one of the main problems with his position is his model of conceptual schemes as bodies of interconnected sentences (plus canons of belief formation and justification, themselves encapsulated in further sentences of the scheme). As noted in the section on Fodor and Lepore, this is a model shared by most of those participating in the general debate on holism. The problem with it is this. It is typically thought that semantic holism has the consequences it does because of the dissemination of meaning across the entire web of beliefs. The meaning of one sentence is thought to be dependent on its relation to every other sentence in the web, so there is no way to preserve semantic identity when a sentence is taken out of its context. But just as central to this way of conceiving how meaning works in the web of beliefs is the identification of webs *as* collections of sentences. Indeed, this conception is presupposed by the holist thesis, at least as construed in recent debates about holism. It is the mass of interconnected sentences that acts as a network across which meaning can holistically spread. On Quine's picture, even

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<sup>30</sup> See Quine, *The Roots of Reference*, 80. Quoted in Raffaella de Rosa and Ernest Lepore, "Quine's Meaning Holisms," in *The Cambridge Companion to Quine*, 79. De Rosa and Lepore make the argument that Quine's introduction of the notions of observation sentences and what they call this "immanent" conception of analyticity is insufficient to overturn the strong holism that follows from his rejection of a principled analytic/synthetic distinction.

<sup>31</sup> Take an "analytic" sentence (in this new sense) such as "All wood comes from trees." A clever scientist might discover a technique for making wood in the laboratory, without the mediation of trees. Most of us would, I suspect, readily cease affirming this supposedly analytic sentence, even if we had "learned it outright in learning our language."

while it is entire theories that “confront experience,” it is always individual beliefs that are abandoned in the face of recalcitrant data or as part of theory-change. Quine’s rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction leads him to abandon the notion that sentences have their “empirical content” individually, but theories, those entities that replace the sentence as the “primary unit of empirical significance,” are themselves *composed exclusively* of sentences. And, it is the idea that theories are to be thought of as composed exclusively of sentences that leads to the holistic conclusion that the revision of a single sentence alters the meaning of every remaining sentence in the whole: there is simply nothing else to the theory that the revision of a sentence could affect. Moreover, the thought that schemes are composed exclusively of sentences provides grounds for the conclusion that, for the content of a single sentence to be shared by two schemes, the schemes must be otherwise identical. There is nothing else in the theory that could account for identity of content, so the sum total of sentences in it is left to pick up the slack. In this view, then, the burden of meaning rests paradoxically on every *single* sentence. Arguments against semantic holism have attacked the holist thesis, while preserving the model of semantic wholes. But again, the argument for holism depends just as much on the model: if webs of belief are not *simply* collections of interconnected sentences, then it does not follow that the meaning of any given sentence depends *simply* on its relation to every other sentence in the web.

Quine, of course, embraces what one might take to be an unwelcome consequence of such a model of conceptual schemes: what he calls ontological relativity.<sup>32</sup> This is the idea that there is no absolute sense in which we can specify what the ontology of a theory is, i.e. what sorts of things it refers to. The argument for ontological relativity is similar to that for the indeterminacy of translation: if we ask what any given term refers to, it is always possible to envision at least two different, ontologically distinct answers, both totally compatible with one’s own or some other speaker’s verbal behavior. Thus, if we ask what “rabbit” refers to, one can so construe one’s language that one is able to take it to refer to undetached rabbit parts, or to rabbit stages, or to the space occupied by a rabbit, etc. Reference, says Quine, is “inscrutable,” and there are no empirical grounds for choosing one system of reference (i.e., ontology) over another. But in order to prevent the very idea of reference from slipping into absurdity, Quine introduces the notion that reference, and thus ontology, is relative to a “frame of reference,” i.e. a conceptual scheme. If reference is *not* taken to be relative, then there would seem to be no difference at all between a rabbit and an undetached rabbit part. But relative to a scheme in which we are able to discuss both, the difference, says Quine, becomes perfectly real. Quine faces the problem of the infinite regress that

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<sup>32</sup> See “Ontological Relativity” in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*.

opens up here by first saying that, to be sure, if ontology is relative to a conceptual scheme, then to talk about the objects of *that particular scheme* requires us to do so relative to *some other* scheme, and so on, ad infinitum. However, we may stop the infinite regress by “acquiescing in our mother tongue,”<sup>33</sup> i.e. not asking what it is our words refer to, but using them.

Indeed, it is because we are able to thus acquiesce in our mother tongue that Quine claims that his position is not relativistic, even while it propounds relativity. In *Word and Object* he asks,

Have we now so far lowered our sights as to settle for a relativistic doctrine of truth—rating the statements of each theory as true for that theory, and brooking no higher criticism? Not so. The saving consideration is that we continue to take seriously our own aggregate science, our own particular world-theory or loose total fabric of quasi-theories, whatever it may be. Unlike Descartes, we own and use our beliefs of the moment, even in the midst of philosophizing...<sup>34</sup>

This “saving consideration” may go some way toward placating one’s worries about relativism, but I would suggest that it is far from decisive. Taking one’s own theories seriously, “owning” them, is precisely what becomes difficult when they are faced with a position like Quine’s. In fact, Quine’s position yields a *clash* of perspectives, which assertions like the one above do not resolve: between the perspective from which ontologies are seen as relative to background languages, and that from which a particular ontology is taken to be true, there is considerable epistemic tension. I will defer a consideration of this tension until I discuss Gadamer, and here would like only to note it.

How does semantic holism fit into the picture put forth in “Ontological Relativity”? A frame of reference is by definition holistic: it represents a total view of the world, whose ontology pervades every object referred to through it. From this referential holism there would seem to follow many of the same consequences as Fodor and Lepore say follow from semantic holism: if reference is relative to scheme, “rabbit” will refer differently, depending on ontology, and two schemes that have the very same vocabulary will nevertheless pick out different things in the world. But wait. Is it coherent to speak this way, from Quine’s perspective? If an ontology cannot be specified absolutely, if reference can only be made scrutable relative to a background language, then we can’t really say that two schemes instantiate distinct ontologies in some absolute sense. We can only do so relative to a background language in which those two distinct ontologies can themselves be specified. And so it is with English in the case of

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<sup>33</sup> Quine, *Ontological Relativity*, 49.

<sup>34</sup> Quine, *Word and Object*, 24-25.

“rabbit,” “rabbit stage,” and “space occupied by a rabbit.” Do we here have a response to some of the worries about the consequences of holism? Take as an example the worry that holism has no way to account for how it is that two people are able to talk about the same thing when their beliefs differ. Let’s say we’re dealing with two people with differing ontologies. The current discussion would lead us to say, with Quine, that we cannot specify the difference in their ontologies in an absolute sense, but only relative to a background language, in this case ours. If we read one scheme as instantiating a stage-ontology, and the other as instantiating an occupied-space-ontology, then we, who know the difference between a stage and an occupied space, will be able to say what the difference between these ontologies consists in. What of the thought that the possessors of these two schemes cannot speak about the same things given the difference in their beliefs? From our perspective, we must surely agree with this conclusion; from our perspective, a scheme that sees the world in terms of stages isn’t really talking about the same things as a scheme that sees the world in terms of occupied spaces. *We* understand the difference, but take those who possess these divergent schemes to be committed to one ontology to the exclusion of the other. So it appears ontological relativity *doesn’t* neutralize the threat posed by semantic holism: we, considering things from our conceptual scheme, are faced with two speakers who have the same vocabulary but are not talking about the same things.

Finally, does Quinean ontological relativity follow from the model of conceptual schemes that we considered above? While relativism is a common charge against holistic semantics, it is unclear whether Quine’s version of relativity requires the model under consideration, even while this is indeed Quine’s model. For example, Heidegger promotes a version of ontological relativity, but neither earlier nor later does he view conceptual schemes simply as networks of sentences. Of course, Quine’s and Heidegger’s versions of ontological relativity don’t completely overlap—Heidegger does not explicitly claim, as Quine does, that the ontology of a given theory cannot be specified absolutely—but he does hold that the things we encounter in the world are subject to an ontology that is one of many, and furthermore that the various ontologies that have trod the human stage are not necessarily reconcilable to each other. To be sure, Heidegger views conceptual schemes not as bodies of sentences or explicit beliefs, but as networks of signification which function primarily as a backdrop, and whose various elements may then be brought into focus by Dasein according to its current interests and projects. Nevertheless, as I will try to show in Chapter 3, Heidegger’s model of conceptual schemes—referred to by him as *worlds*—leads directly to the possibility of ontological relativity.

I will finish this section by briefly discussing how Quine’s account of semantic wholes leads to another of the problems facing holism that we noted above, namely the “instability of content.” Recall that this is the notion that when some element in a holistic system is revised, the meanings of the rest of the elements in that system will themselves be systematically changed as a result. Quine himself does not explicitly address the instability of content problem, but

he does acknowledge that a certain amount of instability threatens the conceptual schemes that he discusses.

Now, Quine holds that, at least in principle if not in practice, one of the results of abandoning the analytic/synthetic distinction is that, either in the face of “recalcitrant data” or as part of a more thoroughgoing change in theory, any sentence in the scheme can be revised. How is it that sentences in the belief system are revised in the face of recalcitrant data? Since empirical evidence underdetermines the system, I can alter the system to fit the data in many different ways, but all will involve abandoning or revising one belief or another. Let’s take an example: a man approaches me at a party and tells me that he is currently standing in my house.<sup>35</sup> This strikes me as odd, since we are not actually at my house. He holds out a phone and says, “call me.” I dial the number to my house, and a voice that sounds like his answers on the other end. “Both” men, the one in front of me and the one at the end of the line, now begin to laugh simultaneously and identically. Faced with this bit of recalcitrant data, I have a few options. I can accept the idea that the man is in fact both in front of me and at my house, or I can conclude that some elaborate trick is being played, or that I’m imagining the voice on the other end of the line, or that I’m hallucinating the man here in front of me, etc. Each conclusion will involve, à la Quine, making compensatory adjustments in the rest of my web of beliefs. For example, if I conclude that the man is both at my house and here in front of me, I will have to abandon my fairly central belief that one body cannot exist in two different spaces simultaneously. Quine would of course advocate abandoning the least central belief, thus minimizing the damage to the system. In this instance that would mean concluding that an elaborate trick is being played: my beliefs in physical law and the veracity of my senses are too central to be overturned by one such counterexample. At any rate, this is how compensatory adjustments work: a bit of data is recognized as clashing with certain beliefs that I have; to square the data with the whole system, I revise the beliefs that engender clash. There is much leeway in what I revise, though I tend to be guided by the pragmatic principle of inflicting the least amount of damage to my current system: I revise peripheral beliefs if I can, and try to avoid revising central beliefs.

What happens when I do revise a central belief? If central beliefs support multitudes of everyday or “peripheral” beliefs, then it would seem that much is threatened when a central belief is abandoned. If for example I abandon my belief that a body cannot exist in two spaces simultaneously, many beliefs that I once held false will now potentially be true. And one would also expect a change in such a central belief to have a greater effect on how less central ones are understood than vice versa. So, embracing the one-body-in-two-spaces physical

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<sup>35</sup> The example comes from a scene in David Lynch’s *Lost Highway*. The man in question is referred to in the credits as the “Mystery Man.”

theory will radically change how I conceive of bodies, while exchanging “Smith’s car is parked on 41<sup>st</sup> St” for “Smith’s car is parked on Ditmars Blvd” will not have such far-reaching consequences. But we may ask: once a central belief is abandoned, just how radically *do* the meanings, and just how thoroughly do the truth-values, of less central ones change? Is the semantic support provided to peripheral by central beliefs as strong as the center/periphery model of belief systems suggests? For example, if abandoned central beliefs are not immediately replaced by new ones (say they are skeptically suspended pending further evidence), what becomes of the semantic status of the peripheral beliefs that were supported by them? If the ‘support’ is strong, then serious instability threatens, but I would suggest that our cognitive lives are not this fragile: theory change happens, and happens once in a while at a deep level, but thoroughgoing conceptual instability is not often the result. Quine’s model makes the conceptual scheme out to be like a fabric that can unravel if the right thread is pulled. Or, to be like a building which will topple if certain stones are removed. The building for the most part doesn’t topple because we try to avoid destabilizing the web of beliefs as much as possible. But the structural instability is there. I would argue, however, that there is something about the web of beliefs that leaves it resistant to such instability. We will see in the following discussion of Donald Davidson that there is in fact a way of viewing the web of beliefs that preempts the instability of content. Here, I just want to suggest that one source of this instability is in the view of semantic wholes as networks of interconnected sentences. As we noted above, when the meaning of the whole rests on the totality of individual sentences, that meaning would seem to change whenever some individual belief is revised. Davidson, who largely preserves this model, nevertheless presents arguments that would seem to go some way toward minimizing the amount of instability that obtains in semantic systems.

### 1.3 — Davidson and Holism without Borders

We now turn our discussion to Davidson, who thinks that the nature of language and understanding makes the “very idea” of a conceptual scheme incoherent. As noted, he presents us with a holism that allows for much more conceptual stability than Quine’s. We will begin by considering how Davidson’s holism (partially) circumvents the instability problem; next we’ll consider Davidson’s argument against the possibility of conceptual schemes, which yields his brand of holism, which is, as we shall say, a holism “without borders,” i.e. a holism that does not assume that conceptual schemes are a necessary part of it. We will end by addressing the question of what, if anything, can replace

conceptual schemes as candidates for semantic wholes. Along the way, we will gather some of the tools for grappling with the consequences of holism.

1.

Unlike Quine, Davidson thinks that in order to understand what someone is talking about, indeed in order to understand someone as speaking a language, or even as having beliefs, it is necessary to take her as having mostly true beliefs, as being mostly right about the world. But in order for us to take someone else as being mostly right about the world, we have to take her to adhere to pretty much the same ontology and logical laws that we do. The reason is that it is difficult to make sense of the idea of someone having *true* beliefs, beliefs that capture some way in which the world is, unless we take her to be talking about the world in which *we* live, which contains the things we know and love. But the things we know and love, in order to be known and loved by *us*, must adhere to our ontology and logic. And that means that there are certain beliefs that we cannot abandon, if we are to think of someone else (let alone ourselves) as having beliefs about the world. Davidson's is thus a transcendental argument: it is the case that we ascribe beliefs about the world to others; but, in order to do so, there are certain beliefs and belief structures we *must* take those others to be in possession of. Contra Quine, if we are even to identify another being as a being that has beliefs, some of *our* beliefs are strictly speaking *not optional*.

Now, it is certainly the case that Davidson's rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction would lead him to say that none of our *individual* beliefs is unrevisable. But his view of interpretation leads him to hold that *most* of any single believer's beliefs must be true — and not just true 'by the interpreter's lights' (though they certainly must also be that). It should be noted that Davidson's argument about truth in interpretation has two sides: the transcendental and the metaphysical. On the one hand, Davidson argues that someone interpreting another must, in order to understand his words, take his sentences to be mostly true; this is the transcendental side of the argument. But Davidson also makes the aforementioned *metaphysical* argument about the necessary conditions for belief. The nature of belief, it turns out, is such that to be a belief is to be part of a network of coherent, mostly true beliefs. We will come back to why this is so in a short while, but for now I'd like to look at why it is that Davidson thinks that in order to understand someone I must *take* him to have mostly true beliefs.

In "Truth and Meaning," Davidson claims that if we know what it is for any given sentence in a language to be *true*, then we arguably *understand* that language. He thus ties meaning to truth: we know the meaning of a sentence when we know its truth-conditions. The question arises: how can we come to understand someone who speaks a language we don't know? We may, as Davidson does in "Radical Interpretation," further radicalize this question: how is

it that we are able to understand anyone at all, given that all interpretation involves trying to understand another without knowing in advance whether one's interpretations will be correct?<sup>36</sup> If we know what someone is talking about when we understand the truth-conditions of his sentences, then we want to be able to say how it is that we can come to know those truth-conditions. If we can answer *that*, then we will know how it is that we can understand what someone means.

Davidson's argument is the following. First, the truth conditions of a given sentence (*s*) are given by a sentence of the following form:

*s* is true if and only *p*

where *s* is replaced by a "canonical description" of *s*, and *p* is replaced by a "translation" of *s*.<sup>37</sup> Davidson calls such sentences T-sentences, after Alfred Tarski. The T-sentence for the German sentence "Es regnet" would thus be:

"Es regnet" is true if and only if it is raining.

We will understand "Es regnet" when we know that 'it is raining' is its truth-condition, i.e. when we know that for "Es regnet" to be true is for it actually to be raining. But how will we know that? Davidson says that the evidence that a T-sentence like this is true comes in the form of facts about when individual speakers of the language in question (in this case German) *hold true* sentences like "Es regnet." But before showing what such evidence looks like, we should relativize our T-sentence, as Davidson does, to a speaker and a time:

(T) "Es regnet" is true-in-German when spoken by *x* at time *t* if and only if it is raining near *x* at *t*.<sup>38</sup>

T-sentences get relativized in this way because otherwise the *sentence* can be either true or false (depending on who's speaking it). At any rate, the evidence for such a sentence is the following:

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<sup>36</sup> This is presumably what Davidson means when he says "All understanding of the speech of another involves radical interpretation." Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 125.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

- (E) Kurt belongs to the German speech community and Kurt holds true “Es regnet” on Saturday at noon and it is raining near Kurt on Saturday at noon.<sup>39</sup>

I.e. we will know that the fact that it is raining is the truth-condition for “Es regnet” when we observe speakers of German holding true “Es regnet” in the presence of rain. The obvious problem is that someone may hold a sentence true when the circumstances about which it makes an assertion do not obtain: Kurt might hold true “Es regnet” even though it is not raining. In that case the fact that he holds “Es regnet” true can hardly count as evidence for the truth of (T). The only way to legitimate (E) as evidence for (T), according to Davidson, is to impose some holistic constraints on interpretation: if we assume that it is *generally* the case that when someone holds a sentence true, that sentence actually *is* true, then the odds are that Kurt’s holding “Es regnet” true is pretty good evidence for the truth of (T). But why would we want to believe that it is generally the case that those sentences a person holds true are actually true? The answer to this question comes in the shape of Davidson’s principle of charity, and gives us his holism in a nutshell. As he says in “Thought and Talk,”

We can...take it as given that *most* beliefs are correct. The reason for this is that a belief is identified by its location in a pattern of beliefs; it is this pattern that determines the subject matter of the belief, what the belief is about. Before some object in, or aspect of, the world can become part of the subject matter of a belief (true or false) there must be endless true beliefs about that subject matter. False beliefs tend to undermine the identification of the subject matter; to undermine, therefore, the validity of a description of the belief as being about that subject. And so, in turn, false beliefs undermine the claim that a connected belief is false.... To put it another way, the more things a believer is right about, the sharper his errors are. Too much mistake simply blurs the focus.<sup>40</sup>

That is to say, the fewer true sentences we take a person to assent to, the less we may be said to understand what he is saying. There is nothing unintelligible in saying that Kurt believes that it is raining when it is not in fact raining (perhaps he thinks he hears raindrops falling on the roof, when in fact someone is playing a CD of rain sounds outside his bedroom). But if Kurt denies that it is raining when in the midst of a downpour, we may start to wonder whether he uses words the same way we do. The alternative — that he knows what rain is but has so many

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 168.

false beliefs about it that he doesn't hold a downpour to constitute rain — is hard to make sense of. As Davidson says in “The Method of Truth in Metaphysics,” for me to take you as having a particular belief that I also have, I must also take you to possess the same (or similar) network of beliefs that supports my belief. Absent such an ascription, it makes little sense for me to say that we *share* a belief, that our beliefs are “the same,” since “beliefs are identified and described only within a dense pattern of beliefs.”<sup>41</sup> Or, as he says in “Radical Interpretation,” “the more sentences we conspire to accept or reject...the better we understand the rest, whether or not we agree about them”<sup>42</sup>; and furthermore,

If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behavior of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything.<sup>43</sup>

So that's the argument for the claim that in interpretation, we must take the interpretee to be mostly right about the world. In radical interpretation we do this by projecting our logic and ontology onto her, thus taking her to hold true most of the sentences that we ourselves would hold true. But why should one also hold that most of one's *own* beliefs are true? The passage from “Thought and Talk” quoted above provides us with a ready answer: not only must I take the beliefs of the other to be mostly true; my own beliefs are subject to the same argument. It makes no sense to say that I could be broadly wrong about how things are, since in that case it wouldn't be clear just what I was wrong about. Davidson offers a related argument in “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” where he introduces the notion of an “omniscient interpreter.” Davidson suggests that if we wonder, like Descartes, whether most of our own beliefs might be false, then we ought to imagine how an omniscient interpreter would go about interpreting our words.<sup>44</sup> Such an interpreter would use the same procedure as a finite interpreter: she would read most of her ontology and logic into the speech of the person to be

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> The obvious objection that such an interpreter would surely not *need* to interpret our words, since, being omniscient, she would already know what they meant, does not hold here. It is not difficult to imagine the omniscient interpreter momentarily suspending this knowledge for the sake of a philosophical thought experiment.

interpreted, and assume that the speaker is caused to hold his sentences true by events in their common environment. Since the omniscient interpreter's theory of the world is true, the beliefs she ascribes to her interpretee will also be true.

One more question before we move on. We have tried to show how Davidson makes the case for the impossibility of being broadly wrong about the world; but is it possible instead to be broadly nonsensical about it? Why is it not possible that most of our beliefs are neither true nor false, but meaningless? We get an answer in "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge." There Davidson argues that a *belief* is just the "notion of a state that may or may not jibe with reality."<sup>45</sup> This suggests that to be a belief is precisely *not* to be nonsensical; beliefs are only either true or false. Our question thus shows itself to be incoherent: sense cannot be made of the notion that one might be broadly nonsensical in one's beliefs *about the world*, for the same reasons one cannot be broadly in error about it. The less coherent one's beliefs are, the less they may be said to be "about" that which one takes them to be about.

Quine holds that any belief is in principle revisable; Davidson does not disagree with this. So why do we wish to claim that there is more stability of semantic wholes on Davidson's picture than on Quine's? Again, for Davidson, one must *take* most of one's own and anyone else's beliefs to be true, and *it is the case* that any system of belief consists of mostly true beliefs. So, while one may discover some of one's beliefs to be false, at any given time one must conclude that most of one's beliefs are true. It is thus simply inconceivable that one could so change one's set of beliefs that one would conclude, from the perspective of one's new set of beliefs, that one's previous set was broadly in error. One will never be in a position to say that one's belief system has undergone radical change, since any change will only be local, substituting the odd falsehood for a newly discovered truth.

On this picture one may revise any single one of one's beliefs, even those that are "central."<sup>46</sup> Why is the abandonment of a central belief not then tantamount to a thoroughgoing reassignment of truth-values or meanings across the system of belief? It must be because "central" beliefs on Davidson's picture are, as it were, not as central as they are on Quine's. A clue is to be found in Davidson's claim in "Belief and the Basis of Meaning" that "If the vast amount of agreement on plain matters that is assumed in communication escapes notice, it's because the shared

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<sup>45</sup> Davidson, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, 153.

<sup>46</sup> Note that Davidson does not utilize Quine's central/peripheral distinction; in fact he explicitly rejects it, insofar as a peripheral belief is defined as one to which assent is prompted by some sort of scheme-neutral sense-data. Davidson *does* think that we are caused to hold certain of our beliefs by our environment, but it is the *objects* of our beliefs that cause us to hold them. (E.g. my belief that grass is green is caused by grass and its greenness.)

truths are too many and too dull to bear mentioning.”<sup>47</sup> Davidson does not say what such a dull shared truth might be, but it seems to me that a good candidate would be a statement like “Snow is white.” Now, how might such a belief be affected by the revision of a more “central” belief? Say the revision in question is ontological: I exchange my Berkeleyan idealism for a Democritan physicalism. While my belief about the being of snow (and everything else ‘out there’) has been revised, it seems on the face of it that I can agree with my former self that, at the very least, snow is white. What Davidson is saying is that *most* of one’s beliefs are like this: obvious, uncontroversial, and, we may conclude, possessing truth values that are not affected by the revision of some of one’s ‘deeper’ beliefs. The instability that threatens the web of beliefs on Quine’s model is thus seemingly circumvented by Davidson’s insistence that most of our beliefs remain true in the face of any revision we might make to any one of our beliefs.

Summing up, the upshot of Davidson’s argument is that his invocation of the principle of charity (the claim that to understand someone else, we must ascribe our own standards of truth, rationality, logic, ontology, etc. to him) has the implication that if we take someone else to be in possession of a conceptual scheme, i.e. a linguistically constituted view of the world, we must take that scheme to have certain characteristics, certain structures reflected in beliefs about consistency and truth. If we take someone to have a scheme, we take it to consist of beliefs; those beliefs we must take to be either true or false; and finally, most of those beliefs must be true, according to our own standards. But what if the very idea of a conceptual scheme is incoherent? Our aim in discussing Quine was to bring into view his conception of semantic wholes. His *holism* is wedded to his idea of conceptual schemes: conceptual schemes are holistically structured semantic wholes. But if, as Davidson recommends, we abandon the notion of conceptual schemes, what is there left of the notion of the semantic whole? Are semantic wholes isomorphic with conceptual schemes — i.e. is a rejection of one ipso facto a rejection of the other? Davidson remains a holist throughout, so his argument, if successful, would show that it is possible to be a holist while rejecting conceptual schemes. Does it follow that one may be a holist while rejecting the notion of a semantic whole? Or are the two inseparable, can holism not be thought without thinking semantic wholes? And if that is the case, what would a semantic whole be if not a conceptual scheme? We will look at the implications of Davidson’s argument against schemes for the idea of a semantic whole below, but first let’s see how Davidson jettisons the idea of a conceptual scheme.

## 2.

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<sup>47</sup> Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 153.

In “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” Davidson suggests identifying conceptual schemes with “sets of intertranslatable languages.”<sup>48</sup> He does so partly because of an inclination to identify thought with language; but he also does so because of his rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction, which amounts to a rejection of the distinction between language and theory.<sup>49</sup> If a conceptual scheme is a set of intertranslatable languages, then two schemes are *different* if the languages that embody them are *not* intertranslatable. Davidson discusses two possibilities: first, that there can be two languages that are *totally* untranslatable into each other, and second, that there can be two languages that are *partially* untranslatable into each other. His essay has two strategies: first, to question the coherence of the notion of non-intertranslatable languages; second, to question the coherence of the “dualism” upon which this notion rests, namely that of conceptual scheme and “empirical content.” Let’s take the second strategy first. Davidson says,

The failure of intertranslatability is a necessary condition for difference of conceptual schemes; the common relation to experience or the evidence is what is supposed to help us make sense of the claim that it is languages or schemes that are under consideration when translation fails. It is essential to this idea that there be something common and neutral that lies outside all schemes.<sup>50</sup>

The notion of a theory-free empirical content lying outside any scheme is thus necessary to make sense of the idea of different *schemes*, while schemes are thought to be *different* when they cannot be translated into each other. If I am to identify another scheme *as another scheme* after attempts to translate it into mine have failed, I must take it to relate to something outside of it in a certain way.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>49</sup> Later in the essay Davidson discusses this consequence of rejecting the analytic/synthetic distinction. If there is such a distinction, then those sentences devoted to telling us how the world is will constitute theoretical sentences, while those that just express truths about meaning will have no theoretical content. Get rid of the distinction, and every sentence expresses theoretical commitments — theory contaminates meaning, as Davidson puts it.

<sup>50</sup> Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 190.

<sup>51</sup> Or at least, that’s the idea. Couldn’t we imagine different conceptual schemes that don’t relate to a common “experience,” but that instead “project” their own

Conceptual schemes are thought of as systems for “organizing” or “fitting” experience (or nature, the world, the passing show, sense data, whatever). Something is identified as a different scheme if it organizes or fits experience in a way that is different from the way my scheme organizes or fits it. To that end, it is necessary that experience not be infected by theory. If it were, there would be nothing for schemes to fit, since whatever they thus confronted would always already be a part of the scheme. Davidson sums this view of things up as the notion that “something is a language, and associated with a conceptual scheme...if it stands in a certain relation...to experience.”<sup>52</sup>

Davidson goes on to critique the two major sets of metaphors utilized by conceptual schemers to illustrate the nature of this relation between scheme and experience. Schemes either “organize” or “fit” experience. The ‘organizing’ metaphor is problematic because organization presupposes a plurality of things waiting to be organized, and the only things we can imagine being thus organized, Davidson claims, are the sorts of things we normally deal with in our language. The ‘fitting’ metaphor is problematic because to speak of a sentence or a theory as fitting experience amounts to saying that it is *true*. But, argues Davidson, theories and sentences are not shown to be true or false by some one thing — and that is just what “experience,” “the world,” “sense data,” etc., are. Rather, they are shown to be true or false by the normal everyday objects our beliefs are about. These objects are just those talked about in any given sentence<sup>53</sup>: for example, the sentence “The cat is on the mat” is true if and only if the cat is on the mat.

Davidson concludes that, given the reducibility of the notion of “fitting experience” to that of simply being true, if there are such things as conceptual

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“worlds”? Such schemes would perhaps not suffer the same fate of incoherence as experience-fitting schemes. Would they leave us with an even greater barrier toward inter-scheme communication? I think Davidson’s argument still applies here: we must ask, what distinguishes one scheme from another? If we answer that each projects its own world, then these supposedly incommensurable schemes will have in common the projection of a world. But in order for this to make sense, those different worlds must have sufficiently enough in common to be called ‘worlds.’

<sup>52</sup> Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 191.

<sup>53</sup> Note that Davidson is careful to distance himself from the notion that a sentence is true when it “corresponds” to a “fact.” See “True to the Facts,” in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Davidson is uncomfortable with talk about facts because he concurs with Frege that if a sentence corresponds to one fact, then it corresponds to all facts. (If “Snow is white” corresponds to the fact that snow is white, it also corresponds to the fact that snow is white and London is the capital of England, and so on.)

schemes, then they may be said to be “largely true but not translatable” into different conceptual schemes. However, since Davidson thinks that to be true *is* to be translatable, no sense is to be made of the notion of conceptual schemes. As we saw above, Davidson appropriates Tarski’s Convention T in order to show that a theory of truth for natural languages will entail T-sentences, or sentences giving the necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of a given sentence. Again, if we know the truth-conditions of a sentence, we also know how to interpret it, i.e. we know what it means. Thus, when a T-sentence gives the truth-conditions for a sentence from another language, the stated truth-conditions *translate* that sentence—they state what the sentence means in that language by stating what its truth-conditions, and hence its meaning, are in ours. For a sentence from another language to be true is for it to be possible to give its truth-conditions in one’s own language. This schema, says Davidson, “embodies our best intuition of how the concept of truth is used,” and thus “there does not seem to be much hope for a test that a conceptual scheme is radically different from ours if that test depends on the assumption that we can divorce the notion of truth from that of translation.”<sup>54</sup> So the idea that there might be another scheme that is both true and untranslatable into our own is incoherent.

Finally, Davidson rejects the idea that there can be partial failures of translation between two schemes. Partial failure assumes some commonality of meaning, i.e., some agreement. But as we have seen he does elsewhere, Davidson argues here that in order to understand someone at all, I must take *most* of what he says to be true. In order to even *say* that someone has a (partially) different conceptual scheme from me, i.e., in order to *identify* some of someone’s belief as (very) different from mine, there must be a whole lot that we have in common, a whole lot of beliefs that we share. Say a Whorfian claims two tribes have radically different conceptions of time. In order for both conceptions to be *about time*, there must be a fairly broad confluence of belief about what time *is* — thus belying the claim of *radical* difference. Davidson thus argues that while there may indeed be differences in conceptualization here, we might as well call them differences of *opinion*, rather than differences of *scheme*.

If we buy this argument, the upshot is that we cannot make sense of the idea that there are different conceptual schemes, or that language relates to reality by taking it as evidence that it fits or organizes. What that means, as Davidson points out at the end of the essay, is that there isn’t even *one* scheme to which we all belong, by virtue of speaking a language. There is just us, our language, and the things we talk about in that language: “In giving up the dualism of scheme and

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<sup>54</sup> Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 195.

world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false.”<sup>55</sup>

There will be time to explore what Davidson means by “world” here, but first let’s look at the implications of “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” for holism. It is typical to think of holism as something that is predicated of things like conceptual schemes. Sentences are said to have meaning as a corporate body, so it makes sense to go around looking for candidates for such an entity. The idea that conceptual schemes fit this description also makes sense: conceptual schemes are thought of as collections of sentences or beliefs that, as a whole, picture the world in a certain way. What Davidson has done is to show that the corporate body of which meaning is predicated is, in a manner of speaking, *infinite*. It is more like the universe whose “outside” cannot meaningfully be conceived than the bounded cosmos that invites immediate thoughts about what might be “beyond” it. It is therefore that we say that Davidson’s holism is a holism without borders: for him, it makes no sense to speak of our web of beliefs as having limits that set it off in principle from “other” webs of belief, or from the world that it is “about.” Much of Davidson’s work supports this picture. In “Thought and Talk” he says

There are good reasons for not insisting on any particular list of beliefs that are needed if a creature is to wonder whether a gun is loaded. Nevertheless, it is necessary that there be *endless interlocked beliefs*. The system of such beliefs identifies a thought by locating it in a logical and epistemic space.<sup>56</sup>

Neither of Davidson’s two mantras —that in order for there to be mutual understanding between speakers there must be a broad background of agreement or shared belief, and that to be a belief is to be part of a network of mostly true beliefs — requires that beliefs occur in delimited clusters, or in bodies facing some “tribunal” of sense-experience that constitutes both their limit and their condition of possibility. Beliefs occur in integrated networks, but those networks in principle have no boundaries. There is no outside to the network of beliefs, nothing with which they may be compared for their “accuracy” — not experience, not some other network. Any two speakers must take each other to be in broad agreement, and no sense is to be made of the idea that people inhabit different “worlds,” or speak as though upon conceptual islands affording no clear views of the rest of the archipelago.

Can we still speak of “holism” when describing the structure of such a boundless network? Nothing would seem to rule this out *prima facie*. Holism for

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 157. Italics mine.

Davidson is just the interrelation of beliefs, the failure of any attempt to draw boundaries between the beliefs it is necessary to believe in order to believe that *p*, and those one does not need to believe in order to believe that *p*. One can surely maintain a belief in such a network without believing that there must be something like unconceptualized experience that the network “confronts,” or that it must in principle be possible for there to be other such networks, membership in which excludes one from membership in any other, “incommensurable” network.

### 3.

What, though, about this “world” that all of our beliefs are about? The question we asked at the end of Section 1 returns: once we have abandoned the idea of a conceptual scheme, what are the remaining candidates for semantic wholes? Davidson does not address this question, but I would argue that if it is the world that our beliefs are ultimately about, then something like Gadamer’s notion of a “worldview” will serve us as a candidate for the most inclusive semantic whole. An account of Gadamer’s understanding of both world and worldview will have to wait until Chapter 3, but we will here get a taste for what is at stake by considering Davidson’s invocations of “world.”

As we saw, Davidson ends “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” by saying that “In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false.” Davidson had criticized the idea that conceptual schemes organize or fit the world, and yet he does not want to “give up the world.” What does he mean by this? It would seem that he is trading on two different meanings of the word “world.” “World” as opposed to scheme is an untenable notion, since it would require us to make sense of something outside of what our beliefs are already about that our beliefs nevertheless somehow organize. In this sense of “world,” the world is just what is outside the scheme, what the scheme organizes or fits. But in what sense are we not giving up “the world” when we give up the world/scheme dualism? Davidson’s only clue is in the next clause: we don’t lose the world, but “re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false.” Is the world just the collection of these familiar objects? We will have to look further afield to find out if this is what Davidson has in mind.

Davidson frequently relies on a concept of “world” in his discussions of what it is our sentences are ‘relating’ to when we utter them. If by “world” he just means the various objects and events that our sentences are about, then why use the word “world,” which suggests a domain encompassing every object and event, or alternately a domain consisting of every object and event, including, but not limited to, everything we are familiar with? And if by “world” he does mean such a domain, what is the relation between it and our sentences? A ‘confrontational’ relationship, in which the world is that to which we compare our sentences to see whether they are true, must be ruled out, as that is what Davidson argues against in essays like “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” and “A Coherence

Theory of Truth and Knowledge.” To shed some light on this question, let’s take a look at some of Davidson’s invocations of the concept of “world.” Here are two passages from “The Method of Truth in Metaphysics”:

In sharing a language, in whatever sense this is required for communication, we share a picture of the world that must, in its large features, be true. It follows that in making manifest the large features of our language, we make manifest the large features of reality.<sup>57</sup>

Why must our language — any language — incorporate or depend upon a largely correct, shared, view of how things are?<sup>58</sup>

It should be immediately clear that Davidson (tacitly) identifies “world” with “reality” and “how things are.” So what does he mean by *these* terms? From the context of this essay it is clear that he means “what our beliefs are about.” But as Davidson says at the end of “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” our beliefs, while interconnected in holistic fashion, are about things and events — not about some one thing like reality or the world. So perhaps to share a view of the world is to share lots of beliefs about various things. The problem is that, arguably, *things* are *in* the world. So if my beliefs are about things, then no matter how many beliefs I have, they are all of them not “about the world,” but about things in the world.

Davidson does not offer an account of what the “world” might be, although he sometimes speaks of it as something transcending or encompassing the things our beliefs are about, and sometimes, like the early Wittgenstein, as the sum total of the things that our beliefs are about.<sup>59</sup> For example, in “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge” he says, “the truth of an utterance depends on just two things: what the words as spoken mean, and how the world is arranged,”<sup>60</sup> and also “A person has all his beliefs about the world — that is, all his beliefs,”<sup>61</sup> and

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Of course, Wittgenstein speaks in terms of facts rather than things, but the notion that the world is simply the *sum* of all of either entity is common to both views: “The world is all that is the case. The world is the totality of facts, not of things.” Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1-1.1.

<sup>60</sup> Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 139.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 143.

finally, “we should allow no intermediaries between our beliefs and their objects in the world.”<sup>62</sup> To decide between these two readings — world as transcending the objects of one’s beliefs or world as reducible to the totality of those objects — it is necessary to delve deeper into the consideration of what it is to be a belief, or of what it is to be a network of interrelated beliefs. We would have to ask whether a network of beliefs can only be ‘about’ those things that individual beliefs are about, or whether beliefs, in addition to being about things, are, either individually or in sum, also ‘about’ the world. If the latter is the case, we would have to ask just what the world *is* such that it can function thus as a remainder in individual beliefs about things. I would suggest that, at the very least, if beliefs are thought simply as parts of networks of interconnected beliefs, then we don’t yet have the resources to speak about a world to which those beliefs somehow refer. Thinking of semantic wholes as networks of interconnected beliefs allows us to speak about those wholes as referential sums, consisting of sets of beliefs whose objects form a vast collection, but not necessarily as a world. Similarly, if the world is not simply those things I have beliefs about, two people who share lots of beliefs will not necessarily share a world. Thinking about the world as just the totality of shared beliefs or states of affairs arguably doesn’t get at what makes the world a world, that is, just what it is that distinguishes the world from everything in it. If we are unable to account for some relation between the grand corporate body of interconnected beliefs and the world, then talk of the world will cease to be very meaningful.

So why not just get rid of the idea of world, and stick with the idea of massive shared belief about things? It seems to me that the concept of world is necessary to overcome some of the problems faced by the holist position. For one thing, the concept of world can help us get beyond some of the problematic consequences of holism, as outlined in part one of this chapter. One of those consequences was that in order for two people to share one belief, they must share virtually all of their beliefs. While Davidson holds that to understand each other two people must be in broad, rather than total, agreement, he is most reluctant to say just what two people may disagree about. If, on the other hand, to speak a language or to have a set of beliefs is to inhabit a world, then the massive sharing of actual beliefs may not be the only necessary condition for mutual understanding, if it is a necessary condition at all. Indeed, it may be the case that two people from different cultural or ideological backgrounds recognize the possibility of mutual understanding before they make any attempts in that direction. If the world is a product of *actually* shared belief, they must rather assume each other (as Davidson says) to be in *very* broad agreement *before* they have even begun the conversation.

Viewing the world as a product of shared beliefs leads to two possibilities: the strong holist notion of multiple worlds grounded in multiple belief

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 144.

systems/languages/ cultures; and the Davidsonian notion that there is a single world grounded in the single (broadly) shared set of (mostly) true beliefs. The first possibility is subject to Davidson's attack in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," while the second threatens some of the intuitions that led to the holist thesis in the first place. Consider one of Davidson's own examples, from "Thought and Talk":

...how clear are we that the ancients — some ancients — believed that the earth was flat? *This* earth? Well, this earth of ours is part of the solar system, a system partly identified by the fact that it is a gaggle of large, cool, solid bodies circling around a very large, hot star. If someone believes *none* of this about the earth, is it certain that it is the earth that he is thinking about? An answer is not called for. The point is made if this kind of consideration of related beliefs can shake one's confidence that the ancients believed the earth was flat.

If our confidence is shaken that the ancients believed that the earth was flat, what are we to say the ancients *did* have beliefs about? How should we translate their sentences about, say, Gaia or Terra? If we don't translate them as about the earth, it will be hard to make sense of them, but if we do, then the ancients will turn out to have some odd beliefs about the earth (and we will face the problem Davidson spells out above). For Davidson, whatever differences there are are differences of opinion, rather than differences of conceptual scheme. But what are we disagreeing about, if we are not talking about the same thing? And if we are not talking about the same thing, what is the difference between what we believe? That is to say, absent both a difference of opinion and a difference of scheme, what kind of difference is there between beliefs about Terra and beliefs about the earth?

The aspect of Davidson's position that is perhaps the most difficult to accept is the amount of agreement that he demands between interpreters. His arguments against radical conceptual difference are well taken. But the feeling lingers that the broad agreement he takes to be a necessary condition of belief ascription does not do justice to our intuitions about conceptual difference. Do the differences between a Newtonian and an Einsteinian, a phenomenologist and a logical positivist, or a liberal economist and a Marxist really boil down to differences of opinion? It may be that they do, but such differences seem somehow broader than differences of opinion, which involve differences about something about which there is considerable agreement. Davidson would of course counter that unless there is considerable agreement between these various factions, it will not make much sense to say that they disagree about anything. But the question remains just how much agreement is necessary for two people to disagree. As we have noted, Davidson is vague on an answer to this question. We will try to shed some more light on it (and on other related questions) by turning to the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer.

In this chapter we have attempted to outline the position of semantic holism. We have relied on Fodor and Lepore's account as a guide, and have then taken a more extensive look at Quine and Davidson. Quine showed us how the relativity and instability of content follow from the holist position, and we concluded that it is Quine's model of semantic wholes—in which conceptual schemes are viewed primarily as networks of interconnected statements or beliefs—that is at least partially responsible for these consequences. Nevertheless, Davidson showed us that one can keep the model while minimizing instability and eradicating relativity if one abandons the notion of a conceptual scheme as organizing or fitting the world.

The discussion of Gadamer, to which we now turn, will pick up these arguments and push them in a different direction. We will try to show that Gadamer's semantics, in which questions play just as important a role as statements, allows us to see semantic wholes as more than just networks of interconnected statements. By doing so, the semantics of the question will also aid us in grappling with conceptual relativity and instability. We will thus supplement Davidson's critique of the notion of a conceptual scheme. We will also see that Gadamer lends support to Davidson's insistence that truth and meaning be understood together. While the rest of the dissertation is primarily an attempt to understand Gadamer's hermeneutics from the perspective of the question of holism, Davidson's spirit will hover over it. Davidson's skepticism before claims of radical difference will find an analogue in Gadamer's optimism regarding the possibility of mutual understanding.

## CHAPTER 2: THE HOLISM OF TRADITION

Gadamer's holism begins and ends with the experience each of us has in our encounter, always already underway, with the things we interpret and understand. We understand artworks, texts, our own lives or those of other human beings, the traditions in which we are formed and which we in turn form, and finally that totality of all that is, the world itself. Everything understood is about, or is itself, some *Sache*, some subject matter, and as such presents itself to the interpreter as a unified whole. And for Gadamer, all such *Sachen* are always to be thought in their relation to the individual interpreter. In order to get clear on his holism, we will therefore have to consider not just the nature of the various *Sachen* Gadamer discusses, but also how they relate to each other and to the individual who encounters them. In essence, Gadamer appropriates the part-whole interpretive method of pre-phenomenological hermeneutics and transforms it, with input from Heidegger, into an ontological conception of the relation between the individual, the world, and everything in the world that the individual understands. By tracing this relationship, we will begin to see how Gadamerian hermeneutics manages to be holistic at the same time that it avoids some of the problematic consequences that holism has typically faced.

In this chapter we will argue for the centrality to Gadamerian hermeneutics of two 'elements' in the "Elements of a Theory of Hermeneutic Experience" section of *Truth and Method*: the truth-directedness of understanding and the role of the question in hermeneutic semantics. To understand a text is for Gadamer to understand it as presenting claims to truth that I, the interpreter, take seriously. Taking a claim to truth seriously means finding the question to which it is an answer questionable myself (for Gadamer a truth-claim is always an answer to a question). We focus on these two elements for the following reasons: 1) If understanding is fundamentally truth-directed, then truth becomes the central problem in the question of hermeneutic holism. A thoroughgoing holism seems to call truth into question, as the consequences of holism that we considered in Chapter 1 should make clear. Truth may involve coherence rather than correspondence; it may be alethic; but it arguably requires some amount of stability in its object and communality of agreement about that object for it to be

‘truth.’ Any position that can be shown to reduce to a strong holism will make such stability and communality difficult, if not impossible. The challenge in our account of Gadamer will therefore be to show if and how his holism and his commitment to the truth-directedness of understanding are reconcilable. I will show how such a reconciliation is possible in Chapters 4 and 5; in this chapter the aim is simply to establish what it is for understanding to be truth-directed.

In those later chapters I will argue that a reconciliation of truth-directedness and holism is possible because Gadamer bases his semantics on the question. Hence our discussion of this second element: 2) If hermeneutic semantics is based on the question, then a way out of strong holism presents itself to us. To understand a question is to understand indeterminate meaning. It involves understanding that there are other possible answers to the question of which the interpreter is not aware. We will argue that it is not the sharing of beliefs but the sharing of questions that provides the prior agreement Gadamer thinks necessary for it to be possible to come to an understanding. This agreement is broad enough, however, to circumvent strong holism in favor of a milder version of it. Once again, this is not a conclusion we will establish in this chapter; here we seek only to show what some of Gadamer’s resources are for grappling with the problem of holism.

## 2.1—The Hermeneutic Circle

Understanding in hermeneutics occurs in what has come to be known as the hermeneutic circle, or the back and forth movement between the understanding of the parts and the understanding of the whole. That which is understood, be it a text or a person or a custom, is always a single thing composed of elements whose meaning contributes in some way to the meaning of the whole. In order for the whole to be understood, then, so do its parts, the elements. The problem is that the parts themselves cannot be understood unless and until the whole itself is understood—their meaning as parts is dependent upon their relation to the whole. The circle thus has the appearance of viciousness, and at the very least it seems difficult to imagine how one might even begin to understand something that one does not already understand. As Heidegger insists in *Being and Time*, however, that which is understood cannot be understood without the circle in play. If, then, understanding necessarily occurs as the hermeneutic circle, it appears that hermeneutics is from the outset a strongly holistic position. An element understood apart from the whole of which it is a part cannot have the same meaning as it does when it is understood in the context of that whole. And since each whole depends for its meaning upon its parts, two wholes with any differences at all in their parts would seem to have different meanings as wholes.

Gadamer, however, is no strong holist; how, then, is he able to invoke the hermeneutic circle as a description of what occurs in interpretation?

On Gadamer's telling in *Truth and Method*,<sup>1</sup> the hermeneutic circle was originally a figure in classical rhetoric, and was first taken up and applied to interpretation by Luther, whose concern was with understanding the Bible in the absence of a dogmatic tradition. As Gadamer points out, there is no circle if one relies on a dogmatic canon of interpretation: the meaning of the whole will be known in advance, and it is then a simple matter of interpreting the parts in light of the whole. The first figure in the history of hermeneutics to whom Gadamer devotes a significant amount of space is the Romantic thinker Schleiermacher. According to Gadamer, Schleiermacher ceases to see hermeneutics simply as the discipline concerned with interpreting individual texts and instead views it universally, as a method for understanding any linguistic production. More concretely, hermeneutics is to be applied in all cases where *misunderstanding* is possible—be they textual, interpersonal, or whatever. And since misunderstanding is *always* possible for Schleiermacher, hermeneutics is always necessary to prevent it. While Gadamer disagrees with Schleiermacher on the notion that hermeneutics can be wielded as a sort of tool for the purpose of avoiding misunderstanding—hermeneutics for Gadamer is a structural component of human understanding—he applauds this universalization of it.

Gadamer goes on to argue that Dilthey and the historians Ranke and Droysen expand the scope of the hermeneutic circle even further than Schleiermacher: for them, history itself is a text to be understood in a movement between part and whole. Gadamer points out that the obvious problem with understanding history in this way is that the whole of history, unlike an individual text within history, is not something the interpreter can experience. But, according to the hermeneutic circle, in order to understand anything *in* history, one must have some sort of access to the whole. The question becomes, how can the individual move from knowledge of the meaningful wholes within his own experience, or the meaningful wholes that are the lives of historical subjects, to knowledge of the meaningful whole that is history as such, which transcends the life of any given individual?<sup>2</sup> One must, after all, do so if one wants to understand one's subject, which as a part of the whole of history can only be understood when the whole is understood. We need not show how Dilthey answers this question here; because of his reliance on the Heideggerian understanding of hermeneutics, Gadamer does not face this particular problem. Specifically, the existential hermeneutics of Dasein shows that humans don't need to have epistemic access to the whole of

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<sup>1</sup> See Gadamer, *Truth and Method* pt. II, section I. Henceforth TM. The German appears in Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke 1*. Henceforth GW1.

<sup>2</sup> TM, 222; GW1, 226.

history in order to be able to project a whole that will serve the hermeneutic function of having something against which one can interpret the parts. To be sure, the price one pays for this move is objective knowledge of the whole—but that is a price whose payment is no burden if one embraces finitude as one's epistemological starting point. Nevertheless, from Dilthey Gadamer takes both the idea that all of history may be the 'object' of interpretation, and the consequent idea that the hermeneutic circle must thus be expanded into one's view of the whole of history.

We see here the fundamental form that hermeneutic understanding takes: it is always a mediation between the understanding of a part and the understanding of the whole. In order to understand a semantic whole, one must develop an understanding not only of those elements that constitute it, but of the whole itself. The life of a historical figure has a cast that illuminates the various elements that make it up, and those elements themselves in turn determine how the life will be viewed. For hermeneutics, understanding the whole is not simply the product of understanding the parts in sum; the whole itself has a meaning that one must grasp in order to understand the parts.

In Heidegger, the next proponent of the hermeneutic circle whom Gadamer discusses, the circle goes ontological. Understanding is part of the existential structure of Dasein, and the way understanding as such occurs is through the hermeneutic circle. What Gadamer emphasizes in Heidegger's description of the hermeneutic circle is his claim that the circle is not vicious, not a barrier to knowledge, but rather in fact productive of knowledge. The fore-structure of understanding—those semantic patterns into which Dasein fits the things it comes across—are what permit one to have experience, to see something *as* something. Another way of putting this is to say that one cannot come to know anything about a particular thing unless one approaches it with some pre-understanding of the sort of thing it is. Heidegger's characterization of the circle thus departs in significant ways from that of the thinkers Gadamer has discussed until this point. Because those thinkers don't view understanding as a structural component of human being, but rather as an act and achievement of subjectivity, they see the hermeneutic circle in principle as something that can be discarded, ladder-like, once one has attained understanding. For Heidegger, however, the hermeneutic circle is in play in all understanding, and understanding is always in play. Because of human finitude, one does not cease to be on the way between part and whole: there is never a point at which 'complete' understanding is achieved, in such a way that the process of understanding would end. Interpretation never ceases to project fore-meanings.

Gadamer says that "[t]he point of Heidegger's hermeneutical reflection is not so much to prove that there is a circle as to show that this circle possesses an ontologically positive significance."<sup>3</sup> To this end, Gadamer himself does not focus

on the circular structure of understanding as such in Heidegger, but rather looks at the way in which the circle makes *true* understanding possible. This involves testing one's fore-meanings against "the things themselves" (die Sachen selbst), i.e. against what one encounters in the text, and not allowing the things themselves to be distorted by fore-meanings that are "arbitrary," that are not "confirmed" by the things themselves. As we said above, the text as such could not be understood unless one approached it with a set of fore-meanings—whether arbitrary or "appropriate." If my fore-meanings are not in play, the very words in which the text is written will not mean anything to me. Even if there is misunderstanding, that is, even if my fore-meanings do not match up with what the text has to say, having those fore-meanings in play will at least give me a way to *begin* interpreting the text. If I am sufficiently open-minded as an interpreter, the text itself will then show me that my fore-meanings are inadequate—but this can only happen if I try to interpret the text through the lens of those fore-meanings. Say, for example, that I pick up a book on the Bush presidency that is written by someone whom I recognize as a social conservative. I expect the book to celebrate the Bush administration, but it turns out that the book is more even-handed in its assessment. What allows me to see this? Most obviously, I have not let my expectation of the content of the book obscure what the book has to say. But more fundamentally, if I did not have *any* expectations about what the book will say (that is, if I follow the recommendation of pre-Heideggerian hermeneutics and put my own beliefs to one side), I would not be able to place the details that I come across into a larger context—and it is precisely such a context that I need in order to make sense of the details. The first sentence of such a book might be, "For the run of his presidency, George W. Bush was ecstatically embraced by much of the religious right." If I have no expectations about the larger context into which this sentence belongs, how could I begin to interpret it? It could, after all, be the first line of a novel, or an example in a style manual of how to begin a work of non-fiction. Only if I make some assumption about the context in which this sentence belongs will I be able to be shown by the text itself that my assumption is correct (or incorrect).<sup>4</sup> In the absence of such an assumption, I will not have any reason to interpret the sentence in one way rather than another. My assumption that the book will offer a certain kind of criticism of the Bush presidency is in effect a view of the whole; when I come across a series

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<sup>3</sup> TM, 266; GW1, 271.

<sup>4</sup> One can of course pick up a book about which one knows nothing and just start reading. But even here there are fore-conceptions in play—that I am reading a book, for example, and not a menu or an employment contract. But more significantly, as soon as I read the first sentence, I project some view of the whole based on it.

of sentence-parts that assert things that are critical of Bush it is precisely my preconception of the book as a celebration of him that comes to be challenged, and in turn allows me to begin to understand the book as a critique. Now, because Gadamer affirms that such fore-meanings are a structural component of understanding, from the perspective of Gadamerian (and Heideggerian) hermeneutics the picture that the older hermeneutists had of the hermeneutic circle was only half-complete. They had seen the text as transparent to the hermeneutic method, which was taken to involve “merely “reading what is there”,”<sup>5</sup> and they held that bringing one’s own ideas into play could only distort the meaning of the text. “What is there” is still available to post-Heideggerian hermeneutics, but it only becomes visible when seen in light of my fore-meanings, i.e. precisely in the light of those ideas that the older hermeneutics counseled one to set aside.

Gadamer’s own contribution to the understanding of the hermeneutic circle is his notion of the “fore-conception of completeness.” It should be noted that Gadamer accepts the movement of the hermeneutic circle more or less as outlined in the hermeneutic tradition, as well as the ontological rendering of it by Heidegger. When we read a text,

the movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole. Our task is to expand the unity of the understood meaning centrifugally. The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding. The failure to achieve this harmony means that understanding has failed.<sup>6</sup>

This is essentially the form the hermeneutic circle takes in the hermeneutic tradition. As we noted above, nineteenth century hermeneutics takes this movement between part and whole to cease once understanding is attained. Its conception of the circle is thus, according to Gadamer, “formal”: its aim is simply a complete view of the whole, and that means one in which one grasps the *harmonious* integration of parts into the whole. Gadamer instead prefers Heidegger’s ontologization of the circle. The ‘contentful’ circle “describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter.”<sup>7</sup> To further emphasize that the circle is not (or at least not only) formal, Gadamer introduces the notion of the fore-conception of completeness (Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit). This fore-conception has two aspects. First, it entails that one always approaches a text assuming that it will have a unity of

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<sup>5</sup> TM, 269; GW1, 274.

<sup>6</sup> TM, 291; GW1, 296.

<sup>7</sup> TM, 293; GW1, 298.

meaning (Einheit von Sinn). The reason for this is that “only what constitutes a complete unity of meaning is intelligible [verständlich].”<sup>8</sup> In order to be understood, a text must have a unity of meaning, and so if one *seeks* to understand something one must *assume* that it has such a unity of meaning. What does Gadamer mean by a unity of meaning? He elaborates by saying that we expect a text to “completely express its meaning [Meinung].”<sup>9</sup> There seem to be two criteria at work here. That the text’s meaning forms a unity suggests that everything in the text is related to the topic in question: the text should be about some one thing, and if it is about more than one thing, the things it is about should be in some way connected. Further, that the text should completely express its meaning implies that what it has to say about the topic in question should not be expressed in an unfinished or partial way, but wholly and fully. If a text does not do these things, it will not be “intelligible.” Why not? Gadamer does not answer this question, but it would seem that a text that failed on the first count would not be grasped as ‘a’ text, but as several. If someone inserts a recipe for meatloaf into a geology textbook, one can either dismiss it as irrelevant, or one can seek connections between it and geology—either way, one is proceeding on the assumption that the text presents the reader with a discussion about a single topic.<sup>10</sup> A text that fails on the second count—i.e., one that does not fully address the topic in question—does not count as a complete ‘text.’ That recipe for meatloaf will not really be a ‘recipe’ if it does not include instructions for how to cook the mush of ground beef and seasonings that it has instructed one to assemble.

Gadamer calls this first aspect of the fore-conception of completeness “formal” or “immanent.” The second aspect is contentful or “transcendent”: “what [the text] says should be the complete truth.”<sup>11</sup> We expect a text not just to be coherent and unified, but also to tell us the truth about the topic in question. Gadamer goes on, “we understand traditionary texts on the basis of expectations of meaning drawn from our own prior relation to the subject matter...[and] we [are] fundamentally open to the possibility that the writer of a transmitted text is

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<sup>8</sup> TM, 294; GW1, 299.

<sup>9</sup> Also ‘opinion,’ ‘intention.’

<sup>10</sup> The situation is a bit more complex in the case of something like an encyclopedia or an almanac. But even here, the whole does impose a certain unity on the disparate texts within it. The texts of the encyclopedia are unified by the notion that they are contributing to universal knowledge, and the texts of the almanac are unified by the principle of general day-to-day usefulness.

<sup>11</sup> TM, 294; GW1, 299.

better informed than we are, with our prior opinion.”<sup>12</sup> Again, Gadamer does not here fully explain why these features of the fore-conception of completeness are necessary for understanding. Lawrence Schmidt argues that we must approach a text with these expectations because if we do not, the text will not be able to challenge our prejudices. If we don’t anticipate textual unity, a potential challenge to one of our prejudices may only be seen as an inconsistency in the text, and if we don’t anticipate truth, that potential challenge will seem simply false. Our prejudices will remain in place, and the text will not show us that we are wrong.<sup>13</sup> This reading is sound, except for its suggestion that we bring the fore-conception of completeness to bear on a text with the *explicit* aim of challenging our prejudices. It is more the case that this fore-conception is in play whenever we seek to understand a text—it is a condition of possibility of understanding.

When we seek to understand, we approach a text with the expectation that it is about a subject matter, and that subject matter is typically one that we have beliefs about—that is, we think the thing under discussion *is* in a certain way, and that our beliefs about it are, depending the degree of our skepticism, possibly or probably *true*. The thought that the text is about this subject matter is then also the thought that the text will express *its* ‘beliefs’ about it—beliefs that are similarly commitments to truths about the subject matter. If we do not approach the text with at least the possibility in mind that it might have a better, truer grasp of the subject matter than we do, we cannot be said to be reading the text with the aim of understanding what it has to say. Since my concern is with the subject matter, if I don’t assume that the author might have a better grasp of that subject matter than me, then I will assume that what he has to say is something I already know, or something false, or perhaps incoherent. But in that case, there will be not much reason for me to read his text.

It might be said in response that I sometimes read texts not with the aim of seeing whether they say something true, but with the aim of critique. But I would argue that the decision to critique a text cannot legitimately be made until *after* one has read it with the aim of understanding it. What is critiqued is a text that one has understood. Unless one has grasped the claims of a text *as* claims to truth, one will not be in a position to question the presuppositions of the sorts of claims to truth that are being made in that text. But to grasp a claim to truth as a claim to truth *is*, for Gadamer, to understand it. In addition, one will only know that the text in question is open *to* critique once one has read it. A text that I assume is, say, a neoliberal tract could turn out to contain Marxist elements, and hence not fully merit the criticism that I had anticipated applying to it. Only after I have heard what the text has to say will I be in a position to determine whether it is subject to whatever form of critique I have in mind.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See p. 48 in Schmidt, *The Epistemology of Hans-Georg Gadamer*.

Now, there are of course possible aims in reading a text other than understanding it: one may wish to have an aesthetic experience, or the text may be assigned reading in a class, or one may be looking for a way to pass the time, or one may wish to deconstruct it. Must the text be understood in order for any of these aims to be fulfilled? It seems that it need not be, at least for the first three; and we ought perhaps to conclude that among the many ways of relating to a text, understanding is not to be privileged above the rest. But Gadamer is not telling us that understanding is the only legitimate way of relating to a text, just that *if* one is to understand a text, *then* one must anticipate its truth and coherence. A text that one does not take to be unified and true will not be a text that one has understood—even if one has found reading it to be a pleasant experience. What then about approaching the text deconstructively? As David Hoy puts it, here the aim is not, as in hermeneutics, to seek “the hidden intentional unity of the text,” but to “decode the lack of such unity” in it.<sup>14</sup> The implication is that whatever unity the interpreter may find in a text is subtended by a fundamental disunity, a proliferation of differences that will forever destabilize any attempts to understand ‘what’ a text ‘means’. There is not space here to weigh in on the great confrontation between hermeneutics and deconstruction, but suffice it to say that while there may or may not be such a thing as understanding a text, Gadamer has surely shown us that, again, *if* understanding occurs, then it is because truth and coherence have been anticipated and found in the text in question.

Gadamer’s position thus amounts to saying that to seek to *understand* something *just means* to approach it with the expectation that it will be coherent and true. We will have much more to say about Gadamer’s claim that we approach texts with an expectation of truth later on; for now we will just point to the picture of Gadamerian holism as it is gradually emerging before us: understanding meaning is holistic in the sense that *only* holistically structured unities of meaning can be understood; further, such unities will only be understood if one anticipates that very unity; and finally understanding a unified whole of meaning is not simply a formal endeavor in which one grasps a harmonious relationship between the parts and the whole—it is also directed at a possible truth.

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<sup>14</sup> Hoy, “Must We Say What We Mean? The Grammatological Critique of Hermeneutics,” in Wachterhauser, ed. *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*.

## 2.2—Tradition and Interpreter

We have been looking at how Gadamer understands the hermeneutic circle, and we saw that the circle shows that hermeneutics is a version of semantic holism. We will now begin to consider the nature of the semantic wholes that Gadamer thematizes in his hermeneutics. We will spend the rest of this chapter discussing the particular semantic whole that is tradition. Historically the task of hermeneutics was to interpret texts handed down in a tradition, and while Gadamer, like Schleiermacher, universalizes hermeneutics, his paradigmatic hermeneutic ‘object’ is always the traditional text. To the end of grappling with the notion of tradition we will be looking at the section of *Truth and Method* entitled “Elements of a Theory of Hermeneutic Experience,” which bases its analysis primarily on the experience of interpreting texts from the tradition. Our aim will be to determine how Gadamer conceives of the relation between the individual interpreter and the tradition she finds herself ‘within.’ If tradition is holistic then understanding the nature of this relation will be key to determining what sort of holism it is that structures tradition. We hope to show that while every interpreter is part of a tradition, to be an interpreter is to have a degree of distance from one’s tradition that precludes one’s thoroughgoing determination by it.

Gadamer does not explicitly define “tradition” anywhere in *Truth and Method*, and the term undoubtedly suffers from a certain vagueness. However, since a number of the most important ideas in *Truth and Method* are connected to the idea of tradition—including prejudice, authority, historically effected consciousness, experience (Erfahrung), and the fusion of horizons—a look at how Gadamer takes up these ideas in his thinking about tradition should help us clarify how he understands this term. Let’s begin, though, by noting some of the things Gadamer does say about tradition. The German word for ‘tradition’ is *Überlieferung*, and the verb *überliefern* means ‘to hand down.’ Gadamer frequently uses the adjective formed from this verb to describe content that gets passed along in a tradition: “überlieferter Inhalt.”<sup>15</sup> For Gadamer, then, tradition is to be thought primarily as something that is handed down. Toward the end of the

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<sup>15</sup> “Traditional content” is the English rendering of “überlieferter Inhalt.” “Tradition” itself comes from the Latin “traditio,” which according to Webster’s Third New International Dictionary means the “action of handing over.” Unfortunately the English word “traditional” is slowly losing the connotation of handing over, and so the translation misses some of Gadamer’s meaning.

book,<sup>16</sup> he argues that what makes a language a worldview is not its grammatical structure—its form—but its “handed-down content.”

As that which is handed down, tradition is experienced as *continuity*. Discussing “temporal distance” (the separation that the interpreter perceives between present and past) Gadamer says that it “is not a yawning abyss but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition [Tradition] in the light of which everything handed down [alle Überlieferung] presents itself to us.”<sup>17</sup> By continuity, Gadamer understands something like the tying together of all of the aspects of one’s life into the meaningful whole of that life. Continuity is to be contrasted with the notion of an aesthetic experience or Erlebnis, in which some element in experience is encountered purely aesthetically, rather than in terms of the personal or cultural meanings that lie sedimented in it. Such experiences cannot be viewed as connected meaningfully to the rest of experience, and are more like experiential atoms. The contents of tradition are not such aesthetic Erlebnisse, but are integrated into the lives of those who practice them as extensions of themselves.

That which belongs to tradition is interwoven with the personal narratives of those who are part of tradition. Gadamer frequently uses the term “belonging” (Zugehörigkeit) to describe how entities relate to tradition. On p. 291 he says that “belonging to a tradition is a condition of hermeneutics.” To *belong* to something is to relate to it as something that partly constitutes what one is; therefore, the relation between the individual as part and the tradition as whole is *teleological*. Two things that “belong” together form a whole that is incomplete if it lacks either one; each of these two things alone does not become fully itself until it is united with its partner. A puzzle piece is what it is in relation to the puzzle to which it belongs—there is no such thing as a single puzzle piece that does not belong (or did not ever belong) to a puzzle. This is a fairly strong sense of “belonging,” and there are weaker ones: if someone belongs to a club, say, the relation is still teleological, but not as fully constitutive of that person’s being as its relation to the puzzle is of that of the puzzle piece. At what end of the spectrum is the relation we have to our tradition? “[W]e are always situated within traditions”<sup>18</sup> says Gadamer. In an oft-quoted passage from pp. 276-7 of *Truth and Method*, he says,

History does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which

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<sup>16</sup> TM, 441; GW1, 445.

<sup>17</sup> TM, 297; GW1, 302.

<sup>18</sup> TM, 282; GW1, 286.

we live.... The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.*

We are said here to belong to history, and in “history” are included things like the “family, society, and state in which we live.” It seems that our belonging to history—and to tradition, which for Gadamer in the end is not fundamentally different from history—is deep. And yet Gadamer is not a historical determinist, i.e. he does not hold that history decides what we are and what we believe in some inescapable fashion. The individual in fact herself determines history after it has determined her: her belonging to tradition involves the possibility of changing her beliefs, and that change in beliefs itself constitutes the forging ahead of tradition. Nevertheless, the sense of ‘belonging’ in this passage is quite strong—tradition forms the individual by imbuing her with prejudices, and this formation of the individual turns her into a kind of avatar of her tradition.

If the individual belongs to his tradition in this way, what are the extent and limits of his tradition? For example, is Christianity one tradition or several? or one *and* several? Does one only belong to a single tradition, or can one belong to numerous, perhaps conflicting, traditions? The answers to these questions are unfortunately not clear in Gadamer. However, he does indicate that tradition is not to be taken as monological, brooking no divisions:

We accept the fact that the subject presents different aspects of itself at different times or from different standpoints. We accept the fact that these aspects do not simply cancel one another out as research proceeds, but are like mutually exclusive conditions that exist by themselves and combine only in us. Our historical consciousness is always filled with a variety of voices in which the echo of the past is heard. Only in the multifariousness of such voices does it exist: this constitutes the nature of the tradition in which we want to share and have a part.<sup>19</sup>

Gadamer is here speaking of the understanding of tradition that takes place in “historical research,” but the point can be extended to the general understanding of tradition. Given his later debate with Habermas, as well as his notion of the fusion of horizons in play in the understanding of the past, it is clear that Gadamer holds traditions to incorporate change and difference.<sup>20</sup> We say, for example, that

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<sup>19</sup> TM, 284; GW1, 289.

<sup>20</sup> Gadamer argued against Habermas that when one overturns one’s prejudices one does not thereby break free of one’s tradition—and furthermore that it is not in fact

both Nietzsche and Plato are parts of the western philosophical tradition. Their perspectives and ideas are of course very different, but we nevertheless do class them as part of the same tradition. Why is this the case? There is a clue to what Gadamer's answer would be in the first sentence of the above passage: he says that "the subject [Sache] presents different aspects of itself at different times or from different standpoints." What ties the various members of a tradition together is that they are talking about the same things, the same subject matters. From this it follows that two traditions are *different* to the extent that interpreters in them are *not* talking about the same things—which is also to say that the same subject matters are not handed down in them. We also see here how we might answer the question of whether someone can belong to multiple traditions: if what unites a tradition is the subject matters that are handed down in it, there seems to be no barrier in principle to someone belonging to more than one tradition. I could for example be both a philosopher and an armchair economist: in the morning I might discuss Plato's aesthetics with my students, and in the evening the idea of supply and demand with friends.<sup>21</sup>

Beyond the characterization of the interpreter-tradition relation that says that one belongs to a linguistic tradition that exists as a process of handing something down, what else can be said about it? I will next consider the mechanics of belonging to a tradition by looking at the effect tradition has on the individual, on the one hand, and the understanding the individual has of her tradition, on the other. Both directions of this interpreter-tradition relationship are embodied in *prejudices*. Now, Gadamer analyzes prejudices as part of a project of countering the Enlightenment ideal of objectivity in the knowledge of history. His aim is to show that the goal of 19<sup>th</sup> century historicism—to attain historical objectivity by suspending one's own beliefs and valuations and understanding a historical era from its own point of view—is not just impossible; the very attempt to do so is in fact more likely to lead to the *distortion* of one's historical 'object,' inasmuch as it makes it more likely that one's unconscious prejudices will actually remain in play. Gadamer appropriates Heidegger's analysis of the fore-structure of understanding, whereby, as we've seen, everything one encounters one encounters to some extent pre-interpreted, and adds the idea that not only does one anticipate

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possible to exist in a state free of tradition. But humans are constantly revising their prejudices, and these revisions are precisely what constitute change in a tradition.

<sup>21</sup> The question remains whether the individual belonging to multiple traditions experiences some imperative to reconcile those traditions in himself, or indeed whether they must already have been reconciled in him as a condition of his belonging to them.

*meanings* in understanding, one pre-judges as well.<sup>22</sup> Understanding involves *unthematized belief*, or judgments about truth or falsity of which one is largely unaware. While the Enlightenment viewed prejudice negatively as “false judgment,”<sup>23</sup> Gadamer argues that prejudices don’t *have* to be false, and in fact constitute a fundamental component of understanding. In the essay “The Universality of the Hermeneutic Problem” he calls prejudices “conditions of experience” and “biases of our openness toward the world.”<sup>24</sup> Not only that; in the segment from pp. 276-7 quoted above, Gadamer argues that self-awareness, the ground of self-reflective, objectivizing historicism, is something that *arises out of* and is *sustained by* “historical life,” i.e. the stream of prejudices, rather than something that can extinguish the force of history and prejudice in itself. The very self-understanding that history as tradition grants us takes the shape of prejudices. These pre-judgments, as Gadamer says, constitute the *historical reality* of our being—that is, insofar as we belong to a tradition, we possess a set of unthematized beliefs about who we are, and who we are—“historically”—*is* these beliefs. The individual thus *receives* prejudices *from* tradition, and tradition can be said to be embodied in the individual *by* prejudices.

The interpreter-tradition relation is thus primarily not one in which tradition is an object of belief, or a text that one encounters from a distance, nor is it strictly speaking simply the relation of part to whole. The interpreter *is* a part of a tradition, but not in the same way that an organ is a part of a body. The tradition is *present* in the interpreter in a way that is unlike the way the body is related to any one of its organs. To be sure, the individual organ does have the relation of ‘belonging’ to the body, and in that way is similar to the interpreter. But since tradition is those prejudices that it forms in the individual, the content of tradition itself is what is present in the interpreter; the body, on the other hand, as that whole that cannot function without the functioning of its organs, supervenes *upon* those organs, rather than actually being present *in* them.

The interpreter is also not simply a part of the whole of tradition as a node in a semantic network. Changes in tradition do not only affect the individual by changing the *meaning* of his prejudices; rather, they *effect* the individual by *reinforcing or challenging* his prejudices. For example, say one of my prejudices is that Nabokov is a cold ironist. After reading *Pale Fire*, I discover that Nabokov is a mischievous humanist. ‘Nabokov’ now becomes a term that no longer

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<sup>22</sup> The incorporation of pre-judgment into the fore-structure of understanding is a corollary of the fore-conception of completeness, which as we saw anticipates the truth of the text being interpreted.

<sup>23</sup> TM, 270; GW1, 275.

<sup>24</sup> Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 9. Henceforth PH. *Gesammelte Werke* 2, 224. Henceforth GW2.

includes the intension ‘cold ironist,’ and any other instance in which I use the term ‘Nabokov’ will, per holism, be affected by this change. An encounter with tradition has thus changed the meaning of one of the words I operate with, and this change has holistic consequences. But while the network metaphor of semantic holism would require that this encounter has also changed the meaning of all of my prejudices about Nabokov, it should be clear that such a change would not be sufficient to change my prejudices as such. I can still believe that Nabokov is a Russian prose master, a mis-reader of Dostoevsky, or whatever, even while ‘Nabokov’ in these prejudices no longer includes the intension ‘cold ironist.’ The only prejudice whose status *as prejudice* has changed is the one that held that Nabokov was a cold ironist. The network metaphor thus does not account for the relationship of the individual to tradition as one between a semantic whole and an interpreter who is both integrated into it *and* who also interprets it. The network metaphor does not do this because it can only view the nodes of the network as *signifiers*; a tradition, however, is not just a system of signifiers but includes elements—interpreters—who *understand* signification, and who are thus not simply further signifiers in the system.

We should see here that implicit in the way hermeneutics thinks about meaning is the assumption that to answer philosophical questions about the nature of meaning, one must take into account the experience of meaning on the part of interpreters. Meaning for hermeneutics is not something that exists independently of the concrete processes of coming to an understanding. Interpreters themselves do not stand apart from meaning as a subject does from an object, but rather *what they are* is in part constituted by the meanings they understand. It is constituted by their prejudices, and they have the prejudices they do in part because of how they understand the subject matters that those prejudices are about. Hermeneutic *holism* is a holism that takes into consideration the interpreter’s experience of meaning in this way.

### 2.3—Historically Effected Consciousness

This relation between interpreter and tradition will become clearer once we bring Gadamer’s notion of historically effected consciousness into play. Historically effected consciousness is both consciousness as the home of prejudices and consciousness *that* one is ‘prejudiced.’ Gadamer does not explicitly draw a parallel between prejudices and historically effected consciousness, but the connection between the two is clear enough. History effects consciousness by imbuing it with prejudices about the things it encounters; these prejudices, again, are pre-judgments that have been formed and handed down in tradition. Tradition itself is history as continuity: history, as that which

imbues consciousness with prejudices, is to be thought as tradition when the interpreter of it also emerges from it. Historically effected consciousness cannot be *identified* with its prejudices, however, since it includes the *awareness* that one is historically effected—the awareness that one’s beliefs are prejudices. In this sense, historically effected consciousness is to be thought in comparison with the other two kinds of “consciousness” that Gadamer discusses, aesthetic consciousness and historical consciousness. Like them—as consciousness—historically effected consciousness “can rise above that of which it is conscious,”<sup>25</sup> i.e. can behold it as an object. Unlike aesthetic and historical consciousness, though, historically effected consciousness does not attempt to attain objectivity by negating its own situatedness; rather, it recognizes that it cannot escape itself when it tries to know its ‘object,’ and instead seeks to *mediate* itself with what it interprets.

The question before us now is the following: how does historically effected consciousness relate to the past? That is to say, what is the relation between historically effected consciousness and the whole that it interprets? We have seen how tradition is embodied in the individual in the form of prejudices. Now we will look at a mode of encountering tradition that is not simply one in which tradition speaks through me, but which rather sets itself at a distance from tradition. This distance will be an important factor in countering the view that the prejudices of the individual are nodes in a semantic network, i.e. that tradition strongly determines the content of an individual’s beliefs.

The short answer to the above question is that historically effected consciousness relates to the past by understanding it. Understanding the past occurs as a fusion of the horizon of the past with one’s horizon in the present. Fusions of horizons occur when the past is seen as making a claim to truth that I hear *as* a claim to truth in the present. To see what this means we will begin by looking at the notion of a horizon, which Gadamer appropriates from Husserl. Husserl had determined that individual experiences are always intended against a background of unthematized intentions that in turn makes any given experience possible.<sup>26</sup> This background Husserl baptized “horizon.” Gadamer has this to say: “Husserl is obviously seeking to capture the way all limited intentionality of meaning merges into the fundamental continuity [Kontinuität] of the whole. A horizon is not a rigid boundary but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further.”<sup>27</sup> Gadamer introduces the notion of horizon into his

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<sup>25</sup> TM, 341; GW1, 347.

<sup>26</sup> See “The Phenomenological Movement,” PH, 154-5. *Gesammelte Werke* 3, 126. Henceforth GW3.

<sup>27</sup> TM 245; GW1, 250.

discussion of historically effected consciousness by tying it to the equally important holistic notion of “situation”: “Historically effected consciousness is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical *situation*.”<sup>28</sup> A situation is a set of circumstances in which one finds oneself, and of which one is “unable to have any objective knowledge.” The *hermeneutical* situation is “the situation in which we find ourselves with regard to the *tradition* that we are trying to understand.”<sup>29</sup> Central to being in a situation is having “a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence essential to the concept of situation is the concept of “*horizon*.” The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point.”<sup>30</sup> The horizon metaphor is to be taken in its fullness: the person within a horizon has a perspective on what is “nearest” to him because he is able to compare it to its larger context; and horizons are not “closed,” since one can always expand one’s horizon. Horizons are in fact doubly open: they are ‘internally’ open, in that everything in them may be compared to everything else in them; and they are ‘externally’ open, in that they admit views broader than those one begins with.<sup>31</sup> But the openness of a horizon has as a corollary the *rootedness* of consciousness within a horizon. Against 19<sup>th</sup> century historicism, Gadamer argues that in understanding an ancient culture (e.g.) one does not ‘leave’ one’s horizon behind and ‘enter into’ that of the historical other, such that one might thus better ‘understand’ his worldview. Just as I always see my geographical horizon from *my* perspective, with my perceptual apparatus, regardless of where I go, understanding the other does not mean leaving one’s own historical situatedness behind. Gadamer argues, however, against the idea that I am *rigidly* bound to a particular horizon: “the closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction. The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon.”<sup>32</sup> A closed horizon—being bound to a standpoint—would come from the *inability* to revise

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<sup>28</sup> TM, 301; GW1, 307.

<sup>29</sup> TM, 302. Ital. mine. GW1, 307.

<sup>30</sup> TM, 302; GW1, 307.

<sup>31</sup> Gadamer also holds that it is possible not to have a horizon at all—“A person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence overvalues what is nearest to him” (TM, 302; GW1, 307). Such a person can, however, always *acquire* a horizon, and is in no way wedded to his standpoint.

<sup>32</sup> TM, 304; GW1, 309.

one's prejudices. Because one can revise one's prejudices, one's rootedness within a horizon does *not* translate into the inability to change one's position. I always look out at things from my perspective, but that perspective is subject to change as I revise my prejudices. Nevertheless, I do always exist in continuity with every prejudice I've had in the past. Any new prejudices that I develop come about precisely as revisions of past prejudices, and in this way every prejudice I've ever had leaves its trace upon those I have now. Those revisions constitute *expansions* of my horizon—and expansions are characterized by the fact that the old prejudice is not expunged, but sublated. The old prejudice remains incorporated in the newly expanded horizon, even while its force as a prejudice is negated. When Gadamer argues against Habermas that the opposition between tradition and reason, or “the reflective appropriation” of tradition,<sup>33</sup> is dogmatic, he points in this direction: the revision of one's prejudices does not simply eradicate those prejudices. Tradition does not cease when one revises a prejudice since the revision itself constitutes a continuation of tradition.

A challenge to this reading of Gadamer's notion of horizon comes in Jean Grondin's book, *Hermeneutische Wahrheit?* Grondin argues that coming to an understanding does not involve the expanding but rather the *shifting* of one's horizon. Grondin takes Gadamer's dictum that “we understand in a *different* way, *if we understand at all*”<sup>34</sup> to mean that no interpreter understands a text “better” than any other, and concludes that to speak of horizons as expanding is to make the mistake of thinking that some horizons can come ‘closer to the truth’ than others. Truth is rather a “historical production” in which a subject matter comes into language—and truth ultimately is the historical emergence of new meanings in the interpreter's encounter with the subject matter.<sup>35</sup> This reading of Gadamer is compelling, but I would argue that a strong case can be made that it runs counter to what Gadamer argues in *Truth and Method*. However, Grondin adduces Gadamer's own testimony in defense of this interpretation: in a letter to Grondin, Gadamer says

I didn't want to speak of a broadening of horizons that succeeds through understanding, but rather of a shifting. The image [of the horizon] in fact also implies that when one attains a new view of the horizon, that is, when one attains a new horizon, one has also left something behind. Acquisition

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<sup>33</sup> “The Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection,” PH, 28; GW2, 240.

<sup>34</sup> TM, 297; GW1, 302.

<sup>35</sup> Grondin, *Hermeneutische Wahrheit?*, 150.

and loss seem to be woven together, and based on this is the historicity of effective history.<sup>36</sup>

Grondin says that he had previously thought that a criterion of correct understanding and the broadening of horizons was to be found in the memory of the interpreter: one is able from one's new, broader perspective to see what was missing from one's previous, narrower one. Contrary to this earlier view, Grondin parses the above passage in this way:

Here Gadamer sees the consequences of hermeneutic understanding-differently [Andersverstehen] that I did not see at the time. If the truth of our memories depends on our former knowledge, then they would be measured by a touchstone which, however, cannot be a standard. The sum of our experiences is constantly seen from a determinate perspective; but this perspective can always be dismissed later on, and therefore can claim no unshakeable authority.<sup>37</sup>

That our memories do not provide us with grounds to assert the absolute validity of our current beliefs is clear: as Grondin points out, anything we believe now may not be something we will still believe in the future, and thus it cannot be a standard of correctness for older, discarded beliefs. However, it seems to me that this is no reason to abandon the notion that horizons can be broadened, Gadamer's own claim in the letter to Grondin notwithstanding. Consider passages like the following, in Gadamer's initial discussion of horizons:

The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons, and so forth. Since Nietzsche and Husserl, the word has been used in philosophy to characterize the way in which thought is tied to its finite determinacy, and the way one's range of vision is gradually expanded. A person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence overvalues what is nearest to him. On the other hand, "to have a horizon" means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 160. (My translation.)

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> TM, 302; GW1, 307.

Gadamer here attributes this understanding of horizon to philosophical discourse, but he does not repudiate this view in *Truth and Method*. Indeed, it is clear that he embraces it: understanding the historical other, he says,

always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other. The concept of “horizon” suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision [überlegenen Weitsicht] that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion.<sup>39</sup>

So what’s going on here—has the Gadamer of the letter to Grondin changed his mind about what it is to have a horizon? It seems to me rather that Grondin pushes his interpretation of what Gadamer says there too far. The point Gadamer would seem to be making is that it is precipitous to think that in revising our prejudices we *simply* come to have a broader, better, more comprehensive view of the whole. We also, he insists, ‘leave something behind.’ That is, we become something different, and cease to have access to a view of the thing that was in fact *true*, that got at some aspect of the thing. Grondin sees in this call for humility in interpretation a rejection of the notion that there is ever such a thing as understanding better, but one need not make this move. It may be that one comes to have a better, broader view of the thing even while one gives up a view of the thing that, while narrower, nevertheless saw the thing in its truth. We might take as an example the views that children have of each other as compared to the view that adults have of them. An adult is able to understand a child in all sorts of ways that are unavailable to the child: psychologically, historically, morally, culturally. The adult is also able to make decisions about the welfare of the child that the child does not understand. The child, however, experiences himself and other children in ways that many adults have long since forgotten, but which, we might want to insist, nevertheless reveal the truth of what it is to be a child. The child’s horizon may be narrower, but the adult is mistaken if he thinks that horizon does not carry its own truth.

In understanding, one both remains within one’s traditional horizon and leaves something of that horizon behind for a new one. In understanding the past, one does not set one’s prejudices to one side, but keeps them in play. If this is the case, however, how can one ever be said to have knowledge of the past? While our express concern here is not epistemological, because the question of what can be understood when one thinks from out of a tradition hinges on the question of truth, epistemological questions will continually bubble beneath the surface of our inquiry. Knowledge of the past is possible because understanding the past,

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<sup>39</sup> TM, 305; GW1, 310.

whether for the “naïve” experience of “earlier times” or for historical consciousness in its alienation from tradition, involves a fusion of the horizon of the past with the horizon of the present. Odd as it may sound, for Gadamer this fusion is not a fusion of *separately existing* horizons. One way to put it<sup>40</sup> is that understanding constitutes a *single* horizon with two distinct moments—“the old and the new”—whose distinctness is constantly being “superseded” in understanding. In naïve experience this fusion is unconscious: the old is not thought historically but in total continuity with the present, whose newness is not remarked but unconsciously sublated into tradition. For historical consciousness in its hermeneutical guise of historically effected consciousness, on the other hand, the fusion of horizons becomes a process of which one is aware. This is how it works. One approaches the historical ‘object’ (say, a book) with one’s prejudices in play. These prejudices “constitute...the horizon of a particular present.”<sup>41</sup> If I am sufficiently open-minded, I will approach it with the readiness to have it show some of my prejudices to be false. This readiness will allow me to “suspend the validity” of a given prejudice when the text makes a claim that calls it into question. I thus do not simply subsume the historically other into my own pre-established conceptions: the fusion of horizons is rather a “process” whereby I “continually...test all [my] prejudices.”<sup>42</sup> If the text tells me a truth, i.e. shows that my suspended prejudice is false, then my present horizon has been fused with that of the text. It should be noted here that for hermeneutical consciousness this past horizon of the text is a *projected* horizon. While naïve consciousness does not experience the present as a horizon that is to be distinguished from a horizon of the past, historical consciousness encounters the traditional text in “tension” with the present. Historical consciousness then *emphasizes* this tension by projecting an entire past horizon for the text. That act of projection is not one in which one assumes that the author believed everything I do, but is rather the formal supposition that the author occupies a horizon that is different from mine. Historical consciousness stops there, and rests in the thought that the past is to be understood in its difference. Gadamer, on the other hand, claims that the past cannot really be understood if it is looked at in this way. Hermeneutic consciousness thus goes a step further than historical consciousness, and by projecting a past horizon gives itself the distance to range the text against its own prejudices. I am now able to view the text not just as not quite jibing with my

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<sup>40</sup> One which Gadamer wavers on, but which I would argue nevertheless captures what he is trying to say.

<sup>41</sup> TM, 306; GW1, 311.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

beliefs, but as offering up a unified position on a certain topic. That view of the text turns it into an interlocutor who might have something to say to me. Precisely because as an interpreter I test my prejudices against the claims of the text, however, the past horizon that I have projected for the text *collapses*<sup>43</sup> as soon as I have heard what the text has to say. The reason is that once I accept what the text has to tell me, once I take it to be true, then the text itself is no longer an *other* belonging to a horizon distinct from my own: it is now part of *my* horizon, it is among the things that *I* hold true.<sup>44</sup>

The notion of the fusion of horizons yields for Gadamer another important idea, namely that of application. Previous hermeneutics had held the application of what one understands to a situation to be a process distinct from that of interpretation—first one interpreted the text, and then applied it to one’s situation, if one so chose. Gadamer, however, argues that *all* understanding involves application to one’s present situation (where situation, as above, is understood broadly to mean one’s historical standpoint, or the sum of one’s prejudices). This is what occurs in the fusion of horizons. I don’t take the text as an object, but, in understanding it as making a claim to truth, apply it to my situation. In effect, to understand a truth claim is to apply the text making it to my situation, which means letting it speak to my prejudices. Of course, this does *not* mean that application only involves hearing those claims that confirm my prejudices; rather, as we saw in the fusion of horizons, ‘speaking to my prejudices’ really means putting my prejudice in question.

Georgia Warnke argues that the incorporation of application into his hermeneutics leaves Gadamer open to the charge of subjectivism,<sup>45</sup> or the idea that all interpretation is based on the individual’s personal, idiosyncratic reception of the text, with no room left over for a truth of the text beyond the varying individual interpretations of it. This is a charge made also by E. D. Hirsch. Hirsch argues that hermeneutics conflates what he calls “meaning” and “significance”: a text’s meaning is the single, correct meaning of the text, identified by Hirsch with the meaning the author intended the text to have. Significance, on the other hand, is what the text means ‘to’ the interpreter—its relevance to her particular situation. Hirsch thinks that if meaning is reduced to significance (as he thinks it

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<sup>43</sup> Or as Gadamer says, it is “superseded” (dessen Aufhebung vollbringt).

<sup>44</sup> Joel Weinsheimer claims that because understanding occurs as the fusion of horizons, two people with the same horizon can’t really be said to ‘understand’ each other. He gives as an example small talk about the weather, in which there is a total familiarity and no alienness needs to be overcome. See *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, 217.

<sup>45</sup> See p. 91 ff. in Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*.

is in Gadamer), there will be no criterion of correct interpretation, and any interpretation will be as good as any other. Gadamer is of course aware of this problem, and he uses Aristotle's discussion of *phronesis* as a way of coming to grips with it. He says that

If the heart of the hermeneutical problem is that one and the same tradition must time and again be understood in a different way, the problem, logically speaking, concerns the relationship between the universal and the particular. Understanding, then, is a special case of applying something universal to a particular situation.<sup>46</sup>

Aristotle develops an ethics in which the task is to understand how universals are applied to situations that are themselves not exhausted as instances of a universal. More important, *phronesis* is a form of knowledge in which the individual's situation is an integral part. All ethical decisions are made regarding particular situations that the decider is faced with. For Gadamer the critical point is that the right decision will vary depending on the situation, but that the decision is no less right for that. The question is how this is possible—how can something (in the case of ethics, the good) maintain its identity across varying situations when what it is is precisely dependent on each situation? This paradox of identity in difference is what Gadamer refers to above as the “heart of the hermeneutic problem.” Gadamer is able to avoid subjectivism not by slipping into objectivism, as Warnke argues, but rather by claiming that interpretation has irreducibly subjective *and* objective moments.<sup>47</sup> The objective moment is of course not one that Hirsch could subscribe to—Gadamer doesn't think meaning is grounded in authorial intention—but Gadamer's objectivism at least avoids the epistemological difficulties that Hirsch gets himself into when he both posits authorial intention as the basis of validity in interpretation *and* concedes that the interpreter is never in a position to know exactly what the author intended.

#### 2.4—Openness and the Logic of Question and Answer

Historically effected consciousness comes to understand the past by fusing with it, i.e. applying it to its situation. While this seems, as we just noted, that it

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<sup>46</sup> TM, 312; GW1, 317.

<sup>47</sup> We will explore this paradox and its combination of subjectivism and objectivism further in Chapter 4.

might lead to subjectivism in interpretation, Gadamer holds that the end result of this sort of hermeneutic experience is ever greater openness, i.e. an ever greater willingness to learn something new about the thing in question. We will now look at how such openness comes about. This will involve considering Gadamer's notions of experience (*Erfahrung*) and the logic of question and answer. In a nutshell, historically effected consciousness is the experience of tradition, and the experience of tradition is only possible if it is approached as a partner in conversation; but to treat something or someone as a partner in conversation is to hold oneself open to what it or she has to say.

Gadamer argues that experience as such is the experience of the new, and that the new is experienced as a dialectical reversal of consciousness. Through experience we build up cognition of concepts, or "universals," but "genuine" experience only occurs when something we experience negates a universal that we have thus built up. Experience in this sense does not "confirm" the universal as it stands, but reveals it to have been incompletely formed. Experience thought in this way, Gadamer holds, is not, as he says it is in Aristotle, conceived "teleologically," i.e. it is not thought in terms of what it results in—knowledge of the universal—but in terms of the "process" that it is. Gadamer thus claims that

The truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience....The experienced person proves to be...someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them.<sup>48</sup>

The experienced person is undogmatic because experience has shown her that positions dogmatically held are liable to be shown to be false *by* experience. Recognizing this leads her to be open to new experiences, to be constantly prepared to learn that what she has thought until now is not the whole picture. If experience results in anything, then, it is the ability to be open to experience, or a certain fallibilism in relation to one's own beliefs. Another result of being experienced, which also is itself tantamount to the openness to experience, is that one becomes cognizant of one's finitude and historicity. Experience teaches us that our power is limited, and that it is in part limited by who we are, i.e., where we come from.

In order "authentically" to experience tradition, historically effected consciousness has to hold itself open for it, has to be ready to be shown by tradition that it (historically effected consciousness) is not right about everything. But, says Gadamer, tradition is not just any experience: "it is language—i.e., it

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<sup>48</sup> TM, 355; GW1, 361.

expresses itself like a you.”<sup>49</sup> What does this mean? Tradition is handed down in the shape of linguistic artifacts, as stories and texts, and as everyday conversation or discourse. Anything linguistic is the production of a human being, and Gadamer’s implicit assertion is that *any* linguistic production has the status of a conversation between two people, between an I and a you. I authentically encounter tradition when I encounter it as a partner in conversation. The conversational encounter is for Gadamer fundamentally characterized by openness—i.e. the same thing that characterizes genuine experience. But what exactly is conversational openness? Gadamer delineates three ways in which one can experience a you, only one of which involves genuine openness, i.e. only one of which encapsulates the way one experiences a you in conversation. The first way one can experience a you is as an object. This is the experience of psychology or sociology (or of “human nature,” as Gadamer says). The you is seen as an entity in the causal chain about which one can make predictions, and that one can perhaps manipulate. The second way one can experience a you is as an other. The you is no longer seen as an object, but as a person with views about things. One does not take these views seriously, but treats them as ‘opinions’ and tries to understand them from the other’s point of view, which means understanding what it’s like to have such beliefs. This experience of the you assumes that one can suspend one’s own situatedness and transpose oneself into the soul, or shoes, of the other. Gadamer argues that this way of viewing another person “robs his claims of their legitimacy.”<sup>50</sup> An example of this way of experiencing the other is when someone says something like “you’re only saying that because you’re a woman”: one claims to understand the belief in question in its relation to the rest of the other’s belief system, but one does not take it seriously as a claim to truth. The third way of experiencing a you involves precisely that—hearing what someone else has to say as a claim to truth. To take something seriously as a claim to truth means to take it as something that might actually be true, and to grapple with and assess it oneself to determine whether it is true. This is the way one “truly” experiences a you as you, according to Gadamer, and only in this way is one “open” to the you: one is precisely open to the possibility that the you might say something that will lead me to *revise* my prejudices. But why is it the case that one only truly experiences the you as you when one hears what he has to say? When I do this, I really treat the you as

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<sup>49</sup> TM, 358, GW1, 364. I have rendered “Du” here as “you.” Philosophical convention, as in Weinsheimer and Marshall’s revision of the English translation of *Truth and Method*, calls for Du to be translated as “Thou.” While this was once the informal second person singular in English, and thus a correct translation of Du, to early 21<sup>st</sup> century ears it sounds archaic.

<sup>50</sup> TM, 360; GW1, GW1, 366.

another I—as someone whose beliefs are to be taken just as seriously as I take mine. Only in this way can the you be a *partner* in conversation, someone who will *seek with me* to draw conclusions about the subject matter. The you and the I are to be identified with their various prejudices, with those claims to truth that I and you take seriously; one “truly” experiences the you as you when one recognizes him as someone who has beliefs about things that he takes seriously.

The purpose of Gadamer’s analysis of these three ways of experiencing the other is to show how the interpreter can relate to tradition. Since tradition for Gadamer is a *you*, these three modes have analogues in the experience of it. Tradition can be experienced as an object to be explained; or it can be experienced as an other to be understood from that other’s point of view; or it can be experienced as having a possible truth to tell me. Experiencing tradition in this third way means that one has not “reflect[ed one]self out of a living relation with tradition,”<sup>51</sup> i.e., that one has not tried to step outside one’s situatedness, one’s circle of prejudices. This “living relation with tradition” in fact involves a twofold relation to tradition: tradition is that which one acknowledges is in play in one’s prejudices, and it is that which one listens to by consciously keeping one’s prejudices in play. Only by maintaining this relationship to one’s own prejudices and to the ‘object’ of tradition can one encounter tradition fully as a you—only in this way do I approach tradition with the possibility in mind that it might have something to tell me.

In his essay “You Don’t Know What I’m Talking About: Alterity and the Hermeneutic Ideal,” Robert Bernasconi asks whether this openness that Gadamer takes to be characteristic of coming to an understanding is really openness to the other in her otherness, or whether it masks a failure to understand. He suggests that there are encounters between individuals in which the subject position of the one prevents him from being able to understand what the other is saying, and that Gadamer’s picture, relying as it does on a prior agreement about the subject matter if there is to be understanding at all, cannot account for the breakdown in understanding when an interpreter is faced with ‘radical’ alterity. What, Bernasconi asks, is openness to the other supposed to consist in if our differences are so great that there is no prior agreement from which we can begin?

The moment of genuine alterity in Gadamer’s hermeneutical theory...is the experience of the other as radical challenge. I find myself addressed and put in question, prior to my assimilating what has been said to me. This moment cannot be readily reconciled with the theory into which it has been interposed, because that theory works to deprive alterity of its otherness prior to its appearance within the system: the other is always *my*

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

other, *my* Thou; the text always belongs to a tradition to which I too belong; if it speaks to me at all it is in a language which has been established in advance in a common accord which unites us from the outset; and if we lack even that level of agreement, we are at least united in our openness to find or await agreement.<sup>52</sup>

This critique of Gadamer is apt, but one question it raises is how much difference there can be in alterity. *Radical* difference would seem to prevent not just understanding in one direction—i.e. to prevent understanding on the part of the interpreter who is told she does not understand—but in the other direction as well: to say “you don’t understand what I’m saying,” an interpreter would need at least to recognize that the other fails to understand; but in that case the other’s words would have to be understood correctly as saying something false about the subject matter, or as being about a different subject matter. Or would they? As Lorenzo Simpson points out, Bernasconi’s challenge to Gadamer’s position consists in part in his claim that “the other challenges not just our biases and limitations, but also our very assumption that a topic, to be addressed by raising criticizable validity claims, is at issue at all.”<sup>53</sup> That is to say, in saying “you don’t know what I’m talking about,” the other is precisely *not* saying that one has got the subject matter wrong, since what is at stake is not agreement about a subject matter. But is agreement about a subject matter wholly absent from what is at stake in this challenge from the other? What Bernasconi is claiming seems to be that what I have failed to understand when the other addresses me in this way is the other *himself*. Gadamer does of course claim that trying to understand the other himself involves not taking him seriously as a you, and that to take him seriously would require me to think instead about what he has to say about the subject matter at hand. And here Bernasconi is perhaps right to suggest that there is more to the you than what he has to say about topics we both care about. But how do I come to understand the other himself, as opposed to his views on things? Gadamer’s framework ought not to be dismissed here: surely one way for me to understand the other himself involves *his* becoming my subject matter. If this happens, to understand him will mean hearing what he has to say about himself, and taking seriously his understanding of himself. The alternative for Gadamer would involve viewing the other’s words as an expression of himself, and not taking those words as claims to truth, i.e. not taking them as answers to the question of who the other is. If I do not do this, I do not understand the other. But it was precisely this failure to understand the other that Bernasconi was worried about.

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<sup>52</sup> Bernasconi, “You Don’t Know What I’m Talking About: Alterity and the Hermeneutic Ideal,” in Schmidt, ed., *The Specter of Relativism*, 193-4.

<sup>53</sup> Simpson, *The Unfinished Project: Toward a Postmetaphysical Humanism*, 114.

Now, if I do take the other's words as claims to truth, is there still room for a radical alterity that escapes me, perhaps that challenges me and calls me into question? This is arguably the question of how I can come to understand anything that differs in significant ways from how I currently understand the world. It is a difficult question, one that gets at the heart of the discussion of holism we have been conducting in this dissertation. We are here only beginning to address it. Part of the answer comes in what we will discuss next, viz. Gadamer's semantics of the question.

Again, for Gadamer experiencing something or someone as a you means being open to what it or she has to say. Because for Gadamer openness is embodied primarily in the structure of the question, we will complete this picture of the interpreter-tradition relation by looking at his discussion of the logic of question and answer. According to Gadamer, the openness of experience is grounded in the openness of the question:

the structure of the question is implicit in all experience. We cannot have experiences without asking questions. Recognizing that an object is different, and not as we first thought, obviously presupposes the question whether it was this or that. From a logical point of view, the openness essential to experience is precisely the openness of being either this or that. It has the structure of a question.<sup>54</sup>

Experience is reversal of consciousness, being shown in and by experience that one's current thought position is limited. What Gadamer is saying here is not that one must ask a question in order to have an experience—that would mean that one would need to be open *before* one had any experiences, when experience is precisely that which *opens*. Rather, his point is that experience *itself* is a question. A question “breaks open the being of that which is questioned.”<sup>55</sup> To ask “What is justice?” is to acknowledge that I do not know what justice is; this means that from my point of view, justice may be one of a number of things. To the person asking the question, justice becomes indeterminate, when before it was determinate, albeit in an unthematized way. This “indeterminacy” is openness. In the same way, experiences break open the being of things whose being I had taken for granted.

If experience really has the structure of a question, it can't be that in experience one replaces one unquestioned thought position with another. Rather, experience must yield genuine openness. For this reason Gadamer says that “the

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<sup>54</sup> TM, 362; GW1, 368.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. Translation slightly emended.

dialectical negativity of experience culminates in the idea of being perfectly experienced—i.e., being aware of our own finitude and limitedness...”<sup>56</sup> Being perfectly experienced, as we saw above, means always recognizing that I may be wrong, and thus being perpetually open to being shown to be wrong. The being of the things I have beliefs about is in this way “broken open”—I do not encounter them as absolutely determinate, but in an open space of possibility. Thus, when Gadamer says that a question breaks open the being of that which is questioned, he has something quite specific in mind. He says that “a question places what is questioned in a particular perspective.”<sup>57</sup> Asking ‘who?’ ‘what?’ or ‘how?’ establishes a range of possible answers that *excludes* the range of possible answers of other kinds of questions. The being of the thing in question becomes an open question within the space delimited by the question.

Gadamer argues that if discourse is to be taken to “reveal” something about a thing, it must be seen as an answer to a question about that thing. This “logic of question and answer” is based on the structural openness of the question. The basic idea comes from Collingwood: understanding the meaning of a statement involves understanding it as an answer to a question. In “The Universality of the Hermeneutic Problem,” Gadamer calls this the “hermeneutical *Ürphänomen*: No assertion is possible that cannot be understood as an answer to a question, and assertions can only be understood in this way.”<sup>58</sup> Tradition, or at least the traditional text that one seeks to interpret, must likewise be understood as an answer to a question. Gadamer connects this demand on interpretation with the notion of the fore-conception of completeness: to see a text as an answer to a question is to see it as something that has a single, unified sense. Understanding a text in this way requires that we “reconstruct” the question that it answers. However, reconstructing this question happens as part of a “process of questioning through which we try to answer the question that the text asks us.”<sup>59</sup> Since genuine understanding is both understanding the text as an answer to a question *and* the fusion of the past horizon with the present, the question that is understood must be *part of* this fusion; and this means that the question must not only be understood in its ‘meaning,’ it must also be *asked*. It must be a *question for us*. Only then will the horizon of the text become fused with our own, since as we have seen fusion occurs when I hear the text as a claim to truth. What Gadamer is saying here is that we understand something *as* a claim to truth when

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> PH, 11; GW2, 226.

<sup>59</sup> TM, 374; GW1, 380.

we ourselves find questionable the question to which it is an answer. Gadamer backs up this claim by making a distinction between understanding someone's opinion and asking a question. While it is possible to understand someone's opinion, i.e. what he means (*Meinung*), without oneself holding that opinion, "to understand the questionableness of something is already to be questioning."<sup>60</sup> I can understand what someone means who proclaims the sentence "marriage is only between a man and a woman," even if I don't myself believe that this is true. But in order to really understand this opinion, I must ask myself the question that motivates it—in this case, something like "Who ought to be able to get married?" This question must really strike me as needing an answer. To find it questionable is for the answer to it not to be *obvious* to me. If I do not ask myself some question like this, the assertion that marriage is only between a man and a woman will sound odd to me, and I will wonder how it is that anyone can believe such a thing. On the other hand, if I really am troubled in my reflections on things by the question about marriage, if the answer to it is not a foregone conclusion, I may begin to see what might lead someone to conclude that marriage should be limited to heterosexual couples—however much I myself may in the end conclude that this answer to the question is incorrect.

But wait—is it really the case that the belief that marriage should be limited to heterosexual couples is itself an answer to a question *for the person who holds that belief*? After all, if this belief is a prejudice, then to the interpreter in question it will surely not be *questionable*. To such a person, the claim that homosexual couples ought also to be able to marry will sound strange and incomprehensible. In order to understand what *I* say, that person will in turn need to find questionable the question that motivates my belief in the acceptability of gay marriage. But then we are back at the same problem: do *I* need to find this question questionable to have this prejudice in the first place? If this belief is a deep prejudice, then certainly at this moment I don't find it questionable. And even if there was a time when I did find it questionable (e.g. when I formed the belief), aren't there prejudices that are learned *unquestioningly* in the course of the perpetuation of a tradition? Perhaps, but if we take Gadamer's claims about the structural openness of experience seriously, then we will have to conclude that anyone who has had experiences (i.e. everyone) has had the experience of having a prejudice overturned. The more my prejudices are overturned the more open I become as an interpreter; but if openness is part of the *structure* of experience, then it follows that *everyone* is open to some degree. But from this it does *not* follow that I need to find the question to which my own prejudices are an answer questionable in order to have those prejudices. The reason is that it is not my prejudices that I understand. I understand what someone says about some thing. My prejudices are what allow me to understand—they themselves only become objects of interpretation when they are put in question by that which I am trying

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<sup>60</sup> TM, 375; GW1, 380.

to understand. Nevertheless there is something odd about this conclusion: if someone else, in order to understand what I say, must find the question to which my statements are an answer questionable, then surely there must be some question to which my statements are an answer *for me*. But as we noted above, the notion of prejudice seems to preclude the person with a particular prejudice from viewing it as an answer to a question that she really asks. The way out of this problem is in fact not to be found in the section of *Truth and Method* that we have been discussing, but in Part 3, “The Ontological Shift of Hermeneutics Guided by Language.” We will turn to that section in the next chapter, but we will note for now that the resolution of this difficulty comes in Gadamer’s claim that in all understanding there is an implicit recognition of a distinction between the being of the thing understood and its presentation in an interpretation. Once such a distinction is in place, we can say that to have a prejudice about anything is to implicitly recognize that one’s prejudice may be wrong—and that means to find the question to which it is an answer questionable.

In the essay “What is Truth?” Gadamer deepens his discussion of the logic of question and answer by making the further claim that not only are statements to be understood as motivated by questions; questions themselves are motivated, are “answers.” What he means is that questions too have presuppositions that are not encompassed by the “content” of the sentence. If I ask “How did India achieve independence?” I not only assume that India did achieve independence; I also assume that there was a way in which this occurred, and that this can be determined in an answer to the question I’m asking. Gadamer must also mean that questions as answers are answers *to* further questions; but that just means that in order to ask a question there must be a horizon within which that question can be asked. The presuppositions of our question above may be understood as determinations within an open space of questioning: Did India achieve independence? Can India’s achievement of independence be described and explained?<sup>61</sup>

For Gadamer, the logic of question and answer shows that historically effected consciousness enters into a relation with the text that is not uni-directional, not the knowledge of an object, but is “reciprocal,” is constituted as a “conversation” in

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<sup>61</sup> We might ask whether there aren’t utterances that don’t fit into the question-answer mold. In “Semantics and Hermeneutics,” Gadamer addresses this question and says that performatives like curses, blessings, commands, and complaints are not answers to questions per se, but they do, like assertions, respond to a “context of action” or a occasion. (PH, 89-90; GW2, 179-80.) In fact, in this essay Gadamer argues that it is this “occasionality,” this “dependency on the situation in which the expression is used,” that marks all speaking, whether assertoric, performative, or interrogatory. All speaking is a response.

which historically effected consciousness finds itself to be “addressed” by the text, to be asked a question by it. This question is one that historically effected consciousness itself finds questionable. This, then, is what it is for historically effected consciousness to mediate itself with tradition: it means finding one’s questions and concerns addressed in it (or discovering in it questions and concerns that one did not know one had); it means viewing tradition as a partner in conversation who talks about things about which I have opinions and about which I want to know more.

Is there a holistic relation between historically effected consciousness and tradition when the former approaches the latter as a partner in conversation? At the very least, it is clear that historically effected consciousness is not simply a part within the whole of tradition. In a conversation the aim of the conversants is to understand what each other has to say about the subject matter in question.<sup>62</sup> They do this by making claims and asking questions. It is thus the subject matter that is approached via the hermeneutic circle, and not the individual with whom we are conversing. Our goal is not to understand *him*, but the thing we are talking about. But in order to understand the subject matter, *do* we in fact need to understand everything our interlocutor believes? After all, he has a set of prejudices about all sorts of things, many of which overlap and inform each other. Is this system of prejudices itself holistically constituted? If it is, it would seem that to understand what he is saying about a particular topic will require me to understand what he has to say about *much* more than the topic we’re talking about. And in that case, our hermeneutic focus would have to shift from understanding the subject matter to understanding him—or at least, understanding all of his beliefs. But of course, this is what Gadamer counsels against in his analysis of historically effected consciousness. We will see in the next section in what sense a set of prejudices is holistically constituted, but note that, at the very least, it is not possible to survey the totality of one’s conversation partner’s beliefs when one engages in conversation with her. Any given conversation, while it may range over a series of varied topics, is always limited to drawing conclusions about just those topics that come up. Any change in my prejudices that comes about as a result of the conversational encounter will thus not be the result of a direct mediation with the other’s entire set of beliefs, but only with what my interlocutor has said about the topics we’ve discussed. All of my beliefs therefore certainly cannot be said to be a part in relation to the whole that is the totality of

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<sup>62</sup> Bernasconi notes (in “You Don’t Know What I’m Talking About,” 190) that much conversation is not aimed at understanding what someone has to say about some thing, but at what one might call social communion. His example is conversations about the weather. While even in such conversations the foreconception of completeness is in play (imagine one’s response to someone who says ‘lovely day’ when it’s pouring), it is true that their *aim* can hardly be said to be *Verständigung*.

the beliefs of my interlocutor. And since for historically effected consciousness, *tradition* is encountered as an interlocutor, insofar as one approaches tradition hermeneutically it would seem to follow that one also does not relate to it as part to whole—assuming there is more to tradition than one’s own prejudices. (That there is more to tradition than my own prejudices would seem straightforwardly true, since I am able to encounter texts from tradition that *overturn* my prejudices.) Tradition’s transcending its interpreters in this way prevents the interpreter from being completely determined by the whole tradition to which she belongs—and this suggests that whatever sort of holism there may be in play in a tradition, it is not a strong holism.

## 2.5—The Logic of Question and Answer and Truth

Now that we have a better understanding of historically effected consciousness and how it relates to tradition, we want to probe further into the question of the holism of tradition. We would like to find answers to the following questions: What is the relation of all of my prejudices to each other? What is the relation among all the things I experience in tradition? What is the relation between what I experience in tradition and tradition as a whole? These are questions about the structure of the semantic whole that is tradition, and the fact is that Gadamer does not answer them systematically. He does, however, give some clues and suggestions as to how he would answer them, and as we have seen devotes a considerable amount of time to showing how the individual interpreter experiences tradition. The place to look for Gadamer’s holistic understanding of tradition is in fact in this experience of tradition. As we saw, the upshot of that discussion was that one experiences tradition hermeneutically when one is open to the truth claims of the traditional text. Gadamer’s whole discussion is oriented, as we noted at the start of this chapter, to establishing the truth-directedness of understanding.<sup>63</sup> This means that if we are seeking an answer to the question of the relation of prejudices to each other, and that of the elements of tradition to the whole, we have to look at the question of truth.

If there is something that all of my prejudices have in common, it is that they are judgments about truth and falsity. And since tradition as that which is handed down to me becomes incorporated into my prejudices, what I experience in tradition must from my perspective likewise fall under the sway of truth. This

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<sup>63</sup> Grondin coins the phrase “Sein-zur-Wahrheit” to denote this fundamental truth-directedness on the part of interpreters. See *Hermeneutische Wahrheit?*, 140.

sway of truth in my experience of tradition we may encapsulate with Gadamer's term "continuity." I experience tradition as continuous with me: this means, I experience myself as a part of it. *This* means that tradition consists of 'yous' with whom I converse about things that matter to me. What matters to me—what I consider right and wrong, where I come from, where I'm going—is under the sway of truth: a text can tell me something about where I come from that I reject as false, or that I accept as true. Continuity with tradition is both achieved, through the encounter with texts that challenge my prejudices, and it is pre-established, in the form of prejudices. Continuity then is the constant forging of my connection with tradition as the bond of truth.

The centrality of truth in my relation to tradition also shows that it is not simply *meaning* that creates the bond between me and tradition. It might be said that what tradition grants me is a set of concepts that permits me to encounter and make sense of the world. In this way, my system of concepts can be said to form a semantic system that is presupposed by any truth claims I might make about things. However, it is manifest that such a picture of semantics is not the one operative in Gadamer. To have meaning is to be understood as an answer to a question. Concepts are not isolable, but occur in discourse—discourse which is always about some thing, which asks and answers questions about that thing. Interpreters are primarily to be viewed not as possessing a set of concepts that subtend, and thus semantically enable, their beliefs about things, but rather as possessing a set of *prejudices*—i.e. a set of commitments about how things are. This means that while concepts for Gadamer do function as 'background meanings,' they are themselves also 'objects' of understanding—things about which I have beliefs.<sup>64</sup> So "car" can be a concept that slips into the background as I talk about individual cars, or it can come into the foreground when I ask what it is to be a car. Thus, while concepts function as background meanings, they do not in that way cease to be ultimately subject to judgments about whether our understanding of them is true.

Integral to the bond of truth that unites the interpreter and her tradition is the bond of the question. My continuity with tradition is not just constituted by the various truths that I discover in it, but more deeply by the questions that I share with it. To have a question is to want to know the answer to it; therefore questioning presupposes a directedness toward truth. If my relation to tradition were only constituted by shared *prejudices*, shared judgments about truth, there would be much that was putatively traditionary that, because I disagree with it, I

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<sup>64</sup> This may be the major difference between Gadamer and Heidegger: Heidegger views concepts primarily as background meanings. On his picture, a concept is not necessarily something that is open to discussion—it is just that which allows us to view something *as* something in the first place. For Gadamer, on the other hand, any concept can in principle come into question.

must reject as a part of my tradition. But this is not how Gadamer sees tradition, as we noted above. As a multiplicity of often contradictory voices, tradition is, as he says, “multifarious.” For this reason, there must be a bond holding me and tradition together that is deeper than that of shared prejudices. More fundamentally, I am held together with tradition by shared questions. A shared question presupposes a shared topic (*Sache*) whose truth I and my interlocutor are both concerned to uncover. It is primarily these shared topics and the desire to draw conclusions about them that creates continuity between the interpreter and her tradition. But, it might be argued in Davidsonian fashion, perhaps to have a shared topic is just to share a more fundamental prejudice. So if two people are both concerned to understand a particular thing, they must begin with some shared beliefs about what that thing fundamentally is. To think of the topic of conversation in this way, however, is to miss one of the basic claims of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, viz., that a belief always emerges as a determination out of the delimited indeterminateness of a question. To share a topic is not just to share beliefs, because beliefs themselves presuppose questions. But to share a question is precisely to acknowledge that the topic one is discussing is not fully determinate—i.e. is not exhausted by whatever beliefs one happens to have about it. Two conversants thus share a topic not when they agree on a certain set of fundamental propositions about it, but when they recognize that many different things can be said about the thing in question, and that what this thing is is an open question.

We said above that truth and questioning bond me to my tradition, which is to say, in Gadamer’s terms, that they establish continuity between me and tradition. The question is, how does this take place? What I mean is: how is it that the truths that I accept and the questions that I ask, simply by being truths that I accept and questions that I ask, can bond my prejudices together with each other, can bond me together with tradition, and can bond tradition together with itself? We have seen how truths and questions can bond me to texts *within* tradition. How do they then serve to bond me to tradition as a whole? One thing that we can say is that all of my beliefs are all of *my* beliefs—i.e., every single prejudice that I have forms a chain of continuity between me and tradition, and so all of my beliefs relate to each other as continuous with the same entity—me. All my prejudices are interconnected, then, because *I* hold them to be *true*. Beyond this merely formal interconnection, we get another clue as to what the relationship might be here if we note what Gadamer says about the continuity between the artwork and the spectator in Part 1 of *Truth and Method*. There continuity means that the artwork speaks to me about my existence as a whole. Might it be the case that each of my prejudices has something to say to me about my existence as a whole? This seems implausible. Gadamer will later make the holistic claim that everything I say resonates throughout the whole of my language, but that is different from saying that everything I say pertains directly to my existence as a whole. Prejudices, in fact, are about all sorts of things, so the question remains open as to how they all integrate into my self-understanding.

We do get an answer of sorts to this question with Gadamer's claim on pp. 339-40 that the way a historian relates to tradition is the way a literary critic relates to a text. The literary critic considers texts as unities of meaning, and as such she applies them to her situation in the process of coming to understand them. In the same way, says Gadamer, the historian views all of history as a unified whole whose meaning she seeks to understand in the process of applying it to her own situation. The individual texts within a tradition become parts of the whole of tradition, to be understood in the movement of the hermeneutic circle. From Gadamer's analysis of the logic of question and answer it follows that to approach tradition as a meaningful text is to find in it the question to which it is an answer, and to do this is to be asked a question by it. What might such a question look like? Here are some candidates: Why do human beings fight each other? How do domination and exploitation come about? How do great human beings become great? All of these questions might act as motivations for historical research, which for Gadamer is not simply concerned with uncovering the objective 'facts' about history, but with understanding history in terms of questions that the historian herself finds questionable.<sup>65</sup> These questions are ones that I might have, given my experiences, and whose answers I would therefore apply to my own situation. If I understand tradition as unified into a response to one of these, as we might call them, 'meta-questions,' then is it also the case that I would view my prejudices as unified into a 'meta-prejudice' that could be challenged by the question that history poses to me? Gadamer does not say, but this would seem to follow from the claim that I can approach tradition like a unified text. Let us speculate what such a meta-prejudice might be. Take our second candidate for a historical meta-question above: How do domination and exploitation come about? One might answer this by saying that history is the history of the struggle for dominance between wills to power. Dominance and exploitation come about because stronger wills triumph over weaker ones, and life just is the will to power. We can view such an answer as a meta-prejudice if we understand it as the final belief in a belief system, by which I mean that it adjudicates among all other possible belief candidates—it is at the center of the web of beliefs, to use Quine's terminology.

In this picture, how do my various prejudices relate to each other? Again Gadamer does not provide an answer here, but we may attempt to extrapolate

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<sup>65</sup> Here we also see the similarities and differences between Gadamer and Nietzsche in sharp relief. In "The Use and Abuse of History in the Service of Life," Nietzsche too argues against an objectivist, scientific view of history, and understands history instead in terms of the motivations of those who do history. Nietzsche does not, however, see questioning as motivated by a desire to understand, a desire to grasp the truth—and this is precisely how Gadamer views historical questioning.

from the twin notions of meta-prejudice and meta-question. My system of prejudices consists of many varying beliefs. I have prejudices about education, politics, food, art, friendship, and so on. Tradition, as we have seen, exists in me as my prejudices, and especially in the process that forms them—the fusion of horizons. All of these prejudices may thus be seen as answers to questions that I have about these various topics. If I also understand tradition as a whole, then it has to be the case that my various prejudices are *unified* under my meta-prejudice—my belief about the being of the whole of tradition. This is demanded by the fore-conception of completeness, which is in play in all understanding. If we take our example of history as the struggle between wills to power again, we would say that having this as a meta-prejudice would involve understanding every other prejudice I have in terms of it. So I see the will to power in play in, for example, politics (elections as legitimated will to power), food (the domination of animals), friendship (will to power made stronger through unions), etc. The principle of the unity of prejudices entails their subordination under one all-encompassing prejudice. In this way, tradition and the system of prejudices in each individual are unified by the same thing: an underlying question that gives meaning to the whole.

The problem with this analysis, of course, is that it is unclear whether anyone other than the historian views tradition as a unified text in this fashion.<sup>66</sup> At the very least, only those interpreters who take tradition as such as their hermeneutic object will have a ‘meta-question’ that they take tradition as a whole to answer. So the question remains how the prejudices of someone who does not view tradition in this way are related to each other. This question is important for our discussion because we are trying to determine whether Gadamer’s holism is strong. As we saw in our initial look at holism in the philosophy of language, *the* holist tenet is that all of the beliefs in a belief system form an interlocking web, and hence that beliefs mean what they do because of their relation to the rest of the beliefs in the web. The rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction was supposed to have as a consequence the untenableness of molecularism, or the notion that our beliefs form not one great web but many smaller clusters that are themselves not semantically interconnected. Gadamer himself does not accept an analytic/synthetic distinction: in his discussion of concept-formation,<sup>67</sup> he argues that concepts are not pre-established universals (i.e. analytic ‘definitions’) that one simply applies to things in experience; rather, experience in its turn changes how we understand concepts. There is no absolute distinction between fact (the synthetic) and meaning (the analytic) in Gadamer, since meaning constitutes facts,

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<sup>66</sup> And even the historian is unlikely to subsume all of her beliefs under a single meta-prejudice.

<sup>67</sup> See TM, 428-38; GW1, 432-442.

on the one hand, and facts influence meaning, on the other. So it would seem that Gadamer is committed to the holism that follows from the rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction. But our purpose in really asking how it is that prejudices are unified into a whole is to see whether there is a plausible account of the holism of prejudices, or whether we are stuck with an argument that while apparently logically sound, has a conclusion whose very drawback is its lack of plausibility.

We do not find an answer to the question of how prejudices relate to each other (for the non-historian, at least) in Gadamer's discussion of tradition, nor, to be sure, do we find such an explicit account anywhere in Gadamer's writings. It seems to me, however, that it is possible to extrapolate an account from Gadamer's discussions of the world, truth, and the question. Over the next three chapters we will piece together this account by taking up Gadamer's discussions of these phenomena in turn.

In this chapter we have tried to establish that hermeneutics is a holism. Through our discussion of the hermeneutic circle and Gadamer's notion of the foreconception of completeness, we saw that the things interpreters understand are encountered as unified wholes. We also saw that interpreters encounter things from within a horizon, and against the backdrop of a tradition. Both are holistic notions, since they are constituted by networks of prejudices that the interpreter mediates with what she seeks to understand. Nevertheless, we also saw that the interpreter is not a part of a tradition as a node in a network; not only does the interpreter with historically effected consciousness have a certain distanced relation to her tradition, but every interpreter can learn things from her tradition that she did not know before. We therefore concluded that whatever holism is at work between the tradition and the interpreter is not likely to be a strong holism. We will continue to determine the strength of Gadamer's holism in the chapters to come, but we will leave off a full reckoning of this question until Chapter 5. Over the next two chapters we will turn to the question of the relativity of truth and meaning. As we saw in Chapter 1, such a relativity is often thought to be a consequence of the holist position. Now that we have a sense of the parameters of Gadamer's holism, we will ask whether it too has this relativity as a consequence.

### CHAPTER 3: THE WORLD

We have seen how the understanding of tradition is holistic in Gadamer: everything in tradition, as well as tradition itself, is encountered in the unending movement back and forth between the understanding of the part and the understanding of the whole. Nothing that is understood can be understood apart from this movement: ‘parts’ can never be understood on their own, and ‘wholes’ can never be understood without reference to their parts. In Part 3 of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer expands his discussion of understanding to encompass not just tradition and its texts, but everything that exists—that is, the world as such.<sup>1</sup> He argues that the medium of understanding is language, and claims that just as traditional content can only be understood because it is verbal, so things in the world may be understood only because they too reveal themselves as they are within the medium of language. The central concepts of Part 3, and arguably of philosophical hermeneutics as such, are language and linguisticity (*Sprache* and *Sprachlichkeit*). In this chapter, our concern with grasping Gadamerian holism will lead us to focus on a concept that is a corollary of language and linguisticity, namely that of ‘the world.’ The world, even more so than tradition, is that toward which understanding is directed. Hermeneutic holism—the holism of interpretation in its universality—requires that we understand how that which is and can be interpreted bears a holistic structure; it thus requires us to investigate the notion of the world. This notion requires a separate investigation from those having to do with both the everyday ‘objects’ of interpretation and the traditional horizon in which such objects appear because the world is not only something we interpret like a text, or a linguistically mediated intentional horizon (though it is both of these). It is that which is understood by every speaker as the absolute

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<sup>1</sup> To some extent the distinction between tradition and worldview is arbitrary: everything we encounter, we encounter from out of our tradition. Thus, our understanding of everything in the world, as well as of the world itself, will be mediated by who we are as a result of our emerging from a particular tradition.

totality in which any possible object of interpretation can be encountered.

As understood by Gadamer, the world is that semantic whole—i.e. that unified totality of meaning—beyond which, for the interpreter, there can be no further, more all-encompassing, semantic whole. It is different in critical ways from both Heidegger's understanding of world and Husserl's notion of the lifeworld. The world for Gadamer is neither a deterministic system of meaning in which the interpreter is somehow trapped; nor is the world one of a plurality of incommensurable semantic systems among which the interpreter has no grounds for choice apart from those internal to the systems themselves. We will see that Gadamer's notion of world in fact attempts to reconcile these two ways of viewing semantic wholes—the world is both a system of meaning that one finds oneself within and that perspective on things that permits the interpreter to grasp perspectives in their relativity.

Needless to say, one would expect any concept that seeks to do both these things at once to be subject to some internal tensions. But if Gadamer can maintain this balance, he will have shown us that there can be a holism in which truth and meaning are not (or not only) relative to context. I will here argue that the notion of the world in fact allows us to think truth and meaning as simultaneously context-relative and context-transcendent. Hermeneutics, in trying to grasp what it is to have a linguistically mediated perspective on things, leads us to conclude that there can be no such thing as a perspective that is constituted solely as the product of a certain context—nor can there be a perspective that is totally free of context (e.g. a “view from nowhere,” as Thomas Nagel has it). Furthermore, one can accept both conclusions while remaining a holist, since one of the conclusions (the impossibility of a context-free perspective) *is* the holist position. We will just have to show that holism should also reject ‘pure’ context-relativity. But to show how Gadamerian hermeneutics leads us to these conclusions, we will first have to see how Gadamer answers a series of questions: What is it to have a world? What is it to be a thing in the world? What is the difference between world and horizon? What is the world?

### 3.1—Being and Presentation

Gadamer's discussion of the world has two fundamental aspects. First, there is the question of what it is to have a world, and second, there is the question of what the world itself is. The first question has to do primarily with what sort of relation the interpreter bears to things in the world. The interpreter, argues Gadamer, encounters the things in her world differently from the way in which

animals encounter things. Animals are “embedded in their environment,”<sup>2</sup> while “man’s relation to the world is characterized by freedom from environment.”<sup>3</sup> Gadamer indicates what this means when he says that

To have a world means to have an orientation toward it. To have an orientation toward the world, however, means to keep oneself so free from what one encounters of the world that one can present it to oneself as it is. This capacity is at once to have a world and to have language. The concept of *world* is thus opposed to the concept of *environment*, which all living beings in the world possess.<sup>4</sup>

To have a world (to speak a language) means to have a certain freedom from that which surrounds me, and a concomitant ability to understand that which surrounds me as it is. As Gadamer implies, the latter ability is predicated upon the former freedom. What does this mean? Why is freedom the basis for the presentation of being? It must be the case that environment—*unfree* presentation—does not yield the being of the things that comprise it. To have an environment means that one is not free to take presentations in any other way than the way in which they are presented. Or rather, it is not to recognize that presentations are presentations *of* some thing, some being. It is to be ‘trapped’ in presentation. To have a world, on the other hand, is to “rise above”<sup>5</sup> or transcend one’s environment, and to present what one encounters to oneself as it is. Having a world thus means being able to *distinguish* between the presentation of things in one’s environment and the being of those things, and to do so by presenting that being to oneself. That presentation of being is of course an *interpretation*, and not an intuition of some non-perspectival essence. But it is nevertheless a presentation of what one takes the thing to be. World is the capacity to think the possibility that the object of interpretation—that which is presented—is *different* from the way in which it is given to me. And what this capacity essentially is, is the ability to make *present* that which is *absent*. Present to the interpreter is her environment; having a world means being able to make present to oneself the being of that which is in the environment. Being, then, cannot itself really be said to be ‘in’ the environment—it is *absent from* the environment, and can only be *presented in* an

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<sup>2</sup> TM, 444; GW1, 447.

<sup>3</sup> TM, 444; GW1, 448.

<sup>4</sup> TM, 443; GW1, 447.

<sup>5</sup> TM, 444; GW1, 448.

interpretation. This is how worldhood may be said to be a quality of things in the world: they are more than they seem.

The freedom from environment of human beings implies, as Gadamer says, a certain distance from things. The capacity to make present that which is absent depends on not being determined by that which surrounds me, on a certain separation from the causal chain to which other living things are subject. In this connection, Gadamer alludes in two different essays to Aristotle's distinction between human and animal communication.<sup>6</sup> According to Aristotle, animals communicate in order to avoid present possibilities of pain, and to seek present possibilities of pleasure. Humans, on the other hand, are able to communicate regarding future pains and pleasures, and can also "make manifest to each other what is useful and harmful, and therefore what is right and wrong."<sup>7</sup> The useful and harmful, however, are not "desirable in themselves," but for something "not yet given." This demonstrates man's "superiority over what is actually present, his sense of the future."<sup>8</sup> This distanced relation to the world is only possible because of language. Indeed, for Gadamer language and world are equiprimordial, each implying the other. It is language that can make the absent present, language that permits the interpreter to rise above her environment, to present the past and the future to herself and to others. Language is also responsible for the distinction between being and presentation that as we saw above characterizes worldhood. Without language things cannot be different, for the interpreter, than they seem. How is this the case?

Gadamer describes the distance from things made possible by language as the basis of the "unique factualness [*Sachlichkeit*]"<sup>9</sup> of language. Language is able to present matters of fact [*Sachverhalte*], which are essentially constituted by a recognition of the "independent otherness" of some thing. This independence of the thing, its distance from the speaker, enters language in the form of an assertion. Gadamer argues that the Greeks thought language in this way, and that their ontology too is "based on the factualness of language, in that it conceives the essence of language in terms of statements."<sup>10</sup> Gadamer himself offers a slightly

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. "Man and Language" in *Philosophical Hermeneutics* ("Mensch und Sprache," GW2) and "Culture and the Word" in *Praise of Theory* ("Die Kultur und Das Wort," *Lob der Theorie*).

<sup>7</sup> "Man and Language," PH, 59; GW2, 146.

<sup>8</sup> PH, 59; GW2, 146.

<sup>9</sup> TM, 445; GW1, 449.

<sup>10</sup> TM, 446; GW1, 449.

different view of language. The essence of language is not in statements, but in “dialogue, in *coming to an understanding*”<sup>11</sup> (ital. Gadamer). This coming to an understanding “is not a mere action, a purposeful activity, a setting up of signs through which I transmit my will to others...[It] is a life process in which a community of life is lived out.”<sup>12</sup> Gadamer argues that it is primarily in dialogue, rather than in statements, that humans have access to the world. He says,

Reaching an understanding in language places a subject matter before those communicating like a disputed object set before them [wie einen Streitgegenstand, der zwischen den Parteien in der Mitte niedergelegt wird]. Thus the world is the common ground, trodden by none and recognized by all, uniting all who talk to one another.<sup>13</sup>

We see here that even while the statement has been rejected in favor of the conversation as the paradigmatic linguistic mode, Gadamer still preserves the idea that distance from things is at the heart of language. The subject matter is “set before” those having a conversation as a “disputed object.” The world is “trodden by none”—it is not anything anyone immediately experiences, and as such is beyond environmental presentation. But why is it that just *conversation* is the mode of language that discloses world? Gadamer’s claim that conversation puts the subject matter before the speakers like a disputed object suggests that the *logic of question and answer* is in play in the disclosing of world in conversation. In conversations statements are not merely made, but questioned. As we saw in Chapter 2, conversation throws the thing under discussion, the thing in question, into an open space of possibility. For a thing to be thus thrown means that I recognize that that thing may be different from how it seems to me. That is to say, I come to see my view of the thing as a *perspective* on it, rather than as the unmediated presentation of the thing. But more fundamentally, what this shift in epistemic self-awareness means is that the *being* of the thing is ‘broken open’<sup>14</sup>—*what* it is comes into question. Thus, it is precisely in conversation that the distinction necessary for *world*—that between being and presentation—emerges.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> TM, 446; GW1, 449.

<sup>12</sup> TM, 446; GW1, 450.

<sup>13</sup> TM, 446; GW1, 450.

<sup>14</sup> See TM, 362; GW1, 368.

<sup>15</sup> It might be argued that what the ‘opening up of being in conversation’ denotes is the ability of interpreters to place a being ‘under a description,’ i.e. to say what *sort* of thing it is. But since it is in the *question* that being emerges in its distinction

From the notion that world is revealed in conversation it also follows that if there were no questions, if language consisted solely of statements, then humans would be much closer to the animal state of environmental enclosure than to the open state of being in the world. Questions allow me to create a bridge between my linguistic horizon and that of someone else. If someone talks about something I don't understand, I can only come to understand him by asking him questions—what does he mean by *x*?<sup>16</sup> There can, Gadamer argues, be no such thing as a statement that is meaningful but not in principle questionable—and a fortiori, there can be no language consisting only of such statements. As Gadamer says on p. 375,<sup>17</sup> “To understand meaning [Meinung] is to understand it as an answer to a question.” Or, as he puts it in “The Universality of the Hermeneutic Problem,” the “hermeneutic *Urphänomen*” is that “No assertion is possible that cannot be understood as an answer to a question, and assertions can only be understood in this way.”<sup>18</sup> What this means is that, because of its rootedness in the asking of questions, *all* language attains the openness of the world (i.e. the distinction between being and presentation), and *no* language merely perpetuates environmental enclosure.

Here we might run into a problem. Couldn't it be said that the view of worldhood presented here, where part of what it is to have a world is to recognize one's perspective as a perspective, is too prescriptive? Surely it is possible to speak a language and to have a world while being *unaware* that one's view of things is but one perspective among many. Here I seem to be claiming, on the contrary, that for Gadamer, anyone who speaks a language will take up a distanced, open, and non-dogmatic attitude toward things. But what I take Gadamer to be saying is rather that worldhood—the recognition that those things I experience may be different from how they are presented to me—is implicit in all language use. There is no such thing as a language user who *cannot in principle*

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from presentation, it is not quite right to say that the presentation of the being of something is to be identified with its presentation under a description. As that which is opened by a question, being occurs as a space of indeterminacy that *exceeds* determinate description. The being which is broken open by the question is always to some extent indeterminate. As we will see later, this indeterminacy of the thing in question will be decisive for the development of a holistic semantics that challenges the notion of incommensurability.

<sup>16</sup> Or he may eventually start speaking in a language I can understand—but that just means that he himself has already bridged the two horizons by asking himself the questions that open them up to each other.

<sup>17</sup> GW1, 381.

<sup>18</sup> PH, 11; GW2, 226.

recognize a distinction between being and presentation for any given thing she has beliefs about. The reason that this is not possible is that we encounter things dialogically, not monologically. In every conversation, I talk to someone whose views about things are *not identical* to mine. To speak to someone about something is always to be presented with a view of the thing that differs, however slightly, from my view of it. As we saw above, “Reaching an understanding in language places a subject matter before those communicating like a disputed object set before them.” Since, for Gadamer, conversation is the “essence of language,” anything I can talk about will be something that I will *always already* view as a being that is presented differently to different people. I will thus also always already view the thing as distinct from the way in which it is presented to me. The transcendence of perspective is *built into language*.

Now, to say that the transcendence of perspective is built into language is not to say that there cannot be dogmatic perspectives or worldviews. Indeed, Gadamer’s account of hermeneutic experience indicates that he thinks dogmatism is something any open interpreter will have developed *out of*—and if this is so dogmatism in interpretation must be decidedly common. But for one thing, *within* a dogmatic worldview there will be disagreement among those who share it about entities they encounter. While their general perspective may be unquestioned, there cannot but be disagreement about entities within their world, and hence a distinction between being and presentation for those entities. But even their worldview as a whole will in principle be questionable. As we will note below, the world for Gadamer is the totality of beings; thus, a non-questionable worldview would have to be one in which there were some entities for which the distinction between being and presentation were not operative. But as we’ve seen, this distinction is operative for *any entity*—anything encountered as a being. The world as the *totality* of such beings must therefore also be questionable, and this means open to being seen as distinct from the way in which it is presented. If this is the case, though, why is there any dogmatism at all in worldviews? Gadamer’s account of hermeneutic experience should show us that dogmatism will always be a matter of degree. Because prejudices must always be seen as answers to questions that break open the being of the thing in question, there is no such thing as *complete* dogmatism, i.e. being *incapable* of seeing one’s perspective as a perspective. But there will always be some degree of *partial* dogmatism: I and my co-traditionists will have different perspectives on the things we encounter, but those perspectives will often not be all that different. The force of tradition will narrow the range of possible interpretations of any given thing, and so will narrow my view of the world as a whole.

### 3.2—World as Formal Totality

Gadamer's assertion that the world is the "common ground, trodden by none and recognized by all, uniting all who talk to one another" indicates what the second fundamental aspect of his understanding of the world is. The world is not just the network of signification in which I find myself as an interpreter, but the *totality of beings* as such.<sup>19</sup> For Gadamer, two things follow from this conception of the world. First, the world cannot be made an object of knowledge, and second, because it cannot be an object of knowledge, it cannot be seen as *relative* to some *worldview*. But if the world cannot be seen as relative to something else, it seems that it must be viewed as *absolute*. A serious question arises here. Gadamer does acknowledge that different people, cultures, etc., have different worldviews—but how can the world be absolute if there is a plurality of (sometimes *very* different) worldviews? This question is especially acute if we note that different worldviews are committed to the existence of *different things*, and also to different *sorts* of things (i.e. to different ontologies). How can the world that is intended in these various worldviews be *the same world*—as it must be if the world is absolute?

Let's begin by outlining Gadamer's various claims in favor of the absoluteness of the world. So, he asserts that "Understanding is reached about the world that presents itself to us in common life and that encompasses everything,"<sup>20</sup> and further that "the verbal world in which we live is not a barrier that prevents knowledge of being-in-itself but fundamentally embraces everything in which our insight can be enlarged and deepened."<sup>21</sup> The world is not simply the totality of what I take to exist at any given moment. It encompasses *everything*, and this includes things that I have not yet encountered. This is why Gadamer says the world "embraces everything in which our insight *can be* enlarged and deepened" (zu erweitern und zu erheben vermag). It is also why he implicitly holds that the world is not just the totality but also the *infinity* of beings.<sup>22</sup> If the

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<sup>19</sup> "Ganze des Seienden." (Cf. TM, 452 & 457; GW1, 456 & 461.)

<sup>20</sup> TM, 446-7 (translation slightly emended); GW1, 450.

<sup>21</sup> TM, 447; GW1, 450-51.

<sup>22</sup> TM, 453; GW1 457. Gadamer does not here explicitly state that the world is the infinity of beings, but the context indicates that this is what he has in mind. He contrasts the way animals are enclosed in an environment both with the way human language users relate to the world as the "totality of what exists", and with the way they relate to the "infinity of beings." What sets humans apart is that they

world were a *concrete* totality, i.e. the totality of just those beings *recognized by me* at some point in time, then the world could not extend beyond these beings, it could not allow for the “enlargement” of my insight. When I speak of ‘my’ world—as when I say “my world is very different from yours”—I am speaking of that world as a concrete totality. But if ‘world’ is always such a concrete totality, not only would my world change—become a *different* world—with the addition of any new entities; every person and every tradition would have its own ‘world.’ To be sure, it is entirely appropriate in ordinary English to speak of a plurality of worlds in this way. But what Gadamer has in mind when he speaks of the world is something altogether different. The world as Gadamer understands it is not *delimited*. My view of the world can expand indefinitely because no single perspective that I can take up will have a completely comprehensive view of the beings it is a perspective on. There will always be new things to say about those beings with which I am already familiar, and there will always be new beings that I encounter for the first time. But all of this enlargement is only possible if the world that I am interpreting is not isomorphic with just those things I am familiar with—i.e. if *the* world is not identical to *my* world.

So the world must be infinite, but it must also be what I will call *formal*. Consider the following: “In every worldview the being-in-itself of the world is intended. It [the world] is the whole to which linguistically schematized experience refers.”<sup>23</sup> And further,

...in language the world itself presents itself. Verbal experience of the world is “absolute.” It [the verbal experience of the world] transcends all the relative ways being is posited because it embraces *all* being-in-itself in *whatever* relationships (relativities) it appears. Our verbal experience of the world is prior to everything that is recognized and addressed as existing.<sup>24</sup> (Ital. mine.)

If the experience of the world is to have this degree of expansiveness—such that it can encompass *any possible* “relativity” (i.e. a subset of beings for which being is posited in a certain way), then the world cannot be isomorphic with any *particular* relativity or set of relativities: since it is absolute, it transcends any such set. This

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have a world; thus, the implication is that the infiniteness of the totality of beings is one of the characteristics of the world.

<sup>23</sup> TM, 447; GW1, 451. Translation slightly emended.

<sup>24</sup> TM, 450; GW1, 453-4.

transcendence of the world means that the world is a *formal totality*.<sup>25</sup> Any specification of the content of the world, or rather, any attempt to identify “the world” with such specified content, will mean that the world is identical to a particular relativity (or set of relativities), rather than to the totality of possible relativities. To be clear: in speaking of the world as “absolute,” Gadamer does not mean to imply that the world is a *metaphysical* totality of pre-existing entities. Such a totality would consist of entities characterized in a certain way, while beings in a formal totality are not characterized in *any* way. Nor is it the case that the world as a formal totality is something we could *experience*—we experience beings in their concrete specificity, not ‘bare,’ uncharacterized beings. But any characterization of the world (any worldview) will be a characterization of the totality of beings—and thus the totality of beings will be what is *formally understood* in any given worldview. That the world has this formal aspect, i.e. that the world is not simply to be identified with what one actually takes to exist, finds further support in Gadamer’s claim that “the verbal experience of the world is prior to everything that is recognized and addressed as existing.” The world is precisely that which must be there if one is to recognize all of those particular things one is familiar with *as* existing in a certain way. A concrete and fully determinate totality, on the other hand, is a totality of recognized particular beings—it is a particular characterization, or *ontologization*, of the formal totality of beings.

From these qualities of the world—its totality, infinity, and, formality—it follows that there is only *one single* world intended in any possible worldview. Put slightly differently, every worldview intends the same world. But what does this mean? And, recalling the question we asked above, what is the relation between *the* world and any given worldview? Gadamer denies that the multiplicity of worldviews entails the “relativization of the “world”.”<sup>26</sup> We can begin to see why this is the case if we see that for Gadamer, the world is precisely that which is intended as transcending relativity in any given worldview. Indeed, as we saw above, to be a *worldview* is to be a perspective on things that always already (if only to a limited extent) *recognizes* the relativity of the various

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<sup>25</sup> I choose this terminology in part to draw attention to the parallel between Gadamer’s conception of the world and his notion of the fore-conception of completeness. As we saw in Ch. 2, to understand a text, an interpreter must approach it with the expectation that it will be a coherent, unified whole. This aspect of the fore-conception Gadamer calls a “formal condition of all understanding” (TM, 294; GW1, 299). Gadamer views the world as something we encounter not only in its concrete specificity, but also as a unified whole. The world viewed in this way is viewed ‘formally.’

<sup>26</sup> TM, 447; GW1, 451.

perspectives that make up that one all-encompassing perspective. Being, says Gadamer, is posited in various ways *within* a worldview. His example is that of the sun, which we perceive to “set,” but which physical theory tells us is a giant ball of energy around which the earth rotates. The sun as energy, i.e. as objective presence, is a relativity that sits alongside talk of beautiful sunsets, and both of these perspectives can sit side by side in a worldview. This cohabitation is possible because in one’s worldview one intends not just beings as disclosed by a single ontology, but possibly numerous ontologies encompassed by the world itself as the totality of beings.

Because to have a world is to have the capacity to see perspectives as perspectives, there are for Gadamer in principle no barriers between worldviews. He says, “each worldview can be extended into every other. It can understand and comprehend, from within itself, the “view” of the world presented in another language.”<sup>27</sup> Only if having a worldview means the capacity to ‘rise above’ perspective can this mutual encompassing of worldviews be possible. If my worldview were limited to the positing of being within a relativity, within a perspective, then I could only understand the contents of another worldview in terms of that perspective. If a worldview were simply such a perspective, then coming to view it *as* a perspective would involve not *expanding* my worldview, but as we saw above, *adopting another one*. Furthermore, “every possible insight,”<sup>28</sup> according to Gadamer available to anyone with a worldview (so anyone who speaks a language), would *not* be available to someone with a perspectival view of things. Such a view could not understand anything from *another* perspective, as it would grasp anything from such an alternative perspective on its own terms.

Here we would seem to run into a problem. We saw above that understanding for Gadamer involves finding the question to which a text is an answer questionable oneself. But here we seem to be saying that having a worldview involves rising above the very perspectives—i.e. the very sets of prejudices—that make understanding possible in the first place. This is not a serious problem, however, since as we have seen, Gadamer’s normative account of prejudices holds them always to have the possibility of being seen *as* prejudices. To have a prejudice is to be able to “rise above it”—even while this does not mean that one could somehow exist in a state free of prejudices.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, having a worldview does not mean that one denies the various relativities within it—they are, after all, part of that worldview, and so must be taken seriously. What Gadamer means

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<sup>27</sup> TM, 448; GW1, 452.

<sup>28</sup> TM, 447; GW1, 451.

<sup>29</sup> This rising above prejudice while remaining ‘prejudiced’ is the hermeneutic condition Gadamer refers to “historically effected consciousness.”

when he says that “verbal experience of the world is “absolute”” is that with language one is able to recognize a relativity within one’s worldview as a *partial* view of things. One sees it as being a view of the thing, and thus capturing the thing in some way; but as a perspective one recognizes that this view does not capture the thing completely or exhaustively. The world—the absolute ideal of the totality of beings—allows me to view any relativity *as* a partial view because the world reveals itself in language as “the whole to which linguistically schematized experience refers.” That is, language reveals the world as the whole for which being is ultimately posited by any relativity.

If language allows us to recognize our view of the world as a partial view, how does it disclose the world as the totality of beings that this view is a partial view of? We have seen how conversation opens up the distinction between being and presentation, and thus how ‘worldhood,’ the distance between interpreter and thing, is disclosed. But we have yet to establish how, on Gadamer’s picture, language also discloses not just particular beings but the totality of beings. We do not get an explicit answer to this question in Gadamer, but it is not difficult to see what such an answer would look like. If language opens up the distinction between the being of things and their presentation, it follows that this distinction is operative for *any* thing we come across in experience. In experience, in turn, we encounter what I above called a concrete totality of such things—experience is always finite, and at any given time we will have encountered a finite number of beings. But because to encounter a thing is to encounter its being as distinct from its presentation, any concrete totality of things will also be a formal totality. That is to say, if I recognize a distinction between being and presentation for *every thing* I encounter, it follows that I must recognize this distinction for *everything*—for the totality of those things. To have a world, then, is to just to recognize the distinction between how everything seems and how everything is. And since language, as conversation, as question and answer, is operative in establishing this distinction for individual beings, it must also be operative in establishing it for the totality of beings.

### 3.3—World as Horizon

The distinction between the world as a concrete totality and the world as a formal totality is central to grasping Gadamer’s notion of the world, and in understanding how Gadamer’s holism differs from other versions of holism. We can make this distinction clearer if we consider again the notion of a horizon. A horizon, we saw in Chapter 2, is everything I have access to from my perspective; it is thus in fact more accurate to call the world as concrete totality a horizon than it is to call it ‘a’ world. Another way of putting this is to say that to use the term

‘world’ for such a concrete totality is to *think world as horizon, and not as ‘the’ world*. As I noted above, the world I am in is always *the* world; my worldview is my perspective on the one world, and this view is *coextensive* with my horizon. But neither my horizon nor my worldview is coextensive with the world. My worldview could not be a *perspective* on the world if the two were identical. Consider, by way of contrast, the way Thomas Kuhn understands world in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. In the chapter entitled “Revolutions as Changes of World View,” he says,

...paradigm changes do cause scientists to see the world of their research-engagement differently. Insofar as their only recourse to that world is through what they see and do, we may want to say that after a revolution scientists are responding to a different world.<sup>30</sup>

There is some equivocation here: Kuhn is somewhat reluctant to say that the scientist ‘really’ responds to a *different* world from that of his predecessors, and he sometimes says that ‘the world’ does not change with a change in paradigm.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless he persists in characterizing the horizons of scientists from different paradigms as different ‘worlds.’ The reason Kuhn does so is that he tacitly identifies ‘world’ with the *contents* of the world, and the contents of the world, for the scientist (as for everyone else), are in part constituted by what she perceives and experiences. Scientists working in different paradigms, Kuhn argues, don’t just employ different concepts, they have different perceptual experiences. (And in fact, what scientists are able to perceive is in part determined by the concepts deployed in their paradigms.) Since Kuhn presupposes that one’s world is constituted by one’s perceptual experiences and one’s paradigm, different perceptual experiences (and different paradigms) equal different worlds. World for Kuhn is thus a determinate, finite, relative totality.

Now, I’d like to argue that any understanding of the world (like that of Kuhn) that conceives of it as a determinate totality thinks world as horizon and not as ‘the’ world. Heidegger’s conception of world in *Being and Time* and Husserl’s notion of the lifeworld in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* in fact come closer to being conceptions of horizon than conceptions of what Gadamer would call the world—though to be sure, neither the Heideggerian world nor the Husserlian lifeworld ought strictly speaking to be identified with the notion of a horizon. Nevertheless, I would like here to consider each in turn, with the aim of shedding further light on Gadamer’s notion of the world by way of a contract with the positions of his phenomenological

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 111.

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., 121.

predecessors.

According to Husserl, the lifeworld is fundamentally that which is “taken for granted, which is presupposed by all thinking, all activity of life with all its ends and accomplishments.”<sup>32</sup> The lifeworld is just my surrounding world—everything that forms the background of all thought and experience of individual objects. I can ‘turn toward’ any part of the lifeworld and bring it into focus as an object of concern and interest—and it is possible to do this only because it is continuous with every other object I can address myself to. Whenever I intend some object, I simultaneously (but indirectly) intend the lifeworld totality as an unquestionably valid background. Now, the lifeworld is always “pregiven as existing for all in common,”<sup>33</sup> as “*the* world common to us all.”<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the lifeworld is “subjective and relative”: different groups of humans have different lifeworlds, and the content of a lifeworld is historically and culturally contingent. Of course, lifeworlds are constituted by transcendental subjectivity, which is itself not relative to anything else. And their content is not completely relative: there are common lifeworld structures. (For example every lifeworld incorporates spatiotemporality, the body, and causality.<sup>35</sup>) But the key for us here is to note that Husserl views the lifeworld as a *horizon*. He says, for example, that the lifeworld “is pregiven to us, the waking, always somehow practically interested subjects, not occasionally but always and necessarily as the universal field of all actual and possible praxis, as horizon.”<sup>36</sup> And further, “Things, objects...are “given” as being valid for us in each case...but in principle only in such a way that we are conscious of them as things or objects *within the world horizon*.”<sup>37</sup> The lifeworld is always this particular world of things with which I am familiar. So while the world as *experienced* in the natural attitude is singular and absolute—for me it is always *the* world—from the point of view of transcendental subjectivity the world is a non-absolute horizon, and it makes sense from this perspective to speak of ‘different’ lifeworlds whose content is relativized.

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<sup>32</sup> Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 113.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 143. (Ital. Husserl)

But Husserl faces a particular problem in viewing the lifeworld as a horizon. He acknowledges the relativity that follows from viewing the lifeworld in this way, but wants also to insist that anyone with a lifeworld (which is, of course, everyone), can only view her world in the singular: the lifeworld is experienced in such a way that every other ‘lifeworld’ one encounters will be viewed against the backdrop of my lifeworld, and hence will be a *part* of my lifeworld. How is Husserl able to maintain both perspectives—i.e. the perspective that recognizes the relativity of lifeworlds, on the one hand, and that from which it makes no sense to speak of there being more than one ‘world’? By performing the transcendental reduction, Husserl claims he is able to take up a view from outside his own lifeworld:

This [the position afforded by the epoche] is not a “view,” an “interpretation” bestowed upon the world. Every view about... [sic], every opinion about “the” world, has its ground in the pregiven world. It is from this very ground that I have freed myself through the epoche; I stand *above* the world, which has now become for me, in a quite peculiar sense, a *phenomenon*.<sup>38</sup>

The paradox that the phenomenologist faces when asking about the constitution of the lifeworld is that ‘I’ am both a world-constituting subject and, as a human being, an object in the world.<sup>39</sup> By privileging the perspective of the transcendental ego, Husserl claims to resolve the paradox. But from a hermeneutic point of view, the difficulty with such a move is plain. For the hermeneut, the transcendental ego is chimerical, since Husserl holds that it is epistemically possible to reach it by suspending the validity of *all* of one’s prejudices in one fell swoop—and no such suspension is possible for the finite, historically situated interpreter.

This particular phenomenological paradox does not arise for Gadamer, even though he is a thinker writing within the phenomenological tradition. To see how this is the case, we will have to give a brief account of how hermeneutics emerged out of phenomenology. So: Gadamer jettisons the transcendental ego, but retains the core phenomenological notion of intentionality. Phenomenology itself may be read as a response to metaphysics: metaphysics institutes the distinction between subject and object, and thus generates the problems of skepticism and their attempted solutions by epistemology; phenomenology, on the other hand, denies that there is any absolute distinction between subject and object, since there can

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>39</sup> Foucault alludes to this paradox when he calls ‘man’ the “transcendental-empirical doublet.” See *The Order of Things*, 318.

be no subjectivity that is not ‘consciousness of’ some object. Subject and object are always co-implicated and correlated. Hermeneutics embraces this view of correlational intentionality, but goes one step further in abandoning talk of subject and object. These intentional poles are replaced with those of interpreter and thing (Sache, subject matter), and instead of viewing the thing as ‘constituted’ by the interpreter (the way an object would be by a phenomenological subject), hermeneutics views *both* as being in the world. Human beings are thus not transcendental subjects standing *outside* the world, but are always already (and never not) *in* the world. Gadamer furthermore accepts Heidegger’s move away from the final vestiges of transcendental subjectivity in the latter’s “turn.” In the *Kehre*, Heidegger recognized that the Dasein of *Being and Time*, while having the seemingly non-transcendental being-in-the-world as its mode of being, nevertheless was world-constituting—not through subjective categorization but through its projects. The later Heidegger abandons the term “Dasein,” and seeks rather to think “man” in his relation to the “Ereignis”—that which gives him the beings he has dealings with and the words he speaks. Man, for the later Heidegger, does not ‘constitute’ anything. Nevertheless, while Gadamer draws philosophical inspiration from the turn, he *also* claims that *Truth and Method* is situated in phenomenology. Along these lines, the project of philosophical hermeneutics is to work out “a theory of the real experience that thinking is.”<sup>40</sup> That experience is one in which *what one is is more than what one experiences*—one experiences oneself as being more than that of which one is aware. There is no juggling of paradoxically entwined transcendental and empirical perspectives here, just an account of how it is that human beings understand things.<sup>41</sup> All three terms—human beings, understanding, and things—designate entities that are in the world (or an event that is in the world, in the case of understanding).

By viewing the lifeworld as a horizon, Husserl affirms that the subject remains at the center of his phenomenology. A horizon is always seen from a point of view—a horizon just is the totality of that which can be seen from a particular point of view. A worldview, on the other hand, is a view of something that will always exceed whatever it is one has in view in one’s horizon. At the heart of philosophical hermeneutics is not the subject, but human finitude, and human finitude *decenters* the subject. On two counts: first, the interpreter encounters a world that is always beyond anything a subject could constitute; and

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<sup>40</sup> See the “Foreword to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition,” TM, xxxvi; GW2, 446.

<sup>41</sup> As we will see in Chapter 4, Gadamer’s position *does* invoke paradox—the paradox of the object of interpretation that is both identical to and distinct from the interpretation in which it ‘appears.’ Unlike Husserl, however, Gadamer does not seek to resolve the paradox, but accepts it as a condition of possibility of interpretation.

second, the interpreter herself is always more than she knows. From the point of view of hermeneutics, the *horizon* that is the lifeworld has to be seen instead as a *worldview*, that is, as an interpretation of the world stretching out beyond that with which I am familiar. But this means that the lifeworld is not the same thing as the world.

Heidegger's conception of the world in *Being and Time* is similar to Husserl's notion of the lifeworld. Worldhood (the being of the world) is defined as significance, and world as the referential totality of Dasein. This referential totality is the unthematized network of background meanings that allows any individual entity to be encountered as equipment—in its readiness-to-hand. More fundamentally, world is constituted by the network of relations that tie back to Dasein's projects, all done ultimately in the service of Dasein's concern for its own being. The beings in this sort of world are determinate—they are disclosed in a certain way by the projects in which Dasein is engaged—and there is a determinate totality of them. The 'world' that Dasein is in is thus a horizon—it is that with which Dasein is familiar. Even in a later text like "The Origin of the Work of Art," in which Heidegger emphasizes its openness, world remains a horizontal notion. For example, he holds that "The world is the self-opening openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of a historical people."<sup>42</sup> The world is here really 'a' world, a horizon for a "historical people."

In *Being and Time*, moreover, there is no principled distinction between environment and world, as there is in *Truth and Method*. In fact Heidegger goes so far as to say that the "world of everyday Dasein which is closest to it, is the *environment*."<sup>43</sup> This should suggest that for Heidegger, at least in *Being and Time*, 'world' does not designate something formal and absolute, but can be predicated only of what we might call 'local totalities.' That the world for Heidegger is always a local totality is further demonstrated by Heidegger's analysis of readiness-to-hand. Anything ready-to-hand can only be encountered as part of a totality of involvements. As part of such a totality, the ready-to-hand has a "worldly character." The world as such is just the totality of all the various involvements that emerge in the context of Dasein's projects. Heidegger says, "The wherein of an act of understanding which assigns or refers itself is that for which one lets entities be encountered in the kind of Being that belongs to involvements, and this wherein is the phenomenon of the world."<sup>44</sup> An involvement is always particular—the hammer is involved in hammering,

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<sup>42</sup> Heidegger, "Origin of the Work of Art," in *Basic Writings*, 174.

<sup>43</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 94.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 119. (Italicized in original.)

hammering in securing something, securing something ultimately in protecting Dasein against the elements<sup>45</sup>—and thus the *totality* of such involvements is a totality of particulars, or as we put it before, a concrete totality. The world of any given Dasein is therefore, as Heidegger says, always “primordially familiar.”<sup>46</sup> That is, the world is comprised of all those projects and involvements that are part of Dasein’s overall concern for its own Being. Heidegger here does not really talk about ‘the’ world as encompassing anything beyond the projects and involvements of Dasein.

Gadamer’s conception of the world, on the other hand, leaves room for such a beyond. As the totality of what exists, the world may in principle consist of innumerable entities that are outside of my ken, in addition to consisting of those things with which I am familiar. The world for Gadamer does not devolve upon individual (or groups of) human beings, and so can never be limited to the “wherein” of their projects. This is why there can be multiple worlds in Heidegger, but not in Gadamer.

Another important difference between Gadamer and Heidegger is that while the latter understands meaning in terms of Dasein’s projects, and ultimately in terms of Dasein’s concern for its own Being, Gadamer understands it in terms of the questions that human beings ask themselves. The question reveals the thing to be possibly different from its presentation; this means that in questioning, a being is not just this thing with which I am familiar, but something that is more than what I encounter in my familiarity with it. The world itself is just such a familiar something whose being exceeds its familiarity. The openness of questioning, the recognition of the distinction between being and presentation, thus yields the world as the totality of what exists in a way that identifying the world with the totality of involvements cannot. At the most, Dasein can take up different projects, and thus constitute its world differently. But since world devolves upon those projects, any changes in them will mean Dasein now inhabits a *different* world than the one it did before. For Gadamer, any new questions that a human being finds questionable will always be questions about the *same* world, the same (because it is the only) totality of what exists.

We’ll be able to further illustrate Gadamer’s understanding of the notion of the world if we take a brief look at Cristina Lafont’s critique of Gadamer in *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*. Lafont argues that Gadamer follows Heidegger in viewing language as “world-disclosing.” By this she means that both thinkers take language to reveal beings in their being—language determines *what* we can talk about by determining what *sorts* of things we can talk about. The phrase she uses to denote this phenomenon is, after Frege, “meaning determines reference.” What we refer to in speech is determined not directly by a sort of

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 119.

linguistic pointing at a non-linguistic entity; rather, language constitutes entities as they are, and thus allows us to refer to them via the meanings of the words we use.<sup>47</sup> Lafont takes Gadamer to more or less adopt the later Heidegger's view of language, though she does say that Gadamer adds into the mix the role of tradition in uniting individuals through communication. However, perhaps because she begins with Heidegger's conception of world-disclosure, Lafont does not grasp the more salient differences between his view and that of Gadamer. She takes Heidegger to view language as disclosing the being of beings—and this she indicates *just is* what it is to disclose the world. Indeed, she holds the notion that the world might also be the *totality* of beings to be a relic of the “philosophy of consciousness,” which viewed beings as objects arrayed before a mind-subject that is not itself an object. But this overlooks the distinction between the world as the totality of beings and the world as the totality of objects. The individual interpreter is included in the former sort of world, and excluded from the latter. The totality of objects is also a totality as a collection of entities, whereas the totality of beings is a whole in which entities are elements.

If, as Lafont argues, Heidegger holds that the world is a “symbolically structured whole” consisting exclusively of beings whose being is disclosed by language, then, given the multiplicity of human languages, there must be multiple, possibly incommensurable worlds. But Gadamer, at least, does not view language as world-disclosing in this way. For Gadamer, the world that language discloses is, once again, not, or not only, the world as a determinate totality. As the totality of what exists, the world is not yet *ontologically* determinate, as it is under a world-disclosure that reveals the being of beings. As Gadamer says, “our verbal experience of the world is prior to everything that is recognized and addressed as existing.”<sup>48</sup> Before (logically, that is, not temporally) there is an ontology of the world, there is the world—the existence of a totality of beings. This formal understanding of the world must be distinguished from its ontological concretization because in conversation one can *change* one's ontology. The being of beings can come into question in conversation, but it is always the *same* world about whose entities one asks when the question of their being comes up. Otherwise, being could not be *in question*—one would have one ontology or another, and ontology itself could not be up for discussion. But if one can ask

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<sup>47</sup> In fact, Lafont holds that the sort of incommensurability and relativism that are often thought to attend semantic holism only follow from it in combination with the view of language whereby meaning determines reference. Holism on its own, she says, yields not relativism but fallibilism. See Lafont, *Heidegger, Language, and World-Disclosure*, xvi.

<sup>48</sup> TM, 450; GW1, 454.

about the being of beings, and entertain various possibilities thereof, one must be able to conceptualize the totality of beings formally, i.e. distinct from any determination of their being—prior to an *answer* to the question of being. Now to be sure, for being to be in question, I must also have ontological prejudices. One of the central tenets of Gadamerian hermeneutics is that I'm never in a position in which I have *no* beliefs about the being of beings. But along with my beliefs about the being of beings, I also understand the world as the totality of beings. This understanding gives me a background against which I can come to find my ontology questionable: I can come to have the thought that beings in general, or just this particular subset of beings, may be *different sorts of beings* from what I thought them to be.

### 3.4—World as Text

It might be argued that the distinction that I am here claiming is operative in Gadamer's hermeneutics—that between formal and concrete totalities, i.e. between the world as the totality of beings and the world as everything with which I am familiar—institutes too strong an ontological distinction between two different kinds of 'worlds.' I would argue, however, that the difference is rather one that is internal to interpretation. This will become much more clear in Chapter 4 when I discuss the structure of the 'object' of interpretation, the *Sache*. The world, in fact, as we started to see above, may profitably be thought of as a *Sache*—as something interpreted.<sup>49</sup> We have already seen that for anything understood the distinction is opened between its being and its presentation, and that this distinction is also operative for the world itself. Now we should see that the world also has the bivalent structure of any text: as a text, to be understood, must be approached with the "formal" expectation that it will be unified and coherent, and the "transcendental" expectation that it will be true,<sup>50</sup> so the world of the interpreter is always approached as a single, unitary ("formal") totality, on the one hand, and this particular ("concrete") totality that I am familiar with and that I take to be the case, on the other. The difference between the world grasped formally and the world grasped in its concreteness, then, is just that difference

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<sup>49</sup> Gadamer uses the same paradoxical formulation to talk about the world as he does to talk about *Sachen*: "what the world is is not different from the views in which it presents itself." (TM, 447; GW1 451.)

<sup>50</sup> See Chapter 2.

that must be in play if the world is something that can be understood.

But, someone might respond, doesn't this make the interpreter a Foucaultian 'transcendental-empirical doublet'? Contrary to our assertion above that Gadamer does not face the phenomenological paradox of the subject that simultaneously constitutes and finds itself within the world, doesn't this view of the relation between interpreter and world place the interpreter in some way 'outside' the world? How is it even possible to have a view of *the world* unless one is able to take up a position 'outside' of it? According to Gadamer, of course, I don't interpret from a position outside the world—I interpret only from within it. I am nevertheless able to have a view of the world from this internal position. How is this the case? Well, the interpreter can never have the entire world in view—there will always be much that is 'behind her back,' and much that she hasn't encountered. But, crucially, the fact that my perspective will always be limited does not prevent me from having a perspective on the whole. Only if the world were an *object of knowledge*<sup>51</sup> would the individual need to take up the impossible position of a subject outside the world. The world is not an object of knowledge, however, but a subject matter that is understood. Unlike objects, subject matters are not held in opposition to a knowing subject; in understanding them the interpreter applies them to her own situation. The world is the ultimate subject matter in this sense, because the interpreter is *in* the world, and hence is in a quite literal sense a part of the subject matter she is interpreting. But because the interpreter is not in addition a subject constituting or beholding the world, there is, as we saw in our discussion of Husserl, no aporia here. The interpreter cannot have the world completely in view, as she would an object that she had objective knowledge of. But, interjects the objectivist, if she cannot have the world completely in view, how can the interpreter know that it is the world that she is interpreting? Here we immediately see the problem with the objectivist's expectations: the objectivist demands that the thing known be transparent to knowledge, and assumes that nothing can be known that is not grasped completely. Hermeneutics insists, on the contrary, that for something to be understood, there needs merely to be a movement back and forth between an *anticipation* of the whole and the experience of the parts. We are able to understand the world because we anticipate the world as a whole. The world, in fact, is just that whole beyond which nothing else can be anticipated; it is the limitless limit that hermeneutics places on itself out of internal necessity. Hermeneutics, Gadamer argues, is universal—everything we come across is an object of interpretation. The world is what we think when we think that 'everything' as 'Everything'—as the totality of what we interpret and are able to interpret. The interpreter does not need to be outside this totality in order to understand it, because as an interpreter she already has the world in view in her anticipation of it as the totality of beings that her worldview characterizes in a

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<sup>51</sup> Or an object of constitution.

certain way.

To conclude: in Gadamerian hermeneutics there is one world—the world is an absolute, infinite, formal totality (the totality of beings). This formal totality is to be distinguished from the totality that is one’s worldview—this latter totality is always relative, finite, and concrete. One’s worldview is a *perspective on* the world. To have a worldview is to have a perspective on something that one takes to transcend that perspective. It is not to be bound to context, not to occupy a position that can only see what is relative to that position, but is rather to have a view *of* something that one takes to be context-transcendent *from* a contextually constituted position. Semantic holism has traditionally only got half of this picture of meaning right. It views meaning always and only as context-bound. What I have tried to argue in this chapter is that the semantic whole of the interpreter—her worldview—is a network of signification that cannot be thought without also thinking the world that is understood in that network. That world, however, is always understood as a subject matter exceeding the concrete significations that make up the interpreter’s worldview. To be an interpreter is always *simultaneously* to transcend and remain embedded in a semantic context.

If this account of having a worldview should sound paradoxical, that is because for Gadamer the world is something understood, and understanding *is* paradoxical. To see how this is the case, we will have to take up the question of *truth* in philosophical hermeneutics.

## CHAPTER 4: TRUTH

We have now considered the two prominent semantic wholes in Gadamerian hermeneutics: tradition and world. We have seen how understanding texts from one's tradition, and perhaps understanding one's tradition itself, occurs holistically (via the hermeneutic circle and the fore-conception of completeness); and we have considered how worldviews both exhibit holistic structures and, insofar as they intend the world as an absolute formal totality, point to a holism that does not devolve upon multiple, incommensurable conceptual schemes. Hermeneutic holism, as it has emerged in our discussion of Gadamer, may be said to have the following two major features. First, in hermeneutic holism semantic wholes are always thought in relation to a historically situated, finite interpreter; hermeneutics insists that to think about truth and meaning, we have to take into consideration the experience of truth and meaning on the part of interpreters. Semantic productions are encountered by interpreters as having some truth to tell, and meaning emerges in the interpreter's experience of hearing something as a claim to truth. Second, any possible semantic whole will always be encountered against the backdrop of the world as the totality of beings. Any semantic whole, any unity of meaning, partly constitutes the world of the interpreter, and from any perspective on the world the world is a *Sache* that the interpreter understands. Because to understand a *Sache* is to see it as a being that is distinct from its presentation, and to have an understanding of the being of that being, a worldview always takes itself to grasp how things are—it takes itself to be true. Gadamer's notion of prejudice confirms that he views humans as truth-directed—as constantly caught up in the language game of making judgments about the truth or falsity of beliefs. Most of those judgments settle into the background as prejudgments, and thus make up a sort of web of prejudices, a set of unthematized beliefs about how things are.

Our account of hermeneutic holism thus demands that we consider the question of truth. Indeed, holism itself raises the question of truth implicitly. If things can only be known or understood within a holistically structured framework, and, *pace* Davidson, there can be multiple incommensurable worldviews, with no “neutral” ground from which to adjudicate among them, then

what, if any, conception of truth is operative? One reason why holism is such a challenging position is that it seems to make truth itself dependent upon the framework in which one grasps the world. But truth thus dependent arguably loses one of the characteristics that make it truth: *irrelativity*—or as we might call it, context independence. That truth has something irrelative or context independent about it has been seen by skeptics about truth from Sextus Empiricus to Nietzsche. Sextus,<sup>1</sup> for example, advocates the suspension of judgment in the face of any claim about the reality ‘beyond’ appearances, since the contrary claim can always be convincingly supported. Furthermore, he holds that no possible perspective on the world will be able to judge claims to truth from any other perspective without begging the question as to which perspective has the ‘correct’ view of things. Both arguments acknowledge that truth claims are intended to be taken as perspective-transcendent. To make a truth claim is implicitly to say that this is not simply how things seem to me; it is how they are. That this is the case even with universal claims based on the skeptical approach (e.g. ‘all arguments about a reality beyond appearances are subject to contradiction by equally convincing arguments’), which thereby become self-contradictory, confirms for Sextus that the only course for the skeptic is the suspension of judgment. To make a truth claim of *any* kind, with the exception of those about what is immediately evident to the senses (‘this tastes sweet,’ e.g.), is to make a non-perspectival claim from within a perspective, and hence to say something that could in principle be contradicted by someone looking at things from a different perspective. The acknowledgment of the perspectival character of human cognition is what leads the skeptic to cease from making any claims about ‘reality’ at all. The skeptic thus tacitly acknowledges the irrelativity of truth—she just holds that since ‘reality’ is not accessible from the strictly relative perspectives of human knowers, irrelative truth-claims are not ones that human beings can conclusively establish to be true.

Some thinkers assert, contrary to what Sextus assumes, that there can in fact be relative truths, indeed, that truth that is not thought as the product of history or the will to power has no hope of being a concept that we finite knowers can make much sense of. To say that truth is relative to a historical epoch or to a culture can be taken to mean that for each such local totality, beings are disclosed in a different way, and truth is nothing more than this determinate, local disclosure of beings. In that way, each totality takes there to be different beings, and hence subscribes to different, non-overlapping truths. But from what perspective is such a claim being made? One wants to ask: Is it *true* that beings are disclosed differently during different historical epochs? If this claim is made against the backdrop of a historical epoch with its own disclosure regime, then the old problem of the self-refutation of relativism (akin to the self-refutation of skepticism noted above) rears its ugly head. If, on the other hand, we say that the

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<sup>1</sup> See *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Book 1.

claim is made *sub specie aeternitatis*, we will be left wondering how it is possible to make a claim that is free from ontological commitments. We might, alternately, settle for Quine's argument, which as we saw holds that there is no fact of the matter what words refer to (reference is not self-announcing, but dependent upon a background language that construes words in a certain way by projecting an ontology onto them). But this would seem to amount to saying that there is no fact of the matter as to whether a given proposition or set of propositions is *true*. Quine denies that this means we must be relativists about truth because we can always "acquiesce in our mother tongue." However, the problem with human cognition, as Thomas Nagel saw in *The View from Nowhere*, is that it can't simply take up the "subjective" point of view (here, the mother tongue) without further ado. The "objective" point of view (here, God's-eye-view ontological relativity) is one that pulls human cognition constantly away from the subjective.

Both views of truth—relative and irrelative—are unsatisfactory. Does Gadamer, as Richard Bernstein argues, offer us a way "beyond objectivism and relativism"? Bernstein defines objectivism as the view that "there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness."<sup>2</sup> Relativism, on the other hand, is

the basic conviction that when we turn to the examination of those concepts that philosophers have taken to be the most fundamental...in the final analysis all such concepts must be understood as relative to a specific conceptual scheme...there is no substantive overarching framework or single metalanguage by which we can rationally adjudicate or univocally evaluate competing claims of alternate paradigms.<sup>3</sup>

Bernstein convincingly argues that relativism assumes that knowledge can only be had if the bar for it is set as high as objectivism sets it, but that unlike objectivism, relativism holds that it is implausible for there to be cognition that reaches that bar. Gadamer, he says, moves beyond this dichotomy by maintaining that while historically embedded interpreters cannot attain an ahistorical cognitive framework, they nevertheless have beliefs about 'how things are,' i.e. they have beliefs about what they take to be an objective reality. While this interpretation of Gadamer is accurate, I will try to show that Gadamer's position is somewhat stronger than Bernstein makes it out to be. 'Truth' in "*Truth and Method*" does incorporate both relative and irrelative moments, but truth also cannot be truth *unless* it incorporates both.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

We will also here try to show how this understanding of truth is to be reconciled with Gadamer's holism: holism, as we've seen, is often taken to imply the relativity of truth claims. A relativist holism won't be a problem for a theory of truth as long as we can show how it can also countenance the irrelative moment of truth. We've already seen how the world is intended as an absolute formal totality, and that worldviews, in a manner of speaking, 'color in' this totality with historically relative content.<sup>4</sup> In this chapter we will argue that the crux in preserving both relative and irrelative moments of truth lies in Gadamer's claim that the distinction underlying his notion of the world—that between being and presentation—is also *no* distinction. For Gadamer this distinction-that-is-no-distinction is, after Hegel, the heart of the "speculative" structure of language, and it in fact structures every *Sache*. We will see that distinguishing being from presentation ensures that in interpretation the *Sache* is viewed as irrelative to that interpretation; on the other hand, insisting that being ultimately (and paradoxically) is also not distinct from its presentation ensures that the *Sache* cannot simply be viewed as transcending interpretation in some absolute fashion. Since truth consists in the coming-into-language of a *Sache*, if the *Sache* is constituted both relatively and irrelatively, we will conclude that truth itself exhibits both moments.

One note on the parameters of Gadamer's discussion of truth before we begin. It has been noted that Gadamer does not really explicitly discuss truth at any length in *Truth and Method*, and that he certainly does not offer us a 'theory' of truth. However, there is a distinct view of truth that emerges throughout his writings, even if it does not always rise to the level of argumentative explicitness. Certainly he hopes to defend a conception of truth that is not the product of the application of method, as the title of his magnum opus intimates. It is possible, he thinks, to attain truth without the certainty that a method is supposed to secure. Clearly, though, this understanding of truth is more an answer to an epistemological question than a definition of truth: it widens the epistemological goalposts for the kind of knowledge we may be said to have when we declare our beliefs to be true, but does not tell us what the word "truth" means. Truth without certainty in fact is compatible with many different theories of truth, from correspondence to coherence, deflationist, and pragmatist theories. So we will have to look beyond this polemical strategy of Gadamer's and try to determine what notion of truth he operates with. One of the questions that will arise as we do this is whether Gadamer offers a 'criterion' of truth—that is, a way in which to

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<sup>4</sup> We want to be careful not to draw too strong a form-content distinction here, since the world as formal unity is itself an idea with content. The operative distinction is between the bare idea of the world as the totality of beings, and the idea of the world as I know it, with its interstate highways, cappuccinos, and walks in the park.

determine whether a statement, argument, discourse, or prejudice is true. Jean Grondin, for one, doesn't think he does, while Lawrence Schmidt maintains the contrary. There are reasons to agree with both positions, and we will try to determine which makes the most sense given our reading of the paradoxical nature of truth in Gadamer.

#### 4.1 — Language and Metaphysics

We will not begin by asking the question, 'what is truth?'. Rather, we want to begin circuitously and ask first what *truths* Gadamer takes it that we can understand or know. If we can determine what truths there are, we will begin to have a sense of what truth is. We will begin with the epistemological position of the human interpreter. The term that captures Gadamer's understanding of that position is "finitude." Finitude is to be opposed to what Gadamer occasionally calls "subjectivity," or the view of human cognition of modern philosophy from Descartes through Husserl. Subjectivity ultimately views the "objects" of knowledge as totally transparent to the knowing subject. Subjectivity sets out, with the indispensable aid of method, to attain a thorough and complete account of the things it encounters, and it holds either that there is nothing beyond its objects that exceeds its possibilities for knowledge; or, in the case of Kant, it holds that, while the thing in itself is beyond any possible knowledge, the subject may nevertheless attain an exhaustive knowledge of the objects of experience. The subject of modern philosophy is able to attain knowledge of objects because the subject is not the product of history or language—it is able to view the world outside of a context. The notion of finitude, on the other hand, acknowledges the limitations that humans face in their attempt to know the world. It is not simply the case that the world is too vast, and human life too short, for any human to have comprehensive knowledge of the whole. Rather, it is the nature of human cognition as such that prevents such knowledge. Historically effected consciousness, argues Gadamer, will always be more than it knows itself to be. I may be able to become reflectively aware that I am historically effected, but becoming thus aware does not mean that I now transcend the effect of history upon me. There will always be prejudices that I have that I have not examined, or that I have examined but that do not comprehensively grasp the subject matter. Gadamer again and again makes the polemical point that consciousness is more than it understands itself to be. "Bewusstsein ist mehr Sein als bewusst," he says—"consciousness is more being than conscious." And finitude is just this exceeding of consciousness by its being—what consciousness *is* is more than it can know. The human interpreter does not face a world of objects about which he slowly builds up factual knowledge; rather, humans are thrown—they approach

the world with a set of prejudices granted by history which partially determine who they are and what they can know.

The fact of finitude, moreover, means that a thinking based in hermeneutics is post-metaphysical: as Gadamer says in the Foreword to the Second Edition of *Truth and Method*,

I have recorded my acceptance of Kant's conclusions in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: I regard statements that proceed wholly by dialectical means from the finite to the infinite, from human experience to what exists in itself, from the temporal to the eternal, as doing nothing more than setting limits, and am convinced that philosophy can gain no actual knowledge from them.<sup>5</sup>

After Kant, metaphysics is no longer an option. Hermeneutics has no interest in making claims that do not recognize the finitude of human thought. The truths that the interpreter comes to know are not metaphysical truths, truths that capture the infinite in its infinity. However, having hermeneutics as a starting point also means that Gadamer's relation to metaphysics cannot be one of outright rejection: metaphysics forms part of the tradition out of which hermeneutics has emerged. Immediately after the passage quoted above, Gadamer goes on to say, "Nevertheless, the tradition of metaphysics and especially of its last great creation, Hegel's dialectic, remains close to us." This closeness will become manifest in Gadamer's appropriation of Hegel's notion of the speculative. But metaphysics is close to hermeneutics in another way: it provides hermeneutics with a way of understanding language. For language, according to Gadamer, has inherent metaphysical tendencies.

Heidegger argues that metaphysics has emerged in the west because of the grammatical structure of western languages, specifically Greek and Latin. Gadamer agrees that the particular way in which metaphysics has taken shape in western philosophy stems in part from Greek and Latin grammar, but he also holds that metaphysics is a possibility within language as such, and is not bound to particular grammatical formations. In "Heidegger and the Language of Metaphysics," Gadamer suggests that metaphysics is a kind of "making-oneself-at-home in the world."<sup>6</sup> He says this in the context of a discussion of Hegel, and so we may suppose that what he has in mind is Hegel's attempt to show subject at work in substance, which is essentially a way of making the alien—the object—familiar by showing it to operate within the realm of subjectivity. But Gadamer

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<sup>5</sup> TM, xxxvi; GW2, 446.

<sup>6</sup> PH, 238; GW3, 236.

goes on to ask, “Is not language always the language of the homeland and the process of becoming-at-home in the world?”<sup>7</sup> And further, “are the universality of objectifying reason and the eidetic structure of linguistic meanings really bound to these particular historically developed interpretations of *subjectum* and *species* and *actus* that the West has produced?” Gadamer here tacitly identifies metaphysics with the “universality of objectifying reason” and the “eidetic structure of linguistic meanings,” but indicates that all languages exhibit these features.

In addition to the two metaphysical aspects of language mentioned above, language opens up further possibilities for metaphysical thinking. In “On the Philosophic Element in the Sciences and the Scientific Character of Philosophy” Gadamer states that both philosophy and metaphysics are concerned with “the whole.” Philosophy and metaphysics, in seeking to think the whole, respond to what Gadamer calls “an ultimate need of reason,” namely, “to be able to preserve a unity in the totality of what is.”<sup>8</sup> Gadamer does not mention it here, but this “need” of reason is parallel to the fore-conception of completeness at play in all understanding. Understanding expects that which it seeks to understand to be coherent and true, that is, it expects to find unity in it. If the aim of reason is precisely to comprehend the whole, then the need for unity in it does indeed seem to be the same as that of understanding, especially if we recall our look at Gadamer’s notion of the world in Chapter 3—the world is understood as the totality of beings. Indeed, in the essay under consideration Gadamer goes on to say that not only metaphysics, but language itself has an “orientation toward the whole”:

Language as orientation to the whole comes into play wherever real conversation occurs and that means wherever the reciprocity of two speakers who have entered into conversation circles about the subject matter. For everywhere that communication happens, language not only is used but is shaped as well.<sup>9</sup>

This somewhat obscure passage may be illuminated if we recall that conversation occurs as questions and answers. The subject matter gets thrown into an open space of questioning, and thus becomes indeterminate. The outcome of the conversation is the renewed determination of the subject matter—and this is surely what Gadamer means when he says language is “shaped” in

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<sup>7</sup> PH, 239; GW3, 236.

<sup>8</sup> Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, 2. Henceforth RAS.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

communication. But how does this constitute an orientation toward the whole? Before the passage quoted above, Gadamer offers the caveat that while language is oriented toward the whole, the “monological modes of speech of scientific sign systems” are *not* thus oriented. Such sign systems are tailored to be about just the delimited set of objects that the science in question deals with. ‘Natural’ language, on the other hand, is never simply cut to fit an object domain. We should conclude that words that are not thus tailored have the capacity to be applied to any object domain, across one’s worldview, across the whole. To this end, Gadamer calls language “the medium from which we live in the outset as social natures and which holds open the totality within which we live our lives.”<sup>10</sup> It might nevertheless be argued that scientific language, while monological (i.e. not forged out of the fusion of horizons), does transcend context: scientists in Buenos Aires, Beijing, and Cambridge can speak the same scientific language and understand each other unproblematically, even while they require the labor of interpretation to understand what each other says about politics, history, and affairs of the heart. But transcending context is not all that Gadamer has in mind when he speaks of being oriented toward the whole. The whole, as we saw above, means “the totality within which we live our lives”; it includes, then, not just the objects of scientific inquiry but everything we talk about and live through. Because it is ‘tailored’ for an object domain, scientific language does not, as does natural language, move freely around the various regions of human experience.<sup>11</sup>

We saw in Chapter Three how language and world are co-implicated: world as the totality of what exists is presupposed in language use. Language opens the distinction between being and presentation for everything that appears in it; everything in sum is also subject to this distinction, and there is never a time for the individual interpreter when there is not an everything-in-sum. The world—the whole—is thus always already there in language. In the “Foreword” to *Hegel’s Dialectic*, Gadamer says “Philosophy must incorporate within itself that anticipation of the whole that makes our desire to know go round, that anticipation of the whole which lies embedded in language as the totality of our access to the world.”<sup>12</sup> This suggests the complex dynamic that is in play in the “orientation toward the whole”: language is the totality of our access to the world,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> As with much that Gadamer has to say about science, this claim that scientific language is bound to its object domain doesn’t pick up on the more complex ways in which science interacts with the lifeworld. Especially today, when scientific notions from genetics to computation pervade everyday language (“he has lucky genes”; “I have to process that before I can answer you”), the line between scientific and “natural” language is ever more blurry.

<sup>12</sup> Gadamer, *Hegel’s Dialectic*, 3. Henceforth HD.

and as such anticipates the whole—i.e. the world as the totality of beings. This anticipation, in a kind of hermeneutic, non-metaphysical version of Aristotle’s unmoved mover, somehow drives our desire to know. Gadamer doesn’t say, but how might this be? Anticipating the whole means thinking the totality of what is. The *desire* to know must begin in a *lack* of knowledge—and the bare thought of the totality of what is tells one nothing of the nature of the beings that comprise that totality. Finite human interpreters are caught between two epistemic poles: their current set of beliefs about the world—the world in its familiar furniture—on the one hand, and the idea that the world is a totality of beings that stretches beyond, but also includes, everything I am familiar with, on the other. It is perhaps then from within this difference, between the known world and the unknown world, that the desire to know the nature of the whole springs.

Whether or not this is what Gadamer has in mind when he says humans have a desire to know the whole, he certainly thinks that this desire to know the whole cannot be slaked. Because humans are finite, the whole cannot be known in its entirety. But if finitude implies the impossibility of metaphysics—of comprehensive knowledge of the whole—then why bother pursuing questions about the whole? Shouldn’t finitude lead us to abandon philosophical questioning, the way it led Kant to abandon the fruitless dialectic of pure reason? Part of the answer to this question comes in Gadamer’s assertion, noted above, that reason has an “exigency for unity.” Reason and language “anticipate the whole”: to think and to speak is to find oneself in the midst of the totality of beings, and to want to understand that totality—to determine what unifies it and to determine what it is. But also, Gadamer holds, philosophical questions continue to plague human beings even after they have accepted finitude as their baseline epistemological position. Gadamer enumerates some of these questions in “The Heritage of Hegel”: we are faced with the “enigmas” of the beginning, of the universe, of human freedom and reason, and of human finitude.<sup>13</sup> From such philosophical questions, he says, “no thinking being can ever completely hold himself at a remove.” Why does Gadamer think there are certain questions that “thinking beings” cannot help but find questionable? As is often the case in his essays, Gadamer does not offer an explicit answer to this question. What he does say is that such questions “befall us...from the vantage of that in the light of which we all know [erkennen] ourselves.” Clarifying this a little he says that “We encounter ourselves in art, in spite of all social utilitarianism. We encounter ourselves in the challenge of religion that perdures in the age of science. No less do we encounter ourselves in thinking.” That is to say, the questions that transcend our finitude, that “go beyond us,” are questions that we are *asked* by art, religion, and philosophy—questions that address us in our situation, and hence that allow us to encounter “ourselves.” We find questionable those questions addressed to us in

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<sup>13</sup> RAS, 52; GW4, 473.

our situation—so questions that are unavoidable for humans in general must be ones that address *every* human situation. If questions about origins and about finitude (for example) are universally questionable, it is because every human situation is one in which its end and its beginning are grasped as end and beginning, but not known with apodictic certainty. My beginning becomes questionable when I understand that I have a beginning, but I also recognize that what my beginning *is* is an open question. We are thus driven back to the dialectic of being and presentation that we suggested above drives the “desire to know.” Just as the anticipation of the whole drives interpretation forward by setting in motion the distinction between how things seem to me and how things are, so any question that I find questionable opens up this same distinction. In this way, we can see that any philosophical question that announces itself to the human interpreter does so because the interpreter already has a belief or a prejudice about the subject matter in question; the question drives a wedge into that belief, revealing it to the interpreter as a view of things that may or may not jibe with how things are. Philosophical questions are inescapable because every interpreter has prejudices regarding philosophical subject matters.

So if philosophical questions continue to assert themselves, what is the hermeneut, who has embraced finitude, to do? She knows that answers to these questions are not available to the human interpreter, but she continues to find them questionable, that is, she continues to seek answers to them. Gadamer finds a solution to this problem in Plato’s representation of Socrates. He says,

Plato’s art of dialogue and the “dialectic” of tireless self-correction of all abstract one-sidedness that the Socratic dialogue reflects can provide certain hints as to how a philosophic figure of thought may be constructed that reunites the metaphysical question concerning the infinite and absolute with the ineradicable finitude of the questioner.<sup>14</sup>

The suggestion is that the problem with metaphysics is not so much in the questions it asks as in the way in which it goes about answering them. Metaphysics, when done in the wrong way, is *dogmatic*; it answers philosophical questions in an “abstract” and “one-sided” way, that is, it asserts one possible interpretation as exhaustively accounting for the whole. The hermeneutic response to this one-sidedness is not to abandon the attempt to answer the question, but rather to “self-correct” it dialectically and dialogically—which means to engage in a conversation about the subject matter in which views are exchanged, discussed, and questioned. Such exchanges cannot hope to arrive at a final all-embracing understanding of the whole that is not subject to further discussion, but

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<sup>14</sup> RAS, 59-60; GW4, 480.

they can reveal an interpretation to be limited, thus sublating that interpretation into a broader understanding. Language, says Gadamer, has a “dialogical structure...in which an entirely undogmatic dialectic is constantly enacted,” and in this dialectic a “step-by-step unveiling of being comes about.”<sup>15</sup> That is to say, in conversation we have the capacity to learn something about a subject matter, but to do so in such a way that the partners in conversation remain open to further expansions of their understanding of the thing in question.

This undogmatic dialectic, sometimes directed at philosophical questions explicitly, mostly unconsciously “concretizing the universal” (i.e. applying concepts), takes place in language. At the end of his essay “The Idea of Hegel’s Logic,” Gadamer says that “Dialectic must retrieve itself in hermeneutics.”<sup>16</sup> Dialectic, which treats thoughts as abstract objects bearing logical relationships to their peers, is, often unbeknownst to itself, linguistic. It occurs in and as language. Hermeneutics, which deals with the understanding of linguistic productions, is thus a mode of thought more originary than dialectic. What does this mean for dialectic? What is the difference between understanding a concept as a word and thinking it as an object? If we can show how Gadamer answers these questions we will be in a better position to see how language limits the range of metaphysical and objectivizing thinking (and hence of what truths can be known), even while it makes such thinking possible.

In “The Idea of Hegel’s Logic,” Gadamer argues that there is a “double movement” in language: language both objectifies and draws that which is objectified back into the realm of understanding. He discusses this double movement in the context of a consideration of Hegel’s claim in the *Science of Logic* that there is in language a “logical instinct,” i.e. that in ordinary language-use the concepts that scientific logic clarifies are already in play. Hegel seeks to raise logic out of its place in ordinary language-use and to grasp the system of concepts in total transparency, or total objectification, as Gadamer says. For Hegel, as for many others before the “linguistic turn” in European philosophy, thought is ‘expressed’ by language, while being logically distinct from it. One of Gadamer’s central hermeneutical positions is that thought and language are not radically distinct from one another, or rather that the difference between thinking and speaking is a difference that is no distinction. But, says Gadamer, language *does* objectify—language has within itself the capacity, exploited by Hegel in the dialectical movement of the *Logic*, clearly and transparently to isolate the categories of thinking. At the same time, however, since all objectification takes place in language (indeed, as Gadamer argues, all objectification *presupposes* language), objective thinking can never leave language behind. What does this

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<sup>15</sup> RAS, 57; GW4, 477.

<sup>16</sup> HD, 99; GW3, 86.

mean? For one thing, “a concept [couldn’t] be determined as a concept without the usage of the word with all of its many meanings playing a role.”<sup>17</sup> Objectification finely delimits the meaning of a concept, but the linguisticity of that concept means that the polysemy of ordinary language-use cannot be eradicated from it. For another, the system of ‘pure’ thoughts can only be grasped within the verbal and discursive strictures of the dialectical presentation of it—for example in an eight hundred page volume called *The Science of Logic*. Such a presentation “must already presuppose and use categories of reflection which it then claims to deduce dialectically—[and this] holds for every relation between word and concept.”<sup>18</sup>

Gadamer describes the movement back from objectivity as “the reabsorption of all objectification into the sustaining power and shelter of the word.”<sup>19</sup> Picking up on the later Heidegger’s understanding of language, he holds it to be a “clearing,” in which beings are revealed via the concealment of that which reveals—language itself. Interpreting a passage from Heidegger’s *Nietzsche* on Hegelian reflection, Gadamer says that Heidegger holds reflection to consider how thought thinks objects, rather than to turn around to behold the clearing in which objects come to light in the first place. Language, as this clearing, is that in which the reflective movement of logic becomes possible. But, says Gadamer,

The linguisticity of all thought continues to demand that thought, moving in the opposite direction, convert the concept back into the binding [verbindende] word. The more radically objectifying thought reflects upon itself and unfolds the experience of dialectic, the more clearly it points to what it is not. Dialectic must retrieve itself in hermeneutics.<sup>20</sup>

That is to say, the thinking of objectivity takes place in and as language; as such, the cognitive mode that grasps it is ultimately interpretation. Concepts are words that must be understood before the logical relations between them can be elucidated. Dialectic can only function after hermeneutics has had its say.

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<sup>17</sup> HD, 93; GW3, 81.

<sup>18</sup> HD, 93; GW3, 81.

<sup>19</sup> HD, 94; GW3, 82.

<sup>20</sup> HD, 99; GW3, 86. (Translation slightly emended: P. Christopher Smith has “valid” for verbindende. But clearly Gadamer is here invoking his notion of language as a medium between interpreter and world; as such, language ‘binds’ the two together.)

So what's the difference between understanding a concept as a word and thinking it as an object? Based on what we've seen in "The Idea of Hegel's Logic," there are a number of factors involved. Understanding a word acknowledges its polysemy, rather than trying to draw rigid lines around it. It "uses" the categories of reflection rather than reflecting upon them. That means that categories like identity and difference recede back into the linguistic backdrop, shaping the things discussed rather than becoming the objects of attention themselves. This is the concealing half of the revealing/concealing dyad of language. Language operates 'behind the backs' of speakers: when I ask someone to "hand me that fork," language reveals the fork both in its self-identity and its difference from the knife, the spoon, and the plate; but, I remain largely unaware of this process. The word is "sheltering" and "binding": 'fork' in the above example does not serve to hold an object before my knowing consciousness, but to bind me to the thing in the world that I am seeking out. This suggests that to understand a word is to enter into a relation that is more intimate than that between subject and object: the word binds me to the thing, while the object stands in opposition to me as a subject. Even the movement of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which is meant to show the subject that this gulf between it and its objects is illusory, is according to Gadamer a path of objectification. In coming to see the categories of thought in play in what it takes to be distinct from itself, thought nevertheless views those categories as universal, as independent of the particularity of any individual subject. Logic in this sense traces the interconnections among thoughts that are valid for all. Hermeneutics, on the other hand, always considers universals from the perspective of the individual interpreter. They are not (or not only) thought as subject-independent, but always in their application to the individual situation. To be a word, then, is to be encountered in this connection to the interpreter; to be an object is to be valid for all knowers, and to rise above any idiosyncratic connections to them as individuals. Gadamer's point is that objectified concepts are primordially encountered as words, and so the movement of objectification, which tries to think of them as transcending the individual, can never escape the orbit of understanding, which always grasps them in relation to the individual.

Let's summarize the relation between hermeneutics, metaphysics, and philosophy. Based on the fundamental supposition of the finitude of the human knower, hermeneutics nevertheless acknowledges the compelling nature of philosophical and metaphysical questions.<sup>21</sup> Finitude leads it to conclude that such

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<sup>21</sup> Consider, for example, how the question of whether or not there is a deity is still one that exercises many, even after the century of the dead God; or how we continue to read Plato, Leibniz, and Hegel, and not just in order to de(con)struct them.

questions cannot be answered in a way that would compel agreement from any possible future interpreter—that is, a final answer to them cannot be given. This means that to a philosophical question hermeneutics refuses to give a dogmatically metaphysical answer. Any answer to a philosophical question must recognize its inescapably provisional nature. Hermeneutics does not go so far, however, as to rule out all attempts to answer philosophical and metaphysical questions. But if the interpreter is to try to answer such questions, she must recognize that the path of objectivity—that is, answers that seek to discover what is true of the thing in question aside from what it might have to say to the individual interpreter—always leads back to hermeneutics. That is to say, the thing in question can ultimately only be understood as mediated by language to the interpreter, as ‘bound’ to the interpreter by the word. And this means that the thing is a part of the interpreter’s world, and has its significance in relation to the network of prejudices that constitute the interpreter’s worldview. Metaphysical speculation cannot occur outside of the historical and holistic constraints upon truth and meaning.

With certain caveats, then, Gadamer accepts philosophical thinking about the whole, and insists on the questionableness of the questions to which metaphysics is an answer. Is it then the case that Gadamer is, as Brice Wachterhauser argues, a “metaphysical realist”?<sup>22</sup> If *true* answers can be given to philosophical questions, is it not the case that the interpreter grasps ‘reality’ in some way? Wachterhauser argues that true interpretations are for Gadamer ones that really get at “intelligible reality,” i.e. get at such a reality as it is in itself: interpreters are able to grasp *Sachen* or “essences” apart from their linguistic expression. To be sure, Wachterhauser holds Gadamer to be a metaphysical realist of a post-Hegelian, post-Heideggerian sort—the eidetic realities that are grasped by interpreters are themselves historical and temporal. Moreover, he argues that for Gadamer intelligible reality itself is infinitely complex, and thus can give rise to endless true interpretations of it that grasp not the whole but an “aspect” of the thing itself. But a metaphysical realist Wachterhauser nonetheless takes Gadamer to be. I will argue in the following section, on the contrary, that Gadamer is *not* a metaphysical realist, since he holds that the things we understand are what they are in how they are understood. Now, Gadamer does not rule out the possibility that some of the things we understand may be ‘metaphysical’ entities like God, justice, or time. If metaphysical questions are not ruled out a priori for hermeneutics, then one would expect answers to such questions, when accepted, to be judged true, and hence for metaphysical entities to be at least taken to be ‘real.’ It is here though that I disagree with Wachterhauser: Gadamer *is* a realist, in that he takes interpretation to be about reality; but this is not metaphysical

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<sup>22</sup> Brice Wachterhauser, *Beyond Being: Gadamer’s Post-Platonic Hermeneutic Ontology*, 59.

reality, if by “metaphysical” one means what Putnam does: pertaining to a world made up of mind-independent (or language-independent) objects. That which is understood, while certainly not reducible to any given interpretation of it, is nevertheless what it is *in* interpretation. What is understood may be independent of any single interpretation, but it is not independent of *every possible* interpretation.

Do we wish to say then that Gadamer is a Putnamian internal realist? An internal realist for Putnam is someone who denies that “what is real is what is “under” or “behind” or “more fundamental than” our everyday appearances”<sup>23</sup>; the internal realist holds that “*what objects does the world consist of?*” is a question that it only makes sense to ask *within* a theory or description.”<sup>24</sup> Mind-independent entities, Putnam thinks, are not ones that we could have knowledge about, since to know anything about them they would have to be “self-identifying”<sup>25</sup>—i.e. I would have to be able to see what they are *without* applying any of my concepts or categories to them. But this, Putnam thinks, is not possible. Now for Gadamer, as we’ve seen, the world is the totality of beings, and some of these beings are familiar to us, while many are not. But since I can only understand something by mediating it with my prejudices, Gadamer would certainly seem to be an internal realist. In one way, though, Gadamer is not: Putnam takes *truth* for the internal realist to be “idealized rational acceptability”—i.e. what a subject would assent to “were epistemic conditions good enough.”<sup>26</sup> Gadamer, as we shall see, does not place truth off in the future like this; for him, truth happens whenever there is understanding.

## 4.2 — The Medium of Language

We’ve been exploring the scope of hermeneutics, and have tried to show that Gadamer’s insistence on finitude does not prevent him from maintaining that philosophical questions about the whole are legitimate (and perhaps inevitable) topics of conversation, even while a dogmatic metaphysics erroneously assumes that it can attain certainty in its attempts to answer such questions. Since philosophy, like any other discourse, asks questions about *Sachen*, we will now

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<sup>23</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Representation and Reality*, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, 49.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>26</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, vii.

turn to a consideration of how truth emerges in the understanding of *Sachen*. To do this, we will look at the structure of the *Sache*; we will start by seeing how *Sachen* are mediated by language, since it is through language that they become available to the interpreter.

Language, Gadamer argues, is a “medium [Mitte—also “middle”]...that, related to the totality of beings, mediates the finite, historical nature of man to himself and to the world.”<sup>27</sup> As we noted above, as a being man is a part of the totality of beings (the world); here Gadamer posits that it is language that allows humans to encounter this totality. Language also mediates between humans and individual beings, and allows humans to encounter beings as beings. Language is able to act as a medium in this way because of what Gadamer calls its “speculative” structure. We will consider what Gadamer means by this term below, but we should begin by saying that the speculativity of language leads him to conclude that in the medium of language the distinction between language and being is superseded. The oft-repeated catchphrase of *Truth and Method*, “being that can be understood is language” is meant quite radically: that which we understand, insofar as we understand it—be it a text, an artwork, another human, or the natural world—*is language*. Language is not a filter through which the light reflected off of things passes, and it certainly is not a tool for designating things that we have already encountered without its aid; rather, it is that in which things are first revealed to us as the things they are.

To place his notion of the medium of language in philosophical context, Gadamer draws upon Greek philosophy and Hegel. For both, “thinking [is]...an element of being.”<sup>28</sup> Socrates’ “flight into the *logoi*” in the *Phaedo* indicates that Plato held that thinking concepts could lead to knowledge of being, while Hegel self-consciously tried to bridge the gap opened up between subject and object in modern philosophy by showing how they are not distinct, but one. Gadamer once again uses the term “belonging” [Zugehörigkeit] to denote the relation between interpreter and world that parallels the Greek and Hegelian notion of thinking as a movement immanent in being. When Gadamer says that subject and object belong together, he means that the interpreter (the ‘subject’) relates to things in the world (‘objects’) by understanding them, which means that he relates them to his situation. Understanding something is always self-understanding, as Gadamer has it, and so the metaphysical line dividing self from other comes under erasure. This is possible, says Gadamer, because language is a medium. Gadamer doesn’t put it quite this way, but because I understand myself through language, and because I also understand things through language, self and thing are not fundamentally

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<sup>27</sup> TM, 457; GW1, 461.

<sup>28</sup> TM, 460; GW1, 464.

different kinds of entities, requiring different cognitive modes for their comprehension. Both are revealed in language. Gadamer does not embrace the Greek and Hegelian metaphysical identification of thought and being, however, but rather draws a parallel between it and what he seeks to illustrate as the hermeneutic identity of “event and understanding.” Just as thinking is an element of being for the Greeks and Hegel, so understanding is an event of tradition for Gadamer. The understanding of tradition is an event that itself furthers that tradition.

The medial being of language, or how language is able to relate interpreter to world, must be further unpacked. The medium of language, in a manner of speaking, runs in two directions: vertically and horizontally. Let’s consider the latter first. Gadamer says, “every word breaks forth as if from a center [Mitte] and is related to a whole, through which alone it is a word. Every word causes the whole of the language to which it belongs to resonate and the whole worldview that underlies it to appear.”<sup>29</sup> That language is a medium means that any instance of language does not occur in isolation, but as part of a larger whole. It is an *entire* language—by which Gadamer means an entire linguistically constituted worldview—that acts as a medium. In fact, so ‘dense’ is this medium that a single word “causes” it in its entirety to “resonate” and “appear.” This position should remind us of the holisms we discussed in Chapter 1. It seems very much to be the case here that Gadamer is presenting a ‘strong’ holism, in which single words are directly connected with every other part of the language. What Gadamer has in mind, however, is not a static semantic architecture, but a dynamic relation between what is said now and what has been said before. After the segment quoted above, he says, “Thus every word, as the event of a moment, carries with it the unsaid, to which it is related by responding and summoning.” The linguistically constituted worldview that every word causes to appear is the result of a personal history of the acquisition and overthrow of prejudices. Language always occurs as conversation: it is not only embodied in a set of prejudices, but in the evolution of those prejudices. It is this constantly evolving worldview in its entirety, in its “living virtuality,” that the word calls forth. This means that the discussion of any particular topic will find its place within that worldview, and will have consequences for it.

The ‘vertical’ axis of the medium of language is constituted by the linguistic mediation of specific *Sachen*. When Gadamer discusses the speculative structure of the medium of language, he for the most part focuses on the understanding of such *Sachen*. We must be careful not to draw a sharp distinction between the individual *Sache* and the total worldview, though. A worldview consists of prejudices about a totality of subject matters, and as we saw above the worldview that encompasses those prejudices is a whole that is called forth when one speaks about anything. Be that as it may, to grasp what Gadamer understands by the

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<sup>29</sup> TM, 458; GW1, 462.

speculative structure of the medium of language, we will get farther if we focus on how language relates to individual subject matters.

Gadamer says a lot of things about the speculative structure of language, and it is not always clear how these various statements add up. We will here outline the numerous claims Gadamer makes about speculation; after that we will attempt to uncover what it is that ties them all together. First, though, we must note the Hegelian origins of this notion. Gadamer sees understanding “not [as] our action upon the thing, but the act of the thing itself.”<sup>30</sup> When I understand a text, I find questionable the question that motivates the text as answer. That is to say, I relate the text to my situation, to which alone anything questionable may be addressed. This event is an act of the thing itself because to find a question questionable is really to be asked a question by the text: I cannot choose to find a question questionable—it can only *occur to me*.<sup>31</sup> The question, as we’ve seen, breaks open the being of the thing: the being of the thing comes into question. From the fact that I cannot choose to ask a question about the being of the thing, Gadamer concludes that it is the thing itself that directs the question about its being at me. In this way, understanding is the “act” of the thing itself. And as Gadamer says, the term we use to denote this “activity of the thing itself” that is thinking is, with Hegel and the Greeks, “dialectic.” There is, then, a hermeneutic dialectic that follows the activity of the thing itself.

To show how hermeneutics (which denies that absolute knowledge is possible) can nevertheless be a dialectic (which historically has given itself the task of rising to absolute knowledge), Gadamer introduces the Hegelian notion of the speculative. For Hegel speculation is the essence of the relation between subject and object in dialectical thought, and the “speculative statement” is the linguistic form embodying this relation. Gadamer cites Hegel’s discussion of the speculative statement from the *Phenomenology* as an illustration of the speculative: unlike a judgment, a speculative (or “philosophical”) proposition does not predicate something of a subject, although superficially it seems to do this. Rather, it “states the truth of the subject in the form of the predicate.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> TM, 463; GW1, 467.

<sup>31</sup> Perhaps I can choose *not* to find a question questionable. But this too is ruled out by Gadamer’s picture of the question as an event. I might shut my ears and try to ignore a question that addresses me, but even if I do so I have *already* found this intrusive question questionable. And I can’t shut out the question *before* I find it questionable, since there will be no question for me to shut out until it announces itself—but then it will be too late. As Gadamer says, “he who is addressed must hear whether he wants to or not.” (TM, 462; GW1, 466.)

<sup>32</sup> TM, 466; GW1, 470.

Gadamer's example<sup>33</sup> is "God is one." This proposition "does not mean that it is a property of God's to be one, but that it is God's nature to be unity"; it thus "presents the unity of the concept." In his essay "Hegel and the Dialectic of the Ancient Philosophers," Gadamer says that in a speculative statement the subject "is not determined as something other than itself, but rather as that which it is."<sup>34</sup> Gadamer also emphasizes the metaphor of the mirror that is expressed in the notion of speculation: a speculative thought "must be thought of as a mirroring, in which the reflection is nothing but the pure appearance of what is reflected..."<sup>35</sup>

This mirror relation at the heart of the speculative is central to Gadamer's exploitation of this notion. But to become clear on how Gadamer understands speculation, let's enumerate the various things he has to say about it. We will save comment until the list is complete.

1. First, to be speculative in part means to be open-minded:

Speculative means the opposite of the dogmatism of everyday experience. A speculative person is someone who does not abandon himself directly to the tangibility of appearances or to the fixed determinateness of the meant, but who is able to reflect, or—to put it in Hegelian terms—who sees that the "in-itself" is a "for-me."<sup>36</sup>

2. Gadamer clearly takes philosophical inspiration from Hegel, but he parts ways with him on the question of the role of "natural" language in dialectic. For Hegel, as we saw above, language possesses in pre-philosophical form the logical relations and categories that scientific logic will systematically explicate. The privileged form of *philosophical* explication is the statement. This Gadamer cannot accept, since he understands language, even language that discourses philosophically, as conversation, as question and answer. However,

Language itself...has something speculative about it...as the realization of meaning [Sinn], as the event of speech, of mediation, of coming to an understanding. Such a realization is speculative in that the finite

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<sup>33</sup> Seemingly misremembered from the *Phenomenology*, where Hegel uses the example "God is being."

<sup>34</sup> In HD, 18; GW3, 15.

<sup>35</sup> TM, 466; GW1, 470.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

possibilities of the word are oriented toward the sense [Sinn] intended as toward the infinite. A person who has something to say seeks and finds the words to make himself intelligible to the other person. This does not mean that he makes “statements.”<sup>37</sup>

And further,

To say what one means, on the other hand—to make oneself understood—means to hold what is said together with an infinity of what is not said in one unified meaning [Einheit eines Sinnes] and to ensure that it is understood in this way....Someone who speaks is behaving speculatively when his words do not reflect beings, but express a relation to the whole of being [Ganzen des Seins].<sup>38</sup>

And,

Even in the most everyday speech there appears an element of speculative reflection, namely the intangibility of that which is still the purest reproduction of meaning.<sup>39</sup>

3. Gadamer also says that, in addition to everyday language, poetry too is speculative: it “expresses a relationship to being.” And,

The poetic statement is speculative inasmuch as it does not reflect an existent reality, does not reproduce the appearance of the *species* in the order of essence, but represents the new appearance of a new world in the imaginary medium of poetic invention.<sup>40</sup>

4. Gadamer expresses the essence of what he understands by hermeneutic speculativity by saying that it involves “something’s coming into language”<sup>41</sup>:

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<sup>37</sup> TM, 469; GW1, 472-3.

<sup>38</sup> TM, 469; GW1, 473.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> TM, 470; GW1, 474.

<sup>41</sup> TM, 471; GW1, 474.

In all the cases we analyzed...the speculative structure of language emerged, not as the reflection of something given but as the coming into language of a totality of meaning. This drew us toward the dialectic of the Greeks, because they did not conceive understanding as a methodic activity of the subject, but as something that the thing itself does and which thought “suffers.” This activity of the thing itself is the real speculative movement that takes hold of the speaker.<sup>42</sup>

5. Finally, an integral part of speculation is the notion of the “speculative unity”:

...everything that is language has a speculative unity: it contains a distinction, that between its being and its presentation of itself, but this is a distinction which is really not a distinction at all.<sup>43</sup>

What are we to make of all this? This last quote suggests what it seems to me lies at the heart of hermeneutic speculation: the distinction, which is really no distinction, between what a thing is and how it is presented to me. If we take this speculative unity to express speculation as such, we will be in a position to understand the disparate things Gadamer says about it above. Let’s go through some of these statements and try to understand what Gadamer is getting at. So: we can see the distinction between being and presentation at work in (1): to see the in-itself as a for-me is to recognize that in experience I treat the things I come across as though they were things in themselves, as though they constituted immediate reality. This is the thought position of sense-certainty with which Hegel begins the *Phenomenology*. To speculate is to rise above this “dogmatism,” and thus to recognize that how things present themselves to me is not necessarily how they are. However, as we can see from (5), the distinction between being and appearance is both made *and superseded* in speculation. How is this possible? How is it that what something is, is both distinct and not distinct from how it presents itself?

To begin to understand the answer to this question, recall that Gadamer holds the mirror relation to be central to the notion of the speculative. If it is language that is speculative, what is it that is ‘reflected’ in it? The short answer is that it is the subject matter, the topic of conversation, “the thing itself”—die Sache selbst. By this term, as we’ve seen, Gadamer means absolutely anything that can be the subject matter of a conversation, from the particular actions of an individual to

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<sup>42</sup> TM, 474; GW1, 478.

<sup>43</sup> TM, 475; GW1, 479.

concepts like justice or being.<sup>44</sup> That it is the Sache that is reflected in language is clear from (4) above: understanding is the “activity of the thing itself,” and this activity is the “speculative movement” of language (it “takes hold of the *speaker*”). So it is the subject matter whose being is distinct from its self-presentation, *and* whose being is *not* distinct from its self-presentation. This means that anything one can possibly talk about is subject to this speculative unity. But again, what does this mean? Consider the quotes gathered together under (2). The “realization [of meaning] is speculative in that the finite possibilities of the word are oriented toward the sense intended as toward the infinite.” That language is finite is clear enough: words themselves are finite entities, and human conversation can never reach the point of infinity—one can always continue speaking.<sup>45</sup> But what is “infinite” about the “sense intended”? Gadamer says, “to make oneself understood...means to hold what is said together with an infinity of what is not said in one unified meaning and to ensure that it is understood in this way.” It must be the subject matter that is somehow infinite, since it is always the subject matter that is under discussion—what one wants the other to understand is what one has to say about the subject matter. But how then is the subject matter infinite? What is the “infinity of what is not said” that one unites into one meaning with what one says about some subject matter? If the speculativity of language means that language opens up the distinction between being and presentation, then anything I discuss in language will be revealed to me as subject to this distinction. Anything I talk about will be presented to me in a certain way, but at the same time I will recognize that how the thing is may be different from how it is presented. To be a subject matter encountered in language is then to be *encountered as transcending* any particular view one might have of it. It must be encountered as transcending *any* particular view of it because *all* views of it will be subject to the same distinction between being and presentation. Subject matters are precisely in this way infinite: no matter what we say about them, we will always be discussing only how the thing seems to us. And a subject matter can appear in potentially endless ways to those who understand it—indeed, the subject matter *must* be understood in a new way by everyone who understands it, since for Gadamer understanding is always application to one’s situation. The infinity of the unsaid is everything that could possibly be said about the subject matter—and that ‘everything’ is just what the subject matter *is*. So to hold what is said together with an infinity of what is not said is to speak about the subject matter as something that is the subject of a potentially infinite number of views, and this is simply to speak about the subject matter *as a subject matter*.

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<sup>44</sup> It is for this reason that we may say that hermeneutics collapses the distinction between philosophy and everyday conversation: all conversations, regardless of what they are about, are subject to the logic of the thing itself.

<sup>45</sup> Until, of course, one can speak no more—the final mark of finitude.

It should be emphasized that *only* because of the distinction between being and presentation that language opens up in the discussion of a subject matter can the subject matter be said to be infinite. If a subject matter is simply *identified* with its presentation in language—i.e. with the interpretation of a particular speaker, or even with that of a finite, determinate group of speakers—then no two such presentations can be about ‘the same’ subject matter. For two different interpretations to be about the same subject matter, there must be a distinction between interpretation and *what* the interpretation *is about*. Otherwise, for every interpretation there would be a different subject matter. But in that case, the ‘interpretation’ would not be an interpretation—it would be more like the perception of a sense-datum, perceived by no-one else because received by no-one else. In this case interpretation would be ‘of’ something, but it would not really be an interpretation. The thing would appear entirely and without remainder in the interpretation, and thus the interpretation could not be wrong—but something that cannot be wrong is not an *interpretation*, but apodictically certain *objective knowledge*. The infinitude of the subject matter means rather that there can always be further interpretations of it, and this means that there is a perpetual distinction between interpretation and ‘object’ of interpretation, between presentation and being.

So there must be a distinction between being and presentation for interpretation to take place. Why must this distinction also be superseded? In short, it is because language is a medium. Any being that is posited as distinct from a linguistically mediated interpretation will always be posited through language. As Gadamer says in “On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutic Reflection,” “Reality does not happen “behind the back” of language;...reality happens precisely *within* language.”<sup>46</sup> Another way of putting this is that anything we speak about is always something we speak about—we cannot escape the categories of language since anything we understand we understand in language. This is the thrust of Gadamer’s argument against Habermas in their debate in the late ‘60s. The universality of hermeneutics is based on the linguisticity of all understanding—there is no language-less viewing of entities ‘outside’ of language, since anything we can understand is disclosed to us in language.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> PH, 35; GW2, 245.

<sup>47</sup> Habermas had argued in “The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality” that because of its focus on understanding meanings, hermeneutics is unable to detect when communication has been “systematically distorted,” i.e. when the very language people use is invested with power relations that are invisible to them. Hermeneutics, in listening to the truth-claims of such speakers, has no resources for determining whether and how their speech has come to be ideologically invested. What is needed, says Habermas, is a critical theory that looks at how

In addition to the medial being of language, there are epistemological reasons why the distinction between being and presentation must be superseded. If language is that which allows us to encounter things, then it would seem that the skeptic's argument against knowledge claims gains a foothold. How can we have knowledge of things in themselves if everything is mediated by language?<sup>48</sup> Only if a thing is visible as itself in language can we be said to understand it. For an interpretation to be said to be correct, it must be the case that that interpretation has access to the thing that it is interpreting—that the thing appears as itself in the interpretation. Otherwise, the interpretation will have nothing to be correct about. If the interpretation only gets at a presentation (i.e. at a presentation that is not a presentation *of* the thing), there will be nothing *of* which it can be said to be an interpretation.

We should here begin to see an answer to Apel's claim<sup>49</sup> that because it lacks a theory of direct reference, hermeneutics cannot account for the possibility of learning things about the world. Unless language can refer directly to things in the world without the mediation of a description, that is, unless meaning does not determine reference, then language will involve making pre-established moves in a language-game or paradigm. It will not involve coming to have knowledge about things 'out there.' But here we see that for Gadamer, the distinction between the thing referred to and its description in a linguistic presentation is internal to language. While meaning does determine reference on this picture, no single meaning or set of meanings (i.e., no single description or set of descriptions) can exhaustively determine the referent. Understanding does not just involve making pre-established moves in a language game because something more, something new can always be said about the thing. This is possible because

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meaning is the product of extra-linguistic power relations and material developments. Gadamer's response is to say that hermeneutics is truly universal—those very power relations that are said to underlie our meaning productions are themselves linguistically mediated *Sachen*, to be understood like anything else.

<sup>48</sup> The skeptic's doubts are not necessarily assuaged by Kant, who in many ways confirms the skeptic's position by saying that knowledge of the thing-in-itself is not to be had by knowers whose knowledge is subject to sensibility and the forms of intuition. Kant's victory against skepticism was to show that knowledge of *objects* is the epistemological space in which human knowers move. The notion of linguisticity (language as a medium) will allow Gadamer to do something similar—though, following Hegel, he does not accept the notion of a thing-it-itself outside of human cognition.

<sup>49</sup> See "Regulative Ideal or Truth Happening?" in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*. Cristina Lafont also makes this claim in *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*.

descriptions of the thing always capture an aspect of that thing, while also always intending the thing itself. The possibility is always held open that there will be some further view of the thing that will reveal the thing more broadly than it has been revealed so far. The distinction, internal to interpretation, between the thing and its aspect thus makes learning itself a possibility that is internal to interpretation.

Summing up: to be language is to relate to being. It is also to deploy the distinction between being and presentation, and at the same time to supersede that distinction. This distinction that is no distinction is what makes it possible for there to be understanding, and it makes it possible for there to be subject matters for the interpreter to understand. We will now delve further into this paradox that sits at the heart of hermeneutics: the being of the subject matter as both one and many, unity and plurality, identity and difference.

#### 4.3 — The Paradox of the Sache

The Sache, the subject matter, is *one* thing—a concept, an historical event, a person; and it is many—the *multiple* interpretations of it. This dual being of the subject matter is best illustrated with an example from the first part of *Truth and Method*: the artwork. Take a painting like David's *Oath of the Horatii*: everyone who views this painting sees the same thing—a painting by a particular artist with a certain title. But there is also a potential infinity of interpretations of this painting. A viewer at the time of its first exhibition in pre-Revolutionary France might have seen in it the nobility of patriotism, whereas it is hard for an early 21<sup>st</sup> century viewer not to see an odd premonition of the Nazi salute in the raised hands of the Horatii. That such a premonition could hardly have been intended by David is beside the point. If the subject matter of the painting is loyalty to one's nation as demanding the superseding of family ties, we come to it from a perspective that recognizes the dangers of patriotism. Of course, we may also read in the painting the claim about patriotic duty as a noble sacrifice, but the point for Gadamer is that that claim speaks to us in our situation, which is one in which patriotism is a much more problematic notion. For Gadamer the artwork is what it is in its reception by its viewers. It is not to be thought of as ontologically distinct from that reception. The reason the artwork is not to be thought of as ontologically distinct from its reception is that what an artwork *is* is an interpreted and interpretable thing. The artwork as artwork is always taken up into someone's situation—it always speaks to someone. Any encounter with the artwork by any interpreter whatsoever will run along the same lines; and so there is no possible

encounter with the artwork that would show us what it is 'in itself.' But also, as Gadamer says, works of art are "the being there of what is presented in them."<sup>50</sup> For Gadamer, being is play and play is self-presentation; the artwork presentation for another. The artwork presents something to a viewer—but since that presentation always occurs as application to one's situation and integration into one's worldview, to be an artwork is to be realized in application and integration (and hence to be something that is in principle different for every interpreter).

But in spite of this difference of the artwork in its various interpretations, it is, again, always the same artwork that is interpreted. Every production of *Titus Andronicus* is different, but every production of it is a production of *Titus Andronicus*. Any artwork or historical event, indeed any subject matter whatsoever, is what it is in its various interpretations. Gadamer recognizes this paradox, and embraces it. He says,

Every appropriation of tradition is historically different: which does not mean that each one represents only an imperfect understanding of it. Rather, each is the experience of an "aspect" of the thing itself....The paradox that is true of all traditionary material, namely of being one and the same and yet being different, proves that all interpretation is, in fact, speculative.<sup>51</sup>

Gadamer here presents an argument that is a close cousin to that of Quine's in *Word and Object* and "Ontological Relativity." Immediately after the above passage he says, "Hence hermeneutics has to see through the dogmatism of a "meaning-in-itself" in exactly the same way critical philosophy has seen through the dogmatism of experience." Quine, as we saw above, had argued against there being a 'fact of the matter' what words mean; meaning is only determinate relative to a background language. Here Gadamer is arguing in effect that meaning is always relative to an interpretation. Quine introduced the notion of ontological relativity to make sense of reference: if ontology is not relative to a background language, then reference is inscrutable—a term like 'rabbit' could be taken to refer to very different things. The drawback of such a move is that one is forced into a kind of philosophical doublethink if one wants to engage in the practice of reference: having risen to a perspective in which one accepts the relativity of meaning, one must then return back from that perspective by 'acquiescing in one's mother tongue.' Gadamer sees the problem, but rather than pragmatically skirting the paradox, as Quine seems to do, discovers in it truths about understanding. As he says, the paradox "proves that all interpretation

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<sup>50</sup> TM, 134; GW1, p. 139.

<sup>51</sup> TM, 473; GW1, p. 477.

is...speculative,” i.e. it proves that in interpretation there is a distinction that is no distinction between the being of the thing interpreted and its presentation in the interpretation. This distinction-that-is-no-distinction, this paradox, lies at the heart of interpretation: *there can be no interpretation without it*. As we saw above, in order for interpretation to occur, there must be a difference between being and presentation, *and* this difference must be superseded. Only if being is both identical to presentation and distinct from it can interpretation do what it purports to do: say something true about a subject matter that transcends the interpretation itself.

In fact, we have what appears to be a transcendental argument lurking in Gadamer’s discussion of speculation in interpretation. We can think of Gadamer as asking what the conditions of possibility of successful interpretation are. His answer is that interpretation is able to take place because that which is interpreted, the subject matter, both presents itself in the interpretation and is distinct from it. I would argue, furthermore, that this paradox explains not just how there can be such a thing as a successful interpretation; it also explains how human beings are motivated to interpret in the first place. The paradoxicality of interpretation may in fact be seen as an engine driving interpretation, which is a kind of movement. As the attempt to understand a subject matter, interpretation can only occur if the interpreter assumes that there is a way the subject matter is that is not identical to the various things people have to say about it—i.e. that there is being distinct from presentation. But the attempt must remain incoherent if the being that is distinct from presentation is not accessible to the interpreter, that is, if being cannot appear *within* some presentation of it in language. So for interpretation to proceed, there must be the promise of correct interpretation. But for interpretation even to *begin* its movement, the thought must occur to the interpreter that how the thing is is possibly different from how it seems. Now, the key to understanding Gadamer is to see that this movement of interpretation has always already begun. The human interpreter exists in the tension-filled space that the paradox of understanding opens up: historically effected in the network of prejudices that open her to the world, she is delivered over into beliefs about things that can at any moment be revised with the advent of a new experience. Every new belief, every expanded horizon, is subject to the same dynamic that allowed for the revision of the original belief and the expansion of the old horizon.

Gadamer confirms that understanding is this place of tension in his essay “Dialectic and Sophism in Plato’s Seventh Letter.” There he tries to show the meaning of what has come to be known as the “indirect tradition” of Plato’s teaching, i.e. that which Plato actually taught in the Academy: “the One and the indeterminate Two.” Plato’s concern, argues Gadamer, was not with establishing the existence of the ideas, which were for Plato simply a necessary “assumption.” Rather, because “In any insight an entire nexus or web of ideas is involved,”<sup>52</sup>

Plato's concern is with how the ideas relate to each other, how the system of ideas is structured. The notion of the One and the Two captures this interrelation: the "oneness and multiplicity, the merging of what is disparate into an astonishing and transparent unity of many far-reaching implications, is the law which in fact governs progress in philosophic insight within the whole of discourse..."<sup>53</sup> That is, in philosophical thinking one moves toward the unity of an idea through discourse, which is multiple, and once one has had insight into such a unity one is able to draw out its implications, again in the multiplicity of discourse. Unity and multiplicity together, the One and the Two, are in fact for Plato

the generative principle of all insight and the structural principle of any discourse which properly reveals the thing under discussion....What this doctrine actually describes, I contend, is the felicitous experience of advancing insight...the way of discourse which reveals the thing being discussed. It is this very dialectic of the One and the Many which establishes the finite limits of human discourse and insight—and our fruitful situation halfway between single and multiple meaning, clarity and ambiguity.<sup>54</sup>

It is clear that Gadamer is here not just explicating Plato, but that he is also largely agreeing with what he finds in him. The thing revealed by discourse is a One, a single, unitary thing; the discourse that reveals it is a Two, a multiplicity. This revealing of the thing does not mean, further, that the One supersedes the Two: as Gadamer says, human interpreters are always "halfway" between single and multiple meaning. We never reach the thing as a One because we can only do so through discourse, which is always Many. But also, we are not simply stuck in the Many, since it is always unities that we discuss and into which we seek to gain more insight. Interpretation, again, is in a place of tension—always progressing toward understanding some thing, but never completely reaching it. And, parallel to what we said above, Gadamer holds that the One and the Two constitute the "generative principle [Erzeugungsprinzipien] of all insight"—there can only be insight because understanding operates according to the One and the Two.

Gadamer elucidates why it is that the One cannot be reached further on: the One and the Two, he says, is

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<sup>52</sup> Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, 119; GW6, 112. Henceforth DD.

<sup>53</sup> DD, 119; GW6, 112.

<sup>54</sup> DD, 119-20; GW6, 112-13.

an entirety of the logoi in which reality, according to its ordering principle, both unifies and unfolds itself. The entirety of the logoi is a true entirety but one which is given to finite human knowing only in its basic structure and only in concretizations of it in specific contexts. What is, is as the whole of the infinite interrelationship of things, from which at any given time in discourse and insight a determinate, partial aspect is “raised up” and placed in the light of disconcealment.<sup>55</sup>

The unity of the whole becomes visible in discourse only in an aspect, only partially. From the standpoint of human finitude, the whole can be thought, can be intended, but only parts of it can reveal themselves. Furthermore, since the whole is the totality of an “infinite interrelationship of things,” no possible being, no matter how great, could come to know the whole in its concreteness. And there is a further barrier to reaching unity for Plato: the very medium of knowledge prevents the thing from being known. The discussion of the One and the Two in Gadamer’s essay is couched in an interpretation of Plato’s *Seventh Letter*, in which Plato argues that the means of knowing, insofar as they are means and not the thing known, inevitably obscure the thing by asserting themselves. But the lot of human knowing is to take place in these means—in names, in discourse, in images. There is thus a close parallel between Gadamer’s construal of Plato’s argument and his own argument regarding the role of prejudices in understanding. A prejudice is a means of knowing, but just as much as it opens one up to the thing, it also to some extent closes one off from it. Indeed, the prejudice *can* only open one up to the thing by closing off other possibilities of that thing. In all of this one is always only on the way to the thing in its fully disclosed unity; and the multiplicity of the path toward the thing is precisely that which prevents the attainment of the thing.

According to Gadamer, the One and the Two present for Plato a profound enigma. Much as he had in the “Dialectic and Sophism” essay, in “Plato’s Unwritten Dialectic” Gadamer argues that rather than the existence of the ideas or the ‘how’ of the participation of particulars in them, the main problem that Plato faced in his philosophy was “the *logical* question of how it is possible...that the one can be many and many, one.”<sup>56</sup> Gadamer illustrates this by saying, “What is said of a thing is supposed to be different than the thing and nevertheless it is supposed to be attributed to it. What a thing is supposed to be in truth is supposed to hold for each of its appearances and yet the appearances are supposed to be

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<sup>55</sup> DD, 120; GW6, 113.

<sup>56</sup> DD, 147; GW6, 147.

different from the thing itself.”<sup>57</sup> In the same way, it is “puzzling” that Two is both a One—a single number with properties that are different from the properties of the numbers that add up to it—and Two—its constituent numbers, One and One. It should be clear, though, that what Gadamer sees as the enigma that Plato faces in trying to understand the Ideas is *identical* to the “paradox of the Sache” that we discussed above. Gadamer in fact reads Plato as basing this notion of the One and the Two in the *finitude* of the human interpreter: the Two is the inherently multiple, indeterminate discourse that humans must engage in to come to know the idea, and as discourse it will only ever grasp an aspect of that idea. He thus reads Plato not as a metaphysician of the first order, but as someone trying to understand the enigmatic character of human cognition, which seeks to know the structural principles of the cosmos from an epistemic position that makes complete access to them impossible. Which is to say that he reads him as a precursor to philosophical hermeneutics.

We have now given an account of the structure of the object of interpretation in Gadamerian hermeneutics. The key for our discussion of holism is to note that in understanding, the thing is encountered as both context-dependent and context-transcendent. In *all* understanding, the distinction-that-is-no-distinction between being and presentation is in play. In Chapter 3 we saw that for every interpreter, any local context is always transcended by the total context that is the world. Now we see that understanding always involves a dialectic between contexts: between the singular context of every interpreter and the broader context of those with whom she is in dialogue; and between these two local contexts and the total context of the world, which encompasses any possible local context.<sup>58</sup> The difference between these various contexts is presupposed in understanding, and understanding constantly moves between them, sublating this difference as it goes.

#### 4.4 — The Event of Truth

We are now ready to address more explicitly Gadamer’s conception of truth. We have considered the structure of those things about which human beings say true things—Sachen, subject matters—and have seen that they are encountered in

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> So while we said the thing is encountered as context-transcendent, it is *not* encountered as independent of the context of the world.

the paradoxical distinction-that-is-no-distinction between being and presentation. Since truth for Gadamer involves the coming into language of the Sache, this (non)distinction becomes an essential part of truth. And as we argued at the start of this chapter, truth, when construed in this way, has both relative and irrelative moments. Truth cannot occur without this moment of relativity, of mediation with an interpreter's prejudices, because it is always some interpreter for whom truth occurs. But truth also cannot occur without the second moment, the moment of irrelativity. That moment comes into the interpretation insofar as the presentation of the thing is a presentation *of* a thing, of something whose being is distinct from its presentation. The question that we now have to answer is what exactly it is for the thing itself to come into language—what exactly is it for truth to occur? We will be able to answer this question, and thus more fully to grasp Gadamer's conception of truth, if we determine how the paradox of the thing itself constitutes understanding as an event. Truth, for Gadamer, is itself an event, and it is an event that is inherently related to the event of understanding. This double-event in fact sits at the heart of what makes hermeneutics holistic—the mediation of the object of interpretation with the context of the interpreter. When we see how truth is an event, we will therefore have completed our picture of Gadamer's hermeneutic holism. We'll begin by considering the event of understanding, and then show how this event yields the event of truth.

So, how is understanding an event? Let's start by asking what Gadamer means by "event." Events are best understood if we compare them to *actions*. An action is something a subject does—it is the activity of an agent, chosen and willed. Events, on the other hand, are not within the subject's control (or at least, not entirely within her control—though what makes an event an event—its eventhood—is that in it which exceeds determination by a subject). Events *happen to* the subject. Understanding, as an event, is not something the subject chooses, but something it undergoes.<sup>59</sup> For this reason, Gadamer calls understanding the "act of the thing itself."<sup>60</sup> It is the thing itself, the subject matter under discussion, that acts upon the interpreter, yielding understanding. How does this occur? We have already seen how Gadamer answers this question in our discussion of the logic of question and answer. To understand meaning is to

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<sup>59</sup> Illusions and delusions also 'happen to' the subject; is there then no difference between understanding and illusion? As we will see later in this section, for Gadamer the only thing that can stand as evidence for a true interpretation is the thing itself. Someone who is delusional arguably does not have prejudices that are adequate to the thing itself. There are needless to say a host of epistemological problems that this way of viewing understanding give rise to, and we will address them later on in the chapter.

<sup>60</sup> TM, 463; GW1, 467.

understand what someone says as an answer to a question that one finds questionable oneself. But finding a question questionable is not something one can choose to do—it either happens or does not happen. It is in fact this very questionableness of the question that constitutes the eventhood of understanding. The way Gadamer puts this is to say that we are “addressed” by tradition: the traditionary text poses a question to us, which means that it addresses the prejudices which we have as a part of our historical situation.

What we should see here is that the event of understanding is an implication of the paradox of the *Sache* that we discussed above. Understanding, we saw, operates in the space that is opened up by the distinction between being and presentation, and this distinction also collapses in the very occurrence of understanding. The being of the thing in question is opened up by the question, and this opening up of being in turn establishes the distinction between being and presentation. If the question itself can only occur as an event, and not the action of a subject, it follows that the distinction that it instantiates itself must occur as event. Now the *Sache*—paradoxically occurring between the singularity of the thing intended and the multiplicity of the interpretations of it—is that which is understood. From the eventhood of understanding, as the act of the thing itself, it thus follows that whenever understanding occurs the thing itself also occurs along with it. It may sound too strong to say that understanding *is* the thing itself, but if language is thought as a medium, then the relation between the two will be very close. Gadamer says, “interpretation is not a means through which understanding is achieved; rather, it enters into the content of what is understood...interpretation in the medium of language itself shows what understanding always is: assimilating what is said to the point that it becomes one’s own.”<sup>61</sup> And further on, “we must recognize that all understanding is interwoven with concepts and reject any theory that does not accept the intimate unity of word and subject matter.”<sup>62</sup> And finally,

Everything that is intelligible must be accessible to understanding and to interpretation. What is true of understanding is just as true of language. Neither is to be grasped simply as a fact that can be empirically investigated. Neither is ever simply an object but comprehends [umgreifen—encompass] everything that can ever be an object.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> TM, 398; GW1, 402.

<sup>62</sup> TM, 403; GW1, 407.

<sup>63</sup> TM, 404; GW1, 408.

The thing appears in the interpretation. The thing itself is, again, *not different* from its presentation in an interpretation (and, of course, it *is* different from that presentation at the same time). But what is it to be a presentation in an interpretation? Such a presentation will take place in the language of the interpretation. A paper written in an English class about *Clarissa* will be written in the language of an early 21<sup>st</sup> century college student and not that of an 18<sup>th</sup> century novel; the interpretation will consist in the student's language, and into that language and that interpretation will come the thing itself, *Clarissa*. "That which can be understood is language": the thing is understood, and it is understood in the language of the interpreter. That language is also the language of her understanding, and as Gadamer says, between word and subject matter there is an "intimate unity." The thing itself enters not just language, but the interpreter's understanding itself.

It should by now be clear how understanding can be an event—indeed, the whole of *Truth and Method* arguably aims to demonstrate the eventhood of understanding. What, then, is the relation between understanding as an event and truth? To answer this question it is important to note the *way* in which understanding is an event. Understanding, says Gadamer, occurs in the way that *beauty* occurs. The beautiful appears suddenly, and appeals to the viewer *as* beautiful before she has had a chance to assess the aesthetic qualities of the beautiful thing, before she has had a chance to weigh it and judge it. Understanding occurs in the same way: that which is understood is "Einleuchtend"—immediately evident.<sup>64</sup> To be evident, Gadamer argues, is not the same as being established as certain through the application of a method: to be evident is to have the appearance of plausibility, of likelihood. Being evident leaves open the task of determining whether the thing in question is in fact the case—it occurs *before* one has had the chance to *integrate* that which is evident into the rest of one's system of beliefs. This occurrence of evidentness is, in fact, the occurrence of truth. To understand is to find something evident—that is, to find something likely to be true. As Gadamer says, "The tradition asserts its own truth in being understood, and disturbs the horizon that had, until then, surrounded us."<sup>65</sup> The event of understanding *is* the event of truth. Gadamer implicitly identifies the two on p. 490, where he says both that "Someone who understands is always already drawn into an event through which meaning asserts itself," and that "In understanding we are drawn into an event of truth, and arrive, as it were, too late, if we want to know what we were supposed to believe." The "assertion of

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<sup>64</sup> See TM, 485; GW1, 488.

<sup>65</sup> TM, 486; GW1, 489.

meaning” is here identified with the “event of truth”—to understand meaning is to partake in truth.<sup>66</sup>

The notion of truth that we are dealing with here does not fit into any of the traditional conceptions of truth—nor can it really be said to be the exact same notion of truth that Heidegger named *aletheia*, even though it clearly is indebted to that conception. Traditionally, truth is not viewed as an event—truth is predicated of sentences that bear a certain relation either to the world or to the other sentences that make up the theory or web of beliefs. Furthermore, truth is not thought to have been established if what is said in a statement or argument is merely evident or probable. Truth is something one secures further down the line—after, say, one has gone through a procedure of verification. In the Heideggerian view, truth is the disclosure of the being of beings, and happens before one determines whether individual judgments are true by measuring them against experience. (The latter, according to Heidegger, is truth as ‘correctness.’) In the Gadamerian event of truth, it’s not that the being of beings isn’t disclosed; rather it’s that, in addition, ontic truths come to light. As we’ve seen in Gadamer’s hermeneutics the distinction between metaphysical and everyday uses of language is broken down; so, in a way, the ontico-ontological distinction does not emerge from *Truth and Method* unscathed. Everything—from individual beings to the being of some being—can become the subject matter of a conversation. As the coming into language of subject matters, truth does not discriminate between the ontic and the ontological—it is not the domain of one to the exclusion of the other. To be sure, Gadamer does not erase the ontico-ontological distinction, but rather shows that the ontological is not just something that recedes into the background as Dasein steps into the clearing of being. Ontology, like the ontic, can be a topic of conversation, can be something that one interpreter says something about that another tries to understand. Even though their positions differ in this way, however, Gadamer’s and Heidegger’s conceptions of truth do share the following similarity: for both, truth is a revealing of beings. In “What is Truth?,” Gadamer says parenthetically, “What we mean by truth, the revealedness and unconcealedness of things,…”<sup>67</sup> In another aside he says, “the mere

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<sup>66</sup> If the event of truth just is the event of understanding, then why does Gadamer distinguish them at all? Since historically truth and understanding have been distinguished, Gadamer of course can’t *begin* by conflating them. Their identification is something he has to establish. But once established, does it continue to make sense to use different words to denote what they are in their unity? To be fair, the real connection between truth and understanding is not fully made until the very end of *Truth and Method*. But also, on their own each concept has a wealth of associations that their replacement by a single term would erase.

<sup>67</sup> Brice R. Wachterhauser, ed. *Hermeneutics and Truth*, 46; GW2, 56.

presentation of that which is present, while certainly true, which means revealed as it is..."<sup>68</sup> Truth occurs when things are revealed as they are; this, for Gadamer, happens not after a method has been applied, but constantly in the ebb and flow of language. Indeed, there is a way in which merely speaking about something is a movement of truth: again in "What is Truth?," Gadamer says, "a relationship between recognition of the truth and effability [Sagbarkeit] discloses itself that cannot be measured in terms of verifiability of propositions."<sup>69</sup> Effability can only be an aspect of truth if the very act of speaking involves the disclosure of beings: "All coming into language...has about it something of [the] quality of self-attestation....As we emphasized, speaking is never just subsuming individual things under universal concepts. In using words what is given to the senses...is itself made present in what is said."<sup>70</sup>

Given the apparent difference of Gadamer's notion of truth from the traditional views, we may be forgiven for asking whether what we are dealing with here is "really" truth. Isn't truth something beyond mere evidentness? After all, we can here too apply the '...but is it true' test: for example, it may be evident that American astronauts landed on the moon, but is it true? Truth as evidence would also seem to rule out an epistemic notion like that of Peirce, whereby truth is what is reached at the ideal end of inquiry. As we noted above, Gadamer is an internal realist while not adopting what Putnam considers to be the natural (epistemic) conception of truth for internal realism, "idealized rational acceptability." Putnam thinks internal realism and "warrantability" go hand in hand because with internalism one abandons the notion that truth is the correspondence between language and a language-transcendent reality. The alternative is that truth is what we are justified in believing, but since what we are justified in believing *now* might turn out to be something we are not justified in believing after further experience, truth has to be that which "could be justified were epistemic conditions good enough."<sup>71</sup> In philosophical hermeneutics, however, truth occurs much sooner; indeed, it is always already under way. The integration of something evident into one's system of prejudices occurs, as we saw above, after the event of evidentness. The process of integration, to be sure, is an epistemic process, and to the extent that integration is a part of truth, Gadamer shares with Peirce and Putnam an epistemic conception of truth. There is another parallel: since true prejudices are those that are shown to be true by the Sache, the Sache may itself be said to justify us in our prejudices about it. But contra

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 40; GW2, 51.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 40; GW2, 50.

<sup>70</sup> TM, 489-90; GW1, 493.

<sup>71</sup> Putnam, "Preface" to *Realism with a Human Face*.

Putnam, this justification does not occur under 'ideal' conditions; it is constantly occurring. Since it is the thing itself that presents itself to the interpreter, there can never be a *completely* unjustified interpretation—even while the view of the Sache of any given interpretation might be constricted and hence partly wrong.

Gadamer says truth occurs as the evident, as what is immediately plausible. But if we still have to determine whether and how to integrate something evident into our worldview, the possibility emerges that not *everything* we find immediately plausible will be something we will later find convincing, after we have had a chance to assess it. This seems to mitigate the charge one might otherwise levy at Gadamer, namely that from his position it follows that anything anyone finds convincing is true. The problem is not completely eradicated, however, since truth remains identified with that which is immediately convincing. But even if we bracket this problem for the moment, the claim that what is evident may later be legitimately abandoned raises the possibility that what is true will nevertheless later be determined to be false. Not just what is *thought* to be true, note, but what is *actually* true, since Gadamer *identifies* truth with the evident. If the same thing can be both true and false, however, it is clear that we are dealing with *relative* truth. But as we noted at the start of this chapter, there is intuitively something irrelative about truth—the notion that something could be true relative to my perspective, and thus perhaps false relative to yours, seems to do violence to the meaning of the word "true." Reason, perhaps, to ignore such intuitions. However, it seems to me that Gadamer's view of truth allows us to preserve the intuitions of truth as irrelative, while also acknowledging truth's inescapably relative character.

How can it be that something can be true (in its immediate evidence to me in the event of understanding) and false (rejected after the attempt at hermeneutic integration fails)? Why does Gadamer say that the evident is the true, rather than just the evident? As always, we must remember what it is that occurs in the event of understanding. Meaning is understood as an answer to a question; the question breaks open the being of the thing and establishes the distinction-that-is-no-distinction between being and presentation. And, in all understanding the interpreter grasps an aspect of the thing itself. Anything that is evident, then, occurs in the openness of the question and in the (non)distinction between being and presentation. This means that, far from being a fully determined, closed statement, what is evident always occurs dialogically. To reject the evident, then, does not mean simply to set aside some 'assertion' as 'incorrect'; because the being of the thing has been broken open, one may reject what has been said even while one tarries in the space of openness that the experience of evidence has disclosed. The event of truth brings the thing into language: this does not mean that it establishes some set of incontrovertible 'truths' *about* the thing; rather it brings the very openness of the thing into the interpreter's understanding. Attending this openness are of course closed determinations of the thing, i.e. specific *answers* to the question that opens it. These appear to the interpreter as evident in the event of truth. But along with these answers is disclosed the thing in

its openness, and this remains with the interpreter after any assessment of the answers has determined them to be false.

If we keep this interpretation of Gadamer in mind, we should be able to answer some of the criticisms that have been made of this position by poststructuralists and critical theorists. It has been said for example by John Caputo, among others, that Gadamerian hermeneutics reduces us to acquiescing before the great “wisdom” and truth of the tradition.<sup>72</sup> Caputo argues that Gadamer holds there to be “eternal truths” that are encountered differently by historically located individuals as “expressions” of an underlying “meaning.”<sup>73</sup> But this misreads Gadamer as holding that it is primarily a concrete, determinate content that is handed down in tradition and taken up in the application to one’s situation. As we have seen, more important for Gadamerian hermeneutics than the reception of any determinate content is the openness of the thing as disclosed by the questionableness of the question. If the tradition hands down anything it is not some theory or set of statements that we must simply accept because of the tradition’s authority; rather, it is the thing itself that tradition hands down—but this means the *open question* of *what* the thing *is*. I don’t read Plato and transform myself on the spot into a believer in eternal, unchanging Forms; I do read him and think the thought for the first time, ‘exactly what *is* the Good, anyway?’ *Is* it as Plato says it is: a self-identical eternally subsisting Idea that permits me to think all other ideas? *Is* the Good a thought? *Is* it real? Now, because truth is what is evident, I may while reading Plato be transported into the immediate conviction that what he says is true. But concurrent with that evidence, indeed underlying it, making it possible in the first place, is the distinction that this experience opens up between the being of the Good and its presentation. Plato’s presentation of the Good, which in the moment of reading the *Republic* I find immediately evident, is disclosed to me, in the very moment I understand it, as distinct from whatever the Good happens to be. It cannot be, then, that what the tradition passes along is a determinate content that one must take or leave. The tradition passes along *Sachen*—but this means, it passes along questions.

To illustrate this response to Caputo’s criticism, consider what we are to do with interpretations of *Sachen* that we find obviously incorrect. Take for example the homophobe’s understanding of homosexuality. If we as interpreters are confronted with this position, must we really acknowledge its ‘truth’ if we are to avoid projecting our own unacknowledged prejudices onto it? If we let our situation determine our reception of this ‘text,’ then surely it will not tell us any

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<sup>72</sup> See “Gadamer’s Closet Essentialism” in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, 258-64.

<sup>73</sup> John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*, 111.

‘truths’—because for us, the homophobe’s view of homosexuality is quite *untrue*. But adopting a more ‘charitable’ position is even less palatable: how can we even imagine accepting the ‘truth’ of the homophobic position? Understanding is supposed to come from application and charity, but here neither one gets us understanding—or truth for that matter. Seen from this perspective, the dilemma seems very real. The problem is that Gadamer’s position, as we’ve seen, is more complex than this. Truths are not limited to propositions (or sets of propositions) with determinate content that one either accepts or rejects. Truth is evidentness, and what is evident is meaning as an answer to a question. So applying a text to one’s situation does not mean imposing one’s prejudices upon it, but seeing those prejudices themselves as answers to questions that quite possibly have other compelling answers. And taking the text to be true does not mean accepting its truth without question, but supposing that the way it answers the question that motivates it is at the very least not arbitrary and incoherent.

Where does this leave us with regard to our encounter with the homophobe’s interpretation? Is either of these interpretive attitudes tolerable here? Based on them we would have to say that understanding the homophobe’s interpretation involves seeing our own prejudices about homosexuality as prejudices, and thus as open to revision; and it involves supposing that the homophobe’s interpretation is neither arbitrary nor incoherent. It is, of course, not at all obvious that this is how we would want to go about interpreting the homophobe. And indeed, there is a decidedly repugnant air about the whole enterprise, if something like this is what we are committed to in interpretation. The problem is that while the event of understanding is the experience of the evidentness of a text or argument, for us there is nothing evident about the homophobe’s interpretation of homosexuality—if anything, that interpretation is *evidently false*. And there is in fact an even deeper problem that comes to light here. If the event of truth is the event of evidentness, are we not committed to saying that those who *do* find the homophobic interpretation evident are experiencing the event of truth? Are we not committed to saying that *anyone* who has prejudices overturned by the experience of a *Sache*, regardless of what replaces them, is experiencing the event of truth? Furthermore, if the thing is its presentation in the various interpretations of it, don’t we have to accept the notion that *all* of those presentations of the thing get at the truth of the thing, no matter how problematic, no matter how much we disagree with them? To use our current example, must we concede that the ‘immorality’ of homosexuality, or of the ‘gay agenda,’ is “an aspect of the thing itself,” i.e. is part of the truth of homosexuality? But how *can* we accept that as a truth, when we affirm its falsehood?

One way out of this impasse is to say that interpretations like that of the homophobe are *dogmatic*. The thing itself is open—it is always more than any single interpretation of it, even while it itself always appears in every interpretation of it. A dogmatic interpretation ignores the distinction between what the thing is and its presentation in an interpretation. It operates as though there were simply *no* distinction between the being of the thing and its

presentation in the interpretation. In other words, it does not view itself as an interpretation, and has not raised itself to the level of historically effected consciousness. Because the thing exists as the (non)distinction between it and the multiple interpretations of it, *it does not fully appear as itself* in a dogmatic interpretation. The thing can only fully appear as itself in an interpretation that recognizes itself as an interpretation. And this follows from the paradoxicality of the Sache. If to be a thing, a subject matter, is to be both distinct from and identical to the various interpretations of it, then any interpretation that recognizes only one of these poles will not actually attain the thing in question. Another way of putting this is that while interpretation is the coming into language of the thing itself, any ‘interpretation’ that does not recognize this (non)distinction cannot be said to be an instance of language into which the thing itself has come. Simply put, the thing itself *does not come into language* without this recognition. So a dogmatic interpretation like that of the homophobe is one in which the thing itself—in this case, homosexuality—does not appear.

But—do we really want to say that the homophobe isn’t actually talking about homosexuality in his various statements ‘about’ it? This recalls Davidson’s question about whether the ancients ‘really believed’ that the earth is flat. The difference is that for Davidson the ‘thing itself’ is just that thing that is circumscribed by my beliefs—‘the earth’ is this large sphere that orbits the sun and upon which I’m currently standing. The ancients did not believe that *this* earth is flat, because that would have meant that they believed that something spherical is also flat—but my assumption that they were rational precludes any such belief ascription. For Gadamer, on the other hand, the ‘object’ of my beliefs is not limited to what is circumscribed by my beliefs, since the former will always exceed the latter. Davidson might have answered our question above by saying that the homophobe does not believe that homosexuality is inherently immoral, since gay people are no more immoral than anyone else. The problem with saying something like this is that the homophobe believes that the people *we* identify as gay *are* immoral—so why shouldn’t we say that the homophobe believes that homosexuality is immoral? We can answer this question and that above from a Gadamerian perspective by revising our previous argument and saying that any dogmatic belief involves a *partial* coming into language of the thing itself. As we saw above, in dogmatic interpretations one pole of the paradoxical being of the thing itself is emphasized above the other: the pole in which the presentation of the thing is not distinct from its being. For the thing to completely enter language, however, the second pole must also be equally emphasized: the being of the thing must be taken to be distinct from its presentation. So a dogmatic interpretation like that of the homophobe is ‘about’ homosexuality, but it does not capture the subject matter, “homosexuality,” itself, since in order to do so it would need to recognize not only the identity of itself with its subject matter, but also its distinction from that subject matter.

But now a new problem arises. Let’s imagine that a homophobe does indeed recognize that his understanding of homosexuality to be an interpretation, and

hence that what homosexuality is is both distinct and not distinct from his interpretation of it. Do we now want to say that, given this caveat, in his understanding the subject matter “homosexuality” nevertheless comes into language? And that somehow the event in which the homophobe comes to have this understanding of homosexuality is an event of *truth*? It is tempting to say that someone who recognizes that his interpretation is an interpretation would *not* be a homophobe; that only someone who did not recognize that his position might not get at the whole truth would believe that that homosexuality is immoral. That would be a very comforting thing to believe, but it is not clear that Gadamer’s position allows for such a move. What would an answer based on Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics look like? Let’s be clear about the circumstances we are dealing with: a non-homophobic person is trying to understand the words of a homophobe. We are trying to see what Gadamer’s theory of truth commits someone to who is faced with an other whose beliefs the former considers false. Our non-homophobe, to understand the homophobe, has to see the latter’s beliefs as an answer to a question that the former finds questionable. But what could such a question be? ‘How can we stop the gay agenda?’ or ‘Why don’t gays recognize that homosexuality a sin?’ aren’t the sorts of questions the non-homophobe is likely to find questionable. But if the non-homophobe finds *none* of the questions that motivate the homophobe’s beliefs questionable, then they can’t really be said to have beliefs about the same thing. Is there *some* question the two can share? Perhaps it is something like, ‘Is homosexuality innate?’ or ‘What is homosexuality?’ Are the homophobe’s answers to these questions part of an event of truth? If these answers are false it does not mean that there has not been such an event. *The event of truth is not simply the event of a proposition or set of propositions that corresponds to reality.* The thing itself, “homosexuality,” enters language—gets presented as (non)distinct from its presentations—and what is said *of* the thing itself in response to the opening question is only part of this coming into language.

But we are still left with the problem of the event of homophobic meaning being a part of this event of truth, even though it is not simply and absolutely true. Does Gadamer give us a way of deciding whether this interpretation is true, i.e., reveals the thing itself as it is? The *only* standard the interpreter has with which to determine whether his interpretation is true in this sense is the thing itself. And, at the very least, the thing itself will show us that there are lots of other things true of it that conflict with the homophobic interpretation. A preponderance of aspects of the thing itself conflicting with the homophobic interpretation should be sufficient for the interpreter to abandon his interpretation and replace it as false, too narrow, or off the mark, with one that acknowledges the more encompassing view of the thing. This might be a matter of the homophobe coming to see that, for example, his very concept of immorality is problematic, and ought to be revised in such a way that it does not cover acts that cause no unnecessary suffering (say). How would the thing itself show him *that*? Here it seems rather that the conversation moves on to a different subject matter—if the question is

whether the homophobe has an adequate conception of morality, then it is morality, and not homosexuality (or morality in addition to homosexuality) that becomes the focus of the discussion. And this of course is how conversations run—they circle around a set of interconnected subject matters, and apply conclusions from one sub-conversation to another. But, assuming that the homophobe would need to be addressed by these multiple ‘things themselves,’ what are we to say about the prickly problem of how someone who is not open to being shown wrong is to even *hear* the claims of the thing itself in the first place? Just how does the event of truth reach someone with a dogmatic view of things? The only answer that Gadamer can give, again, is that the thing addresses that person in his situation. There are any number of ways in which this may happen, and some people will be very hard to reach. But at the very least Gadamer has shown that there is no such thing as someone who is closed in principle or by constitution to alternate views.

If all this should seem unsatisfactory—if the idea that the only standard we have for adjudicating interpretations is the thing itself, which is of course only available to us in further interpretations—then we should ask ourselves what the alternative is. Remember that Gadamer begins from the epistemological assumption that human beings are finite. There is simply no position we could take that would allow us to leave interpretation behind and enter into something like absolute or objective knowledge. All our understanding takes place as interpretation. This means that *all* we can do when confronted with an interpretation that seems wrong to us is to go back to the thing itself and see whether there is more to it than is given to us in the bad interpretation. To the homophobe all we can do is to try to show that there is much more to gay people than he thinks, and that his interpretation does not hold up to a careful reading of the ‘text’ in question. For Gadamer, as finite knowers we simply do not have access to any other ‘method’ that would guarantee beyond question that the interpretation we confront is false. Now this means that the homophobe stands on the same epistemic ground that we do, and is within his rights if he takes us to be wrong, and tries to show us that the thing itself is not what we take it to be. For hermeneutics, though, it certainly does not follow from this that he is *right*, or that he will or ought to convince *us*—after all, as far as we can tell, we have a broader view of the thing itself than he does.

The question raised by this fraught encounter with someone whose beliefs are objectionable is the one Hirsch did not think Gadamer could adequately answer, namely that of validity in interpretation. If an interpretation can be true, then it makes sense to ask how an interpreter can determine *whether* her interpretation is true. Is there some *criterion* that marks off true interpretations from false ones, some way of identifying an interpretation as true? For Hirsch, that criterion is the author’s intention. Grondin denies that Gadamer has such a criterion of truth, but argues that this “deficiency” is “the positive and original contribution of

Gadamerian hermeneutics.”<sup>74</sup> Gadamer can offer no criterion or measure of truth, says Grondin, because “a criterion claims universal validity. But how could it be possible to state a criterion that will be valid for later generations? The way truth will be seen in the future lies beyond our horizon.”<sup>75</sup> Giving a criterion of truth would in this way be like attempting to provide a final theory of any Sache—it will inevitably be superseded by future understandings of the thing. But surely any discussion of truth will have to take into account what counts as true, what it is that makes something true. If we have a sense of this, then it seems we will have *some* sort of standard by which to judge claims to truth. Such a standard will itself, for a Gadamerian, only be one further aspect of the thing itself, and will assuredly not be all there is to truth—but it will be no less true for that.

Schmidt maintains that there is indeed a criterion of truth in Gadamer, and it is what he calls the “enlightening aspect [einleuchtende Ansicht] of the thing itself,” or the evident self-presentation of the thing itself in language. He claims that for Gadamer “The word as light permits the Sache to be seen in its self-presentation in language. In this sense the self-presentation of the Sache in language is self-evident. It presents itself to the cognizer as it is.”<sup>76</sup> The criterion of truth, then, is just what the Sache shows us of itself in the event of truth, which is the experience of evidentness (here, ‘self-evidentness’). In calling this the criterion of truth, Schmidt parries Grondin’s claim that such a criterion would demand absolute, universal validity. No single disclosure of a thing in language can claim validity over and against every other, but truth always is just such a disclosure. False prejudices are shown to be false by the thing itself in its enlightening aspect. No more ‘universal’ criterion is needed. The problem with Schmidt’s argument is not that the thing itself can’t be a criterion of truth; it’s that, as we’ve seen, there is more to the experience of truth than the experience of evidence. Or rather, the experience of evidence is a multilayered experience. In addition to the experience of being immediately convinced, there is the experience of finding the question to which the convincing argument or statement is an answer questionable. Finding that question questionable means intending the distinction-that-is-no-distinction between the being of the thing (broken open by the question) and its presentation in the immediately convincing argument or statement. Only if this occurs can we make sense of Gadamer’s claim that that which is found to be evident in the experience of truth is later subject to the labor of integration with the prejudices that constitute one’s horizon. Such integration would not be necessary if the

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<sup>74</sup> Jean Grondin, *Hermeneutische Wahrheit? Zum Wahrheitsbegriff Hans-Georg Gadamer*, 176.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>76</sup> Lawrence Kennedy Schmidt, *The Epistemology of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, 180.

evident itself were simply and straightforwardly true: one would just accept its truth and move on. The necessity of integration presupposes that truth will *also* emerge once that which is evident has been reconciled with the entire system of one's prejudices. The whole of one's worldview comes into play, and the openness of the thing as disclosed by the question renders that which is evident to be a presentation, not dogmatic truth.

Summing up: the eventhood of truth shows us that truth has both relative and irrelative, or context-dependent and context-independent, moments. The thing itself is always evident in a particular way to some interpreter, but what the thing itself is always exceeds whatever happens to be evident about it. Truth is this entire complex structure: the coming into language of the thing itself. Because truth has these various components, it becomes possible to say that whenever there is a *conflict* of contexts, whenever there is a dispute about some thing, it is that thing that serves as the ground upon which the dispute will be mediated. Conflict is not resolved by the comparison of evident propositions, but by mediating that which is evident with the question to which it is an answer. This mediation is for Gadamer a mediation with the thing itself. As we've tried to show, in hermeneutics there is no higher court of appeal.

Some questions remain for us to answer. If the thing itself is the final court of appeal, what constitutes the identity of such a thing across contexts? How different do the contexts of two interpreters need to be before we say that they are not disagreeing about a subject matter (and hence cannot appeal to a common subject matter to adjudicate a dispute), but are talking about different things? If the contexts of interpreters are holistically structured, and different things are understood in them, to what extent is inter-contextual communication possible? In the next chapter we will try to answer these questions by turning to a consideration of just what sort of holism is in play in Gadamerian hermeneutic holism.

## CHAPTER 5: HERMENEUTIC HOLISM

In Chapter 2, we established that hermeneutics is a holism. Holism, recall, is any position that claims that the meaning of a sentence is dependent upon its relation to the rest of the sentences in a theory or set of related theories. Hermeneutics holds that the meaning of the part is dependent upon the meaning of the whole, and vice versa. There is no such thing as understanding the part without understanding the whole of which it is a part. Every Sache is a unified whole, and to understand it is to understand the parts in terms of the whole and the whole in terms of the parts. If one takes one's Sache to be a tradition or a culture or a historical epoch, the same dynamic is in play. Furthermore, every Sache is understood against the holistic backdrop of one's own prejudices. And, every Sache is understood as part of the world—the holistically conceived totality of beings. As we saw in Chapter 3, the world itself is not a part of some further whole: it is that totality of which any possible thing can be a part. The infinite regress of wholes that semantic holism seems to open up is stopped here because there can be no context greater than the totality and infinity of beings.

Our concern in this final chapter will be to determine what kind of holism hermeneutic holism is. We will do so by taking into consideration what we have identified in Chapters 2-4 as the fundamental elements of Gadamerian hermeneutics, namely: the truth-directedness of understanding; the semantics of the question; the absoluteness of the world intended in any linguistically constituted worldview; and the paradoxical way in which the object of understanding is encountered as both immanent in and transcendent from any beliefs about it. We will seek to establish that these various elements ensure that hermeneutic holism is not a *strong* holism. Strong holism holds that the meaning of a sentence is to be *identified with* its role in a semantic system, or with its relation to every other sentence in such a system. That is to say, for strong holism, if a sentence or a group of sentences is taken out of its context, then it will mean something else entirely in its new context (because its meaning will now be determined by its role in that new context). There is thus no continuity of meaning across semantic systems on the strong holist picture. From this it follows that Smith cannot understand some single belief of Jones's unless she has access to all

of Jones's beliefs. This problem—the failure of communication across worldviews that a strong holism seems to make inevitable—will occupy us here as we determine the nature of hermeneutic holism.

Before we look at what Gadamerian hermeneutics has to say about holism, however, we should offer some clarifications about holism itself. As we saw in Chapter 1, Fodor and Lepore claim that the argument for semantic holism hinges upon the rejection of the distinction between analytic and synthetic sentences that Quine urged in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism.” There are, however, two ways of reading that rejection, and each yields a slightly different version of holism. The first, which Fodor and Lepore use in their paradigmatic argument for holism, interprets the rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction as the claim that there is no principled distinction between analytic and synthetic sentences. Any sentence may be thought of as true because of what it means, and hence as unrevisable in the face of experience; and any sentence may be thought of as true because of how the world is, and hence as revisable in light of further evidence. If that's the case, then the argument for holism goes like this: If Smith has some belief, *p*, she must have lots of other beliefs. There is no principled distinction between those beliefs that are necessary to have the belief that *p* (i.e. those that are connected to it via “analytic inference,” in Fodor and Lepore's terminology<sup>1</sup>) and those that one need not have in order to have that belief. Thus, either all of Smith's beliefs are necessary for *p*, or none of them are. The latter is implausible,<sup>2</sup> so the only alternative is that to believe *p* one must have *all* of Smith's beliefs. Note that while there are a lot of holists around, not many of them explicitly argue for this strong version of holism—and this is not surprising, since from it, it follows that no two people with even the slightest belief variance can share any beliefs at all. Indeed, it seems to me that this argument is less a serious argument for holism than a kind of philosophical bogeyman, a bit like strong relativism, skepticism, or solipsism. That is, it is a *reductio* that functions as a challenge to anyone accepting holism to show that her version of it is able to avoid such thoroughly counterintuitive consequences.

The second reading of the rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction holds that while there is no principled distinction between analytic and synthetic sentences, it is not the case that every sentence could be reinterpreted analytically, i.e. as true by virtue of meaning. An argument for holism that takes this reading as a premise would not be able to maintain that all (or even some) of Smith's beliefs are necessary to believe that *p* because of their analytic connections; rather, it would claim that all of Smith's beliefs form a grand overarching *theory* in which

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<sup>1</sup> See Fodor and Lepore, *Holism: A Shopper's Guide*, 31.

<sup>2</sup> What's implausible is that two people could share a single belief and nothing else.

her belief that  $p$  is a part. Say Smith has beliefs about Donne's poetry and the health risks of soy. An analytic/synthetic distinction would ensure that someone listening to Smith hold forth on "The Sun Rising" could ignore her opinions about soy because no analytic inferences can be made from sentences about 'Donne's poetry' to sentences about 'soy'—the *meaning* of the two terms do not overlap. But if one rejects the notion of analyticity, then anything one has a belief about could in principle be inferentially connected to anything else one has a belief about. There is no way of *ruling out* the possibility that Smith's beliefs about this poem are informed by her beliefs about soy—that is to say, it is always possible that soy and Donne's poetry are for Smith the objects of a single, unifying theory. And indeed, for Quine,<sup>3</sup> the belonging together of all of one's beliefs in one great theory is a consequence of rejecting the idea that sentences are confirmed or disconfirmed individually. The consequences of this argument in favor of holism are similar to the one which rejects the principled analytic/synthetic distinction: to understand what Smith says about  $x$ , one must have access to the whole host of her beliefs about everything else.

This second version of the argument for holism is, it seems to me, more plausible than the first. There is good reason to doubt whether there is such a thing as an analytic sentence, and certainly Gadamer is committed to the idea that our beliefs are revisable. Even so, anyone accepting this argument also faces some difficult consequences. It may still be that there is much that the other believes that I don't have access to, but that informs her beliefs about the thing we are discussing. In that case I may think I understand her words, while in all likelihood being barred from understanding what she's saying by the inaccessibility (to me) of many of her beliefs. Our challenge here will be to determine whether a hermeneutic holism can overcome this difficulty.

## 5.1 — The Semantics of the Question

In this section, I will address strong holism by showing how the phenomenon of interpretation makes strong holism questionable. I will do so by focusing on the phenomenon of asking questions. So—as we saw in Chapter 2, at the heart of Gadamerian hermeneutics is a semantics based on questions, rather than statements. Or better, his semantics is based on the relation between questions and statements as answers to questions. In this question-based semantics there are two sides to meaning. There is the question that 'opens,' and the answer that 'closes':

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<sup>3</sup> At least in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism."

“what is  $x$ ?” and “ $x$  is  $y$ .” The question places the thing that is being discussed in an open space of indeterminacy: it opens up the possibility that it could *be* in different ways. The answer is one of those possibilities. Gadamer argues that this relationship, in which a statement is viewed in the context to which it responds, is not accounted for in a statement-based semantics.

Now, bracketing the role of the question for a moment, statements may be seen as clear or vague. Wittgenstein argued that vagueness is no barrier to understanding what someone says<sup>4</sup>; but in language use there are of course degrees of clarity and vagueness. If, however, one views a statement as an answer to a question, that statement must be seen as having a higher order of determinateness than the question. Built into the question is uncertainty: one does not predicate something of some subject, but tarries with the subject before predication, i.e. before it has been determined to be a certain thing, or to be a certain kind of thing, or to be identified in any of the myriad ways that questions open up. But while questions open up a space of indeterminacy, they themselves are not *completely* indeterminate. As Gadamer says, “A question places what is questioned in a particular perspective.”<sup>5</sup> And further,

The openness of a question is not boundless. It is limited by the horizon of the question. A question that lacks this horizon is, so to speak, floating. It becomes a question only when its fluid indeterminacy is concretized in a specific “this or that.” In other words, the question has to be posed. Posing a question implies openness but also limitation. It implies the explicit establishing of presuppositions, in terms of which can be seen what still remains open.<sup>6</sup>

What are these presuppositions behind the question? They constitute the beliefs that the question needs in order to be asked. To have some thing in question, I must have certain beliefs about it. The question takes the thing about which I have beliefs, and opens it up: it shows me that there is something that I don’t yet know about the thing. To have a question, I can’t know *nothing* about the thing; otherwise, I won’t be able to find the question questionable *as* a question *about* that thing. The question therefore involves *partial* knowledge. The familiar thing

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<sup>4</sup> He compares statements to requests like ‘stand roughly here’ (which are perfectly serviceable even while they are not precise). See *Philosophical Investigations*, §88.

<sup>5</sup> TM, 362; GW1, 368.

<sup>6</sup> TM, 363; GW1, 369.

reveals itself as to some extent unfamiliar; the question, we may say, places the thing into a partially determinate space of indeterminacy.<sup>7</sup>

What are the consequences of this understanding of the question for meaning? When one considers the semantics of the question, it turns out that *meaning itself can be open or indeterminate*. To understand a question is not to understand a subject characterized in a particular way by a predicate, but to understand that subject incompletely, and furthermore to recognize that one's understanding of it is incomplete. In asking the question I take this unknown remainder to be *part of* the subject, and its incorporation into the subject makes the *meaning* of that subject term (and thus the question of which it is a part) indeterminate—or rather, partially indeterminate. Now, if there can be such indeterminacy of meaning in a question, then a semantic system that incorporates questions will be one that exhibits a certain degree of indeterminacy. This may not seem like a problem, but it poses difficulties for holism. The first argument for holism we considered above held that a belief is identified by its position in a web of beliefs, and that every belief in a belief system is necessary for having every other belief in that system. This suggests that the content of a belief is *strongly determined* by its relation to all of its neighbors—that content is the content it is because of its place in the system of which it is a part. But the content of questions is, as we have seen, partially indeterminate. Questions, therefore, cannot be viewed as strongly determined by a web of beliefs. A question does not mean what it does as a function of its relation to the totality of beliefs in a belief system. This becomes even more apparent when we consider that the same question can give rise to different answers, which can in turn be incorporated into different belief systems.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> It might be argued that to say that meaning is always an answer to a question is to say that the question instantiates a language game in which the answer is a move, or that it deploys a category that the answer concretizes. But this would imply that the answer is to some extent already known before it is given. One may not be able to anticipate every single move in a language game before it is made, but one will at the very least be able to say what qualifies as such a move. A genuinely open question, on the other hand, is one whose answer or answers one can only discover in the course of a conversation. Answering a question does not involve filling in the blanks with pre-established responses, but searching after the thing.

<sup>8</sup> This sentence seems to beg the question as to what constitutes a belief system. A belief system could be the worldview shared by the members of a particular culture, say, or it could be the individual's worldview. I here seem to assume the latter. At the very least, though, different individuals within a culture have belief variance—not everyone believes exactly the same thing. It is therefore possible to identify a belief system with what the individual believes, and certainly discussions of holism sometimes take the individual's set of beliefs to be that of which holism is predicated.

For this to be possible, questions themselves cannot be *identified*, as beliefs are on the strong holist picture, with their role in a particular semantic system.

Now, since any belief in a belief system must ultimately be seen as a response to some question, every belief comes out of an open space of indeterminacy. Thus, the entire system of belief, in addition to being seen as consisting of mutually determining beliefs, must, on a question-based semantics, also be thought as a *possibility* enabled by a set of questions that can also in principle motivate alternate possible webs of beliefs as answers. This notion that systems of belief are to be viewed as possibilities, as sets of interpretations of things that sit alongside a multitude of other possible interpretations, brings to our attention a feature of semantic systems that no semantic holism can afford to ignore. Webs of belief are held by interpreters; *interpreters* are characterized, among other things, as being able to entertain *possibilities as possibilities*.<sup>9</sup> When considered in the abstract, a web of beliefs may come to seem like a static system consisting of elements connected to each other by inferences following a set of rules. But if we look at the practice of interpretation, we see that one salient thing interpreters do is to take into consideration things that they do not yet believe. What accounts for this capacity? Arguably, interpreters are able to do this because they are able to ask questions. Only if the object of belief is recognized as being possibly different from the way in which it is understood in the belief can the interpreter be open to considering the validity of an alternate view of the thing. And to have a question is precisely to hold that the thing is very possibly not as I understand it to be. But the ability to ask questions makes the holist picture questionable: to have a question is to understand something whose meaning is not (or not only) a function of its relation to the rest the beliefs in one's belief system.

To make this point more clear, consider again the holist thesis. For a holist, a semantic element like a word or a sentence means what it does only in the particular total semantic context in which it appears. Take it out of that context and place it in a new one and its meaning will change. What a question means, however, *cannot* be simply dependent upon the context in which it appears. As we noted above, questions are 'open' or 'indeterminate.' The way Gadamer expresses this is to say that questions break open the being of the thing—and since for Gadamer the distinction between the being of a thing and the meaning of the word that refers to it is a non-distinction, an 'open' thing will be referred to by an 'open' word. If, for example, justice is in question, then justice itself will be placed in an open space of indeterminacy, and the word "justice" will also be opened up—its meaning will become indeterminate, or not-yet-fully-determinate. If justice is not in question, on the other hand, then the being of justice is not open: justice is now *a definite something*, and the word "justice" means *something definite*. What I would like to suggest is that every element in a strongly holistic

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<sup>9</sup> See TM, 365; GW1, 371.

semantic system must mean something definite. Any element that does not mean something definite cannot be said to mean what it does *as a function of* its relation to the rest of the whole. The whole is something that the person who ‘possesses’ it understands. Every element in the whole is understood as a part of that whole. Because of this, an element that I only partially understand (and understand *as* partially understood) cannot be said to mean what it does *in relation to* that whole. And questions are precisely such elements. I understand them, and am able to understand them only against the backdrop of my entire worldview, but I also understand that I do not understand—I understand that the thing in question is at the moment beyond me. Now, because of the non-distinction between thing and word, the meaning of the word that refers to the thing in question is also beyond me. But that means that *its* meaning cannot be a function of its place in my total semantic system, whose meaning I *do* understand. Its place within that system is, in fact, precisely what is in question.

The upshot is that questions are semantic elements that can be understood, but whose meaning is not subject to determination by the semantic system as a whole. The upshot of *that* is that the holist thesis is false—if it is meant to apply to *anything* that has meaning. Even if a statement can only be understood within a total semantic context, questions, in being understood, exceed such context. Their meaning is not dependent (or not only dependent) upon their relation to the rest of the elements in a semantic system. Nevertheless, because I don’t have questions in a vacuum, but only against the backdrop of my system of beliefs, a holism is still in play: it is my belief system that allows me to understand a question. Still, the question is precisely that which opens me to changing my belief system. Its meaning thus cannot be a function of that very belief system.

## 5.2 — The Sache and the Possibility-Conditions of Interpretation

One of the most troubling consequences of the argument for strong holism is that it seems to imply what has come to be known as the “instability of content.” If a belief is identified by its place in a network of interconnected beliefs, then it seems that two people with much overlapping belief will have totally different beliefs unless their beliefs overlap completely (i.e. unless they are in fact the same person). It also seems that anyone who revises a single belief will have a totally different set of beliefs after the revision than he did before it. Furthermore, if a thing is identified as just the thing intended in beliefs about it (that is, if meaning determines reference<sup>10</sup>), it will become difficult to say that any interpreter ever

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has beliefs about the *same things*. Say, for example, that I have beliefs about elephants. I now learn that there are two different kinds of elephant, namely Asian and African elephants. At first sight, it appears that I have revised my beliefs about elephants: I had thought there to be just elephants, simpliciter, whereas now I realize that there are two different elephant species. But if the referent of my beliefs is determined by the content of those beliefs, then it seems I haven't actually revised my beliefs about elephants. Rather, I have *replaced* beliefs about an entity called an 'elephant' with beliefs about a *pair* of entities, the 'Asian elephant' and the 'African elephant.' The upshot is that every time I seem to revise a belief about something I actually posit a new entity, and enter a new world.

Hermeneutics responds to this rather counterintuitive prospect by insisting that we always think of meaning from the perspective of the interpreter who experiences it. If we do that, we will see that the experience of belief revision is not that of the positing of new entities, but of coming to believe new things about old entities. In interpretation, I anticipate both the truth and the formal unity of the text I am interpreting. This means that I always assume that the text will have something true to say about the unified topic it is addressing. I come to the text with some pre-understanding of the topic in question; if the text tells me a truth about that topic, I will come to see it in a new light. This experience is only possible if I assume that it is the same topic that I have beliefs about before and after I encounter the text.

Underlying this view of what happens in the experience of interpretation is Gadamer's understanding of what the object of interpretation is. We argued above that for Gadamer, the object of interpretation has an inescapably paradoxical structure. The thing understood is both distinct and not distinct from the interpretations in which it appears. To anyone who worries that holism leads to the instability of content, Gadamerian hermeneutics counters that to be an object of interpretation is to be a self-identical thing that is understood differently in every interpretation of it. There can be no interpretation—nothing can be understood—if there is no object of interpretation that different interpretations say different things about.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the idea of the object of interpretation—the idea of the *Sache*—is the idea of content *identity*, and thus of content *stability*. In understanding the interpreter encounters unified, individuated things, and whenever she encounters a text that tells her something true, she comes to

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<sup>10</sup> Gadamer holds a version of this thesis, though as we will see below it differs from the standard version.

<sup>11</sup> Gadamer's is, as we have pointed out, a transcendental argument.

understand the *same thing* in a *different way* than she did before. In short, if understanding occurs, content is not unstable.<sup>12</sup>

What then, of the experience of more radical reversals of belief? Aren't there instances when the interpreter does posit new entities, rather than revising beliefs about old ones? This is the experience Kuhn says occurs when a new scientific paradigm is embraced and an old one rejected. For example, he argues that Copernicus meant something different by 'the earth' than did his contemporaries: those contemporaries could not *disagree* with Copernicus about the earth, since by 'the earth' they understood something that could not move, while Copernicus included movement in his understanding of 'the earth.'<sup>13</sup> Kuhn argues that Copernicus's total view of nature was such that 'earth' in his system referred to something different than did 'earth' in the Ptolemaic system.<sup>14</sup> Someone accepting the Copernican worldview would thus not be revising an old belief about the earth, but positing a new entity, 'earth,' that happened to have the same *name* as a different entity (now no longer taken to be real) in the discarded paradigm. We will come back to one of the problems raised here—viz., the question of how much overlap there needs to be between the beliefs of two people to justify saying that they share beliefs about the 'same' thing—below. For now I want to call attention to the strangeness of what Kuhn is proposing. Intuitively, Ptolemaic and Copernican astronomers both have beliefs about the earth. Intuitions are just intuitions, to be sure, but consider what one gives up if one embraces the putative consequences of the notion of a paradigm shift. Someone who goes from a Ptolemaic view to a Copernican view seems committed to saying that what he thought he was standing on—the earth—turns out not to have existed. That earth was a referent in a total theory of nature that held (in part) that this thing that I'm standing on is at the center of the universe. The total theory of nature that I accept when I go Copernican says that this thing that I'm now standing on is revolving around the sun. I'm thus now standing on a different entity than I was before, one of whose existence I was unaware until I learned of the Copernican paradigm.

Strange as this description of belief change may sound, its strangeness does not of course rule out its being true. But note that at the very least it does not capture the experience of belief change. Certainly the interpreter occasionally comes to accept the existence of new entities. But I would argue that 'the earth'

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<sup>12</sup> What if it turns out that the text is discussing a different subject matter than I had taken it to be about? Content is not destabilized, even so. I still identify the thing I had mistaken for something else as a *Sache*, that is as a thing that endures through changes in belief and variations in interpretation.

<sup>13</sup> See Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 149.

<sup>14</sup> Kuhn thus also implicitly accepts the thesis that meaning determines reference.

posited in the Copernican system is at least not *experienced* as a new entity. From the perspective of Gadamerian hermeneutics, the experience of adopting the Copernican system rather involves coming to see my old beliefs as significantly *narrower* than my new ones. It was still the thing itself, ‘the earth,’ that I intended in those beliefs, but it was a more delimited profile of it that I saw. To be sure, I thought I was intending the thing itself in its fullness; but now I see that what I saw was an aspect, and a small one at that, of the thing itself.

To see how this hermeneutic view is different from that of Kuhn, consider what a hermeneutic reading of Plato’s analogy of the cave tells us about the experience of coming to understand. The prisoner who is set free from the cave arguably does not come to see what he experienced in the cave as simply false. Rather, he comes to see it for what it *is*—shadows on a cave wall, rather than all reality. He does not simply posit a new entity and reject an old one, but recognizes that the old entity itself is something different from what he took it to be. The old entity is *revealed* as something different, and what he took to be real turns out to have been the appearance, in aspect, of something he now takes to be real. So while it is true that the liberated prisoner now believes that what he once took to be real is not actually real, he also recognizes a *connection* between the old entity and the new one. The new entity is what he sees in a broadened view, a view that is *continuous* with his old, narrower view. The prisoners, says Socrates, are “like us”: we don’t encounter changes in perspective as leaps out of one total cognitive context into another; rather, we move continually through the same world, discovering that things aren’t always as they seem. Likewise, the astronomer who goes from a Ptolemaic to a Copernican view of the universe does not stick an old name on a new entity, but recognizes this new entity as what he has been looking at all along—albeit in a narrower, more circumscribed view. As the freed prisoner looks at the remaining prisoners and sees that *if* one were in their position, one *would* take mere shadows to be all of reality, so the Copernican looks back at the Ptolemaic and sees that if one knew nothing of Copernicus’s theory, it would make sense to think that the earth is at the center of the universe.

And what about the vexed question of scientific progress? In a sense for Kuhn there is no progress—just the periodic replacement of scientific paradigms. But in another sense there is indeed progress: nobody can simply go back to the Newtonian paradigm. That paradigm was unable to solve problems that later paradigms successfully addressed. So while we might want to reject, with Kuhn, the idea that science (and experience more broadly) consists in getting closer and closer to the Truth, we can hold onto the idea that our view of things becomes ever broader, ever more comprehensive.<sup>15</sup> Considering one of the most frequently

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<sup>15</sup> With this caveat: we may leave things behind whose resources we have left untapped, so while we ‘progress,’ we also go astray. For example, much is lost when one gives up a mytho- or theo-centric view of the world, some of which it

cited passages in *Truth and Method*, it might here be countered that Gadamer posits that we never understand better, only differently.<sup>16</sup> This would seem to rule out any notion of interpretive progress for Gadamer—except for the fact that Gadamer’s overall picture of interpretation is at odds with this apparently relativistic passage.<sup>17</sup> There *is* a kind of progress in Gadamer, and it is like the progress out of Plato’s cave: it involves the broadening of one’s horizons, and coming to see the thing in ever more aspects. Every interpreter will understand things differently, but experience also forces every interpreter to leave behind views of the thing that don’t account for what she encounters in experience.

If there can be ‘progress’ in understanding, what must understanding be like? Certainly, there must be what we have been referring to as “content stability.” Now, the instability of content that is supposed to follow from the holist picture involves in part the inability to *isolate* subject matters in a discussion. Another way of putting this is to say that if one rejects the analytic/synthetic distinction, as Fodor and Lepore argue, one cannot be a *molecularist*. A molecularist is someone who thinks the meaning of a sentence is dependent not on the whole language or belief system in which it occurs, but on a subset thereof—specifically, the subset that has to do with all of those subject matters related (by “analytic inference”) to that subject matter in play in the given sentence. In a given belief system, there might be a politics molecule, a geography molecule, an art molecule, and so on. What Fodor and Lepore point out, though, is that the only way to draw a line between semantic molecules (i.e. to identify them as distinct molecules) is by invoking the analytic/synthetic distinction: if there is such a distinction we don’t need to understand geographical subject matters in order to understand art-historical subject matters because of the *meaning* of geographical and art-

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might have been worthwhile not to have left behind. Cf. the discussion of Grondin in Chapter 4.

<sup>16</sup> TM, 296-7; GW1, 302.

<sup>17</sup> And certainly if one pays attention to the context in which this statement is made one will see that Gadamer is not making an argument for relativism, but rather distancing himself from “romantic hermeneutics.” Romantic hermeneutics was concerned with “understanding the author better than he understood himself,” which meant something like transposing oneself consciously into the creative process that he engaged in unconsciously. Gadamer wants to substitute for this a hermeneutics whose aim is grasping what is said as a claim to truth: as an interpreter one does not seek to understand the author, but the subject matter about which the author writes. If this is what one seeks as an interpreter, then the notion of “better understanding” is internal to interpretation: one presupposes that if the text tells me a truth about the thing in question, he will have a better understanding of it than he did before.

historical terms. Absent such a distinction, it may be that one won't really understand what someone is saying about, say, a landscape by Ruisdael without knowing her geographical theory. But note what follows from this. For any conversation, while it may seem that two people are discussing a subject matter, it turns out that they are not actually discussing *only* that subject matter; in addressing a single subject matter they are also addressing *everything* they have beliefs about. The subject matter is what it is only in the context of the whole world that one intends; to talk about it to the exclusion of the rest of that world is thus, for holism, not really to talk about it. But that exclusion is precisely what needs to happen if a conversation, which takes place during a finite, delimited period of time, is to occur. Interpreters are, one might say, practical molecularists. In practice they cut subject matters off from the world whole and discuss them without taking into consideration things that they don't consider relevant. That is to say, they do something that on the holist picture ought not to be possible—we might say that for the holist, nothing is irrelevant. If the analytic/synthetic distinction is unprincipled, or if there is no such thing as an analytic sentence, then there is no way in principle of isolating one subject matter from another—there is no principled way of saying that a subject matter is a *distinct* subject matter, that can be understood without reference to all other subject matters. If such an isolation of a subject matter from its peers occurs, for the holist this move can only be seen as *arbitrary*. Excluding *anything* one has beliefs about from consideration in discussing a subject matter will be groundless.

I would like to argue that the conversational experience of the subject matter as isolable is based in the semantics of the question. To have a question is to have some thing in question—it is to talk about and think the thing in its open possibility for being one sort of thing or another. Now, if a truth-claim is understood as an answer to a question, this means that it is seen as one possible way of viewing the thing in question. But what this activity of questioning presupposes is that I am able at least in practice to separate out some thing from the rest of the world, and am able to determine it in its specificity by asking questions about it. Since it is in question, this thing is one that I take to be partly unknown to me. That which I don't know cannot be circumscribed by the rest of my beliefs; it therefore cannot contribute to the semantic whole that is my total theory of the world. In isolating the thing to talk about it, I therefore do *not* do something fundamentally arbitrary. Since precisely what I am trying to do is to answer the question about the thing, I cannot think of the thing simply in terms of its role in the world as I understand it. That is to say, in an effort to say what it is, I cannot just trace out its relations to the rest of the things I have beliefs about. If I did that, I would simply be locating the thing as I *understood* it in my total view of the world. But I no longer understand it—it is in question. The thing itself must therefore be viewed in questioning as separable from the world as I know it. Questioning would thus seem to presuppose a molecularism of content.

Now that we have seen how the notion of a Sache carries with it the notions of content stability and content isolability, we are in a position to draw out the

consequences for holism of what we have been referring to as “the paradox of the Sache.” This, again, is the notion that the object of interpretation is both distinct and not distinct from the individual interpretation. Another way of putting this is to say that the object of an interpretation, to be an object of *interpretation*, must be viewed as both *immanent in*, and *transcendent from*, that interpretation.<sup>18</sup> Recalling our reading of this Gadamerian paradox from Chapter 4, if the thing is viewed simply as immanent in interpretation, then the plurality of interpretations will mean that for every interpretation there is a different thing, and that thing will appear in its entirety in its interpretation—but then the interpretation is not an interpretation; on the other hand if the thing is viewed simply as transcendent from the interpretation, then the interpretation can hardly be said to be ‘of’ the thing. The way Gadamer puts this is to say that being is both distinct and non-distinct from presentation: the object of interpretation (the Sache) is both different from its presentation in an interpretation and identical to that presentation. If belief systems consist in beliefs about such Sachen, what conclusions can we draw about the structure of belief systems?

As we saw above, one of the salient features of semantic systems (or at least, interpreters) is the ability to entertain possibilities as possibilities. Interpreters don’t just have beliefs; they are also able to take into consideration beliefs that they don’t yet have. A question-based semantics accounts for this ability by positing the question as the basis of meaning: to have a question is to recognize different answers to it as alternate possibilities for belief. Since for Gadamer meaning is *always* to be understood as an answer to a question, a *network of beliefs* must be seen as founded on a *network of questions*<sup>19</sup>; and this means that to understand all of my beliefs, I need to have all of my questions. But since a question implies the possibility of other beliefs as answers, if I have all of my

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<sup>18</sup> Note that for Gadamer, the object of interpretation is not to be viewed as transcendent from *all possible* interpretations; that would make it a metaphysical object, and as such inaccessible to interpretation. The object of interpretation, however, must be seen as transcendent from any *given* interpretation. No interpretation has complete access to the thing, even while every interpretation intends the thing itself.

<sup>19</sup> It might be argued that there is an infinite regress here, since the questions I have arise out of my tradition, which is constituted by a network of beliefs. It is true that I am able to have the questions I do because of my beliefs—questions, remember, always address my situation—but the question is not founded on a belief the way another belief might be (i.e. inferentially). Questions are open: they are not to be thought of as determined by a prior belief state. A genuine question for Gadamer breaks in on a set of beliefs and calls *them* into question.

questions, I also can understand a vast multitude of possible beliefs that I don't have, that may not even have occurred to me. These are all of those beliefs that are possible answers to my questions.

If questions are what allow the interpreter to understand things he doesn't believe (and ultimately to understand those things he does believe), then it is not quite right to identify cognitive life with the "web of beliefs." The semantic system of the interpreter is not only a finite, determinate set of propositions embodied by beliefs, but a set of questions that open the interpreter to entertaining multiple possibilities for belief. Now, if this is the case, then against the view of strong holism, a belief is not (or not only) individuated by its place within a single system of belief. It is also individuated by the question to which it is an answer. For the strong holist a belief means what it does—it is the belief it is—because of its relation to the rest of the beliefs in a belief system. That is, it is 'individuated' by its place in that system: what makes this belief distinct from others is not its positive content (strictly speaking it has none on its own) but its relations to other beliefs—no other belief has exactly these same relations. If one takes questions into consideration, however, the meaning of the belief is individuated not just by these relations but also by its relation to the question to which it is an answer.

What are the consequences of this view? We saw that in the paradox of the Sache to be a subject matter is to be *one* thing taken up into *many* different interpretations. If beliefs are always about subject matters, then to be a belief is to be a belief about something that can be taken up differently in different webs of belief.<sup>20</sup> So while the individual belief is caught up in a unique web of inferences, questions, and other beliefs, *as a belief about a thing*, what that belief is is in principle not exhausted by its place in its web. The thing it is a belief about must be seen as being the object of possibly multiple beliefs that differ from mine, and that are part of other webs of belief. In this way, it is a *condition of interpretation* that the object of my belief in principle not be seen as unique to my web.<sup>21</sup> And thus, a fortiori, it is also a condition of interpretation that any *beliefs* about such an object not only be characterized as elements in this particular semantic system. The reason is this: since, as we saw above, the thing must be taken as both *appearing in and transcending* the belief about it, this belief cannot only be individuated, as the holist implies, by its 'position' in a web of beliefs. If it were, then because of the non-distinction between belief and thing (the 'appearance' of thing in belief), the *thing* would also be thus individuated. That is, for every web of beliefs there would have to be a unique range of objects intended in that web.

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<sup>20</sup> Again construing 'web of beliefs' as something held by the individual. It should also be clear that I'm here using 'belief' and 'interpretation' more or less interchangeably; for my purposes, a belief should always be seen as an interpretation.

<sup>21</sup> Or as uniquely picked out by my web.

But, as Gadamer shows, the object of belief cannot be thought (simply) as non-distinct from its belief; it must also paradoxically be thought as distinct from it (as ‘transcending’ the belief). A fortiori, the object of belief cannot be thought simply as non-distinct from the web of beliefs to which its belief belongs. To be a belief is to have an object, and that means to be an interpretation of something that is the object of many other possible interpretations. So while beliefs are undoubtedly meaningful because of their relationship to their peers in a belief system, they also mean what they do because of *what they are about*.

Now, a holist might respond to this argument by denying that meaning determines reference. That is, she could deny that belief and thing are non-distinct. There are epistemic difficulties that come with completely distinguishing belief and thing (e.g. access to the thing becomes hard to construe if the two are *very* different), though perhaps this challenge could be met by the direct reference theorist. This is not the place to take up the question of whether the thesis that meaning determines reference is true; we would like to show, however, that one can, like Gadamer, hold meaning to (more or less, see below) determine reference and accept a version of semantic holism while avoiding some of the consequences that are taken to follow from one or both of these positions. What then is Gadamer’s relation to the thesis that meaning determines reference? The “immanence” of the object in the belief is akin to the meaning-determines-reference thesis: what the belief says about the object is what the object is, and thus the object is picked out by this description. But the object also “transcends” that belief—it is never completely circumscribed by the particular belief or set of beliefs. Nothing other than meaning determines reference, but no particular meaning is ever enough to nail down reference—reference exceeds meaning in every instance.

Gadamer has essentially given us a way of viewing the relation between subject and object that departs from both metaphysical realism and idealism, while retaining elements of both. Belief and object, interpretation and thing, are never wholly distinguishable, nor are they ever wholly identical. Their relation is constituted by a paradoxical unity in which their differences are maintained. The paradoxical immanence of a transcendent object in a belief means that the belief is to be (partly) identified with a transcendent object. Again, in order for the idea of a belief to be at all coherent, the object that the belief is about must to some extent appear in that belief—a belief from which its object were wholly different or distinct wouldn’t be able to say anything *true* about that object.<sup>22</sup> But, a belief

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<sup>22</sup> This is not to say that the belief must in some mysterious fashion ‘picture’ the thing it is a belief about. But beliefs *are* representations of things—in true beliefs things come to be seen as the things they are. This is all I mean when I say that the thing must ‘appear’ in beliefs about it. Beliefs must be taken to really get at the thing if they are to be said to be beliefs.

in which the object appeared entirely and without remainder—that is, a belief that could not be wrong about its object because the object was not something different from the belief—would not merit being called a ‘belief.’ Part of what it is to be a belief is to be possibly false; necessary truth belongs only to apodictically certain knowledge. Now, as we said above, it is a condition of interpretation that the object not be viewed as unique to my web. We should here see more clearly why beliefs also cannot simply be identified by their place in a given web: the belief is identified in part by its object, since that object is part of the belief—object and belief are one. But, since that object can also be taken up into other beliefs and other webs of belief, object and belief are not one. The consequence of the combination of both positions (which are the two premises in Gadamer’s argument for the paradoxical nature of the thing itself) is that the content of the belief—what the belief says about the thing in question—cannot (or cannot only) be a function of that belief’s relation to the entire system in which it occurs. Content, it turns out, is not simply what is said about the thing, or a description of the thing. It is *the presentation of the thing itself in the belief about it*.<sup>23</sup> If that’s the end of the story, and one accepts holism (the determination of the content of a belief by the role of that belief in its belief system), then every belief system will have a unique range of objects. But for Gadamerian hermeneutics, that is not the end of the story: the thing itself is not just presented in any given belief about it; it also transcends that belief. So *what* is presented in the belief transcends the belief. But since content is precisely the presentation in a belief of this transcendent ‘what,’ a belief-*system* to which that belief belongs *cannot* wholly determine the content of that belief. A belief system cannot determine something that transcends it; but content is precisely the making present in a belief of something that transcends the belief system. Hence content cannot be fully determined by the belief system of which it is a part. Holism, in this strong sense at least, is false. This does not mean, however, that there is no holism worth having. Content on this view is still a function of its place in a semantic system—it’s just that it is not *only* a function of its place in that system.

And what, again, of the question of whether meaning determines reference? As we noted above, Gadamer does hold that meaning determines reference, but no single interpretation can determine any given referent exhaustively. All interpretations of a thing determine the referent together. Since there is a potentially infinite number of interpretations of any given thing, for any given interpreter the referent will never be completely circumscribed by her interpretations. Everything the interpreter says about the thing will never be everything that *can be* said about it. We might say that for Gadamer, meaning determines reference *weakly*. This jibes with our conclusion in the last paragraph

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<sup>23</sup> Consider the etymology of the word ‘content’: in content, *something is contained*.

that a system of beliefs cannot fully determine content: the referent, Gadamer is effectively saying, is itself part of the content of a belief—it is made present in the belief. Since no single system of belief will ever be able to completely determine the referents it has beliefs about, for any given belief system those referents will always transcend it. But if that's the case, many of the worries that are thought to attend the holist thesis lose their force.

We have here been tracing out the consequences of Gadamer's hermeneutic ontology. This is an ontology in which interpretation and Sache, belief and thing, language and world, are not separated by a chasm of difference; nor is the distinction between them collapsed. Human beings for Gadamer are not closed off from the world behind a wall of subjectivity, nor are they fully ensconced within their environment, the way he says animals are. We find ourselves always 'halfway' between these poles. As we've tried to show above, this being-halfway has consequences for how we think of meaning.

### 5.3 — Coda: How Much Do Two People Need to Agree about in Order to Understand Each Other?<sup>24</sup>

The holist assumption that individual beliefs are only to be identified with their place in a semantic system is thus false, as is holism's central claim that the content of a belief is determined by that belief's relations to the belief system of which it is a part. What consequences can we draw for interpretation and understanding? We will try to answer this question by addressing one of the deepest problems faced by any account of interpretation. That problem, stated in the title of this section, may be rephrased as follows. As we have seen, both versions of the argument for strong holism seem to have as a consequence the breakdown of intersubjective communication. I would argue that many thinkers who accept one or another version of holism do so because of the salience of such breakdown. Postmodernists like Lyotard attempt to illustrate the failure, on the part of speakers with one worldview, to understand those with one that is marginalized or de-legitimated by that worldview. Foucault speaks of radical ruptures between historical epistemes, among which communication seems difficult at best. And of course, Kuhn is famous for the notion of the incommensurability of scientific paradigms. We saw above how he argues that

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<sup>24</sup> Portions of this section have appeared in a paper I read at the 2007 meeting of the International Association for Philosophy and Literature entitled "Gadamerian Textual Renovation."

someone speaking about the earth from the point of view of the Ptolemaic paradigm isn't 'really' talking about the same thing as someone who speaks about the earth from the point of view of the Copernican paradigm. Some sort of holism underlies all of these claims; for example, it is only because our sentences don't stand or fall on their own, but only as part of a larger view of things, that statements about the "earth" can mean different things in the mouths of speakers with different worldviews. Now, the critical question faced by anyone accepting such a picture of meaning is the question of what constitutes *agreement* about a subject matter. Most thinkers would not go so far as to say that only total belief identity would ensure agreement (i.e. that one could ultimately only agree with oneself, and no one else). It thus becomes a question of degree. Is it an ontology that must be shared? A set of rules for making inferences? Or do there need to be shared cultural or historical narratives?

This question faces us even after we have concluded, as we did at the end of the last section, that meaning only weakly determines reference, and that strong holism is false if one holds that content is the presentation in beliefs of things transcending those beliefs. The thing may, after all, show a different side of itself to two different interpreters, and two such interpreters may (and probably always do) have beliefs about different things. Given that all of our beliefs form part of a more or less integrated worldview, how are we to recognize someone else as talking about something we also have beliefs about? When can two interpreters *be said* to be talking about the same thing? We've seen that it's in principle *possible* for two people with different webs of belief to talk about the same thing; now the question becomes a) what *is it* for two people to talk about the same thing?, and b) how will two people *recognize* that they are talking about the same thing?<sup>25</sup>

We will set out here to find some answer to this question, basing our discussion on what we have outlined in the foregoing pages as Gadamerian hermeneutic holism. Before we do that, though, we should summarize the main features of that holism. First, hermeneutic holism is a holism based on the

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<sup>25</sup> These are questions that Derrida also faces in his account of the determination of meaning by context in "Signature Event Context." The mark, says Derrida, is "structurally repeatable"—to be a mark is to be able to taken up into ever new contexts, and not to have its meaning exhaustively determined by any given context. Nevertheless, repeatability makes content identity between contexts possible—if a mark could not be repeated it could never be taken up into a new context. And yet, the very iterability of the mark makes content identity *impossible*—it is always possible that the mark will be construed differently in any new context in which it is taken up. The point though is that we still face the hermeneutic question of whether that differently construed mark can nevertheless be *understood* by interpreters within the two contexts—that is, does understanding between contexts ever occur, and if it does, what accounts for it?

semantics of the question. The semantic whole that hermeneutics is primarily concerned with—the worldview—is to be primarily thought not as a set of statements, but as a body of responses to questions. Second, the ultimate ‘object’ of any holistically structured worldview is the world, which is encountered both ‘formally’ and ‘contentfully.’ The world is both this world that I encounter every day, and it is the totality of beings. All worldviews, however different, are interpretations of the world, i.e. of the totality of beings. The world itself is a Sache, and is subject to the same logic as any other Sache: it is one thing in all of the varying interpretations of it, and what it is is not different from what is understood in all of those interpretations. This paradoxical logic of the Sache is the third feature of hermeneutic holism. As we saw in the last section, a belief is not to be viewed as identifiable only with its place in a worldview, i.e. with its relation to the rest of the beliefs in a worldview. It is to be thought as being about a thing that is potentially the object of other beliefs that are themselves parts of other worldviews. Summing up, if ‘classical’ holism says that a belief can only be understood in its relation to all of the beliefs in a belief system, hermeneutic holism says that a belief a) must be understood as an answer to a question; b) is part of a worldview, which ultimately is an interpretation of the totality of beings; and c) always has as its object something which in principle can be the object of beliefs in different worldviews.

What I want to argue here is that the *question* provides the *minimally necessary conditions* for the sharing of an object of belief. Two people who share a question may share a number of other questions and beliefs, but they will not need to share all of them. Saying *precisely* what two such people need to share may itself not be possible, but all we need to do to show that holism need not imply radical communication failure across belief systems is to show that the interpreter can share a question, i.e., a Sache, with her interlocutor without sharing significant portions of that interlocutor’s view of the world. By ‘significant portion’ I mean more than single beliefs and less than every belief. It would be satisfactory, I think, if we could show that two people can share an entity while not sharing some semantic ‘molecules.’ That is, someone might lack a ‘Russian literature’ molecule and nevertheless understand what a Tolstoyan has to say about golf. We would not want to go so far as to try to show that two people might communicate who don’t share *most* of each other’s beliefs. Holism is plausible to the extent that it insists that communication in the face of *this* degree of belief-sharing would be difficult, to say the least. But we will come back to this question, the question of how *little* two people can agree on while still understanding each other, after we’ve addressed the question in the title of this section.

So, how does the question provide the minimum of agreement for the sharing of an object of belief? Consider the different possibilities for belief overlap. First, two people can have completely overlapping sets of beliefs about some topic—say, ‘Brooklyn.’ Second, two people can have some variance in their beliefs about that topic. Finally, there can be no (or virtually no) overlap at all among their

beliefs. For example, Jones might take Brooklyn to be a borough of New York City, while Smith believes it to be the name of David and Victoria Beckham's daughter. In the latter case, Smith and Jones are not talking about the same thing when they speak of 'Brooklyn,' while in the first case, we would probably not be talking about two people, since it is very unlikely that two people believe *exactly* the same things about a given topic. So the interesting case is the second one. Where is the line to be drawn that divides having beliefs about the *same* thing from having beliefs about *different* things? In all probability, a precise line cannot be drawn. Nevertheless, there are controversial cases, and this attests to the plausibility of saying that there is a line—even if it is difficult to say where it is. Kuhn, for example, speaks of Einsteinians and Newtonians as referring to different things when they speak of space: for the former, space is curved, while for the latter, space 'by definition' is not curved. "Space" is just a word that denotes two different things, and depending on one's paradigm one rejects the existence of what someone from the other paradigm refers to as "space."

What I want to argue is that if two people have the question, "what is space?", curved space and 'straight' space can both be answers to it. Of course, this can only be the case if space in this question is not *assumed* to be 'straight.' And indeed, being informed that space is curved may be precisely the event that *opens* the question, "what is space?", since before one had simply assumed it to be a certain way. One now asks, "how can space be curved?", or "what is space, such that it can be curved?" The question takes a familiar concept and shows it to perhaps describe something that is quite different from what one thought. The question makes the familiar *mysterious*. But for the thing to come into question, it must be assumed that it is the *same* thing that I had faulty beliefs about, and that I am now trying to understand.<sup>26</sup>

But what really is it that we understand when we ask a question as open-ended as "what is space?" The interpreter asking this question has to have a couple of things in mind. First, as we saw above, she has to have some pre-understanding of space; without that she can't ask the question, cannot find the question questionable. She must also have the feeling that whatever space is, her old understanding is quite possibly not adequate to it. What gives her this feeling is the experience of evidentness that comes about when someone offers an alternate

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<sup>26</sup> Does this scenario coincide with that discussed in the interpretation of Plato's allegory of the cave, above? Is there some subject matter that the prisoners have beliefs about when they are prisoners and that perdures after they have left the cave? After all, the freed prisoner has perhaps as radical a change in perspective and belief as is possible. But if nothing else, the freed and bound prisoners both have beliefs about *reality*. Reality is arguably the subject matter that is reinterpreted as the prisoner leaves the cave.

view of space. We saw above that Gadamer argues that truth is always experienced as the evident: questions become questionable when a prejudice is suddenly overturned by the immediate plausibility of an alternate view of the thing. Having the question means seeing that there is some phenomenon—here, space—that *is* in a certain way, that I have certain beliefs about, and that may be different from my beliefs about it. Of course, it can't be *radically* different from my beliefs about it, as then I couldn't be said to have any beliefs *about it*. There must be some beliefs that carry over from the old conception into the new—there must be conceptual continuity. These beliefs might be something like what Charles Taylor calls “criterial properties,”<sup>27</sup> that is “some very basic, correct notions” of what the thing is. It is these notions, argues Taylor, that allow us to recognize some view we have of the thing as *false*—it fails to live up our correct (but necessarily incomplete) understanding of the thing. We may not be explicitly aware of what these criterial properties are, but they are necessary if the thing is to be gradually revealed in dialectics (or dialogue). And certainly, when the thing is in question I can't know in just what *way* the thing will turn out to be different from my previous beliefs about it. The question is predicated upon that lack of knowledge, and the implicit recognition of that lack of knowledge.

In addition to revising one's beliefs about a thing, it is also possible to reject the existence of the thing as such. This is what Kuhn says occurs in paradigm shifts—the classic example is phlogiston, which chemical paradigms after the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century did not consider real. What is it that happens when I reject the existence of some entity that I had previously had beliefs about? Putting it in Gadamerian terms, I do this when that entity becomes less and less questionable. I am unable to find any plausible alternate theories of the thing. I can't imagine any way for the thing to be that would allow me to find its existence plausible. To reject the existence of an entity is furthermore to say that there is no room in the world as I see it for this particular being. There is no way of reconciling all of my other beliefs with a belief in this entity. No question has revealed to me that there may be a broader view of the entity available to me. Of course, I can't in principle rule out the possibility that such a question will come along, but for now no such question has come along—so the thing drops out of my view of the world.

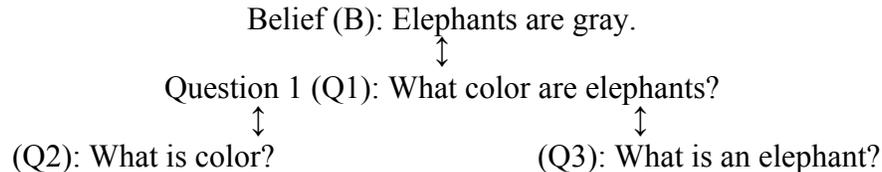
Now, given that it is possible both to revise one's beliefs about a thing, and to reject the existence of the thing outright, what are the possibilities for the sharing of an entity—i.e., regarding entities, what can two people conversing with each other share? Two people can share a question and the answer to that question—i.e. they can share a belief or a prejudice. Or they can share the question, but not

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<sup>27</sup> See Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, 59-60. Lorenzo Simpson pointed me in the direction of Taylor here.

the answer to it. In that case, though, they *still share an entity*.<sup>28</sup> Finally, two people may not share a particular question, in which case the one will think the thing whose being the question breaks open is real, while the other will reject its very existence. There would thus seem to be degrees of entity sharing: two people may share none, some, or all of the entities in their view of the world. This means: they may share none, some, or all of their questions. But what degree of the sharing of questions or entities is demanded by the holist picture? The obvious response would be to say that to live in the same ‘world,’ two people would need to share quite a few entities or questions. In order to answer this question, however, what we need to do is to determine whether questions and entities are strongly or ‘loosely’ interconnected in a worldview. That is, as beliefs are for the strong holist, are questions to be identified with their place in a view of the world?

In a worldview, beliefs are connected to each other via inferences. Is that also the case for questions? Consider a particular belief-question nexus:



(B) is an answer to (Q1). (Q1) presupposes (Q2) and (Q3), i.e. it assumes that one knows what colors are, and what elephants are. But does (Q2) presuppose that one also asks (Q3)? In a way yes, and in a way no. On the one hand, everything I know about elephants points to their having a color: they are the sort of thing (they are opaque and visible) of which we typically predicate color. But on the other, it is intuitively possible to *ask* (Q2) without asking (Q3), without, that is, even being aware of the existence of elephants. So what, again, is the relation between (Q2) and (Q3)?

The above diagram shows that questions are related to each other via beliefs, and via other questions. Consider, now, what happens if Smith doesn’t believe that gray is a color. She would presumably have a different answer to (Q2) than someone (Jones) for whom gray is a color. To Smith, (Q1), the question of what color elephants are, is nonsensical: elephants have no color, since they are gray, and gray is not a color. For Jones, on the other hand, this question is a perfectly good one. It would seem that both, though, in spite of their disagreement about whether elephants have a color, continue to have beliefs about elephants—and

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<sup>28</sup> It could be argued that two people can share a question without sharing an entity. ‘How does combustion work?’ for example, is a question shared by both oxygen and phlogiston theorists. Here it is a *process*, rather than an entity strictly speaking, that is shared. The same problematic is in play, however: to be said to be speaking about ‘the same’ process, what beliefs must the two theorists share?

about color. For both, elephants and color are in question. Why wouldn't holism prevent this conclusion? A holist for whom meaning determines reference might argue that disagreement about the color of elephants is tantamount to the intending of two different entities—proboscidian pachyderms that have color and proboscidian pachyderms that do not have color. But basing meaning in the question allows there to be agreement about entities, even if meaning is holistic and determines reference. “An elephant is a large proboscidian pachyderm without color” is only *one possible answer* to the question of what an elephant is. Anyone for whom elephants are in question *presupposes* that this is so, *whether or not* she believes that gray is a color.

What's going on here may become clearer if we consider the problem from the perspective of the interpreter trying to understand someone. I understand what someone says as an answer to a question that I myself find questionable; do I need to find the rest of her questions questionable? As we saw in the above diagram, depending on my answers to the questions we share, I will not find some of the other's questions questionable. But I can still understand what the other is saying if I find the questions that *underlie* those questions questionable. What if I don't find those more fundamental questions questionable? There are two ways in which I wouldn't find such questions questionable. First, it may be that I have prejudices about the phenomenon in question, but I have not yet come to ask myself the question to which my prejudices are an answer. In this case I'm still 'stuck' in my perspective, taking it to exhaustively capture the thing.<sup>29</sup> The second way in which I can fail to find a question questionable is if I don't have beliefs about the phenomenon or entity in question. This second alternative provides a much greater challenge to mutual understanding than the first, since if I have beliefs about the given entity, the question underlying them is merely 'buried'; if I have no such beliefs, on the other hand, there will be no underlying question for me to exhume—I won't be able to realize that my beliefs are actually answers to an open-ended question.<sup>30</sup> So let's consider that second alternative. Say someone (Sam) from a culture consisting of professional philosophers encounters someone

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<sup>29</sup> To be sure, I'm not really *stuck* in my perspective, since it is always possible for the underlying question to become questionable for me.

<sup>30</sup> It might be argued that there is a third way in which a question is not questionable: I may see the question as irrelevant or uninteresting. For example, it may not strike me as especially urgent that I answer the question of how many hot dogs it is possible for one person to consume in five minutes. I do know there is an answer to this question, even though I don't care to find out what it is. *That* I don't care to find out shows that I do in fact have beliefs about the *value* of hot-dog-eating contests. So even here, there is something that I and the champion hot dog eater disagree about, and hence a question that we share.

else (Jane) from a culture consisting of professional biologists. Both Sam and Jane, let's say, have beliefs about animals. Each finds questions like "what makes an animal 'endangered'?", "do animals have rights?", and "what is an animal?" questionable. Sam, however, also has beliefs about phenomenology, while Jane has none. Now, is there any way in which Jane needs to find the following sorts of questions questionable, as Sam does, in order to understand what Sam says about animals?: "what is phenomenology?", "what is the relation between phenomenology and hermeneutics?", and "is phenomenology a family resemblance concept, or language on holiday?" Certainly, Sam's beliefs about animals might inform his beliefs about phenomenology, and vice versa. But even if this is the case, Sam and Jane can still share questions about animals. The reason is that whatever connection Sam understands there to be between phenomenology and animals *itself figures in an answer to a question about animals*. There are many other possible answers to these questions that don't address phenomenology. Take the second animal-related question above, "do animals have rights?" A phenomenologist might answer this question by looking at how a 'right' is constituted by transcendental intersubjectivity. A biologist might answer it by looking for relevant biological similarities and differences between humans (typical rights bearers) and animals. The point is that both answer the question. To share a question, two people have to find that question questionable. To be questionable, the question has to be asked. To ask the question, *all* one needs is an inkling that one's beliefs about the thing in question are not the whole story. One does *not* need to know every other possible answer to the question.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, we face a significant problem here. If Jane does not find phenomenology questionable, will she be able to understand an answer to the question "do animals have rights?" that incorporates phenomenology? She herself finds questions about animals rights, which Sam is attempting to answer phenomenologically, questionable. There is, in fact, *no* reason to think that she will understand Sam's answer if she knows nothing about phenomenology. But if that's the case, isn't a holist incommensurability right around the corner? Note, though, that the situation here is one in which mutual understanding is in question, not whether or not Sam and Jane are able actually to share a question. This latter possibility we hope to have demonstrated by arguing against the exhaustive determination of the content of questions by a semantic system: as we saw above, since all *Sachen* can in principle be taken up into a multitude of different worldviews, the questions breaking open the being of those *Sachen* can themselves be shared by interpreters with different worldviews. Mutual

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<sup>31</sup> We *could* not know every possible answer to the question, since the question will be answered differently depending on the contexts of those who seek to answer it—and we cannot predict what every possible context will be.

understanding requires that some, but not all, questions be shared. But the question that has emerged here is just when an interpreter can be said to *recognize* that the question she is asking is the question that someone else is asking. That is, how can an interpreter recognize someone else's statements as answers to the very same question she is asking herself? There is, of course, no *definite* answer to this question. It is just the hermeneutic question of when understanding occurs. Hermeneutics cannot say that there is some single point at which understanding occurs, since it holds that there is no method of understanding that could identify some final step after which comprehension would be ensured. At *some* point in the course of reading, the text is understood. And there are of course *degrees* of understanding: Jane might read *Ideas I*, and thus begin to grasp Sam's answer, even though he based it on a late and obscure volume of *Husserliana*. She could penetrate even further into his answer by reading ever more widely. That such a process can occur shows that mutual understanding requires not the impossible entering into the entire worldview of the other, but the gaining of piecemeal access to those things the other talks about. Piecemeal access is possible, on Gadamer's picture, precisely because the twin theses of meaning holism and the determination of reference by meaning are mitigated by the claim that interpreter and world come face to face in the medium of language. Because language is a medium, I am able to have access to the thing; but because the thing is nothing other than how it is presented in a potentially infinite number of interpretations, my access to it will always be partial. But this partial understanding is in effect a kind of foothold on the thing; it allows me to see more and more aspects of it as I talk to others who have their own partial understanding. The upshot is that while we cannot say exactly when an interpreter will recognize her question in the words of another, we can say that coming to understand what someone else is saying need not be an all or nothing affair—it need not require that one come to have access to all his beliefs, or all of his questions. The more one gains access to the better, but at any stage of the conversation it will always be one more aspect of the thing that comes to be revealed. The process will be gradual, and never complete.

## ABBREVIATIONS OF FREQUENTLY CITED TEXTS

DD	Gadamer, <i>Dialogue and Dialectic</i>
GW (1-10)	Gadamer, <i>Gesammelte Werke</i>
HD	Gadamer, <i>Hegel's Dialectic</i>
PH	Gadamer, <i>Philosophical Hermeneutics</i>
RAS	Gadamer, <i>Reason in the Age of Science</i>
TM	Gadamer, <i>Truth and Method</i>

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