

# CHAPTER ONE

## Philosophical Hermeneutics

### Navigating the Approaches

#### INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### ELEVEN THESES ON PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

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

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

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

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

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

### Thesis One: Hermeneutical Understanding Requires Difference

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

### Thesis Two: Philosophical Hermeneutics Promotes a Philosophy of Experience

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

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

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

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

### Thesis Three: Philosophical Hermeneutics Entails a Commitment to Hermeneutic Realism

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

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

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

#### Thesis Four: Philosophical Hermeneutics Seeks Otherness within the Historical

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

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

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

### Thesis Five: Philosophical Hermeneutics Reinterprets Transcendence

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

## Thesis Six: Philosophical Hermeneutics Entails an Ethical Disposition

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

preserved. Keeping understanding exposed to the risk of such interventions allows understanding to “become more,” for by being prompted to disclose more of its overlooked presuppositions, understanding grasps more of itself. The positivity of the negative aspects in hermeneutic understanding shows itself in another light too.

The charge that a given understanding is *particular* in relation to a “whole” body of other interpretations is simultaneously negative and affirmative. The invocation of what an interpretation is *not* (i.e., not the whole of the matter) also reveals what the interpretation is (i.e., one element of a larger nexus of mutually related understandings). Such a “dialectical” shift in perception does not negate the negative aspects of hermeneutic understanding but refigures them positively. Five points are salient.

1. The “negativity of experience” may disrupt one’s expectancies of a text but it also opens unexpected alternatives. An awareness of the finitude of understanding exposes one to different interpretative possibilities.
2. The very limitedness of one’s understanding provides a position from which one can negotiate with other forms of interpretation. Such limitedness does not so much indicate the incomplete or distorted nature of one’s understanding as provide the foundation for one to understand “more.”
3. Gaining an awareness of that which limits one’s understanding (other horizons), strengthens a sense of belonging to an expanding whole. Becoming conscious of the limitedness of understanding is a precondition of hermeneutical transcendence.
4. A grasp of what makes one’s understanding perspectival (i.e., being in a relation to other perspectives) allows one’s understanding of a subject matter to become more complete (multiperspectival).
5. The hermeneutic differential that formally blocks understanding from completing itself, perpetuates the motion necessary to keep understanding open to the possibility of further responses to a subject matter.

Philosophical hermeneutics recognizes the “power of negativity.” It strives to remain open to the different and to learn from the teachings of such suffering. Philosophical hermeneutics displays the *eclat* of a life-affirming mode of thought that recognizes that the (tragic) endurance of its own neg-

ativity contains the promise of its redemption. It *understands* that the possibility of hermeneutic transcendence follows on the affirmative embrace of its own negativity.

### Thesis Eight: Philosophical Hermeneutics Affirms an Ontology of the In-between

Philosophical hermeneutics indisputably aligns itself with the Heideggerian argument that understanding is a mode of being. Gadamer articulates this mode as a "*being in-between*": "Hermeneutics is based upon a polarity of familiarity and strangeness . . . the true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between" (TM, 295).<sup>21</sup> Philosophical hermeneutics proposes an ontology of the in-between that attempts to articulate what *occurs* within the *process* of understanding. This ontology displays what is within philosophical hermeneutics a characteristic dialectical reversal, a reversal that stresses the transformative processes of encounter which negotiating parties are subject to. Philosophical hermeneutics does not seek to analyze the perspectives of two negotiating subjects in order to discern the *de facto* differences between them. To the contrary, the process of encounter itself is regarded as an ontological power capable of generating differences in and between subjects. Within the differences generated by such encounters, subjects are opened to the transformative possibilities for further understanding. As a process of encounter, the *being* of understanding resides in the continuous generation of the in-between. This is no "no man's land" between isolated subjects. It is, rather, the disclosive space of the hermeneutic encounter itself. It is this space which subjectivizes the participating individuals.

Hermeneutical encounter requires engagement. Engagement involves more than an acknowledgment of the proximity of perspectives and horizons other than my own. Such *factic* acknowledgment changes and risks nothing. Hermeneutical understanding entails a great deal more than tabling theoretical statements of the obvious, such as, between opposing traditions there are different points of view. It is, above all, concerned with the transformative potential of that differential space that *emerges* when two parties engage one another. Hermeneutical understanding is ontologically generative: it brings a differential space into being. It is the generative space of the in-between that discloses the contrast between our perspective and that of the other. It shows the other to be *other* while revealing our outlook to be distinctively our own. It is the generative space of the in-between, the space of the hermeneutical encounter, which discloses the reality of alternative possibilities not presently my own but which might yet become my own.

The process of subjectivization does not just take place between two selves but also places us between ourselves. It opens a differential space between unquestioned past self-understandings and future potentialities for understanding. The event of hermeneutical understanding is the emergence of such a being-in-between. The gift of the other is not merely their otherness per se. It is much rather that such otherness discloses possibilities that are not presently my own. This places us between ourselves, so to speak, between what is disclosed of how we have in the past understood ourselves as being and what is intimated of how we might be transformed by future understanding. However, the gift is reciprocal. While the other invites me to become open to alternative possibilities that are not my own and to develop and enhance my own understanding, in so doing I become more other to the other. Yet it is precisely because of this transformation that I can offer to the other alternative possibilities that are not immediately her own. Philosophical hermeneutics evidently assigns a dignity to difference and contends that the differential space of the in-between has its genesis in the processes of hermeneutical encounter, which invites us to allow those who see things differently to enlarge our world.

It is with good reason that the locus of hermeneutics is identified as the in-between. The locus of our understanding invariably involves being in between what, on the one hand, we have understood and what, on the other hand, we intuit we have yet to understand. Understanding entails the process of becoming different to ourselves. We do not merely encounter the different but become different to ourselves because of that encounter. The hermeneutical experience of difference is not just a confrontation with the unfamiliar. It involves the recognition of the familiar having been rendered strange by the unfamiliar. We reside, it would appear, somewhere between our once and future selves. This suggests that understanding is a mode of relatedness or, to put it another way, it expresses the *coming into being* of a mode of relatedness. What emerges within me as a singular *subjective* awareness, philosophical hermeneutics regards as an *objective* expression of a relationship. Self-awareness is, it is argued, not a precondition of being-with-others. Rather, its emergence demonstrates the fact of already having entered into such a relationship. There is no preexistent "inwardness" in which the self is found. Reflexive inwardness emerges from the world of exchange, of converse and interaction.<sup>22</sup> The self that emerges is far from transparent. Its emergence denotes that it has become a problem to itself. It is problematized by the very relationship whose being it expresses. Philosophical hermeneutics recognizes that the linguisticity of our being always renders us vulnerable to different narra-

tives of ourselves. The encounter with the other opens a differential space between what I have come to grasp as myself and how others come to see me. Understanding, in other words, entails a great deal more than recovering what is implicitly understood “between ourselves.” It also grasps that self-awareness entails a being placed in between our past and future selves. To be hermeneutically aware is to understand that the self resides in the differential space between what we understand ourselves to be and what others think us to be. In the eyes of philosophical hermeneutics to be a subject is always to be in between. A being who resides in the in-between is a being whose being is always open, vulnerable, and in question.

### Thesis Nine: Philosophical Hermeneutics Is a Philosophical Practice Rather Than a Philosophical Method

The sound practice of a discipline requires that appropriate training and experience regulate attitude and behavior. The notion of a practice demands that its disciples be *methodical* and *disciplined* in their chosen approach. Being an experienced practitioner does not strictly speaking impose limits on deployable methodical devices or tactics. To the contrary, becoming an experienced practitioner entails sharpening if not acquiring a guiding *sense* for judging which approach to a task is more plausible or appropriate than another. *Knowing* when a decisive judgment is demanded is the mark of a skilled practitioner. Yet such judgment is not a matter of deploying methods or rules. Philosophical hermeneutics offers a valuable reminder of what philosophical and hermeneutical *practice* should entail. What philosophical hermeneutics understands as its practice will be the subject of discussion below. Chapter 4 of this essay will discuss the implications of Gadamer’s notion of hermeneutic practice at length. That philosophical hermeneutics is indeed orientated toward a form of philosophical *practice* rather than to philosophical theory is obscured by the shortcomings of Gadamer’s approach to the question of method.

The “integrity of interpretation” no longer distinguishes the humanities from the natural sciences, as is amply demonstrated by Paul Feyerabend and Mary Hesse, for whom contemporary science has become thoroughly “hermeneuticized.”<sup>23</sup> Gadamer’s hasty slighting of the objective and universal pretensions of scientific method has needlessly drawn to philosophical hermeneutics the hostile charges of subjectivity and methodological arbitrariness. As a result, philosophical hermeneutics often stands accused of exactly the same shortcomings it perceives in

Nietzsche's nihilism. Yet a twist in this irony serves philosophical hermeneutics unexpectedly well.

Integral to philosophical hermeneutics' critique of Nietzsche's nihilism are arguments that attempt to discern objectivities within the subjective voice and to show that interpretation is far from groundless, but is rooted in specific ontological structures. Both sets of argument are central to Gadamer's attempt to articulate the ontological foundations of practice. Discerning them enables Gadamer to turn the tables on Nietzsche: any practice that does not recognize how it is enabled by the conceptual perimeters of its historical and cultural inheritance or, indeed, which tries to break with that inheritance, is nihilistic. By default, the argument provides philosophical hermeneutics with a riposte to the accusations of subjectivism and of methodological arbitrariness. The objectivity and methodological rigor frequently demanded of philosophical hermeneutics also reflects a nihilistic outlook, that is, the supposition that there are or ought to be ways of thinking and seeing purged of every element of historical and cultural determination. Such methods of reasoning are far from being independent of historical determination. The demand to make them so would deprive them of the cultural foundations upon which their drive and focus depends.

The implicit charge that (positivistic) models of scientific reasoning are nihilistic makes two points about how philosophical hermeneutics operates. First: many of its methodical insights (and specifically those to do with the philosophical foundations of practice) are unduly understated. A principal aim of this essay is to correct this and formulate some of the key methodical insights that underwrite philosophical hermeneutics. Second: though philosophical hermeneutics does not constitute a system or method, its critical procedures have a clear style and a discernible signature. With regard to the latter, consider the following.

The *riposte* that scientific reasoning betrays a nihilistic trait, does not refute the accusation that philosophical hermeneutics is governed by subjective prejudices and methodological arbitrariness. Rather, it indicates an intellectual maneuver characteristic of Gadamer's style of thought which invites us to think *differently* about the concepts in the accusation. Does not the charge against philosophical hermeneutics betray a very particular and somewhat limited epistemological understanding of the concepts *subjectivity* and *objectivity*? Yet if these concepts were to be rethought so as to include their ontological dimension, it becomes possible to think differently about them. Philosophical hermeneutics can suggest that subjectivity is not a block to

greater objectivity but rather a gateway to it. Subjectivity (in the sense of having a distinct but negotiable point of view) can be regarded as enabling. The observation in support of this derives from another question: "Is it not precisely when our expectancies and 'prejudices' are challenged that we begin to learn?" If the concept of subjectivity is accorded the positive value of an enabling ontological prejudice, philosophical hermeneutics is indeed guilty of subjectivism. But (and this is the point) it is no more guilty of such subjectivism than scientific reasoning itself, which also rests upon a series of enabling fore-understandings. The tactic in such reasoning is plain: it endeavors to expose the objection to philosophical hermeneutics as embracing only one of a much more complex nexus of meanings that cluster around the term *subjectivity*. Such a move mirrors a classic figure within hermeneutic criticism: an allegedly universal claim is *particularized* against an implicit background (*whole*) of hidden or forgotten assumptions (*Vorverständnisse*) and comes to be understood differently when reread against the reappropriated background.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, such a rereading initiates other changes in understanding. To grasp conscious subjectivity as entailing a positive commitment to deepening and exploring its enabling assumptions, suggests that objectivity can no longer be understood as the absence of subjectivity. Objectivity can be rethought phenomenologically as a critical recovery, as a widening and, perhaps, as a deepening of the enabling assumptions that guide the subject's perspective in the first place.<sup>25</sup> A subjectivity blind to its formative assumptions is a danger to philosophical hermeneutics *and* scientific reasoning in that it runs the risk of becoming nonobjective, that is, of becoming inconsistent with its enabling presuppositions.

Now, the invitation to think differently about core concepts within a criticism demands that philosophical hermeneutics opens itself to renegotiating its own understanding. This is indeed precisely what the *practice* of philosophical hermeneutics aspires to. The result of dialogical encounter should be that *both* parties retire thinking in different and unexpected ways about criticisms made and received. The formal employment of part/whole figures of thought clearly contributes to the transformation of understanding yet such transformations *happen* to us in an unpredictable fashion. They are not achieved by the application of method alone.<sup>26</sup> Philosophical hermeneutics is not a philosophical method but there is a clear style in the manner of its reasoning.

A discernible assemblage of intelligent intuitions informs the hostility of philosophical hermeneutics to the formalities of method. They are as follows.

*The Finitude of All Thought and Experience.* A leitmotif that virtually defines philosophical hermeneutics is the conviction that all human experience is particular and finite. Faithful to Heidegger's ontological axiom of thrownness (*Geworfenheit*), it maintains that all thought and expression are articulated within historically and culturally specific frameworks.<sup>27</sup> Though the interconnectedness of language patterns may link them, no one framework speaks for all or can claim universal completeness. That understanding remains a perpetually unfinished task renders suspect the certainty claimed by the adherents of method.

*The Hermeneutic Differential.* Given the huge variety of intellectual and artistic traditions, one of understanding's tasks involves the translation of one framework of expression into another. However, the hermeneutic differential that drives such translation also puts the task beyond completion. By definition, no translation or interpretation can claim completeness. In this respect, philosophical hermeneutics seems rather partisan in its opposition to method. It trumps an epistemological claim (a methodological claim to universality or completeness) with an ontological claim concerning either the finitude of understanding or the inability of propositional language to capture the full nature of a subject matter. Philosophical hermeneutics is indeed committed to an ontology of becoming but that commitment is used somewhat bluntly in its quarrel with method. The point against method is surely subtler.

If the claims of methodology are rethought as expressions of a "will to method," that is, as a specific mode of interpretation, the will to method appears as self-defeating. The methodological aspiration to translate the complexities of human experience into a comprehensively intelligible framework is doomed by the very differential that makes its task appear plausible in the first place. If the methodological aspiration is an act of translation, fashioning the complexities of experience for methodological assimilation only serves to generate an ineluctable difference between what it is to be translated and the register into which it is to be transposed.<sup>28</sup> This suggests that as a mode of interpretation, the "will to method" produces a residual untranslatability which simultaneously drives and yet frustrates its endeavor.<sup>29</sup> From the point of view of the "will to method," such untranslatable excess spells failure, but from the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics it opens the possibility of new forms of understanding.

*Ethical Resistance.* Philosophical hermeneutics expresses a modest but discernible ethical distaste for the ambitions of strict philosophical method.