

Chapter 1

From Metaphysics to Hermeneutics

1. From Kant to Hermeneutics and Schleiermacher

There are very few things held in common in the fragmented field of contemporary philosophy, except perhaps for this very fact that we do live in a “fragmented field” of philosophical discourse, that is, one that is inescapably characterized by interpretation. The philosophy which tries to contend with this situation can safely be called “hermeneutics,” since it has traditionally been understood as the theory of interpretation (*hermeneuein*). If interpretation is the only universal or common aspect characterizing philosophy, one could claim that hermeneutics functions as a *prima philosophia* of sorts. One is obliged to add “of sorts” here because the relationship of hermeneutics to the metaphysical heritage is an ambiguous one. Indeed, hermeneutics can be seen as both an overcoming and an accomplishment of traditional metaphysics. By stressing interpretation, it is mostly antifoundationalist and would seem to be anti- or post-metaphysical. Yet, by recognizing universal perspectivism, it is obviously raising a universality claim which is akin to traditional metaphysics (whether those who espouse such a hermeneutical conception acknowledge it or not). Indeed, many so-called “deconstructionists” seem to be blissfully unaware of the metaphysical nature of their own claim to truth. It is hence a much needed desideratum

to reflect anew on the relation or tension between metaphysics and hermeneutics.

In order to do this, however, some historical recollection is called for. In what follows, I will try to reconstruct historically the transition from metaphysics to hermeneutics within the realm of philosophical thought, a shift that quietly took place over the last two centuries or so. The origins of this transition can be traced back in large part to the appearance of Kant's epoch-making *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). And although Kant himself had no inkling that his destruction of dogmatic metaphysics would eventually usher in the age of hermeneutics, key elements in his philosophy do point to such a shift. The mere idea that two millenia of metaphysics had produced no real knowledge, but only illusions, is in itself a hermeneutical insight. Metaphysical reason doesn't only yield hard truths, it can also produce fictions, interpretations and even sophistry. What metaphysics took for rational truths could be nothing other than delusions which one becomes aware of only after a careful deconstruction of the capacities of cognition beyond the limited realm of experience. This suggests that reason could very well follow interpretations of reality which enjoy no other credence than the fact that they satisfy its impulses, an idea that Nietzsche, a hermeneutical thinker if ever there was one, would use against Kant, and most forcefully against his metaphysical understanding of practical reason.

The other important insight made by Kant that announces a shift towards hermeneutics is to be found in the simple distinction between things-in-themselves and phenomena or appearances (*Erscheinungen*). One can say that classical metaphysics or *prima philosophia*, defined by Aristotle as the science that pertains to Being as such, claimed to possess knowledge about the nature of things in themselves. According to Kant, however, this claim disregards the fact that the things we know are already schematized or conceptualized by our understanding. In this respect, Kant followed and perhaps radicalized Hume's idea that our cognition rests on the association of ideas accomplished under the authority of the subjective principles of our mind (*e.g.* causality), but whose objective reality cannot be ascertained. Our mind is not merely passive in the act of knowledge, it is active to the point of imposing on nature its own laws of logic. Kant's *Transcendental Logic* thus offers the guiding principles of physics, but also of nature itself, that is, nature as it is "produced" or "required" by the categories of our thought. The idea that the world we know is based upon a conceptual projection of such categories is a revolutionary notion which indicates a shift from the

metaphysical to the hermeneutical, a realm where one no longer has access to the things-in-themselves, but only to interpretations of things which are produced in accordance with our conceptual apparatus. Kant, to be sure, never viewed his destruction of metaphysics as something that would lead to anything like a hermeneutical perspectivism. According to his system, the laws we impose on nature and the moral law that impels us to act according to the categorical imperative of reason are not mere interpretations or fictions that could vary from one culture or epoch to the next, nor from one individual to another. They testify to the unchallenged authority of reason where it is genuinely effective, *i.e.*, not in the area of theoretical and syllogistical metaphysics, which is doomed to sophistry, but in the realm of practical philosophy and the metaphysics of nature.

Yet, Kant's distinction between phenomena and things-in-themselves grew beyond its author's intentions, which is in itself a hermeneutical event. Kant's criticism of any knowledge that would claim to speak of things as they are in themselves had two somewhat contradictory offsprings. One actually paved the way for the notion of a general perspectivism, or for some kind of hermeneutics, whereas the other produced a new burst of metaphysical thinking in the form of transcendental idealism. This second progeny is well known. The idealists, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, thought that Kant was too shy when he prudishly wanted to limit knowledge to the realm of the phenomenal. By showing in his *Transcendental Deduction* that our understanding produces out of itself the logic of the world, as it were, he clearly established, at least in the mind of the idealists, that it is our reason which dictates how things are in themselves. Kant's active notion of a genesis of the world out of the capacities of the transcendental *ego* thus opened up the possibility of a new metaphysics, a metaphysics of the absolute subject. This foray into idealism has been interpreted as the logical next step from Kant's alleged destruction of metaphysics to some new kind of metaphysics. Indeed, the very step that Kant's philosophical revolution secretly entailed, or so the idealists contended, but which it wasn't able to express fully. Others, however, have claimed that idealism was in fact a "step backward" from critical philosophy; indeed, a relapse into the type of metaphysics that Kant had been warning us against.

The silent transition from metaphysics to hermeneutics followed a somewhat different path and was carried out by authors who are less familiar in the history of philosophy, perhaps because Kant's destruction instilled in them some despair as to the possibility of

developing any kind of philosophical or rational knowledge. It was the general "impact" of Kant's *Critique* which caused this sense of desperation regarding rationality. Of course, one has to distinguish Kant's impact on the times from his own intentions. Indeed, Kant aimed at a new foundation of metaphysics which he sought in both moral philosophy and the new metaphysics of nature.¹ Yet, most of his readers believed that Kant, in spite of his best intentions, had made this outcome totally impossible. This sentiment is expressed dramatically by Mendelssohn's famous phrase about the "*alles zermalmenden*" Kant, referring to him as one who destroys or crushes everything. According to Kant's argument, reason falls prey to a necessary metaphysical illusion when it seeks to go beyond the limited scope of experience and therefore it cannot be sure of anything it produces. With Kant, who would have followed Hume more than he would have answered his challenge to metaphysics, reason would become aware of its essential frailty. As it turns out, reason appears to be trapped in two ways: it cannot efficaciously go beyond the realm of phenomena, and even there, it is only dealing with its own projections and not with the things-in-themselves. Although Mendelssohn himself hoped that Kant would be able to build a new foundation of philosophy on the ruins of traditional metaphysics, many of his contemporaries, those who resisted the temptation to develop a new idealism of absolute subjectivity, were skeptical and, consequently, turned hermeneutical.

An important figure here was that of Jacobi who found a notorious contradiction in Kant's doctrine of the thing-in-itself. Kant appeared to exclude any notion of the thing-in-itself from his system, since it is essentially unknowable; yet he still needed an objective basis in reality in order to avoid any form of absolute idealism. Our knowledge, if it is to be more than a fictitious creation of the subject, has to find some objective corroboration in the things-in-themselves. However this is precisely what Kant's system prohibits. Most of the *idealist* readers of Jacobi, therefore, drew the conclusion that one could only resolve this contradiction by jettisoning the notion of the thing-in-itself as something extrinsic to subjectivity and by developing a coherent system of absolute idealism.² Jacobi, on the other hand, following indications he found in Kant (for instance, the famous passage of 1787 in which Kant confessed he had to limit knowledge to make way for faith), came to another conclusion: "fideism." If reason cannot bring us to reality, the only instance that can give us any sense of an objective and stable world is faith in an authority higher than that of our limited reason which can only lead us toward nihilism (a term, incidentally, which Jacobi himself coined).

It is by faith, and by faith alone, that we gain access to the true foundation of Being, one which the sisyphical projections of reason prevent us from reaching. This fideist reading had some appeal at the time and one can observe that it still manifests itself today. Many forms of religious fundamentalism clearly stem from the fear or anguish produced by the perspectivism which characterizes our knowledge. It is only through a leap of faith that some hope to become reacquainted with, and thus reassured about, hard reality.

Jacobi's radical rebuttal of reason in the name of fideism had a direct impact on the transition from metaphysics to hermeneutics. Through the mediation of the more radical skepticism of G.E. Schulze and S. Maimon, who wondered openly whether Kant's transcendental philosophy was more cogent than the classical forms of metaphysics it called into question, it reached the thought of Nietzsche's often forgotten mentor, Schopenhauer. For Schopenhauer, a pupil of Schulze, knowledge, being limited to a mere representation of reality, never goes beyond the illusory realm of phenomena. The things-in-themselves are seen to be dominated by forces of the "will," which remain impenetrable to our intellect. From here, it is but a small step to Nietzsche's universal perspectivism which views the world as the domain of the will to power and unmasks all truth claims as illusions fostered by hidden power structures. There is an historic path from Kant to Nietzsche, therefore, the road from Jacobi to Schopenhauer. And it is precisely this road that accounts for the passage from a metaphysical to a hermeneutical universe.

However, Jacobi's fideism also had a direct impact on the father of contemporary hermeneutics, Friedrich Schleiermacher. In his early *Discourses on Religion* (1799), Schleiermacher followed Jacobi in dismissing the claims of rational knowledge and characterized the religious sentiment as one of total dependence, a feeling of reliance on a reality that transcends our fragile understanding. This romantic promotion of the religious sentiment is a distant consequence of Kant's humiliation of reason in his first *Critique*.

It is also a notion which Schleiermacher took up in his own hermeneutical thinking, one which he never really brought to fruition in a satisfying or publishable form. In his manuscripts on hermeneutics, Schleiermacher distinguishes two ways of understanding the art of interpretation: a loose and a strict sense. In its loose or "relaxed" sense, understanding is something which happens naturally when one is reading a text. One only needs a doctrine of interpretation, or a hermeneutics, to deal with the limited problem of ambiguous or equivocal passages, where understanding is not arrived at immediately. By distinguishing two types of hermeneutics,

Schleiermacher is clearly taking aim at the hermeneutical attitude which prevailed before him, the notion that hermeneutics is nothing but an "auxiliary" science which one calls upon when one stumbles upon difficult passages, a science one can do without as long as understanding flows relatively well. Incidentally, most human beings do understand without the help of any hermeneutical technique. Against this loose understanding of the practice of interpretation, where understanding manifests itself naturally, Schleiermacher introduces a new conception of hermeneutical practice. According to the strict sense, a theory of understanding should follow the maxim that it is rather *misunderstanding* which proceeds naturally and that understanding must be sought after and grounded in every step of interpretation.³ Hermeneutics, therefore, in its most stringent sense, presupposes the virtual pervasiveness of misunderstanding. In the absence of a sure and potentially methodical art of understanding, or *Kunstlehre des Verstehens*, there is no way one can be sure of one's own understanding.

Schleiermacher thus makes understanding dependent on hermeneutics. True understanding can only result from an interpretation which is grounded on the rules and canons of some *Kunstlehre*. This dramatic promotion of hermeneutics (where one does not understand *unless* one can provide a hermeneutical foundation) has to be viewed with the backdrop of Romanticism in mind and follows what was seen as Kant's humiliation of the capacities of human reason. According to this romantic conception, our knowledge dwells in the realm of phenomena, where it cannot be sure of anything. Finite reason cannot hope to grasp adequately the infinite reality which grounds it and that points to a higher subject (whether it be God, nature or some other superhuman reality) of which one can only have a presentiment through some form of "feeling" or *Ahndung*. This post-Kantian idea that the feeling of infinity takes up where reason lets us down was common to the first Romantics, most notably to Schlegel and Schleiermacher.⁴

Nevertheless, there is another motivation behind Schleiermacher's dramatization of the hermeneutical task. If understanding cannot be sure of itself unless it is grounded on a solid *Kunstlehre*, it is also because the prime objects of understanding are mostly works of genius, a tendency which is also evident in Schlegel's normative understanding of philology. How can one understand a piece of genius without misunderstanding it in a chronic way? Indeed, one can only misunderstand the products of genius if understanding means that one subsumes the *interpretandum* under what is already known. One understands an utterance when one can bring

it back to something which is already familiar. Consequently, understanding is condemned to miss the originality that constitutes any work of genius. This is perhaps why geniuses are never properly understood in their own time. In a sense, this is tragic. For if one claims to understand geniality, one reduces it to something which is already familiar and common and therefore misunderstands it. The seduction exerted by the aesthetics of genius is certainly at work in Schleiermacher's own conception of hermeneutics. Confronted with originality and far-reaching geniality, the basis of hermeneutics has to be that one *doesn't* understand.

This is indeed a sound maxim of modesty. It can also apply to more common forms of understanding which do not deal with works of genius. In the most trivial forms of interpersonal communication, when can we be sure that we understand each other? It is normal to presuppose that we do and it would be psychotic to claim the opposite. But how can we be sure that we understand fully what others have to say? We seem to understand the utterances of others, but how can we grasp everything if we have not been through what they have experienced, nor been affected by the influences which have shaped their lives and so on? Because of this failure, misunderstanding frequently appears and can often seem to be the norm in interpersonal relations.

This insight is at the basis of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics and accounts for what one can call his universalization of the dimension of misunderstanding.⁵ It is an insight which conveys a new dignity, and a new sense of urgency to hermeneutics. In the aftermath of metaphysics, where the pretension to know Being in itself has become ever more problematic, the rise of hermeneutics rests on this constant possibility of misunderstanding. In this regard, Schleiermacher is a very contemporary thinker. He derived from his premise of misunderstanding the notion that human knowledge is necessarily "dialectical" or, if one wishes to avoid the speculative connotations of Hegel's notion of Dialectic, "dialogical." Schleiermacher clearly understands dialectics in the Platonic sense as the art of dialogue. If all our perspectives on the world are limited, we can only but profit from the differing views, experiences and objections of others. Through dialogue, we can grow beyond our limited selves and achieve some kind of relative universality. We get to see things from different perspectives and enrich our limited understanding. This stress on the dialogical element of understanding is precious indeed. One can find traces of it in contemporary hermeneutics, in Gadamer's dialogical conception of the hermeneutic experience, but also in the project of an ethics of discussion (*Diskursethik*).

A less contemporary aspect of Schleiermacher's thought is perhaps his notion of a "technique of understanding" which seems to suggest a methodical conception of the hermeneutical endeavour. If one cannot be sure of one's own understanding, it would be very useful if one could rely on some *Kunstlehre* that would ensure the validity of our interpretations. But how can we be sure about the *Kunstlehre* itself or its application? In other words, isn't this technical conception of hermeneutics a scientific ideal which in fact identifies a difficulty more than it actually solves it?

However, it should be noted that Schleiermacher himself had a keen sense of this problem. He often acknowledged that the task of understanding is a never-ending one if one follows the strict sense that he assigns to hermeneutics. He was also aware that one has to rely on divinatory methods in order to understand the individuality of the other. Nevertheless, is the appeal to methods and to a rigorous methodology not a misunderstanding of what hermeneutics is all about? Doesn't Schleiermacher's own universalization of misunderstanding and its consequent stress on dialectics point to the very limits of method?

As far as I can see, and the fragmentary character of his hermeneutics makes it most difficult to interpret, Schleiermacher constantly struggled with this daunting task. This struggle could also explain why he never published his work on hermeneutics. He had found no solution to the contradictory tensions of his hermeneutical thinking. There is indeed a deep tension in his philosophy between the cartesian and the more romantic motivation. His notion of a universal *Kunstlehre* of understanding alludes to a cartesian-like method that would precede actual comprehension and make it scientific. However, this cartesian aspect is undermined by his constant reliance on the dialectical, the divinatory element and the necessity of intuitive insight or sentiment. Schleiermacher, therefore, seems to have failed to reconcile the romantic background of his thought with the ambitious cartesian formulation he gave to his hermeneutics. And while it is clear that the cartesian dimension seeks to contain, as far as possible, the anguishing universality of misunderstanding, the total perspectivism which is looming here calls perhaps for a solution other than the one method alone can offer.

2. From Schleiermacher to Heidegger and Gadamer

The transition from metaphysics to hermeneutics takes on a new dimension when one leaps to the hermeneutics of the 20th century.

The pervasiveness of total misunderstanding has not disappeared. In fact, through authors like Nietzsche it has become an inescapable part of our intellectual universe. Hermeneutics, one could claim, is the philosophy that tries to come to terms with this radical situation which Schleiermacher was one of the first to confront.

Heidegger represents the crucial juncture in the philosophical transition from metaphysics to hermeneutics. One could say that he was the first to actually present the two as being directly opposed. There is no doubt that his early hermeneutics of facticity is intended as an alternative to classical metaphysics. The young Heidegger was perhaps not fully aware of this, since he seems to have entertained a "positive" understanding of metaphysics at least as late as 1929, in his last real book, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, where he alludes to the task of a "metaphysics of *Dasein*," thus claiming for himself the term metaphysics.

Nevertheless, from early on his hermeneutics takes the form of a destruction of the ontological tradition and, therefore, of metaphysics. It is in this context that one may again identify the dilemma that characterized Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, torn, as we have seen, between a cartesian and a more romantic or almost existentialist motivation. The possibility or even "peril" of total misunderstanding was the guiding force behind Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, but his cartesian instincts pointed to a methodical solution or some sort of *Kunstlehre*. Unlike Schleiermacher, Heidegger relegated the "methodical" solution to the age of metaphysics.

It is important to note that the notion of metaphysics encountered with Heidegger is slightly different from the notion present in Kant. For Kant, metaphysics was the type of thinking that aimed at *a priori* knowledge of what lies beyond our experience (for example, in rational psychology or theology). For Heidegger, metaphysics stems from a more basic urge, namely, man's tendency to secure his fragile position in the world by understanding the totality of Being out of an onto-theological framework. In this regard, Heidegger claims that onto-theology sums up the general constitution of metaphysics. This "constitution" rests on a threefold axis, alluded to in the three Greek terms that make up the notion of onto-theology. Metaphysical thinking is:

1. *Ontological*, in that it aims at a universal, comprehensive and totalizing grasp of Being (insisted upon by Aristotle's definition (*Met.* IV, 1) of *prima philosophia* as a discipline which does not deal with a specific province of Being, but with Being in its universality).

2. *Theological*, in so far as it unfolds this universal perspective on Being out of a general principle, an *archè*; it is this basic principle which makes the totality of Being understandable and derivable (this principle need not be “theological” in the divine sense; wherever one seeks a principle of Being, in the form of a common denominator to which Being can be reduced, even if it is a materialistic or a sensible principle, one is still thinking “theologically” or in a foundationalist way, that is, metaphysically).
3. *Logical*, in that metaphysics reads its universal and principled understanding of Being through the lenses of a specific logic, that of propositional and syllogistical discourse; it is through the basic categories of logic, or even grammar (the subject being viewed as substance; the predicate with the notion of property or accident; the “if-then” language game with ontological causality, etc.), that one hopes to get a secure grasp on Being. By transposing its own logic onto the world, metaphysics tacitly secures its onto-theological hold on what is.

It is obvious enough that the basic impulse of Heidegger’s step back from metaphysical thinking is the fact that metaphysics leads man away from his own finitude. The notion of a science, or outlook, that would provide a universal, causal and logical account of Being, and of ourselves, masks the sheer uncertainty and facticity of our Being-in-this-world. Metaphysics is thus to be understood as a flight from one’s own temporality and mortality. It is because we are mortal that we seek to ground Being on something like eternal permanence, whose model is provided by divinity or reason.

One can see to what extent methodical thinking can appear to be a by-product of metaphysics for Heidegger. In face of the utter insecurity of our knowledge, it is alluring indeed to appeal to a method of certainty (for example, to a *Kunstlehre*, to take Schleiermacher’s term), that would eradicate, as it were, our essential finitude by imparting certain knowledge to us. But for Heidegger, this is nothing but an illusion, a self-delusion of *Dasein*, comparable in a way to Kant’s notion of a transcendental *Schein* or illusion. *Dasein* flees from itself, from its own insecurity when it falls into onto-theology (a “fall,” a *Verfallen*, which one can oppose to an authentic mode of *Dasein* which, in resolute lucidity, would stand up to its inescapable finitude).

It is against this metaphysical outlook that Heidegger proposed his own hermeneutics of *Dasein*, *i.e.*, his philosophy of human

finitude as that which metaphysical thought consistently and constitutively erases, and thus necessarily presupposes. All of metaphysical thinking, from Parmenides' notion of monolithic Being and Plato's theory of the Ideas up to Descartes' *Discours de la méthode*, Schleiermacher's *Kunstlehre*, Hegel's Logic and the merely logical conception of knowledge in Logical positivism, is based upon this shying away from man's radical finitude. Heidegger's hermeneutics promises to open the door to a more lucid account of our finitude. This is how the general shift "from metaphysics to hermeneutics," that began with Kant's *Transcendental Dialectic*, acquires a new radicality with Heidegger.

Heidegger's claim is that metaphysical thinking is vitiated in its inception by its option for "infinity," in whatever shape or form it happens to take and that one also encounters in some of the more "materialist" philosophies (to the extent that they are reductive or foundational). According to Heidegger's conception, metaphysics stands under the domination of a specific understanding of Being as permanent presence. What "is" or deserves the dignity of "Being," is that which is permanently there. Something that passes away cannot count as Being in the full sense of the word. It only enjoys a derivative ontological status as a predicate or attribute of some permanent Being. Permanence in the present erases again the shrieking finitude of our future. What is primordial for Heidegger is always this mortal finitude—the fact of our limited being in time. It is out of a negation of this finite facticity that the metaphysical reading of Being as permanent presence comes to the fore.

Heidegger sees this reading of Being in terms of "presence" at work in propositional logic. For this logic of accountable presence, all that can be said of something can be put in propositional form, following the schema "S is P": this subject has this predicate, a statement whose "truth claim" can be verified by the means of method and logical analysis. For Heidegger, however, human language cannot be reduced to the logical content of our propositions. The essential can never be said or put in propositional form, since there is always more to what is being said than can be grasped from a logical proposition. This is why Heidegger urges a "hermeneutical" understanding of language, one that is attentive to all that isn't said in a statement. In this regard, his early lectures presents "hermeneutical" understanding in opposition to the "apophantical" sphere which remains exclusively on the level of the proposition, without taking into account what lies behind language and cannot be seen by logic.

Heidegger gives a now classic example of this in the sentence: "the hammer is heavy," a sentence that is thought of as a gasp which

may come to the lips of a suffering carpenter in her workshop. Now, what the statement "states" is merely that the object "hammer" is endowed with the property of "heaviness." It seems, therefore, to be a theoretical statement about an independent object in the world. According to this logical reading, one that metaphysically concentrates on what is presently at hand in the statement, what is neglected is the hermeneutical dimension of the suffering carpenter. In the theoretical, "apophantical" understanding of the statement as a claim regarding a subsistent object, no mention is made of *Dasein*. But if the statement is to be understood properly, that is, hermeneutically, one has to develop an ear for *Dasein*. The statement could then mean something like: "I can't take it anymore," "please, help me out," "please, take over," "let's have a break," etc. The essential dimension in language is not the logico-semantic content of our statements, on which logic focuses, but the relation of *Dasein* to that which strives to be understood in language. Heidegger will even go as far in *Sein und Zeit* as to claim that the proposition is a "derivative" mode of understanding (SZ § 33).

Throughout his philosophical itinerary, Heidegger will constantly struggle with this propositional conception of language. It is a view which is cemented by logic and, ultimately, by metaphysics with its stress on Being as that which is readily at hand, presently observable and thus susceptible of mastery. He will even characterize his own philosophical concepts as mere "formal indications" (*Formalanzeigen*) which are not to be taken literally in their semantic context, but as invitations for us to fill them with content by applying them to our existence. This is also the idea behind his appropriation of the Augustinian distinction between the *actus signatus* and the *actus exercitus*. If one remains exclusively on the level of the *actus signatus*, or the level of what the proposition states or "signifies," one will necessarily miss its intent and purview. True understanding occurs only if one goes "into" language, or into the "exercise" (loosely playing on the notion of an *actus exercitus*) of what is happening in this *logos*.

According to Heidegger, this hermeneutical interpretation or "hearing" of *logos* has been obliterated in the metaphysical tradition through the dominance bestowed on logical thinking. Again, this domination can be seen as an erasing away of finitude, as the masking of the finiteness of our language, and an avoidance of the fact that the words we use cannot be literally taken as manipulable bits of information that exhaust all there is to say about something. In terms of logic, the presence of meaning occurs fully in propositional language. However, Heidegger's hermeneutics proposes that this

metaphysical logic misses what really happens in language, *i.e.*, the unending struggle to find words for all that should be said in order to understand ourselves. The transition “from metaphysics to hermeneutics” thus alludes to a shift in our relation to language, one that would take adequate distance from the propositional or “presential” conception of our linguistical dwelling in this world.

This hermeneutical understanding of language, which is leveled against the domination of propositional logic, has been taken up in Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Gadamer follows Heidegger when he writes at the end of *Truth and Method* that “the concept of the statement (. . .) stands in the greatest possible contrast to the essence of the hermeneutical experience and to the linguisticity of our experience of the world in general.”⁶ He correctly uses the word “contrast,” because what we seek to understand is always what propositions *mean*, what they have to say, why they say it, and that, no proposition on earth can state it fully. It is an abstraction or a fiction to concentrate simply on what is said in our statements. The “said” can only be adequately understood if one takes into consideration the unsaid side of our statements, what hopes to be heard in our utterances even if it cannot be said. This hermeneutical relation of the said to the unsaid corresponds to what Gadamer calls the “speculative” dimension of language. “Speculative” comes from the Latin word *speculum*, which means “mirror.” Our statements are always the mirroring of a meaning that is never entirely uttered. Proper understanding must go beyond the uttered words themselves in order to reach this motivating dimension of the unsaid.

To illustrate his critique of strictly logical interpretation, Gadamer compares the logical fixation on statements with what happens in police or judicial “interrogations” where statements that are made, and recorded, can easily be used in a context very different from the one that was intended. In this fixation on the “stated facts,” the notion that language can only be understood according to its original intent, context and motivation, is lost. All this, of course, cannot be spelled out in the statements we come to utter and this is why they receive very different interpretations (as is evident in the case of police interrogations). To further explain this notion, it is helpful to quote at some length Gadamer’s subtle analysis: “Language itself, however, has something speculative about it, (. . .) as the realization of meaning, as the event of speech, of mediation, of coming to an understanding. Such a realization is speculative in that the finite possibilities of the word are oriented toward the sense 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.' Anyone who has experienced an interrogation—even if only as a witness—knows what it is to make a statement and how little it is a statement of what one means. In a statement the horizon of meaning of what is to be said is concealed by methodical exactness; what remains is the 'pure' sense of the statement. That is what goes on record. But meaning thus reduced to what is stated is always distorted meaning."⁷⁷

Gadamer expresses this speculative element of language, the fact that our words refer to the hermeneutical dimension of the un-said which begs for understanding, in what he terms the logic of "question and answer." An utterance or a sentence can only be understood properly if one seeks to understand the question to which it is the answer. A proposition hardly ever says it itself. One has to go into the proposition to get at it, engaging into the dialogue out of which the statement "emerges," in the literal sense of the word. To understand is to know or to have an idea of the question to which the statement may be read as an answer. It is in this specific logic of question and answer, developed in contradistinction to the propositional logic which reduces our words to their "visible" logico-semantic content, that one finds the basic hermeneutical experience. In his essay of 1966 on "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem" (which incidentally sparked the debate with Habermas), Gadamer writes that it is the "hermeneutically primordial phenomenon," that "there is no possible assertion that cannot be understood as an answer to a question and that it can only be so understood."⁷⁸ Adequate understanding can only be achieved if one ventures into this realm of questioning. A questioning which is not always stated, or cannot be fully articulated, but which is nevertheless essential to the penetration of what is being said.

This hermeneutical intelligence of language stands in direct opposition to the logical understanding of language which focuses solely on what is said and the logical connections of our propositions, as if our struggle with language always obeyed some form of propositional logic. For Gadamer, therefore, the transition "from metaphysics to hermeneutics" can be understood as a passage from a restrictive, logical conception of language to a more dialogical understanding, one which is attentive to the speculative dimension of linguisticity. In this respect, Gadamer would appear to be following the lead of his teacher Martin Heidegger.

Yet, Gadamer somehow refuses to drive a wedge between metaphysics and hermeneutics. The two need not be seen as a rigid alternative, as Heidegger might have suggested. In the important chapter on the speculative dimension of language, Gadamer even

writes that his “hermeneutics of the human sciences—which at first appears to be of secondary and derivative concern, a modest chapter from the heritage of German idealism—leads us back into the problems of classical metaphysics.”⁹ This enigmatic passage invites us to think that there might be some form of reconciliation between metaphysics and hermeneutics.

If hermeneutics leads us back into the problems of metaphysics, it is in part because it is attentive to elements in this tradition which divert from the mainstream “onto-theological” trend that became dominant and which celebrated the virtues of the logical, technical and methodical, as that which enables us to have a secure grasp on things. This is true about the understanding of language. The third part of *Truth and Method* argues that the bulk of the metaphysical tradition has stood under the aegis of a technical, instrumental view of language, according to which words are there to express our thoughts and the connections between them. Yet, Gadamer points to a few exceptions, most notably those of Augustine and Plato. In his insistence on the gap between the external word we utter, the *logos prophorikos*, and the internal word of the soul, the *logos endiathetos*, which we can never adequately express, Augustine was well aware that there is more to language than what is and can adequately be said.¹⁰ The words that we pronounce are nothing but the contingent signs that come to our mind, signs which never exhaust everything that we might wish to say or we need to say if we were to be understood properly. Plato was also attuned to this element of contingency, even if he espoused a rather instrumental understanding of language in his theoretical reflections on linguisticity, as in the *Cratylus* for instance. However, in his *Seventh Letter* as well as in the *Phaedrus*, he took into account the steep indigence of the words we happen to utter. This is especially true of written discourse, because written words can receive the most ludicrous of meanings if the author is not there to defend his or her intentions. Some logicians would fault Plato with being auto-contradictory because he himself *wrote* about this. In this regard, we have here a prime example of how statements can lead to false readings if they are not understood hermeneutically. Plato does not condemn language in itself, but only the way in which it can be misused (by the sophists, for instance, who keep playing with sentences without regard for the truth of our statements). Words, written or oral, should only be employed as means of remembrance (*hypomnemata*) of the truths they wish to express. What is to be understood is not what is or can be said in words, but the whole of meaning they wish to convey to the capable ear. So, there are

indeed luminous elements in our metaphysical tradition for hermeneutical understanding. Hermeneutics, therefore, cannot dismiss the whole tradition of metaphysics. Such a dismissal, stemming from an attitude not unlike the one sometimes found in Heidegger, would in itself perhaps be something "metaphysical." It is only if we pretend to stand on a firm, universal, principled and logical ground that we can discard an entire tradition. Heidegger's massive shift "from metaphysics to hermeneutics," if one can sum it up that way, would remain tacitly metaphysical in nature. Some elements of metaphysics need to be saved against hermeneutical thinkers who are too sure of themselves.

If metaphysics contains some resources which point beyond the logical, methodical and technical, one can also ask whether there really is such a thing as a closed "language of metaphysics." This is a point Gadamer made against Heidegger in his study of 1968 on "Heidegger and the Language of Metaphysics," which seems to have been a matter of direct debate between Gadamer and Heidegger.¹¹ Can two millenia of metaphysics be reduced to a simple formula, to that of "onto-theo-logy"? Again, isn't such a reduction "metaphysical" in the sense it is criticizing?¹² It is Gadamer's contention that the language of metaphysics is not one that can be put at a distance. It is still part of the way we think and we cannot but use it in our effort to make sense of ourselves. Moreover, the alleged "language of metaphysics" is not some kind of confinement, or prison. It is a genuine avenue of humanity's self-understanding, an avenue which cannot be dismissed without, at the same time, unsettling the ground upon which our own thinking is articulated. Furthermore, if language is our way of becoming at home in language,¹³ one which remains open to new experiences, there is no such thing as a preordained language of metaphysics that would fatally limit our avenues of understanding.

So far, we have seen that the transition "from metaphysics to hermeneutics" is far less dichotomous than one would have thought in the wake of Kant, Schleiermacher, Nietzsche and Heidegger. This is true despite the fact that most of modern philosophies have tried to situate themselves outside or beyond what had been done before them. There is perhaps no common denominator which has characterized the philosophy of the last two centuries more than its urge to surpass metaphysics. Kant, Schleiermacher, Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger, Habermas (who published a collection of essays in 1988 under the title "Postmetaphysical Thinking"¹⁴), Wittgenstein, Carnap, Foucault, Derrida, etc. all heralded their thinking as one which would finally bring us beyond

metaphysics or tell us the final truth about what metaphysics was all about. It is perhaps odd to note in a chapter which considers this very transition “from metaphysics to hermeneutics,” but the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer is perhaps the only philosophy in the 20th century that did not recommend itself as an overcoming of metaphysics. Hermeneutical thinking disbelieves the notion that there could be something like a completely new era in philosophy. We are too finite, too dependent on tradition and the work of history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) to entertain the utopian and perhaps dangerous hope of a new beginning in the realm of thought. Indeed such a rupture would disregard the achievements of the past out of which contemporary thought continues to nourish itself.

With regard to our metaphysical heritage, the only thing that is required is that one become aware of this debt. This is why Gadamer urges the elaboration of a consciousness of our being worked upon by history (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*). Through an explicit consciousness of the presence of metaphysical thinking in us, we can perhaps come to a reflective awareness of our debt to this tradition, an awareness both of what cannot be discarded and also of that which cannot compel us anymore. Through hermeneutics, a differentiated, more subtle, and more dialogical understanding of metaphysics can be brought about. So long as we continue believing in philosophy, metaphysics can help us become aware of the truth-claim we are raising and the type of questions we wish to answer in doing so. One of the elements of the metaphysical tradition that has to be kept alive is the universal scope it attributes to philosophy. Gadamer’s hermeneutics is fully aware of this when it raises a claim to universality. However, hermeneutical thinking does not necessarily renew the onto-theo-logical framework of metaphysics exposed by Heidegger. It reactualizes its universal (or “ontological”) scope, while realizing that the notion of an ultimate “grounding” goes well beyond the capacities of our finitude. As Heidegger has credibly argued, this quest for an ultimate ground may well stem from the self-concealment of finitude.

As is already evident in the Aristotelian texts that make up his *Metaphysics*, metaphysical thinking has always been torn between its option for universality and its quest for the theological. The onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics presented a solution to this problem, but it always remained problematical whether a theological answer could lay claim to universality, but also whether a universal or philosophical investigation had to end up in the security of theology. Nevertheless, with hermeneutics, we encounter a new form of metaphysics. The metaphysical claim of Gadamer’s

hermeneutics only renews the universal or ontological claim of philosophy, while shunning its theological (or ultimately grounding) foundation. The truly universal character of hermeneutics is indeed this dimension of finitude.