

HERMENEUTICS AND PREJUDICE: HEIDEGGER AND GADAMER IN THEIR HISTORICAL SETTING

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This is an inquiry into the paradoxes of ontological and phenomenological hermeneutics whose founders called for radical self-reflection but failed to recognize the intellectual debt their theories owed to the historical tradition within which they were articulated. My thesis is that (a) Heidegger's and Gadamer's early views fed off the affective-political currents of the Weimar and Hitler Germany, that (b) both authors systematically misinterpreted their Nazi era discursive-affective-performative corpus, and that (c) the hermeneutics of prejudice grounded on Heidegger's fundamental ontology lacks the theoretical tools for hermeneutic critique and self-reflection insofar as it privileges language as a medium of interpretation.

Keywords: Heidegger, Gadamer, hermeneutics, pragmatism, biocritique

Even a master of the historical method is not able to keep himself entirely free from the prejudices of his time, his social environment and his national situation. –Hans-Georg Gadamer

[A]uthentic historicity, as the moment of vision of anticipatory repetition, deprives the “today” of its character as present, and weans one from the conventionalities of the “they.” –Martin Heidegger

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Radical historicity is the hallmark of ontological hermeneutics. As Martin Heidegger argued in his ground-breaking work *Being and Time* (BT), all understanding is circumscribed by its time, drenched in its distinctive moods that form affective horizons no inquirer can shake by recourse to a scientific method or an empathetic identification with the past. Hans-Georg Gadamer built on this premise a kindred brand of philosophical hermeneutics put forward in his magnum opus *Truth and Method* (TM) which urges scholars engaged in historical research to use their encounters with the past as an opportunity to reflect critically on their historical situation. This radically historical outlook that tethers understanding to age-bound prejudices has engendered a fruitful line of inquiry (Hans, 1997; Jost & Hide, 1997; Michelfelder & Palmer, 1989; Ferry & Renaut, 1988; Shalin, 1986b). It also raised a host of issues that exposed ontological hermeneutics to epistemological and sociological critique (Adorno, 1973; Farias, 1989; Habermas, 1987; 1990; Safranski, 1998; Shalin, 1992b; Wolin, 1991; Wolin, 2000). Particularly intriguing is the charge that Heidegger and Gadamer have failed to come to terms with their own historical situation and give a convincing account of their political engagements during the Nazi era.

This paper is an inquiry into the paradoxes of ontological and phenomenological hermeneutics whose founders called for radical self-reflection but failed to recognize the intellectual debt their theories owed to the historical tradition within which they were articulated. My thesis is that (a) Heidegger's and Gadamer's early views fed off the affective-political currents of the Weimar and Hitler Germany, that (b) both authors systematically misinterpreted their Nazi era discursive-affective-performative corpus, and that (c) the hermeneutics of prejudice grounded on Heidegger's fundamental ontology lacks the theoretical tools for hermeneutic critique and self-reflection insofar as it privileges language as a medium of interpretation. In my critique, I follow the line of inquiry developed in American pragmatism (Joas, 1985, 1996; Rochberg-Halton, 1986; Kilpinen, 2000; Shalin 1986a, 1992a; 2001). The concluding section outlines pragmatist hermeneutics as an alternative to the depth hermeneutics based on the phenomenological tradition.

HEIDEGGER'S EARLY PROJECT

Heidegger starts with an unassailable premise that well before researchers take up their problems and commence a historical inquiry they have been thoroughly steeped in the sentiments, commonplaces, and political currents of their time. The human agent's historical being — *Dasein* — is constituted by the pervasive structures of everyday life, which Heidegger identifies by the German expression "das Man," commonly translated as "they" or the "they-mode," that refers to the impersonal, taken for granted, unreflexive attitudes informing the agent's perspective on the world. The most intimate knowledge of the self is

colored by the horizon-forming attitudes that enable the agent to see some things just as they blind it to the things obscured by the regnant prejudices:

But the self of everydayness is the 'they.' The 'they' is constituted by the way things have been publicly interpreted, which expresses itself in idle talk. ... Proximately and for the most part the Self is lost in the 'they.' It understands itself in terms of those possibilities of existence which 'circulate' in the 'average' public way of interpreting Dasein today (Heidegger, 1927, p. 296, 435).

What makes Heidegger's early formulations intriguing from the pragmatist standpoint is that he does not privilege reason and logic in the business of understanding, rather, he traces interpretive knowledge to affect and practical activity. This perspective, which will be supplanted in Heidegger's later work with the increasing emphasis on language, ties understanding to emotionally-charged everyday affairs like minding a business, chatting with a neighbor, answering a threat, or simply feeling bored. The world surrounding us on all fronts is made of "ready-to-hand things" whose being is determined by our mundane purposes, objects like "equipment for writing, sewing, working, transportation, measurement" (Heidegger, 1927, p. 97). Such ready-to-hand things are tinged with an affective halo disclosing an object's relevance to our everyday existence. Well before the human agent appropriates conventional beliefs, it finds itself submerged in the dominant mood of the era, in what Heidegger calls "ontic states of mind," which furrow our understanding and interpretation. The world to which we belong becomes part of ourselves through dominant sentiments imbibed in formative years. Everyday moods tend to be misconstrued as private states, but in reality they belong to and disclose themselves within the historical world we inhabit:

The dominance of the public way in which things have been interpreted has already been decisive even for the possibility of having a mood — that is, for the basic way in which Dasein lets the world 'matter' to it. The 'they' prescribes one's state-of-mind, and determines what and how one 'sees'. ... Indeed from the ontological point of view we must as a general principle leave the primary discovery of the world to 'bare moods' (Heidegger, 1927, p. 213, 177).

Everyday affects are fickle; they change from situation to situation in a seemingly haphazard fashion, yet this very unsteadiness is a sure indicator of what matters to those inhabiting a given social niche. The historical Dasein of group members remains attuned to Being as long as it follows prevailing moods. "It is precisely when we see the 'world' unsteady and fitfully in accordance with our moods, that the ready-to-hand shows itself in its specific moodhood, which is never the same from day to day," points out Heidegger (Heidegger, 1927, p. 177). "By looking at the world theoretically, we have already dimmed

it down to the uniformity of what is purely present-at-hand. ... Yet even the purest *theoria* [theory] has not left all moods behind it. ...”

Once the historical agent matures enough to adopt a theoretical perspective and commence a historical investigation, it glosses over its constitutive moods and taken-for-granted attitudes. Although moods tend to be “tranquilized” at this point, they never disappear entirely. The most abstract research is rooted in attitudes privileged in a given era, in prejudices informing the researcher’s judgment about problems “worth investigating,” “interesting questions,” “problems at issue,” and so on. “Whenever something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception. An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us” (Heidegger, 1927, p. 191-192). For as long as the knowing agent remains oblivious to its presuppositions and moods, it persists as an “inauthentic, the they-self” whose “existence is inauthentically historical, it is loaded down with the legacy of the ‘past’ which has become unrecognizable” (Heidegger, 1927, p. 444).

If we are creatures of prejudices whose understanding feeds off preconceptions and fore-sentiments, how can we escape the circle inherent in reasoning — the hermeneutical circle that allows us to see only what accords with the present moods? How can we break through this circularity that seemingly dooms us to inauthenticity? The answer Heidegger offers to this predicament is counterintuitive. An authentic outlook on ourselves and history does not require an emancipation from the present-day conventions as Schleiermacher and Dilthey believed. Such a feat is neither possible nor desirable. “To deny the circle, to make a secret of it, or even to want to overcome it, means finally to reinforce this failure. We must rather endeavor to leap into the ‘circle’, primordially and wholly, so that even at the start of the analysis of Dasein we make sure that we have a full view of Dasein’s circular Being” (Heidegger, 1927, p. 363). Our goal, instead, should be habituating the circle, residing in it in such a fashion that we can glean the innermost prejudices constituting our lifeworld and stir our Dasein toward freely chosen ends, for “authentic existence is not something which floats above falling everydayness; existentially, it is only a modified way in which such everydayness is seized” (Heidegger, 1927, p. 224). The result of this exercise would be an existential illumination achieved through a phenomenological reduction, the kind that Husserl counseled and that brings us back to things themselves experienced in their primordial Being:

What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way. The circle of understanding is not an orbit in which any random kind of knowledge may move; it is the expression of the existential fore-structure of Dasein itself. It is not to be reduced to the level of vicious circle, or even of a circle which is merely tolerated. In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing. To be sure, we genuinely take hold of this possibility only when, in our interpretation, we have

understood that our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves (Heidegger, 1927, p. 195).

The political implications of this philosophical stance were not evident at the time when *Being and Time* found its readers. A few hints sprinkled across some 500 pages of this existentialist manifesto called for a robust self-reflection, a willingness to make tough decisions, and a resolution to confront head-on the prevailing conventions. Somehow one had to embrace everydayness in all its unnumbered forms, albeit in a proper attitude of “sober anxiety” (Heidegger, 1927, p. 358) and the awareness of impending death distinguishing the authentic being in the world. An existentially purified Dasein comes to terms with its historical finitude, accepts its fallenness in the world, takes a firm hold of its moods, faces danger unflinchingly when called upon to act, and resolves to endure the world shorn of its smug certainties:

That which anxiety is anxious about is Being-in-the world itself. In anxiety what is environmentally ready-to-hand sinks away, and so, in general, the entities within-the-world. ... Anxiety thus takes away from Dasein the possibility of understanding itself, as it falls, in terms of the ‘world’ and the way things have been publicly interpreted. ... Anxiety individualizes Dasein for its utmost Being-in-the world (Heidegger, 1927, p. 232).

GADAMER’S STRUCTURAL HERMENEUTICS

Hans-Georg Gadamer declined to follow Heidegger’s existential paradigm that seeks to redescribe objective reality in experiential terms and recover the radical singularity of individual existence, but he remained faithful to *Being and Time*’s central premise according to which humans are saturated with history-bound attitudes, stated and unstated, whose temporal imperatives they cannot evade. This is not a limitation, however, a deplorable condition we are doomed to suffer. According to Gadamer, prejudices informing our perspective need not be viewed as blinding and stultifying. Far from that — and this is where Gadamer parts company with his teacher who tended to equate everydayness with inauthenticity — tradition lends historical inquiry proper dignity, allows the researcher to shed new light on the past as well as reflect critically on the present. The hermeneutical task is not to devise an ingenuous strategy for getting around our prejudices as the Enlightenment rationalism would have it. The question is rather how to become conscious of the biases informing our inquiry, appropriate the tradition to which we belong, and apply consciously fore-understandings to the historical realities confronting the interpreter. To elaborate on

Gadamer, we can say that prejudice is an unacknowledged assumption, and assumption is an acknowledged prejudice.

The recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutical problem its real thrust. By the light of this insight it appears that historicism, despite its critique of rationalism and of natural law philosophy, is based on the modern enlightenment and unknowingly shares its prejudices. And there is one prejudice of the enlightenment that is essential to it: the fundamental prejudice of the enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which deprives tradition of its power (Gadamer, 1982, p. 239-240).

Gadamer positions hermeneutics as a universal discipline that forswears the goal of expunging prejudices from understanding via scientific method, dedicating itself to bridging the gap between traditions, or as he put it, achieving “the fusion of horizons” endemic to different historical epochs. By engaging in interpretive acts from within the tradition, the interpreter participates in its historical being, borrows from its stock of meaning, and perpetuates, as well as updates, its cherished prejudices constituting the historical formation’s lifeworld. While interpreting the past, we participate in the life of the tradition which never ceases to affect our existence even as it receives a continuous feedback from our interpretive efforts. This is what Gadamer calls “effective historical consciousness,” a consciousness that remains within the circle of understanding peculiar to the age yet subtly updates it in light of experience and encounters with alien traditions.

Tradition is not simply a precondition into which we come, but we produce it ourselves, inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition and hence further determine ourselves. Thus the circle of understanding is not a ‘methodological’ circle, but describes an ontological structural element in understanding (Gadamer, 1982, p. 261).

Thus, our prejudices are not sacrosanct, they are open to change. Moreover, they submit to adjudication. Rational investigation lets interpreters sort out what is tenable and what is not in our tradition: “True prejudices must still finally be justified by rational knowledge” (Gadamer, 1982, p. 242). Immersing ourselves in an alien tradition affords us an opportunity to reflect critically on our pre-understandings, with the historical distance itself stimulating self-reflection and self-criticism. “It is only this temporal distance that can solve the really critical question of hermeneutics, namely of distinguishing the true prejudices, by which we understand, from the false ones by which we misunderstand” (Gadamer, 1982, p. 266).

With this move, Gadamer gives hermeneutical inquiry a decidedly phenomenological thrust consistent with Husserl’s program of uncovering objective meanings in stable

linguistic forms inherent in a lifeworld. This agenda also dovetails with the structuralist movement that construes language as a universal medium through which humanity transmits its tradition as it searches for mutual understanding across space and time. Gadamer's claims that "being that can be understood is language" (Gadamer, 1982, p. xxiii), that "it is literally more correct to say that language speaks us, rather than we speak it" (Gadamer, 1982, p. 421) — the claim taken over and further developed by Paul Ricoeur — should be understood in line with his general philosophical commitments. This view is also consistent with the precept Heidegger articulated in his later writings, according to which "*language speaks*" and the "being of anything that is resides in the word" (Heidegger, 1971, p. 129, 61-62). Hermeneutical inquiry is thereby redirected away from the authorial intent, biographical circumstances, and unique historical context that occasioned a given expression and towards close textual analysis of the universal meaning preserved in written documents surviving the test of time:

What is fixed in writing has detached itself from the contingency of its origin and its author and made itself free for new relationships. ... Every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text is part of the whole of the tradition in which the age takes an objective interest and in which it seeks to understand itself. The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and whom he originally wrote for. ... understanding is certainly not concerned with understanding historically, ie reconstructing the way in which the text has come into being. Rather one is understanding text itself (Gadamer, 1982, p. 357, 262, 350).

HEIDEGGER'S ENCOUNTER WITH FASCISM

An unexamined life is not worth living, Socrates famously opined. If Plato's account can be trusted, his life met the standards of *bios theoretikos* or a life informed by the person's understanding of its true purpose. Michael Foucault made a similar point in one of his last interviews where he urged that the philosopher's life "is not to be sought in his ideas, as if it could be deduced from them, but rather in his philosophy-as-life, in his philosophical life, his ethos," that "at every moment, step by step, one must confront what one is thinking and saying with what one is doing" (Foucault 1984, p.374). How Foucault's life fits with his theoretical creed is a subject of separate investigation (Shalin, 2001, 2007). What concerns us presently is how the hermeneutical stance outlined above comports with its authors' personal choices. We should note that this is the line of inquiry Heidegger strenuously resisted when he set out to investigate Nietzsche, as he warned, "What we must do is turn away from Nietzsche the man and Nietzsche the author, inasmuch as these are fields that lie within a context of human dimension" (Heidegger, 2002, p. xvii). Heidegger was even less

inclined to examine his own Dasein in light of his theoretical commitments. We should not shy away from this task, however, and ask how his political engagements during the Nazi were aligned with his discursive commitments.

In years prior to Hitler's ascent to power, Heidegger assiduously avoided political engagement. In 1921, he wrote to Karl Löwith a letter professing disdain for the present day culture and politics: "I do not embellish my philosophical labors with cultural requirements suitable for a vague historical present. I work for my own 'I am' and my particular spiritual origins. From this faculty surges the fury of 'Existence'" (Löwith, 1994, p.31). There was indeed a fury welling up in Heidegger, a tangle of emotions attuned to the gloomy mood that enveloped Germany after its defeat in World War I. This mood grew increasingly dower and prickly as the Weimar Republic began to unravel. One senses this in the famous Davos debate held in 1929 between Heidegger and Cassirer, each man displaying personal styles that contrasted the new Germany from Germany of the past. "The debate between Heidegger and Cassirer also meant a great deal to us in human terms," remembers a witness to this exchange:

[T]his short dark-brown man, this fine skier and sportsman, with his energetic unflinching mien, this rough and distant, at times downright rude, person who, in impressive seclusion and with deep moral seriousness, lives for and serves the problems he has posed to himself on the one hand — and on the other hand that man with his white hair, not only outwardly but also inwardly an Olympian with wide spaces of thought and with comprehensive set of problems, with his serene features, his kindly courtesy, his vitality and elasticity and, last but not least, his aristocratic elegance (Safranski, 1998, p. 186).

There were few hints at the time that Heidegger was ready to jump into politics, none as to what kind of politics he might choose to endorse. Given the stultifying effect of the public life on self-understanding described in his writings, one could have expected Heidegger to shun the mass euphoria that swept the country after 1933. The reality proved otherwise. Given a chance to practice his theory, Heidegger leaped into the fascist circle of understanding and eagerly lent his intellectual powers to National Socialism. Many of Heidegger's cherished principles articulated in the 1920's surfaced in his Nazi era pronouncements. The buzz words that were making round since 1927 and that would be unmistakable to any reader of *Being and Time* were now summoned to prop up the repressive regime. This is evident in the publications and addresses Heidegger gave after he assumed rectorship at Freiburg University in 1933. Here is a smattering of Heideggerisms gleaned from his political speeches: "one single resolve," "the world of innermost and most extreme danger," "the determined resolve to the essence of Being," "standing firm in the midst of the uncertainty of the totality of being," "the forces that are rooted in the soil and

blood of a Volk,” “to be *master* of the situation into which we are placed,” “the genuine following of those who are of new courage,” “the extreme distress of German fate,” “the honor and the destiny of the nation,” “our will to national self-responsibility,” “the new German reality embodied in the National Socialist State,” “that fundamental mood out of which self-limiting self-assertion will empower resolute self-examination to true self-governance” (Heidegger, 1991, p. 52, 31, 33, 38, 48, 34). The sentiments embedded in these verbal ticks are deafening. If mood offers a privileged insight into the Being of Dasein, as Heidegger taught us, then we must conclude that Heidegger’s existence in those years was suffused with pathos and determination. The philosopher of Dasein whole-heartedly hitched his existentialism to the National socialist cause.

What is striking about Heidegger’s subsequent efforts to situate his contemporaneous thoughts in the “they-spirit” of the Nazi era was his refusal to take responsibility for his words and actions. In the letter to the de-Nazification committee that Heidegger (1991) wrote in 1945, he sought to explain away his Nazi party membership, picturing himself as a reluctant participant with misguided hopes to steer the National Socialist movement away from its vicious agenda. Offering a gloss on his rectorship at the Freiburg University, he cast himself as a last minute consensus candidate who accepted the position in order “to contain the penetration of unsuitable persons and the threatening predominance of the Party apparatus and of Party doctrine” (Safranski, 1998, p. 238). This explanation flies in the face of the lavish praise he gave to Hitler and the Third Reich; the strict discipline he imposed on the faculty whom he ordered to give the Nazi salute during his inaugural speech; his refusal to investigate the anti-Semitic violence perpetuated by the university students; his decision to sever ties with his teacher Edmund Husserl whose funeral he declined to attend; his stated conviction that the “Führer alone is the present and future German reality and its law” (Heidegger, 1991, p. 47); his contempt for the “much-praised academic freedom [which] is being banished from the German university; for this freedom was false, because it was only negative” (Heidegger, 1991, p. 34); and his secret letters to Nazi authorities denouncing his colleagues as unsuitable for the job, one of whom, in Heidegger’s words, had once been associated with “that liberal-democratic circle of intellectuals around Max Weber” and was now “closely tied to the Jew Frankel” (Safranski, 1998, p. 273).

Years after the demise of Hitler and National Socialism Heidegger remained committed to “the inner truth and greatness of this movement” (Safranski, 1998, p. 289). Nor could he ever bring himself to acknowledge the reality of the Holocaust. When Herbert Marcuse (1947, p. 161) wrote to his teacher — from whom “we learned an infinite amount” — that one “cannot make a separation between Heidegger the philosopher and the Heidegger the man, for it contradicts your own philosophy” and urged the famous philosopher to acknowledge the Nazi atrocities, Heidegger (1947, p. 163) replied:

To the charges of dubious validity that you express ‘about a regime that murdered millions of Jews, that made terror into an everyday phenomenon, and that turned everything that pertains to the ideas of spirit, freedom, and truth into its bloody opposite,’ I can merely add that if instead of ‘Jews’ you wrote ‘East Germans’ [i.e., Germans of the eastern territories] then the same holds true for one of the allies, with the difference that everything that has occurred since 1945 has become public knowledge, while the bloody terror of the Nazi in point of fact had been kept a secret from the German People.

GADAMER’S ACCOMMODATION WITH FASCISM

Now we turn to Gadamer, whose life under Nazi regime contrasts, at least outwardly, with Heidegger’s. Gadamer never joined the Nazi Party. He did not shun his Jewish friends. Nor did he inform on the ideologically suspect colleagues. It is true that Gadamer voluntarily enrolled in the rehabilitation camp set up by the Nazi ideologists for the aspiring scholars; eagerly took over an academic post after his Jewish colleague and friend Richard Kroner was purged from his position; and signed in 1933 a public letter addressed to Saxon Nazi teachers by a public rally in Marburg (something he did to avoid making a show of his true beliefs, he explained later) — not an unreasonable concession given what German scholars had to go through to remain in academia. Looking back at those years, Gadamer (1997; 2001) took credit for smartly taking refuge in the ideologically neutral field of classical studies and doing nothing to implicate himself in the Nazi ideology. “My cleverness consisted in taking seriously as colleagues those who were Nazis but who were also at the same time genuine, rational scholars; avoiding, of course, political conversations” (Gadamer, 2001, p. 129). When in 1941 he went to Paris to give a talk on Herder, Gadamer points out, he managed to slip in a jab against the Third Reich, intimating to the imprisoned French officers that “an empire that extends itself beyond measure, beyond moderation, is ‘*aupres de sa chute*’ — ‘nears its fall’” (Gadamer, 1997, p. 14). He also claimed to have communicated his differences with the Nazis in an epigraph to a paper on Plato he published in 1934 where he quoted Goethe to the effect that philosophy is always in conflict with the present time.

Recent scholarship has shown that Gadamer’s account of his Nazi era publications and his claim of having no affinities with the fascist ideology are misleading (Orozco, 1995; Wolin 2000). As Richard Wolin (2000) demonstrated in his article titled “Nazism and the Complicities of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Untruth and Method,” the Paris talk, which came on the heels of the crushing defeat France suffered in 1940, was sponsored by the German Institute in Paris, a Nazi propaganda organization dedicated to indoctrination of defeated nations. Titled “Volk and History in Herder’s Thought” and replete with Heideggerisms (“cleansing,” “an hours of decision”), this talk scorned the poverty of French rationalism and the Enlightenment and hailed the superiority of German thought as articulated by Herder,

“a visionary of a new basic force in the sphere of the state: *the life of the Volk*” (Wolin, 2000, p. 43). One can imagine how the imprisoned French officers felt about the German professor lecturing them about his victorious nation’s strength rooted in the “*genetic spirit and a character of a Volk*” (Wolin, 2000, p. 43).

Gadamer’s take on his 1934 publication “Plato and the Poets” where he discusses the infamous episode of the expulsion of the poets from an exemplary state turns out to be equally disingenuous. Among other things, Gadamer writes in this pamphlet: “Plato’s paideia is thus meant as a counterweight to the centrifugal pull of those forces of sophistic enlightenment exerted upon the state. ... In opposition to this sophistic paideia, Plato advances a willfully and radically purified poetry, which is no longer a reflection of human life but the language of an intentionally beautiful lie. The new poetry is meant to express the ethos which prevails in the purified state in a way that is pedagogically efficacious” (Wolin, 2000, p. 41). This is hardly Nazi propaganda, but the malodorous tenor of these remarks made in Nazi Germany that was bent on crushing dissident is unmistakable.

The quote from Goethe that prefaced the piece on “Plato and the Poets” and that was supposed to establish Gadamer’s anti-Nazi bona fide also amounts to something other than Gadamer would have us believe. Much longer than Gadamer’s extemporaneous summary, the epigraph states in part, “He who philosophizes is not at one with the previous and contemporary world’s ways of thinking of things. Thus, Plato’s discussions are often not only directed to something but also directed *against* it” (Wolin, 2000, p. 41). That this was probably an allusion to the liberal Weimer Germany rather than to the murderous Third Reich becomes clear from the subsequent discussion where Gadamer defends an educational dictatorship that Plato developed in his *Republic* — a dialogue that came to be treated as a model of a totalitarian state in the German classical studies of the Hitler era (Orozco, 1995). Gadamer (2001, p. 128, 127) is also hard to take seriously when he claims that “the real Nazi had no interest in us at all,” that “the Nazi didn’t give a damn what we [German classicists] did,” that in his war-time classes he could teach what he wanted, and that he never sullied himself with the Nazi propaganda. The glowing review that Gadamer wrote in 1935 about Hildebrandt’s infamous book, *Plato: The Struggle of the Spirit for Power*, belies this claim, as does his decision not to include his pamphlet on Herder in the standard edition of his collected works. The book was reprinted in 1967 under a different title, with the offensive passages expunged and no reference given to the original 1942 publication. Asked if he would respond to the questions raised by Teresa Orozco’s book about his Nazi era views, Gadamer replied that he would not “because that would dignify the book with an attention it did not deserve” (Palmer, 2001, p. 20). This self-serving answer should not deter us from exploring interfaces between Gadamer’s life and his hermeneutical teaching.

RECOLLECTING PERSONAL BEING

In a curious ways, the discursive corpus that Heidegger and Gadamer produced during the Nazi years fits well with their general hermeneutical stance, with the premise enunciated in the epigraph to this essay: “Even a master of the historical method is not able to keep himself entirely free from the prejudices of his time, his social environment and his national situation” (Gadamer, 1982, p. 466). Indeed, if all texts are rooted in their time and suffused with prejudices nourishing its historical imagination, it is only natural that these two thinkers would follow the historical currents of Hitler’s Germany, absorb the nation’s mood and its regnant prejudices. The difference is that Heidegger did so openly and proudly, Gadamer half-heartedly and gingerly. Once history rendered obsolete old beliefs and new prejudices invaded the *Zeitgeist*, the two men changed their tune — Heidegger reluctantly and half-heartedly, Gadamer proudly and defiantly. Their old texts had to be ignored or reinterpreted to highlight the textual fragments consistent with post-World War II sentiments.

With the wheel of history turning, Gadamer professed his contempt for Hitler’s ideology and condemned Nazi atrocities. Yet even though his theory calls for a “rational examination” of prejudices, Gadamer declined to acknowledge the extent to which his earlier engagements dovetailed with the vile intellectual currents of the time or square off with the fact that Nazi propaganda machine harnessed his intellectual powers to its cause. Given his revisionist stance, Gadamer in the post-Nazi era, one has to take a closer look at his injunction that interpretive practice should deal with “text in itself,” with writing insofar as it has “detached itself from the contingency of its origin and its author and made itself free for new relationships” (Gadamer, 1982, p. 357). Gadamer’s post-war statements make one wonder where his heart really is. To the very end he remained convinced that all “cultures have racial foundations,” that classicists Oscar Becker and Erick Rothacker, well-known Nazi sympathizers, were also “great” scholars (Gadamer 2001, p. 120-121). The accent on universal conversation in Gadamer’s post-war writings is welcome, but it begs the question. Gadamer grounds his *dialogism* on Plato whose totalitarian fantasies he had earlier championed as a blueprint for the Volkish state. Now he recast his earlier statements as a playful ruse: “the Platonic ideal state presents a conscious utopia which has more to do with Jonathan Swift than with ‘political science’” (Gadamer, 1997, p. 13).

Heidegger’s refusal to acknowledge his complicity in the Nazi era ideological violence is more appalling. It is hard to buy his self-exculpatory narrative that pictures himself as a public intellectual trying to stir the movement along a noble path until he realized the futility of his efforts to uplift fascism. His claims (Heidegger 1991, p. 66, 65) that he completely broke with Nazism, stopped “wearing its regalia,” and embarked on the path of “spiritual resistance” are at odds with the contemporary records showing that he proudly wore swastikas on his sleeve as late as 1936 at a conference in Italy where he met Karl Löwith,

that he actively continued to explore career opportunities in the Nazi establishment after he stepped down as rector, that he gave up his rectorship and active role in the National Socialist movement not because he saw through the inhumanity of fascism but because he was considered too rabid even by the hardened Nazi leaders who refused to dismiss the faculty Heidegger renounced to the authorities.

Heidegger failed to honor his own philosophy that demands from the existentialist to stay in tune with one's moods and stir oneself along the chosen path. Heidegger's innermost Dasein that projected itself in his Nazi era involvements hints at a man with vivid, if disturbed, affectivity. In June of 1933, Jaspers asked his esteemed colleague from Freiburg how an ignoramus like Hitler could possibly lead the German nation, to which Heidegger replied, "Education is quite irrelevant . . . just look at his wonderful hands" (Safranski, 1998, p. 232). In the last conversation between the two, Heidegger confessed to his friend, "with anger and fury in his voice, that it was 'nonsense that there should be so many professors of philosophy, only two or three need be kept in Germany.' When Jaspers asked which ones, Heidegger remained meaningfully silent" (Safranski, 1998, p. 231). Nietzsche's will to power comes to mind as one searches for a driving motive of Heidegger's complicity with the Nazi era politics.

FROM STRUCTURAL HERMENEUTICS TO PRAGMATIST INTERPRETATION

Now we can address the limitations of phenomenological and ontological hermeneutics. It is not the emphasis on prejudice that raises red flags (although Wolin rightly points out that Gadamer's opposition to the Enlightenment bespeaks his conservative political leanings), but the emphasis on language and textual analysis as the focal point of hermeneutical inquiry, the emphasis that limits the scope of hermeneutics and dulls its critical thrust (Habermas, 1990).

What is fixed in writing has detached itself from the contingency of its origin and its author and made itself free for new relationship. Normative concepts such as the author's meaning or the original reader's understanding represent in fact only an empty space that is filled from time to time in understanding. ... In writing, this meaning of what is spoken exists purely for itself, completely detached from all emotional elements of expression and communication. A text is not to be understood as an expression of life, but in what it says. Writing is an abstract ideality of language. ... In this sense understanding is certainly not concerned with understanding historically, ie reconstructing the way the text has come into being. Rather, one is understanding the text itself (Gadamer, 1982, p. 354, 357, 350).

Such formalism suits well interpreters distancing themselves from their own feelings. The notion that “tradition is linguistic in nature” and that “it is the nature of tradition to exist in the medium of language” (Gadamer, 1982, p. 351) conflates “tradition” with “textual corpus” and robs hermeneutical inquiry of valuable resources. Why shouldn’t the interpreter raise the question about the author’s intent and the audience for which the text was originally written? This is not just a romantic fancy, as Gadamer would have it; it is a sound imperative that goads us not to squint when confronted with the messy socio-historical and affective-somatic realities surrounding the production of a textual product. We gain an insight into what Gadamer and Heidegger meant when we follow their public engagements in post-Weimar Germany and connect their scholarly corpus with their affective life. Learning the frame of mind behind a given discourse may yield surplus meaning.

Language is not the only “being that can be understood,” as Gadamer contends. Sometimes actions, or inaction, speak louder than words. There is a lot more to tradition than its extant texts. From the pragmatist standpoint, things get interesting when we can measure words with deeds and align emotions with symbolic and behavioral performances — when we bring one type signifying media to bear on an alternative signifying practice (Peirce, 1991). This is what Peirce’s maxim — judge the idea by its consequences — amounts to. We should not short-circuit interpretation within the same signifying media but seek to interpret one kind of signs in terms of another sign types — words with deeds, deeds with moods, moods with discursive outputs, and so on. Once we learn how Heidegger signed himself in the flesh, we can compare his discursive tokens with his emotional offerings and bring these two forms of signification in line with the behaviorally-embodied significations, gaining in the process a multi-dimensional view of meaning that incorporates its textual modalities without reducing meaning to symbolic signs.

We should question the structuralist tendency to reduce tradition to the meanings preserved in textual forms, to confine hermeneutical inquiry to the totality of what has been textually fixed, whether we deal with the “Classical Age,” “Medieval Europe,” “Third Reich,” or “Soviet Civilization.” Focusing on the surviving literary forms, we also risk underestimating historical inconsistencies. Important though textually transmitted meanings are, they are bound to mislead if taken outside the far larger universe of what has been secreted, emoted, expressed, embodied, produced, manufactured, and created in any given era. Textualized forms cannot fully capture the vibrancy of lived experience reduced to a thin-gruel abstraction of linguistic lifeworlds. Written traditions tend to distort voices incompatible with dominant discourses, edit out incongruent sentiments from the annals of history, tidy up and prettify the rough edges of affective experience.

“Bringing into language” that Gadamer sees as the hermeneutically constitutive act has a potential for illuminating as well as obscuring human agency whose being is not coextensive with its textual apparitions. Paul Ricoeur, it seems to me, risks falling into the same trap. Building his structural hermeneutics on the principles articulated by Gadamer, he

urges the interpreter to follow “the ‘arrow’ of meaning” revealed by the text, to elevate “the saying to the said,” to pursue the “distanciation by which a new being-in-the-world, projected by the text, is freed from the false evidence of everyday reality” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 193, 200, 113). Ricoeur underestimates the loss of meaning in a text-centered interpretation. An everyday event brought into language may seem like an arrow pointing in a right direction, but the meaning it projects all too often glosses over the objective indeterminacy of the situation submerged in the strategically crafted text. “Textual arrows” made out of the “crooked timber of humanity” miss the target as often as they hit it — even when fashioned by skilled-interpreters like Gadamer and sent on their way by such master-archers as Heidegger. This is where pragmatist hermeneutics may offer an alternative to ontological and structural theories of interpretation.

Pragmatist hermeneutics opens up the hermeneutical circle wide enough to include in its sweep emotions, body, action, and words (Shalin, 2001, 2004). Building on Heidegger’s precept that “Understanding always has its mood” (Heidegger, 1927, p. 182), pragmatist interpreters reconnect affect with its corporeal substratum, placing both in the historical context of social action. Pragmatist hermeneutics starts with the premise that embodied human agency signs itself in the verbal-discursive forms, as well as in its somatic-affective markers and behavioral-performative traces. The pragmatist perspective implies that historical temporality is transmitted through the somatic-affective media as readily as in the discursive symbolic forms. Every tradition has its somatic-affective a priori inscribed in its agents’ brain circuitry, hormonal pathways, and emotional structures that come to the fore in practical deeds and wide-ranging behavioral forays — the embodied forms of agency bearing the imprint of an era and passed on from one generation to another through extra-textual channels. It is the task of pragmatist hermeneutics to expand the scope of hermeneutical analysis so that it can accommodate all the semiotic resources of the body.

Informed by the pragmatist ethos, hermeneutics explores the word-body-action nexus and uses triangulation to find meaning on the intersection of these three primary signifying media. The focus is on the misalignments in the signification process, on occasional and systemic breaks in the live semiotic chains produced by agents inhabiting a given socio-historical niche. Symbolic distanciation is measured here by pragmatist engagement, textual fixation is matched with practical indeterminacy. The former focuses on the process that progressively disembodies human agency, reducing it to what Frege called “sense,” Husserl identified as “meaning,” and Ricoeur equated with “what has been said.” By contrast, interpretation in the pragmatist key pursues the reverse distanciation which realigns the linguistic forms with the somatic-affective and behavioral-agentic signs. What phenomenological hermeneutics dismisses as “noise” obscuring “universal meaning,” pragmatists treat as a sign of indeterminacy and a signal of repressed affectivity occluded by the dominant textual practices.

The political agenda germane to pragmatist hermeneutics calls for recovering the voices that have failed to come to language, retrieving the moods that have been suppressed by the powers that be. Pragmatist hermeneutics draws attention to the pragmatic-discursive misalignment manifest in everyday life and endemic to human conditions. It also calls upon the interpreters to come to terms with their own prejudices — affective, somatic, agentic, and discursive — which bind us to privileged perspectives and serve our hidden agendas. Above all, pragmatists need to keep in check the tendency to edit out disagreeable facts from our own past and resist the tendency to bury our all too human agency in textual products.

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