

ELEMENTS OF THE FUTURE IN GADAMER'S CONCEPTION OF UNDERSTANDING

Abstract: In this essay, I offer an exegetical analysis of futural elements in Gadamer's concept of understanding from *Truth and Method*. Gadamer's *opus magnum* is largely known for his focus on the finite historical features of human existence through notions such as history of effects, prejudice, tradition, authority, etc. My thesis is that Gadamer's ideas of history and historical understanding remain inadequately grasped if too much weight is placed on the temporal dimension of the past. By a close reading of some salient concepts articulating Gadamer's theory of hermeneutical understanding, my aim is to shed light upon the dimension of the future that these concepts entail. As a result, my contribution provides an interpretive schema that detects a theory of the future running through Gadamer's investigation of the hermeneutic phenomenon.

Keywords: Future, Gadamer, Hermeneutics, *Sola Scriptura*, Understanding.

I. Introduction

The aim of this essay is to point and sketch the idea of the future in Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of understanding, especially in relation to *Truth and Method*. In brief, *Truth and Method* purports to clarify the hermeneutic phenomenon, which traditionally applies to the relationship of mutual belonging between the interpreter and her object. In what follows, I

will focus on some salient moments pertaining to Gadamer's analysis of the unity of the interpreter and the object, which shall shed light upon Gadamer's conception of the understanding and perhaps its essentially futural character.

I will show that the futural determination of the understanding emerges eminently in relation to the main steps taken by Gadamer in order to describe the relation of belonging (*Zusammengehörigkeit*) found in the hermeneutic phenomenon. The analysis of these steps will therefore prove especially informative in order to exhibit the future as pivotal moment in the process of the understanding. In this essay, I follow a guiding insight that frames the whole analysis. The guiding insight is this: the clarification of the concept of belonging exhibits certain *limits* (x belonging to y, whereby x is not identical with y and y exceeds x), yet the task to exhibit limits is not only a negative one but rather shows also a true productivity. In contrast to the notion of "reproduction," "production" carries an element of novelty, which is defining of the future.

The essay is divided into four sections: in the first and second section, I will outline the phenomenon of belonging with reference to the hermeneutics entailed by the *sola scriptura* principle and the relation of parts and whole manifested therein. On this basis, I suggest that Gadamer's *Truth and Method* can be read following the two main implications of this principle. The *first* implication pertains to the unity of sense given to the understanding as a whole or totality. The *second* implication highlights the inclusion of the interpreter into the totality of sense to be understood. In this connection, I point to some salient phenomena operative in the process of understanding: as regards the moment of sense–totality (third section), I draw attention in particular to the phenomena of "anticipation of completeness" (*Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit*), the "transformation into structure" (*Verwandlung ins Gebilde*), and "total mediation" (*totale Vermittlung*); as regards the moment of inclusion of the understanding subject into a sense–totality (fourth section), I emphasize the role of phenomena such as "reflection" and "experience." I will show that the interpretation of these main moments of Gadamer's analysis in *Truth and Method* outlines the character of futurity of the understanding, which has ultimately its realization in the phenomenon of language. This last point about language, however, will not be dealt with in the present essay and is deferred to another venue.

2. The Concept of Belonging as Overarching Theme of Gadamer's Truth and Method

I shall begin the present essay by offering at the outset a more precise determination of the object of Gadamer's study in *Truth and Method* and of the interest in detecting possible clues for a theory of the future in this work. Right in the first line of the "Introduction," Gadamer states that his study is concerned with the "problem of hermeneutics" (Gadamer 2004: xx). If the problem of hermeneutics is traditionally that of the exegesis of texts, that is, a problem of interpretation, Gadamer makes immediately clear that the theme of his investigations is the hermeneutic *phenomenon*. This turn of phrase introduces us into the universal scope of hermeneutics as not primarily limited to the experience of understanding and interpreting of texts for scientific purposes. In addressing the problem of hermeneutics, Gadamer is neither interested in securing the outcomes of a certain technical use of the understanding nor in laying out especially methodic procedures with the aim to provide the sciences of the understanding (human sciences) with a validity comparable to that of the natural sciences. Rather, the hermeneutic phenomenon is more fundamentally the problem of phenomenality at large, i.e. of what in general comes to appearance to a consciousness (the being-for-us of reality), as hermeneutical in nature. Thus, the hermeneutic phenomenon itself, which *also* deals with the understanding and interpreting necessary to accomplish scientific work, "is basically not a problem of method at all" (*ibid.*). "The understanding and the interpretation of texts," Gadamer writes, "is not merely a concern of science, but obviously belongs to human experience of the world in general" (*ibid.*). This incipit sets the premise for the analysis in the rest of the book, which critically targets the principal epistemological implication of modern scientific programs, i.e. the tacit equivalence between the idea of achieving *correct understanding* and being *result of scientific methodology*. Gadamer's study of the hermeneutic phenomenon aims at removing this tacit semantic equivalence.

Modern scientific methods operate a basic distinction between the one doing the investigation and the object investigated. This distinction is raised to a fundamental presupposition by modern science in order to realize its ideal of objective knowledge. The relation of subject and object certainly remains a problem for the natural sciences, e.g. as a question taken up by the epistemology of science. The solution to this problem, however, is not what science immediately purports to offer. The separation of subject and object

represents rather an essential presupposition of the natural sciences. Even most epistemological approaches within science do not aim at overcoming this separation as much as they aim at strengthening it as presupposition.

If the firm separation of the subject and the object in scientific epistemology coincides with the emergence of modern natural science and proved especially successful to develop instrumental scientific practices, whose specific truth-value and rigor Gadamer is far from contesting, the problem arises when the underlying working assumption of such practices is unqualifiedly extended to the totality of our cognitive experience of reality. This is the modern assumption that *if*, beyond our constitutive finitude, it were possible to arrive at a final framing of reality by way of scientific knowledge, *then* the knowledge or truth reached through this scientific procedure would express the true nature of reality.

We see now more clearly why the hermeneutic phenomenon has become a problem. The determination of the idea of scientific objectivity, and of the procedures designed to achieve this ideal, as the exclusive locus of knowledge and truth introduces a rift in the “relationship of the understanding” (Gadamer 2004: 370). This is the relationship between the interpreter and her object, which is vital for experiences such as those of aesthetics and the cognition operative in the human sciences⁽¹⁾. This rift, however, announces Gadamer’s true and deeper philosophical concern with what he calls the hermeneutic phenomenon.

Gadamer’s hermeneutic perspective is revealing because it points from the outset to the proximity of a certain dominant contemporary epistemology of science to the onto-theological epistemology of modern philosophy. The modern philosophical-scientific attempt that aims at severing the ties of our scientific conception of reality, which can be observed and measured according to objective methods, from any subjective contribution to the way reality itself

(1). Aesthetic experience and non-natural scientific endeavors have been traditionally associated with eminent sources of insight and truth. On the one hand, modern aesthetics has tended to disqualify aesthetic experience from any contribution to our understanding of reality due to its intrinsic subjective nature. On the other hand, modern attempts to provide the human sciences with a method as rigorous and objective as that of the natural sciences have coincided with the emergence of programs designed to justify the *existence* itself of the human sciences. Before the adoption of the scientific ideal of method, the human sciences had their justification in their own peculiar mode of experience of reality. Cfr. Gadamer’s remark about the relationship between science and philosophy in connection with the concept of “system”: “The concept of system, which has since become a methodologically essential requisite of philosophy, thus has its historical root in the divergence of philosophy and science at the beginning of the modern period, and it appears as something obviously to be required of philosophy only because this divergence between philosophy and science has since presented philosophy with its constant task” (Gadamer 2004: 255n5).

appears, turns against its own intentions and yields a paradoxical result: the objectified world of science, which includes the scientist and the philosopher, corresponds to the picture, and the experience, that only an absolute subject or an infinite intelligence could achieve. As a result, the customary realist assumption that identifies the objectivity of scientific knowledge with the postulate of a “view from nowhere” remains liable to an extreme form of subjectivism and follows the trajectory of a quite traditional “archetypal” conception of experience⁽²⁾.

By setting the hermeneutic phenomenon as the theme of his investigation, therefore, Gadamer is choosing a deliberate and polemical strategy aiming at setting aside the archetypal attitude issuing from the uncritical adoption of the subject–object separation in all domains of human cognitive experience, as necessary ideal warranting objective knowledge (cfr. Rorty 1979: 357). These summative considerations purport to elucidate the central theme of investigation in *Truth and Method*: if the uncritical adoption of the scientific method into all domains of knowledge implies a rupture in the relationship between the subject and the object, then setting the task to investigate and clarify the hermeneutic phenomenon coincides with the deliberate intention to recover and revise this relationship. In Gadamer's *opus magnum*, the possibility to shed light upon the phenomenon of understanding, especially in the context of aesthetic experience and the human sciences, depends therefore on the more fundamental recovery of this belonging relationship as the dimension in which our finite human experience operates.

In the present summative statement of the line of investigation in *Truth and Method*, it is pivotal to note that Gadamer explicitly ties his analysis of the hermeneutic phenomenon to “the *transcendental* significance of Heidegger's problematic” (Gadamer 2004: 254; cfr. also Gadamer 1976: 121). It was Heidegger who first analyzed the problem of the hermeneutic phenomenon in the context of his critique of the abstract subjectivism characterizing modern philosophy. In this connection, it is well-known that Heidegger spoke of a “circle in the understanding” (*Zirkel im Verstehen*) (cfr. Heidegger 2006: 152–153; Gadamer 2004: 268–269). The hermeneutic dimension of this circle consists in the fact that any operative understanding — of a text, of a historical event, of a political situation, etc. — stands under certain anticipations. These “prejudices,” as Gadamer will title them, make understanding possible while also being a limiting factor entailing always a danger of misunderstanding. The thematization of the traditional principle of *sola scriptura* in the early stages of

(2). On the critique of “archetypal” projects of foundation of our finite experience in connection with modern *Subjektphilosophie*, see Lindén 1997: 202, 233, 235 *et passim*.

hermeneutics exhibits a clear awareness of this circularity of understanding⁽³⁾. Already in the limited context of the exegesis of texts, therefore, it is possible to demarcate a hermeneutic problem and its orienting moments. It is no accident that in *Truth and Method* Gadamer describes the “development of the hermeneutical method” against the backdrop of the *sola scriptura* principle (Gadamer 2004: 177). In light of Gadamer’s reading of the circular structure implied by this principle, there are two moments that are raised to prominence for the clarification of the process of understanding: first, the overarching unity and continuity of a whole of sense; second, the inclusion of the one understanding into this sense–totality. The considerations in the third and fourth section of this essay are therefore framed by these two salient features, which shall offer an orientation to our task to evaluate the presence of futural elements in the understanding. Before taking up this task, however, I shall briefly sketch the hermeneutic situation motivating the relevance of this line of inquiry.

3. The Recovery of the Belonging–Relationship with a Look into the Future

Gadamer’s study of the hermeneutics phenomenon fundamentally rejoins Heidegger’s critique of modern *Subjektphilosophie*, which he however develops and deepens from a specific thematic angle. In the “Forward” to the second edition of *Truth and Method* from 1965, Gadamer writes, “the purpose of my investigation is not to offer a general theory of interpretation and a differential account of its methods [...] but to discover what is common to all modes of understanding and to show that understanding is never a subjective relation to a given ‘object’ but to the history of its effect [*Wirkungsgeschichte*]; in other words, understanding belongs to the being of that which is understood” (Gadamer 2004: xxviii). Gadamer’s main concern is therefore the articulation of the historical incarnation in a process as what is common to all understanding.⁽⁴⁾ For Gadamer, the history of effects

(3). After the abolition of the canonic interpretation of the Bible defined by the *corpus dogmaticus* of the Church, Reformed theologians raised the Scripture itself as measure and standard of their interpretation. According to this principle of interpretation, as it is well–known, the Bible as a whole must dictate the *clavis aurea* for the deciphering of its single passages. The hermeneutic *sola scriptura* principle therefore establishes a circle between the whole of the text and its parts: we approach the text with a preliminary understanding, which has a guiding function with respect to the interpretation of the parts of the text; the understanding of the parts enables a further deepening of the whole, etc. This is the basis leading to the overlapping of understanding and interpretation that Heidegger presents in terms of a “circle” and that Gadamer will take up and radicalize. For a succinct statement of this direction of radicalization in Gadamer, see Gadamer 1976: 122.

(4). As we know, Gadamer’s integrative project culminates in his theory of *Wirkungsgeschichte*. On this point, see in particular Gadamer 2004: 299–306.

determining our living understanding has however little to do with what we do: "My real concern was and is philosophic: not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us [*was...mit uns geschieht*] over and above our wanting and doing" (Gadamer 2004, xxvi)⁽⁵⁾. This emphasis on *Geschichte* over against all *Gemächte* has prompted some interpreters to raise the hypothesis that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics would entail a form of "ontological historicism" (Vattimo 2005: 161)⁽⁶⁾. This hypothesis is further strengthened by the role played by Hegel in Gadamer's reflections as the principal source for counteracting modern philosophies of consciousness (Gadamer 1976: 112ss.; Vattimo 2005: 161; Pippin 2002: 217–238). There is no doubt that the concept of "spirit," especially in the Hegelian sense of "objective spirit" and therefore "history" has a central place in philosophical hermeneutics (Lindén 1997: 104; Lindén 2011: 128). In a paper from 1962, entitled "The Philosophical Foundations of the Twentieth Century," Gadamer argues that the starting point of contemporary philosophy is still Hegel, but this is Hegel of the objective spirit and not that of the spirit which reached its absolute self-transparency in the concept (Gadamer 1976: 112–113; Giorgio 2006: 167; Ricoeur 1969: 9). As a result, the Gadamerian project to take up and continue Heidegger's hermeneutic ontology may appear to pivot especially around the dimension of the past.

If in light of these observations the role of the future in Gadamer seems at first sight less radical than in the latent "decisionism" of the early Heidegger, an attentive analysis would show that Gadamer's ontological turn of hermeneutics is capable of a rigorous account of the experience of the future. This account is not compelled to inherit the traits of an "activist philosophy of will," which is unfortunately the way Heidegger's idea of resoluteness at play in authentic life has often been received in the literature (Gadamer 1976: 124; Lindén 1997: 100n1, 166). It could be argued that this latter tendency finds further echo in the philosophies of emancipation and their emphasis on hermeneutics as a theory of interpretation aiming at transforming the world⁽⁷⁾. Other authors

(5). This perspective is amply developed by Lindén in his *Philosophie der Gewohnheit*: "Wenn es eine Dignität unseres Willens und Bewusstseins geben soll, liegt sie nicht im hektischen Leben jener strebsamen Rationalität, die begehrend über die Welt zu verfügen sucht, sondern in dem Bewusstsein dessen, was dabei eigentlich geschieht. Genau dieses Verständnis setzt aber voraus, dass wir nicht subjektphilosophisch uns selbst aus der Welt herausheben, sondern statt dessen den musterhaft vorausbestimmten Ursprung unserer 'Gemächte' immer mitberücksichtigen". Lindén 1997: 235.

(6). This hypothesis seems especially hard to defend if we pay attention to Gadamer's explicit claim that identifies the ultimate aim of the whole investigation in "the overcoming of the hermeneutics of historicism". Gadamer 2004: 379n91.

(7). On this point cfr. Vattimo 2002: 300ss. Vattimo espouses hermeneutics as an ontology pointing "in the direction of an identification between transformation and interpretation of the world".

have contested this idea of hermeneutics as a philosophy of interpretation and have pointed out that Gadamer raises the question of understanding and not that of interpretation (cfr. Di Cesare 2013: 208). This debate provides us with a clue for detecting elements of the future in Gadamer's hermeneutics in *Truth and Method*. To be sure, the focus on the phenomenon of understanding in this work does not coincide with the repudiation of every activity or action. My proposal, however, is that the focus on interpretation as modality of action risks to detract from Gadamer's full contribution. Rather, my suggestion is that Gadamer's theory of understanding as it is laid out in *Truth and Method* exhibits elements of the future at the core of the disturbing experience of the *vita contemplativa* (Lindén 1997: 236). That this experience is not conceived by Gadamer as being purely theoretical is clear in light of the prominence of the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* in his work.⁽⁸⁾ In following this line of interpretation, I hope to advance a more precise grasp of the role of the future in connection with the historical consciousness of effects (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*) that Gadamer elaborates in *Truth and Method*.

A preliminary detour was necessary in order to circumscribe more precisely the object of study in *Truth and Method* and the present interest in the dimension of the future in this work. This preliminary set of considerations allows us to delimit the domain in which my hypothesis regarding the presence of a theory of the future in *Truth and Method* can be either confirmed or rejected. In what follows, the recovery of the relation of belonging defining the hermeneutic phenomenon will lead us to a selection of salient features in Gadamer's analysis especially from the second and third part of *Truth and Method*.

4. The First Side of the Belonging Relationship and its Futural Character

4.1. The Overarching Unity of a Totality of Sense: The Anticipation of Completeness

The first pole of the *sola scriptura* principle affirms the presence of an overarching totality as guideline for the understanding. The current task is therefore that of offering a closer determination of this totality. In the context

Another voice in this direction that rather stresses the emancipatory critique of ideology is Habermas. See Lindén 1997: 87n66.

(8). On the Aristotelian background of Gadamer's philosophy, cfr. Lindén 1997: 108n11, 188n25. On the co-originary nature of theory and praxis, see Gadamer 1987.

of his remarks about the hermeneutic importance of “temporal distance” (Gadamer 2004: 291ss.), Gadamer introduces the notion of the “anticipation of completeness” (*Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit*). He writes,

The circle, which is fundamental to all understanding, has a further hermeneutic implication which I call the “fore-conception of completeness.” But this, too, is obviously a formal condition of all understanding. It states that only what really constitutes a unity of meaning is intelligible. So when we read a text we always assume its completeness, and only when this assumption proves mistaken — i.e. the text is not intelligible — do we begin to suspect the text and try to discover how it can be remedied. The rules of such textual criticism can be left aside, for the important thing to note is that applying them properly depends on understanding the content (Gadamer 2004: 294).

The principle of “completeness,” which Gadamer presents as a formal condition of all understanding, expresses the basic unity underlying the hermeneutic circle. Completeness requires temporal distance, since for Gadamer it is temporal distance that enables the manifestation of the true (complete) meaning of a text (Gadamer 2004: 298). Yet, in light of the temporal character of the distance between the interpreter and her object, any reference to “completeness” does by no means imply a “fixed” magnitude:

But the discovery of the true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process. Not only are fresh sources of error constantly excluded, so that all kinds of things are filtered out that obscure the true meaning; but new sources of understanding are continually emerging that reveal unsuspected elements of meaning. The temporal distance that performs the filtering process is not fixed [*eine abgeschlossene Größe*], but is itself undergoing constant movement and extension (Gadamer 2004: 298)⁽⁹⁾.

The overarching unity of meaning is not only what exerts “validity” (*Geltung*) upon us (Gadamer 2004: 298) — the fact that “a text should completely express its meaning” (Gadamer 2004: 294). The unity of meaning as “complete” is also, and especially, an “otherness” which, Gadamer writes,

(9). Gadamer also comments on the idea of “completeness” or “closure” (*Abgeschlossenheit*) in a text published few years after *Truth and Method*. In this text, he writes “that knowledge and becoming-aware-of-oneself are not the making present of something complete as such but they rather obtain their possibility and realization only from what is new and in relation to their to-day.” Gadamer 1993: 141.

in order to be understood, “must be something that has already asserted itself in its own separate validity” (Gadamer 2004: 298). The fact that we always already carry a certain understanding, the fact that we live already *within* a totality of meaning, does not only mean that we gain automatic and immediate access to this or that aspect of a text or of our reality. The inclusion in the “circle of understanding,” in a totality of meaning, implies simultaneously that this overarching unity of sense and meaning announces itself. In Gadamer’s words, “[u]nderstanding begins [...] when something addresses us [*dass etwas uns anspricht*]” (Gadamer 2004: 298; cfr. Gadamer 1993: 142).

In order to shed further light upon this feature of “otherness” attaching to the total unity of sense, a parallel reading of the *sola scriptura* principle and Heidegger’s concept of world may be helpful. The clue to this parallel reading is found in the way Gadamer himself sets up the issue. Actual understanding of a text sets out where the assumed unity of sense of a text proves “untenable” (Gadamer 2004: 294). Allow me to recall the sections in *Being and Time* that posit the world as a totality already presupposed by every particular understanding. This world–totality can become manifest with the appearance of something “other” or “disturbing.”⁽¹⁰⁾ These sections lend themselves to a parallel reading with Gadamer’s treatment of the anticipation of completeness.

The overarching total unity is a unity of meaning. In the hermeneutic tradition, this unity of sense is presupposed as the condition for making explicit the sense of a text. I shall briefly turn to Heidegger’s treatment of the concept of the world, which represents the first step in the analysis of *Dasein* as “being–in–the–world”. The primary meaning of the world is said to coincide with the world of the practical things available to manipulation. This world of things that are capable of being manipulated is identified with the pre-given world where human beings live for the most part. In this *Umwelt*, the human *Dasein* encounters the things of experience immediately as tools of her manipulating behavior (Heidegger 2006: 66). This encounter, however, never takes place as a side–by–side (*Nebeneinander*) of *Dasein* and her tool (Heidegger 2006: 55). Heidegger specifies this relationship as follows: “Taken strictly, there ‘is’ no such thing as *a* [tool]. To the Being of any [tool] there always belongs a totality of [tools], in which it can be this [tool] that it is” (Heidegger 2006: 68). Starting with this phenomenological analysis,

(10). See in particular § 16 of *Sein und Zeit*: “Zur Alltäglichkeit des In–der–Welt–seins gehören Modi des Besorgens, die das besorgte Seiende so begegnen lassen, daß dabei die Weltmäßigkeit des Innerweltlichen zum Vorschein kommt”. Heidegger 2006: 73.

Heidegger's treatment will proceed to extrapolate the concept of the world as a totality of meaning. Yet, already on the ontic level of our relationship with things that can be manipulated around us, the totality of tools functions as precondition for the determination of sense of any particular tool within the world. An isolated tool separated from the totality of manipulable tools is an abstraction because each tool draws its proper meaning only from the whole of the "workshop" (Heidegger 2006: 75). Thus, both in the case of the understanding of a text as well as in relation to our immediate manner of orienting ourselves in the world, we are pointed to the presence of an "implicit" sense or meaning orienting our exegetical or practical behaviors.

The implicit world of manipulable tools undergoes transformation when a shock intervenes in the frictionless machinery of everyday activities. A disturbance arises which breaks the implicit, compact, and coherent unity of references from tool to tool (Heidegger 2006: 74): the tool is missing, is broken, is not up to the task at hand. Suddenly the tool appears as what it is, and with it some light is shed upon the manipulable world of practical behavior in which *Dasein* goes on living from the start. Similarly, the unity of a text becomes an "explicit understanding" (Gadamer 2004: 291) when the projected unity of meaning proves to be "mistaken" (Gadamer 2004: 294). As a result, the completeness or unity of meaning truly appears in its validity: as we have seen, this is not only the complete meaning that we attribute to the text when we approach it, but, more significantly, it is the validity of its truth-content, namely the fact that "what [the text] says should be the complete truth [*vollkommene Wahrheit*]" (Gadamer 2004: 294). This second aspect of the anticipation of completeness coincides with what I have called an "otherness." The unity of meaning as formal-condition of all understanding is inseparable from the otherness of meaning-content that the text asserts in its "separate validity" (Gadamer 2004: 298). In this way, while we do live within the overarching unity of meaning (linguistic, historical) that encompasses both us and our texts, and that we apply to every text we want to understand, we are also made witnesses of an alterity inherent to the text. According to Gadamer's argument, the truth of the text lies in this alterity.⁽¹¹⁾ Instead of separating the reader from her belonging to the world of the text, this alterity has the effect to provoke an actual understanding of the text by shedding light upon its linguistic and historical diversity and, conversely,

(11). See Gadamer 1993: 136: "The continuity that is called into question in the inquiry into the being of history culminates ultimately in the fact that there is no understanding at all that, in spite of all transience, would not also already be a becoming."

upon the implicit linguistic and historical “pre-judices” tacitly enabling our understanding. The “otherness” of the text emerges therefore as the otherness of the unity of meaning itself. To be other is an essential feature of the unity of meaning. Gadamer thus remarks: “Hermeneutic work is based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness” (Gadamer 2004: 295).

The meaningful unity of textual totality as well as the unity of “total references” pertaining to our practical lifeworld (Heidegger 2006: 70) represent the dimension of a pre-understanding guiding the understanding of the text or orienting us within a practical situation. This implicit and operative dimension becomes explicit when a disturbance intervenes, and a distance is produced by the emergence of an “otherness” in the process of understanding. Yet, we have now seen that the overarching unity of meaning becomes manifest not just because our projecting expectations may be disappointed when confronted with the text. The unity of meaning asserts itself in its “separate validity” as other. We do not have to wait for a “wrong” interpretation in order to let the whole of sense be announced, as if this whole could be “obtained mediately by inference” (Heidegger 2006: 75). That the otherness pertaining to the unity of sense is laid manifest is an ontological feature of this very overarching unity and not of any determinate human way to approach meaning. Understanding takes place where a unity of meaning asserts itself and discloses “ unsuspected meaning relations” (*ungeahnte Sinnbezüge*) (Gadamer 2004: 298).

There follows from these last considerations that a fundamental futural character attaches to the unity of meaning of a text. On the one hand, the completeness of the total meaning implies a reference to the past, which implicitly orients our present understanding. When we approach a text, we bring with ourselves a context filled with linguistic and historical presuppositions. These presuppositions or “prejudices” enable our access to the text by guiding our understanding of its singular parts. This understanding is a *pre*-understanding that comes before us and that, lacking any explicit inquiry into this dimension, lays “unrecognized” and “unregulated” in our historical consciousness (Gadamer 2004: 300). Gadamer’s aim is to point to this dimension as the aspect of the history of effects operative in our understanding of a text, a work of art, or a historical event. In our exegetical considerations, however, this historical dimension exhibits simultaneously a distance, an otherness. This distance and this otherness, however, which may seem to break the historical continuity that carries and guides our understanding, emerges rather as truly realizing this understanding. The temporal distance, we read, “lets the true meaning of the object emerge fully

[...] [Temporal distance] not only lets local and limited prejudices die away, but allows those that bring about genuine understanding to emerge clearly as such." (Gadamer 2004: 298).

Thus, in preliminary fashion, I would like to put forth the pivotal role of the future in Gadamer's concept of the historical understanding as a plausible working hypothesis. But now, how does the overarching unity of meaning become "other"? How does this transition take place? I will address these questions in the next section by taking up two further phenomena that Gadamer studies in connection with the hermeneutic problem.

4.2. Transformation into Structure and Total Mediation

The reference to the concept of "transformation into structure" (*Verwandlung ins Gebilde*) purports to further the definition of unity of meaning and therefore to offer additional clues about the futural moments in play in the understanding. The notion of the transformation into structure is connected with that of anticipation of completeness by the idea of total mediation.

We have seen above that the overarching unity of meaning is inherently characterized by the assertive moment of an otherness. Let me now quote a passage that has the effect of linking our previous elaborations to what is to follow. In reference to his remarks about "play," Gadamer writes:

[W]hat no longer exists is the world in which we live as our own. Transformation into structure is not simply transposition into another world. Certainly the play takes place in another, closed world. But inasmuch as it is a structure, it is, so to speak, its own measure and measures itself by nothing outside. (Gadamer 2004: 111)

The unity of meaning of a text is to be thought in analogous terms to those describing the totality of a world. As such, the text does not have its measure outside of itself. In other words, the text is not delivered to the arbitrariness of more or less "correct" conclusions. This confirms what has been established above: the unity of meaning comes to be manifest in an otherness, a strangeness, requiring distance, which has its source in the unity of meaning itself.

Gadamer continues:

In being presented in play, what is emerges. It produces and brings to light what is otherwise constantly hidden and withdrawn. (Gadamer 2004: 112)

The autonomy of the overarching unity of meaning, which otherwise remains hidden and withdrawn, emerges in what it is, i.e. as a *reality*. Thus, we observe again that the unity of meaning entails two movements: on the one hand, the unity of meaning is continuously hidden, it is the presupposition that remains implicit in the understanding and that determines the latter as a pre-understanding; on the other hand, the same overarching unity is what comes to be manifest, and this not in an arbitrary way (I understand what I already expected to be the case), but as the actual appeal of *what is* to our understanding. Gadamer describes this double movement in terms of a “transformation into structure.” With this notion, the futural character of the understanding begins to take on a more definite shape. We read further:

“Reality” always stands in a horizon of desired or feared or, at any rate, still undecided future possibilities. Hence it is always the case that mutually exclusive expectations are aroused, not all of which can be fulfilled. The undecidedness of the future permits such a superfluity of expectations that reality necessarily lags behind them. Now if, in a particular case, a context of meaning closes and completes itself in reality, such that no lines of meaning scatter in the void, then this reality is itself like a drama [*Schauspiel*]. (Gadamer 2004: 112).

Having laid out the autonomy of the unity of meaning, and its double movement of withdrawal and coming to appearance, we are now equipped to show the concrete futural horizon of the understanding and then move to the second pole of the *sola scriptura* principle highlighted above.

What we are heading towards is the decoupling of the horizon of the future from its identification with expectation. We hear that reality “always stands in a horizon of desired or feared or, at any rate, still undecided future possibilities.” The undecidedness of the future, however, is not a matter of our expectations but of reality itself. A horizon of the future attaches essentially to reality and reality is the closing or completing of an open context of meaning. There can only be expectation if there is already a horizon of the future as condition of possibility for expectation to take place in it. The futural character of the understanding is therefore not primarily that pertaining to the expectant projections of the subject. To be sure, through the notion of transformation into structure, Gadamer is designating the projecting character of the understanding. This is the futural feature defining the understanding. The notion of “transformation into structure” aims precisely at removing the equivalence between this projective feature and the self-encapsulated activity of a subject.

“Structure” is the element that here designates enduring meaning. The “transformation,” on the other hand, expresses the sense of transitoriness. Yet the transformation is not a change, “even an alteration that is especially far-reaching” (Gadamer 2004: 110). The unity of meaning is a wholly new appearance that from now on raises claim to autonomous truth. So long as the unity of meaning remains hidden, however, no distinction can be made between “structure” (*Gebilde*) and its “imitation” (*Abbild*). The unity of meaning can become manifest as “structure,” as enduring meaning, only in producing a radical gap or distance with its imitations. In this manner, the unity of meaning as structure becomes also experienceable, that is, as otherness. The formation of otherness is linked to the formation of a temporal distance, which Gadamer here expresses in terms of “an insuperable ontological difference” (*ein unaufhebbarer Seinsabstand*) (Gadamer 2004: 114). In its manifestation as otherness, the unity of meaning can raise its demand to be understood in *what it is*. The unity of meaning emerges thus in a total distance from its imitations. This “insuperable ontological distance” is what is described by the notion of “total mediation” (*totale Vermittlung*), namely that “the medium as such is superseded (*[sich selbst] aufhebt*)” (Gadamer 2004: 118). In this way, the unity of meaning is raised to its true being, it completes its transformation into structure, and can thereby assert itself in its “separate validity.” At the same time, the idea of “total mediation” implies the simultaneous attachment of the unity of meaning to its manifold realizations. This is a pivotal aspect that leads us now to the second element exhibited in the *sola scriptura* principle, which will be evidenced in relation to the phenomena of reflection and experience. In so doing, however, I will also point to the change that these notions must undergo. But before moving to the next and final section, let me present a passage illustrating the double sense of “total mediation”:

What we have called a structure is one insofar as it presents itself as a meaningful whole. It does not exist in itself, nor is it encountered in a mediation (*Vermittlung*) accidental to it; rather, it acquires its proper being in being mediated. (Gadamer 2004: 117)

The futural character of understanding lies in total mediation. With reference to the phenomena of “transformation into structure” and of “total mediation,” we point with Gadamer to the *productive* feature of the understanding emerging in the autonomy of the sense, whether of a text

or a work of art. This autonomy establishes a temporal distance with the interpreter. This distance, however, cannot be “reproduced” or travelled back again. Approaching the truth of a text, a work of art, or a historical event is always again a new event that requires to be laid open in its special, yet enduring, singularity. This means that the unity of sense of a text is indeed something completely novel in relation to any conceivable expectation. In this productive characteristic we observe the concrete futural horizon of the understanding. In a footnote, Gadamer remarks in this regard:

It still seems to me a vestige of the false psychologism that stems from the aesthetics of taste and genius if one makes the processes of production and reproduction coincide in the idea. This is to fail to appreciate that the success of a work has the character of an event, which goes beyond the subjectivity both of the creator and of the spectator or listener (Gadamer 2004: 164n27).

We could say with Nietzsche that it is the future that gives the rule to our today (Nietzsche 1980: 443). In the process of “transformation into structure” as “total mediation” achieving “completeness,” the unity of meaning remains a totality without disintegrating in the manifold expectations of any present understanding. What is more, the unity of meaning remains what it is while also raising itself *against* our habitual expectant understanding with its tacit assumptions.

5. The Second Side of the Belonging Relationship and its Futural Character

5.1. The Inclusion of the Understanding in a Totality

Up until now I have highlighted *one* side of the *sola scriptura* principle coinciding with the idea of a distance as source of otherness, but also, for this reason, of truth. Now I will turn to the *other* side of this principle. The completeness of a whole of meaning is achieved in the formation of an otherness. In this it appears the primary character of the future attaching to the understanding. The unity of meaning, we could even say, grants a future to the understanding. The unity of meaning is however not free-floating in a realm of ideas. Then, Gadamer writes:

[N]either is it true that one would have to abstract from the work's relations to the life world in order to grasp the work itself. Rather, it exists within them. (Gadamer 2004: 119)

The productivity of meaning is exhibited in relation to the actual understanding of an interpreter: the unity of meaning asserts itself *for* an interpreter and her understanding. I turn again to a closer reading of Gadamer's investigation in order to clarify this second moment implicit in the *sola scriptura* principle. In this way, I will lead the present survey of futural elements in the process of understanding to a preliminary completion.

5.2. Reflection

In Gadamer's analysis, the concept of reflection plays a pivotal role. This concept is related essentially with that of experience. Reflection implies a relation of self-reference. This self-reference, our self-awareness or self-perception implies however the presence of something that is other than ourselves. The experience of an otherness, thus, has also in itself the potentiality to trigger a movement of self-experience. This would explain Gadamer's formulations to the effect that experience is always already "self-knowledge" (Gadamer 2004: 349) or that understanding is always already "self-understanding" (Gadamer 2004: 251). I will briefly clarify this reflective feature of the understanding with the purpose to determine more precisely the relationship between the one doing the understanding and the subject matter that is to be understood. What we are aiming at is the demonstration that the movement of understanding exhibits a futural characteristic also on the side of the interpreter. This is done by showing that the interpreter herself participates in the productivity emerging from the unity of meaning. As a result, the process of the understanding does no longer appear as the process initiated by a self-enclosed subject.

In his analysis of Hegel's concept of experience, Gadamer writes: "[Experience] is the reversal that consciousness undergoes when it recognizes itself in what is alien and different" (Gadamer 2004: 349). Reflection depends on the nature of genuine experience as having the structure of a "reversal of consciousness" (Gadamer 2004: 349). If this is so, however, then reflection, like experience, cannot be completed. The movement of reflection is not to be accomplished once and for all (*pace* Descartes) because the reflective seeing emerges only when an otherness has been made manifest in experience. The reversal upon oneself attracts into itself, so to speak, the productive side of the thing. Reflection is not an immanent absolute seeing separated from all transcendence, but rather, paraphrasing Gadamer, a "reflecting oneself out of" (*herausreflektieren*) the thing itself (Gadamer 2004: 354). The impossibility to

achieve a pure seeing upon oneself bears witness therefore of the belonging of this seeing to the thing and ultimately to the world. Gadamer points to this insight with the claim that experience is “the reversal that consciousness undergoes when it recognizes itself in what is alien and different.” Only when something other than ourselves appears on the scene of the world can we perceive and experience ourselves. The seeing of what is other enables the seeing of oneself. The latter, like the former, is never an absolute seeing. If the otherness asserts itself in the unity of meaning, thereby enabling experience and understanding, then the one understanding can never absolve herself from this overarching unity. This impossibility of a view from nowhere defines reflection therefore as “recognition” (*Wiedererkennung*) (Gadamer 2004: 113) and as return upon what was already implicitly endowed with meaning. There is seeing, even theoretical seeing, only if there is a meaningful totality. The seeing can never fully abandon its inclusion in this totality. In “recognizing,” however, we know “*more* than is already familiar. In recognition what we know emerges, as if illuminated, from all the contingent and variable circumstances that condition it; it is grasped in its essence. It is known as something” (Gadamer 2004: 113). In reflection, the one understanding recognizes her belonging to a totality of meaning, i.e. she recognizes her own situation as “structural,” i.e. as an enduring, productive, and inclusive totality.

5.3. Experience

Following Gadamer, I have shown that the object of the process of understanding is an overarching unity of meaning that asserts itself as otherness and through a distance while firmly encompassing the one engaging in the activity of understanding. I take a further step now in the determination of the role of the interpreter in the process of understanding: is the interpreter simply delivered to the manifestation of otherness? In other words, does the future simply burst into an otherwise harmless activity of understanding? What I am addressing here is the question of receptivity and passivity in the understanding of the interpreter. Does the interpreter participate in the futural dimension opened up by the play of an all encompassing and essentially anonymous sense totality or should we attribute to the understanding activity of the interpreter a further sense of productivity and futurity? In order to approach this final question, I turn to Gadamer’s concept of experience.

I would like to begin by pointing out the possibility to detect in Gadamer’s concept of experience a structure equivalent to Heidegger’s “disturbance of

reference" (*Störung der Verweisung*). Gadamer writes that "this generation [of experience] takes place as false generalizations are continually refuted by experience and what was regarded as typical is shown not to be so" (Gadamer 2004: 347). Gadamer describes this process in terms of "negative experience." The feature of "negativity," however, captures the primary sense of experience. Only when experience is negative we can truly say to have had experience (*Erfahrung machen*) and to have gained thereby some insight (*Einsicht*) about something (Gadamer 2004: 359, 362).

These remarks about the negativity of experience may appear puzzling at first sight. Can we find any productivity in negativity? Our puzzlement only increases if we turn to the testimony that Gadamer invokes and that seems at first glance to support the idea of a mere receptivity and passivity of experience. Gadamer quotes Aeschylus' word "pathei mathos" or "learning through suffering" (Gadamer 2004: 351). He adds that this quotation does not only refer to painful experiences. Aeschylus' injunction rather purports to think "the reason why this is so" (Gadamer 2004: 351), that is, why undergoing suffering is linked with a process of learning and experience. In Gadamer's reading, suffering bears witness of the finitude of our experience. The finitude of human beings, however, coincides with the possibility of their future. As a result, negative experience as negative is at the same time productive experience. Finitude refers to the essential impossibility to identify without any rest our entire existence with our own expectations and plans. To do this is impossible, even in the context of modern natural science, for the reason that human beings are not and cannot be master of their own experience. Experience happens, that is, we gain some insight about a certain unity of meaning. Experience already is traversed by an overarching unity of meaning while also accessing, as experience, its otherness, its truth. Gaining insight, which has to do with reflection, is possible because our experience actively participates in a total meaning that "prevails" (*durchsetzt*) in spite of all our monitoring and expectations (Gadamer 2004: 300). This aspect of active participation in the prevailing productivity of sense indicates the presence of the productive, that is, unsuspected and overpowering character of human existence. What human beings indeed *do* when they *have* experience is to let the unity of sense prevail and be. This letting be is not simply a receptive behavior. "To let something be" means not only that the emergence of something is passively approved, as it were, or suffered. Letting something be demands rather our participation in it.⁽¹²⁾ In

(12). One could compare this meaning with the sense of *Zulassen* in the Grimm's dictionary: "mit der räumlichen zulassung verbindet sich die von sitte, recht oder persönlicher entscheidung abhängende theilnahme an einem vorgang oder einer einrichtung."

explicit acts of understanding, human beings humble themselves in front of the temporalizing of things.⁽¹³⁾ We who engage in understanding let something be when we vacate the place of our own expectations so that something can truly happen. In Gadamer's summative words:

[T]he birth of experience as an event over which no one has control and which is not even determined by the particular weight of this or that observation, but in which everything is co-ordinated in a way that is ultimately incomprehensible (Gadamer 2004: 347).

The capacity to participate in the incomprehensible co-ordination of experience means for us human beings to curtail all expectations and ideological "deformations" (Gadamer 2004: 300) in order to have experience of our own finitude and therefore of reality. Deepening the awareness of our own finitude increases the capacity to experience truth beyond one's own pre-conceptualities. Human beings can then begin to safeguard the "dignity of the 'thing'" (Gadamer 2004: 452) rather than covering it up with their own projections, thereby reducing it to an expectable object. Only when human beings no longer think of themselves as masters of time nor the future (Gadamer 2004: 351) will their *doing*, i.e. their *future* truly begin.

References

- Di Cesare, D. 2013, *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*. English translation by Niall Keane. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Gadamer, H.-G. 1976, "The Philosophical Foundations of the Twentieth Century" (1962). In *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. English transl. and ed. by David E. Linge, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press.
- , 1987, *Lob der Theorie (1983)*. In *Gesammelte Werke 4. Neuere Philosophie 2*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- , 1990, *Wahrheit und Methode (1960)*. In *Gesammelte Werke 1. Hermeneutik 1*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. English translation revised by J. Weinsheimer and D. J. Marshall. *Truth and Method*. London/New York, Continuum, 2004.

(13). See Gadamer 1993: 138: "ripening, e.g. the growing of a child into an adult, is not a process that one could follow up with by recourse to the means use to measure elapsed time." Measuring expresses a behavior that aims at confirming certain expectations while the phenomenon of ripening appears as imposing or prevailing of the thing itself.

- , 1993, *Die Kontinuität der Geschichte und der Augenblick der Existenz* (1965). In *Gesammelte Werke 2. Hermeneutik 2*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Giorgio, G. 2006, *Il pensiero di Gianni Vattimo. Lemancipazione dalla metafisica tra dialettica e ermeneutica*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Grimm, J AND W. 1971, *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm*. Leipzig: S. Hirzel.
- Heidegger, M. 2006, *Sein und Zeit* [1927]. Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag. English translation by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. *Being and Time*. New York, HarpersCollins, 1962.
- Kuhn, T. 1970, *The structure of the scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lindén, J.-I. 1997, *Philosophie der Gewohnheit. Über die störbare Welt der Muster*. Freiburg/München: Verlag Karl Alber
- , 2011, “Wirkungsmächtige Tradition. Hermeneutische und lebensphilosophische Aspekte.” In *Studia Phaenomenologica XI*.
- Nietzsche, F. 1980, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, ed. Karl Schlechta. München/Wien: Carl Hanser.
- Pippin, R. 2002, “Gadamer’s Hegel.” In *Gadamer’s Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*. Ed. by Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnschwalt, Jens Kertscher. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Ricoeur, P. 1969, *Le conflit des interprétations. Essais d’hermeneutique*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Rorty, R. 1979, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Vattimo, G. 2002, “Gadamer and the Problem of Ontology.” In *Gadamer’s Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*. Ed. by Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnschwalt, Jens Kertscher. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- , 2005, *Introduzione a Heidegger* (1971). Roma-Bari: Laterza.

ALESSIO ROTUNDO

Loyola University New Orleans; arotundo@loyno.edu.