IS GADAMER'S HERMENEUTICS INHERENTLY CONSERVATIVE?

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Abstract. According to two critics, Georgia Warnke and John Caputo, Gadamer's hermeneutics is inherently „conservative" insofar as he appeals to tradition as a constituent in understanding. They insist that he simply preserves the ideals, norms and values of the Western metaphysical tradition without critically examining them. I do not agree and will argue that views like this depend upon several false assumptions – for example, that Gadamer reifies the text as a „thing-in-itself" (*Sache selbst*) and remains trapped in subjectivism. I will begin by examining some of the ways in which these charges might be warranted before proceeding to defend him.

I.

There are basically two sets of objections which are leveled at Gadamer's hermeneutics and, ironically, they seem to contradict one another. On the one hand, Gadamer is deemed „conservative" insofar as he appeals to tradition and regards it as being „authoritative." More specifically, the claim is that Gadamer simply preserves the ideals, norms and values of the Western metaphysical tradition without critically examining them. For example, John D. Caputo argues that Gadamer „remains attached to the tradition as the bearer of eternal truths, which...does nothing more than modify Plato and Hegel from a Heideggerian standpoint." (Caputo 1987, pp. 110-11).

Another critic insists that Gadamer's thesis regarding the authority of tradition is „the fundamentally conservative one" – namely, that „since we have no concept of rationality that is independent of the tradition to which we belong, and hence no universal norms and principles to which we can appeal, we ought not even to attempt to overthrow the authority of that tra-

dition." (Warnke 1987, p. 136) Other thinkers claim that Gadamer is guilty of „radical historicism," and his hermeneutics arbitrarily relativistic, due to his claim that prejudices (*Vorurteilen*) constitute the meaning of a text. In this case, it is E.D. Hirsch who argues that Gadamer is guilty of falling under the sway of „the fallacy of the inscrutable past" and recommends that, „we vitalize the inscrutable texts of the past by distorting them to our own perspective." (Hirsch 1967, p.245)

I will not be directly addressing this paradox here – namely, how it might be possible for Gadamer to be both a conservative reactionary as well as a relativistic historicist. Although both lines of argument appear to share some common assumptions – namely, that Gadamer reifies the text as a „thing-in-itself" (*Sache selbst*) and has not avoided the snares of subjectivism – I will be not be directly confronting that here. Instead, I will discuss only the critiques of Caputo and Warnke and address a few, basic questions. For example, how does Gadamer's account of interpretation and understanding warrant these charges of „conservatism"? What might be considered conservative or, even worse, „reactionary" about Gadamer's hermeneutics and how can one respond in his defense?

Although Caputo claims that, „Gadamer is extremely good at defending the idea of a mobile, flexible tradition which never congeals into timeless, canonical formulations," he also maintains that his appeal to it indicates a rejection of „the deeper and more radical side of Heidegger's thought." (Caputo 1987, pp. 110-11). Given a cursory look, Gadamer does appear to make claims that appear to support that very criticism. For instance, he agrees with the Romantic objections to Enlightenment thought insofar as,

> becoming master does not mean that a person becomes his own master in the sense that he is freed from all tradition. The real force of morals, for example, is based on tradition. They are freely taken over but by no means created by a free insight or grounded on reasons. This is precisely what we call tradition: the ground of their validity. And in fact it is to romanticism that we owe this correction of the Enlightenment: that tradition has a justification that lies beyond rational grounding and in large measure determines our institutions and attitudes. (Gadamer 1994, pp. 280-81)

Indeed, Gadamer sounds rather conservative here and not unlike those Nietzsche dubbed „monumentalist historians" or those who idealize the past over the present and make tradition the ultimate ground of morals and values. To make matters worse, Gadamer then asserts that „classical ethics are superior to modern moral philosophy" because classical works „[ground] the transition from ethics to 'politics,' the art of right legislation,

on the indispensability of tradition." (Gadamer 1994, p. 281) Specifically, Gadamer is referring to Aristotle's claim that,

> while words evidently do have the power to encourage and stimulate young men of generous mind, and while they can cause a character well-born and truly enamored of what is noble to be possessed by virtue, they do not have the capacity to turn the common run of people to goodness and nobility. (Aristotle 1962, p. 285)

Since this has often been taken as an example of Aristotelian elitism, can we say that Gadamer too is presupposing a similar distinction between „the common" people and a „well-born" nobility? In other words, is the latter associated with those who preserve conventional norms and values, while the former represent those who fail to respect such traditions and, thus, lack moral character? Are the latter to be regarded as orthodox traditionalists who respect the authority of convention, while the latter are somehow heretical? My short answer to this is, no. Rather, Gadamer is merely defending Aristotle's claims regarding the nature of moral deliberation and *phronesis*. More specifically, he is proceeding from the premise that one must already be good or, at least, have been brought up with some concern for the good in order to become good. In other words, if someone is nurtured in an environment where no sense of right and wrong is inculcated or cultivated, then he cannot be expected to demonstrate any interest in ethical issues, nor is it likely that he will ask or even understand moral questions. Simply put, Gadamer is underscoring the point that no amount of rational argument will suffice when it comes to convincing someone, who is not so inclined already, that he should become moral or even care about questions of ethics and morality.

As Aristotle insists, „the soul of the listener must first have been conditioned by habits to the right kind of likes and dislikes, just as land must be cultivated before it is able to foster the seed." (Aristotle 1962, p. 296) Differently put, „there must first be a character that somehow has an affinity for excellence or virtue, a character that loves what is noble and feels disgust at what is base." (Aristotle 1962, p. 296) Thus, what Gadamer finds „superior" about classical ethics is not the concrete content of any particular tradition but the acknowledgment of this paradox regarding virtue – namely, that one must be good in order to become good.

Moreover, classical theorists exhibit a willingness to accept that such recognition does not, indeed, *cannot* depend on reason alone but must be grounded in the authority of tradition. Traditions may be political, religious,

cultural, historical or some intersection or network of these various strains but no human person exists in a moral or value-free vacuum.

In contrast, Enlightenment thinkers (like Kant) have sought to deny the effects of tradition and establish the ground of morality in the pure practical reason of an autonomous subject. Differently stated, the Kantian approach to moral problems offers a strictly formal method for understanding virtue or the good and is void of any specific content. However, this is a pretense that Gadamer finds impossible, undesirable and devoid of meaning. Thus, when Gadamer appeals to Aristotle and his paradigm of moral reasoning, he does so only to make a general point about the nature of ethical inquiry – namely, that the subject must begin from some concrete set of assumptions. In other words, one cannot and should not pretend to possess an empty consciousness or attempt to deliberate from a value-neutral position. Instead, Gadamer proceeds from the assumption that human beings are fundamentally finite, historical creatures who are constituted, partly though not entirely, by their traditions and prejudices (*Vorurteilen*). However, this does not imply that he also accepts the particular traditions to which Aristotle belonged nor is he defending any conventional prejudices of his own.

In sum, none of Gadamer's claims provide support for Caputo's conclusion that, „Gadamer has a deeply Hegelian streak which leads him to search for some hermeneutic version of the *Aufhebung*" – one „which consists in the continual appropriation and reappropriation of the ageless contents (the *Sache*) of the tradition." (Caputo, pp. 96-113) In fact, Gadamer himself never refers to any specific cultural tradition in *Truth and Method*, nor does he appeal directly to the canon of Western philosophy as one which is normative for understanding – that is, Gadamer consistently and explicitly asserts that we are historical beings who cannot transcend the cultural conditions in which we find ourselves. Like Heidegger, he takes the concept of *Dasein's* „thrownness" seriously and regards it as constitutive of understanding or interpretation. „What first seemed simply a barrier, according to the traditional concept of science and method, or a subjective condition of access to historical knowledge, now becomes the center of a fundamental inquiry." (Gadamer 1994, p. 262)

In other words, the fact that we are historical creatures to begin with provides the very conditions for the possibility of understanding or interpreting any human artifact and that includes our own traditions, norms, etc. Certainly, Gadamer himself is subject to the historical conditions of his time and his hermeneutics may belong to the so-called „Western" tradition, but I do not see how he is necessarily tied to it or bound by it in the strict sense maintained by Caputo. Lastly, I believe that Caputo's critique depends on

two unstated assumptions: First, he presumes that Gadamer is valorizing a particular tradition -– one which is understood as something singular and static as I've indicated above. Second, he ignores the significance of Gadamer's distinction between the classical as normative and the classical as historical upon which I will elaborate below.

II.

First, although it is beyond the scope of this paper, I have argued elsewhere that Gadamer's concept of tradition is not to be construed as something fixed or reified. Rather, it is a formal concept which exhibits no concrete content of its own and, perhaps, could be said to have more of a regulative than a constitutive function. Certainly, particular traditions contain specific norms, beliefs, practices and so forth and may serve as a foundation for the actual prejudices (*Vorurteilen*) one holds.

However, any truth or meaning that a particular tradition may have is to be found only by engaging in dialogue with it or in the continual raising of timeless questions about its content. Differently put, the *Sache* is not discovered in how those questions are actually addressed or in the actual answers one finds, but in the interrogation process itself. If one accepts the historicity of human consciousness, as Gadamer does, one recognizes that we cannot neutralize ourselves to the effects of our histories or the conditions placed upon us by our traditions, though we do have a choice to embrace them as our own or not. So, perhaps it would be more fruitful to speak to those elements or prejudices of a tradition which one chooses to accept or reject? In other words, since Caputo does not at all make clear what would constitute a tradition in its entirety or how one historical tradition might be distinguished from another, why should we regard what is handed down in a holistic or totalistic sense? Specifically, we always have the option of re-evaluating elements of a tradition, of accepting or rejecting an authority figure. Someone can embrace certain aspects of his traditions or he can reject those parts that he regards as degenerate, obsolete, or irrelevant. What finite human beings cannot do is transcend the effects of their history or traditions as a general rule.

Particular prejudices may be more or less likely to facilitate understanding but „step[ping]-back from all horizonality," as Caputo implies we should, is impossible for anyone who accepts *Dasein's* fundamental thrownness. Just as questions, by their very nature, are intentional and delineate possible responses, any meaningful kind of human inquiry has a sense of direction

or intentionality – that is, one must always already be attuned to or possess some knowledge of the world in which one lives and respond to it.

Neither the Romantic ideal of interpretation as divination nor the Enlightenment's faith in the apriority of reason is acceptable to Gadamer or to anyone who acknowledges that human beings are historically situated. Still, one can and should remain open to possibilities which may be disclosed when one encounters the world in which one finds oneself or to the objects which constitute it, and this becomes most evident when we consider how we stand in relation to the traditions which constitute us or distinguish us as individuals. For example, when Gadamer describes the activity of preservation, he admits that it involves „an act of reason, though an inconspicuous one." (Gadamer 1994, p.281)

What he is suggesting here is that any act of interpretation or appropriation need not preclude taking a critical stance towards who we are or what constitutes us. Rather, preservation includes and requires this critical perspective if the specific truth-claims of any particular tradition are to be „freely taken over." What is not freely chosen or „rationally grounded," are the historical conditions in which one finds oneself and the specific traditions which one must confront. For that is what we are „thrown into," as Heidegger would say, or what Bakhtin maintains is „thrust upon" us. In other words, „the authority of what has been handed down to us...always has power over our attitudes and behavior;" however, „[t]rue authority does not have to be authoritarian." (Gadamer 1994, p. 280) Even in rejecting some aspect of tradition, we are still responding to its claims.

In sum, Gadamer refers to tradition in a merely formal sense, not to any actual world of values or particular set of norms. Thus, it is not clear what kind of a conservative Gadamer would be, even if he were one, since he manifests no commitment to any specific tradition or concrete set of prejudices. Certainly, he would be unable to deny that he too is constituted by the traditions to which he belongs but that does not mean that he considers those normative for all understanding at all times or in all places.

III.

Second, Caputo conflates the normative concept of the classical with „the tradition" or what is popularly referred to as „the canon of Western philosophy." Moreover, he indicates that this fusion, between the classical which represents the historical period of antiquity and the classical as that which has „suprahistorical value," leads to many misconceptions about the

nature of authority and tradition. In other words, the tendency today is to identify classical works as those belonging to ancient Greek and Roman times, which is perhaps due to the influence of the Renaissance's retrieval of the texts and documents of this epoch. Does this mean that Gadamer is arguing that all works of antiquity should be understood as having suprahistorical value? Not necessarily, for what is classical in the normative sense must be proved to be so time and time again, as he persistently maintains. This is what Romanticism failed to recognize – namely, that the classical works which have authoritative value are not only Scriptural or those which belong to antiquity. Rather, they are those which „present tasks of historical understanding to a developed historical consciousness, one that is aware of historical distance." (Gadamer 1994, p. 290)

This is what leads Gadamer to conclude that understanding is to be thought of as „participating in an event of tradition." (Gadamer 1994, p. 290) Through such participation we are not simply preserving what has been handed down by merely repeating it. If a work is to be deemed classical in a normative sense, even if it is a classic in the historical sense of the term or has traditionally belonged to the canon of Western philosophy, it can only be so because it is meaningful or relevant here and now. In other words, „[t]he classics only become classics when they are relevant again. They [works of antiquity] are like the ghosts Odysseus met in the underworld. They cannot speak until Odysseus performs the sacrifice that gives them fresh blood to drink." (Wills 1997, p. 42) Differently stated, historically classical works must prove themselves time and again. Whatever meaning they may have had previously cannot simply be taken for granted or regarded as given. If a classic is to have any normative value at all, or be said to possess any timeless truth, it must continue to be revealed by different interpreters under different conditions for different periods in history and in different ways.

Gadamer makes a similar point when he discusses the historical context and evolution in our understanding of the sacred and the profane: „It is quite in order that the opposition between profane and sacred proves to be only relative. We need only recall the meaning and history of the word 'profane'… But that does not alter the fact that the profane has remained a concept related to sacred law and can be defined by reference to it alone." (Gadamer 1994, p. 150) In sum, just as the profane loses its meaning without some sense of the sacred, so too do classical texts lose their value when the questions they raise become irrelevant to their readers.

Caputo also insists that Gadamer ultimately resists the radical implications of Heidegger's phenomenology by remaining „attached to the tradition" in a way that precludes critique:

> Gadamer remains within the tradition, which he regards as an inescapable facticity, but he sees no need to think through the tradition to that which is at work, or at play, in the tradition. He is concerned with what is given in the tradition--with keeping it alive, with passing on the word and teaching us to listen--but not with the giving process itself, the event of unconcealment itself which comes to pass in and as the tradition (Caputo 1987, p.114).

But, which tradition or set of traditional values and prejudices is Caputo referring to here? As I have indicated above, I will continue to assume that this means the tradition of Western metaphysics. Caputo says as much himself when he argues that Gadamer, like all metaphysicians, „wants to give us comfort in the face of flux, to reassure us that all is well, that beneath the surface of historical transition an unchanging, infinite spirit labors" (Caputo 1987, p.112). However, once again, Caputo fails to distinguish between the general or formal concept of tradition, which assumes no particular or substantive content, and the specific elements or prejudices that do provide such substance.

Again, if one accepts Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* – which understands human beings as always, already thrown into a set of existential conditions – this would entail an appeal not to some single tradition but, rather, to a complex network of traditions. In other words, this need not mean that there is any particular tradition or set of prejudices – i.e., any specific content – to which Gadamer is appealing for its authoritative value.

When Gadamer invokes Aristotle's *phronesis* as a model for hermeneutic understanding, he is not thereby appealing to any of the specific moral virtues that comprised Aristotle's cultural traditions or political community. For example, the excellence of courage that is described in reference to the exploits of the heroic warriors of ancient Greece reflects an ideal that would be virtually meaningless for today's soldier who is unlikely to ever engage in hand-to-hand combat. Moreover, courage can take many forms – e.g., Bonhoeffer's resistance to Nazism, Fannie Lou Hamer's civil rights activism or, in a unique and contemporary example, Fr. Gregory Boyle's ministry in Los Angeles involving street gangs. It could be argued that each of these individuals has found his/her virtue in terms of a mean between the extremes of excess and deficiency – specifically, between the deficiencies of apathy and inaction and the excesses of violent confrontation.

In addition, what Aristotle's ethics does not allow us to ignore is that, if one is capable of understanding any of the virtues, or understands how moral excellence may be realized, it will depend upon one's ties to a community and a familiarity with traditional norms. Even if one grasps this in a strictly negative sense. In other words, even if one's understanding

of the good is understood only in relation to *what it is not* – for instance, action X is neither cowardly nor reckless – this is not akin to a view from nowhere. In each of the above instances, of what I would call courageous characters, none exhibited the kind of warrior virtues or martial excellence that Aristotle extolled and Aristotelian ethics preceded the traditions of their religious faiths.

Still, his classical text can provide a ground from which to understand their actions. I too can find truth or authoritative value in Aristotle's concept of virtue insofar as it provokes me to question my own behavior and character. Obviously, reading this classical text cannot answer the question as to what would constitute courage for me in a given situation, nor can it offer clear counsel as to how I might become the courageous person that I desire to be. However, if one allows Aristotle's work to inspire inquiry and reflection, its authoritative value can be maintained. To fail to engage with a text in this manner means refusing to engage in the dialogue or „play" (*Spiel*) that is essential to the kind of hermeneutic understanding that Gadamer describes.

IV.

This leads to my last question in response to Caputo. Namely, is his claim, that it is not the „process itself" or „event of unconcealment" with which Gadamer is concerned, plausible given a close reading of *Truth and Method*? Given Gadamer's persistent claim, that understanding always means understanding differently, it seems that it is precisely the event or process with which he is concerned – especially when it is the dialectical or dialogical nature of understanding that he repeatedly emphasizes, and when he himself uses the term „event" to characterize it. While I would emphasize Heidegger's influence on Gadamer, Caputo insists on contrasting the two thinkers. Saying that,

> for Heidegger the *Sache* is not any particular metaphysics or fusion of metaphysical standpoints but the very happening of metaphysics as such… He wants to think the truth-event itself, the happening of truth and untruth, which is what *a-letheia* means. Gadamer is interested in the verum, *aletheia*, what is true here and now and ready for our consumption (application), not *a-letheia*, the event of concealment and unconcealment (Caputo 1987, p.115).

I would argue that this „happening" is precisely what Gadamer is concerned with insofar as he too focuses on the event of concealment and

unconcealment that Heidegger describes as „truth" or *aletheia*. However, Gadamer does have a practical side that is far less evident in Heidegger, in as much as understanding is considered inseparable from application. Gadamer refers to truth as that which is meaningful only insofar as it is concrete and particular rather than as abstract or universal. In other words, as I've already explained above, if anything is to have any relevance or significance for me, then it must be applicable to my life or the conditions of my existence. Differently stated, meaning is contextual for Gadamer in a way that it isn't for Heidegger.

Moreover, what Gadamer calls the „fusion of horizons" is not represented as some melding together of particular traditions or metaphysical perspectives. Rather**,** fusion is only possible to the extent that one is asking the same questions as the object of interpretation or „other" (text, work of art or fellow human creature) with which one is in „dialogue." If the interpreter and the object, or conversational partner, do not at least agree on the questions or the nature of the matter at hand (the *Sache*), then dialogue is manifestly impossible. Still, because Gadamer does not explicitly offer a definition of truth, as Heidegger did, it is easy to see why some criticize him in this fashion. As he does with tradition or the good, Gadamer tends to define „truth" in a predominantly negative fashion -– that is, truth in interpretation is most often represented in terms of what it is not. For example, truth is not something repeatable or verifiable in a scientific sense; it is not transcendent, trans-historical or prejudice free; and, it is not revealed to us as the product of a specific method or in accordance with universal principles or canons.

Nonetheless, it is not entirely arbitrary, despite its relativity or manifold nature, for that would make a mockery of the very notion by rendering the term trivial at best, meaningless at worst. Like Bakhtin, Gadamer's notion of truth is „dialogical." Differently stated, Bakhtin describes Dostoevsky's heroes in a manner that is quite similar to Heidegger's *Dasein* -– that is, not as some static character preconceived and constructed according to the author's plan, but as a being who is constantly revealing himself through his projects and comportment in the world of the novel.

Thus, truths are revealed in a give-and-take process of engagement, in the event of dialogue, not via some static fusion of subject and object. Unfortunately, the scope of this essay prevents me from elaborating further here. However, in an attempt to put the most generous interpretation on Caputo's critique, what else might he be trying to say? Or, what does he mean when he says that Gadamer is interested in *aletheia* over *a-letheia*? Perhaps his point is that Gadamer remains trapped within the perspective of

a subjectivist metaphysics, whereas Heidegger has somehow transcended it. If so, how likely is this? Has Heidegger succeeded in overcoming his own historical situation or managed to avoid questions of ultimacy that have pervaded human history? Has he managed to secure that proverbial „view from nowhere" to see beyond the metaphysical tradition of Western philosophy? Could this be what Caputo is referring to when he deems the early Heidegger a „radical" and Gadamer a „conservative"?

As mentioned previously, despite Heidegger's insistence on the historicity of understanding, he himself displays a typically Modern attitude toward the philosophical tradition he has inherited. Specifically, he is convinced that his phenomenological approach to fundamental ontology has succeeded in doing away with the „degenerate" metaphysics of the past. But how is this kind of escape possible if one accepts an ontology of finitude? Isn't it more likely that his thought would also remain tinged with traditional metaphysical elements? One might say that this actually renders him less of an historical thinker or less radical than Gadamer. For not only does Gadamer give extensive accounts of the thinkers who preceded him and recognizes his debt to them, he, unlike Heidegger, „refuses to drive a wedge between metaphysics and hermeneutics." (Grondin 1995, p.14) In fact, according to Grondin, what distinguishes Gadamer from his 20th century peers is that his is the only philosophy „that did not recommend itself as an overcoming of metaphysics." (Grondin 1995, p.17)

Thus, I would argue, despite Heidegger's emphasis on temporality and *Dasein's* finitude, it is he not Gadamer who does not go far enough or backs off from radical historicity. Differently stated, Heidegger's „massive shift 'from metaphysics to hermeneutics'... [remains] tacitly metaphysical in nature" (Grondin 1995, p.16). This is due to the very conditions tradition places upon us and the fact that we inherit a past. Moreover, despite the claims of Heidegger or those who insist we live in an age that is „post-metaphysics", we still cannot avoid asking metaphysical questions. Why is this? Perhaps ultimate questions, or those pertaining to first principles, remain meaningful to the extent that the act of questioning itself always reveals something true even if or, perhaps, because definitive answers continue to elude us or because the truths one discovers can so often be something unexpected.

Still, no human being is capable of going so far that he or she can claim to have discovered something entirely new – for example, paradigm shifts never prove to be quite as „massive" as they might first appear. Or, as Grondin says,„[i]t is only if we pretend to stand on a firm, universal, principled and logical ground that we can discard an entire tradition." (Grondin 1995, p.16) Of course, this is a mere pretense. Thus, we must rest content with

making moves which are slightly less radical and settle for a more finite form of transcendence. As Grondin puts it,

> [h]ermeneutical thinking disbelieves the notion that there could be something like a completely new era in philosophy. We are too finite, too dependent on tradition and the work of history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) to entertain the utopian and perhaps dangerous hope of a new beginning in the realm of thought. Indeed such a rupture would disregard the achievements of the past out of which contemporary thought continues to nourish itself. (Grondin 1995, p. 17)

Grondin concludes that the truly universal character of hermenetics lies precisely in this admission and acceptance of human finitude. That „[t]he metaphysical claim of Gadamer's hermeneutics only renews the universal or ontological claim of philosophy, while shunning its theological (or ultimately grounding) foundation." (Grondin 1995, p.18) Nonetheless, critics like Caputo suggest otherwise – namely, that there is or must be a dogmatic assumption behind the appeal to tradition. Is this warranted? Or, is this critic merely assuming something that Gadamer does not?

In many respects, Caputo's arguments suggest that Gadamer's position depends upon an „implicit acceptance of the metaphysical distinction between a more or less stable and objective meaning and its ceaselessly changing expression" (Caputo 1987, p.111). But, he offers no textual evidence for this and Gadamer's theory of understanding has been devoted to overcoming exactly those sorts of dichotomies, towards blurring the distinction between subjectivism and objectivism. While Caputo's criticism presupposes dualisms like these, I would maintain that Gadamer does not, for nowhere does he indicate that meaning can exist outside of its particular concrete expression. This is why Gadamer equates „understanding" with „application," for there can be no access to „meaning per se" or the „truth-in-itself." According to Gadamer, „understanding always involves something like applying the text to be understood to the interpreter's present situation." (Gadamer 1994, p. 308).

Ironically, it is precisely this conflation of „meaning" and „significance" that leaves Gadamer open to charges of relativism and subjectivism by neo-Schleiermacheans like E.D. Hirsch. By failing to allow for any stable content or objective truths and rejecting the separation of understanding and application, Gadamer's position is deemed subjectivistic and relativistic. As I have argued above, although a classical text, may be authoritative for hermeneutic understanding, it is a purely formal kind of authority or „universal" norm – that is, it is one which is devoid of any actual meaning or content until the questions which it raises are taken up by the interpreter

and applied to some concrete situation. As with Aristotle's idea of natural law, this kind of universal has „only a critical function. No dogmatic use can be made of it." (Gadamer 1994, p. 320) Yet, this is what Caputo accuses Gadamer of doing – accepting some notion of a work's „objective meaning" that will serve as a substantive criterion for determining which particular „expressions" of it are correct or incorrect in a categorical fashion. In other words, Caputo is construing the process of interpretation as analogous to an act of subsumption, whereby a particular interpretation of a text may be subsumed under some notion of „The Text Itself" or in accordance with „The Tradition" without explicitly saying what that would entail or how it is that Gadamer's hermeneutics is more consistent with a Platonic Theory of Forms than a Heideggerian concept of finitude and historicity. So, is it really Gadamer who is manifesting a pretension to ultimate meaning or objectivity in interpretation or someone else? It is precisely this notion of interpretation, found in „legal dogmatics," that Gadamer says is „untenable" (Gadamer 1994, p. 330).

Only if one equates universality with ultimacy, or assumes that meaning and its expression are distinct and separable, or identifies the authoritative function of tradition with something dogmatically authoritarian, are Caputo's charges plausible. Again, and paradoxically, it is Gadamer's insistence to the contrary – namely, that interpreters must give up the search for an *Aufhebung* or accept that ultimate foundations are elusive, coupled with the willingness to abandon all hope of objectivity in interpretation – that has led other critics to accuse Gadamer of the most crude forms of relativism.

V.

As I mention above, philosophers like Hirsch are not concerned that Gadamer is insufficiently „radical," as Caputo maintains, but that his hermeneutics is radically subjective to the extent that it undermines the conditions for the possibility of truth in interpretation altogether. Yet, in many respects, both forms of criticism share fundamental assumptions that Gadamer explicitly rejects. In order to shed some light on what these presuppositions might be, I think it is worth considering what another critic has to say regarding Gadamer's „conservatism."

Georgia Warnke suggests that it is Gadamer's „anticipation of completeness," among other things, that gives a conservative spin to his account of hermeneutical understanding. This concept represents Gadamer's version of a principle of charity or rationality. Specifically, the interpreter should

assume that the text constitutes a coherent whole – i.e., that the parts will cohere with the whole in such a way that truths will emerge and that this makes an authoritative claim upon the interpreter.

This is basically what is meant by „enabling prejudices" (*Vorurteilen*), as discussed above, or what Heidegger calls the „fore-structure of the understanding" and both function similarly. However, according to Warnke, Gadamer's central question is, what constitutes the truth of the text as a whole? Although she herself does not make clear what she takes this to mean, she seems to assume, not unlike Caputo, that it involves an appeal to some inherent or essential content in the „text itself." In other words, that the interpreter must accept, at least provisionally, what the text says explicitly and assume that he has something to learn from it.

Warnke uses *Mein Kampf* to illustrate her point that there is a danger in even temporarily accepting the text as authoritative. „If we have to assume the normative authority and possible truth of a work in order to allow for an adequate understanding of it, how can we possibly learn to criticize it?" (Warnke 1987, p. 90) Her concern is that texts like this, whose primary aim is to spread some pernicious form of propaganda, will be accepted without reservation, critical insight nor even questioned. Still, to what kind of „truth" is she referring? The implicit presupposition is that the „truth" of *Mein Kampf* would be constituted by what Hitler himself intended. Yet, this appeal to authorial intent is one that Gadamer explicitly rejects as irrelevant, if not an impossible ideal. Instead, if one accepts the hermeneutic priority of the question (as noted above), then it is not what a work or its author attempts to tell us directly that forces the reader to confront his own prejudices. Rather, it is the questions which are raised in the context of reading it or the ways in which the reader attempts to apply what is written that challenges her.

To reiterate: We are confronted with certain questions to the extent that we are challenged or provoked by the answers proposed. Moreover, these arise only insofar as we are already engaged in „dialogue" with the object of interpretation. Like any object, which is inaccessible or meaningless in itself and always calls for interpretation, questions too can only emerge in an actual encounter with a text or other human artifact. The historically effected interpreter is one who allows herself to be challenged and risks her own prejudices, thus enabling a fusion of horizons to take place. This is a fusion which occurs at the level of questioning, not to the extent that substantive responses can be given or are passively assimilated. „Adequate understanding can only be achieved if one ventures into the realm of questioning." This is the kind of „questioning which is not always stated, or cannot be fully

articulated, but which is nevertheless essential to the penetration of what is said." (Grondin 1995, p.14).

Thus, one need never „give up the attempt to learn from *Mein Kampf*" as Warnke says we must nor do we have anything to fear from reading it. Despite the fact that I may not be interested in reading such a work (as I have better things to do with my time), this does not mean that no one has anything to learn from an encounter with it. Most likely, if one has any degree of historical awareness and human sensitivity, what one will learn from it will be very different, if not altogether contrary, to whatever Hitler himself may have intended. And perhaps, this is one good reason to avoid reducing the truth-value of a text to authorial intent, as Gadamer repeatedly admonishes us.

VI.

Lastly, as discussed above, there is no need to assume that understanding requires a grasp of the „text as a whole," as Warnke suggests Gadamer does. Nowhere in his hermeneutics does Gadamer appeal to a holistic notion of truth, an ideal of the „work-itself" or to „authorial intent" – again, something that gets him into trouble with those like Hirsch who accuse him of relativism. Not only would such ideals depend upon a static conception of the object of interpretation, Gadamer also repeatedly reminds us that this cannot be the case with human artifacts like texts or works of art. In essence, Gadamer's anticipation of completeness is simply that – namely, a principle of charity which assumes or *anticipates* that the work is coherent and intelligible. This does not mean that inconsistencies will not become evident or made manifest in textual interpretation.

However, mediating between conflicting claims or apparent contradictions is precisely what interpretation or application entails, and this need not involve any sort of fidelity to some reified ideal of The Text as a whole or „completed" entity. Instead, as I have been arguing all along, Gadamer is appealing to a regulative ideal here rather than making any substantive kind of claim – that is, his anticipation of completeness not only allows for but facilitates the kind of openness that is essential for interpretation, not one which constitutes the understanding of a text or reduces its meaning to authorial intent.

Warnke also takes on Gadamer's conception of reason. Specifically, she claims that his hermeneutics merely presents us with „a new form of subjectivism" – one which recurs to a „different form of subjectivism that simply

affirms the interpretations of the tradition to which one happens to belong." (Warnke 1987, pp. 90-91). Warnke, like Caputo, believes that Gadamer does not go „far enough" in his historicization of reason. What disturbs her is that Gadamer does not give up „the notion of a reason that can transcend conventional bounds" but, instead, „tries to preserve it while recognizing the demands of history" (Warnke 1987, p.166).

In a similar vein, Caputo says that Gadamer merely „offers us the most liberal possible version of a fundamentally conservative idea" (Caputo, p.115). Clearly, Warnke is accusing Gadamer of being a conservative or reactionary sort of subjectivist that „retains something like a deabsolutized Hegelian conception [of reason]" (Warnke 1987, p.165). In a similar kind of analogy, one might also characterize him as a Cartesian who manifests a sensitivity to history. Assuming that this is what is generally meant by those who label him or his hermeneutics conservative, it is worth elaborating on what Gadamer has to say about reason and its relation to tradition.

On the one hand, Gadamer denies that reason and authority are necessarily antithetical, arguing that authority is something that must be „earned" and „has to do not with obedience but rather with knowledge." (Gadamer 1994, p. 279) On the other hand, as he also does with his interrogation of tradition, Gadamer spends more time critiquing others' conception of reason than he does developing a positive one of his own. And perhaps there is good reason for this – specifically, Gadamer asks himself whether his own attempt at historical hermeneutics has succeeded in freeing itself „from the metaphysical claims of reflective philosophy." (Gadamer 1994, p. 342) In other words, he puts the same question to his own work that he levels at others. Moreover, he explicitly acknowledges that, while „absolute reflection is powerfully compelling," we must also admit that, „Hegel's critics never really succeeded in breaking its magic spell." (Gadamer 1994, p. 342)

Thus, when Warnke conflates the terms „text" and „subject-matter" as she does throughout her critique; or, when Caputo confuses the *Sache* or contents of a specific tradition with the formal concept of tradition, they are ignoring Gadamer's injunction that:

> We are concerned with understanding historically effected consciousness in such a way that the immediacy and superiority of the work does not dissolve into a mere reflective reality in the consciousness of the effect – i.e., we are concerned to conceive a reality that limits and exceeds the omnipotence of reflection." (Gadamer 1994, p. 342)

Actual texts represent those kinds of „realities" which both limit and exceed human rationality. In this context, Gadamer is attempting to show

here how Hegel's dialectical argument jettisoned any Kantian type appeals to „things-in-themselves" or rational intuition. In other words, he uses Hegel's „polemic against Kant's 'thing-in-itself'" to make a further point about the nature of reason and the more practical nature of hermeneutic understanding.

Still, a problem inevitably arises whenever one sets limits. Namely, if reason sets limits to its own understanding, it has already, in effect, gone beyond those limits by making such a distinction in the first place. For „[w]hat makes a limit a limit always also includes knowledge of what is on both sides of it. It is the dialectic of the limit to exist only by being superseded." (Gadamer 1994, p.343) What Gadamer does is call for „openness" and invokes the „priority of the question" as requirements for understanding and interpretation. (Gadamer 1994, p. 362) However, the problem of limits is never completely dissolved for, „[t]he openness of the question is not boundless. It is limited by the horizon of the question." (Gadamer 1994, p.363)

In other words, not only is Gadamer not the type of Hegelian that Caputo describes, he is sympathetic to his criticisms as well as to those of Warnke:

> Thus the question arises how far the dialectical superiority of reflective philosophy corresponds to a substantive truth and how far it merely creates a formal appearance. For the arguments of reflective philosophy cannot ultimately obscure the fact that there is some truth in the critique of speculative thought based on the standpoint of finite human consciousness. (Gadamer 1994 p. 344)

Clearly, Gadamer acknowledges that his own hermeneutics is subject to these same conditions – namely, to the limits of finite human consciousness. Differently stated, he is no more immune to what Grondin calls „*Dasein's* dream" than anyone else. This dream, manifest in our yearning or need for something ultimate or in our search for some firm ground for our beliefs, is something that no human person can escape entirely. Whether claims to ultimacy lie in the kind of stable foundation sought by Descartes, or in the culmination of the development of reason in Absolute Spirit that Hegel described, the fundamental denial of human finitude and the refusal to confront our limitations remains an all too common human failure. Gadamer, however, works quite hard to avoid this as much as possible. Unlike Plato's appeal to *anamnesis* or the certainty Descartes discovered in his *Cogito*, Gadamer openly admits that there must be a finite starting point for any act of interpretation – that is, what Heidegger called the fore-structures of understanding, what Aristotle says is „known to us" or what Gadamer himself identifies as *Vorurteilen* cannot be transcended.

If one accepts that premise, then the only distinction to be made is whether one acknowledges one's prejudices or not -– whether one remains trapped in a dogmatic slumber or directly confronts the reality of one's facticity and finite nature. Differently put, „[t]he Archimedean point from which Hegel's philosophy could be toppled can never be found through reflection." (Gadamer 1994, p. 344)

Like so many philosophers who are driven by a desire to know, to make sense of the world, to seek out the deeper meaning of words or deeds, Gadamer may certainly have wished for a stable starting point or have dreamt of ultimate answers. If one is allowed to dream the impossible dream, then he may indeed be guilty of „continuing to search for an *Aufhebung"*; as Caputo puts it; or, as Warnke says, of having failed to give up on „the notion of a reason that can transcend conventional bounds." Regardless, Gadamer makes no explicit claim to have found any such thing or to have the satisfaction of having this dream realized.

In brief, I would argue that Gadamer's hermeneutics simply reminds us of what it means to be human -– namely, that every human being or *Dasein* must find a way to live within the tension of limitation and transcendence. Dreaming for the impossible in one's intellectual life is not the same as seeking perfection in one's daily activities, nor is it even identical to believing that such is attainable. For instance, Kant recognized that some ideals are asymptotic – that is, worth striving for despite being unattainable.

Aristotle too distinguished between the object of wishing and that of deliberation and choice – namely, that we can wish for anything but we only deliberate about matters that are in our power to change. I place Gadamer's anticipation of completeness, appeals to reason and the authoritative value of tradition in a similar category insofar as they represent regulative or corrective ideals that depend upon an ontology of finitude as well as on the historicity of understanding. To conclude with this point, I will turn to one of his shorter works in order to argue that, not only is Gadamer *not* a conservative, he describes a creative approach to interpretation and defends a dynamic concept of reason.

VII.

In his article on „Historical Transformations of Reason," Gadamer notes that „[h]uman reason occurs in manifold forms."Thus, he is not explicitly appealing to some singular or monolithic conception of rationality. Rather, he traces reason's development and acknowledges that the tradition we have

inherited from the Greeks forces us to „raise again and again the question of the *Logos*, of the rationality of being itself." (Gadamer 1979, p.13) According to his research, there have been three basic attempts to respond to this problem:

> The first answer is Leibniz's subordination of the new science under the old metaphysics; the second, Hegel's renewal of the Greek *Logos* in attempting to discover reason in nature as well as in history on the basis of a universal 'logic'; and the third is the attempt of our century to break through the subjectivist approach of modern philosophy and to restrain the primacy of self-consciousness in favor of a broader concept of reason and being. (Gadamer, 1979, p. 9)

In addition, Gadamer insists that we cannot completely escape the particular form in which this question of rationality is comprehended today. Specifically, the challenge for contemporary philosophers is to strive to break away from subjectivism as he indicates above. That this is the task which we, historically conscious beings, must face up to seems clear. Whether or not we can actually do this or re-shape the debate is another matter. Moreover, this is not an achievement to which Gadamer has explicitly laid claim. On the contrary, he admonishes his fellow philosophers, professional or otherwise, to take up this task for themselves and offers hope by reminding us that,

> [e]ach experience that breaks the Egocentrism of the individual by recognition, solidarity, or love, stands in the bright space of what we have to justify by thinking, and in front of which we justify ourselves. Science may dedicate its investigatory efforts to the world of nature, and to the social life which carries us on, as well as to the historical worlds which are transmitted to us;--philosophical thought will participate in all the different forms of human rational creativity, not with the despotic superiority of a system of concepts which integrates everything in its framework, but with the thoughtfulness of someone, who never knows totally and definitely what he knows. (Gadamer 1979, p.14)

What this suggests, to me, is that philosophy should remain a primarily second-order, critical or corrective discipline. In other words, the suggestion is that philosophers must be content to reflect upon the claims of the sciences, whether physical/"hard" or „soft"/social, and/or raise questions concerning their methods and conclusions, while resisting the temptation to seek ultimate answers or provide firm foundations. Simply put, the job of all philosophically inclined thinkers and interpreters of texts is to remind each other as well as their fellow human beings that there is much we do not know, that our theories may rest on false assumptions and that our methods may be flawed or require critical re-examination. In this respect, any phi-

losopher can be a modern day Socrates – wise in not only knowing but in *showing* the world that there are things which he or she does not know. We might also recall Hamlet's injunction, „[t]here are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.5)

Certainly, living with this is neither comforting nor easy but, perhaps, it represents yet another kind of courage that Aristotle himself might appreciate. The prejudices with which one identifies, or which constitute one's character, are often not brought to the fore or made evident until they are challenged by another *Dasein* with a different starting point or set of assumptions. This underscores the discussion above regarding the limits of reason, for what else are prejudices but the particular limitations which prevent us from reaching an ideal state of absolute consciousness or complete openness. Like questions, which circumscribe possible responses; or, the existential conditions of a particular *Dasein* which delimit certain possibilites while, at the same time, open up a space for other possibilities to emerge, our prejudices (*Vorurteilen*) actively enable understanding to take place. Differently stated, without specific prejudices, a historical subject and articulated questions, experience and understanding would be impossible. This is the sense in which rational thought and tradition may be said to be authoritative or have value.

What else inspires a challenge or confrontation except that which is taken seriously or, in some sense, is considered authoritative? Only once one has effectively risked her prejudices, and found reasons which enable her to defend or reject them, can claims to have understood someone else's words or to have appropriated the meaning of a text be substantive. This is what makes dialectical or dialogical understanding a creative kind of event as it is one in which an individual must actively participate. How can this possibly be construed as „conservative" rather than as productive or liberating? Traditions, and the traditional values and beliefs which constitute them, may be preserved or conserved to some extent but hermeneutic understanding compels one to understand in a different way. Or as Bakhtin puts it, „[t}he genuine life of the personality is made available only through a *dialogic* penetration of that personality, during which it freely and reciprocally reveals itself." (Bakhtin 1984, p. 59) And, although *Dasein* is not „radically" free (in the Sartrean sense), insofar as it cannot completely transcend or break away from the conditions of its history, the traditions which constitute it can and should be acknowledged – that is, one's debt to the past must be paid, even if that legacy is merely recognized as a point of departure from which to proceed or move beyond.

In conclusion, Gadamer may not be able to entirely avoid the charge of „subjectivism," to the extent that understanding will always involve the projected meanings of the interpreter and any objectivistic ideals have been rejected as chimerical. However, what prevents this historicization of reason from lapsing into a new form of subjectivism? What checks are placed on the interpretive process which will prevent an interpreter from imposing arbitrary prejudices on the text or object? Further questions remain regarding the *Sache selbst* or how to distinguish between prejudices which are enabling as opposed to those which may be disabling. I have made only a brief attempt at an answer here but have primarily been arguing that Gadamer is sufficiently radical, open and undogmatic -– that is, that he is not guilty of the kind of conservatism for which Caputo and Warnke criticize him. But, this does not address the criticisms of those who claim that this means Gadamer has gone „too far" in the direction of relativism. Must readers of Gadamer choose between these two conclusions? Specifically, does one have to accept that either Gadamer's hermeneutics is irredeemably conservative, due to his appeals to tradition and its authoritative value, or that he is guilty of a defending a relativistic theory of interpretation because he valorizes prejudice and insists on the historicity of human consciousness?

Of course, I would insist that this question rests on a false dichotomy but, just as I said at the beginning of this essay, that argument is beyond the scope of this paper. In the meantime, I hope that I have mitigated suggestions that Gadamer is a reactionary or conservative thinker (regardless of whatever his personal politics or religious beliefs may have been); and, that his account of hermeneutic understanding is sufficiently open to allow for manifold interpretations of any literary work that one deems worthy of reading, whether that text is *Mein Kampf* or the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

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