

# FOR A POST-HISTORICIST PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY. BEYOND HERMENEUTICS<sup>1</sup>

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ABSTRACT: With the publication of *Being and Time* and *Truth and Method* philosophical hermeneutics seems to have become the official philosophy of history, with exclusive rights on the questions arising from the fact-of-having-a-past. From now on the epistemological approach of the German historical school, reaching a peak in Dilthey's thought, is unanimously recognized as definitively overcome, *aufheben*, by the ontological interrogation of hermeneutics. But, with the same unanimity, it is also recognized that the reasons behind this overcoming and their validity are not readily apparent. For, as it has been shown in the literature, Heidegger's critique of Dilthey proves to be partial and lacunar, whereas Gadamer's is straightforwardly ambiguous. Our paper assumes as its first task a re-evaluation of these critiques and of the hypotheses proposed in the literature with regard to what could be the problem with Dilthey's epistemology. In this sense the paper argues that the problem resides in that the fundamental concepts on which it is based are bound to miss the peculiarity of history by idealizing it and masking the power relations inhabiting it. As a second task, our paper proposes an investigation of whether philosophical hermeneutics itself manages to rise to the expectations through which Dilthey's thought is evaluated. As it will become manifest, the answer to this question is in the negative. That is why, in the end, we will defend the necessity of a post-historicist and post-hermeneutic philosophy of history.

KEYWORDS: epistemology of history, ontology, historical experience, historical meaning, historical understanding

## 1. Introduction

Sometimes it is worth doing philosophy with the hammer even if you do not have Nietzsche's genius and are not planning the transvaluation of all values. A wrong question, a brutal inquisitive gesture can open paths imagination alone would not have discovered.

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Take for example: how many books dealing with the philosophy of history have been written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

How should one approach such question? How could one answer it? It is practically impossible to determine the number of books written in *one* language during a *single* year on any topic whatsoever. Books can take years to be published. Either because they are deemed not interesting by the criteria of their time only to be recognized as important afterwards; or because they get lost and are rediscovered only years later.

But if one disregards the practical difficulties involved in such an endeavor and, with a completely unreflective gesture, heads straight to the catalogs room of the nearest library or a database, while counting titles, one will be struck by the following fact: in the 20<sup>th</sup> century history was a problem mainly for the hermeneutic and phenomenological philosophy. Hence it was taken as an ontological problem and it received an ontological treatment. Judging by the number of books carrying titles with such keywords as 'narrative,' 'historical understanding,' 'phenomenology,' 'life-history,' etc. that come up during a basic search, all the other approaches to the problem are secondary.

Now, this is certainly a remarkable fact if we bear in mind that no later than the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the problem of history was considered to be an epistemological problem *par excellence*. As it is well known, for the German historical school, the first philosophical movement to study history in a systematic manner, the central problem was the possibility of an objective knowledge of history and the scientific character of the historical sciences.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, what happened so that the epistemology of history faded out of the philosophical scene and the ontological approach gained a hegemonic position?

The present paper proposes itself a threefold task: first of all, to retrace the origins of this shift in the history of the philosophy of history; second of all, to examine the theoretical justification (or lack thereof) of the abandonment of the epistemological approach to history; and, third of all, to examine whether the ontological approach proposed by the hermeneutic project is truly more suitable for the study of history and if it really does justice to the peculiarity of this field of investigation.

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<sup>2</sup> See in this sense Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Heaven & London: Yale University Press, 1994), 76-90; Jeffrey Andrew Barash, *Martin Heidegger and the Problem of Historical Meaning* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 1-64; Paul Hamilton, *Historicism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996).

## 2. Brief history of the philosophy of history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

If one were to retrace the history of the philosophy of history back to its turning point at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one would find the first signs of the shift from epistemology to ontology in the works of Wilhelm Dilthey and the process completed through the works of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

Dilthey commences his life's work on the premises of the historical school whose methodologist<sup>3</sup> he considered himself to be. His central question is the historical school's question: is an objective knowledge of history possible? Do the historical sciences really deserve the name 'science'? In contrast to the other members of the historical school though, Dilthey approached these questions by way of a "critique of historical reason" – paralleling Kant's "critique of pure reason" – centered on the constitution of knowledge in the historical sciences and their specificity in comparison with the natural sciences. It is in the elaboration of this critique that the shift towards ontology appears for the first time.

A failed attempt to offer for human sciences a methodological foundation through the development of a descriptive psychology determines Dilthey to approach the intertwining of knowledge and life head on. Once this reflection on life appears, it seems that nothing else matters any more and the fate of the epistemological approach to history is sealed. In fact, everything happens as if in both Dilthey's work and the history of philosophy such an epistemological inquiry has always been a means to an end, but never an end in itself. The way in which Heidegger describes Dilthey's thought in "Wilhelm Dilthey's Research and the Struggle for a Historical Worldview" provides us with a telling example.

Dilthey's formulation of the question of history *in terms of the history of the sciences* began with his essays on Schleiermacher's hermeneutics and those dealing with the study of the history of the sciences, etc. These essays are not simply historical research on the history of the sciences but rather attempts to understand how in earlier times human life was interpreted. Their ultimate theme is a question about the concept of life.

Dilthey's *epistemological* formulation of the question of history had the same motive. Here too we need to emphasize his question about the concept of life. [...] [H]is interest was not a doctrine of method and system; he was not

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<sup>3</sup> Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 84.

concerned with the question of how to classify particular sciences within different domains. Such matters later became the interest of Rickert.<sup>4</sup>

For Heidegger, the elaboration of the concept of life is Dilthey's greatest merit and fundamental contribution to the philosophy of history. This is the reason why, of all the philosophers of history before and after him, Heidegger takes Dilthey as partner of dialogue in the development of his thought. On the other hand though, Dilthey's greatest failing is that he did not go far enough in the line of questioning he started. Heidegger notes:

Dilthey penetrated into that reality, namely, human Dasein which, in the authentic sense, is in the sense of historical being. He succeeded in bringing this reality to givenness, defining it as living, free, and historical. But he did not pose the question of historicity itself, the question of the sense of being, i.e., concerning the being of beings.<sup>5</sup>

Heidegger's contention is that precisely because he does not pose the question of the meaning of being Dilthey fails to complete the project of the critique of historical reason. That is why both his *Ideas Concerning Descriptive and Analytic Psychology* – the work containing the first formulation of the critique of historical reason – and in his *Introduction to the Human Sciences* – containing the second formulation – are bound to remain unfinished. Thus Heidegger feels he has to take it upon himself and carry further the task remaining incomplete after Dilthey and the historical school. As he writes:

We need to repeat his questioning and to do this on the basis of a type of research – namely, *phenomenology* – that provides us with the suitable resources for advancing further than Dilthey's own position.<sup>6</sup>

His insights into historicity and reflections upon the being of history are meant to be just that: a repetition of Dilthey's questions but this time asked 'correctly,' i.e., so that they can be answered. These brief reflections upon historicity from "Wilhelm Dilthey's Research..." will receive an in-depth elaboration in the fifth chapter of *Being and Time*. But nowhere does Heidegger say either in what sense is phenomenology more suitable for the investigation of history or why the ontological examination of history constitutes a "further advancement" by comparison with Dilthey's epistemological inquiry.

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Wilhelm Dilthey's Research and the Struggle for a Historical Worldview," in Martin Heidegger, *Supplements. From the Earliest Essays to Being and Time and Beyond*, ed. John van Buren (Albany: State University of New York, 2002), 155.

<sup>5</sup> Heidegger, "Wilhelm Dilthey's Research," 159.

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger, "Wilhelm Dilthey's Research," 159.

It might seem that it is precisely in order to overcome this lack that, in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer engages in an extended discussion of the historical school, taking up the first half of the Part II. This work set out explicitly to “inquire into the consequences for the hermeneutics of the human sciences of the fact that Heidegger derives the circular structure of understanding from the temporality of Dasein”; i.e. to carry further, at the ontic level, Heidegger’s insights into the questions of history. Obviously, this task, whereby the shift away from epistemology in the study of history becomes complete, could have done without that “Historical preparation” culminating in “Overcoming the hermeneutical problem through phenomenological research” in Dilthey’s thought.

The only problem is that neither *Truth and Method* makes clear in what sense Dilthey’s epistemology of history is overcome through phenomenology’s ontological research. As it has been remarked in the literature, although

The general outlines of Gadamer’s estimation of Dilthey and the latter’s contribution to hermeneutic philosophy are fairly well known” [...], “[t]he exact details of Gadamer’s interpretation and critique of Dilthey and their justification (or lack of justification) are less clear – perhaps not in the least because Gadamer’s own remarks are for the most part rather general and oftentimes ambiguous as well.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, the only clear thing when it comes to what constitutes for Gadamer the problematic character of Dilthey’s thought is that announced in the titles of the sections dedicated to him: that there is a conflict between science and life and that this somehow gets Dilthey entangled in the “aporias of historicism.” That is why the interpreters of Gadamer’s work have adopted all the logical possibilities on the basis of what is said in the text.

For some, Gadamer accuses Dilthey for the psychologism and subjectivism of his epistemology.<sup>9</sup> For others, the problem would be the objectivism of his views on historical understanding.<sup>10</sup> Or the fact that he proves himself to be an

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Nenon, “Hermeneutical Truth and the Structure of Human Experience: Gadamer’s Critique of Dilthey,” in *Dilthey-jahrbuch für Philosophie und Geschichte der Geisteswissenschaften* 8 (1992-1993): 75.

<sup>8</sup> Nenon, “Hermeneutical Truth,” 75.

<sup>9</sup> See Anthony Giddens, “Hermeneutics and Social Theory,” in *Hermeneutics. Questions and Prospects*, eds. Gary Schapiro and Alan Sica (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 225 and David Couzens Hoy, *The Critical Circle. Literature, History and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1978), 11.

<sup>10</sup> See Joel Weinsheimer, *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method* (New Heaven & London: Yale University Press, 1985), 148-155.

objectivist and a subjectivist at the same time.<sup>11</sup> Or that his thought is purely and simply ambiguous.<sup>12</sup>

Given the symmetry of these positions it is obvious that each institutes itself as a counter-argument for its opposite and thus that they eventually annul each other.

This puts our brief history of the philosophy of history in a difficult position. By the very movement through which this history becomes manifest, by the same movement it also becomes opaque and incomprehensible. We have now a clear image of the steps that lead to the hegemony of the ontological approach to history but we have no clue as to why we have actually ended up here. In fact, given that no one seems to know in what it consists, the step beyond Dilthey and the historical school proposed by Heidegger and Gadamer in their respective hermeneutic projects ought to have taken us nowhere. And yet it does...

### 3. Why abandon the epistemological approach to history

In order to overcome this difficulty we would like to venture the following interpretive hypothesis: *the problem with Dilthey and the reason why his epistemology of history is to be left behind becomes manifest if one approaches the ambiguous text of Truth and Method from the point of view of Heidegger's reproach from "Wilhelm Dilthey's Struggle..." for not having asked the question of the being of history.*

The first indication in favor of this interpretive hypothesis appears already in that, as we have seen, Gadamer presents his work as a continuation of his master's. A second favorable sign for our hypothesis is to be found in the very terms in which Gadamer expresses the question that will guide *Truth and Method* after he learned the lessons from Dilthey's failure. These are precisely the general terms in which Heidegger discussed Dilthey's thought in "Wilhelm Dilthey's Struggle..." terms which appear only once in the whole Gadamerian corpus. Gadamer asks:

What is the relation between power and significance, between forces and ideas, between the facticity and the ideality of life? This question must decide how knowledge of history is possible.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Nenon, "Hermeneutical Truth," 77.

<sup>12</sup> James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other. Re-reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 64-65.

<sup>13</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London & New York: Continuum, 2004), 221.

From the point of view of this question, problematic in Dilthey's thought appear to be the basic concepts, the fundamental epistemic cuts on the basis of which he constructs his philosophy of history. For Gadamer, the problem of Dilthey's epistemology is that it proves itself incapable of showing how lived experience (be it individual or collective) becomes historical? How can it leave marks upon the future and future generations? Due to this, Gadamer shows, Dilthey is also prone to misunderstanding the concepts of historical meaning and historical understanding. For he ceaselessly falls prey to the temptation of overstating the ideality of existence and minimizing the play of forces immanent to the flux of historical life and the power relations constituting it.

3.1.

For Gadamer, in the first formulation of the critique of historical reason Dilthey misses completely the problem posed by historical experience. The task he assumed at this point was to institute the facts of consciousness as foundation for historical knowledge. The presupposition underlying this endeavor is announced explicitly by Dilthey:

[t]he first condition of the science of history is that I myself am a historical being, that the person studying history is the person making history.<sup>14</sup>

For him, just as the life of the individual is constituted through the continuous structuring and unification of the meaning of his/her personal experiences history is constituted by the meaning of the different particular events structured around certain unifying centers. And, just as the whole of someone's life can be understood on the basis of the particular experiences he/she had, history as such can be understood starting from any particular epoch.

As one can see, here the homogeneity between the subject and the object of historical knowledge, between the historian and the past to be known is postulated purely and simply. And with this it is postulated also the possibly historical character of human experience. Hence Dilthey's interest in the biographies of exceptional people supposed to open for us the royal path for understanding history. For history is nothing more, nothing less than a reflection of their genius.<sup>15</sup>

As Gadamer observes,

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<sup>14</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 217.

<sup>15</sup> See in this sense Wilhelm Dilthey, "Poetry and Experience," in *Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Works. Volume V*, eds. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

This, however, is no solution to the epistemological problem that Dilthey posed. Rather, posing homogeneity as its condition conceals the real epistemological problem of history.<sup>16</sup>

This is clearly visible in that it never crosses Dilthey's mind to ask the reverse question: why would not the geniality of exceptional people be the reflection of the historical movements in which they are caught?

### 3.2.

In the second formulation of the project of historical reason the problem of historical experience is finally recognized as a problem. By approaching the task he assumed for himself in terms of lived experience, Dilthey is finally in possession of the means to show why individual experience and historical experience are homogenous.

In contrast to the facts of consciousness, the lived experience invoked now is preconscious, prior to the subject-object dichotomy and defines itself as the smallest unity of meaning that can be taken as basis of the nexus of psychic life. And, still in contrast, it is teleologically oriented towards its exteriorization in expression (which can take different forms, above all linguistic), just as this exteriorization (the expression), through the very way in which it is constituted, paves the way for its understanding.

Through the correlation lived experience – expression – comprehension Dilthey sees though another one – *that between life and comprehension*. Behind this triad we discover the fact that life bears within itself from the very beginning a dimension of knowledge. Of course, this is a prescientific knowledge, but by taking the form of legend, work of art, economic order, law, etc., not less objective. Here we can find the ground of the homogeneity between the knower and the known in history, between the historian and the past under scrutiny. Gadamer is in perfect agreement with Dilthey on this point:

In language, moral values, and juridical forms the individual – the isolated being – is always already beyond his particularity.<sup>17</sup>

But, as *Truth and Method* shows, when it comes to the consequences to be drawn from all these, it would seem that we should keep away from Dilthey's thought.

Out of the correlation lived experience – expression and out of the latter's possibility to 'solidify' itself as objective spirit Dilthey jumps straightforwardly to the conclusion that

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<sup>16</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 217.

<sup>17</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Le probleme de la conscience historique* (Louvain: Publications universitaires de Louvain, 1963), 28.



Each single manifestation of life re-presents something common and shared in the realm of objective spirit.<sup>18</sup>

Is this not another way of affirming the identity of individual and historical experience? This time though Dilthey goes even further by showing in fact that individual experience is not just potentially but *de facto* historical. For if every gesture of the individual is a manifestation of the objective spirit and only because of this it can be understood, then the individual participates to history by every single gesture he/she makes. Here is the precise way in which the second formulation of the critique of historical reason misses historical experience.

By missing the peculiarity of historical experience and the particular way in which it differs from individual experience though, as we were saying, Dilthey fails to arrive at a suitable understanding of the concepts of historical meaning and historical understanding as well.

In the case of historical meaning everything happens as a direct consequence. Since there are just historical experiences, the meanings in which these are expressed and objectified, in their turn, cannot be but historical, every meaning being thus forced to reflect, like a Leibnizian monad, the whole history of humanity and to pave the way towards a complete understanding of the past, present and future. On this point, the only difference between the two formulations of Dilthey's critique of historical reason is that in the first all meaning it is just potentially, whereas in the second it is actually historical.

If one connects the dots between the problematical character of historical meaning and historical experience, the problem with historical understanding comes to the fore, too. For, irrespective of the way in which Dilthey approaches the question of historical knowledge, the understanding it presupposes will be forced to take as normative ideal the phantasm of complete transparency. Since any individual experience comes to express itself in an objective meaning and since this is always historical, understanding becomes a simple 'deciphering' of the past able to render it completely transparent. The only condition here is to pursue it with sufficient determination.

Thus, no wonder that when it comes to explaining how understanding takes place, Dilthey takes Schleiermacher's textual hermeneutics as a model. Gadamer remarks:

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<sup>18</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, "The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences," in *Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Works. Volume III*, eds. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 168.

We can thus understand why Dilthey starts from romantic hermeneutics. [...] Romantic hermeneutics came to the assistance since, as we saw, it took no account whatsoever of the historical nature of experience. It assumed that the object of understanding is the text to be deciphered and its meaning understood. Thus for romantic hermeneutics every encounter with a text is an encounter of the spirit with itself. Every text is strange enough to be fundamentally intelligible even when we know nothing about it except that it is text, writing, an expression of mind.<sup>19</sup>

So, irrespective of the way in which he poses the problem, Dilthey levels out the peculiarity of history, erasing its factual dimension and transforming it into a history of the spirit or an intellectual history.

Through this failure, Dilthey's thought functions like an index to the entire historical school and gives us the reasons for abandoning the epistemological approach to history as such. For, if we take a step back and regard the causes of Dilthey's failure from afar we will see that these are actually constitutive of the research presupposition of the classical epistemological project. The very definition of knowledge as a process carried by a subject upon an object forces us to look for its foundation in the direction of the subject and leaves us no other choice but to take either the consciousness of the individual or his or her life as the ultimate ground. This is the only possible choice because no other human trait is generic enough to characterize the knowing subject.

#### 4. Beyond hermeneutics?

That Dilthey and, in general, the historical school's approach to history deserves to be abandoned on account that it does not do history justice is one thing, whether it should, is another. Even in the hard sciences a theory is not given up simply because it is wrong; at least not until there is another to replace it.

As we recall though, Heidegger and Gadamer's claim was that their ontological approach is meant explicitly as a replacement of the historical school's epistemology. At the beginning of our paper we noted that Heidegger envisaged (his) phenomenology as an "advancement" of Dilthey's position. Just as Gadamer spoke of the "overcoming of the epistemological problem through phenomenological research." But nothing said so far tells us whether this is actually so. And nothing says why it would be. Thus, in order to establish the superiority of the ontological approach of Heidegger and Gadamer's hermeneutic projects, at the very least, we have to ask them the same question they asked Dilthey and the historical school:

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<sup>19</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 233.

“What is the relation between power and significance, between forces and ideas, between the facticity and the ideality of life?”

Insomuch as that is *their* question, insomuch as it is a question anticipated by Heidegger and asked explicitly by Gadamer, at first sight, it might seem that this is a futile endeavor. Of course both of them are going to answer this question, probably in an exemplary manner. At first sight, this is really the case.

From the very first steps of the formulation of his ontological project Heidegger takes the necessary measures to avoid Dilthey’s trap of reducing history to a history of the spirit. Already in his 1921 lecture course on Aristotle, Heidegger straightforwardly defines human existence in terms of facticity, as immersed in a horizon of opacity in which and beyond which the light of our reason cannot go. As Heidegger notes:

The noun ‘life,’ has a rich and autonomous meaning, which we can briefly articulate into three senses:

1. Life in the sense of the unity of succession and maturation...
2. Life, grasped as such a delimited unity of succession: now in the sense of something that specifically bears possibilities, ones matured partially in life itself and for it. Life of which we say that it can bring all things, that is incalculable...
3. Life understood in the sense in which 1. and 2. intertwine: the unity of extension in possibility and as possibility – lapsed possibilities, laden with possibilities and laden with itself, forming possibilities – and this whole taken as reality, indeed as reality in its specific opacity as power, *fate*.<sup>20</sup>

And in *Being and Time* we are shown that precisely Dasein’s finitude is that which confronts it with its own ‘destiny,’ its authentic historicity on which any history whatsoever is grounded.

Once one has grasped the finitude of one’s existence, it snatches one back from the endless multiplicity of possibilities which offer themselves as closest to one – those of comfortableness, shirking, and taking things lightly – and brings Dasein into the simplicity of its *fate* [*Schicksals*]. This is how we designate Dasein’s primordial historizing, which lies in authentic resoluteness and in which Dasein *hands* itself *down* to itself, free for death, in a possibility which it has inherited and yet has chosen.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle: Initiation into Phenomenological Research*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 64.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1962), 435/[384].

By contrast, Gadamer will adopt a more elaborate strategy. We have seen, he agrees with Dilthey on the way in which individual experience becomes historical. For him too, history is the spirit objectified in legends and literatures, in laws and customs, in general, in tradition. But, in order to avoid Dilthey's false conclusions, just like Heidegger, Gadamer will try to show that *tradition has a factual character and is the ontic sign of our finitude*. Or, otherwise put, that

... the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.<sup>22</sup>

Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life.<sup>23</sup>

To this end *Truth and Method* undertakes a demonstration developed in several steps that begins with the well-known rehabilitation of tradition and prejudices. In this first step Gadamer will seek to show that tradition is something else than a collection of curiosities of the past capable of raising only the interests of antiquarians and that, through the knowledge it carries within itself, it offers each and every one of us a solid point for anchoring our lives.

Against a widespread opinion since the Enlightenment the originary meaning of the concept of prejudice makes it quite clear that these cannot be reduced to the status of unfounded judgments, deprived of any value whatsoever. Even though they are not methodically validated, as the ideal of objectivity of modern rationalism requires, prejudices have an experiential foundation confirmed over and over again in the passing of time. That is why they offer the individual a guiding light in all the situations in which his or her reason is confronted by its limits.

In a second step Gadamer shows that this horizon of knowledge brought along by prejudices never exists in and for itself. It is always immersed in another horizon, a larger one, that safekeeps (*bewahrt*) our entire past. That is why tradition presents itself to us as a dual nature. It is at the same time perfectly transparent and completely opaque; it is at once familiar and strange, the discovery of its opacity and strangeness behind its familiarity being experienced as a "pulling up short."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 278.

<sup>23</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 278.

<sup>24</sup> In German Gadamer says "Erfahrung des Anstoßes," an expression which makes utmost clear the shocking and violent nature of the encounter with tradition. For 'Stoß' actually means

The prejudices regulating social interactions are the privileged example. Through them almost every one of us is able to recognize what counts as the 'right' behavior in a given situation but, most of the time, no one can indicate either why that behavior is considered as such or whether it is truly so. And as soon as we realize our impotence in this regard, the great majority of us will experience frustration.

Thus, we have to recognize that

That which has been sanctioned by tradition and custom has an authority that is nameless, and our finite historical being is marked by the fact that the authority of what has been handed down to us – and not what is clearly grounded – always has power over our attitudes and behavior.<sup>25</sup>

The opacity of tradition reveals its factual character and indicates quite clearly our finitude. Precisely in this nameless authority we can find the dimension of force of history along with or behind its spirituality. And thus it would seem that the steps of the demonstration taken so far would suffice to prove the superiority of Gadamer's ontological approach to history by comparison to Dilthey's epistemological questioning. All the more in these first two steps taken Gadamer finds already a basis solid enough for rethinking the concepts of historical meaning and historical understanding.

Due to the dual nature of tradition, the hermeneutic 'object'<sup>26</sup> – the bearer of traditionary meaning in the passing of time – is itself not a unity in itself but the unity of a duality. As Gadamer shows us, the hermeneutic 'object' is in fact constituted in and through the tension between the initial meaning intended by the agent/author of the event, work of art or the text making history and the meanings attributed to it through the different interpretations it received throughout time. It is true, as David Couzens Hoy notes:

We do not see Plato as Descartes or as Kant saw him, but we certainly see Plato differently because of Descartes and Kant.<sup>27</sup>

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'shock,' 'kick,' 'impact,' etc. See his *Gesammelte Werke, Band 1, Hermeneutik 1. Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1990), 272.

<sup>25</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 281.

<sup>26</sup> We have to use the scare quotes here for the hermeneutic object is not an object *per se*. Inasmuch as, through the prejudices orienting it, tradition is constitutive of the individual, the traditionary meaning is not simply in front of us and we cannot relate to it as to an object. The relation between the individual and tradition is not simply a relationship between subject and object and thus it cannot take the form of a rapport of knowledge.

<sup>27</sup> David Couzens Hoy, *The Critical Circle. Literature, History and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1982), 41.

Through this it becomes manifest, on the one hand, that historical meaning cannot be just an expression of the spirit and that it presents itself as a “fluid multiplicity of [ontological] possibilities” anchored in the moment in which they occur. And, on the other hand, that historical understanding is inexorably tied to the tradition and prejudices from which Dilthey, just like the entire historical school, was trying to keep away. Otherwise put, because history is not a text, its understanding cannot be an act of deciphering, but an act of life reflecting clearly its finitude.

Despite the fact that they finally give us the possibility of recognizing the reality of history in historical meaning and historical understanding though, the steps took so far in his demonstration are only seemingly sufficient for probing the superiority of hermeneutics’ ontological approach to history over Dilthey and the historical school’s epistemological one. Even though they attest the factual character of tradition and give us reasons for seeing in its opacity the reality of history, in the end, they do not demonstrate anything. For one can always reply – as Jürgen Habermas actually does in his debate with Gadamer in the 60s<sup>28</sup> – that this opacity is strictly circumstantial, that it is a sign of a momentarily weakness of reason and that, given the appropriate scientific means, it can easily be overcome.

Gadamer was very much aware of all these. Precisely this is why in the third part of *Truth and Method* he undertakes an “ontological shift of hermeneutics guided by language” whose focus is to show that language, as the essence of tradition, is an ontological determination for us. For it is responsible for the humanity of man and its singularity in comparison to all the other creatures on the face of the earth.

As Gadamer explains, if, for man, there is a world as for no other creature in the world, if in contrast to the other creatures which live in an environment and are so caught up within it that they cannot escape it even if they venture as far away as possible from their natural habitat, man *has* a world, this is because man can have a different “posture” towards what he/she encounters from the surrounding world (*Umwelt*). To have a world means to be free from the environment by having an “orientation” (*Verhalten*) towards it, and thus, by being able to situate it in front of your eyes and to present it to yourself as is. Man has a world because he has risen above the surrounding world and he is able to put the latter into a perspective.

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<sup>28</sup> See in this sense Jürgen Habermas, “A Review of Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*” in *The Hermeneutic Tradition. From Ast to Ricoeur*, eds. Gayle Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 213-245.

But, as Gadamer argues, in this sense, man has a world only due to the *variability of language*. In the same language one and the same thing or state of facts can be described in different ways. One description centers on one particular aspect of the thing or the state of facts described while other descriptions center on other aspects. That is why with every such new description a new facet of the thing or the state of facts comes to appearance and, with this, our perspective upon it is enlarged, the distance separating us from the thing or the state of facts becoming wider and wider.

With this Gadamer crosses once again paths with his master, the thesis of the co-originary of language and world being one that traverses Heidegger's thought through and through, irrespective of the *Kehre*. If anything, in this particular regard the *Kehre* brings about a radicalization. For if in *Being and Time* the meanings of language are taken as expressions of the significance constituting the worldhood of the world, in Heidegger's later work they themselves come to constitute the world. The "Origin of the Work of Art" says:

Where there is no language, as in the being of the stone, plant, and animal, there is no openness of what is, and consequently no openness of what is not and of the empty. Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance. Only this naming nominates beings to their being *from out of* their being.<sup>29</sup>

And some ten years later Heidegger notes:

It is because language is the house of Being that we reach what is by constantly going through this house. *When we go to the well, when we go through the woods, we are always already going through the word 'well,' through the word 'woods,' even if we do not speak the words and do not think of anything relating to language. [...] All beings – objects of consciousness and things of the heart, men who impose themselves and men who are more daring – all beings, each in its own way, are qua beings in the precinct of language.*<sup>30</sup> (italics are mine)

But, if everything in the world and the world as such has a lingual constitution; if all beings – those having the being of the historical included – are what they are in and through language, then how can the hermeneutic project, be it Gadamer's or Heidegger's, avoid the reduction of history to the history of spirit that set it in motion? Isn't hermeneutics affirming in a different way Dilthey's old conclusion: "Everything in history is intelligible, for everything is text. 'Life and

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<sup>29</sup> In Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York & London: Harper Colophon Books, 1975), 73.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 132.

history make sense like the letters of a word.”<sup>31</sup>? But was this not the conclusion that gave birth to Heidegger and Gadamer’s critique of Dilthey? Wasn’t for Heidegger and Gadamer precisely this the sign that the epistemological approach to history must be “overcome”?

In view of all these, it becomes apparent that the moment of reality just discovered is in fact the moment of a spiritual reality. The force of the nameless authority that imposes itself upon the individual and proves to be stronger than the justifications of his or her reason is a spiritual force. For the language in and through which everything ‘is’ (in an ontological sense) is, obviously, spirit. With this, any precaution taken by defining existence in terms of facticity and instituting finitude as a condition of possibility of historicity vanishes. If we do not know individually where we come from or where we are going, collectively, as people,<sup>32</sup> insomuch as we ourselves and everything that surrounds us ‘is’ language, we can gain a quite clear idea of where we have been.

But this detour through the question of historical being and the reality of history asked by the hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer does not prove itself to be just unnecessary. It is not just that through it the hermeneutic project fails to defend its superiority over the epistemological approach of Dilthey and the historical school; due to it the hermeneutic approach proves itself to be even more problematical. If for Dilthey’s epistemology the Gordian knot were the concepts of historical experience, meaning and understanding, for the hermeneutic project to this list one has to add the concept of historical change as well.

How is the new possible? How do historical changes come about and how are they recognized as such? How does the moment of rupture occur in the continuum of our lives and how is such a moment perceived? Grounding his philosophy on a metaphysics of genius, Dilthey never had any trouble in answering these questions. Genius is, by definition, an agent of change, originality being its fundamental trait. When historical being becomes lingual though, what will be will be conditioned in its being by what has been, by an already constituted horizon of meaning. Through this, what comes to be, the eventual future, what Derrida was designating through *avenir* is reduced to *future*, the expected future, in fact, the present that is not yet present, but when it will be, it will be precisely as expected. Gadamer notes it explicitly in *Truth and Method*:

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<sup>31</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 234.

<sup>32</sup> As it is known, for Heidegger the people are the true agents of history. See in this sense *Being and Time*, 435/[384].



## For a Post-Historicist Philosophy of History. Beyond Hermeneutics

Even where life changes violently, as in ages of revolution, far more of the old is preserved in the supposed transformation of everything than anyone knows, and it combines with the new to create a new value.<sup>33</sup>

Given all these a last question imposes itself upon us: if the hermeneutic project does not manage to go further in the study of history than the historical school it was trying to overcome, then should we not endeavor to overcome the hermeneutic project itself? Should we not abandon it as it teaches us to abandon the epistemological approach to history of Dilthey and the historical school before it?

Unfortunately these questions are only rhetorical.

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<sup>33</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 282-283.