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# BEING AND LANGUAGE IN PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

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I once formulated this idea by saying that being that can be understood is language. This is certainly not a metaphysical assertion. Instead, it describes, from the medium of understanding, the unrestricted scope possessed by the hermeneutical perspective.

—Hans-Georg Gadamer<sup>1</sup>

### 1. PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS AND THE *LINGUISTIC TURN*

“Being that can be understood is language” is perhaps the most cited, and possibly the most famous sentence of *Truth and Method*.<sup>2</sup> Written as kind of a summative statement toward the end of the book, it testifies to the centrality of language in philosophical hermeneutics. On the other hand, this centrality echoes, albeit indirectly, the movement of language from the margins to the center stage of philosophy. It illustrates the linguistic turn that Humboldt and Frege had already set in motion in radically different and independent ways in German-speaking philosophy, and finds its major twentieth-century representatives in Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger. Language is destined to become the dominant—if not exclusive—theme on the philosophical landscape.

At the end of the 1950s, when Gadamer wrote the third part of *Truth and Method*, the turn had not yet been fully achieved, and language had not yet imposed itself, as it would a few years later, also thanks to philosophical hermeneutics. The most diverse philosophical currents will coalesce under the theme of “language”: These include logical positivism and the *ordinary language philosophy* of Oxford, American pragmatism,

structuralism, and psychoanalysis, the late Merleau-Ponty and Derrida's deconstruction, Heidegger and philosophical hermeneutics, culminating in the transcendental pragmatics of Apel and Habermas.

When Gadamer sets about outlining his *hermeneutics of language*, he has neither important forerunners nor actual points of reference—other than the tradition that he will reassess in a careful confrontation. Obviously, Heidegger constitutes the only notable exception to this rule. But the connection with Heidegger is more problematic here than one might think. On the one hand, Gadamer largely knows the works Heidegger dedicated to the theme of language and poetry from 1935 onward, and, although he can be assumed to have found a source of inspiration therein, it is hard to say how much and to what extent. On the other hand, one cannot forget that Heidegger's *On the Way to Language* was published only in 1959, when *Truth and Method* had just gone into print. Even if many turns of phrase in Gadamer's magnum opus seem to emerge against the background of Heidegger's thought—not least the very sentence “Being that can be understood is language”—he never expressly refers to Heidegger's writings on language.

Thus, when he ventures out alone into what in many respects is still uncharted territory for philosophy, the difficulties of his paths are as entirely clear to him as the goal he had set out to reach: *the ontological turn of hermeneutics guided by language*. Gadamer does not know, nor could he have known, however, that his *Wendung* corresponds to the *linguistic turn* of Anglo-American and French philosophy. In a footnote added to the new edition of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer significantly writes: “I am not unaware that the ‘linguistic turn,’ about which I knew nothing in the early ‘50’s, recognized the same thing.”<sup>3</sup> And he goes on to refer to his essay *The Phenomenological Movement*.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. WHICH “TURN”?

It is worth noting that the word Gadamer uses for “turn” is not *Kehre*, but *Wendung*. Here, it is clear that the aim is to distance himself from Heidegger, who, by way of his *Kehre*, wanted to abandon the ground of hermeneutic philosophy so as to turn toward the mystery of language. From Gadamer's standpoint, the *Kehre* seems more like a *Rückkehr*, a return—which nonetheless also implies a radicalization—to the early hermeneutics of *Geworfenheit*, of “being-thrown,” where language, the primary *pro-jec-tion* of this “being-thrown,” of this being-*there* in the world, is the *being-there*, in its original form, and is the first presence to Being. The significance Heidegger attributes to language resounds in the “ontological turn” of Gadamer who, by following the guiding thread of language, remains within the bounds of hermeneutic

philosophy. This may shed light on some important differences between the two philosophers on this point—and not on this point alone.

Aside from the weakening in Gadamer's thought of notions that are absolutely central to Heidegger's—such as metaphysics, the forgetting of Being, and the ontological difference—what is more noteworthy here is the different and novel interpretation of the relationship between *Being* and *language* put forward by the founder of philosophical hermeneutics. With respect to this reading, Vattimo, borrowing an expression from Habermas, speaks of the “urbanization” of Heidegger's thought.<sup>5</sup> As previously mentioned, Gadamer takes up the Heideggerian identification—or connection—between Being and language, but decidedly shifts the emphasis onto language. Such a shift could be regarded as an act of unfolding, or even dissolving, Being into language.<sup>6</sup>

Irrespective of what interpretation is given to the shift from Being to language, which is already achieved in the third part of *Truth and Method*, the distance between the two philosophers truly stands out when the concluding statements on their respective reflections on language are read together. In the famous conversation with the Japanese scholar, included in *On the Way to Language*, Heidegger recalls the phrase he had already used with reference to language in the *Letter on “Humanism”*: “Language is the house of Being.”<sup>7</sup> For his part, Gadamer writes in the closing section of *Truth and Method*, which deals with the “*The Universal Aspect of Hermeneutics*,” that “Being that can be understood is language.”<sup>8</sup>

### 3. FROM HEIDEGGER TO GADAMER: LANGUAGE AS DWELLING, REFUGE, SHELTER, EXILE

The terms of the relationship between *Being* and *language* are clearly inverted in the following two statements: in the first, language is the subject and Being is the predicate, whereas in the second, Being is the subject and language the predicate.<sup>9</sup> But this is not all. Beyond the inversion of subject and predicate, the terms, which mediate the relation, are different. More specifically, the metaphor of the “house” disappears in Gadamer—not just in this context, but also deliberately in all his reflections on language.

Rather than the house [*Haus*] of Being, language is more the dwelling of man [*Behausung*] that often reveals itself as a casing or shell [*Gehäuse*], which is too suffocating and too closed.<sup>10</sup> Gadamer thus wonders at the end of the essay *Von der Wahrheit des Wortes* (*On the Truth of the Word*): “But who is ‘at home’ [*zu Hause*] in a language?”<sup>11</sup> If language is truly the most familiar and intimate place of being-by-oneself (or perhaps the only one), it is likewise true that an even more fundamental nonfamiliarity stands behind and comes before this familiarity. The intimate familiarity of language is something

uncanny [*Unheimliches*] and immemorial [*Unwordenkliches*]. This disquieting intimacy, this disconcerting immemoriality of language—actually revealing itself so *unheimlich nahe* to thought<sup>12</sup>—would represent our “homeland.”<sup>13</sup>

The best-known version of hermeneutics is that most reassuring and urbanized one, emphasizing familiarity. Indeed, hermeneutics is responsible for drawing attention to the urban and civilized side of language. Yet hermeneutics is unwilling to eschew the paradox inherent in that strange and uncanny “homeland.” This explains the existence of the other version, the more disquieting one, which rather emphasizes unfamiliarity. However, the two versions cannot be torn asunder, for they indeed complement one another.

“What is the homeland for us, this place of original familiarity? What is this place and what would it be without language? Language is above all a part of the immemoriality of the homeland!”<sup>14</sup> *Heimat*, which is the fleeting and ephemeral homeland that language can offer, is only attained with effort, starting out from the most essential *Heimatslosigkeit*, the lack of homeland, which defines our finitude in language even prior to our finitude in the world. At a second glance, however, dwelling, the refuge of language, reveals itself to be a shelter, or rather an exile. Poets such as Celan have managed to give voice to this exile—which can even be an exile in the mother tongue.<sup>15</sup> In giving voice to the originary homelessness in language, Gadamer’s hermeneutics, especially in his later works, seems to converge with Derrida’s deconstruction.<sup>16</sup>

But what might that more fundamental and more original nonfamiliarity be, if not Being’s resistance to language? This question maps out the context most suited to explain the presence of “understanding” that mediates the relation between *Being* and *language* in Gadamer.

#### 4. “THE HISTORY OF A COMMA”

The most-cited, but also the most misunderstood, sentence of philosophical hermeneutics already has its own *Wirkungsgeschichte*, its history of effects, a history of its reception, which has taken a troubled—and thus all the more interesting—path in Italy. Vattimo revisits this issue in his article “The History of a Comma.”<sup>17</sup>

As so often happens, the problem stems from the translation, whose creative role in the *Wirkungsgeschichte* can never be overemphasized. The German sentence reads: “*Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache.*”<sup>18</sup> In Vattimo’s Italian translation, the sentence is rendered in the following way: “*l’essere che può venir compreso è linguaggio.*”<sup>19</sup> The two commas, present in German for grammatical reasons, are left out in Italian for stylistic reasons. Vattimo recalls that at the time he would rather have left the commas in,

but the final decision rested with Gadamer. “I submitted the problem to Gadamer and he said that he did not agree, and that there was a risk that the sentence would be misunderstood.”<sup>20</sup> Hence, the marginal aspect of a comma takes on a fundamental relevance for the translation and, therefore, also for the interpretation. In short, the necessary presence of the commas in German maintains the ambiguity of the sentence; the possibility of leaving the commas in or out in Italian, however, requires a choice that is more than just stylistic. More than simply style, it is the meaning that undergoes a transformation, or better, the “‘ontological’ weight” of the statement. Taken without commas, Vattimo maintains, it is a harmless utterance, which identifies the domain of beings that offer themselves to understanding with the domain of language; within commas it says that Being is language, and as such it is understandable.<sup>21</sup>

The chasm runs deep and perhaps leads to a crossroads not just in philosophical hermeneutics—or at least not just starting from there. As it stands, the hermeneutic difficulty of the statement raises the crucial question of the meaning to be attributed to Gadamer’s philosophy as a whole. If the second interpretative path—the one indicated by Vattimo—is chosen over the first, one can find in philosophical hermeneutics the possibility of a “weak ontology,” namely, a kind of “ontology of actuality.”<sup>22</sup>

In the latter case, it follows that Being is identified with language. In Vattimo’s view, this “ontologically more radical” reading would rid hermeneutics of a metaphysical residue that it would otherwise retain, and that might compromise its position with regard to ontology, from which it nonetheless seeks to take leave. Hence, one is faced with the necessity of going beyond Gadamerian hermeneutics that is locked in a sort of realism where the Being of the world is still identified with the objects as they present themselves, in space and time, to the subject describing them. Such a form of realism would ultimately expose hermeneutics to the suspicions of traditionalism and, above all, relativism.

Yet, in a bid to move beyond Gadamer, Vattimo’s path returns to Heidegger. Vattimo’s legitimate intention is to further the discussion with Heidegger that Gadamer never actually broke off.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, by taking up the Heideggerian discourse on the authenticity of Being, and recalling the metaphor of language as the “house of Being,” Vattimo reads Gadamer with Heidegger, or better, on Heidegger’s terms. Gadamer’s sentence “Being, which can be understood, is language” is thus regarded as a “translation”<sup>24</sup> of Heidegger’s sentence from *Being and Time*: “Being (not beings) [*Sein, nicht Seiendes*] is something which ‘there is’ [*gibt es*] only in so far as truth is [*ist*]. And truth is only in so far as and as long as Dasein is.”<sup>25</sup>

Vattimo underlines the importance of the *nicht*, the “not” that separates Being from a being: There is Being only insofar as there is not only a

being, and wherever there is Being, and not just a being, there is truth. Far from having a merely descriptive meaning, the “not” has a teleological meaning.<sup>26</sup> And thus Heidegger’s sentence—but Gadamer’s too—becomes an indication that somehow refers to the difference between the authenticity and inauthenticity of existence: For there to be Being, there cannot be—or cannot just be—a being in its beingness, namely, in its everyday objective “reality.” In other words, Being is language precisely because it is not a being, precisely because it is not—authentically—a being.

By identifying Being and language, one grasps the ultimate meaning and, at the same time, the starting point of Vattimo’s ontological and nihilistic radicalization of hermeneutics.

### 5. GADAMER’S SELF-INTERPRETATION

What kind of self-interpretation does Gadamer offer? If one of the principles of hermeneutics is that the interpreter understands the author better than the author understands himself, and if consistency is a criterion that must always be upheld when interpreting an author, since we are dealing with a sentence that somehow sums up philosophical hermeneutics as a whole, it might be fitting to listen to the author, who nevertheless will have the same difficulty as others in interpreting himself.

Certainly, Gadamer chooses the first interpretative path that does not identify Being with language. This not only applies to the early Gadamer of *Truth and Method*, but also and above all to the late Gadamer, who dedicated numerous essays to language. Conversely, the second interpretative path is carefully and willfully intentionally avoided. What Gadamer does *not* want is precisely to say that Being, all Being, can be understood insofar as it is language.<sup>27</sup> Even in the 1971 essay entitled “The Idea of Hegelian Logic,” in distinguishing his own position from that of Heidegger’s, Gadamer writes: “But Being itself, which has its abode there [in language], is not disconcealed as such, but keeps itself as concealed in the midst of all disconcealment as, in speaking, language itself remains essentially concealed.”<sup>28</sup> And, in a retrospective interview about his work dating back to 1996, he warns: “Absolutely not, I have never thought or said that everything is language.”<sup>29</sup>

### 6. UNDERSTANDING AS MIDDLE TERM AND MEDIATION

A closer look at the German sentence shows that it is less ambiguous than it may seem: *Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache*. The role of the relative clause, wedged between the two commas, must not be underestimated. In fact, it is a restriction, or better still, a delimitation.<sup>30</sup> One could rephrase it this way: *Sein, sofern es . . . Being, insofar as and within the limits*

*in which* it can be understood, is language. The relative clause is not a surplus tacked onto the previous equation of Being and language just to highlight the character of comprehensibility that Being has insofar as it is language. Quite the opposite, the relative clause is essential in that it both delimits and mediates at the same time. This is why “understanding” was mentioned earlier as a middle term between Being and language, a middle term that becomes pivotal for the other two by mediating their relation. Being and language can relate to one another only *through understanding*.

Being that gives itself to *understanding* is language. Or also, a Being that presents itself with the character of comprehensibility will therefore also have the character of linguisticity. This is because “understanding itself has a fundamental relation to linguisticity.”<sup>31</sup> Only that which becomes language can be understood and, vice versa, one can only understand that which has become language. This does not rule out, starting from the possibility of understanding, that there is always not-understanding. Hence, if one thinks of the centrality of understanding in philosophical hermeneutics, it should come as no surprise that understanding is the middle term in Gadamer’s statement.<sup>32</sup> Already in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer uses those words to point to the actual field of hermeneutics which, as he will later declare, is in no way limited to the human sciences.<sup>33</sup> What is made understandable *for us* is such because it is given in language, and hermeneutics is concerned precisely with what is “understandable.” Outside and beyond language (i.e., what has come into language), there is no understanding, and hence, no hermeneutics.

Therefore, starting from understanding, hermeneutics cannot but address the issue of language, for “*language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs.*”<sup>34</sup> In other words, language is the condition of understanding, both of what is understood and the way in which understanding takes place.

## 7. LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICALITY

One could object to such a thesis by arguing that what gives itself to understanding is not necessarily in a linguistic form, or that understanding does not necessarily occur linguistically. For instance, what would be the linguistic character of a piece of music or painting and, likewise, the interpretation of the former and the contemplation of the latter?

Yet, it is worth noting here that Gadamer also speaks of “language” in a metaphorical sense when, for example, he refers to the language of a figurative work that calls on and addresses its beholder. Within this metaphorical absolutization of language that may in some cases be misleading, Gadamer, however, clearly asserts the priority of spoken language, into which all the other “languages” ultimately let themselves be translated.

We must rightly understand the fundamental priority of language asserted here. Indeed, language often seems ill-suited to express what we feel. In the face of the presence of overwhelming works of art, the task of expressing in words what they say to us seems like an infinite and hopeless undertaking. The fact that our desire and our capacity to understand always go beyond any statement that we can make seems like a critique of language. But this does not alter the fundamental priority of language.<sup>35</sup>

It is not by chance, then, that Gadamer separates “language” from “linguisticity.” Following this distinction, which will be increasingly clarified in his work, linguisticity is the virtuality of the not-yet-said, always remaining in the background of saying, and the not-yet-understood, always remaining in the background of understanding. Hence, linguisticity always refers to language or, better still, to its self-fulfillment in the linguistic event. By colliding with the boundaries of the linguistic event, however, it helps bring about their overcoming. Here, in the experience of its boundaries, one can better grasp, and more so than anywhere else, the universality of language because even what is “prelinguistic,” “paralinguistic,” or “ultralinguistic,” is such only in relation to language.

#### 8. SEARCHING FOR THE “RIGHT” WORD

The *limits of language* correspond to the delimitation made by the relative clause. The hermeneutic experience of language therefore becomes the hermeneutic experience of the limits of language. Within the context of a critical—or self-critical—reflection on the third part of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer, especially since the 1980s, has again insisted on this experience, which is not neglected in his main work. *Grenzen der Sprache* (*The Limits of Language*) is the revealing title of an essay from 1985.<sup>36</sup> The “limits” are not to be understood here as “lacks” or “flaws” of language, measured against the yardstick of reason’s perfection, as it is conceived in the linguistic–philosophical paradigms of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Gadamer sums up the hermeneutical question regarding the limits of language in what he calls “the search for the ‘right’ word.” Yet the “right” word is by definition never “right,” for otherwise it would be a word adequate for a pregiven object, which would only need to be pointed at by the tool of language. In the hermeneutical experience of limits, which occurs in speech, language is far from a means of dominating and calculating the world. In every act of speaking, even when subconscious and self-oblivious, and, likewise, in every act of understanding, one experiences the *limit*: the limit of the word that has been heard and uttered, understood and spoken. As the limit of the said refers to the unsaid, so too the limit of the understood refers to the not-understood, and so on *ad infinitum*.



The limit says that there is more: Gadamer thus outlines phenomenologically the experience of the limit:

Finally it is worth dwelling upon the most deep-seated of the problems inherent in the limit of language. I take a dim view of this phenomenon that has already played a major role in other areas of research—my mind goes to psychoanalysis in particular. I am talking about every speaker's awareness that, in every instant while searching for the right word—such is the word that reaches the other—this might never be fully attained. What is hinted at, suggested, or subtly implied always goes beyond that which reaches the other through language, and is spoken in words. An unfulfilled need for the right word—that is perhaps what amounts to the true life and essence of language. A strong link is established here between the inability to satisfy this yearning, this *désir* (Lacan), and the fact that our own human existence dwindles over time and with the onset of death.<sup>37</sup>

For human finitude, which after all is one and the same with the finitude of language, the search for the “right” word remains an infinite task.

#### 9. “BEING” TWICE: THE SPECULATIVE PASSAGE FROM BEING TO BEING-LANGUAGE

Beyond the interpretative arguments emphasized above, it has not been noted thus far—as it should be—that Being appears twice in Gadamer's sentence: “*Being* [*Sein*], . . . *is* [*ist*]. . . .” Yet, the *is* of the abstract copula concretely marks the passage (*Übergang*) from *Being* to *being-language*. It follows that the *is* does not mark a mere identity in which a tautology takes hold, sinking it into nihilism.<sup>38</sup> Rather, the *is* marks at the same time *identity and difference*; it shifts and defers the discourse from tautology to the other, that is, to what is different from the predicate.

“The ‘is’ or copula of the statement has an entirely different meaning here. It does not state the being of something using something else, but rather describes the movement in which thought passes over from the subject into the predicate in order to find there the firm ground which it has lost.”<sup>39</sup> The *is* means that the passage, the speculative movement from subject to predicate, must be meant as interpretation. Gadamer's sentence finally reveals itself as a *speculative statement* in the Hegelian sense.<sup>40</sup> By setting it apart from all propositional statements, Gadamer observes that “the speculative statement maintains the mean between the extremes of tautology on the one hand and self-cancellation in the infinite determination of its

meaning on the other.”<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the speculative statement does not pass from the concept of the subject to the concept of the predicate, but asserts the truth of the subject in the form of the predicate.<sup>42</sup> In the predicate the subject is unfolded, understood, and interpreted. Nevertheless, the subject *Being*—and it is not without significance that *Being*, not language, is the subject—is not exhausted by the predicate *language*. If it were, it would not only be identified but defined as well, and hence *Being* would be something defined and determined, the very reproach that Heidegger makes in his criticism of the “forgetting of *Being*.”

Hence, when the finitude of the “linguistic event” is considered, one is likely to say that *Being* is more than language.<sup>43</sup> And this is the case even if language also enacts *Being*’s possibility of being. In doing so, however, by enacting from time to time *Being*’s possibility of being, language achieves in turn a statute of existence. This is the only sense in which the *is* has not only a copulative, but also an existential value. Gadamer’s explanatory addition should be understood in such a context: “To come into language [*Zur-Sprache-kommen*] does not mean that a second being [*Dasein*] is acquired.”<sup>44</sup> For the manner in which something presents itself—through language—belongs to *Being* (*Sein*). It belongs to it, yet does not exhaust it. So, on the one hand, “the word is a word only because of what comes to language in it”; on the other hand, “that which comes into language is not something that is pregiven without language [*sprachlos Vorgegebenes*]; rather, the word gives it its own determinateness.”<sup>45</sup>

Within the speculative unity of language, Gadamer stresses the “distinction” between being and self-presenting: “a distinction that is not really a distinction at all.”<sup>46</sup> One cannot say that Gadamer here forgets or overlooks the ontological difference.<sup>47</sup> Rather, focusing on the passage from *Being* to *Being-language*, where that distinction slips in, Gadamer also envisages the reverse passage, where that distinction should not be: He thinks of the capacity of the spoken word to reflect, like in a *speculum*, the infinitude of the unsaid. “Speculative”—in the sense in which language is speculative—is “everything [*Seiendes*] in so far as it can be understood.”<sup>48</sup>

#### 10. THE UNIVERSAL “THERE” OF THE WORD

The word is the universal “there” of *Being* that comes to *Being-there* through the word. Hence, it is the “valence of being” within the word that Gadamer emphasizes.<sup>49</sup> Written in fits and starts between 1971 and 1993, when it was finally published, this essay is important because it clarifies the statute of the word, perhaps more than any other. “The universal ‘there’ of being that resides in the word is the miracle of language, and the highest possibility of saying consists in catching its passing away and escaping and in making

firm its nearness to Being. It is nearness or presentness not of this or that but of the possibility of everything.”<sup>50</sup>

There is Being in the “there” of the word. Yet what is withheld in the “there” of saying refers to what escapes its grasp. The presence of the universal “there” of Being in the word is always an absence as well, precisely due to Being’s continual dispersal and retraction. The same play of presence and absence that marks Dasein,<sup>51</sup> underpins the hermeneutics of language that reveals itself as the thinking of the “there,” that “miracle of language” in which Being *presences* by making itself absent. This is because the experience of language, as the experience of the limits of language, carries in itself a reference to Being that is *not* yet in the “there”—that is always already *beyond*.

## II. SELF-OVERCOMING: THE MOVEMENT OF HERMENEUTICS

Going back to the statement in *Truth and Method*, it is noteworthy that Gadamer does not just reaffirm the delimitation carried out in the passage from Being to language, nor merely re-emphasizes the boundaries of understanding—for what has come to language must, yet cannot, be fully understood. Instead, once again he stresses the importance of the limits of language.

When I wrote the sentence “Being which can be understood is language,” I implied that what is can never be completely understood. And this follows insofar as everything that goes under the name of language always refers beyond that which achieves the status of a proposition [*Aussage*]. What is to be understood is what comes into language, but of course it is always what is taken [*genommen*] as something, taken as true [*wahr-genommen*]. This is the hermeneutical dimension in which Being “manifests itself.”<sup>52</sup>

What language involves, as it enacts itself, entails the movement of hermeneutics that must constantly overcome itself. This is so because to follow language is to overcome oneself, if overcoming oneself means overstepping each time the “there” of the finite word, which in the finitude of its self-presenting points to the absent infinity of the unsaid. Habermas rightly claims that hermeneutics “uses the tendency to self-transcendence that is inherent in the practice of language.”<sup>53</sup> This does not cast doubts over the insuperability of the “dialogue that we are,” within which, however, everything can be said differently. The hermeneutic dimension in which Being can be understood is marked by this uninterrupted linguistic movement from finite to infinite.

12. THE UNDERSTANDING OF BEING:  
HERMENEUTICS FACING ONTOLOGY

In the passage [Übergang] from *Being* to *Being-language*, a passage that is destined to remain as such, that is, to enact itself infinitely, conceals the fundamental aspiration of hermeneutics to be a critique of ontology.

The difficulty with all ontology consists in wanting to say what Being is. In order to do this, it either passes from Being to difference and says what is other and different; or, it sticks with identity and says nothing, it renounces all saying. In its sticking with, in its lingering on the question of the meaning of Being—which remains uncomprehended—ontology reveals an inclination toward mysticism. In an exemplary way, Hegel, in the *Science of Logic*, interprets Being as the “indeterminate immediate,”<sup>54</sup> on condition that this interpretation, at least in the context in which it appears, does not require, in its turn, to be interpreted. One must therefore resist saying and thinking, together with Being, what is *other* than Being. *Interpreted in this way*, Being—and here we are dealing with the whole *Science of Logic*—indicates the difficulty of understanding it, if not in an immediate manner.

What, then, does understanding Being mean? Either one presumes to understand Being immediately, or better, in its immediacy; or one understands Being through its passing into language—where *through* already refers to the infinity of the process of understanding, of the transitory Being-language of Being that continuously escapes the immediacy of understanding. The passage [Übergang] of Being into language is here a progression [Fortgang] in understanding: from what is understood to what is still to be understood, because what is understood has nothing but the appearance of a definitive understanding, of a last word—it is such only in comparison with this provisionality of past words that comes to light at every turn. The progression in understanding always fulfills itself in a *now*, and always in new words that interpret those words, which, although once understood, are now found to have become somewhat incomprehensible. This is the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics. And it is, therefore, from this perspective that hermeneutics faces ontology with the aim of understanding Being that passes to language.

13. THE A-METAPHYSICAL DIMENSION  
OF PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

It is then legitimate to ask—with Michael Theunissen—whether Gadamer’s philosophy is an ontologization of hermeneutics, or whether it is not rather a hermeneuticization of ontology.<sup>55</sup> Certainly, hermeneutics does not aim to

radically transform the way in which Being is thought. And neither can one say that it is a theory of Being. As has been pointed out, hermeneutics is an *understanding of Being*. Rather than *anti-metaphysical*, the trait that distinguishes it is *a-metaphysical*.

In this respect, Gadamer puts it as follows: "I once formulated this idea by saying that being that can be understood is language. This is certainly not a metaphysical assertion. Instead, it describes, from the medium of understanding, the unrestricted scope possessed by the hermeneutical perspective. It would be easy to show that all historical experience satisfies this proposition, as does the experience of nature."<sup>56</sup>

Hermeneutics looks away from Being in order to turn toward language as the medium of understanding. Thus, by looking away from Being, it takes leave of ontology. Taking leave means that it no longer advances—nor does it want to advance—the claim to provide the final and definitive *lógos* of Being.

From this perspective, the aim of hermeneutics is not Being, even if it were to identify it with language, and not because the identification proposed by the radical ontological reading would appear scandalous. The scandal could only be felt by a philosophy founded on—as a prejudice but not only as a prejudice—a metaphysical realism. Yet hermeneutics has indeed contributed, in a decisive way, to solving and dismissing the metaphysical prejudices about ontology by turning toward language and omitting that question in which Rorty sees the barrier of metaphysics: "to get beyond metaphysics would be to stop asking the question of what is or is not real."<sup>57</sup> If this question has lost its weight and value with the *linguistic turn*, then even philosophical hermeneutics can be included in contemporary philosophy's "turn" toward language.

#### 14. A PHILOSOPHY OF INFINITE FINITUDE

Yet it is necessary not to let a fundamental difference slip by quietly: Hermeneutics does not claim to affirm that Being *is* language. Not only because it does not accept the nihilistic consequences of such an identification, and neither in response to the legitimate concern that it might fall back into historicist metaphysics—a concern that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics indeed shares with Derrida's deconstruction. It does so simply because that identification would amount to an ultimate assertion that would go against the spirit and the *habitus* of hermeneutics.

To all intents and purposes, hermeneutics appears—or presents itself—as a philosophy marked by the finitude of historical horizons, which are never enclosed or static, but may still always merge at a later point. Untranslatability reveals itself as still being translatable.

Yet the thrust of the hermeneutic movement of understanding is not the ontological difference as such, nor the gap between *Seiendes* and *Sein*, the resoluteness of *Dasein*, and nor is it the Heideggerian concern for authenticity. If there is a striving toward Being, it does not arise from a response to the call of Being, but from heeding to and understanding the voice of the other speaking from the past of historical tradition, in a dialogue that extends to the present-day diversity of cultures, and demands the response of a project that is both individual and shared. It is in this uninterrupted dialogue that Being manifests itself as a polyphony.

Still, there is no single moment when Being is fully understood or defined, let alone by identifying itself with the horizon of language. For the horizon that expands and changes constantly would cease to be a horizon, insofar as it would stop the hermeneutic movement and would bring about the end of dialogue. In this way hermeneutics is a *philosophy of infinite finitude*.

#### NOTES

1. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. David E. Linge (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), 103.

2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 474.

3. *Ibid.*, 487.

4. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Phenomenological Movement," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. David E. Linge (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), 172–173.

5. Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1991), 130. See also Jurgen Habermas, "Urbanization of the Heideggerian province" in Jurgen Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 190.

6. See Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 131.

7. Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1982), 135. Martin Heidegger, "Letter on "Humanism,"" in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 239. See also Martin Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?" in *Poetry Language Thought*, ed. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1971), 132.

8. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 474.

9. On this meaningful inversion, see § 9 of this chapter.

10. This is how Gadamer objects to Heidegger in "The Diversity of Europe: Inheritance and Future" in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, eds. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 221–236.

11. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On the Truth of the Word," *Symposium 2*, no. 6 (2002), 132.

12. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 387.
13. See Chapter IV, § 4.
14. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Leben ist Einkehr in die Sprache. Gedanken über Sprache und Literatur," *Universitas* 10 (1993), 923.
15. See Chapter IV.
16. For a comparison of hermeneutics and deconstruction, see Chapter VI.
17. See Gianni Vattimo, "Historie d'une virgule. Gadamer et le sens de l'être," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 213, no. 3 (2000).
18. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 474.
19. This is translated into English as "Being that can be understood is language."
20. Gianni Vattimo, "Historie d'une virgule. Gadamer et le sens de l'être," 499.
21. Gianni Vattimo, "Historie d'une virgule. Gadamer et le sens de l'être," 499–500.
22. Gianni Vattimo, "Gadamer and the Problem of Ontology" in *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnsward, and Jens Kertscher (eds.), Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002, 305.
23. See Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 121–137. Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, trans. David Webb (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).
24. Gianni Vattimo, "Historie d'une virgule. Gadamer et le sens de l'être," 509.
25. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962), 272.
26. Gianni Vattimo, "Gadamer and the Problem of Ontology" in *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnsward, and Jens Kertscher (eds.), Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002, 305.
27. Nevertheless one continues in general to attribute to Gadamer the identity of Being and language.
28. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hegel's Dialectic*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 97.
29. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Dialogischer Rückblick auf das Gesammelte Werk und dessen Wirkungsgeschichte," in *Lesebuch*, ed. Jean Grondin (Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck) UTB, 1997), 286.
30. Gadamer himself speaks explicitly of *Begrenzung* in his self-interpretation: "Here [in the commented on sentence] there is an inherent delimitation [*Begrenzung*]." See *ibid.*
31. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 396 [translation modified].
32. On this, see particularly Chapter VI, §§ 9–10.
33. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics," 103.
34. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 389.
35. *Ibid.*, 401.
36. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Boundaries of Language" in *Language and Linguisticity in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, ed. Lawrence K. Schmidt (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2000), 9–17. On this, see Jean Grondin, *Einführung zu Gadamer* (Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck) UTB, 2000), 202.
37. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Boundaries of Language," 17. Translation modified.
38. Edmond Jabès warns against the risks of such a tautology in *The Book of Shares* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 70.

39. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hegel's Dialectic*, 18.
40. On the "speculative assertion," see Chapter II, § 10.
41. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hegel's Dialectic*, 95.
42. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 456–474; Gadamer, *Hegel's Dialectic*, 93–99.
43. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 476.
44. *Ibid.*, 475.
45. *Ibid.* Translation modified.
46. *Ibid.*
47. On this issue, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Letter to Dallmayr," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, eds. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 94.
48. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 477.
49. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On the Truth of the Word," 152.
50. *Ibid.*, 153.
51. And in this play Gadamer had already captured the fundamental trait of Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Letter to Dallmayr," 97.
52. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, eds. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 25.
53. Jürgen Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1988).
54. G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. Arnold V. Miller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1998), 79.
55. See Michael Theunissen, "Philosophische Hermeneutik als Phänomenologie der Traditionsaneignung," in »*Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache*«: *Homage an Hans-Georg Gadamer* (Edition Suhrkamp, Nr. 2183), Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2001, 61–88.
56. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics," 103.
57. Richard Rorty, "Being That Can Be Understood Is Language," in *Gadamer's Repercussions: Reconsidering Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. Bruce Krajewski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 26.