

Truth as a Lost Faith: Philosophical Hermeneutics in a Post-Truth World

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In 2005 the political satirist Stephen Colbert brought a new usage into the American political lexicon, one that has proved to be both useful to commentators on American politics and problematic for our understanding of the limits of our political culture – *truthiness*.¹ Colbert used the term to capture an understanding of truth that is based on a “gut feeling” as opposed to reason, and that answers to the “heart” rather than the “head.” The idea suggested by the term captures a reality of a political culture where the “truth” of beliefs is confirmed not by clear evidence and argumentation but rather by the extent to which these new beliefs confirm or at least fall in line with preexisting belief structures.

In the years following Colbert's coining of the term, the idea of truthiness found traction in media accounts of American politics and saw wide use in political discussion and debate, both popular and elite. A striking fusion of the two levels of discourse appeared in an amicus brief to the United States Supreme Court penned by the political satirist P.J. O'Rourke and the CATO Institute's Ilya Shapiro in the case of *Susan B. Anthony List, et al. v. Steven Driehaus, et al.*, a case turning on the question of whether political speech that is determined to be untrue can be legally curtailed. In that brief, O'Rourke and Shapiro note, tongue in cheek, that

In modern times, "truthiness" — a "truth" asserted "from the gut" or because it "feels right," without regard to evidence or logic — is also a key part of political discourse. It is difficult to imagine life without it, and our political discourse is weakened by Orwellian laws that try to prohibit it.

¹ Stephen Colbert, The Word – Truthiness, video, 2:40, October 17, 2005, <http://thecolbertreport.cc.com/videos/63ite2/the-word---truthiness>.

After all, where would we be without the knowledge that Democrats are pinko-communist flag-burners who want to tax churches and use the money to fund abortions so they can use the fetal stem cells to create pot-smoking lesbian ATF agents who will steal all the guns and invite the UN to take over America? Voters have to decide whether we'd be better off electing Republicans, those hateful, assault-weapon-wielding maniacs who believe that George Washington and Jesus Christ incorporated the nation after a Gettysburg reenactment and that the only thing wrong with the death penalty is that it isn't administered quickly enough to secular-humanist professors of Chicano studies.²

As the above quote makes clear, accusations of truthiness know no party identity. And while, in keeping with Colbert's original usage, conservatives in the United States have been more likely to be tarred with this particular description, liberals have not escaped untouched.

In political discourse truthiness has been associated with a second idea – epistemic closure – which suggests further that entrenched partisan positions are increasingly solidified in a political culture that has fragmented to the point that individuals can readily seek out only news and information sources that confirm their preexisting views of the world. Within these so-called “echo chambers,” the argument goes, it is increasingly common for partisans to encounter only their fellow believers, with little interaction with those who may disagree with a particular party position and thus little opportunity to have the questionable bases of their beliefs challenged.

As the 21st Century has progressed and with the rise and continued influence of Donald Trump in American politics an additional concern has emerged. Repeated claims deriding unfavorable media coverage as “fake news” and a gleeful disregard for factchecking and truth-telling have culminated in a growing concern that we may in fact be entering a “post-truth” era. The idea of dismissing inconvenient facts as “fake news” offers a kind of mirror image of truthiness: where truthiness embraces a demonstrably false idea because it coincides with the subject's interests and identity, claims of fake news reject ostensibly true statements because

² Brief of *Amici Curiae* CATO Institute and P.J. O'Rourke, *Susan B. Anthony List, et al. v. Steven Driehaus, et al.*, no. 13-193 (2014).

they clash with these same interests and identities.

Beyond the obvious concerns that these developments raise about contemporary political culture in the United States, there is a deeper problem to be considered here. Political philosophers and observers have known since Thucydides that there are infinite steps between truth and falsehood. The value and defensibility of truth against overt lying, and the ways in which political actors can and do exploit the space in between have occupied political theorists as diverse as Machiavelli, Nietzsche, Kant, and Habermas. But the notion of “truthiness” and related claims about a post-truth era capture a fact distinct from these various shades of gray or the political expediency of untruth. The questionable (or even demonstrably false) statements that characterize truthiness are based not on willful deceit or even simple ignorance, but rather on a systematic distortion of reality that appears impervious to competing truth claims.³ We seem to be confronted with a truth that is a truth within a closed epistemic system, but not without.

It is tempting in the face of such challenges to reinvest in the notion of objective truth and to double down on the notion that, truthiness and fake news notwithstanding, reason and clear evidentiary standards can establish truth that is resistant to motivated reasoning, that is the same whether you believe it or not. This, I argue, is not a fruitful path to pursue. As authors like Datson and Galison persuasively argue,⁴ what “objectivity” itself means is a moving target, whose standards and claim to capture the truth of the matter have fluctuated over time. The fatal flaw of “objectivism” is to make a kind of ideology out of a particular, narrow understanding of what constitutes objective truth. Instead it will be necessary to find our bearings in the shifting

³ Or perhaps worse than impervious. Volumes of research on motivated reasoning and the “backfire effect” have suggested that, when confronted with information that challenges factually incorrect beliefs, political partisans are likely to double down on the false belief rather than change views to accommodate new information.

⁴ Datson, Lorraine and Peter Galison, Objectivity, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

sands of truth, untruth, and truthiness without recourse to such seemingly firm, but ultimately groundless moorings.

In what follows I will present a reading of Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophy as presented in his Truth and Method, arguing as I do so that his particular approach to hermeneutics – his philosophy of interpretation – offers promising insights that may help us to navigate the difficulties presented by the apparent undermining of the concept of truth, and may do so more effectively than alternative approaches. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics constitute an approach to understanding that can help us to ground our notions of truth without falling back into illusory claims to objectivity or collapsing under the weight of subjectivism and relativism. In elucidating this argument I will first outline some key features of Gadamer's hermeneutics that are of particular importance given the challenges posed by the post-truth era, noting how the philosophy of interpretation has sought to justify claims to understanding in the absence of authoritative claims to objectivity. Then, to bring Gadamer's thinking more directly to bear on social and political questions I will outline a key debate between Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas that illustrates a striking contrast between the hermeneutic approach and one that relies on a more rationalist model of understanding. Finally, with revised understanding *of* understanding ready to hand, we will be in a position to reevaluate the prospects for truth in the “post-truth” era.

Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Universality of Interpretation

Hermeneutics concerns itself at least in part with the question of the interpretation of texts, the uncovering of meaning in the written word. With that notion in mind, the question of truth is central to the work of hermeneutic philosophy, and throughout its history thinkers have conceived of numerous ways to uncover the grounds of our understanding the meaning of a

particular text, and our means to evaluating the truth of what we read. Along these lines one of Hans-Georg Gadamer's central hermeneutical insights is that the tripartite division of early hermeneutics⁵ into three faculties – *subtilitas intelligendi*, *subtilitas explicandi*, and *subtilitas applicandi* – is really no division at all.⁶

Early hermeneutics held that *subtilitas intelligendi* (literally the talent of intellection or understanding: the realm of the self-evident, that which needs no explanation) governed everyday acts of understanding – understanding that did not require the self-conscious use of any particular interpretive methods. In terms of textual analysis truth here is understood as being essentially self-evident and available more or less unproblematically to the reader. Thus understanding much writing in history and non-fiction was taken to be primarily an act of intellection, of simply reading what was on the page and understanding it in an unmediated fashion.

Subtilitas explicandi (the talent of explication or interpretation: the occasional work of making transparent the meaning of a text that is obscure), then, was needed when the meaning of a text was not self-evident, but rather required some act of interpretation on the part of the reader. Poetical texts, for example, were taken to require some form of explication, and early hermeneutics was much concerned with the development of interpretive methods that could provide this illumination – considerations of the intention of the author, the context of the

⁵ This tripartite division was introduced by J.J. Rambach, who added *subtilitas applicandi* to the Pietist division of *subtilitas intelligendi* and *subtilitas explicandi*. See Joel Weinsheimer, Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 184ff.

⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, Translation revised by J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall. Second, revised edition (New York: Continuum, 1989), 307. I will follow Gadamer in referring to these as “faculties” or “talents”: “It is telling that all three are called *subtilitas*—i.e., they are considered less as methods that we have at our disposal than as talents requiring a particular finesse of mind.”

writing, etc. And while we can still discuss the question of the truth of such texts – is the poem true to human experience, for instance – this truth is neither as evident nor as unproblematic as it the previous case. This talent could similarly be applied to a text that is presumed to have an occult or esoteric meaning that requires uncovering by the reader. In each case a conscious effort is made on the part of the interpreter to make evident what is hidden or implied by the text.

Finally *subtilitas applicandi* (the talent of applying or application: taking the insights of a text and making them do work for us) denoted a third and separate cognitive act whereby the meaning of a text – apparent now thanks to the work of *subtilitas explicandi* – could literally be applied to a task at hand. In this application the meaning of the text is essentially re-interpreted into the contemporary context.⁷ Truth here relates to the extent to which the text is true *to me* in my current context. Application in this sense implies a certain degree of subjectivity – the meaning of the text is dependent on contextual factors particular to the interpreter. Truth claims in this context begin to take on a decidedly questionable aspect in the sense that what is true begins to seem more like what is true *to me*.

Prior to Gadamer's writing, the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher's romantic hermeneutics had argued for the unity of understanding (*subtilitas intelligendi*) and interpretation (*subtilitas explicandi*) by outlining how interpretation is not some special faculty recruited when meaning is not self-evident but is instead always implicated in understanding. In doing this, romantic hermeneutics illustrated that interpretation is not occasional but continual – an ongoing

⁷ This model of interpretation also differs from the Medieval and Renaissance Christian interpretive practice of so-called four-fold hermeneutics, which featured the following levels: the literal (historical) level, the allegorical (typological or figural) level, the tropological (moral) level, and the anagogical (eschatological) level. Romantic hermeneutics (and historically-minded hermeneutics more generally) have semi-analogues for the literal and allegorical levels in intellection and explication, and are less interested in the moral and eschatological aspects of interpretive practice.

process in which we come to understand the world. Insofar as we understand anything at all— not just obscure or arcane texts but also aspects of “everyday life”— we engage in interpretation. This interpretation can be more or less *conscious* on the part of the interpreter,⁸ but it occurs in every case of understanding nonetheless. Even observations that are “self-evidently” true are, from this viewpoint, subject to prior interpretation on the part of the observer whether conscious or not.

Bringing interpretation and understanding together as romantic hermeneutics did extends the purview of interpretation considerably. Not just meaning, but truth is made a matter of interpretation and, hence, of debate in all cases. Even matters that seem amenable to definitive truth claims on the basis of objective facts are opened up to this interpretation and contestation. Beyond this accomplishment of romantic hermeneutics, Gadamer takes a step further by reading application (*subtilitas applicandi*) in a more fundamental, ontological sense: Gadamer argues that application, too, is inseparable from interpretation and understanding. If the unique accomplishment of romantic hermeneutics was to show that interpretation is continual rather than occasional, Gadamer’s further contribution with his philosophical hermeneutics was to show that all interpretation (and hence all understanding—remember that romantic hermeneutics established the unity of interpretation and understanding) is *applied* in the sense that it is practiced by an interpreter whose present situation is involved in the work of interpretation. Gadamer writes:

In the course of our reflections we have come to see that understanding always involves something like applying the text to be understood to the interpreter’s present situation. Thus we are forced to go one step beyond romantic hermeneutics, as it were, by regarding not only understanding and interpretation,

⁸ In fact this work of interpretation is more often than not entirely non-conscious, and this is precisely what interests Gadamer. It is in this respect that Gadamer can be read as saying that language like history, does not belong to us, we belong to it (see pp. 20-21).

but also application as comprising one unified process. This is not a return to the pietist tradition of three separate “*subtleties*,” for, on the contrary, we consider application to be just as integral a part of the hermeneutical process as are understanding and interpretation.⁹

All understanding is interpretation and application. These are not in fact separable talents or methods but rather integrated facets of all understanding, indeed, of all human *being*. This is the primordial and truly universal nature of hermeneutics according to Gadamer—that insofar as we understand we interpret; we apply.

It was the accomplishment of romantic hermeneutics to make it impossible to speak of interpretation as an occasional practice—instead interpretation is continual. Gadamer moves beyond romantic hermeneutics by showing that this ongoing interpretation is not separable from the interpreter and her own context. Gadamer’s hermeneutics is *universal* in this sense—interpretation is both temporally ongoing, and ontologically all encompassing. Gone is the view of application as a conscious, after-the-fact process of the intellect. In its place stands Gadamer’s understanding of application as the inescapable entanglement of the interpreter and that which is interpreted. No sphere of human existence escapes the play of interpretation, and the interpreter’s relation to the world is implicated in this process. This is a tricky point, and one that has significant consequences for our discussion of truth, so a bit of explanation may be in order.

Gadamer’s illustration of this point draws on two examples selected from the “home field” of hermeneutics favored by Schleiermacher: legal and theological interpretation. By examining Gadamer’s treatments of these fields, we can gain a better sense of what this tripartite configuration of understanding/interpretation/application entails. On the topic of these classic

⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, Translation revised by J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall. Second, revised edition (New York: Continuum, 1989), 308.

hermeneutical fields, Gadamer writes:

A law does not exist in order to be understood historically, but to be concretized in its legal validity by being interpreted. Similarly, the gospel does not exist in order to be understood as a merely historical document, but to be taken in such a way that it exercises its saving effect. This implies that the text, whether law or gospel, if it is to be understood properly—i.e., according to the claim it makes—must be understood at every moment, in every concrete situation, in a new and different way. Understanding here is always application.¹⁰

Insofar as one understands a law or scripture as meaningful, one has already applied that law or scripture to one's own situation. The question of whether one takes the further, conscious step of using or appropriating that law or scripture for one's own purposes is a separate issue. The important thing for Gadamer is the process of understanding itself, a process that always includes application in this new sense. According to Gadamer legal and sacred tradition are not unchanging, historically circumscribed bodies of doctrine. As soon as a law is taken as a historical artifact, as soon as scripture is reduced to the novelty of historical literature, the effective power of the law to adjudicate and of scripture to save are lost.

This insight forms the core of Gadamer's hermeneutics. Against dogmatists in both legal interpretation and scriptural exegesis who seek the *one true meaning* of the text at hand, against romantic hermeneutics with its emphasis on rules of interpretation that will lead to true understanding, Gadamer offers a hermeneutics of application that subsumes earlier models of hermeneutics. This extension of the meaning of hermeneutics has extraordinary consequences for the interpretation of texts, clearly, but also on our views of truth and understanding more broadly. Objectivity in the sense of an appeal to a "pre-interpretive" truth that can somehow be grasped without any intervening interpretation is called into question as interpretation and

¹⁰ Ibid: 309.

application are involved in all understanding.¹¹ Equally, it seems apparent that all claims to truth are revealed to be in some sense partial insofar as the individual making the claim is herself implicated in this act of understanding. Objectivity in this naïve sense is both impossible in light of this implication and entirely inappropriate to the nature of human understanding. According to Gadamer's hermeneutics, insofar as we understand, we interpret and apply. For Gadamer this is not merely an epistemological point. Rather our way of being in the world as thinking subjects is necessarily interpretive – literature, science, human relations, none escape this universal understanding of hermeneutics.

The Gadamer/Habermas Debate

In seeking to understand the stakes of Gadamer's hermeneutics for our consideration of truth and truthiness in the contemporary sociopolitical context, it will be helpful to contrast his approach explicitly with that of a more overtly political author with his own approach to questions of truth, including concerns about systematically distorted communication. One of Gadamer's most frequent interlocutors was Jürgen Habermas, and the extensive debate between the two illustrates how Gadamer's linguistically grounded ontology shapes a unique approach to social philosophy.¹² On the face of it, Gadamer and Habermas have quite a lot in common. As

¹¹ N.B. "Called into question", but not completely undermined. As we will see, Gadamer has his own arguments concerning the possibility of objectivity in interpretation.

¹² A full account of this debate is well beyond the range of the current project, and would have to account for considerable modifications to the interlocutors' positions and the changing intellectual climates of the 30+ years of dialogue between the two thinkers. For our purposes I will be focusing on the earliest iteration of the debate, where the terms and stakes of the distinction between hermeneutics and critical theory are established. For more thorough treatments of the Gadamer-Habermas debate, see the relevant works by each author, most essentially Habermas's essays "A review of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*," in Understanding and Social Inquiry, ed. Fred Dallmayr and Thomas McCarthy (Notre Dame University Press, 1977) and "The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality," in Interpreting Politics, ed. Michael T. Gibbons (New York: New York University Press, 1987) as well as Gadamer's "Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and the Critique of Ideology: Metacritical Comments on *Truth and Method*," in

Yvonne Sherratt notes, “Habermas has many of the same intellectual enemies as Gadamer, notably the intrusion of crude scientific methodologies into the humanities, positivism in particular.”¹³ Habermas’s familiar critiques of the privileging of instrumental or strategic reasoning in the modern era,¹⁴ for example, seem right in line with Gadamer’s hermeneutic rejection of the positivistic model of human science. Habermas, like Gadamer, objects to the ahistorical, means-oriented approach that positivism embodies and seeks to counter that tendency with an alternative approach to human understanding.

The enemy of my enemy is not my friend, however, and Gadamer and Habermas’s shared antagonism toward positivism masks deep divisions between the two thinkers.¹⁵ The deepest of

The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985). Commentary on the debate is extensive, and includes Scheibler’s Gadamer: Between Heidegger and Habermas, (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2000); Richard Bernstein’s Beyond Objectivism and Relativism Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) and “What is the Difference that Makes a Difference: Gadamer, Habermas, and Rorty,” PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association, Vol. 1982, Volume Two: Symposia and Invited Papers (1982), 331-359; Martin Jay, “Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn? Reflection on the Habermas-Gadamer Debate,” in Fin-de-Siècle Socialism and other Essays, (New York: Routledge, 1988), 17-36; William Outhwaite, New Philosophies of Social Science: Realism, Hermeneutics and Critical Theory, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991); etc.

¹³ Yvonne Sherratt, Continental Philosophy of Social Science: Hermeneutics, Genealogy, Critical Theory, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 95.

¹⁴ See esp. “Technology and Science as ‘Ideology’” (1968) and The Theory of Communication Action (1981).

¹⁵ These divisions are theoretical, but also temperamental; given this fact the debate was notable for a remarkable amount of mutual respect and appreciation. In an interview with Riccardo Dottori Gadamer memorably characterizes one aspect of the debate saying “I think the tremendous thing about the experience that I had with Habermas is that our attempt at a conversation has shown us both that we must learn from each other and that the arguments that we brought into the discussion weren’t pushed further simply because they came from the other person, but, rather, we gave as good as we got. He was unable to make a political person out of me; I was unable to make a philosophical person out of him—he remained a political thinker.” Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Ethics and Politics,” in A Century of Philosophy: Hans-Georg Gadamer in Conversation with Riccardo Dottori, trans. Rod Coltman with Sigrid Koepke (New York: Continuum, 2003), 92. Part of my goal in the pages that follow will be to examine precisely the

these divisions find their origins in the dramatically different approaches to reason and rationality – and hence, truth – embraced by the two thinkers. Habermas is an avowed advocate of the “unfinished project” of the Enlightenment, and embraces the enlightenment emphasis on human (communicative) rationality as a route to overcoming prejudice and ideology on the way to uncovering truth. In this sense Habermas follows Kant in his emphasis on the potential of human rationality. For Gadamer, on the other hand, the legacy of the Enlightenment emphasis on rationality is more mixed. In Gadamer’s view the Enlightenment project overemphasizes both the possibility and the desirability of a break from tradition and authority, a break that the Enlightenment claims to accomplish through reason. Ingrid Scheibler summarizes the debate well:

...the debate remains an exchange between two positions: Habermas’s commitment to a project that follows the Enlightenment in its view of tradition and authority as essentially dogmatic forces and that sees rational (emancipatory) reflection to be operative in the *agonistic dissolution* of these forces, and Gadamer’s hermeneutical philosophy, which seeks to combat the Enlightenment “prejudice” by emphasizing that rational reflection is also at work in a reflective *acknowledgement* of authority and tradition.¹⁶

The differing views of the legacy of the Enlightenment thus lead to differing views of the value and scope of authority and tradition. The Enlightenment devaluation of tradition and authority against reason—the tendency to eschew the former in preference for the latter—is well-established in political theory, where this rebellion against tradition and authority was part and parcel of the early-modern political project. From this perspective Gadamer’s rehabilitation of these concepts may strike us as strange or even retrogressive. Nonetheless Gadamer argues that prejudice, authority and tradition play key roles in human understanding, and thus they figure

political implications of Gadamer’s hermeneutics in a way that Gadamer himself would not, and to do so from what Gadamer might consider a *philosophical* perspective.

¹⁶ Ingrid Scheibler, *Gadamer: Between Heidegger and Habermas* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 4, *italics* in the original.

prominently in his hermeneutics.

Gadamer's rehabilitation of the concept of prejudice begins as an examination of the Enlightenment prejudice *against* prejudice. The Enlightenment view of prejudice emanates from Kant's insistence that "Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another."¹⁷ In this view, prejudice is due either to over hastiness in thought or, more insidiously, to over reliance on the authority of others.¹⁸ Thus an antithesis is established between reason—the fruits of the use of one's own understanding "without the guidance of others"—and unreason or intellectual immaturity, understood as the unthinking acceptance of authority. Understood in this sense, prejudice is a precondition that limits freedom by tying oneself to received tradition—to the authority of the past. Prejudice stands between the rational individual and the truth. The child of the Enlightenment exercises reason by rooting out these prejudices (through the use of Kantian abstract reason or the ruthless application of Cartesian universal doubt) and eliminating their foundations in authority and tradition.

The question that Gadamer explores is whether this antithesis between reason and prejudice is tenable. In the course of this exploration Gadamer notes the seemingly obvious fact that there are, in fact, legitimate prejudices. Starting from this fact, he then sets out to discover the *ground of the legitimacy* of prejudices or, in other words, their *authority*. Gadamer observes:

The Enlightenment's distinction between faith in authority and using one's own reason is, in itself, legitimate. If the prestige of authority displaces one's own judgment, then authority is in fact a source of prejudices. *But this does not preclude its being a source of truth*, and that is what the Enlightenment failed to see when it denigrated all authority.¹⁹

In this reading, reason and prejudice are not opposed. Reason, insofar as it seeks truth, loses a

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'"

¹⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, Translation revised by J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall. Second, revised edition (New York: Continuum, 1989), 271.

¹⁹ Ibid, 279. *Italics* mine

powerful ally by denigrating prejudice based on authority. The essence of authority for Gadamer is an acknowledgement of knowledge. Authority properly understood is a property that is earned over time and through examination, not the unexamined root of misunderstanding and obfuscation. Authority “has nothing to do with blind obedience to commands. Indeed, authority has to do not with obedience, but rather with knowledge.”²⁰ For Gadamer true authority need not be authoritarian. The distinction rests on the availableness of true authority to examination. An appeal to authority is not a closing off of dialogue by fiat, but rather an invitation to examine the grounds of knowledge.

For Gadamer, authority in this sense is well illustrated by the authority that adheres to that which has been sanctioned by tradition. Tradition does not have authority simply because it designates “what has always been the case.” Rather, tradition as “what has always been the case” earns its authority through the continual examination, reexamination, and dialogue that has characterized its creation and endurance. “Standing the test of time” is not a merely temporal determination. “Even the most genuine and pure tradition does not persist because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated. It is, essentially, preservation, and it is active in all historical change.”²¹ In fact, absent the authority of tradition and the productive prejudice that is supported by this tradition, understanding of any kind is compromised. We understand as being always already situated in a tradition, with our understandings framed and supported by pre-judgments, fore-understandings, that are a precondition of our understanding the world at all. It is through tradition, not in spite of it, that we are enabled to understand the world at all. It is this situated perspective that stands to be “affirmed, embraced, cultivated” — to be preserved or altered in keeping with an ever-expanding

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 281.

understanding.

It is this thesis of Gadamer's—the insistence that tradition informs all understanding and that prejudice is in this sense inescapable—that ultimately brings him into conflict with Habermas. Arguing from a perspective inspired by the Enlightenment rationalism that Gadamer questions, Habermas challenges the hermeneutic claim to universality. According to Habermas the hermeneutic claim to universality depends on this role of tradition as informing all understanding, but there are aspects of our reliance on tradition that must be challenged. In particular, in his review of Gadamer's Truth and Method and later in his essay “The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality,” Habermas argues that understanding rooted in tradition fails to penetrate the workings of *power* in language. This shortcoming is particularly pronounced in cases of what Habermas calls “systematically distorted communication.” Habermas argues that “the dogmatism of the context of tradition is subject not only to the objectivity of language in general but also to the repressivity of forces which deform the intersubjectivity of agreement as such and which systematically distort everyday communication.”²² Habermas's use of the terms “dogmatism,” “repressivity,” “deform,” and “distort” make it clear that in his view tradition can have a negative or constraining effect on our understanding and the search for truth. This critique draws our attention to the myriad ways in which the tradition we inhabit, the very language we use, bears with it power structures that can be repressive, damaging, or limiting to our understanding.

Of course this observation begs the question of how, exactly, one can expect to uncover or reveal these hidden workings of power in tradition and language, and Habermas has an answer:

²² Habermas. “The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality,” in Interpreting Politics, ed. Michael T. Gibbons (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 197.

It is only the formal anticipation of an idealized dialogue, as the form of life to be realized in the future, which guarantees the ultimate supporting and contra-factual agreement that already unites us; in relation to it we can criticize every factual agreement, should it be a false one, as false consciousness.²³

Here Habermas's debt to the Enlightenment is clear: he appeals to an idealized speech situation—idealized in the sense that it can be constructed through reason alone, this is what makes the idealized speech situation “formal”—and uses this situation as a benchmark to evaluate all actually existing communication. Through this idealization Habermas seeks to circumvent the distortion inherent in tradition—the distortion that characterizes *ideology*. Habermas seems to have in mind something like the psychoanalytic model. The patient in analysis is incapable of escaping his or her own psychosis, and so depends on the analyst to provide an external measure of evaluation. The analyst is capable of perceiving distortions in the inner life of the patient that are opaque to the patient him- or herself. Habermas's idealized speech situation plays this analytical role—society, in the thrall of the systematically distorted communication that characterizes language and tradition where power operates unexamined, is incapable of generating rational standards of evaluation *internally*, and so must turn to idealized speech situations for assistance. In short, Habermas argues that the universality of hermeneutics based on tradition runs into difficulty when that tradition is itself infected by systematically distorted communication (ideology). In such instances an appeal to an external, perfectly rational ideal must be made. This is the basis of Habermas's critique of ideology.

Given the insights provided by philosophical hermeneutics, this appeal is problematic. For one, even if the analyst can play the part of the external observer to a patient's neuroses,²⁴ it is far from clear that an analogous role can be played by an appeal to ideal speech situations in

²³ Ibid, 198.

²⁴ Habermas seems to dramatically underestimate the entanglement of the analyst in even the most ideal analytical situations.

the case of society. To put it rather bluntly, who is society's shrink? If we take Gadamer's hermeneutics and linguistic ontology seriously, then it becomes clear that even conceptualizations of idealized speech situations can emerge only from within the language of a given tradition—there is no escaping the universality of hermeneutics. Habermas, for his part, acknowledges this fact: “it is, of course, true that criticism is always tied to the context of tradition which it reflects.... There is no validation of depth-hermeneutical interpretation outside of the self-reflection of all participants that is successfully achieved in dialogue.”²⁵ Here Habermas notes that there is no “outside” of tradition—critique is always situated and is in this sense always internal to language and dependent on the hermeneutical experience. How, then, is this tension to be resolved? Is it possible to mediate between the appeal to reason and the pull of a tradition that we cannot meaningfully escape?

Paul Ricoeur's treatment of the debate has proven to be popular in part because it refuses to choose between the two sides, preferring to see Gadamer's hermeneutics and Habermas's critique of ideology as two moments in the same process. The first, reconstructive moment is provided by Gadamer's hermeneutics and coincides with the recollection of tradition. The second, critical moment is provided by Habermas's critique of ideology and coincides with the anticipation of freedom from domination. Ricoeur argues “nothing is more deceptive than the alleged antinomy between an ontology of prior understanding and an eschatology of freedom....In theological terms, eschatology is nothing without the recitation of acts of deliverance from the past.”²⁶ I am not interested in recreating this antinomy, and I find Ricoeur's attempt at a conciliatory philosophy that embraces both sides of the debate to be both subtle and

²⁵ Ibid, 201.

²⁶ Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics and Critique of Ideology,” in Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences, ed. John B. Thompson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 100.

admirable. Nonetheless I wonder whether something is lost in this conciliatory approach. In particular, I want to push the question of whether the turn to ideology critique—the eschatological moment that Ricoeur speaks of—is appropriate and necessary, particularly when considered in light of the challenges posed by truthiness and our post-truth era.

To the question of appropriateness allow me to reprise the crucial element of Gadamer’s hermeneutics—its universality. Even if we accept the second “moment” of critique, we would be underestimating the power of Gadamer’s hermeneutical insights if we were to take this moment as separable from or independent of the first, reconstructive moment. Indeed, I argue that to think of Gadamer’s hermeneutics as preeminently reconstructive is to overlook the transformative potential of the dialogic relationship to tradition that is implied in these hermeneutics. Reconstruction, critique, anticipation, all are elements of an essentially hermeneutical orientation to the world that is inescapable. There is no *outside* from whence to evaluate society or the authority of tradition. *Being that can be understood is language*²⁷ and the language we speak is in turn the language that speaks us—we *are* in language, and this language is borne by tradition.

To the question of necessity I suggest that one of the greatest limitations of Habermas’s critique and even of Ricoeur’s reading of the debate is the tendency to read the hermeneutics of tradition as monological. In this reading tradition speaks through us. But Gadamer’s hermeneutics are essentially dialogical, and it is this aspect of Gadamer’s hermeneutics that is too often overlooked in treatments of Gadamer – and that is of crucial significance in our current situation with respect to truth. There is in fact no need to look outside of Gadamer’s hermeneutics in order to find resources for critical engagement. Instead, by developing the

²⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Translation revised by J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall. Second, revised edition (New York: Continuum, 1989), 474.

dialogical aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutics we can uncover an understanding of tradition that is both open to and dependent on interpretation.

This point is well illustrated by Gadamer's theory of the fusion of horizons. If we conceptualize one's horizon as it relates to human understanding as the range of what is understandable from one's own historical position, it becomes clear that one of the tasks of human understanding is the expansion of this horizon to encompass ever greater range. Further examination makes it clear that one's horizon is both conditioned by tradition and open to constant revision. For Gadamer, the horizon of the present and the historical horizons of tradition are not isolated, but rather are intimately related. This is what Gadamer calls the fusion of horizons:

Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. *Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.*²⁸

Gadamer seeks to evade two approaches that miss the mark in opposite directions here. On the one hand, the horizon of the present must not be subordinated to the past. That is to say, a blind deference to a historical understanding is inappropriate to understanding. On the other hand, we must not seek to subsume the horizon of the past in our own contemporary horizon, allowing the hubris of our methods or the false superiority of historical distance to trump the meaning of what we seek to understand. Instead, true understanding is the product of the fusion of these horizons by way of dialogue between the interpreter and the tradition of interpretation.

²⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method , Translation revised by J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall. Second, revised edition (New York: Continuum, 1989), 306, *italics* in original.

Gadamer notes “it must be emphasized that language has its true being only in dialogue, in *coming to an understanding*”²⁹ and further, “Reaching an understanding in language places a subject matter before those communicating like a disputed object set between them. Thus the world is the common ground, trodden by none and recognized by all, uniting all who talk to one another.”³⁰ In understanding how this might be the case it would be well to recall the hermeneutical *subtilitas* of application. Above application was discussed as the element of hermeneutical experience that points to the implication of the interpreter with that which is to be interpreted. In the case of tradition and the fusion of horizons the nature of application becomes clear. Application in this case refers to the sense in which any act of understanding involves just such a fusion, where tradition is taken up and affirmed, embraced, cultivated—preserved in such a way as to be meaningful in our own enlarged horizon.

Confronting Truthiness in a Post-Truth Era

At this point, having explored Gadamer’s bridging of understanding, interpretation, and application in the hermeneutic experience of meaning; his rehabilitation of the notions of prejudice, tradition, and authority; and his dialogic understanding of the fusion of horizons, we are positioned to better understand how Gadamer’s hermeneutics position us to confront the challenges posed in a “post-truth” era. While other approaches have proven up to the task of reinforcing the value of truth in the face of concerns about dishonesty and deceit, Gadamer’s argument is well situated to respond to this new challenge. Truthiness and epistemic closure confront us not with dishonesty per se, nor with ignorance in any clear sense, but rather with the threat of a kind of alternative standard of truth that is impervious to external challenge. Lest we minimize the threat posed by truthiness, it is worth noting that shared standards of truth and

²⁹ Ibid, 446, *italics* in original.

³⁰ Ibid.

falsity and, more significantly, a shared understanding of the processes by which we come to adjudicate between the two, are key features of any functioning civil society.³¹

The approach to truthiness suggested by Gadamer's hermeneutics is novel insofar as it does not confront truthiness with a claim to a more authoritative or objectively verifiable truth. The break with a benighted past in the thrall of unexamined prejudice envisioned by Enlightenment thinkers and their heirs was illusory. Modernity saw the emergence of an apparent objectivity that has since been revealed to be both ill-founded and fragile – this was not the dawning of a new era, but more of an optimistic and perhaps misguided interlude. What we are experiencing in the 21st Century is not a crisis of objectivity or of truth. It is the decline of a particular understanding of objectivity and truth that had been presented as universal, codified in the ideology of objectivism. Insofar as each claim to the truth or to knowledge of any kind is the product of an interpretive process that implicates the subject herself, any assertion that seeks to put forward such an authoritative account is vulnerable to the same critique. Indeed, when confronting a phenomenon like truthiness, an approach analogous to Habermas's appeal to an idealized speech situation in which rationality can function unencumbered seems entirely inadequate. The answer to uncertainty is not an appeal to a higher reason.

In light of his arguments against naïve objectivism and his rejection of the ideal of a perfectly rational speech situation it is tempting to view Gadamer's position as a tacit acceptance of an equally naïve subjectivism or even an all-out relativism. This is a particularly important consideration to evaluate given the prominent role played by accusations of radical relativism in

³¹ For particularly striking discussions of this idea, see Rosenfeld, Democracy and Truth, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019) and Snyder, On Tyranny: 20 Lessons from the 20th Century, (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017).

contemporary debates over the undermining of truth.³² Here it is worth noting that Gadamer's arguments against a naïve subjectivism are even more forceful than those offered in opposition to objectivism,³³ and these arguments will be essential to rescuing the concept of truth from the challenges posed by truthiness. Where naïve objectivism falls into the trap of positing an untenable distance between the interpreter and the text, subjectivism fails in its over-psychologizing of understanding – viewing understanding as a matter of peering into the psyche of either the author of a text (or action) or its interpreter.

What starts to emerge in Gadamer's work is an understanding *of* understanding in which a frontier between objectivism and subjectivism is discovered in the form of a dialogue with the text. This dialogue prizes neither the objectivity of a historically circumscribed text (a universal, independent truth), nor the psychological state of the author or interpreter (a vision of truth that is entirely dependent on the speaker's status), but rather the *meaning* of the text—a meaning that is underdetermined by both the subjectivist and the objectivist interpretation. This is precisely the domain of application—application is the forging of this dialogue in language between the interpreter and the text in which the meaning of the text emerges as something irreducibly *other* that either the interpreter or the text in itself.

³² See Rosenfeld, Democracy and Truth, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 140ff. for a good overview of this line of reasoning.

³³ This is attributable, in part, to the fact that subjectivist philosophies of interpretation held considerably more sway at the time of the writing of Truth and Method than naively objectivist hermeneutics. This is arguably still the case today within the field of hermeneutics. In the world of the social sciences the debate is more evenly matched. This is what makes Gadamer's hermeneutics so interesting for the social sciences—its status as neither objectivist nor subjectivist, properly speaking. See Bernstein's Beyond Objectivism and Relativism for a fascinating discussion of this in-between space.

Instead of appealing to a higher truth that truthiness will inevitably reject out of hand, or collapsing into a muddle of subjectivism and relativism, a Gadamerian approach insists on three related points: a tradition of interpretation, dialogue, and the common sense of the community.

In the first place, the Gadamerian insistence on the role of application in interpretation emphatically does not open the door to any interpretation whatsoever. Rather, the range of interpretations that can make a plausible claim to truth are heavily constrained by the tradition of interpretation of which they are a part. In other words, Gadamer's view is not compatible with an "anything goes" view of interpretation. While a Gadamerian approach to truth and truthiness avoids any attempt to discredit truthiness with a superior truth, it can help us to understand how some visions of the truth are simply untenable. To return to the example of the text, there are some interpretations of any given text that can be authoritatively ruled out if on no other grounds than on account of the fact that said interpretations are so radically out of line with received knowledge and understanding – with the history of interpretation – that they cannot be accepted as remotely plausible. In short, while Gadamer would avoid making any claims to know an independently verifiable, capital-t Truth, he would not be shy about pointing out clear falsehood as determined by reference to the history of interpretation. If the version of truthiness that reigns in a particular community is so radically inconsistent with prevailing understandings that it brings us up short, that interpretation will ultimately fail to serve the purpose of allowing that community to meaningfully understand and engage with the broader political community.

Second, Gadamerian hermeneutics appeals to the desirability, even the inescapability, of dialogue. In short, a Gadamerian approach suggests that epistemic closure is never, can never be, complete. However fractured the public sphere may be in Western democracies, however ghettoized news media have become, it is still consistent to refer to these polities as unified in the

sense that they share common, or at least adjacent, horizons in Gadamer's sense. His metaphorical horizons can characterize not just the perspectives of an interpreter and a text, or a contemporary and a historical point of view; they could equally describe political or ideological positions. Gadamer offers the fusion of horizons not as a regulative ideal but rather as a fact of understanding. Understanding is nothing other than this fusion of horizons, and in time the horizons of radically different perspectives have tended toward fusion. To use one of Gadamer's examples, the move from a geocentric understanding of the universe toward a heliocentric understanding of the universe took a significant amount of time, and required each position to understand the elements of truth expressed in the other. In time a consensus was reached that understood simultaneously the truth of the earth's revolution around the sun, and the truth of the statement that, in spite of that knowledge, for us the sun still rises on earth. With this model in mind we must consider truthiness not as one more form of falsehood to be confronted with a superior, independently verifiable truth, but rather as one more interpretation to be considered and engaged with toward the end of coming to a more coherent, unified understanding.

Finally, Gadamerian hermeneutics does not, ultimately, reject the possibility of something like objectivity. It simply grounds this objectivity in the sense of the interpretive community – the *sensus communis* in Vico's term borrowed from the stoics³⁴ – rather than in any independently existing reality, verifiable if the correct methods are used. This is the result of the combination of the above two points – the fusion of horizons over time and the history of interpretation. These factors come together in the shared sense of a political community. Truthiness, when engaged with by other perspectives and confronted with the weight of a history of understanding cannot help but give way to a broader, shared understanding of the truth. This

³⁴ Gadamer, Truth and Method, 19-34; Schaeffer, John D., *Sensus Communis: Vico, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Relativism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

truth is objective insofar as it is not a product of a single, partial, subjective viewpoint, but rather the consensus, confirmed and reaffirmed through dialogue and debate over time.

This raises the specter of a troubling critique: what is to stop this common sense of the interpretive community, based on tradition and arrived at through dialogue, from becoming tyrannical? What, to put the challenge in terms familiar to political theory, can prevent the common sense of the community from becoming a tyranny of the majority? In response to this concern I appeal again to Gadamer's sense of what is meant by authority and tradition. At a given moment in time it is likely that a given interpretation or understanding of truth will be hegemonic. But this "moment in time" view is deceptive. This hegemony is never static, and never unchallenged. Truthiness, from this perspective, serves as a check on hegemonic understandings of truth. As a society we will likely ultimately reject the view of the world presented by these apparently (but only apparently) closed-off communities of interpreters, but their continued existence forces the broader community to expand its horizons and consider whether the dominant interpretation of reality remains tenable. In this sense the construction of truth over time is profoundly democratic, and subject to continual revision. It is undoubtedly the case that, in order to flourish, democracy cannot do without some conception of truth. This understanding of Gadamer's hermeneutics suggests that our most sound route to establishing truth is itself by way of democracy.