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The moving structure of reality in Gadamer's method of interpretation: A philosophy of life in the making of history

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ABSTRACT: The reorientation in hermeneutics from matters of textual interpretation and historically effected consciousness to "hermeneutic realism" and immanent metaphysics has created questions about our place in both history and nature. They are as mutually exclusive of one another as linear and cyclic time and yet human beings have a share in both. To resolve the contradiction, the steps in Gadamer's method of interpretation are mapped onto the following structures of reality: (1) the ontic surface defined by relations of mutual exclusion and contradiction; (2) the underlying ontological dimension in which opposites turn into one another; and (3) a mode of human existence between them that is responsible for creating the order of nature in time.

KEYWORDS: hermeneutic realism, hermeneutics, metaphysics, ontology

> If there is anything that is free from change, and that, as the unchangeable, may be certain of everyone's assent, then this is doubtless the rational, and as long as "ratio" moves within its own field, all its steps partake in its immunity from historical change. (Gadamer, 1979, p. 3)

Introduction

Contributors to *Hans-Georg Gadamer: Cuestiones abiertas/ Open Questions* (Bey, 2025) provide evidence that philosophical hermeneutics is undergoing a transition from inquiries shaped by "historically formed consciousness" to inquiries shaped by ontological presuppositions. Contra Nicholas Davey's (2022) conviction that language-being does not have a metaphysical principle, in "Gadamer's Metaphysics of Play", Eddo Evink (2025, p. 146) writes that "[w]hat Gadamer says about art, its ontology and condition for understanding it, is valid for everything that appears in the world". According to Evink, the ontology of art pivots on play which is prefigured in the Greek cult experience of the divine (see Lammi, 2008). The analogical association of play with a religious experience implies that participation in the back-and-forth movement of a game includes a transformation in existence from the ordinary to the extraordinary. Without such a transformation, it would not be possible for beings to come to be in themselves. And yet, Evink (2025, p. 150) specifies that the immersion and loss of self in the back-and-forth movement of play depends not only on our choice to play the game, but "to make choices within this play". If so, then the truth-value of Gadamer's "general theory of ontology" depends on our free will or capacity to choose. It is not clear that this is always the case in a religious experience of the divine.

In "Reason, History and the Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem", Roger W. H. Savage gestures toward a transcendent order within the realm of immanence. He writes that "[t]he power of language to reveal dimensions of our experience that otherwise remain hidden is accordingly the initial touchstone for a sustained inquiry into the way that works, words and deeds, and acts transcend the given order from within" (Savage, 2025, p. 212). Language thus has a "power" within our worlds of understanding to change a pre-given world, i.e. the world formed by the aesthetic attitude that places art at a distance (Savage, 2025). Clearly, for Savage, hermeneutics is no longer limited to text and interpretation and instead takes its bearings from, as he says, "presuppositions". However, "presuppositions" belong to propositional reasoning rather than to matters of, in the words of Heidegger, "the meaning of existence". What are the existential preconditions for a metaphysical presupposition? Unless Savage accounts for metaphysics in the play of language, the notion of presuppositions contradicts his insight into "the power of language" to reveal the ontological dimension of experience. Alternatively, perhaps the contradiction between propositional reasoning and "the meaning of existence" is a necessary precursor to their harmonisation. This is the point at which Dieter Tiechert is appropriate to introduce.

In "Language, Historicality and Truth", Tiechert (2025) acknowledges an ambiguity in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics between the historical and ontological. He describes the ambiguity as follows:

> Ontological truth as disclosure and access to sense and meaning *and* factual truth in interpretation; understanding as passion or suffering (*Geschehen*), as a process the interpreter is submitted to *and* understanding as the

> result of successful appropriation of historical information as a necessary condition for interpretations; dialogue as the interpreter's experience of being addressed in the text and dialogue as an interplay of questions and answers with due regard to the meaning of the text. (Tiechert, 2025, p. 140; emphases in original)

Contra Nicholas Davey's (2022, p. 66) apophantic insistence, "[a]ny Cartesian interpretation of the Gadamerian mind is profoundly misguided", Tiechert recognises the two sides (ontic and ontological) of Gadamer's hermeneutics in which human beings abide (see Fuyarchuk, 2022). However, contrary to his conclusion that propositional reasoning and "ontological truth as disclosing" are irreducible to one another, for Gadamer the Heraclitean ontologist, opposites turn into one another. The "ambiguities" Tiechert identifies are themselves a catalyst for a resolution that unravels itself in qualitatively different ways as surely as we do and do not choose to play a game (that plays us).

Elsewhere, I have developed the argument, stated succinctly by Gadamer (1982b, p. 6), that hermeneutics "is a basic structure of the experience of reality" (see Fuyarchuk, 2019; 2020). This article consolidates those findings by coordinating the steps in his method of interpretation with the structure of reality, i.e. his cosmology in "The Continuity of History and the Existential Moment" and "Heraclitus Studies", as follows: (1) the ontic surface defined by relations of mutual exclusion and contradiction; (2) the underlying ontological dimension in which opposites change into one another; and (3) a middle mode of human existence between both (1) and (2) that cannot avoid responding to the responsibility to re-interpret history from the side of nature's rhythms.[1] Importantly, the structure is not static. Instead, it is mobile on account of the ontological difference between the surface and its grounds in the interplay of opposing forces. For this reason, the structure ought to be interpreted as an organic whole; each part breathing life into the others and sustaining the life of understanding. Not unlike the medical advice of the doctor Alkmaion, Gadamer (1970) likens the process of resolving and unravelling contradictions to a life process of living things. There is, therefore, a sense in which Gadamer's method of interpretation ameliorates divisions in time and, in so doing, restores health to the cosmos as if it were the animal to which Plato compares the universe in the *Timaeus*.

Ontic surface of contradiction and conflict

Gadamer calls attention to the title, "The Continuity of History and the Existential Moment". He says that it "questions the legitimacy of historical questioning itself" (1972, p. 231). In particular, he is concerned with calling the concept of "continuity in history" into question. In so doing, he sees himself as calling a century into question in the midst of a transition from one epoch to the next and thus between the past and the present. But of course, the past is not "over". Instead, it endures in the first of the three dimensions in Gadamer's method. He defines "continuity" in terms of the Heidelberg (rather than Marburg) Neo-Kantian "epistemology of historical science" that subsumes historical research to datum (empirical science). The "continuity of history" is characterised by chronological-linear time which corresponds to the hermeneutic understanding of "effective history", and the tradition handed down by text (Evink, 2025) to which Tierchert (2025) attributes a cognitive concept of truth. At this epistemic level of understanding, the inner relation between ideas and concepts is not recognised and therefore the continuity of history is fraught with division and discord. Stated differently, the epoch to which Gadamer is speaking, the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, has produced its own antithesis in a "vigorous opponent", namely Wilhelm Dilthey's allegedly post-Romantic "humanistic psychology". In contrast to the abstract theorising of Hegel's speculative philosophy of history and the progressive positivism of John Stuart Mill and Auguste Comte, Dilthey prioritises the concrete particularity of lived experience (Nelson, 2021).

For Gadamer, the problem of history is a problem in history. The problem of history is reflected in the manifold ways in which he formulates the first stage in understanding: Heraclitus and Parmenides, Aristotle and Plato, Schleiermacher and Hegel, Aristotle and theories of evolution, mythos and logos, freedom and "determinism", Greek philosophers and the Fathers of the Church, Protestants (Oetinger) and Catholics (Aquinas). These counter positions are, of course, placeholders, but nevertheless logically entailed by a kind of thinking that is pinned to the poles of subject-object dichotomy. In "Continuity of History and the Existential Moment" (Gadamer, 1972), he counterposes the Neo-Kantian universalist view of history with Dilthey's endeavour to preserve subjective experience in the human sciences. Yet the alleged adversaries are reverse images of one another; manifestations of opposition between beings that runs through everything from metaphysics to ethics and that has defined the course of Western philosophy (and Western self-understanding) since its inception. The proof is in the pudding: Centuries of division and conflict. Forgetting the meaning of existence by confusing it with either an externalised series of events, or one's internalised private experience, is also a way of being-in-the-world that Gadamer experienced during and after World War II. The problem of history is thus a problem in history evident in sublimated, repressed and overt forms of aggression.

Not unlike polarised adversaries whose ideologically motivated political ambitions self-implode, the Neo-Kantian "epistemology of historical science" and Dilthey's "humanistic psychology" refute themselves. Rather than inquire into how we belong to history, they reason about time in terms of the subject-object dichotomy and therefore cannot avoid reproducing contradictions. Hence, on the one hand, as Gadamer (1972, p. 231) explains, in an endeavour to distinguish the datum of history from the natural sciences, the Neo-Kantians developed "the concept of cultural unity", which contradicts the scientific value of their epistemology. On the other hand, to rescue his understanding of "the essential structure of the historical process" from "inner self-confirmation", he says that Dilthey invoked the objectivity of scientific knowledge (Collingwood, 1956). Tiechert (2025, p. 111) explains that "Dilthey tried to formulate a descriptive psychology that was to function as an epistemological and methodological basis for *Geisteswissenschaften*". By grounding autobiography in an objective standpoint toward beings, Dilthey becomes a spectator of his own life, which is precisely the standpoint on history that dovetails with the natural sciences,

[1] For a concise outline of the structure of being coordinate with Gadamer's method of interpretation, see Gadamer (2001). Plato's doctrine of the one and the many is a numerological formulation of Heraclitus' understanding of nature as a unitary interplay of opposites.

thereby undermining the philosophical import of a return to the "life world" (Gadamer, 1972, p. 231). The Neo-Kantian and reputedly post-Romantic schools of thought are thus caught in a conundrum.

Ontological unity of opposites

Gadamer disputes the philosophical credibility of the two schools of thought that were trending in the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Since they are functions of the Cartesian subject-object dichotomy, which excludes the middle term, i.e. relations within non-relations, they cannot but reproduce contradictions when they attempt to remove them. In anticipation of disclosing the common ground between two sides of history, the objective and subjective, and thereby restoring harmony to a divided world, Gadamer (1972, p. 231) comments sardonically "if the epistemology of historical sciences can be called a philosophy of history" and "if the dissolution of metaphysics in history can be called a philosophy of history". What is "the philosophy of history" to which he is referring? In an endeavour to mend the schism and thereby impart peace to a divided world, Gadamer steps behind the historical sciences and history as autobiography to uncover the ontological interplay in their non-relationality.

Although the Neo-Kantian schools of thought suppress the ontological grounds of their own position, Gadamer does not emphasise the tension between the concept of continuity in history and those grounds. Instead, he traces the concept of linear time to its historical precedents in the Augustinian and Aristotelian view of time as a series of "nows" and then contends that below their surface, time flows like a "river", a "flowing ribbon of events", "the river of oncoming and subsiding time" and "stream of history" (Gadamer, 1972, pp. 232–234). The allusions to Heraclitus are unmistakable. We cannot step into the same river twice because it is always changing (Gadamer, 2001). Importantly for Gadamer, the constancy of change in the river attests to the unity of opposites, i.e. one and many in his Platonic-Heraclitean philosophy. He thus characterises the river's time as follows: "in perishing there is always becoming, in becoming there is always perceptible perishing, and again and again a continuity of historical relationships is built out of the endless flow of changes" (Gadamer, 1972, p. 233). The building of continuity out of "the endless flow of changes" foreshadows reclaiming the past (in the sense of the gnashing of time's "it was") in an existential moment. At this point in the exposition, the unitary interplay of forces belongs to nature.

With respect to the subjective side of the divide, Gadamer highlights the significance of Dilthey's friend Graf Yorck von Wartenburg's concept of "historicity" (*Geschichlichkeit*) for history. He explains that "historicity" "expresses nothing about the relationship of events – that it really was so – but rather states something about the mode of being of man who is in history and whose existence can be understood fundamentally only through the concept of historicity" (Gadamer, 1972, p. 232). Just as the Neo-Kantian mechanisation of time conceals the flow of time (interplay of opposites), so too does Dilthey's alleged post-Romantic humanism conceal "the mode of being of man" and thus, a trans-historical existence that is nevertheless historical. In "The Continuity of History and the Existential Moment", Gadamer does not elaborate on this trans-historical mode of existence. Nevertheless, in agreement with the way in which he reveals the constancy of change below the surface of continuous time, i.e. in terms of Heraclitus' ontology, in "Heraclitus Studies" he alerts the reader to a transformation in consciousness from "self-consciousness" to "consciousness of something" (Gadamer, 2001, p. 15). Gadamer then suggests that Heraclitus' reorientation of consciousness is tantamount to directing us "toward the place of human beings in the world" (Gadamer, 2001, p. 15). In the context of the pregiven world into which we have been thrown, "consciousness of something" is consciousness of the metabolic cycles of nature to which we belong. Indeed, to which every living thing belongs. Along the same lines as Heraclitus's concept of time, the life of every living being is animated by the cycles of birth and death as surely as light follows day, the seasons change and we experience old age. Gadamer (2018a, p. 59) acknowledges the fit between humans and reality in this regard when he reasons "[j]ust as our death is the other side of life, the moon has an illuminated and unilluminated side". Thus, does consciousness shift from inoculating itself against the consequences of its own actions (construed as data in the external world), to a trans-historical mode of being in history that takes responsibility for the coming to be of all beings.

Fecundity of the middle mode of existence

For Gadamer, the existence of human beings straddles the ontic surface of continuous time and its ontological grounds in the interplay (rather than repudiation) of opposing forces in nature. Since, for Gadamer, all things strive for balance, humans cannot avoid feeling the tension (and hearing the call) to reconcile opposites with one another. This entails reinterpreting and thereby remaking history from the ground up – according to the metabolic cycles of nature that have sustained life on the planet for aeons. Gadamer (1972, p. 234, 235) reasons his way toward this conclusion by highlighting three "forms of epoch-making experiences": (1) the transition to old age with an allusion to J. Alfred Prufrock in "My but he has grown old"; (2) the transition from one generation to the next; and (3) the "Absolute epoch" marked by the birth of Christ. In each example, the continuity of time in history is interrupted by the realisation that something has changed. As a result, the continuity of linear time is re-interpreted as the rise and fall of epochs. Yet the birth of Christ is also different. In contrast to the Greeks for whom, as Gadamer (1972, p. 235) says, history was but "a deviation from the order of things", in the wake of the historical significance of the Christian message, we are aware of a moment of decision in which to say either "yes" or "no" to life and thereby reshape the unique character of our destiny. But even this moment of decision, as Gadamer calls it, falls within the range of nature's self-generating processes. He calls attention to a Heraclitean fragment, "[t]he father is the son of himself" (Gadamer, 2001, p. 24). This fragment need not be reduced to the "inner word", or anything remotely theological. The father is not the son, yet based on the metaphysical principle of opposites merging into one another, as Gadamer (2001, p. 24) says, "[w]hen the father produces a son, he turns himself into a father". This is congruent with how we reshape ourselves in history. The incarnation or "word made flesh" is an organic process self-similar to the rise and fall of epochs and peaks and valleys in a person's life. It is this very realisation that imparts potential (power) to the existential moment.

The "existential moment" refers to a time in which the ontological interplay of opposites erupts into history through our choice in a moment of decision insofar as we are already conscious of our place in nature. Gadamer conveys this by way of Hölderlin's understanding of tragedy. For him, tragedy is not simply a matter of suffering one's virtues and instead, a "yes" to decline in which the past is reappropriated as the new future that comes toward us. Thus is the continuity of time restored. However, the "yes" or "moment of decision" is analogous to the rhythms of nature. After relating that Hölderlin's view of "the moment as a transition and an opposition of two realities", one declining and the other arising, is "guided by the notion of the whole as a living unity", Gadamer (1972, p. 236) writes, "[w]hat makes life what it is is the constant change of material within the unity of the organism: in every dissolution something new is created". He clearly interprets tragedy in terms of an order in nature in which everything rises and falls and therefore, accepts death. In this regard, Gadamer (2018a, p. 61) refers to animals and asks the reader, "[d]o we also know how to accept death in such a way?". Along the same lines, "a newly rising brightness, the flickering of the candle on the verge of burning itself out seems at times to spread a wee bit more brightness than that of the quietly burning candle; the unintelligibility of death is the highest triumph of life" (Gadamer 2018a, p. 70). The fecundity of a fall transforms our lives and consciousness. Aeschylus' "learning through suffering" therefore, does not simply refer to the limits of what we know (Davey, 2022, p. 69), but to an experience of finitude that is inseparable from experience of the divine (Gadamer, 2004). Finitude is not final and instead, a "world's life time". "Everything finite is an expression, a representation of the infinite" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 58). Just as the destructive power of the French Revolution marked the beginning of a new age, so too does the transition into old age, or the passing of one generation into the next (Gadamer, 1972). In each "transition", whether in the scope of history (Neo-Kantians), or the scope of a person's life (Dilthey), the past is redeemed or remembered when decline is embraced as a necessary precondition for renewal of "order at a higher level" (Gadamer, 1972, p. 235). The "Absolute" moment of creation in Christ's farewell speech on the cross (Rudolph Bultmann's "moment of decision") (Gadamer, 1972) cannot be repeated verbatim, but in kind.

Recreating the order of nature in time

Evink explains that the ontology of play surfaces in every facet of Gadamer's thought. This is confirmed by Gadamer. In "The Continuity of History and the Existential Moment", he writes that "[l]anguage fulfils itself in the give and take of speaking" (Gadamer, 1972, 238). He also says that the dialogical structure of play recurs "in the communication of historical traditions" (1972, p. 238). Eric S. Nelson (2021) concurs. According to him, Gadamer's alternative to Dilthey's notion of the human sciences yielding discrete structural wholes and the relativisation of truth to cultures consists of "the dialogical appropriation of the tradition and the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) in which language or history actualizes itself" (Nelson, 2021, p. 254). Through dialogue, Gadamer restores continuity to discrete structural totalities dispersed into many traditions. But then, what of the "actualisation" (*energeia*) to which Nelson refers? The latter gestures toward a trans-historical source of energy in the "existential moment". Gadamer (2007, p. 214) writes: "When we say about the artwork that to be an artwork 'it' must come forth, then I think one would do better to compare it to nature, which lets the flowers come forth, instead of a work of craftsmanship". "Letting something come forth" and the example of a flower calls to mind Heidegger. The salient point is that the grounds of the flowers coming to be do and do not belong to it. Craftsmanship has a share in the same process insofar as we understand the meaning of existence.

As Gadamer says, hermeneutics thus refers to a "natural human capacity". Just as a living organism thrives by reconciling itself with its environment, human beings dislodged from their environment by human facticity (thrownness) want to restore the order of nature to history. The rhythm of nature holds as much for the *condition humaine* as it does for every living being and, hence, animals and every other living thing play a role in the making of history when thought moves in time to the self-unfolding structure of reality. A crucial aspect of remaking history into an ecologically self-sustaining environment in which the flow of regeneration and regrowth is not arrested (and dammed) has been introduced, namely care for the well-being of all living things. This follows as a matter of course when we are conscious of reality, or rather, of our place in the world (Gadamer, 2001). Gadamer (1982a, p. 12) explains, "[t]he demand for justice requires self-restraint in the profoundest sense. The individual must recognize that he is integrated into an order which transcends him – a communal order to which he can adhere and by which he is sustained, along with his fellow members". Like effects in the quantum realm, we cannot act without influencing everything else that is simultaneously implicated in anything we do. At this level of our cosmological life without prejudice, in the non-material space in which everything is one (undifferentiated), we are justly constrained by the good of all and realise that animals too have *praxis* and *bios*, actualisation of life (*energeia*) and "a way of life" (Gadamer, 1987, p. 90). Walter Lammi recognises this possibility in the early Greeks. He relates that in the festivity of the festival, the subjectivity of the subject collapses while expanding into the living whole, "a species togetherness" (Lammi, 2008, p. 9) and "undifferentiated zoe" (Lammi, 2008, p. 11). The "metaphysical abyss" between humans and animals has collapsed and, in its stead, stands a measure of equality among all living beings. Lammi (2008) thus refers to Gadamer forming a community among human beings not unlike a community of bees or ants in which each part plays a role in the fulfilment of the entire organism. This is called for if, as Gadamer (1972, p. 234) says, we are in the mist of the "atomic age" and therefore on the cusp of "world conflagration" (Gadamer, 2001, p. 22).

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