

Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* Revisited: On the Very Idea of a Fusion of Horizons in Intense, Asymmetric and Intractable Conflicts

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Abstract: This article is the second part of a two-part paper. The first part was my chapter 'Hans-Georg Gadamer' published by the Dialogue Society in *Dialogue Theories II* in 2016. In the 2016 chapter, I showed how Gadamer's 'philosophical hermeneutics' as expounded in his great book, *Truth and Method* (1960), influenced conflict resolution attempts to overcome cultural clashes and inspired the United Nations millennial 'dialogue of civilisations' forty years later.

This article begins with a brief recapitulation of the theme of my previous paper,¹ but then moves on to a constructive critique of Gadamer's approach in the spirit of Critical Dialogue Studies that suggests how it can be supplemented and made more effective in circumstances where otherwise it does not yet gain purchase.

In the second section I look at attempts to apply Gadamerian hermeneutic conflict resolution to the most difficult cases of intense, asymmetric and as yet intractable conflict. I argue that these attempts are premature because they ignore the chief linguistic feature of such conflicts – radical disagreement. As a result, the aim to transform or prevent actual or potential conflict by promoting hermeneutic dialogue and a fusion of horizons does not yet gain traction.

In the third section, I revisit Gadamer's *Truth and Method* and trace the refusal to take radical disagreement seriously to the founding assumptions of his philosophical hermeneutics. I emphasise his impressive – and less well known – struggles with the very concepts of 'the horizon' and 'the fusion of horizons' that result.

I end by suggesting how hermeneutic conflict resolution can be supplemented and revised in the light of this so that the ground can be prepared even in the most intransigent phases of conflict for its initiation or revival.

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1 Ramsbotham, O. (2016), 'Hans-Georg Gadamer' in *Dialogue Theories II*, ed. Omer Sener, Frances Sleep and Paul Weller, London: Dialogue Society.

From Philosophical Hermeneutics to Hermeneutic Dialogue

Truth and Method (Wahrheit und Methode) is not a book about conflict, but a book about hermeneutics – understanding texts from other times and other cultures. It is about interpretation (*Auslegung*). In Gadamer's book interpreting a text is seen as a dialogue between object and interpreter. In the application of Gadamer's ideas to human conflict and conflict resolution it works the other way – a hermeneutic dialogue is seen as a mutual interpretation of texts.

In this opening section I give a brief resume of my former article.

For Gadamer's biographer:

To the extent that individuals and cultures integrate this understanding of others and of the differences between them within their own self-understanding, to the extent, in other words, that they learn from others and take a wider, more differentiated view, they can acquire sensitivity, subtlety and a capacity for discrimination. (Warnke 1987, 174)

Contributors to the *Festschrift* presented in 2002 in honour of Gadamer's hundredth birthday say the same:

[Gadamer's] single most important insight may turn out to be a conceptual scheme that allows us to overcome cultural conflicts as well as clashes of different forms of life. (Arnsward 2002: 35)

Writing in 2011, Fabio Petito agreed that 'the Gadamerian-hermeneutical model of "fusion of horizons" can help us to understand what the process of inter-civilisational dialogue might look like' (Petito 2011, 14).

Much of the first part of *Truth and Method* is related to the origins of hermeneutics in the West such as the interpretation of sacred texts, and to its development and expansion by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) who introduced the idea of the 'hermeneutic circle' and by Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) who extended hermeneutics to cover all the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) and was influential in his rejection of the idea that the 'scientific method' of the natural sciences (objective, neutral, culture-free, universal) could be applied to the social sciences.

But for Gadamer the decisive shift in hermeneutics came with the eruption of the 'existential' or 'ontological' hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger. It is not possible to do justice to Heidegger's contribution here. But one key element for Gadamer was Heidegger's extension of the idea of the 'hermeneutic circle' to the insight that

the interpreter is never separate from what is interpreted. The thinker is already a product of tradition, of history, an existing being (*Dasein*) 'thrown' into the world that is at the same time to be interpreted. Heidegger demonstrated the significance of the fore-conceptions that precede and shape experience, and through which the future discloses itself through our never ending and intensely practical discursive engagement with things.²

So it is that most of the ideas that have influenced later attempts to apply hermeneutic dialogue in conflict resolution are found in the latter part of *Truth and Method* from the point where Gadamer addresses the thinking of Martin Heidegger (2003: Part II: II (254–307)). He calls his own development of the ideas of Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Heidegger 'philosophical hermeneutics'.

Truth and Method is a continuous struggle to find a route for human understanding (*Verstehen*) between two erroneous – albeit almost irresistible – dead ends. On the one hand, Gadamer continually tries to distance hermeneutics from subjectivist or relativist ideas, hence the unqualified use of the word truth (*Wahrheit*) in his title. Understanding the other is not just becoming familiar with a different subjective world but addressing an initially rival claim to truth. On the other hand, Gadamer also wants to distance hermeneutics from the objectivist idea that there is a scientific method (*Methode*) that gives insight to an interpreter independent of any reciprocal relation with what is being interpreted. For Gadamer to apply a simple subject/object dichotomy of this kind is entirely misleading. We are already part of a history that shapes us (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), and all our mutual interpretations take place in language within which – however 'forgetful' we may usually be about this – our own socially conditioned being is already constituted. Understanding is relational. We do not discover truth from outside as individual investigators. It reveals itself from within as we encounter each other in dialogue.³

So we begin with Gadamer's notion of prejudice (*Vorteilung*), the fore-understanding that we as interpreters bring to the text (or object) that we are wanting to understand. For Gadamer hermeneutics begins when we become aware of what interrupts or challenges our fore-understanding:

understanding becomes a special task only when natural life, this joint meaning of the meant where both intend a common *subject matter*, is disturbed.

2 For Gadamer's account of his own life and influences see his *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1985).

3 See Hans-Herbert Kogler for a thoughtful explication and critique of Gadamer's efforts here: 'A critique of dialogue in philosophical hermeneutics. *Journal of Dialogue Studies* 2, no. 1 (2014), 47.

(Gadamer 2003, 180) [original italics]

This introduces the idea of the horizon (*der Horizont* – a term borrowed from Nietzsche and Husserl) as that beyond which we cannot see:

Every finite present has its limitations. We define the concept of ‘situation’ by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence essential to the concept of situation is the concept of ‘*horizon*’. The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. (2003, 302, original italics)

a hermeneutical situation is determined by the prejudices that we bring with us. They constitute, then, the horizon of a particular present, for they represent that beyond which it is impossible to see. (2003, 306)

We only become aware of our prejudices (limits to our understanding) when we are confronted by and acknowledge what does not fit in with or challenges them:

A person who does not admit that he is dominated by prejudices will fail to see what manifests itself by their light. (2003, 360)

The encounter with a traditionary text can provide this provocation. For what leads to understanding must be something that has already asserted itself in its own separate validity. Understanding begins, as we have already said above, when something addresses us. This is the first condition of hermeneutics. (2003, 299)

What is at stake in the encounter is not merely subjective perception, therefore. What is at issue is the *object* or ‘subject matter’ or ‘thing’ (*die Sache*) that the encounter is *about*. This is not within the sole power of either to determine individually:

This is not an external matter of simply adjusting our tools; nor is it even right to say that the partners adapt themselves to one another but, rather, in a successful conversation they both come under the truth of the object and are thus bound to each other in a new community. (2003, 379)

To sum up:

Transposing ourselves consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in the subordination of another person to our own standards; rather, it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other. The concept “horizon” suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. (2003, 305)

Gadamer here moves from the idea of a single horizon to the idea of hermeneutic understanding as a 'fusion of horizons' (*Horizontverschmelzung*):⁴

In the process of understanding, a real fusing of horizons occurs – which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded. (2003, 307)

In the encounter between horizons each is constantly moving relative to the other. So the process of the fusion of horizons is continuous and never ending. This is nothing less than the unfolding of understanding itself. There is no final horizon.

All of this suggests to Gadamer the idea that the genuine hermeneutic encounter between interpreter and text/object is a conversation or dialogue in which each addresses the other:

What characterises a dialogue, in contrast to the rigid form of statements that demand to be set down in writing, is precisely this: that, in dialogue, spoken language – in the process of question and answer, giving and taking, talking at cross-purposes and seeing each other's point – performs the communication of meaning that, with respect to the written tradition, is the task of hermeneutics. (2003, 368)

Hans-Herbert Kogler puts it like this:

The foundational character of dialogue derives from the fact that all experience is understood to be linguistically mediated, while language as a medium exists in its true and essential form as dialogue. (2014, 47)

Understanding is relational. This defines the hermeneutic stance within and towards the world – an openness to experience that is ready to recognise otherness and thereby grow in awareness and insight. It is not we who discover truth. It is truth that discloses itself. And it does so, not to solitary individuals, but through the perpetual 'dialogue that we are' (Gadamer borrows from Holderlin here) – in language.

From Gadamer's idea of hermeneutics as a genuine conversation or dialogue between interpreter and object, conflict resolution has derived the idea of conversation as a mutual interpretation of texts.

Here is a well-known account of dialogic conflict resolution based on Gadamerian hermeneutics:

4 See David Vessey, 'Gadamer and the fusion of horizons', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 17, no. 4 (2009): 531–542.

The most common dictionary definition of dialogue is simply as a conversation between two or more people. In the field of dialogue practitioners, however, it is given a much deeper and more distinct meaning...Elements of this deeper understanding of the word include an emphasis on questions, inquiry, co-creation, and listening, the uncovering of one's own assumptions and those of others, a suspension of judgement and a collective search for truth. (Bojer and McKay, 2006, 10)

The authors go on to describe a varied range of dialogic conflict resolution approaches that fulfil these criteria.⁵

Here is another dialogic conflict resolution approach influenced by Gadamer, this time to do with ways of handling and overcoming competing narratives:

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict for primacy, power, and control encompasses two bitterly contested, competing narratives ... [These are] symbolic constructions of shared identity [which do not so much] reflect truth [as] portray a truth that is functional for a group's ongoing existence ... Both need to be understood, reckoned with, and analysed side by side in order to help abate violence and possibly propel both protagonists toward peace. This is an immensely tall order. But the first step is to know the narratives, the second to reconcile them to the extent that they can be reconciled or bridged, and the third to help each side to accept, and conceivably to respect, the validity of the competing narrative. (Rotberg 2006, 1)

In the book a number of examples of narrative-based hermeneutic conflict resolution approaches are described.⁶ The editor sees the narratives (horizons) as *reflexive* (they are the narratives of the conflicting parties), *functional* (they serve the underlying interests and needs of the conflicting parties) and *equivalent* (they co-exist symmetrically). The only non-Gadamerian element here is the editor's statement that the competing narratives do not 'reflect truth'.

Here, finally, is a description of the way Gadamer's Hegelian idea of a fusion of horizons which 'involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other' is translated into the conflict resolution language of 'relational empathy' (what goes beyond one person's empathy for another) and the emergence of a 'third culture':

5 For example, *Appreciative Enquiry, Change Lab, Deep Democracy, Future Search, Open Space, Scenario Planning, Sustained Dialogue, World Café, Bohemian Dialogue, Learning Journeys* etc.

6 For example, Ilan Pappé on bridging the narrative concept, Daniel Bar-Tal and Gavriel Salvendy on building legitimacy through narrative, Mordechai Bar-On on mutual critical self-re-examination, Dan Bar-On and Sami Adwan on parallel texts.

The third culture can only develop through interaction in which participants are willing to open themselves to new meanings, to engage in genuine dialogue, and to constantly respond to the new demands emanating from the situation. The emergence of this third culture is the essence of relational empathy and is essential for successful conflict resolution. (Broome 1993, 104)

These are some of the ways in which conflict resolution hopes to use hermeneutic dialogue to 'overcome cultural conflicts' and 'understand what the process of inter-civilisational dialogue might look like'.

Towards the end of his life Gadamer himself entertained similar hopes in the heady days after the end of the cold war. I have taken both these quotations from Fabio Petito (2011):

And if we then have to become part of a new world civilisation, if this is our task, then we shall need a philosophy which is similar to my hermeneutics; a philosophy which teaches us to see the justification for the other's point of view and which thus makes us doubt our own. (Gadamer in Misgeld and Nicholson, eds (1992) p.152)

The human solidarity that I envisage is not a global uniformity but unity in diversity... Such unity-in-diversity has to be extended to the whole world – to include Japan, China, India, and also Muslim cultures. Every culture, every people have something distinctive to offer for the solidarity and welfare of humanity. (Gadamer in Pantham, 1992, 132)

Testing Hermeneutic Conflict Resolution

What happens if hermeneutic conflict resolution, inspired by Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, is applied to the most demanding real-life examples of conflict? What happens when hermeneutic dialogue encounters radical disagreement?⁷

Let us first test hermeneutic conflict resolution by looking at an attempt by the philosopher Charles Taylor to apply Gadamerian principles to an imagined conversation between representatives from radically different cultures in which:

[the representatives] strive to come to an understanding, to overcome the obstacles to mutual comprehension, [and] to find a language in which both can agree to talk undistortively of each. (2002, 287)

7 On radical disagreement see Oliver Ramsbotham *Transforming Violent Conflict: Radical Disagreement, Dialogue and Survival* (London: Routledge, 2010) and Oliver Ramsbotham *When Conflict Resolution Fails: Engaging Radical Disagreement in Intractable Conflicts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

Here is Taylor's account of what takes place when originally distinct horizons (the different 'way that each has of understanding the human condition in their nonidentity') meet in this way:

For instance, we become aware that there are different ways of believing things, one of which is holding them as a 'personal opinion'. This was all that we allowed for before, but now we have space for other ways and can therefore accommodate the beliefs of a quite different culture. Our horizon is extended to take in this possibility, which was beyond its limit before.

But this is better seen as a fusion rather than just an extension of horizons, because at the same time we are introducing a language to talk about their beliefs that represents an extension in relation to their language. Presumably, they had no idea of what we speak of as 'personal opinions,' at least in such areas as religion, for instance. They would have had to see these as rejection, rebellion, and heresy. So the new language used here, which places 'opinions' alongside other modes of believing as possible alternative ways of holding things true, opens a broader horizon, extending beyond both the original ones and in a sense combining them. (Taylor 2002, 287)

Let us now apply this to a concrete example of radical disagreement that was raging at exactly the time Taylor was completing his chapter – and may indeed have been in his mind as he wrote it. This was the bitter war of words that was integral to the fierce struggle in Afghanistan between the Taleban and the US-led coalition following the 11 September 2001 attack on the United States.

In this case the radical disagreement was about whether ideas of western democracy should prevail or whether *sharia* law should be imposed in Afghanistan. In this struggle the 'different ways that each has of understanding the human condition in their nonidentity' met politically and militarily as well as ideologically. In Taylor's reading the radical disagreement at the core of the conflict was a clash between 'different ways of believing things,' one of which was to hold them as 'personal opinion' and the other of which was to hold them as obedience to the will of God.

We begin with Taylor's first paragraph.

'We' become aware that 'they' have an entirely different way of 'holding things true', namely as the command of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in Arabic by the angel Gabriel. Our horizon is thereby said to be extended, because we can now 'accommodate the beliefs of a quite different culture'. But what does 'accommodate' mean in a context of continuing radical disagreement and war? In relation to final outcome – which is what matters to the combatants – does it mean that 'we' will now allow the imposition of *sharia* law after all? If we do, then the context will indeed

have changed. But if we do not, what will 'they' say? Will they agree that we have expanded our horizon? Or will they say the opposite? Will they say that we still want to flout the will of Allah, only now we are doing this by more devious – and therefore more insidious and dangerous – means? Is this not what they *do* say in the continuing radical disagreement?

Conversely, in the second paragraph the exchange is described as a 'fusion' rather than an 'extension' of horizons, because 'they' now come to realise that there is an alternative 'way of holding things true' than as the word of God – namely as 'personal opinion.' They, too, expand their horizon by accommodating the possibility of a belief that was hitherto outside their bounds of comprehension. But, once again, what does this mean in practical terms? Do they, as a result, abandon their determination to impose *sharia*, or soften or compromise their stance? If they do, once again things have indeed changed. But what if – as currently remains the case nearly twenty years later – this is an intractable conflict and the radical disagreement persists? What if, like Abu Musab, they say this?

Democracy means sovereignty for man. Islam means sovereignty for the *sharia*. In the American form of democracy any issue is allowed to be put to the vote of the people, and the majority decision prevails upon all. Can we Muslims put an issue that has already been decided for us by Allah up for a vote and accept the will of the majority if they vote against the will of Allah? Of course, we cannot, so we can never accept democracy as defined, practised and promoted by America. (Abu Musab 2003)⁸

In that case the radical disagreement – and the war – continue.

It is evident in Taylor's Gadamerian analysis that 'we' are seen to be on one side in this conflict. But the challenge to Gadamerian hermeneutic dialogue goes deeper than this. We find that our entire hermeneutic model is now involved in the dispute. We say,

[T]he new language used here, which places 'opinions' alongside other modes of believing as possible alternative ways of holding things true, opens a broader horizon, extending beyond both the original ones and in a sense combining them.

But in this radical disagreement it is the very idea of 'a broader horizon extending beyond both the original ones and in a sense combining them' – the fusion of horizons itself – that can be seen to be irrevocably part of what is at issue in it. Hermeneutic assumptions are found to be already involved in the radical disagreement they are

8 Abu Musab, article from *Kcom Journal*, online source (no longer available), 2003.

invoked to overcome.

Is this a special feature of Charles Taylor's 'thought-experiment'? I do not think so. I think that it applies in general in cases of intense, asymmetric and as yet intractable conflict where the conflicting parties are not yet ready to think or behave as Gadamerians want. It is not difficult to find cases of radical disagreement to test this out. The Internet is overflowing with examples of radical disagreement associated with every form and level of conflict, as well as with interventions by those trying to resolve them. This evidence did not exist earlier. It is a new and as yet hardly explored resource for studying and testing conflict resolution models and approaches.⁹ In the space available I will illustrate this with two other brief examples.

In the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, ignoring what are of course huge internal differences within the two conflicting parties, any time spent listening to Israelis and Palestinians shows why hermeneutic dialogue approaches, such as those outlined at the end of the previous section, despite many local successes, do not yet work when applied to the core of the radical disagreement as a whole.

Israelis do not refer merely to their own narrative, but to the reality of lived experience, of deep history, and of the security imperative. *Eretz Israel* (the land of Israel) is the homeland. Two millennia of exile and persecution were finally ended in 1948. Since then Israel has been subjected to attack by Palestinians from within and by neighbouring Arab states from without. Jewish Israelis are outnumbered 50-1 by Arabs, and 250-1 globally by Muslims. There is only one Jewish state. There are 22 Arab states. Withdrawing from the West Bank and handing over to a weak Palestinian government would risk a repeat of what happened in Gaza after Israel's withdrawal in 2005. Israelis do not refer to what is merely a 'subjective' horizon. Israeli arguments and claims cannot be divorced from the harsh 'objective' realities and bitter lessons of contemporary politics and past history that have generated them.¹⁰

Palestinians refer to the fused reality of fact (the *nakba*), value (its injustice), emotion (indignation) and will (determination to win back equality and freedom for their children and grandchildren). This is not just a 'Palestinian narrative'. What Palestinians say points at the lived reality of forcible dispossession. This is a collective nightmare which continues to this day. That is why conflict resolution approaches that do not engage with, and aim to rectify, the underlying inequity and injustice of

9 I think that this is a major *lacuna* at the moment in conflict and linguistic studies. I try to remedy this in the book I am currently writing, *Radical Disagreement and Philosophy*.

10 This is indicative only. Evidently there is a very wide divergence of views among Israelis. I have been engaged in collective strategic thinking work with Israeli partners from across the political, social and religious spectrum since 2006.

the situation, or the power asymmetries that underpin it, are rejected as normalisation. Normalisation tries prematurely to pacify what needs to be challenged, and, by drawing a false veil of equivalence over an unequal situation, perpetuates inequality. This is how the Palestine Strategy Report *Regaining the Initiative* (2008) puts it:

Above all it is important to combat a central idea in the peacemaking discourse that what is at issue is two equivalent 'Israeli' and 'Palestinian' 'narratives'. No doubt there are Israeli and Palestinian narratives. But what is centrally at issue is not a mere Palestinian narrative, but a series of incontrovertible facts – facts of expulsion, exclusion, dominance and occupation bitterly lived out by Palestinians day by day over the past 60 years and still being endured at the present time. This is not a narrative. It is a lived reality. Finding the best strategy for ending this lived reality is the main purpose of this Report. Transforming the discourse within which it is discussed is a major part of that effort.¹¹

In this radical disagreement, therefore, in their very different ways, neither Israelis nor Palestinians refer to what they say as merely reflexive of their own perspectives, or functional for their own interests, or equivalent to what the other says. They do not recognise the equal 'validity' of the other 'narrative'. They do not say that they are ready to 'uncover their own assumptions, suspend their own judgements, and join in a collective search for truth'. They do not say that they are 'willing to open themselves up to new meanings' or create a 'third culture' which 'offers alternative ways of holding things true and opens a broader horizon extending beyond both the original ones and in a sense combining them'. They do not say any of these things. That they do not say this is what makes it a radical disagreement. It is what so far blocks hermeneutic conflict resolution.

Hermeneutic dialogue dismisses radical disagreement as an unproductive and all too familiar dead end. It sees radical disagreement as a terminus to dialogue that needs from the beginning to be overcome, not learnt from.¹² And that is why hermeneutic conflict resolution does not yet work when the situation is not as it assumes and the conflicting parties are not yet ready to think or behave as it wants. Something else has to happen before hermeneutic dialogue gains purchase. Radical disagreement needs to be taken seriously first before a 'fusion of horizons' becomes possible.

11 Palestine Strategy Group, *Regaining the Initiative*, 2008. 16. I have been working with Palestinians from across the political, social and religious spectrum since 2006.

12 This is how Marianne Bojer and Elaine McKay describe radical disagreement (debate) as the antithesis of hermeneutic dialogue: 'In contrast [to dialogue], a debate is a discussion usually focused around two opposing sides, and held with the object of one side winning. The winner is the one with the best articulations, ideas and arguments.' Marianne Bojer and Elaine McKay, eds., 'Mapping Dialogue' (Pioneers of Change Associates, www.pioneersofchange.net, 2006), 10.

My final illustration is another class of radical disagreement in which the very idea of a fusion of horizons is itself already explicitly involved. This is the situation in which what is at stake is the attempt by the conflicting parties to expose what the other says as 'mere ideology'. Take the conflict between Marxism and Thatcherism. Here a critical theoretic analysis of Thatcherism as false ideology confronts a forthright Thatcherite dismissal of Marxism as itself false ideology. The very idea of the possibility of a fusion of horizons rests on a 'neutral' conception of ideology.¹³ But in this case neither of the main protagonists yet subscribes to this. Marxism adopts a 'critical' conception of ideology, which appeals to the material reality of the class struggle in order to expose the subterfuge of Thatcherite ideology in its attempt to conceal continuing exploitation. Thatcherism appeals to 'ordinary British people' in plain everyday language which 'calls a spade a spade' in order to expose the 'ideological, political and moral bankruptcy of Marxism'.¹⁴

In intense and asymmetric political conflicts, the radical disagreement at the heart of linguistic intractability is not a co-existence of equivalent 'horizons', but a life-and-death struggle to occupy the whole of discursive space – and act accordingly.

Truth and Method Revisited

Before following up the suggestions for extending hermeneutic conflict resolution mentioned towards the end of the previous section, let us revisit *Truth and Method* in order to discover the origin of the refusal to take radical disagreement seriously in philosophical hermeneutics.

A closer reading of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* uncovers why the phenomenon of radical disagreement is ignored in his text. This is built into its foundations. It is the categorical rejection of what Gadamer calls 'the statement' in philosophical hermeneutics that rules out the verbal disputes (radical disagreements) constructed accordingly:

The concept of the statement, dialectically accentuated to the point of contradiction,...is antithetical to the nature of hermeneutic experience and the verbal nature of human experience of the world. (2003, 468)

Why is 'the statement' ruled out in philosophical hermeneutics? Because it

13 In *Ideology and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990) John Thompson distinguishes between 'neutral' conceptions of ideology and 'critical' conceptions of ideology. Critical conceptions 'convey a negative, critical or pejorative sense. Unlike neutral conceptions, critical conceptions imply that the phenomena characterized as ideology or ideological are misleading, illusory or one-sided', 53-5.

14 See Nigel Fairclough, *Language and Power* (Harlow: Longman, 1989).

is identified with what Gadamer calls the 'unproductive prejudices.' Whereas productive prejudices 'enable understanding', as seen in the first section of this article, unproductive prejudices 'hinder it and lead to misunderstanding' (2003, 295). Here is the first slippage in the metamorphosis of philosophical hermeneutics into hermeneutic conflict resolution. The question of what determines the difference between productive and unproductive prejudice is a crucial issue in hermeneutic dialogue and radical disagreement, but it is not considered further in philosophical hermeneutics.

Instead of 'the statement', Gadamer's whole concern is with its opposite – what he calls 'the question' (*die Frage*):

all suspension of judgements and hence, a fortiori, of prejudices, has the logical structure of a *question*. (2003, 299)

It is through his emphasis on the question, and the suspension of judgement that it entails, that Gadamer defines his concept of genuine conversation or dialogue:

Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus, it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says. What is to be grasped is the essential rightness of his opinion, so that we can be at one with each other on the subject. (2003, 385)

Nothing could be further from the nature of radical disagreement than this. Radical disagreement – as 'contradiction' – is the antithesis of hermeneutic dialogue as defined by Gadamer. So the first hermeneutic move is to set it aside.

We now reach the critical moment in *Truth and Method* in relation to the transition from philosophical hermeneutics to the hermeneutic dialogue in conflict resolution derived from it. At the beginning of Part III, Gadamer searches for the equivalent in a conversation between two people to the 'resistance' of a text to our initial 'prejudice' as interpreters. Gadamer has already rejected the most obvious example of conversational resistance – radical disagreement. So instead he reaches for the example of translation from one language into another:

Everything we have said characterising the situation of two people coming to an understanding in conversation has a genuine application to hermeneutics, which is concerned with *understanding texts*. Let us again start by considering the extreme case of translation from a foreign language. (2003, 385)

But this is not the extreme case in human conversation. A text being translated does

not answer back like an opponent in radical disagreement. So the analogy breaks down at this point.

Gadamer (as usual) is aware of this:

the dialectic of question and answer that we demonstrated makes understanding appear to be a reciprocal relationship of the same kind as conversation. It is true that a text does not speak to us in the same way as a Thou. We who are attempting to understand must ourselves make it speak. But we found that this kind of understanding, “making a text speak”, is not an arbitrary procedure that we undertake on our own initiative but that, as a question, it is related to the answer that is expected in the text. (2003, 377)

Gadamer’s qualification, however, does not rescue his analogy. The fact that a text does not resist us like a ‘Thou’ in radical disagreement makes all the difference. It means that it is ‘we’ as interpreters who must ‘make the text speak’. Whereas in radical disagreement it is the other who answers back despite us. Interpretation/translation may not be ‘arbitrary’ insofar as we are trying to adopt the hermeneutic stance of questioning and to ‘listen’ to what the text is saying. But this is still no parallel to a conversation between opponents in a radical disagreement.

All of this bears centrally on the concept of ‘the horizon’ and of the ‘fusion of horizons’.

Once again Gadamer anticipates the problem with the description of prejudice (fore-understanding) as analogous to the ‘horizon’ of a visual field (that beyond which it is impossible to see):

the hermeneutically trained mind...will make conscious the prejudices governing our own understanding, so that the text, as another’s meaning, can be isolated and valued on its own. Foregrounding (*abheben*) a prejudice clearly requires suspending its validity for us. For as long as our mind is influenced by a prejudice, we do not consider it a judgement. How then can we foreground it? It is impossible to make ourselves aware of a prejudice while it is constantly operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, provoked. (2003, 219)

How can we be visually aware from within a visual field (horizon) of what is outside it? If to ‘foreground’ a prejudice and therefore see beyond it is to suspend its validity for us, what is the equivalent operation in the case of a horizon or visual field? Here is the germ of the problem with the very idea of a horizon in radical disagreement identified in the previous section. But it is not developed further in *Truth and Method* because the nature of Gadamer’s conversational analogy precludes it. He never tells us how to distinguish between ‘productive’ and ‘unproductive’ prejudice or who is to decide.

The same applies *a fortiori* to the very idea of a fusion of horizons itself. Here the problem lies with the reference to horizons in the plural in the first place (masked by the collective noun in German *Horizontverschmelzung* but exposed in Gadamer's accompanying explanation). What is the containing space within which a fusion of horizons occurs?

However, the question is whether this description really fits the hermeneutical phenomenon. Are there really two different horizons here – the horizon of the person seeking to understand lives [the interpreter] and the historical horizon within which he places himself [what he is seeking to interpret]? Are there such things as closed horizons in this sense? ... Is the horizon of one's own present time ever closed in this way, and can a historical situation be imagined that has this kind of closed horizon? (2003, 304) ... 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.* (2003, 306) [original italics]

Once again Gadamer is aware of the problem and makes another characteristic distinction to accommodate it – this time between a proper fusion of horizons and a premature or 'naïve' fusion of horizons (a 'naïve assimilation of the two') (2003, 306). Here we reach another crux in the derived idea of hermeneutic dialogue and radical disagreement in conflict resolution. As with the distinction between productive and unproductive prejudice which problematises the notion of the horizon, this distinction problematises the idea of a fusion of horizons. What distinguishes genuine from naïve fusion and who decides? In *Truth and Method* Gadamer does not pursue the question further. We are left with the suggestive, but indeterminate, notion of human understanding as a continuous and mysterious fusion of horizons 'supposedly existing by themselves'.

Supplementing Hermeneutic Conflict Resolution

It is time to pull together threads from earlier sections and suggest how hermeneutic dialogic conflict resolution, derived from Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, can be adapted and supplemented so that it gains traction even in the most intense phases of political conflict.

The clue lies in the fact that Gadamerian hermeneutics does not succeed in intense, asymmetric and as yet intractable conflicts because it ignores the chief linguistic aspect of those conflicts – radical disagreement. So, before hermeneutic dialogue becomes possible in conflict resolution, two things have to happen.

First, the radical disagreement that so far blocks conflict resolution must be taken seriously. If we want to transform radical disagreement, we must first understand it.

When this is done, it is seen that radical disagreement is not all too familiar but is perhaps the least familiar aspect of intense political conflict. And it is not a terminus to dialogue but the most characteristic form of dialogue in those circumstances, namely, what I call ‘agonistic dialogue’ or the dialogue of struggle (*agon*) (Ramsbotham 2010; 2017). In Gadamerian terms, radical disagreement is about what it is about – what Gadamer calls ‘*die Sache*’. The conflicting parties do not agree about that. And radical disagreement reaches as far as what both parties appeal to in the process of disagreeing. They appeal to the far horizon – the world itself. This is what shows why the action they advocate and fight for is justified and why what the other says is factually or ethically or logically mistaken. Radical disagreement goes as deep as the contested distinctions that constitute it – distinctions such as those between fact and value, opinion and reality, (logical) form and content, subject and object. In short, radical disagreement might be described as a *clash of horizons* in which the very idea of a horizon, and *a fortiori* a fusion of horizons, is already compromised and part of what is in dispute. Conflicting parties are much further apart than we realised.

Second, having understood this, we can then engage the material, conceptual and strategic asymmetries that block peaceful management, settlement, and transformation. Once again, we do not begin *between* conflicting parties when they are not yet ready for hermeneutic dialogue. We begin *within* them. And we start where they are, not where hermeneutic conflict resolution wants them to be. This means promoting collective strategic thinking – where are they? Where do they want to be? How do they get there?¹⁵ Why are conflicting parties ready to do this even in the most intense and intransigent phases of conflict? Because they want to overcome internal differences in order to attain collective strategic goals. Why can this nevertheless prepare the ground for a possible future initiation or revival of hermeneutic conflict resolution? Because by its very nature collective strategic thinking (CST) helps to loosen the straitjacket of radical disagreement. To see this, consider the following brief indication.

CST takes account of internal differences within the conflicting parties. This opens space for all manner of cross-cutting possibilities otherwise not available. CST analyses the *status quo* as a complex system and makes a sophisticated evaluation of existing strengths and weaknesses. This distinguishes different forms of power. CST looks to the future, not the past, and compares possible futures (scenarios) not just in terms

15 The Collective Strategic Thinking Methodology has been developed over many years by the Palestine Strategy Group, the Israeli Strategic Forum, the Palestinian Citizens of Israel Strategy Group, and latterly the Palestinian Diaspora/Refugee Strategy Group. Something similar has been developed in Yemen by the Hadhramaut Strategy Group and the Marib Strategy Group. All of this work has been done through the Oxford Research Group and respective Israeli, Palestinian and Yemeni partners. See Ramsbotham (2010) and Ramsbotham (2017).

of desirability, but also in terms of attainability and likelihood. This introduces an element of realism instead of wishful thinking. CST considers short-term, medium-term and long-term goals building in flexibility. CST determines and orchestrates various strategic options and paths for reaching strategic goals, ensuring creativity and variety. CST also requires sophisticated formulations of strategic messages in general in order to appeal to the disparate nature and interests of different audiences and enlist the support of influential third-party allies. Finally, and above all, in the light of all this, CST looks at the chessboard from the perspective of the opponent. CST does this, not in order to empathise with the other, but in order not to lose the chess game. Nevertheless, this begins to open the way for the possibility of future hermeneutic dialogue because it identifies sympathetic constituencies within the opponent who can be allies on specific issues, and, more broadly, notes what is most likely to influence the opponent's calculations of the expected cost-benefit of various strategic options. This means gaining insight into what motivates the other, and what factors weigh most heavily on the other's evaluations. All of this can be seen to anticipate the expanded 'understanding' of the other that Gadamerian hermeneutics seeks to open up and foster.

Conclusion

The upshot of this article is to reassert my admiration for and appreciation of the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamerian hermeneutic dialogue approaches achieve remarkable results in 'overcoming cultural conflicts as well as clashes of different forms of life'. They do, indeed, 'help us to understand what the process of inter-civilisational dialogue might look like'. However, no single philosopher or philosophic approach can encompass theoretically, or resolve practically, the ongoing and ever varied phenomenon of intractable human conflict and its most prominent linguistic feature – radical disagreement. This article has focused on those intense, asymmetric and intractable political conflicts where, so far, hermeneutic conflict resolution derived from Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics finds it most difficult to gain purchase. But Critical Dialogue Studies is of little practical use if it remains purely negative. So I have also tried to suggest how, by supplementing hermeneutic dialogue with a prior strategic engagement that takes radical disagreement and agonistic dialogue seriously, it is possible to prepare the ground for an application of Gadamerian understanding even in the most intransigent phases of conflict. Subject to this qualification, Gadamer's deep and subtle insights retain full validity.

The last words of the Afterword, added to *Truth and Method* by Gadamer in response to his first critics, are these:

I will stop here. The ongoing dialogue permits no final conclusion. It would be a poor hermeneuticist who thought he could have, or had to have, the last

word. (Gadamer 2003, 579)

Setting aside the no doubt ironic – and significant – fact that these *were* the last words of the book, Gadamer himself remained consistently open to new learning to the end of his life. When he was over a hundred years old, in his last months, came the shock of the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon that seemed at a stroke to invalidate the high hopes of the millennial Gadamerian ‘dialogue of civilisations’. In perhaps his last recorded interview he responded: ‘*es ist mir recht unheimlich geworden*’ ([the world] has become quite strange to me) – a fitting epitaph because, as seen above, coming across something ‘strange’ and recognising that it lies outside your previous range of understanding was regarded by Gadamer as the beginning of wisdom. Perhaps, had he lived even longer, he might himself, after all, have said more about the phenomenon of radical disagreement than he did say.

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