

# “Holding Oneself Open in a Conversation” – Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Ethics of Dialogue

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Philosophical hermeneutic ‘understands itself not as an absolute position but as a way of experience. It insists that there is no higher principle than holding oneself open in a conversation’

–Hans Georg Gadamer

This paper’s aim is to explore Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics in order to draw out implications for the ethics of dialogue. Through examining key interconnected components in Gadamer’s theory, I highlight the openness to the other and otherness as a key normative ideal for dialogic understanding and their influence on the core practical ethos that underpins dialogue encounter, including the ethics of alterity, self-cultivation, equality, reciprocity, and solidarity. We further consider hermeneutical application or *praxis* by way of a guide insofar as to how one might act in the world through dialogue construed through these ethical dimensions.

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Keywords: philosophical hermeneutics, Gadamer, dialogue, encounter, otherness, ethics, praxis.

## Introduction

Gadamer argues that dialogue is fundamental to understanding and to our way of being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962). Since a human’s embeddedness and finitude demand self-transformation, the hermeneutical problem is not only universal but also existential. One of the central threads in Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics is the place of the other in dialogic interpretation and in the process of understanding. From this emerges the intersubjective nature of transcendent human conditions.

Dialogue takes place whilst individuals seek to understand within the interplay of the perspectives present in an encounter, which are constituted in historical consciousness, traditions, cultural contexts, and so forth. Gadamer postulates that understanding is dialogic, and thus intersubjective, including the relationship between oneself and the other, and the relationship between the agent and the world. Indeed, many thinkers have addressed a similar topic, among them,

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Emmanuel Levinas, Paulo Freire and Habermas. Despite criticism of Gadamer for being a 'traditionalist', on the one hand, and 'relativist', on the other, through a closer reading, this paper argues that philosophical hermeneutics offers a truly comprehensive theory encapsulating the central place of the other and otherness in dialogue and in human existence. Equally, hermeneutical applications call for ethical engagement in dialogue.

By dialogue ethics I refer to any argument that proposes desirable ways to engage in dialogic encounters. In discussing this, I want to articulate ethical considerations derived from philosophical hermeneutics. In particular, this paper will look at four important aspects of Gadamer's theory that demand ethical considerations:

1. The situatedness and embeddedness of the interpreter, that requires an openness towards the other and otherness as being paramount in prompting and expanding our understanding;
2. The finitude of being human, that necessitates self-transcendence that is essentially afforded by the other through 'fusion of horizons';
3. The reciprocal nature of dialogic understanding that stipulates an equal and mutual relationship between the dialogue partners; and
4. The linguistic mediation of all understanding that calls for participation in community through language, thereby developing solidarity with others.

Within these, there can be questions such as "In what way does the other count in dialogue?" and "What is it that is actually counted?" However, I do not regard Gadamer's theory as a set of 'oughts' towards the other, since his concern 'was and is philosophic: not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting' (TM, xxviii). Philosophical hermeneutics is thus a radical departure from traditional ethics which tends to deal with the abstraction, identification and articulation of values, principles and rules that frame the right actions. Indeed, Gadamer's theorisation does not detach dialogue from life itself, nor our mode of being in the world, and instead, as we will illustrate later, it points to ethics as being hermeneutical and thus practical (Thames 2005).

So, the project of this paper is to explore some of the key ideas in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics that explicitly render his view on the place of the other and otherness in dialogic understanding. These prepare fertile ground for discussing the practice of dialogue ethics. In Gadamer's words, dialogue is itself the practice of ethics by 'not merely recognizing the good, but demanding it as well' (Gadamer 1999, 116). In a global era, where a plurality of otherness is a common factor in all encounters, an analysis of the ethical resources and a reconstruction of the ethical

orientations are pressingly necessary in order to provide guidelines through the use of which dialogue partners may put ethics into practice.

First, though, we must (re)familiarise ourselves with philosophical hermeneutics and what we should be looking for in terms of dialogue ethics in his theory.

## **Hermeneutical Understanding<sup>1</sup>**

Hermeneutics is applied in situations in which we encounter meanings that are not immediately accessible to us and which require interpretive effort. Dallmayr (2009, 34) calls it the 'ambivalent character of interpretation'. The earliest situation in which the hermeneutical principles were being adopted was when interpreters sought to understand significant texts, such as religious scriptures, whose meanings were often obscure, resulting in the alienation of the interpreter from the meaning. Since then, hermeneutics has been used to refer to all situations of understanding where the same alienation may occur. These situations include occasions when individuals engage in dialogue or conversation, experience works of art, or try to understand historical events and actions. In this paper, I mainly focus on situations of dialogue and dialogic conversations.

In his book, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer makes an important distinction between hermeneutics and method or methodology. He asserts that hermeneutics is not a method, but rather it is a human's mode of being-in-the-world; differently put, human existence is constituted in the world, an enveloping wholeness (Steiner 1978). This claim does not mean the rejection of the importance of methodological concerns. Instead, it is an insistence on the limited role of method and on the necessity to prioritise understanding as a dialogical, practical, situated activity. What Gadamer maintains here is that human understanding, which has ontological significance, is irreducible to mere methodological applications.

Philosophical hermeneutics offers some distinct ways to define a number of key concepts, such as: human finitude, historical consciousness, tradition, prejudice, horizon and language. I will briefly introduce these concepts here and elaborate on them further in order to explore their wider implications for dialogue ethics in the later sections.

For Gadamer, interpretation has a temporal and situated character and cannot be carried out by an anonymous 'knowing subject'. To understand is also to understand a web of meanings and contexts within which such understanding takes place.

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1 This section may seem very descriptive in setting out the key ideas from Gadamer's complex theory. It is indeed aimed at readers and scholars who are less than familiar with Gadamer's work.

Gadamer asserts that humans are finite beings, as our knowledge and language are always framed within, and conditioned by, our historicity and tradition. It requires human effort to overcome such finitude through hermeneutical endeavours.

As has been briefly mentioned, historically, the hermeneutical approach had been applied to the unfolding of the meanings in the text from the author's perspectives and the contexts within which the author's perspectives originated. It combines tapping into the framework of language (syntax, discourse, semiotics) with a critical analysis and interpretation of the author's intentions, which 'are themselves expressions of an on-going dialogue situated in a historically evolving and culturally specific tradition' (Kögler 2014, 13).

Gadamer critiqued the ideas of two philosophers, Schleiermacher and Dilthey, who also explored the topic. Schleiermacher saw that both understanding and misunderstanding occur naturally. To avoid misunderstanding, he argues, it requires a 're-creation of the creative act' (TM, 187) in order to understand the author of the original text better than he understands himself. This approach aims to interrogate the words' meanings, the author's worldviews, the historical situation and/or the author's biographical contexts, in order for the 'true' meanings of the texts to unfold. Dilthey, on the other hand, wanted to develop a hermeneutical approach to understanding the human world that could achieve the same rigour as a scientific approach to the knowledge of the natural world. The hermeneutical task, for Dilthey is to uncover the original life-world the author inhabits, and to understand the author as he/she understands him/herself. Understanding in this way, according to Dilthey, is self-transposition and the imaginative projection of the author's intention and meaning across temporal distance.

Notwithstanding these differences in their hermeneutic approaches, from Gadamer's perspective both Schleiermacher and Dilthey would have regarded the tradition of the interpreter as being negative and unhelpful in attempting to achieve an understanding that is not interfered with by his/her own tradition. As mentioned, for Gadamer, any knower or interpreter's present situation (which carries his/her own historicity and tradition) is already present and well constituted in the very process of understanding. His critique of Schleiermacher and Dilthey's approaches is therefore that they provide a one-sided view of interpretation by trying to somehow ignore the interpreter's tradition and to promote an idea that to understand is to purge all prejudices from one's subjectivity. For Gadamer, such an approach would result in alienating the knower from his/her own historicity and tradition.

To avoid alienating the knower, it is necessary to recognise that understanding, as a hermeneutical task, is not to reconstruct (objectively) the intention of the author/person who writes/speaks. Instead, understanding is 'the entering into an

event of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated' (TM, 274), and is hence concerned with historical continuity. The interpreter always seeks to understand within the boundedness of his/her own tradition which, when combined with the temporal distance separating the person from his/her objects and from his/her own past, offers a rich and productive ground for the critical and creative application of tradition. It is noticeable that this participation in one's own tradition is not the object of understanding, but the condition of its occurrence.

Our historicity and tradition form the basis of our prejudice in Gadamer's conceptualisation of the concept. He maintains that the original meaning of the word does not have the negative connotation that we have now attached to it. Prejudice is not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, thereby distorting the truth. Prejudice simply means 'a judgement that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined' (TM, 273). Gadamer asserts that being situated within traditions, and thus assuming certain prejudices, does not readily limit our freedom. On the contrary, prejudice opens up our scope for understanding. It defines the unexamined premise that the interpreter brings when seeking understanding. Emerging from our history and tradition, prejudice can bridge the temporal gulf between the interpreter and the object of understanding, be it a text, an event, an action, a conversation, or a piece of artwork. It connects the familiar world we inhabit and the unfamiliar meanings (otherness) that resist being incorporated into our own. It is where we can start to engage with otherness.

This may sound controversial, but Gadamer claims that prejudices or prejudgements constitute our being. To understand does not necessitate that we somehow become prejudice-free. Instead, to understand is to form new horizons that are more comprehensive and that can help to overcome the limitations of our existing one. In this way, the meaning of a text or conversation surpasses its author, not just occasionally, but always, and understanding is not a reproductive process, but rather a productive one.

Habermas (1990) challenges that such an appeal to tradition and prejudice implies the lack of a critical approach to tradition and thereby results in our turning a blind eye to the power of ideology. In other words, stressing that human's embeddedness makes it impossible to critically reflect upon the social and political impact of ideology. To respond, Gadamer asserts that the interpreting subject can him/herself never be truly free from tradition and to suggest otherwise would be a deception. Indeed, Gadamer asks: 'Is not, rather, all human existence, even the freest, limited and qualified in various ways?' (TM, 277)

Indeed, this finite determinacy of human thought shows that the way one's horizon can be expanded must be through understanding. Horizon refers to our range of

vision, which ‘includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point’ (TM, 301). A person who has no horizon does not see far enough, and hence overvalues what is nearest to him. To acquire a horizon means that ‘one learns to look beyond what is close at hand – not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion’ (TM, 305). This makes it possible for the interpreter to discern without excluding these positions, and to integrate what is within the immediate vision and what is at large in the world. Horizons do not imprison us, since they can shift and expand. Hermeneutical endeavour thus entails broadening our perspectives through the fusion of horizons. Fusion of horizons is the fruit of encounter where we are open so the other can genuinely challenge our own perspectives and we are able to recognise the particularity of our horizon and that of the other in relationship to greater universality. Taylor (2002, 132) concurs that the ‘road to understanding others passes through the patient identification and undoing of those facets of our implicit understanding that distort the reality of the other’.

This is Gadamer’s response to the critique of reducing hermeneutics to facile consensualism, or to a form of relativism. Indeed, the historical movement of human life means that there is never a horizon that is closed and, instead, it is ‘something into which we move and that moves with us’ (TM, 303), indicating that understanding is continuous and necessarily incomplete. It is also clear that Gadamer dismisses dialogue as balancing differences in opinions or perspectives, or as assimilating the other into our own. Instead, he focuses on the openness of dialogic understanding and its to-and-fro nature, an infinite possibility for self-transcendence and growth, as we shall see.

Gadamer further claims that dialogue occurs in language, and that understanding is always mediated by language, which is itself formed in the process of dialogue. This primacy of language in the hermeneutical experience determines that our mode of being in the world is through our being ‘in’ language. This means that it is within language that anything to be understood is interpreted and, similarly, it is within language that we encounter ourselves and others (Malpas 2013). In this regard, language is dialogue and is, in part, human’s being-in-the-world, an important aspect that we will elaborate further when discussing its implication on dialogue ethics.

So far, I have revisited a few of the interconnected foundational concepts in philosophical hermeneutics which clearly articulate how Gadamer conceives human understanding. Together, these establish our ways of being in the world as being fundamentally relational – not only in the way we are in relation to other human beings, but also in our relation to the world itself. They serve as a starting point from which we can further elaborate on Gadamer’s influence on the ethics of dialogue, which we shall turn to next.

## The Ethics of Dialogue

I have identified four broad ethical considerations that are embedded in Gadamer's dialogue theories. In this section, I will exam each of them more closely.

### ***The Place of Otherness in Dialogue – The Ethics of Alterity***

The first condition of hermeneutics is an encounter with otherness. An encounter brings our attention to something alien which, in turn, makes us become acutely aware of the situatedness of our understanding and knowing. According to Gadamer,

The hermeneutical problem only emerges clearly when there is no powerful tradition present to absorb one's own attitude into itself and when one is aware of confronting an alien tradition to which he has never belonged or one he no longer unquestioningly accepts. (PH 1977, 46)

This is also to say that when a person is trying to understand something, be it text, or the subject matter of conversation, he/she is prepared for it to tell them something – something alien (in Gadamer's words), something different from what they already know. This requires sensitivity to otherness that is 'neither neutrality with respect to content nor the extinction of one's self' (TM, 271), but involves the interpreter's foregrounding and fore-meaning, as well as an acceptance that the other person and his/her perspectives count in the dialogic deliberation. Gadamer does not speculate in terms of how much, and from which aspects, the other and otherness should be counted in dialogue, nor does he maintain that an openness to the other and sensitivity to their otherness necessarily result in understanding. All that he asserts is that openness to otherness calls for one's capacity to attend to and listen to what addresses us in a text or conversation.

It is therefore in Gadamer's insistence on the place of otherness in dialogue that we come across an explicit claim concerning the ethical essence of interpretation. Following Kant, hermeneutics does not treat the other as a means to an end. Instead, the other and otherness are constituted in the moral worthiness of a person, which is an end in itself. Equally, the other can equally command our own moral attitudes of respect, responsiveness and relationship.

What addresses us is also what prompts us to become aware of our own embeddedness which further invites the subject or the thing that we dialogue about to 'present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth' (TM, 272). As we have already touched upon, after all, it is our own tradition, pre-judgement and truth claim that are being called into question. To be sure, whilst it is necessary that we remain open to the meaning of the other, this openness 'always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings or

ourselves in relation to it' (TM, 271). Tradition or historicity is thus 'a genuine partner in dialogue, and we belong to it, as does the I with a Thou' and 'the Thou is not an object but is in relationship with us' (TM, 352). Gadamer contrasts this experience of the Thou with the hermeneutical experience of the other, and he suggests that the former is forever self-regarding, always rooted in self-relatedness. In comparison, the hermeneutical experience of the other is 'to experience the Thou truly as a Thou – i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us' (TM, 355), and this is where the openness (to the other) belongs.

In this way, the presence of otherness and our openness to the other are absolute prerequisites for dialogic understanding to take place. Here, one allows oneself to be put into question by the other, which goes beyond merely keeping an open mind on the meaning of a text or what the dialogue partner has to say to us. It means allowing the questions of otherness to become one's own and putting one's own prejudices at risk. When both dialogue partners do so with regard to the object of dialogue, it becomes a shared inquiry, and the other becomes our co-investigator/co-interpreter. The ethos here is to regard the other as a co-subject and not just as a 'Thou', as such. In fact, Gadamer cautions the use of the I/Thou relationship because it jeopardises the mutuality of such a relation, as we shall soon see, and it 'changes the relationship and destroys its moral bond' (TM, 354). So, for Gadamer, it is preferable to refer to 'the Thou' as 'the other', because it can help us make it clear that the 'I', or the one, is always the other's other. The hermeneutical relationship is therefore ultimately aimed at a relationship of we, or solidarity, to which we will return later.

From the perspective of dialogue ethics, hermeneutics demands that the interpreter, first and foremost, prioritise an openness and attentiveness to the other and otherness. This means care – care for the other and care for what the other has to say, instead of inattention to, or disinterest in, the other. It is such openness that enables us to care for, listen to, respond to, and thereby bond with the other. Hence, philosophical hermeneutics embodies 'an ethics of alterity and responsibility' (Bruns 2004, 38).

The primacy of the other in dialogical encounter is equally proposed in the philosophical ideas of Emmanuel Levinas, insofar as there is a similar insistence on the subject's irreducible engagement with otherness (Tealon 1997). However, some Levinasian scholars have criticised Gadamer for downplaying the importance of alterity (Vessey 2005). For instance, Bernasconi (1995, 180) suggests that Gadamerian dialogue features a 'diminishing alterity', and Caputo (2000, 43) critiques that 'there are limits on Gadamer's notion of alterity'.



Gadamer's response to these challenges can be found in his writings. He points out that during our encounter with otherness, there are always tensions between the polarities of strangeness and familiarity, and he suggests that individuals generally try to resolve such tension in their experiences of the text or the subject of a conversation. When the meaning is 'not compatible with what we had expected', it 'brings us up short' and allows us to engage with it differently (TM, 269). This ongoing process of encountering the other, and of renewal or expansion of one's horizon is precisely what Heidegger has termed the 'hermeneutic circle'. Gadamer sees that this process 'makes it possible to venture into the alien, the lifting up of something out of the alien, and thus the broadening and enrichment of our own experience of the world' (PH, 15). This is a challenging tension between at-homeness and not-at-homeness, between self-possession and what places our horizon in question. This in-between-ness is where hermeneutics is located and otherness resides, and it equally posits the other in a place that is central to our own understanding. In order to attend to the meanings implicit in the otherness and to achieve understanding (rather than misunderstanding), the criterion for questioning is imperative. The hermeneutical task thus '*becomes of itself a questioning of things* and is always in part so defined' (TM, 271, italics in original). In fact, the 'real power of hermeneutical consciousness is our ability to see what is questionable' (PH, 13). In this way, Gadamer proposes the central role of the other and otherness, rather than downplaying alterity. Kögler (2014, 10) goes further and interprets Gadamerian alterity as meaning that 'the other appears as a partner, a mutual co-self, an other who is both different and close enough to be understood, to be taken seriously, to be taken into account'. The Gadamerian ethics of alterity is therefore not a diminished alterity, instead it insists on the continuing presence of the other in a never-ending hermeneutical process (Vessey 2005).

### ***Fusion of Horizons – The Ethics of Self-Cultivation***

Philosophical hermeneutics recognises the finitude of human understanding and its temporal and cultural situatedness. To overcome such finite determinacy, Gadamer proposes that one of the hermeneutical tasks be to reach an understanding about something *with* the other through the fusion of horizons. He elucidates that the reason why he insists on the *fusion* of horizons, rather than on the *formation* of one horizon, is that forming one horizon can underplay the tension between divergent perspectives, beliefs, cultural contexts and historical traditions that shape our interpretation of the subject matter we seek to understand. In fact, as we have seen, residing in such tension are the conditions for understanding. It is precisely by engaging with these differences that our own horizon becomes expandable.

Hermeneutics thus entails a to-and-fro movement between the whole and the part where we never truly escape our prejudices, nor are we fully constrained by them.

For Gadamer, this fusion does not mean disregarding oneself, nor assimilating the other. On the contrary, he suggests that we must imagine the world of the other by bringing ourselves into it. This ‘consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another person to our own standards’ (TM, 305). Instead, hermeneutics promotes virtues such as humility, by accepting the temporality and historicity of our being as we seek the opportunity to expand our horizons so that we rise to ‘a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity, but also that of the other’ (TM, 305). Gadamer further elaborates that what is achieved here is a higher truth, precisely because hermeneutics allows what is alien to become one’s own, not by destroying it critically or by reproducing it uncritically, but by ‘explicating it within one’s own horizons with one’s own concepts and thus giving it new validity’ (PH, 94). In this way, a hermeneutical task is mutually enriching for the dialogue partners and thus dialogue enables a superior breadth of vision for both. Gadamer summarised thus: the fusion goes on as one continues to encounter the other’s horizon, into ‘something of living value’ (PH, 94).

Gadamer equates the hermeneutical understanding to *bildung* – self-cultivation and self-transcendence (without necessarily the metaphysical ‘substances’), in which both dialogue partners and their perspectives are elevated. *Bildung* is a process whereby the individual and his/her horizon have been transformed and it thus implies growth. To understand dialogically is to be able to contextualise meaning, re-configure our horizon and to integrate otherness into our understanding. This process creates a unity in which difference is appreciated, not rejected.

Self-cultivation depends on collaboration with the other in dialogue and so has an ethical dimension. It involves being ‘dialogically sensitive’ to the presence of the other and to the pivotal part that otherness plays in helping to expand our horizons and to deepen our self-understanding. Hermeneutics is thus constituted in a person’s virtuous character, which is situated within their unique tradition, background and dispositions. This aspect appeals to Aristotle’s conceptions of *phronesis* and *ethos*. Gadamer asserts that ‘there is no *phronesis* without *ethos* and no *ethos* without *phronesis*. The two of them are both aspects of the same basic constitution of humanity’ (1999, 155). Hence, *bildung* itself is the pursuit of hermeneutical life through the practice of dialogue ethics. Our earlier point, that the hermeneutical circle is never complete, also suggests that *bildung* is ongoing.

This hermeneutical idea, that the essence of a human’s being-in-the-world is being in dialogue with one another and with the world, is also supported by Paulo Friere (1970). However, Freire’s (1998) reflection on human finitude is a self-conscious one: ‘in my unfinishedness I know that I am conditioned. Yet conscious of such conditioning, I know that I must go beyond it’ (1998, 54). Although aimed at

enabling self-transcendence, Freire's (1970) approach to dialogue ethics is to equip the individual with critical capacities and a critical attitude so as to reflect on one's own 'existential experience and human-world relationship and on the relationship between people implicit in the former' (78). From a Freirean perspective, an obvious challenge to hermeneutical ethics of self-cultivation is thus precisely to observe it from the social, cultural and political constraints that result in the 'limited situations of the oppressed' and that critique hermeneutics as having little to say about that. Similarly, as we touched upon earlier, in the Habermas-Gadamer debate, one challenge remains: the fusion of horizons is not sufficient to critically account for the ideological, social and institutional structures and cultures that define these contexts. Further, critical theory tends to challenge hermeneutics' capacity to drive transformation in the world.

In his defence, Gadamer claims that hermeneutical reflection 'exercises a self-criticism of thinking consciousness' (PH, 94). Indeed, self-transcendence leads to a reconstruction of the way traditions on each side are understood, and historical meaning is comprehended. The fusion of horizons rejects the assertion of authority from the interpreter's tradition. This ethos is that both dialogue partners are open to the other's truth-claim but, at the same time, they are willing to confront it and to be confronted by it. Accordingly, hermeneutical dialogue, through the ethics of self-cultivation, will contest those forces and influences embedded in our prejudices and cultural biases. This process is never static and uncritical but productive and transformational.

As to the commitment to changing the world, Gadamer does propose a world-oriented ethics of self-cultivation, insofar as *bildung* represents striving for understanding from the perspective of universality through consciousness-elevating dialogue. Indeed, this Gadamerian ethos not only gives rise to opportunities for individuals to transform themselves and to transcend their horizons, but also for cultures to develop and evolve (Linge 1977).

### **Equality and Active Reciprocity in Dialogue – The Ethics of Mutuality**

In the Introduction to *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Linge summarises that the hermeneutical dialogue involves 'equality and active reciprocity' (1977, xx). This is because, in dialogue, both interlocutors must be concerned with a common topic or a common question. (In textual interpretation, it is assumed that the interpreter and the author share the same concern.) Dialogue is always dialogue about something. So, understanding means coming to an understanding with someone, and when two people understand each other they always do so 'with respect to something' (TM, xvi). Accordingly, dialogue requires equally committed partners to engage in a mutualising act of interpretation. Hermeneutical endeavour would

be undermined if the interpreter were to concentrate on the other person, rather than on the subject matter. Gadamer clarifies that it is not a matter of looking *at* the other person, but looking *with* the other at the thing that the dialogue partners communicate about.

The equality here refers to both dialogue partners being concerned with what motivates the conversation about the subject matter, its meaning and the questions it intends to address in a similar way; and at the same time, both are provoked by it to 'question further' in the direction that it indicates. This active reciprocity in a hermeneutical dialogue evokes genuine understanding as not only being intersubjective, but also as being dialectical – a new meaning that is born out of the interplay that goes on continuously between the past and the present, and between different horizons.

Gadamer uses the example of playing a game to illustrate the equality and reciprocity. The game and its rules, to which the participants adhere, insofar as they are *playing*, have priority over the individual players. In order to stay in the game, the players must relinquish themselves to the act of playing and cede their individual freedom of subjectivity to something beyond themselves – the game itself. In this sense, as it were, it could even be said that the players are being 'played'. Gadamer then depicts this through an image of two men having free play of the saw together 'by reciprocally adjusting to each other so that one man's impulse to movement takes effect just when that of the other man ends' (PH, 54). This indicates 'a reciprocal behaviour of absolute contemporaneousness – neither partner constitutes the real determining factor, rather it is the unified form of movement as a whole that unifies the fluid activity of both' (PH, 54). The end of this play is that dialogue partners are spoken to, enriched and transformed by the truth which is emerging. Hence, 'when a dialogue has succeeded, one is subsequently fulfilled by it ...' (PH, 66). Gadamer sees that the reciprocal engagement in understanding goes far beyond what we ourselves can become aware of through a mere 'methodical effort and critical self-control' as '[t]hrough every dialogue something different comes to be' (PH, 58).

This is one of Gadamer's principal contributions to hermeneutics which shifts the focus of discussion away from technique and methods (all of which assume understanding to be a deliberate product of self-conscious reflection) to the clarification of understanding as an event that is, in its very nature, episodic (or historical) and inter-subjective and trans-subjective. In the give-and-take 'game' of play in dialogue (with the support of language, as we shall see) lies the ethics of mutuality, the practice of which can help engender new meaning that takes both dialogue partners to greater horizons.

However, the questions remain in terms of whether hermeneutical ethics underestimates the place of power or domination as a social issue in modern societies. Marshall (2004, 126) writes provocatively that the ethics of mutuality can be problematic, especially when the relationship between the dialogue partners is 'inherently asymmetrical', because it is not in the power of the individuals to establish equality, but it is in the 'historical institutions and realities' that the power imbalance prevails.

To respond, the ethos of mutuality does not undermine critical self-examination, as it is neither an act of empathy, of assimilation, or of domination. This reciprocal engagement rests on a conception of the good which can give rise to ethical questions about dialogic understanding, rather than mere procedural concerns. According to Marshall's (2004) own close reading, the ethos of mutuality involves our openness to 'accept[ing] some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so' (TM, 361). Acceptance, rather than denial, is an important step towards recognising the power imbalance. Marshall (2004) continues to show that Gadamer 'recognizes the limited sphere of dialogue oriented toward understanding', and 'refuses to pretend that hermeneutics is a critique of domination or an answer to the problems of political life' (131), and that the advantage we gain from the 'duality between the equal and reciprocal partners in dialogue is that we escape the false unity of monologic self-enclosure and orient our thinking toward a unity of being that presents itself' (137).

For Gadamer, it is precisely due to this limitation that dialogue must be carried away by the 'rule of the game' in order that the ethical conditions of equality and reciprocity are met.

### ***Language and Understanding – The Ethics of Solidarity***

Gadamer argues that language and understanding are not two processes, but one and the same. This is because language frames our prejudices, and language and understanding are inseparable structural aspects of a human's being-in-the-world. Gadamer elucidates that 'Language is by no means simply an instrument or a tool...Rather...we are always already encompassed by the language which is our own' (PH, 62).

Understanding is language-bound and language is 'the real mark of our finitude', and we are 'always already biased in our thinking and knowing by our linguistic interpretation of the world' (PH, 64). Drawing on Hans Lipps, Gadamer proposes that in every round of interpretation, the dialogue partner is exposed to a new circle of the unexpressed or unsaid, which continues to pose new questions and prompts us to seek new answers. It is the continued and sustained language enrichment that

leads to enhanced understanding and, similarly, and it is the endless linguistic circle that can serve as a bridge between the dialogue partners.

Gadamer proposes that there are three essential features of language in hermeneutics: (1) self-forgetfulness, which is due to the fact that language is lived and so we are less aware of it, and that 'the real being of language is that into which we are taken up when we hear it' (PH, 65); (2) I-lessness, as speaking does not belong to the sphere of the "I" but to the sphere of "we", which unifies one and the other; (3) the universality of language, because 'language is all-encompassing', and therefore 'every dialogue has an inner infinity and no end' (PH, 67). To be sure, when the interlocutors do break due to the lack of anything further to say, the resuming of the dialogue is always implied.

In addition, Gadamer posits that language 'is only properly itself when it is dialogue' and language 'is only fully what it can be when it takes place in dialogue' (EH, 127-8). This demonstrates that language is perfected in the dialogue processes to enable the meaning expressed in language to come to the fore. Things and ideas thus bring themselves to expression in and through language. Gadamer (1986) writes:

It is only in this way that the word becomes binding, as it were: it binds one human being with another. This occurs whenever we speak to one another and really enter into genuine dialogue with another (186).

So, it is in language that solidarity amongst people occurs. This conception of solidarity is that it is an expression of human bonds developed through a reciprocal engagement with one another in dialogue. These bonds emerge from dialogic encounters among those who embody otherness and will remain the other, and they involve a recognition that our attachment to, and care for, the other are developed when we are able to perceive the I and the other as the 'we', in spite of the differences in our horizons – history, tradition, culture, and so forth. This 'we' is not based on the commonality of humanity; instead, the 'we', in a Gadamerian construct, is much more local and parochial (Walhof 2006).

Such sustained engagement with otherness is important in order that the community of life is lived through solidarities. It forms a universal human task enabling individuals to reach out to each other through language. Gadamer précised this thus:

Hence language is the real medium of human being, if we only see it in the realm that it alone fills out, the realm of human being-together, the realm of common understanding, of ever-replenished common agreement – a realm as indispensable to human life as the air we breathe. As Aristotle said, man is truly the being who has language. For we should let everything human be spoken to us (PH, 68).

Hence Gadamer perceives solidarity as being connected to practice, to how we act together – acting in solidarity (Gadamer, 1981). Solidarity thus highlights that though language, norms and practices bind people to each other in certain shared enterprises, such as acting together for the greater good, ‘Everything human’ must indeed refer to its meaning in the noblest sense.

Vessey (2012) considers this way of understanding language as a further support of the afore-mentioned Gadamer's preference for ‘the one/other’ relationship in dialogue (instead of ‘the I/Thou’ relationship). The one/other relationship allows us, as it were, to appreciate the fact that our relations with the other are always mediated through language, culture and tradition. One's openness to the other also implies a recognition of the limitations of the ‘Cartesian accounts of autonomous subjects’ (Vessey 2012, 99). Vessey further proposes that the Gadamerian emphasis on language in dialogue ‘leads him into a unique dialogical social ontology’ (106). Similarly, Rorty (2004) remarks on this unique aspect of Gadamer's theory, highlighting that as our being is in part constituted in language, humans are always already in dialogue. Di Cesare takes this further by suggesting that we are not only in dialogue with one another, but ‘according to our most intimate nature we are ourselves dialogue’ (2013, 158), and that we bring with each of us an ‘unlimited readiness for dialogue’ (2013, 159). Hence, the ethos of solidarity is lived out in dialogue.

The Gadamerian conception of solidarity is further developed in his later works, in his continued discussion on the linguistic structure of human experience and the part that language plays in constructing social meaning. This is where Gadamer shows more interest in the practical consequences of hermeneutics, not only by expressing his ethical concerns, but also by engaging in the political dimension of his thought. However, when applying Gadamerian thought in a political arena, care is paramount in order to consider the possibility of translating hermeneutics into the spheres of political and social matters. At a minimum, the ethos of solidarity means that dialogic understanding is a human's being-in-the-world, and that hermeneutics is not a method, dialogue never instrumental. Marshall describes the character of the ethos of solidarity thus:

We do not enter into dialogue, we find ourselves already in it – but only if we are already listening with the most intense attention, all ears to the discreet, the whispered word. ... (If – a large if – anyone is left in this world who wants to understand, dialogue has already begun (2004, 143).

That is to say, solidarity is already embodied in the dialogue which underlies political communities, but solidarity is not the consequence of dialogue. It rejects the commonalities or shared interests which would render solidarity superficial.

Instead, despite being historically and culturally situated, people bond with one another as the other. Walhof (2006) offers an example of the environmental movement, which is brought forward by solidarity, the bonds of which are not due to race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or sexual orientation, although these external identity markers are very important. The example of environmental movement suggests that it calls forth solidarity amongst people who see the other as another, 'thereby making it possible for us to see new ways that we are bound together' (Walhof 2006, 586).

## Conclusion

In this article, I have revisited some key concepts and arguments from Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and have examined their implications for dialogue ethics.

Rooted in human experience, philosophical hermeneutics has the potential to be applied to our social and political concerns. As we have seen, dialogic understanding comprises our being-in-the-world and serves the ends of being and action. Following Aristotle, Gadamer terms this practical philosophy, which involves *praxis*, i.e., how we relate to things in the world and ground our relationships, including social life, political institutions and economics (PH, 60). In Dallmayr's words, praxis implies 'a thoughtful conduct' (2009, 31). This process requires the integration of ethics so that the purpose of practical philosophy is not limited to understanding, but also to learning how to relate to things in the world (Dobrosavljev 2002). In turn, such concerns can kindle ethical sensibilities and encourage dialogue ethics. As we have explored in this article, philosophical hermeneutics does not fall into the theory-practice duality, instead, it aims to transform our knowing and understanding into something that is more universal. In doing this, accomplishing dialogic understanding through deep encounter draws the individual away from the self in order to return to the self anew. That is to say, the person emerges from genuine dialogue transformed. This new understanding modifies the individual in the dimension of his/her action in the world.

In a highly politicised world, where there are competing ideologies, values and embedded power imbalances, all decisions are made within finite and limited knowledge constrained by cultural contexts, historical references and individual and institutional narratives. The project of hermeneutic ethics can help us to recognise differences, to negotiate meanings and to seek understanding in order to reach out to one another.

Historical consciousness, culture and religious traditions constitute our otherness to each other, and are an important impetus for understanding which contextualise



the self-understanding of each person. In dialogue, the application of the ethics of alterity can ensure that interlocutors are not talking past each other, and avoid the situation where two egos meet separately. Our recognition is that it is through the continued presence of the other and otherness in all forms that we can access and engage in a proactive process of shared inquiry. This need for the other makes dialogue always necessary. Gadamer suggests that the ethics of alterity must be practised at both the micro- and macro- levels, a similar dialogic encounter holds true in larger communities, nations and states (Dallmayr 2009).

The humility to accept our own finitude and the recognition of the need to turn to the other and to be open to the otherness in order to understand ourselves, and things, better, make for productive dialogue. It is an important avenue through which to explore the self-transcendent power of what is described by hermeneutics. Today, the globalised multiplicity of difference prompts us to appreciate all the more the Gadamerian emphasis on the boundedness of our horizons, which demands openness to an ongoing revision of our own prejudices and pre-judgements. Hence, the necessity to engage in continued self-cultivation. Self-cultivation and transcendence may further prompt cultures, institutional norms and community practices to shift. Indeed, the future of mankind may depend on the cultivation of virtues at both the individual and the communal levels in order to prepare our readiness for dialogue and to act towards the end of social transformation.

During dialogue, the interlocutors are equally critical and reciprocally engaged participants in an unfolding inquiry. The ethics of mutuality posits the dialogue partners as co-inquirers through participation in language. In this co-inquiry, there lies the imperative to disclose the roots of modern social malaises, such as violent conflicts, the exploitation of the planet earth, inequality, and so on. In dialogue, people and communities are thus brought together in ways that can lead not only to better mutual understanding, but also to a critical self-awareness of possible hindrances within one's own tradition that might impede a more peaceful and flourishing world.

However the openness to the other and otherness is by no means 'reducing the other to the categories of the self' (Nealon 1997, 129). Indeed, the ethos of mutuality reminds us of the danger of domination, control or assimilation, especially after the West's active othering of indigenous and minority cultures for its own benefit. Equally, it prompts us to be aware of the risk of essentialising cultures' otherness. Instead, it must be insisted that a shared appreciation and mutual learning and transcendence be at the core of dialogue, aimed at the greater good. That is to say, that unity in diversity is not the end but, rather, a flourishing life for all is.

Dialogue ethics enables us to develop a sense of we-ness and of solidarity both with and in the world. This is really the basis on which communities come together, what Gadamer calls, the 'actual relationship of men to each other' (PH, 17). Solidarity calls for actions to address power imbalance, oppression and exploitation, and hence, hermeneutical life that is inhabited in the solidarity involves the participation in 'a community of doing', in the words of Merleau-Ponty (1973). We participate in each other's *doing*, including our memories, narratives, past pains, present concerns, future inspirations and hopes, a participation 'proceeding in the direction of ethical well-being and a shared concern with the good life' (Dallmayr 2009, 37). Such community must be dialogically cultivated globally.

Indeed, Arendt's (1958) *vita activa* challenges us to bring the relevance of philosophical ideas into social and political life. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and its implications on dialogue ethics are truly significant responses to this challenge in a globalising world.

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