

INTERPRETING POSTMODERNISM: HERMENEUTICS AS
PARTICIPATORY UNDERSTANDING

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The era of postmodernism is still upon us, and no part of our theologies or ministries have found exemption from its influence. Indeed, perhaps now more than ever before Christians are recognizing the responsibility imposed upon us to respond to post-modern and post-enlightenment challenges greeting us at the doorsteps of our homes and churches. And yet, even now, years after names like Jacques Derrida and Hans-Georg Gadamer have become almost commonplace, many well-intentioned people still tend to assume their challenges (which are admittedly guided by obscure and mysterious terminology) to be entirely esoteric and reserved only for those ivory-tower thinkers who rarely get their hands dirty with “real life” affairs. This is clearly an unfortunate and perhaps even dangerous belief when, in truth, the contrary is the case. Since the death of modernism many new developments have become very practical or “hands-on” in response to the legacy of the Age of Reason, especially as worked out in contemporary hermeneutics (the theory of interpretation). Contemporary hermeneutics encapsulates many of the fundamental postmodern challenges facing this as well as the next generation of Christians. This is perhaps no more evident than in the challenge to make sense of human experience outside the authority of the natural sciences by describing the facts of our situatedness (our finitude, context bound nature, etc.) without succumbing to empty and abstract theories or any pseudo form of logical positivism which locates meaning entirely within the realm of the objective and measurable.

In short, the importance of postmodern developments cannot be easily dismissed precisely because they impact so much of our everyday views and understandings of even the most rudimentary experiences. For example, believers have long recognized the distinction between head-knowledge and heart-knowledge—arguing that without religious experience, faith and belief are empty, and without Biblical authority or appeals to truth, experience often leads to empty emotionalism and irrationalism. This longstanding dilemma has been how we should mediate these extremes of head and heart. Surprisingly, even secular hermeneutics face similar concerns in the continued move away from the strictness of the Age of Reason, with its stifling rigidity, and the move toward experience itself as the source of understanding and meaning, including the dangers of empty emotionalism or subjectivism.

How then, may we begin to make sense of this post-rationalist (though not irrational), post-methodology, and post-objective (though not arbitrary or relative) way of thinking? How, if at all, does this foster ministry and the religious life of communities and individuals? My proposal is that one of the best ways to arbitrate between postmodernism and the church is through hermeneutics. More specifically, I propose that to begin to appreciate what is going on in the greater context of society, as well as locally, we should begin with an examination of hermeneutics which is characteristically “participatory.” To that end, an examination of Paul Tillich’s existential hermeneutics and Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics is made in the following paper.¹

Hermeneutics is a term often associated with the methodological interpretation of scripture, but it is no longer merely a tool or technique for exploring texts (legal, sacred, etc.). Rather, it has become, for many, the way to describe every event of human understanding. The relevance of hermeneutical thinking to church communities becomes manifold when one considers that acts of interpretation, practicality, applicability, understanding, etc. are no longer considered isolated or discrete elements of what we do (one moment applying truth, the next contem-

1. The history of interpretation is littered with attempts to articulate good, better, and best hermeneutics—the word itself being relatively new to the scene. If my purpose to show hermeneutics as necessarily participatory is correct then the question, What is hermeneutics? will be rather misguided. There are good reasons for why a participatory approach will confound simple explanation—except that the “is” of hermeneutics is a phenomenological description or description of “experience” rather than an attempt toward method, formula, and scheme.

plating it), but are all subsumed simultaneously under the grand mode of hermeneutical understanding—experience. Hermeneutics attempts to make this participatory understanding explicit and to show that application and theory or practice and understanding are not in anyway antithetic or mutually independent acts, but are necessarily joined in every act of coming-to-understand. All understanding is participation and participation always takes place in the context of practical concerns. Hence, every act of ministry and theology falls under the universality of the hermeneutical claim.

The stakes are high when the ultimate goal is understanding understanding, that is, making sense of sense. The claim to universality makes hermeneutics both practical and serious, relevant and audacious. If correct, contemporary hermeneutics, in all its various forms, is deserving of a household name. If incorrect, then it will eventually be seen as little more than a brash claim that seemed serious at the time, but really had no merit. Either way, the following broadly brushed outlines of two major hermeneutical thinkers is a beginning for sorting out the dilemmas faced by the church and its ministries aimed toward those living within a postmodern mood. To have any relevance at all, we must at least attempt a conversation with it.

Brief Outline

First, this is an examination of the way in which Tillich's "religious symbol" and Gadamer's "fusion of horizons," including his notion of "play" or "game," overcome estrangement and alienation through participation. Tillich and Gadamer recognize, with stunning lucidity, the need to make connections between several dimensions of experience, namely, those dimensions typically segmented between the natural sciences and human sciences, arts and sciences, religious *experience* and philosophical *thought*, practical ministry and theological discourse, etc. Tillich's religious symbol and Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics are two distinctive hermeneutical approaches that attempt to bridge artificial epistemological boundaries and existential estrangement that still dominate much of what might be called Christendom.

Second, this is an examination of the way in which Tillich and Gadamer's approaches maintain the priority of the question in response to their ontological understandings (structure of our being). The hermeneutics of Tillich and Gadamer are attempts to replace the logic of pro-

positions with the logic of dialectic (question and answer) that does not have a fixed resting point or end but is a perpetual participation in infinite possibilities. It will be argued that their dialectical approaches are attempts to make the deepest thoughts and feelings accessible to understanding. For example, it will be shown that for Gadamer the aesthetic consciousness (e.g., in his notion of “play” or “game”) must reclaim the truth value it has lost, and that for Tillich the religious symbol must be revived (e.g., employed in discourse) as it participates in the transcendental to which it points.

Third, this paper, as primarily an examination of how each thinker overcomes alienation and foreignness, will look closely at their respective views of the subject and object bifurcation. It will be argued that through Tillich’s correlation of subjective and objective elements that are inseparable in the symbol, and Gadamer’s “play” and “fusion of horizons,” in which understanding is not a reconstruction but a creative participation in a movement of history without autonomous parts (interpreter or text), there is an overcoming of subject and object dichotomies for a universal hermeneutical experience that must maintain the priority of openness and the question to find truth.

A Response to Life and Relativism

Tillich looks at the world as an apologetic theologian. His apologetic is not a defence of dogma or tradition, but a concern for the “situation.”²

2. That exact question was not explicitly stated by Tillich but serves as a foundational question as to why Tillich provided work on symbolism. Tillich characterized his theology as apologetic or as an “answering theology.” See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I (London: James Nisbet, 1964), 1-8. On the one hand, theological authority, the source of theology, is necessary. On the other hand, the situation or whole expression of the world-view or mind-set of a society must be analysed. In this dialectical approach the authority (in most cases the Bible) supplies the content of theology, but the expression of it will be determined by the questions of the culture. Fundamentally speaking, neither task may be accomplished without an adequate way of expression or interpretation. For Tillich the task is necessarily accomplished through the religious symbol. Therefore, it seems appropriate to ask, How does non-literal language qualify as adequate? Adequacy is achieved in so much as language facilitates meaning, an understanding of theological authority (with its own symbolic representations) and is able to plumb the depths or analyse particular “present cultural symbolic meanings.” Without an adequate language, how could any talk of transcendence be accomplished? In addition to his *Systematic Theology*, Tillich develops

Tillich, the “answering theologian,” has a concern for correlation that is itself a concern to respond to the time and place of real life questions. In like manner, Gadamer also begins with our situationedness and attempts to describe what it means to understand from the facticity of our existence. Both Tillich and Gadamer regard hermeneutics as unbound to specific and universal methods or finite sets of possible interpretations. Hermeneutics is bound to all situations, for example, home, church, the office, where there is a necessarily unending attempt to come-to-understanding. However, if, as they claim, understanding is the perpetual burden of interpretation and reinterpretation then we must ask how one might participate in the world, church, reading books, etc., without succumbing to a helplessly subjective relativism. Tillich’s response is the religious symbol. Gadamer’s response is a fusion of horizons in which we encounter life and texts like a work of art through “play.”

Estrangement and Ultimate Concern

Tillich’s approach to the problems of Western religious traditions does not begin with the question of the existence of God as he believes that such a question should not even be asked.³ Instead, he begins with what he believes to be the human predicament. Mackenzie Brown, in his introductory section on Tillich’s theology, asserts that for Tillich, “...the primary problem is our situation, our sense of estrangement and the tension in which we live.”⁴ Tillich’s existential estrangement is an estrangement from the ground of all there is, and in response to this estrangement he calls for the courage “to be” in spite of our estranged existence

“symbol” in his major texts and a number of articles. For example, see further *Dynamics of Faith* (Galaxy Books: New York, 1964); *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); “The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols,” and “The Religious Symbol,” in Sidney Hook (ed.), *Religious Experience and Truth* (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 3-11 and 301-321.

3. “Thus the question of the existence of God can be neither asked nor answered. If asked, it is a question about that which by its very nature is above existence, and therefore the answer—whether negative or affirmative—implicitly denies the nature of God. It is as atheistic to affirm the existence of God as it is to deny it. God is being-itself, not *a* being.” Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 237.

4. MacKenzie Brown, *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue*. First Dialogue. [book on-line] (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1978, accessed 29 September 2002); available from http://www.religions-online.org/cgi-bin/research.dll/showbook?item_id=538; Internet.

toward non-being.⁵ Tillich's theology is well known and has been thoroughly criticized for its panentheistic world-view in which God is neither a being nor even a supreme Being, but is the "ground" or "power" of all being.⁶ In this sense, all of existence is grounded in "being" which is both finite and infinite, and from which human existence has become estranged.

Unlike the concern for a God who is a personal being, which Tillich considers to be merely a concern for a being alongside other beings, the concern for the ultimate is for that which transcends all that exists, all other beings, yet remains the "ground of being." Faith, for Tillich, as part of the religious enterprise, is the movement toward the ultimate although indefinable concern. This concern is for a God which cannot be defined by words nor even considered *a* God in the traditional sense of classical Christian theism. This is a concern not for a being but "being-itself" because to be something is to be finite⁷ and the divine cannot be finite.

Tillich's notion of ultimate concern is both objective and subjective. It is clearly subjective in so much as it is the concern of the person toward something in an *unconditional manner* and it is objective in so much as the person is concerned *unconditionally about* something. Tillich's ultimate concern is a compelling notion of human possibility where one does not simply have a theoretical abstraction or a purely practical ability, where the two may be confused or isolated, but is a possibility of understanding in a unified and whole manner. It is a centred act of the whole self that cannot be merely objective or subjective in character. To be open to the ultimate is to be open to possibility. The final resting place for this movement is the ultimate truth, "the one that no one pos-

5. "God as being-itself transcends nonbeing absolutely. On the other hand, God as creative life includes the finite and, with it, nonbeing, although nonbeing is eternally conquered and the finite is eternally reunited within the infinity of the divine life. Therefore it is meaningful to speak of a participation of the divine life in the negativities of creaturely life. This is the ultimate answer to the question of theodicy. The certainty of God's directing creativity (Providence) is based on the certainty of God as the ground of being and meaning. The confidence of every creature, its courage to be, is rooted in faith in God as its creative ground." Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 270.

6. For example, see Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 190. In Tillich's panentheism, God is the ground of all being but is not a being. God is the force that causes all things to exist but he does not exist. To be clear, God is in all things and somehow all things are in God but God transcends and is more than all things.

7. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 190.

esses.”⁸ God is not an object that we may know or fail to know but is “Being-itself,” in which we participate as whole persons rather than as possessors of scriptural data or empirical facts.

Tillich believes that many religious systems are dangerous sources of estrangement when they become rigid, inflexible, and unable to address anew the meanings of their symbolic life in relation to the ultimate. Consequently, in Tillich’s account, it is essential to find a way of restoring the meaning of religious symbols that have been lost to technological, literal-minded prejudices, “bourgeois ways of life, nationalism, and the quasi-religions.”⁹

Tillich’s Concept of Symbol

The notion of symbol stands alone, for Tillich, as a key hermeneutic concept and as a way beyond the finite prison of literal interpretive prejudices. There are many who move toward literal interpretation and demythologizing in which the symbolic claim of meaning and significance is left behind as an irrelevant way of speaking meaningfully to a contemporary audience. In contrast to the literalising of many religious ideas, Tillich argues that symbols are indispensable in language and that they represent a way in which we may be opened up to understanding new levels of reality and meaning.

Following his notion of correlation, Tillich interprets religious symbols in relation to the existential or real life questions they point toward. Through an analysis and interpretation of how humanity has understood itself in a given period or culture, Tillich argues one may find questions of priority that otherwise remain to be formulated.¹⁰ Much like his quest for interpretation, Tillich finds that questions are expressed in works of science, law, morality and art but must remain to be interpreted to find their questions concerning the meaning of being.¹¹ In many ways Tillich considers his interpretations or reinterpretations of traditional Christian symbols to be superior because they give expression to the existential situation of modern humanity.¹² Scharlemann writes:

8. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 98.

9. Brown, Dialogue Two.

10. Robert P. Scharlemann, “Paul Tillich,” in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religions*, XIV (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1987), 531.

11. Scharlemann, “Paul Tillich,” 531.

12. See further, Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 47ff. and 59ff.

Human existence, Tillich said, is itself a question—that is, it has the structure of being open to something beyond it and complementary to it—but the way in which that question is formulated changes from time to time. To interpret how it is being asked in a given situation is the task of the analysis of culture.¹³

The religious symbol, for Tillich, both embraces us and is embraced by us as we come back from estrangement and move toward an understanding of the infinite as an existential reality far beyond mere linguistic analysis or grammatical correctness. Not surprisingly, the Enlightenment ideal of objective rationality will necessarily fail to appreciate Tillich's religious symbol as a relational and personal notion.

Tillich's notion of the symbol stands in clear contrast to that of the sign. He believes that the singular common characteristic between signs and symbols is that they point beyond themselves to something else. He writes, "The red sign at the street corner points to the order to stop the movements of cars at certain intervals. A red light and the stopping cars have essentially no relation to each other, but conventionally they are united as long as the convention lasts."¹⁴ Signs are used whenever one desires to identify an object in the physical world, usually employing letters and numbers in words. The essential and defining character of a symbol, and its distinction from a sign, is its participation in the reality to which it points.

The Nature, Levels, and Truth of Religious Symbols

According to Tillich, the symbol is born to open up levels of reality in new and meaningful ways. He presents a twofold manner of openness. First, symbols open up levels of external reality which are otherwise closed off from us. For example, Tillich appeals to the external reality that only the arts can reach through their created symbols. "All arts create symbols for a level of reality which cannot be reached in any other way. A picture and a poem reveal elements of reality which cannot be approached scientifically."¹⁵ Second, symbols open us up to a new internal reality and "...[to] dimensions and elements of our soul which correspond to the dimensions and elements of reality."¹⁶ A novel

13. Scharlemann, "Paul Tillich," 531.

14. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 41.

15. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 42.

16. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 42.

or a theatrical play is not only entertaining but it can open us to the hidden depths of our own being. In Tillich's account, one cannot be existentially freed until one embraces and participates in the meaning presented by symbols—an event in which one embraces and is embraced by the symbolic that remains tied to the finite objective referent while offering disclosure of concealed aspects of our being.

Tillich suggests that each epoch in human history unconsciously discovers its own symbols. Cultural symbols, unlike artistic symbols, cannot be produced intentionally by individuals. They are born of the “group unconscious” or “collective unconscious.”¹⁷ Unless a symbol is accepted within a culture's given epoch it simply cannot function because it has not been born of that era. “Like living beings, they grow and they die. They grow when the situation is ripe for them, and they die when the situation changes.”¹⁸ Also, once a symbol has been born of a given context it cannot be replaced with other symbols. In contrast, the conventional character of signs is that they are consciously invented and removed while symbols remain as long as they are meaningful to the “collective unconscious.”¹⁹

Toward the end of his life Tillich acknowledged his overriding apologetic and passion, “My whole theological work has been directed to the interpretation of religious symbols in such a way that the secular man—and we are all secular—can understand and be moved by them.”²⁰ Tillich's presentation of the religious symbol is the expression of an existential commitment to a way of life. Religious symbols are means of preserving ultimacy (the highest priority among possible concerns) and in so far as they succeed in yielding an openness to new levels of reality they achieve their existential role of overcoming estrangement and bring us into relation with Being-Itself.

17. Paul Tillich, “The Nature of Religious Language,” 194, originally published in *The Christian Scholar* 38 (September 1955), cited hereafter from the reproduced version in David Stewart, *Exploring the Philosophy of Religion* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 3rd edn, 1992), 191-99.

18. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 43. For instance, Tillich contends that the symbol of the Virgin Mary has died, in part because “the ascetic element which is implicit in the glorification of virginity” no longer has a prominent role in our culture. See further Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (ed. Robert C. Kimball; London: Oxford University Press, 1959).

19. Tillich, “The Nature of Religious Language,” 194.

20. Brown, *First Dialogue*.

Following Tillich's symbolic and non-symbolic characterization of God, one may say that God is thus symbolically a person but is really not a person at all, that is, is actually the ground of being. Though God is not a person, Tillich contends that we must symbolize and encounter God rather than "with the highest of what we ourselves are, *person*."²¹ Using the symbol of person we allow ourselves to express an understanding of God in the terms of the highest qualities we experience of ourselves, for example, love and mercy. Tillich argues that we may preserve the divine and transcendent as well as that which we experience as persons in symbolizing God as a person.

In all these ways, Tillich shows how the language of either objectivity or subjectivity is less adequate than that of personification, that is, the religious symbol which has elements of both the "unconditional" and the "ego-thou" relationship. He writes: "...in the notion of God we must distinguish two elements: the element of ultimacy, which is a matter of immediate experience and not symbolic in itself, and the element of concreteness, which is taken from our ordinary experience and symbolically applied to God."²²

Heidegger and the Project of Gadamer's Hermeneutics

Gadamer looks at the world as a participation through creativity—a participation in language as interpretive beings that make intelligible and meaningful what seems incoherent, strange or alien. His participation is a mediation that refuses unilateral determining properties to the present or the past, identity or otherness, self or the other, but to participation in an event that happens to us, rather than a process we determine beforehand. Reality is always a horizon of "still undecided possibilities" and of unfulfilled expectations and contingency.

Since coming to prominence in the works of those such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey, the discipline of hermeneutics has recently and most profoundly developed into a broader discipline through the thinking and works of Martin Heidegger and Gadamer. Separated by somewhat ambiguous definitions and different uses, their

21. Tillich, "The Nature of Religious Language," 196.

22. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 46.

ontologically centred hermeneutics maintain that both scientific and cultural knowledge must be derived from the structure of Being itself.²³

Although influenced by Dilthey, Heidegger, in *Being and Time*,²⁴ argues that Dilthey, among others, was unable to overcome the subjective tendencies of Western thought since Descartes. Heidegger believes that subjective tendencies have led to a dilemma in epistemology and an enticing preoccupation with the ideals of the natural sciences and technology. Further, Heidegger rejects the notion of objective historical knowledge (history as something to be viewed or examined by a detached or unbiased attitude that is not conditioned by its own historical situatedness) because Dasein (the “there-being” we all are) is thrown into a world in which language, culture, and institutions of life are already given. According to Heidegger, human existence itself has a hermeneutical structure that underlies all our interpretations, including those of the natural sciences. Being exists in time with conditioned understanding from previous understanding. Truth is not an objective grasp of meaning but an unveiling of Being through the medium of language. Historically conditioned Dasein interprets by bringing prior understanding into the future.

Like Heidegger, Gadamer begins with the axiom that all understanding is hermeneutic. That is, the hermeneutic function (which should not imply method or mechanism) is our basic mode of being-in-the-world. Understanding is neither a methodological concept nor an “attempt to provide a hermeneutical ground for the human sciences,” but is “the original characteristic of the being of human life itself.”²⁵

Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics is not concerned with unlocking the proverbial “lock of past meaning” but is, instead, concerned with establishing a dialectic between the past and present, the text, and the interpreter.²⁶ To do this he primarily appeals to language

23. “Being” hereafter capitalized to distinguish the unique consideration of human “being” from other “beings.”

24. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit* (trans. Joan Stambaugh; New York: State University of New York Press, 1996 [1927]).

25. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall; New York: Continuum, 2nd rev. edn, 2002), 259.

26. Osborne writes concerning Gadamer’s “fusion”: “There are not two (interpretation and understanding) or three (with application) separate aspects in the hermeneutical enterprise but rather one single act of ‘coming-to-understand.’” See Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 371. Osborne’s observation

and tradition. Following his teacher, Gadamer recognizes that one's present horizon (one's knowledge and experience) is the productive ground of understanding where one's present horizon can be transcended through exposure to another's linguistically encoded cultural tradition.

The Fusion of Horizons

For Gadamer, the structure of the hermeneutical experience is characteristically like that of an event. Within the hermeneutical experience, that is, through the linguistic fusing of the objective and subjective, new horizons of possibility are opened that are rooted in the present and effectively conditioned by the past. This exposure or fusion is the opening up of a subject's horizons to another's horizons and subjectivities. Interpretation and understanding, or as Grant Osborne points out is a "coming-to-understand," are arrived at by a gradual and perpetual interplay between the subject-matter and the interpreter's initial position, that is, one's own horizons and the horizons of a text. Gadamer's interpretation of history and thought denies that there is a single objective true interpretation transcending all view points and simultaneously denies that we are restricted to our own viewpoint. "Coming-to-understand" is never a static and absolute experience but is an interplay involving real risk taking, the universality of which binds together tradition, experience, interpretation, and our effective-history in the comprehensiveness of the hermeneutical experience.

This new relationship of interpretation is not merely an act of one's subjectivity but a historical act as a placing of oneself within a process of tradition where past and present constantly fuse. Gadamer contends that all of life reflects this dialectical movement.²⁷ To truly experience this reflection for oneself involves a giving over of self to the event and by doing so allowing the subject-matter, for example a text, to speak for

seems correct because for Gadamer all understanding has the structure of an experience, in which language, understanding, interpretation, experience, tradition and effective-history are all bound together to form the universality of the hermeneutical experience.

27. Agreeing with Hegel, Gadamer argues that all "experience has the structure of a reversal of consciousness and hence it is a dialectical movement." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 354. Gadamer also argues that, "Every experience worthy of the name thwarts an expectation." (356)

itself. To allow a text to speak one must be prepared to be confronted by the new and the unexpected which is negative in so much as something is unpredictable or counter-intuitive. While simultaneously giving oneself over to be grasped by the hermeneutical event one is also incorporating or assimilating the subject-matter into one's own horizon. There is always this sense of reciprocity in Gadamer's thought concerning fusion.

In short, through language and upon the basic mode of being-in-the-world which is understanding, Gadamer argues that one lives in a world which is subjective but nevertheless has a fundamental reality, prior to our subjectivity, that our projected horizons must fuse with to achieve understanding. "All understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of language that allows the object to come into words and yet is at the same time the interpreter's own language."²⁸ It is the play between the world of linguistically encoded reality and our historical givenness that represents the coming-to-understand of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutic.

Tradition, Effective History, Prejudice, and Understanding

Gadamer's explication of what it means to have a tradition does not admit to the obvious. In many important ways Gadamer's notion has far more to do with what it means to be "grasped by" tradition rather than to "grasp at" tradition reflectively. We are all *historically effected consciousnesses*, according to Gadamer, of which hermeneutical understanding attempts to make more structurally explicit. The conditions of prejudice, tradition, and finite historicity culminate in Gadamer's notion of "effective-history" or "history of effects."

It is important to emphasize that Gadamer's effective-history is not a reflective process but has the structure of an experience of an ongoing process of dialogue or interpretation between past and present. Thus, we can be somewhat confident in our ability to be rational but we cannot partake of this confidence without accepting historically mediated intuitions and interests.²⁹ Between the horizon of historically shaped

28. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 389.

29. See further, Brice R. Wachterhauser, "Prejudice, Reason and Force," *Philosophy* 63 (1988), 235.

prejudices (intuitions) and explicit reasoning, we can never be entirely clear on where we are.³⁰

One of Gadamer's most controversial elements is his defence of prejudices. His interpretation schema assumes a context of intelligibility in which the presuppositions and assumptions (prejudices) of the interpreter enable both understanding and misunderstanding. "A person who does not admit that he is dominated by prejudices will fail to see what manifests itself by their light."³¹ For Gadamer, an interpretation which holds to the presuppositionless ideal of scientific objectivity is in error and understanding that attempts to scientifically reconstruct the psychological intention of the speaker will fail. It is only through the mediation between the interpreter's immediate horizon and his or her emerging horizon that one may participate in the act of coming-to-understand which necessarily involves prejudices or pre-judgments.³²

Accordingly for Gadamer, it is through tradition, which lives and changes, that some prejudices are discarded and others further enforced as they are put at risk. This is not to suggest that there is a point in time during which all prejudices of worth will be exhausted while those of falsity will be disclosed and erased. On the contrary, there are seemingly infinite numbers of interpretations and prejudices that are possible. Each historically rooted prejudice is influenced by untold numbers of events and untold numbers of meanings that perpetually shape it. How could one ever expect to critically evaluate and be completely objective about the conditions that conceive of prejudice? Surely, a hermeneutical approach that ignores the facts of the human context-bound nature and supports a presuppositionless interpretation exposes its own prejudice in trying to escape preunderstanding.

Play, Poetry, Openness, and Dialogue

Gadamer's persistent objection to the radical severing of subject and object, being and thinking, particularly manifest within the advent of Cartesian dualism, reflects his overarching concern with the alienation of humanity that has become, to him, the foundation of Western philosophy and the Western world. Against said alienation, Gadamer argues for the rekindling of the ignored sphere of art and its own truth claims.

30. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 335.

31. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 360.

32. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 234, 267.

Through an ontological analysis of the experience of philosophy and the experience of art, Gadamer believes he has found an experience of truth ignored by many. “The fact that through a work of art truth is experienced that cannot be attained in any other way constitutes the philosophic importance of art, which asserts itself against all attempts to rationalize it away.”³³ Especially important for Gadamer’s recovery and development of notions of truth and understanding, is his notion of “play” or “game.” His analysis of the ontology of the experience of art borrows much from Hegel and offers itself as an analysis of the experience of truth—a participation with ourselves in our encounters with art and infinite possibilities.

In play one commits to a trans-personal understanding where dialogue between oneself and the work is not where one is merely talking with oneself but an existential leap involving testing and risk-taking.³⁴ Play has the potential to overcome the subject/object dichotomy in which we do not confront the game as an object but participate in it as an event—as we give ourselves over to the rules (the structure of the game). In Gadamer’s play there is a strong sense of the transformative quality of artwork and the dislocation of our own pre-understandings, and even our identity. If one encounters a genuine work of art and remains unchanged then one has not truly encountered the work at all. While it is a personal experience, play is not merely about one who plays but an experience where “all play is a being-played.” The experience is not a sequence of intentional activities where we “do” something, but a counter-intentionality or negative experience in which one is grasped by the game in unexpected ways. Consequently, genuine dialogue in the experience of play involves vulnerability, risk, and exposure which, to be clear, is neither through passive subjective experience nor external objective happenings. Like most transformative processes, play involves laborious and traving efforts. A neutral or indifferent engagement will not suffice. To have an experience of truth in a work of art one must be willing to engage it like a game and become subject to its rules, which include the possibility of somehow losing. The experience goes beyond method and resists a reduction of the problem of understanding to either

33. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xiii.

34. Writing concerning the experience of the work of art, Gadamer says that “Everything familiar is eclipsed.” See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Aesthetics and Hermeneutics,” in David E. Linge (ed. and trans.), *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1st pbk. edn, 1977), 101.

the subjective consciousness of the interpreter or the originator of the work—it is a disclosure of our ontology and understanding beyond the ordinary. “Art is a special organ for understanding life because in its ‘confines between knowledge and act’ life reveals itself at a depth that is inaccessible to observation, reflection and theory.”³⁵ The voice present in an experience of art is an intimate and changing encounter with ourselves as well as the object of our attention. In his “Aesthetics and Hermeneutics” (1964) essay Gadamer writes:

The intimacy with which the work of art touches us is at the same time, in enigmatic fashion, a shattering and a demolition of the familiar. It is not only the “This art thou!” disclosed in a joyous and frightening shock; it also says to us; “Thou must alter thy life!”³⁶

In the work of art, like other experiences of openness, one is engaged in the structure of the question. For Gadamer, all knowledge is mediated through the question. The openness in the question consists in the fact that it is not yet answered—it must be undetermined, unknown. Gadamer asserts that one of the greatest achievements of the Socratic dialogues is to show that it is more difficult to ask questions than to answer them.³⁷ There must be something new in the openness because Gadamer believes that to be able to ask necessitates wanting to know; wanting to know necessitates not knowing—a genuine desire to encounter the new. Gadamer wants to avoid anything that is only posing as a question and is really only an apparent question. To have asked a question “rightly” is to have come into true openness without holding to false presuppositions.³⁸ It is enough at this point to say that what unfolds during dialogue or conversation is more than mere opinion. “What emerges in its truth is the logos, which is neither mine nor yours and hence so far transcends the interlocutors’ subjective opinions that even the person leading the conversation knows that he does not know.”³⁹

In short, Gadamer’s question and answer dialectic can be understood as a temporally contingent dialogue of interpretation which evolves in relation to the rules of emerging historical contexts and real life questions. The real is the hermeneutic experience of possession by means of

35. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 235.

36. Gadamer, “Aesthetics and Hermeneutics,” 104.

37. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 362.

38. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 363-64.

39. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 363.

which we are opened up for the new, the different, and the true. Through asking a question, experience (e.g., of a text) is brought to life, so to say. Every question brings about a modification or move of the horizon of the writing. All that is questioned is also limited and directed by the questions of the interpreter and, of course, the evolving text itself. Gadamer's question/answer dynamic, distinguished from intentionality, is always a claim within a context. Through the horizon of the question we come to understand why someone might make a given claim at a given point in time. To be clear, the question is the mode or locus of encountering something different and not the claim which answers the question.

Conclusion

Based on the work of Paul Tillich and Hans-Georg Gadamer I have tried to make a general outline of the features of participatory hermeneutics. It is only when we accept the universality of hermeneutical consciousness as the movement to overcome estrangement and alienation, that we can begin to participate in understanding beyond science and either extremes of head or heart knowledge. Traditionally, the hermeneutic act has been understood as that which offers insights that may contribute to the understanding and application of various concepts of translation; philological, legal, and theological. However, the hermeneutical experience, arguably best exposed in Gadamer's hermeneutic event and complemented by Tillich's existential participation in the symbol, offers a turn that not only contributes to a fuller understanding of the traditional hermeneutic act itself but of experiences as they relate comprehensively to our understanding of ourselves in the world. A conceptualization of the hermeneutical event as an unfolding expression of our primary Being-in-the-world is of fundamental importance to a fuller conceptualization of the boundaries and possibilities of both philosophical and theological enterprises at large and the living dynamic of experience in particular.

In Gadamer's hermeneutics one finds a profound ontological move away from prescriptive and mechanical concerns (typified by the sciences) and the emphasis on subjectivity, as a concerted effort to develop an understanding of the best examples of our self-encounters and expressions, for example, the poetic expression and the dialectic knowledge of the question. In Tillich's hermeneutics one finds an effort to develop the existential participation with the symbol and the religious

symbol specifically. Tillich's concerns are very much like those of Gadamer, that is, to ask real questions about our interaction with language, to peer into the culture around us as the productive grounds of our prejudice and interpretive horizons, and to work out the implications of risk in our openness to the other. Ultimately, both Tillich and Gadamer relate their ideas to notions of either possession or of being grasped by the world in which we are immersed. After recognizing and emphasizing our finitude both Tillich and Gadamer move beyond it in their desire to be open to the priority of the question as a participation in infinite possibilities—a fusion of horizons for one and a participation in the symbol for the other.

Perhaps the most profound impact of Gadamerian and Tillichian hermeneutics is that they remind us of our struggle with understanding that always escapes us, is always transcendent, and that, I believe, becomes an expression of our struggle to find and participate in truth. The sense of alienation and disorientation of modern society, due largely to the substitution of natural or instinctive dialogue with the world for narrow scientific truth claims, for Gadamer, and the ontological estrangement from the ground of being, for Tillich, presents us with two intelligible accounts of existential schism that deserve thorough consideration. The value of dialogue, poetry, historical study, and participation in the symbolic, is not that we are told of factual happenings or told of that which is decidedly right or wrong, but that we are drawn into a relation with the past, ourselves, and the infinite, in a way that further shows us who we are and offers us more than what we already know.