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# Hermeneutics and inter-cultural dialog: linking theory and practice

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## Abstract

Inter-cultural dialog is frequently treated as either unnecessary or else impossible. It is said to be unnecessary, because we all are the same or share the same ‘human nature’; it is claimed to be impossible because cultures seen as language games or forms or life are so different as to be radically incommensurable. The paper steers a course between absolute universalism and particularism by following the path of dialog and interrogation—where dialog does not mean empty chatter but the exploration of the ‘otherness’ of interlocutors on the far side of either assimilation or exclusion. Such dialog is the heart of hermeneutics as formulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer. The paper explores the question whether hermeneutical interpretation can be transferred from textual readings to the domain of cross-cultural encounters. After discussing both the historical development and the basic meaning of contemporary hermeneutics, the paper draws attention to the intimate linkage between interpretive understanding and ‘application’, or ‘practical philosophy.’ Drawing on the insights of Gadamer and some more overtly political thinkers, the paper then shows the relevance of hermeneutics for cross-cultural studies, as an antidote to the looming ‘clash of civilizations.’ It turns to some writings by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in order to emphasize the necessary linkage between interactive dialog and concrete embodied engagement. Undercutting purely mentalist or ‘idealist’ misconstruals of dialog, this linkage shows the mutual compatibility between Gadamerian hermeneutics and existential phenomenology.

**Keywords:** *hermeneutics; dialog; praxis; cross-cultural understanding; Gadamer, Merleau-Ponty*

As customarily defined, hermeneutics means the theory, or rather the practice or art of interpretation. In its primary and traditional sense, interpretation means textual interpretation, that is, the encounter between a reader and a text. In this encounter, something has to happen, some work has to be done: the reader needs to discover the meaning of the text, a meaning which usually is far from self-evident. The difficulty of the work is increased in case of temporal or spatial distance: when the reader wishes to understand a text from another age or in a different language. Yet, to some extent, the difficulty prevails even in the absence of such distance: for example, in reading the letter of a friend. Basically, the problem derives from the peculiarly

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ambivalent character of interpretation: the reader can neither remain entirely passive, nor must he/she be overly active. The interpreter cannot find the meaning by passively copying or transliterating the text; nor should she willfully foist a meaning on the text, thereby manipulating or coercing it. Hence, the labor is transformative: the reader must bring himself/herself to the text, but in an open manner, such as to allow for a new learning experience to happen. This is why we say (or why leading hermeneuticists say) that interpretation is necessarily dialogical.

In the present context, the question I want to raise is whether this meaning of hermeneutics can be transferred from the reading of texts to interhuman relations and especially to the relation between cultures and civilizations. Obviously, cultures are different from written texts. Cultures are complex semantic clusters; following Wittgenstein, we might say that they are complex language games—and, more than language games, they are ‘forms of life’ comprising, in addition to written texts, social customs, religious beliefs, rituals, and practices. Moreover, cultures are internally diversified and unfinished, that is, always evolving and on the move. Given this character, some people consider cross- or inter-cultural hermeneutics impossible or futile. As main reasons for this impossibility, they cite the internal complexity as well as the incommensurability of semantic clusters or forms of life. This is a weighty objection; carried to an extreme, the objection lends credence to the thesis of a looming ‘clash’ of cultures or civilizations (famously formulated by Samuel Huntington). However, this seems to be an overly pessimistic and debilitating outlook. As in the case of textual interpretation, we might agree that the difficulties are considerable—and proceed nonetheless. My own preference, in any case, is to adopt an experimental approach, the approach of hermeneutical inquiry—and then see how far it will lead us.

This is basically the approach I follow here in my presentation. I shall proceed in three main steps. First, I discuss the historical development and basic meaning of hermeneutics, as expounded by the leading proponent of modern and contemporary hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer. At this point, I also review some possible practical ‘applications’ of the hermeneutical perspective in the social and cultural domains, lifting up for attention certain parallels between hermeneutics and practical philosophy. Next, drawing on the insights of both Gadamer and more overtly political thinkers, I shall elaborate on the specific relevance of hermeneutics for cross-cultural or inter-cultural understanding and dialog. Finally, I turn to some writings by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in order to emphasize the necessary linkage between interactive dialog and concrete embodied engagement. Undercutting purely mentalist or ‘idealist’ misconstruals of dialog, this linkage shows the mutual compatibility between Gadamerian hermeneutics and existential phenomenology.

## **HERMENEUTICS: ITS MEANING AND DEVELOPMENT**

Regarding the meaning and development of hermeneutics, Gadamer’s magisterial *Truth and Method* (1960) is an indispensable resource. As Gadamer there points out,

hermeneutics has followed a complex trajectory and undergone profound transformations in its history: starting from limited, closely circumscribed beginnings it evolved over time until, in the end, it came to coincide with human life experience as such. In its infancy, hermeneutics was basically a specialized art or method employed in the fields of theology, classical philology, and jurisprudence. While theologians needed to decipher the meaning of scriptures which were removed in time and place, philologists faced the task of capturing the meaning of classical texts in modern idioms; jurists, finally, needed to detect the significance of classical law books in post-classical (say Germanic) societies. At the onset of the modern age, these endeavors were continued and refined by Renaissance humanism and Protestant theology, with scholars in both fields seeking to distill a more original meaning from later corruptions or deformations. A major innovation or change of focus occurred in the Romantic era and especially in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Departing from the earlier use, the latter extended the role of hermeneutics to all literary expressions, while also ‘psychologizing’ the methodology. The task of interpretation, in his view, was to discern the ‘author’s mind’ (*mens auctoris*) or the inner spirit or inspiration animating a given work.

This approach was further broadened and given a more robust academic anchorage by the ‘Historical School’ of the nineteenth century whose chief spokesman was Wilhelm Dilthey. For Dilthey, all of human history had to be approached hermeneutically, which means: an effort had to be made—a scholarly disciplined effort—to decipher the meaning of historical events or activities by examining the motivating intentions of historical actors. In Gadamer’s words: It was ‘for the first time Dilthey who consciously took up Romantic hermeneutics and expanded it into a historical method—indeed into an epistemology of the human sciences.’ For Dilthey, the point was not just that historical sources are encountered as texts, but that ‘historical reality as such is a text in need of understanding.’ In this manner, the enterprise of hermeneutics was ‘transposed to the study of history’; differently put: ‘hermeneutics emerged as the basis of the study of history’—which is a field of vast dimensions.<sup>1</sup> Although broadening and transforming the role of interpretation, however, Dilthey and the Historical School still remained hostage to certain premises which restricted its scope. The main premises obstructing a full flowering were of an epistemological kind: the aspiration of historical study to be recognized as a ‘science’ on par with the natural sciences. In trying to grasp history scientifically, the historian had to adopt a superior or neutral standpoint, extricating himself/herself from the flow of historical experience. Critiquing this approach, Gadamer observes that historical experience cannot be reduced to a ‘procedure’ or have the ‘anonymity of a method.’ Despite Dilthey’s best intentions, the ‘epistemological pull of Cartesianism’ proved in the end too strong, preventing him from ‘integrating into his thought the historicity of historical experience itself.’<sup>2</sup>

For Gadamer, the most important event in recent times—the event which basically reshaped the role of hermeneutics—was the shift from epistemology to ontology, a shift associated with the name of Martin Heidegger. What was involved in this shift was the transformation of interpretive understanding from a methodology tailored

for academic disciplines into a mode of human existence, of human being-in-the-world. ‘Under the rubric of a “hermeneutics of facticity,”’ Gadamer states, Heidegger opposed himself not only to the ambitions of historical science, but also to the restrictive ‘eidetic phenomenology of Husserl, with its distinction between fact and essence.’ In contrast to the latter, ‘the contingent and underivable “facticity” of existence or *Dasein*—and not the epistemic *cogito* as warrant of essential universality—came to represent the ontological yardstick of phenomenological questioning.’ For Heidegger, interpretive or hermeneutical understanding was not the province of specialized human disciplines (nor of a transcendently construed phenomenology) but rather a constitutive feature of every human being inserted both in the world and in the movement of temporality. With his thesis that ‘being itself is time,’ Gadamer comments, Heidegger called into question the ‘basic subjectivism of modern philosophy’, as well as the entire ‘frame of reference of modern metaphysics which tended to define being as what is present.’ At the same time, by focusing on the ‘understanding character’ of human *Dasein*, Heideggerian ontology departed from and overcame the ‘historicist’ dilemmas of the Historical School. In comparison with Dilthey, understanding is no longer a mere ‘methodological concept’; rather, it pinpoints the ‘original mode of being of human life itself.’ Through his ‘analytic of *Dasein*,’ in particular, Heidegger revealed ‘the projective (not merely present-ist) character of all understanding and conceived the act of understanding itself as a movement of transcendence, of moving beyond the existent (state of affairs).’<sup>3</sup>

From Heidegger’s perspective, interpretive understanding thus is not so much a methodology as rather a happening or temporal event—a happening with possibly transformative consequences for the interpreter. In the case of textual exegesis, for instance, the text may (and usually does) prove initially recalcitrant to immediate access. In the attempt to gain leverage, the reader does not approach the text with a ‘blank slate’ (*tabula rasa*) which would permit passive appropriation; rather, to gain entry, the reader has to apply to the text a tentative frame of reference—what Heidegger calls a ‘pre-understanding’ (*Vorurteil*) or a ‘projected meaning’ (*Vorentwurf*). As Gadamer describes the process: ‘Whoever is trying to understand a text, always engages in projecting (*Entwerfen*): he/she projects a meaning for the text as soon as some initial meaning comes to the fore. That initial meaning, however, emerges only because the text is read with certain expectations regarding its meaning.’ Yet, when approached with this ‘fore-meaning’ or pre-understanding, the text may refuse to yield and prove resistant. This resistance, in turn, may force the reader to revise his/her initial assumptions or presumptions—a revision which can prove wrenching or painful. In revising initial assumptions, the reader is not required to abandon all critical reservations or queries; rather, what is demanded is a certain openness to the issues raised in the text and to the possibility that prior assumptions may have been wrong or lopsided. In Gadamer’s words again: When reading a text, ‘we are not expected to jettison all our “fore-meanings” concerning its content. All that is asked is that we remain open to the intrinsic lesson of the text (or of another person).’ Hence, he adds, ‘a person trying to understand a text must be prepared to be told something by the text. That is why a hermeneutically trained

person must be, from the start, sensitive and receptive to the text's alterity or difference (*Andersheit*).<sup>4</sup>

These comments bring into view a crucial aspect of hermeneutics as conceived by Heidegger and Gadamer: the dialogical and circular character of understanding. Gadamer, in particular, is famous for his insistence on the close linkage and even convergence of dialog and hermeneutical understanding. As we read in *Truth and Method*: 'That a historical text is made the object of exegesis means that it puts a question to the interpreter. Hence, interpretation always relates essentially to the question that is posed to the reader.' But every question solicits a response—and thus leads into the thick of dialog. A genuine dialog, Gadamer observes, has necessarily the 'structure of question and response.' To conduct such a dialog requires that the participants are 'attentive to each other' and do not 'talk past each other.' Above all, dialog demands a certain modesty and non-aggressiveness, a willingness to listen and a refusal to try to 'overpower the other partner.' By placing at the center the 'weight' of the respective opinions, dialog is a mode of 'experimental testing' (*Erproben*) or inquiry; its fruit is not the triumph of one opinion over another, but, rather a mutual learning process in the course of which partners gain a better understanding of both the subject matter and themselves. This feature leads Gadamer to a poignant formulation of the relation between dialog and hermeneutics, a formulation which is quintessential for his entire approach:

What characterizes a dialogue . . . is precisely this: that—in the process of question and answer, in giving and taking, talking at cross purposes and coming to an agreement—dialogical discourse performs that communication of meaning which, with respect to the written tradition, is the task of hermeneutics. Hence, it is more than a metaphor: it is a recollection of what is originally at stake when hermeneutical inquiry is seen as entering into dialogue with a text.<sup>5</sup>

Dialoguing with a text, just as dialoguing with a human partner, is a difficult process fraught with many pitfalls and possible derailments. Occasionally, Gadamerian hermeneutics is accused of, or identified with, a facile consensualism, with a happy blending of views devoid of conflict. To some extent, his *Truth and Method* has encouraged this construal, especially through its notion of a 'fusion of horizons.' As we read at one point: understanding does not recognize limits but is always 'the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.'<sup>6</sup> Yet, at a closer (and more sympathetic) look, what is involved here is not so much a fusion in the sense of convergence but rather an unlimited openness to horizons—in such a manner that interpretive understanding can never be fully stabilized or completed. This aspect is admirably highlighted by Gadamer at another place when he speaks of the tensional character of all understanding—a tension deriving from the distance or difference between reader and text, between self and other, between present and past. 'Hermeneutics,' he writes, 'must start from the position that a person seeking to understand has a bond with whatever a transmitted text tries to say and thus is connected with the tradition from which the text speaks.' At the same time, however, hermeneutical inquiry is aware 'that this connection does not have the character of

an unquestioned, self-evident consensus (as would be the case in an unbroken stream of tradition).’ Hence, the tensional nature of all understanding. ‘Hermeneutical work,’ Gadamer adds pointedly, ‘is based on a polarity between familiarity and strangeness (*Fremdheit*)’—although this polarity should not be construed psychologically (with Schleiermacher), but ontologically. ‘Here is the tension: the play between strangeness and familiarity encountered in tradition is the mid-point between a distantiated object of history and membership in a living tradition. The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between.’<sup>7</sup>

This tensional character also affects the circular quality of interpretation—what is called the ‘hermeneutical circle.’ As one should note, this circle is not a closed sphere permitting only an empty turning ‘round and round,’ but an open circle fostering a learning process or a steady amelioration and transformation of understanding. This, in any event, is the construal which was favored by Heidegger. In approaching a text, the reader projects a ‘fore-meaning’ of the whole—which, however, suffers shipwreck because parts or portions of the text refuse to be integrated. Hence, a new holistic projection is needed—triggering an ongoing adjustment of parts and whole. In Gadamer’s description, it was Heidegger who gave to the circle an existential-ontological significance deriving from the constitutive role of understanding for human *Dasein*. Given this constitutive role, the circle for Heidegger cannot achieve closure—although it points toward an infinite completion. In Gadamer’s words: ‘The circle of whole and part is not dissolved (or terminated) in genuine understanding but, on the contrary, is most fully realized.’ Seen in this light, the circle is not ‘formal in nature’ but ontological; it is ‘neither subjective nor objective’ but rather pinpoints understanding as ‘the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter.’ The anticipation of meaning that governs the interpreter’s understanding of a text is ‘not an act of subjectivity’ but proceeds from ‘the commonality linking us with the tradition.’ But this commonality, Gadamer adds, is never finished but in ‘a constant process of formation (*Bildung*).’<sup>8</sup>

## HERMENEUTICS AND PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Hermeneutics is not, and has never been, a purely abstract theory, but is closely linked with lived experience and human conduct. This linkage has been intensified in recent times with the shift from methodology to ontology, when understanding comes to be seen as part and parcel of our living and being-in-the-world. Yet, even in earlier times, the linkage was never entirely lacking. As we read in *Truth and Method*, an integral part of traditional hermeneutics was the so-called ‘*subtilitas applicandi*,’ the ability to bring the meaning of a text to bear on a given situation. Thus, it was commonly assumed that a proper understanding of textual meaning involved ‘something like applying the text’ to the situation of the interpreter and reader, that is, to relate that meaning to practical human conduct. Gadamer gives the prominent examples of scriptural and legal or judicial interpretation. Clearly, scriptural exegesis was not just meant to increase theological knowledge but to

provide a resource for pastoral preaching which, in turn, was designed to mold the lives of the faithful. The same connection prevailed (and prevails) in judicial interpretation where the judge is asked to discern the relevance of a legal norm in the particular situation or context. 'A law,' Gadamer comments, 'does not just exist as an historical object or entity, but needs to be concretized in its legal validity by being interpreted.' Similarly, the gospel does not exist simply as an edifying historical document, but needs to be approached 'in such a way as to disclose its message of salvation.' Hence, in order to be properly grasped, a given text—whether scriptural or legal—needs to be understood 'at every moment, in every concrete situation, in a new and different way.' As a consequence, 'hermeneutical understanding always involves a mode of application.'<sup>9</sup>

As indicated before, this linkage with application or practical conduct is greatly intensified in Heidegger's ontological approach. Construed as an interpretive creature, human *Dasein* now is seen to conduct his/her entire life under hermeneutical auspices. From the angle of Heidegger's 'hermeneutics of facticity,' Gadamer writes, understanding is no longer a method through which an inquiring consciousness targets a given object; rather, it means being situated in a temporal happening, in an ongoing 'process of tradition' (*Überlieferungsgeschehen*). In fact, 'understanding proves to be itself a lived happening', and as such a mode of human conduct—a conduct which is neither predetermined by fixed rules (presumably beyond interpretation) nor purely whimsical or arbitrary. In this context, to illustrate the sense of 'happening,' Gadamer invokes the tradition of Aristotle, and especially the legacy of Aristotelian ethics which is neither an ethics of purely cognitive principles (like Kantian morality) nor of irrational will power (like 'emotivism'), but an ethics of concretely lived *praxis*. On the level of practical application, he writes, Aristotle's ethical analysis offers 'a kind of model of the problems of hermeneutics.' As in the case of the practice of virtues, hermeneutical application is not merely 'an occasional feature or subsequent addition' to the process of understanding, but rather permeates this process from beginning to end. As in ethical *praxis*, application does not just consist in relating a pre-given general principle to a particular case; rather, the interpreter has to make sense of his/her situation in light of the broader 'process of tradition' (comprising both that situation and the text). Hence, in order to understand a text and its general teaching, the interpreter 'must not try to disregard his/her particular hermeneutical situation,' but rather must 'correlate that text with this situation if understanding is going to be possible at all.'<sup>10</sup>

Moving beyond the strictly ethical dimension, *Truth and Method* also comments on some social and political implications of hermeneutical 'application' or *praxis*. As Gadamer indicates, such application cannot really happen in a society or political regime where norms or rules of conduct are entirely static and exempt from further interpretation, that is, where there is a ban on creative exegesis and transformation. At the same time, hermeneutics cannot flourish in a society or regime dominated by arbitrary power or a Hobbesian sovereign. In Gadamer's words, hermeneutics presupposes a dialogical give-and-take occurring in a continuity of tradition: 'Where this is not the case—for example, in an absolutist state where the will of the absolute



ruler is above the law—hermeneutics cannot exist, since the ruler can abrogate the rules of interpretation.’ In such a situation, the arbitrary will of the ruler (who is *lege solutus* or not bound by any law) can render decisions without regard for the law and hence without the effort of interpretation. Hermeneutics, for Gadamer, hence presupposes a constitutional regime (perhaps a democratic constitutional order) which does not rely on arbitrary decisions or wilful domination and which makes room for the hermeneutical balancing of ‘whole and parts’ and the dialogical inquiry into the conditions of social justice and fairness. ‘It is part of a properly constituted legal order,’ he writes, ‘that the decision of a judge (as well as the policy of rulers) does not proceed from an arbitrary and unpredictable fiat, but rather from a just weighing up of the whole’ or the balancing of all elements involved in a situation. The possible democratic connotations of this outlook are evident when Gadamer adds that ‘anyone (that is, any citizen) is capable of undertaking this just weighing up, provided she has immersed herself in the concrete particular situation’ as seen in a broader social context.<sup>11</sup>

Gadamer’s comments on application and practical conduct are not limited to *Truth and Method*. Some 10 years later, he published an essay specifically focused on the relation between hermeneutics and practical philosophy. As the essay emphasizes, hermeneutics should not be viewed simply as an abstract theory, but always implies or implicates a reference to practical conduct. Since its earliest beginnings, hermeneutical inquiry has always claimed ‘that its reflection on the possibilities, rules and means of interpretation is somehow directly useful or advantageous for lived *praxis*.’ For this reason, he notes, interpretation has often been treated as an art form or artistic skill (*Kunstlehre*) rather than a routine technique. As in the earlier volume, the essay traces the development of hermeneutics from its roots in scriptural and juridical interpretation to the shifts occasioned by Renaissance humanism, Reformation, and post-revolutionary Romanticism and historicism. As before, the basic sea-change in the meaning of hermeneutics is attributed again to the work of Heidegger, to his break with the static (or presentist) metaphysics of the past, and his inscription of understanding into the lived, temporal experience of *Dasein*. ‘It was Heidegger’s great merit,’ we read, ‘to have broken through the aura of self-evidence of the Greek concept of “being”,’ as well as the presumed self-evidence of the modern concept of consciousness or ‘subjectivity’—thus paving the way for a new understanding of ‘being’ as a mode of temporal experience and practical conduct. In this context, Gadamer stresses the significance of Heidegger’s famous lecture on ‘What is Metaphysics?’—treating this lecture as an illustration of (what might be called) a hermeneutics of suspicion. By focusing on the elusive quality of the ‘being’ (the ‘is’) of metaphysics, he writes, the lecture queries ‘what metaphysics really denotes in contrast to what it claims to be.’ Understood in this manner, Heidegger’s query ‘acquires the force of a provocation and reveals itself as example of a new conception of interpretation.’<sup>12</sup>

By turning to ‘being’ as lived occurrence, Heidegger’s work forcefully discloses the intimate linkage between understanding and *praxis* (which had always been implicit in the hermeneutical tradition). As in *Truth and Method*, Heideggerian ontology is

correlated with Aristotle's notion of 'practical philosophy' (though, minus the latter's metaphysics of 'substances'). In Gadamer's account, *praxis* and practical philosophy in the Aristotelian tradition are not the antithesis to 'theory' or theoretical thought, but rather intimate a thoughtful conduct. 'The semantic field in which the word and concept '*praxis*' have their proper place,' he writes, 'is not primarily defined by its opposition to theory or as the mere application of a (given) theory.' Rather, *praxis* denotes 'the mode of conduct of living beings in the broadest sense.' Differently phrased: *praxis* means 'the actuation of life (*energeia*) of anything alive—anything that displays in some fashion life, a mode or conduct of life (*bios*).' To be sure, by contrast to animal behavior, human life conduct is distinguished by a certain measure of deliberation and the employment of language and symbols. The most important distinction, however, prevails between practical conduct and mere instrumental fabrication or technical production (*poiesis*, *techne*). In Gadamer's words: 'Practical philosophy is determined by the line drawn between the practical insight of a freely choosing person, on the one hand, and the acquired skill of an expert (which Aristotle names *techne*), on the other.' Hence, practical philosophy has to do 'not with readily learnable crafts and skills,' but rather 'with what is fitting for an individual as citizen and what constitutes his/her civic virtue (*arête*).' At this point, the connection between *praxis* and hermeneutics emerges clearly into view. To quote a crucial passage of the essay:

The knowledge that guides action is essentially called for by the concrete situations in which we need to choose the fitting response (*das Tunliche*)—and no skillful technique can spare us the needed deliberation and decision. As a result, practical philosophy seeking to cultivate this practical ability is neither theoretical science (in the style of mathematics) nor expert know-how (in the sense of mastering technical processes), but a knowledge of a special kind. (As in the case of the hermeneutical circle) this knowledge must arise from *praxis* and, though moving through various generalizations, must relate itself back to *praxis*.<sup>13</sup>

## HERMENEUTICS AND INTER-CULTURAL DIALOG

From Gadamer's perspective, hermeneutics is related not only to practical conduct in general, but also to such conduct in a given time and place. In our time of globalization, when different societies and cultures are pushed closer and closer together, hermeneutical understanding is bound to transcend local contexts and to acquire a cross-cultural or transnational significance. At this point, members of a given society or culture are called upon to interpret not only the modalities of their own tradition, but the complex lineaments of initially quite alien texts and life forms. To make headway in this endeavor, individuals and groups have to bring to the encounter their own 'fore-meanings' or pre-understandings and then expose them to correction or revision in an interactive (or dialogical) process of give-and-take. Gadamer has been keenly attentive to these cultural issues in some of his later writings, especially in a text on the 'Legacy of Europe' and the ongoing process of European unification. For Gadamer, Europe represents a model of that 'unity in

diversity' characteristic of hermeneutical dialog where, coming from distinctly different backgrounds, each partner seeks to discern the other's meaning. The deeper philosophical and hermeneutical significance of Europe, he observes, resides not in its presumed 'universality' but in its multicultural and multilingual composition, in its historical practice of 'cohabitation with otherness in a narrow space.' In our time, this cohabitation can provide a lesson for humanity at large, for an evolving ecumenical world culture. In his words: 'To live with the other, as the other of the other—this basic human task applies to the micro- as well as to the macro-level. Just as each of us learn to live with the other in the process of individual maturation, a similar learning process holds true for larger communities, for nations and states.'<sup>14</sup>

Just as in the case of hermeneutical dialog, the point of inter-cultural encounter is not to reach a bland consensus or uniformity of beliefs but to foster a progressive learning process involving possible transformation. For this to happen, local or indigenous traditions must be neither jettisoned nor congealed (or essentialized). As Gadamer points out, the role of local or indigenous traditions is a feature endemic to the 'hermeneutical circle' with its emphasis on fore-meanings or pre-judgments—which are seen as corrigible but *not* expendable starting points of understanding. In a similar fashion, participants in cross-cultural encounter are expected neither to erase themselves (in a vain attempt to 'go native') nor to appropriate and subjugate the other's difference; rather, the point is to achieve a shared appreciation and recognition of differences (what Heidegger used to call 'letting-be'). In Gadamer's words: 'Where the goal is not (unilateral) mastery or control, we are liable to experience the otherness of others precisely against the backdrop of our own pre-judgments. The highest and most elevated aim we can strive for in this context is to partake in the other, to share the other's alterity.' The stakes, in this encounter, are high, both for individual societies and for humanity at large. In fact, 'the future survival of humankind' (he says) may depend on the proper cultivation of cross-cultural understanding and dialog—more particularly on 'our readiness not to utilize the immense resources of power and technical efficiency (accumulated in some states), but to pause in front of the other's otherness—the otherness of nature, as well as that of historically grown cultures of peoples and countries.' If we are able to do the latter, a transformative and humanizing learning experience may result: for 'we may then learn to experience otherness and human others as the "other of ourselves" in order to partake in one another (*aneinander teilzugewinnen*).'<sup>15</sup>

As Gadamer leaves no doubt, his observations were not narrowly tailored to European integration but were relevant for broader global developments. Although initially triggered by western colonialism, social and political ferment now engulfs countries around the world. 'What we are witnessing,' he writes, 'is in truth a global process which has been unleashed by the end of colonialism and the emancipation of the former members' of European empires. The central issue today is no longer Europe but 'the cultural changes produced by the global economy and the worldwide network of communications.' In this situation, many societies today are engaged in the difficult search for a mode of life capable of reconciling 'their own traditions and the deeply rooted values of their life-world with western-style economic (and

technological) progress' or advancement; 'large segments of humanity' now are facing this agonizing dilemma.<sup>16</sup> In an interview with an Indian political thinker, conducted a few years before his death, Gadamer clearly pinpointed the global significance of hermeneutical understanding. 'The human solidarity that I envisage,' he stated at that point, 'is not a global uniformity but unity in diversity. We must learn to appreciate and tolerate pluralities, multiplicities, cultural differences.' As he frankly conceded, such appreciation is in short supply and actually undermined by the rampant power politics pursued by military-industrial complexes: 'The hegemony or unchallengeable power of any one single nation . . . is dangerous for humanity; it would go against human freedom.' Hence, he added, that unity in diversity which has been a European legacy must today become a global formula: it must be 'extended to the whole world—to include China, India, and also Muslim cultures. Every culture, every people has something distinctive to offer for the solidarity and well-being of humanity.'<sup>17</sup>

To flesh out and corroborate Gadamer's perspective, I want to invoke here the testimony of two thinkers friendly to his hermeneutics—the first directly, the second indirectly so. The first is the Canadian political philosopher Charles Taylor. Following in Gadamer's footsteps, Taylor in several of his writings has underscored the importance of hermeneutical interpretation both for philosophy as such and for the academic practice of the human and social sciences.<sup>18</sup> Moving beyond the confines of textual exegesis, Taylor also has ventured into the domain of inter-cultural understanding and dialog, concentrating in particular on the difference between the traditional western conception of selfhood and the Buddhist notion of 'no-self' or 'emptiness' of self (*anatta, sunyata*), together with the contrasting social imaginaries deriving from this difference.<sup>19</sup> Significantly, Taylor has also tackled one of the persistent conundrums or charges leveled against hermeneutics: the charge that 'understanding everything means condoning everything,' such that hermeneutics is left devoid of critical ethical standards. As he has pointed out—in an essay specifically dealing with intersubjective and inter-cultural 'recognition'—understanding others or another culture does not always entail acceptance. What another culture has in its favor is only a 'presumption of worth'—a presumption calling for attentive study, but capable of being dislodged or defeated through contestation. To be sure, once hermeneutical understanding is seen not as a neutral occurrence, but—with Gadamer and Aristotle—as an ethical *praxis*, understanding is already inhabited by an ethical criterion (and does not need to be supplemented by borrowings from 'critical theory,' as Paul Ricoeur has sometimes intimated).<sup>20</sup>

The other thinker more indirectly or distantly related to hermeneutics is John Dewey—sometimes called 'America's philosopher of democracy.' In large measure, Dewey's so-called 'pragmatism' can actually be seen as a practical philosophy displaying distinct affinities with Gadamerian hermeneutics. A central parallel resides in the refusal to divorce thinking from doing, in the effort to link theory and *praxis* under the rubric of lived experience. Together with Gadamer (and Heidegger), Dewey rejected the legacy of Cartesian rationalism focused on the *cogito*, together with its corollary, the 'spectator theory of knowledge' which exiles the observer from

the context of human being-in-the-world. In opposing that theory, he did not opt for a crude empiricism or positivism, but rather insisted that sense data or sensory phenomena are perceived in a semantic frame of significance—a frame provided by language and symbolization (and hence in need of interpretation). Together with Gadamer (and again Heidegger), Dewey did not subscribe to a static metaphysics of essences, but rather preferred a dynamic ontology in which being and temporality converge in an ongoing process of disclosure of possibilities. Most importantly, human life for Dewey was not a solitary venture, but basically formed in the crucible of interhuman ‘interactions’ or ‘transactions’—a crucible closely connected with communication, dialog, and contestation. As in the case of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, social interactions for Dewey were a mode of *praxis* (in the Aristotelian sense) and as such imbued with ethical connotations. This aspect is illustrated in his presentation of society as an ethical community, and especially, in his depiction of democracy as the ‘idea’ or ‘ideal’ of community life—an idea constantly in the process of improvement or perfection.<sup>21</sup>

In view of my concern here with inter-cultural understanding, there is another parallel between the two thinkers which deserves to be highlighted. Dewey was at no point a fervent nationalist nor a supporter of rigid friend–enemy distinctions (as formulated by Carl Schmitt). This aspect is particularly evident in his essay on ‘Nationalizing Education,’ written during a time of war. The essay sharply distinguishes between a benign and a destructive sense of nationalism or patriotism. Too often, he writes, the development of a sense of national unity has been ‘accompanied by dislike, by hostility, to all without.’ What has happened is that ‘skillful politicians and other self-seekers’ have known how ‘to play cleverly upon patriotism and upon ignorance of other peoples, to identify nationalism with latent hatred of other nations.’ Especially during war time, many influential people ‘attempt to foster the growth of an inclusive nationalism by appeal to our fears, our suspicious, our jealousies and our latent hatreds.’ Such people like to measure patriotism by ‘our readiness to meet other nations in destructive war rather than our fitness to cooperate with them in constructive tasks of peace.’

By contrast to this outlook, Dewey upholds the prospect of a global ecumenism which does not erase local or national loyalties, but uses them as a springboard for inter-cultural cooperation. ‘We are faced,’ he states, ‘by the difficulty of developing the good aspect of nationalism without its evil side: of developing a nationalism which is the friend and not the foe of internationalism’—which is a matter ‘of ideas, of emotions, of intellectual and moral dispositions.’<sup>22</sup> As it seems to me, this prospect is not far removed from, and even coincides with, Gadamer’s vision of a global ‘unity in diversity’—a unity not imposed by ‘one single nation’—and his plea that ‘the future survival of humankind’ may depend on our willingness to engage dialogically with others on both the personal level and the level of larger human communities and cultures.

## **MERLEAU-PONTY AND INTERCORPOREAL ENGAGEMENT**

By way of further elaboration, I want to turn to another dialogical and cross-cultural thinker roughly of Gadamer's generation: the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. What renders Merleau-Ponty's work particularly important in the present context is his opposition to an idealistic consensualism and his insistence on the linkage between dialog and embodiment. As he continuously emphasized, dialog is not simply a cerebral process or an abstract 'meeting of minds' but rather involves a concrete existential and bodily engagement among participants. This point is made particularly forcefully in his essay titled 'Dialogue and the Perception of the Other,' contained in his book *The Prose of the World* (assembled posthumously by his friend Claude Lefort). Distinguishing between a purely abstract, logical algorithm, and a concrete encounter between human beings, Merleau-Ponty states boldly: 'Alongside the analytic truth espoused by the algorithm and leaving aside the possibility of the algorithm's being detached from the thinking life in which it is born, we affirm a truth of transparency, recovery, and recollection in which we participate—not insofar as we think *the same thing* but insofar as we are, each in his own way, moved and touched by it.' This being 'moved and touched' in an encounter cannot and should not be understood as a simple intellectual convergence but rather as a kind of mutual embroilment and trespass: 'the trespass of oneself upon the other and of the other upon me.'<sup>23</sup>

In his essay, Merleau-Ponty first turns to the 'silent relationship with the other,' as a prolog to the understanding of speech. In opposition to many writers on 'intersubjectivity,' he considers it 'not sufficiently noted that the other is never directly present face to face.' In effect, the interlocutor or adversary is 'never quite localized: his voice, his gesticulations, his twitches, are only symptoms, a sort of stage effect, a ceremony.' Their producer is 'so well masked that I am quite surprised when my own responses carry over.' What comes to the fore is that the other's 'self' is not pre-constituted and exists neither before nor somehow behind the voice but rather emerges in the encounter itself, in the inchoate relationship being forged. 'The other, in my eyes,' Merleau-Ponty writes, 'is always on the margin of what I see and hear, he is this side of me, he is beside or behind me, but he is not in that place which my look flattens and empties of any "interior".' This insight leads him to one of his stunning formulations which are a trademark of his existential phenomenology:

Myself and the other are like two *nearly* concentric circles which can be distinguished only by a slight and mysterious slippage. This alliance is perhaps what will enable us to understand the relation to the other that is inconceivable if I try to approach him directly, like a sheer cliff.<sup>24</sup>

In the encounter with another human being, the other is both my partner or accomplice and different from or non-absorbable by me. 'I give birth,' Merleau-Ponty writes; 'this other is made from my flesh and blood and yet is no longer me. How is that possible?' The solution to the riddle must be found in the realization that the difference I encounter is not only external but internal, that somehow I am myself

inhabited by difference. ‘There is,’ we read, ‘a *myself which is other*, which dwells elsewhere and deprives me of my central location.’ At this point, the roles of the seeing subject and what is seen are ‘exchanged and reversed.’ For Merleau-Ponty, the central issue is to understand ‘how I can make myself into two, how I can decenter myself’ or become decentered—how the experience of the other is always at the same time ‘a response to myself.’ Like the other human being, the self is neither a compact entity or thing; nor is it a self-transparent mind (or *cogito*). From this single, there can neither be a fixed or stable human ‘nature’ nor a self-contained ‘identity.’ In lieu of the atomistic units found in an imaginary ‘state of nature,’ all that one finds is a fluid cohabitation in a dwelling place to which none of the partners has privileged access or the unfailing pass-key: ‘It is in the very depths of myself that this strange articulation with the other is fashioned. The mystery of the other is nothing but the mystery of myself.’ What is intimated here is an identity constituted by non-coincidence, but unable to escape elsewhere (outside the world).<sup>25</sup>

Ultimately, the dwelling place of which Merleau-Ponty speaks is neither an individual, nor even a collective ‘project,’ but rather a shared experience where seeing and being seen, speaking and being heard come together. It is the very bodily experience, he says, that marks ‘my hold on the world’ and makes me capable of perceiving another imprinted with the same ‘hold’ or bond. ‘As long as it adheres to my body like the tunic of Nessus,’ he continues in another vintage formulation, ‘the world exists not only for me, but for everyone who makes gestures toward it. There is (perhaps not a universality of reason but) a universality of feeling or sensation—and it is upon this that our relationship rests, the generalization of my body, the perception of the other.’ Thus, the notion of an interpersonal (and inter-cultural) relation for Merleau-Ponty is incomplete or inadequate as long as it does not take account of our embodiment or ‘intercorporeality.’ This means that there would not be others for me ‘if I did not have a body, and if they had no body through which they could slip into my field (or world), multiplying it from within, and oriented to the same world as I.’ To be sure, the notion of a ‘same world’ here does not mean a uniform or identical world but only a plural and loosely shared world, because everyone opens onto it in different ways: ‘A field tends of itself to multiply, because it is the opening through which, as a body, I am “exposed” to the world.’<sup>26</sup>

At this point, Merleau-Ponty turns (or returns) to language, and first of all to the ‘silent language’ of sensations and bodily interactions. The problem of understanding words is no greater or lesser than the task of understanding ‘how the movements of a body patterned into gestures or actions can reach us,’ or ‘how we are able to find in these spectacles anything other than what we have put into them.’ The solution, for Merleau-Ponty (as for Heidegger), consists in the bracketing of a constituting ego, of a self-contained mind or subjectivity. What we have to grasp, he notes, is that ‘our sensibility to the world, our synchronized relationship to it—that is, our body, the thesis underlying all our experiences—removes from our existence the density of an absolute and singular act, making a transferable signification of our “corporeality,” and creating a “common situation”.’ The same process operates in speech and especially in reciprocal speech or dialog. With regard to ‘the particular gesture of

speech,' we read, 'the solution lies in recognizing that, in the experience of dialog, the other's speech manages to reach us in our significations, and that our words, as the replies attest, reach in him his significations.' This mutual encroachment testifies to the power of language which is in principle inexhaustible, and also to our participation in a shared 'cultural world'—or at least our effort to foster communication across and beyond sedimented cultural worlds. In this sense, the language we speak is something like a dispersed or 'anonymous corporeality' which we share across boundaries.<sup>27</sup>

In this connection, Merleau-Ponty introduces a thought which points beyond neutral communication in the direction of ethical and political practice. The 'expressive' operation, and speech in particular, he states, establishes a 'common situation' which is no longer merely a juxtaposition or a relationship of knowing but 'a community of *doing*.' At this point, the common world fostered by language involves not only a sharing of ideas or points of view, but a sharing of practices—which includes a willingness to learn about unfamiliar practices, rituals, rites, and customs. Willingness to learn about such practices, in turn, involves a form of existential participation or engagement: a participation in past memories, present agonies, and future hopes and aspirations. Clearly, such participation moves beyond the level of narrow self-interest and idle curiosity, proceeding in the direction of ethical well-being and a shared concern with the 'good life.' In this respect, Merleau-Ponty joins Gadamer, as well as Taylor and Dewey, in the endeavor to foster a 'great community' without hegemony, exploitation, and oppression—a community which today has to be dialogically cultivated on a global level. To recall the statement made by Gadamer in his interview with the Indian colleague: 'The human solidarity that I envisage is not a global uniformity but unity in diversity. We must learn to appreciate and tolerate pluralities, multiplicities, cultural differences.' To this one might add a statement by Merleau-Ponty about cross-cultural learning, in an essay dealing with the emerging global space-time matrix in our period:

Civilizations lacking our philosophical and economic equipment take on an instructive value. It is not a matter of going in search of truth or salvation in what falls short of (Western) science or philosophical awareness, nor of dragging chunks of mythology as such into our thinking, but of acquiring . . . a sense of the theoretical and practical problems *our* institutions are faced with, and of rediscovering the existential field they were born in and that their long success has led us to forget. The Orient's 'childishness' has something to teach us, if it were nothing more than the narrowness of our 'adult' ideas.<sup>28</sup>

## NOTES

1. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 198–9 (translation slightly altered).
2. *Ibid.*, 241.
3. *Ibid.*, 254, 257, 259–60.
4. *Ibid.*, 267–9.



5. Ibid., 367–70.
6. Ibid., 306.
7. Ibid., 295. Compare on this point also Fred Dallmayr, ‘Hermeneutics and Deconstruction: Gadamer and Derrida in Dialogue’, in Dallmayr, *Critical Encounters: Between Philosophy and Politics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 130–58; and Fred Dallmayr, ‘Self and Other: Gadamer and the Hermeneutics of Difference’, *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 5 (1993): 101–24.
8. Gadamer, ‘*Truth and Method*’, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 293. Continuing this line of thought, Gadamer (293–4) perceives in hermeneutical understanding an anticipation or ‘fore-conception of completeness’ (*Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit*) aiming at the disclosure of ‘truth’ (and hence bypassing any kind of relativism).
9. Gadamer, ‘*Truth and Method*’, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 307–9.
10. Ibid., 309, 324.
11. Ibid., 329.
12. Gadamer, ‘Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy’ (1972), in *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 93, 101–2.
13. Ibid., 90–2. The same volume also contains Gadamer’s important essay ‘What is Practice [*Praxis*]? The Conditions of Social Reason’ (1974), 69–87. Although perhaps unduly sidelining Heidegger’s influence, Richard Bernstein is surely correct in saying that Gadamer’s hermeneutics stands firmly in ‘the tradition of practical philosophy that has its sources in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*’ where understanding takes the ‘form of *phronesis*.’ See Bernstein ‘*Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*’ (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), xiv–v.
14. Gadamer, ‘*Das Erbe Europas: Beiträge*’ (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989), 28–31. As he adds: ‘And here it may be one of the special advantages of Europe that—more than elsewhere—her inhabitants have been able or were compelled to learn how to live with others, even if the others are very different.’
15. Ibid., 31–4.
16. Ibid., 35, 46–8.
17. Thomas Pantham, ‘Some Dimensions of the Universality of Philosophical Hermeneutics: A Conversation with Hans-Georg Gadamer’, *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, 9 (1992): 132.
18. See, e.g., Charles Taylor, ‘Gadamer on the Human Sciences’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 126–42; and Taylor, ed., ‘Interpretation and the Sciences of Man’, in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15–57.
19. Charles Taylor, ‘Conditions of an Unforced Consensus on Human Rights’, in *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*, ed. Joanne R. Bauer and Daniel A. Bell (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 124–44.
20. Charles Taylor, ‘The Politics of Recognition’, in *Multiculturalism and “The Politics of Recognition”*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 66–8, 72–3. Compare also Paul Ricoeur, ‘Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology’, in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed., trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 63–100.
21. See in this respect especially John Dewey, ‘Search for the Great Community’ from *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 2: 325–7. Compare also David Foot, ‘*John Dewey: America’s Philosopher of Democracy*’ (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

22. John Dewey, 'Nationalizing Education' (1916), in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899–1924* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975), 10: 202–4.
23. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Dialogue and the Perception of the Other', in *The Prose of the World*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 133.
24. *Ibid.*, 133–4.
25. *Ibid.*, 134–5. On the issue of identity and non-coincidence compare the exemplary study by Bhikhu Parekh, *A New Politics of Identity: Political Principles for an Interdependent World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
26. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Dialogue and the Perception of the Other', in *The Prose of the World*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 137–8. As he adds (p. 139): 'We are trying to awaken a carnal relation to the world and the other that is not an accident intruding from outside upon a pure cognitive subject . . . or a "content" of experience among many others but our first insertion into the world and into truth.' As should be clear, 'truth' here refers to a 'disclosive' truth, not a propositional truth. On this distinction compare Nikolas Kompridis, *Disclosure and Critique: Critical Theory Between Past and Future* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006); and also Fred Dallmayr, *Between Freiburg and Frankfurt: Toward a Critical Ontology* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991).
27. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Dialogue and the Perception of the Other', in *The Prose of the World*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 139–40.
28. *Ibid.*, 140–1; and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Everywhere and Nowhere', in Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 139. Compare also John Dewey, 'Search for the Great Community', in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927; reprinted, Athens: Ohio University Press, 1954), 143–84.