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From Deconstruction to Rehabilitation: Heidegger, Gadamer, and Modernity

David Liakos

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FROM DECONSTRUCTION TO REHABILITATION:
HEIDEGGER, GADAMER, AND MODERNITY

by

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B.A., Philosophy, Connecticut College, 2012
M.A., Philosophy, University of New Mexico, 2017

DISSERTATION

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To Genevieve and Francis J. McNamara, and Kathleen and Gregory Liakos

“The pleasure of abiding. The pleasure of insistence, of persistence. The pleasure of obligation, the pleasure of dependency. The pleasures of ordinary devotion. The pleasure of recognizing that one may have to undergo the same realizations, write the same notes in the margin, return to the same themes in one’s work, relearn the same emotional truths, write the same book over and over again—not because one is stupid or obstinate or incapable of change, but because such revisitations constitute a life.”

— Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 112

“The greater part of what we have is not a burden to be carried or an incubus to be thrown off, but an inheritance to be enjoyed.”

— Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 113

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In one of his reflections on the poet, Gadamer quotes Hölderlin's moving expression of thankful gratitude before the expanse of the divine and of nature: "Who wants to thank before he receives, / And give an answer, before he has heard?" (quoted in EPH 106/GW9 242) As a good Gadamerian, I believe that the most essential part of what we receive and hear is the past that shapes us and that provides us with our point of orientation. My own past has been shaped first of all by my family, and now, in submitting my dissertation, it is time for me to thank them. I dedicate this dissertation, then, to my grandparents, Genevieve and Francis J. McNamara, and to my parents, Kathleen and Gregory Liakos. Their love, support, and encouragement means more to me than words can say, and without them, I could not have written this dissertation. The same goes for my wonderful sister, Madeline Liakos, who has been here the whole way.

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I hope this project offers what Gadamer calls a *fusion of horizons*—on which more later—with all these family members, teachers, and friends.

I have read portions and drafts of this dissertation to audiences at meetings of the North American Society for Philosophical Hermeneutics, the North Texas Philosophical Association, and the Southwest Seminar in Continental Philosophy. Part of Chapter 2 is forthcoming in *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy*.

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Abstract

This dissertation is a study of *the problem of modernity*, formulated as the following multivalent question: How should we understand the scope, character, and limitations of our historical age? The study approaches this question from the point of view of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. We will, first, clarify how Heidegger and Gadamer think about modernity, thereby shedding light on their widely misunderstood intellectual relationship; and, next, uncover and defend a distinctively Gadamerian response to modernity as a viable argument, and as potentially more coherent and hopeful than Heidegger's answer to the problem of the modern age.

In the first part, I present my reading of how these figures think about modernity. I outline Heidegger's deconstruction of the modern age, that is, his main critique of modernity and his account of the movement into a postmodern future. Next, I motivate a contrast between Heidegger's vision of modernity and Gadamer's. Contrary to numerous misreadings, Gadamer proceeds along his own path of thinking, one that crucially begins with Heidegger but goes its own direction by advancing past the shortcomings of Heidegger's thinking of modernity.

The next part outlines my interpretation of Gadamer's post-Heideggerian response to the modern age, arguing that he accomplishes this task by rediscovering what

remains most true and meaningful in the guiding metaphors of the modern age, while criticizing the pernicious elements of modernity's bequest to the present. First, I reconstruct and defend Gadamer's rehabilitation of modernity's guiding epistemic metaphors, namely, transcendental thought, humanism, experience, objectivity, and curiosity, against the backdrop of his critique of other elements of modernity's epistemic regimes. Next, I make the same type of argument with regard to guiding ocular metaphors of infinity, perspective, and mirroring.

A speculative Conclusion, on the political implications of Gadamer's differences from Heidegger, suggests that the Gadamerian rehabilitation of modernity successfully engenders a more genuinely hopeful response to modernity than Heidegger provides. This short Conclusion again makes the case for Gadamer's appreciable advancement beyond Heidegger.

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Introduction: From Modernity to Postmodernity and Back Again

This dissertation is a study of *the problem of modernity*, which I formulate in terms of this multivalent question: How should we understand the character, scope, and ultimately the limitations of our historical age? From the point of view of the two thinkers who will provide us with our point of orientation, namely, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), the modern age, which traces the germs of its origin to the Italian Renaissance and coalesces into a coherent historical epoch by the Scientific Revolution in the seventeenth century, is marked above all by its faith in scientific and objectifying rationality. In this dissertation, I aim, first, to clarify how Heidegger and Gadamer think about modernity, thereby shedding hermeneutical light on their widely misunderstood intellectual relationship through the lens of this controversial philosophical problem. Then, I shall uncover and defend a distinctively Gadamerian response to modernity as an independent and viable argument worthy of attention, and as potentially more coherent and hopeful than Heidegger's better-known answer to the problem of the modern age. Hence, in addition to being a study of the problem of modernity, this dissertation functions also as an exegetical engagement with the thinking of Heidegger and Gadamer, clarifying how Gadamer's thought stands in relation to that of his teacher, and ultimately demonstrating how, precisely, Gadamer advanced beyond Heidegger's thinking. In this Introduction, I shall explain what makes modernity a significant philosophical question in §0.1, as well as how the thinking of Heidegger and Gadamer is of important relevance for this problem in §0.2. Finally, I will provide in §0.3 an intimation of the structure and overall argument of the rest of this dissertation.

§0.1: The problem of the modern age

It may sound surprising, and even offensive to some ears, to refer to modernity as distinctively problematic. Do we not prize, for example, the miracles of modern medicine? Does it not count as an insult to describe something as medieval, and thereby obsolete, regressive, and not up to contemporary standards? For most of us today, the modern age connotes self-evidently beneficial economic development, material progress, and technological advancement. But for many writers, these undeniable features of modernity also bring darker and more sinister, if not also less definable, phenomena in their wake. In 1948, for example, W.H. Auden startlingly described ours as *The Age of Anxiety*, exclaiming: “The modern world...how much restlessness, envy, and self-contempt it causes.”¹ Auden poetically depicts lives desperately in search of meaning and significance in an indifferent society. Speaking in a different idiom and to another set of intellectual concerns, but ultimately anticipating Auden’s diagnosis, Edmund Husserl in 1936 characterized modernity as suffering from what he called *The Crisis of European Sciences*. The crisis of European modernity from Husserl’s perspective, as for Heidegger and Gadamer, meant the alienation of a mathematically flattening scientific description of reality from the phenomenally and subjectively felt world of human experience: “The natural science of the modern period, establishing itself as physics, has its roots in the consistent abstraction through which it wants to see, in the lifeworld, only corporeity.”² Through the lens of Heidegger and Gadamer, we will flesh out this critique of modern science with greater detail and precision in subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

¹ *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue*, 12.

² *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 227.

In their depictions of modern anxiety and crisis, Auden and Husserl express what Robert B. Pippin has aptly described as “a great, persistent dissatisfaction within European high culture with its own ideals and results.”³ Pippin identifies three features of the problem of modernity that shall prove crucial for our discussion. First, when we speak about the modern age, we refer to a paradigmatically Western and European phenomenon emerging from that civilization’s technological and industrial development. For our purposes, we can bracket the genuine, and in some contexts pressing, question of how globalization and its exchanges and conflicts affects this problem. In this study, we will consider a discourse among European voices that draw upon European cultural touchstones. Second, modernity emerges as a problem within the context of “European high culture.” As a description of our epoch and way of life, modernity appears worthy of question particularly within the milieu of discussions among an educated and bourgeois class. Above all, artists and intellectuals—like Auden or Husserl—articulate the alienations and misgivings in the wake of apparently neutral and universally recognizable phenomena like medicine, natural science, and technology, even if these problems purportedly affect all of us living in modernity. Finally, Pippin refers to a prevalent “sense of dashed hopes” among these participants in high culture.⁴ Here we approach a more precise sense of why European modernity appears as especially problematic.

The problem of the modern age purports to identify a sense of dread and disappointment at the heart of modern life and culture. When these writers refer to modernity as beset by anxiety or as enduring a crisis, they express their feeling that something about our modern age represents a failure. Despite the advancements of

³ *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture*, xii.

⁴ *Ibid*, 30.

science and technology, there lurks also a loss for our culture. This intimation of decline refers perhaps to some pre-modern phenomenon, such as religion, whose role in modern life has apparently diminished. The sense of failure may also point to some promise the modern age itself made that it manifestly could not deliver, such as Kant's utopian ideal of a kingdom of ends. Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly summarized this existential mode of response in their diagnosis of modern nihilism: "We in the modern West no longer live in a culture where the basic questions of existence are already answered for us."⁵ Advancements measurable by economic and technological indicators cannot address, indeed perhaps they even caused, an existential inability that modern human beings uncannily detect within themselves to give significance and meaning to their lives in a culture not organized around a dominant religious, spiritual, or existential center. We may notice and appreciate modern technological miracles that make our lives materially better off than those of our pre-modern ancestors. Nevertheless, the problem of modernity refers to lingering feelings of dread, anxiety, and aimlessness that persistently suggest that something existential or spiritual has been lost or is amiss in modern life.

At the heart of modernity lies what Karsten Harries has called its "bad conscience," that is, its underlying anxiety that its own distinctive accomplishments count as illegitimate.⁶ We find dramatic examples of this bad conscience in comical and scientifically illiterate but disturbingly prevalent contemporary conspiracy theories that suggest, for example, that the earth is really flat or that the moon landings never in fact occurred. Such conspiracy theories, whether consciously or not, seek ultimately to deny the modern age's signature achievements, such as heliocentric astronomy and space

⁵ *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age*, 20.

⁶ "Modernity's Bad Conscience," 53-60.

travel, and thus testify to our collective and lingering bad conscience about the ill effects of modernity's scientifically and technologically oriented way of life. For the thinkers under consideration in this study, science and technology distinctively characterize the modern age as a whole. We will focus, then, on the intellectual foundations of modernity by attempting to understand the genesis and meaning of modern science and technology. Consideration of the political character of the modern age, on the other hand, including in particular the phenomenon of liberalism, will have to wait for the Conclusion.

As this all too brief excursion into the dense thicket of the problem of modernity already indicates, writers from throughout the arts, humanities, and social sciences have attempted to come to grips with the problem of the modern age. One could easily be forgiven, then, for getting lost amid this labyrinthine debate in which theorists define our historical age and critique its shortcomings. Before turning to the two philosophers who constitute the focal point of this study, then, I will discuss four landmark commentators who helped to sharpen my own point of departure. I shall identify how each of these writers contributes a crucial insight while also suffering from certain shortcomings.

In his masterpiece, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Hans Blumenberg framed modernity in terms of "self-assertion," his term for the historical emergence of immanently human projects of material improvement, scientific discovery, and technological manipulation of nature.⁷ In Blumenberg's narrative, modernity counts as legitimate to the extent that its development enabled an increase in human independence from sources that anchored meaning in a wholly transcendent and divine God by dialectically responding to the inadequacies of Christian theology. Blumenberg's crucial contribution comes in the form of setting up the issue of the modern age in terms of its

⁷ *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 138, 210.

putative legitimacy. I take as one of my essential assumptions the need for the debate about the modern age to come to terms with the possibility that modernity's achievements may ultimately prove more defensible than lamentable. However, Blumenberg's defense of modernity, while immensely compelling, veers too readily in my view toward a triumphalist and self-congratulatory tone, eliding and overlooking the existential problems that we have gestured toward here. Nowhere does this lacuna count more against Blumenberg's argument than in his dismissal of Heidegger's contributions.

Jürgen Habermas's study *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, my second point of reference, outlines a canon of the philosophical contributions to the debate about the modern age by Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and several others, including Heidegger. I accept Habermas's important suggestion that "since the late eighteenth century modernity has been elevated to a *philosophical* theme," which implies that we must understand the philosophical genealogy of the concept if we want "to be able to judge whether the claim of those who base their analyses on other premises is legitimate."⁸ With Habermas, I understand European thought, including Heidegger and Gadamer, as a philosophical discourse of modernity—an attempt to define and debate the meaning of our modern age—that provides the backdrop of any contemporary debate about modernity's legitimacy. But Habermas explicitly wants to save the modern Enlightenment and in doing so, he engages in violent misreadings of the figures he considers. I will answer many of Habermas's criticisms of Heidegger in Chapter 1. Furthermore, Habermas prominently omits Gadamer from the canonical contributions to the philosophical discourse of modernity. Against Habermas, I will argue that we should recognize Gadamer as one of our most insightful and important thinkers about the modern age.

⁸ *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, ix, 4.

Charles Taylor provides my third point of reference in his methodological considerations for thinking about modernity. While Taylor orients his project toward secularization and distinctively moral phenomena and I do not, he makes an essential point that guides my discussion: “Modernity is often read through its least impressive, most trivializing offshoots.”⁹ A rigorous engagement with modernity requires coming to terms with its real achievements. I will suggest that Gadamer provides such a reading of the history of modernity that encourages us to live up to its genuine and worthy exemplars without overlooking the alienations that modernity introduces into our lives. I will attempt to do justice, then, to Taylor’s eminently judicious sentiment: “To see the full complexity and richness of the modern identity is to see, first, how much we are all caught up in it, for all our attempts to repudiate it; and second, how shallow and partial are the one-sided judgments we bandy around about it.”¹⁰ Our lives are enmeshed with the phenomena of the modern age, and so our philosophical considerations of our epoch must come to terms with our deep involvements with modernity’s results. We must creatively reconstruct our modern Western intellectual history, engaging with its most important and challenging exemplars, to show how the form of modernity that has received such harsh criticism from figures like Auden and Husserl shapes our present.

To clarify my own emphases, I turn to my fourth point of reference, the analysis of modernity by Karsten Harries in his book *Infinity and Perspective*. Like Blumenberg, to whose memory this important study is dedicated, Harries focuses on the genesis of the modern age, especially the science and theology of the Renaissance and Early Modern Period. As I shall attempt to do with the help of Heidegger and Gadamer, Harries wants

⁹ *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, 511.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, x.

to understand the emergence of the modern scientific rationality that shapes our sense of intelligibility and behavior, as well as the limitations and legitimacy of this form of rationality. Following Harries, I am drawn to the thinkers that founded our modern epoch, whose texts I will bring into conversation with and analyze in terms of the thinking of Heidegger and Gadamer. His method for this analysis informs my own:

I...take a closer look at a small number of texts as well as some paintings, drawing from them what I hope will be at least a perspicuous, if quite limited model—perhaps only a caricature—of the emergence of our modern world. It is my hope that like any successful caricature, it will cast light on what it caricatures: the thresholds that separate the modern from the pre-modern but also from the postmodern world.¹¹

I will follow Harries in selecting Early Modern sources to understand the historical stakes and genesis of the fierce debates surrounding the meaning and legitimacy of our modern age, a snapshot of which I provided in this Introduction. Like Harries, I shall provide limited historical narratives about modernity toward the purpose not of providing a definitive or final analysis of the development of modern thought, but rather of clarifying and informing my readings of the accounts of the modern age in Heidegger and Gadamer.

§0.2: Modernity in light of Heidegger and Gadamer

Heidegger and Gadamer address the modern age from within the milieu that Pippin describes, in the subtitle of his book, as the “dissatisfactions of European high culture.” Before previewing the distinctive contributions Heidegger and Gadamer make to the problem of the modern age, I want to take a step back to consider how these two thinkers are ordinarily understood in relation to each other in general. I am convinced that a detailed analysis of their agreements and differences concerning modernity produces a

¹¹ *Infinity and Perspective*, 13.

greatly improved exegetical account of how the two stand in relation to each other. Heidegger surely counts as the most important philosopher in the Continental European traditions, if not of Western philosophy as a whole, in the twentieth century, exerting a decisive influence on subsequent developments in existentialism, phenomenology, deconstruction, post-structuralism, and even psychoanalysis, critical theory, pragmatism, ecology, and feminism, among other movements. His influence has been felt profoundly, too, in hermeneutics, the study of interpretation and understanding. In that field, Gadamer, who between 1923 and 1927 was Heidegger's student at Freiburg and Marburg, where he wrote his habilitation thesis under Heidegger's supervision in 1928, has proven the central figure in the twentieth century. Every major figure in hermeneutical philosophy, broadly construed, over the last several decades—including Linda Martín Alcoff, Karl-Otto Apel, Donald Davidson, Jacques Derrida, Donatella Di Cesare, Günter Figal, Hans-Helmuth Gander, Jürgen Habermas, Rudolf Makkreel, Jeff Malpas, John McDowell, Paul Ricoeur, Claude Romano, Richard Rorty, Dennis J. Schmidt, Charles Taylor, Gianni Vattimo, and Georgia Warnke—has either been directly influenced by Gadamer (and through him, by Heidegger) or has brought their thinking into direct and productive dialogue with Gadamer's. The Gadamerian tradition remains vitally alive today, with recent contributions extending and applying his insights and his conception of hermeneutics into domains and disciplines like politics, bioethics, memory studies, medicine and nursing, and even social work, in addition to ongoing work in the traditional hermeneutical domains of research in the arts and humanities.¹² These facts make Gadamer arguably Heidegger's most influential student.

¹² For examples of this exciting research, see the essays collected in Georgia Warnke, ed., *Inheriting Gadamer: New Directions in Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Further evidence of the endurance of Gadamer's

And yet, as we already saw with Habermas's omission of Gadamer from *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Gadamer remains within Heidegger's shadow. The most concise expression of the widespread, even if only implicit view, of their relationship occurs in a comment Hermann Heidegger, in his capacity as his father's literary executor and editor, includes as the epigraph and dedication to the sixteenth volume of Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe*: "Hans-Georg Gadamer: My father's oldest and most faithful student [*Schüler*], on his 100th birthday. In admiration [*Verehrung*] and gratitude [*Dankbarkeit*]" (GA16 v).¹³ This passage speaks to the depth of the fraught personal bond between Heidegger and his student, and also to the philosophical confusion that has arisen in attempts to understand their relationship. Calling Gadamer Heidegger's "most faithful student" might suggest that Gadamer remained philosophically unoriginal, continuing along Heidegger's path of thought or failing to contest his teacher's controversial philosophical views. I will correct these misreadings in Chapter 2. Donatella Di Cesare insightfully underscores the crucial point concerning this relationship: "Heidegger opened the door for Gadamer... But we should nevertheless ask how advantageous this was for Gadamer. 'Heidegger and Gadamer' is the formula that gained quick acceptance and became a questionable interpretative cipher for Gadamer's philosophy."¹⁴ This dissertation will show that a careful consideration of how Heidegger and Gadamer approach the problem of the modern age reveals their striking differences,

thought can be found in the *Internationales Jahrbuch für Hermeneutik* and the *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*, as well as in contributions to meetings of the Canadian Hermeneutic Institute, the International Institute for Hermeneutics, and the North American Society for Philosophical Hermeneutics.

¹³ See the References section for abbreviations of in-text citations. For Heidegger, I quote from the *Gesamtausgabe*, and for Gadamer, from the *Gesammelte Werke* when possible and from other German sources if not, unless otherwise noted. I also frequently modify English translations of these two writers.

¹⁴ *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*, 205.

despite the enormous and genuine commonalities that emerge from Gadamer's profound respect for and points of departure in Heidegger's thought.

Though I will go on to defend and legitimate Gadamer's contestation of Heidegger, I readily concede at the outset that Gadamer's struggle with and against his mentor already counts as deeply Heideggerian:

Students [*Schüler*] always understand their teacher only historiologically [*historisch*]; he is for them precisely still the present, yet already the passing and the past, that *they* follow up. In order to grasp the teacher *historically* [*geschichtlich*], one must be a *non-student* [*Nicht-Schüler*]... The true non-student is the one who is not *merely* a student but one who would himself—*by himself*—be an essential teacher. (BN1 262/GA94 359)

In taking some of Heidegger's insights as his point of departure while disputing others, Gadamer stays true to this Heideggerian conception of what it means to go beyond one's teacher.¹⁵ As I shall argue, Gadamer inherits something from his mentor, but goes his own way. For Heidegger, living up to such a task means being more than a merely "faithful student," as Hermann Heidegger's backhanded compliment suggested of Gadamer. Gadamer fulfills Heidegger's criteria for being "a *non-student*" who comes into his own by going beyond his teacher. Gadamer himself could only agree: "This is what Heidegger himself basically wanted: that each student should find his or her own words. I of course count myself among Heidegger's students. But I say this: Do not imitate Heidegger; let yourself be inspired by him!" (GIC 111) Given the enduring vitality of Gadamer's work today, his thought demands rigorous attention. Such attention must include thinking through his crucial but misunderstood relation to Heidegger as well as his own thinking about modernity, which as I will show, occupies a central place in his

¹⁵ On Heidegger's operative conception of education, see Iain Thomson, "Heidegger's Perfectionist Philosophy of Education in *Being and Time*," 439-467.

thought. Uncovering, explaining, and defending Gadamer's interventions into the problem of modernity will reveal his advancement past Heidegger. Previous studies have misunderstood either Gadamer's relationship to Heidegger or Gadamer's treatment of modernity. By clarifying both these features of his work, this dissertation attempts to legitimate Gadamer's development of a post-Heideggerian engagement with modernity.

Understanding the genesis, character, and limits of modernity from a Gadamerian perspective requires going back to Heidegger and to the Early Modern Period. Heidegger and Gadamer, though they differ on numerous issues, agree on a crucial point in the philosophical discourse of modernity with Blumenberg, Habermas, Taylor, and Harries. All these writers share the conviction that an adequate contemporary engagement with the problem of the modern age requires a coherent account of the historical development of the modern age. We must construct a philosophically attuned intellectual history to understand and respond critically to modernity. On this point as on so many others, Heidegger points the way. In his 1935/1936 lecture course *The Question Concerning the Thing*, in which he engages in close readings of the foundations of modern natural science formulated by Galileo, Descartes, Newton, and above all Kant, Heidegger declares: "Most of the facts of this history are well known, and yet our knowledge of the innermost driving contexts of this happening is still very poor and obscure" (QT 44/GA41 65). Heidegger insists that we retrieve the history of the genesis, development, and metaphysical substructure of the modern age to truly understand how the modern history we inherit shapes and conditions our present. We will subsequently present Heidegger's and Gadamer's developments of this mode of intellectual history, and we will contribute details and evidence in order to motivate and illuminate their views.

While Heidegger and Gadamer share the conviction that we require a confrontation with the historical development of modernity, they differ markedly in their approaches to history, as Dennis J. Schmidt suggests: “To understand Heidegger one needs to understand how crucial the destruction of metaphysics is. On the other hand, to understand Gadamer one needs to understand the power of sedimentation that leads him to suggest that such destruction is never fully realizable.”¹⁶ Allow me to preview how I will draw this distinction. For Heidegger, we must leave modernity behind: “Today much of the essential tradition [*Überlieferung*] must be abandoned, but that is perhaps unavoidable and not necessarily disastrous” (BN1 315/GA94 434). By transcending the damaging effects of the modern age, which produced the anxiety and crisis noted by Auden and Husserl, we will subsequently arrive at another beginning for Western humanity. This central insight, which we will describe (and explain) as Heideggerian *deconstruction*, rather than the more common but less tenable translation “destruction” adopted by Schmidt, renders Heidegger the most important thinker of the problem of the modern age, which he seeks to deconstruct to move toward postmodernity: “Thinking does not begin until we have come to know that the reason [*Vernunft*] that has been extolled for centuries is the most stubborn adversary of thinking” (OBT 199/GA5 267). We must ultimately leave behind the inheritances of modern thought in order to arrive at another beginning, a postmodern understanding of being free of modernity’s ill effects. As Iain Thomson has argued, Heidegger’s critique of modernity and his vision of how to move beyond it into a postmodern future jointly constitute the single most distinctive philosophical achievement of his later work, from the early 1930s onward.¹⁷

¹⁶ “Introduction: Among the Ways,” xxii.

¹⁷ *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 1-6.

For Gadamer, meanwhile, historical traditions, far from something we can transcend in favor of another understanding of being, function as storehouses of truth. I will show that Gadamer treats the modern age as a tradition containing positive resources for his own thought. As a response to modernity, Gadamer's appeal to modern thinking and refusal to move beyond the modern age diverge from Heidegger. Alasdair MacIntyre succinctly underscores how Gadamer encourages us to see how "the history of ideas turns out to be the queen of the sciences."¹⁸ Gadamer plumbs the depths of the traditions to which we belong to find the resources we need and the truth we are capable of achieving. But is Gadamer a good candidate for contesting Heidegger's thinking of modernity? Was not Gadamer above all a classicist, and not primarily a thinker of the modern age? "The dialogues of Plato," he avers, "even more than the works of the great thinkers of German Idealism, have left their stamp on my thinking" (RPJ 32/GW2 500). One could adduce many textual citations about this centrality of the Greeks against my contention that Gadamer provides the most promising post-Heideggerian account of the modern age.¹⁹ In my presentation, I will shift the focus from the Greeks toward Gadamer's engagement with modern thought. We find our first clue here in the fact that Gadamer took to heart Heidegger's insight that we can never return to dead historical worlds from the past: "World-withdrawal and world-decay can never be reversed" (OBT 20/GA5 26). Since he remained in many ways a good Heideggerian, Gadamer's thinking cannot be reduced to a naïve retrieval of the Greeks. Indeed, Gadamer insists: "As a child of modern Enlightenment, I have been led to my path via the great humanistic heritage. I owe my

¹⁸ "Contexts of Interpretation: Reflections on Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*," 46.

¹⁹ See James Risser's discussion of Gadamer's critique of modern subjectivism, in which an appeal to Greek thought is essential (*Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 4-17).

early formative impulses to it insofar as I could never entirely follow Heidegger in his search for God with full devotion.”²⁰ In this revealing passage, Gadamer articulates what I will take to be the main distinction between his thought and that of Heidegger. Unlike Heidegger, Gadamer refuses to transcend the modern age, and attempts instead to make productive use of the intellectual resources it provides. Part II of this study will trace my historical narratives of a family of modern motifs, images, and metaphors that Gadamer deploys in his thinking in order to suggest how he remains committed to working with, rather than moving on from, concepts that developed in modernity. Part I, which traces Gadamer’s departure from and continuities with Heidegger, will motivate the possibility that Gadamer differs markedly from his teacher’s approach to the modern age. Part II then substantiates this suggestion by suggesting that Gadamer constructively engages with inheritances and currents from modern thought. I will attempt to underscore the plausibility of this suggestion by providing some relevant details about the modern background of the concepts and metaphors that Gadamer rehabilitates.

As Leo Strauss recognized in 1961 when he perceptively suggested that Gadamer sides with the moderns in *le querelle des anciens et des modernes*, attention to a number of features of Gadamer’s work reveals the depth and pervasiveness of his engagement with modern thought (CWM 11).²¹ Gadamer devoted two volumes of his *Gesammelte Werke*, which he prepared himself, to topics in modern philosophy (GW3, GW4). Many of these essays, and other papers and interviews, will provide essential evidence for my arguments. Of course, Gadamer’s masterpiece, *Truth and Method*, must serve as the

²⁰ “Reply to P. Christopher Smith,” in Lewis E. Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, 526.

²¹ Kristin Gjesdal provides a model for reading Gadamer’s engagement with modern thought by interpreting him in light of the post-Kantian traditions. Because she recommends “a return to the early nineteenth-century theory of interpretation,” her Romantic-inspired account remains, in my more sympathetic view at least, excessively critical (*Gadamer and the Legacy of German Idealism*, 4).

centerpiece of any complete account of his thinking, and this study will follow suit. In that text, one finds Gadamer engaging, with varying degrees of intensity, a remarkable cast of thinkers from early modernity, including Alberti, Bacon, Castiglione, Nicholas of Cusa, Descartes, Gracián, Hume, Hutcheson, Kant, Leibniz, Pascal, Shaftesbury, Spinoza, and Vico. But Gadamer severely understates the depth of his engagement with modernity when he writes that *Truth and Method* attempts “to revive ideas from Greek thought” (TM 457/GW1 465). In fact, as I will argue in Chapter 3 when I show how the critique he develops in *Truth and Method* targets Cartesian method in particular, he aspires to a more ambitious goal, namely, to critically confront and productively engage with the essence of modernity. When Gadamer criticizes the modern tendency to equate truth with, or reduce it to, what can be produced under conditions governed by a scientific method, readers may find themselves tempted to understand his target as such contemporaneous positivistic philosophical movements as Neo-Kantianism or Logical Empiricism.²² Rather than any twentieth-century intellectual phenomenon, though, Gadamer confronts “the Cartesian foundation of modern science” (TM 457/GW1 465). In other words, he attempts to come to terms with the deepest historical and conceptual roots of the modern age. Many commentators thus construe Gadamer as a Heideggerian critic of modernity.²³ In this dissertation, I will contribute important additional detail to this recognition that Gadamer criticizes the modern age, especially by going further than previous scholars in my attention to Gadamer’s relationship to the genesis of modernity.

²² Warnke develops the most systematic and cogent interpretation of Gadamer as essentially “against a positivism that is no longer generally accepted” (*Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, 4).

²³ See Richard J. Bernstein, “The Constellation of Hermeneutics, Critical Theory and Deconstruction,” 267; Stefano Marino, *Gadamer and the Limits of the Modern Techno-Scientific Civilization*, 13; and Richard E. Palmer, “Moving Beyond Modernity: The Contribution of Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics,” 160.

In addition, though, I will contend that Gadamer's reaction to the modern age does not uncritically follow Heidegger's deconstructive approach. Taking inspiration from Theodore George's recent comparison of these two figures, we will track a general movement from Heideggerian deconstruction to Gadamerian rehabilitation.²⁴ Unlike previous studies, this dissertation will explain *both* Gadamer's complex relation to Heidegger *and* Gadamer's own treatment of the modern age. These two issues will be read in light of each other. Heidegger's treatment of modernity encourages us to transcend and move beyond the modern age in favor of another beginning: "For the sake of that [other] beginning, the previous history must not perish [*verenden*] but must indeed be brought to its end [*zu ihrem Ende gebracht*]" (BN1 228/GA94 314). Attention to the full scope of Gadamer's wide-ranging response to modernity and its Cartesian foundation reveals that, rather than engaging in critique in the service of a postmodern movement out of the modern age as in Heidegger's deconstruction, Gadamer's engagement with the modern age occurs rather in a surprisingly, and compellingly, positive register.

Gadamer rehabilitates the modern age by sensitively and charitably drawing out the insights and resources contained within our inheritances from modernity. The Gadamerian concept of rehabilitation that I shall balance against Heideggerian deconstruction derives from the section of *Truth and Method* on "The Rehabilitation of Authority and Tradition" (TM 278/GW1 281). There, Gadamer defends the view that our situatedness within historical traditions, which exert authority over our cognition and our entire being, enables human understanding. Tradition hands down to us historical conditions that authoritatively point our understanding toward some directions and away from others. When Gadamer provocatively claims to rehabilitate tradition and its

²⁴ "The Responsibility to Understand," 104.

authority, he refers to two main objectives. First, and more narrowly, he aims to reclaim tradition as positive and enabling from the denigration of tradition by the Enlightenment's one-sided praise for autonomous rationality, which views the authority of the past as *ipso facto* illegitimate. We will return in subsequent chapters to this confrontation with the Enlightenment. His second, more general claim directly interests us here. Gadamer suggests that traditions contain a wealth of resources that we can, and indeed must, draw upon: "Even the most genuine and pure tradition does not persist because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, and cultivated" (TM 282/GW1 286). This passage proposes an implicit but programmatic alternative to Heidegger's movement beyond modernity toward another beginning. Gadamer suggests that, in our finitude and openness to history, we take the tradition handed down to us by the past as our starting point, which we can then mold and rework in some new direction or for some new purpose. Rehabilitation means taking what we inherit from the past and positively cultivating and reworking its promising insights. I will flesh out this strategy by reading Gadamer's thought in light of and in dialogue with thinkers from early modernity, the tradition that we inherit today and to which we remain open and subject. My presentation of the historical background of the modern concepts that I locate in Gadamer does not pretend to be authoritative or definitive. Rather, I wish thereby only to plausibly motivate my suggestion that Gadamer's thought remains committed to engaging with the thinking of modernity in a way that Heidegger's attempt to transcend the modern age certainly is not.

We find ourselves embedded within the tradition of the modern age. But this fact can be no more lamentable than is our own mortality. For Gadamer, our situatedness

within this tradition means that modernity contains reserves of conceptual and philosophical insights with which we must productively engage. Heidegger thinks of the modern age as exhausted, emptied out, ripe for replacement by a more encompassing understanding of being that will usher in another age. But Gadamer sees traditions as containing opportunities for new and surprising directions. Throughout this dissertation, I will show how Gadamer takes our inheritances from the modern age and, instead of transcending and leaving them behind, works with and twists them in new directions such that they provide the tools for improving upon modernity's worst impulses. I read Gadamer's confrontation with the modern age, then, as essentially enacting his fundamental conception of hermeneutics: "I must allow tradition's claim to validity, not in the sense of simply acknowledging the past in its otherness, but in such a way that it has something to say to me. This...calls for a fundamental sort of openness" (TM 355/GW1 367). Gadamerian hermeneutics demands listening to, being open toward, what we inherit from history. In the case of our present investigation, this feature of hermeneutic experience refers to Gadamer's call for us to listen more attentively and urgently to what the modern age still has to say to us than Heidegger would allow.

§0.3. Summary of the dissertation

This study is divided into two main parts, each of which consists of a brief preface and two substantive chapters. Part I, "From Heidegger to Gadamer," presents my reading of how these figures think about modernity. Chapter 1 comprehensively outlines Heidegger's deconstruction of the modern age, that is, his main critique of it and his account of the movement into a postmodern future. Chapter 2 motivates a contrast between Heidegger's vision of modernity and Gadamer's. This chapter establishes that,

contrary to numerous misreadings, Gadamer proceeds along his own path of thinking, one that crucially begins with Heidegger but goes along its own direction. I view Gadamer's project of rehabilitation as a genuine improvement beyond Heidegger. This contrast cannot properly be made without an adequate presentation of both its sides.

Part II, "Gadamer's Rehabilitation of Modern Guiding Metaphors," outlines my interpretation of Gadamer's post-Heideggerian response to the modern age, arguing that he accomplishes this task by constructively engaging with what I shall call (and define later as) the *guiding metaphors* of the modern age, while criticizing the pernicious elements of modernity's bequest to the present. Chapter 3 contains my reconstruction and defense of Gadamer's rehabilitation of several modern guiding epistemic metaphors, namely, transcendental thought, humanism, experience, objectivity, and curiosity, against the backdrop of his critique of other elements of modernity's epistemic regimes, especially Cartesian method. Chapter 4 proceeds to make the same type of argument, this time with regard to the guiding ocular metaphors of infinity, perspective, and mirroring. Part II will show that Gadamer remains within the orbit of modern thought—not by either uncritically accepting or rejecting it, but rather by constructively cultivating and reworking some of its contents.

A brief and speculative Conclusion, on the political implications of Gadamer's differences from Heidegger, ends the dissertation by suggesting that the Gadamerian rehabilitation of modernity successfully engenders a more genuinely hopeful response to modernity than Heidegger provides. This Conclusion provides one final opportunity to again make the case for Gadamer's appreciable advancement beyond Heidegger.

Part I: From Heidegger to Gadamer: Preface

As I outlined in the Introduction, I am concerned in this dissertation with the responses to the problem of modernity by Heidegger and Gadamer. Here in Part I, I will situate these two thinkers relative to modernity. Ultimately, I intend for this dissertation to motivate and defend a Gadamerian response to the modern age. Fulfilling this goal requires first establishing the essential Heideggerian background for any adequate understanding of what Gadamer is up to. Part I aims to fulfill this need. In making this hermeneutical decision, we take our point of departure from Gadamer himself, who movingly writes to Heidegger in a letter dated June 19, 1971: “You have unmistakably been the old man to me for a lifetime—converting every confirmation [*Bestätigung*] and affirmation [*Bejahung*] into a new demand [*Forderung*]. From time immemorial, nothing better could have happened to me than that.”²⁵ We rightly hear paternal echoes in this passage’s underlining of Heidegger’s influence, as Gadamer confirms in a mournful May 28, 1976 letter to Heidegger’s widow, Elfride, two days after his mentor’s death: “No man, not even my own father, meant so much for me as did Martin Heidegger. From the early years of the first inspiration and the first influence, the presence of Martin Heidegger was for me a real issue of being.”²⁶ The purpose of Part I, then, is to lay out as precisely as possible this Heideggerian provocation or demand, this issue of being, that eventually provided Gadamer with the essential impetus for his own thinking, and then ultimately to suggest that Gadamer does not fully accept Heidegger’s response to modernity.

²⁵ “Ausgewählte Briefe an Martin Heidegger (1944–1976),” 43.

²⁶ Quoted in Jean Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography*, 417-418n44.

Chapter One: Heidegger's Deconstruction of Modernity

In Division Two of *Being and Time*, Heidegger quotes the following passage from Count

Paul Yorck von Wartenburg:

It seems to me that the ground-swells evoked by the principle of eccentricity, which led to a new era [*eine neue Zeit*] more than four hundred years ago, have become exceedingly broad and flat; that our knowledge has progressed to the point of cancelling itself out; that man has withdrawn so far from himself that he no longer sees himself at all. The “modern [*moderne*] man”—that is to say, the post-Renaissance man—is ready for burial. (Quoted in BT 452/SZ 401)

As Ingo Farin argues, Heidegger regarded Yorck's passage as significant, since he also quotes it in his 1924 *The Concept of Time* and in his 1925 essay “Wilhelm Dilthey's Research and the Struggle for a Worldview.”²⁷ We should read this passage (which recalls those from Auden and Husserl that we considered in the Introduction) as programmatic for Heidegger's *critique of modernity*, a sustained argument that stretches across the arc of his career and becomes increasingly central to his project from the 1930s onward, the period that will be the focus of my discussion.²⁸ Yorck's passage contains a number of substantive claims for which Heidegger would provide detailed arguments in his own mature critique of the modern age. *First*, in his reference to the heliocentric revolution in astronomy, Yorck connects the character of the modern age with developments in natural science. *Second*, Yorck places the emergence of modernity in a relatively specific historical location near the beginning of the sixteenth century that inaugurates “a new era.” *Third*, Yorck suggests that the objective knowledge produced by

²⁷ “A Response to Sheehan's Attempted Paradigm Shift in Heidegger Studies,” 127.

²⁸ As Hubert Dreyfus puts it, “Around 1930...Heidegger began to investigate the understanding of being peculiar to modern Western culture” (“Heidegger on the Connection Between Nihilism, Art, Technology, and Politics,” 290). Even as pronounced a critic of Heidegger as Jürgen Habermas recognizes that “Heidegger brought the discourse of modernity into a genuinely philosophical movement of thought once again” (*The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, 53).

natural science comes at a cost. *Fourth*, he then defines that cost in terms of a corresponding alienation in the human condition. Some decentering, unmooring, or loss of meaning and self-understanding characterizes modern humanity. *Fifth*, because of this enormous cost for the human condition wrought by advancements in modern science, Yorck advocates that humanity move past its distinctively modern instantiation, articulating this exhortation with dramatically violent rhetoric. Yorck's short but pregnant passage outlines a program for *diagnosing* the flaws in modernity, and then consequently *moving past them*. Heidegger's later work develops this project in a sophisticated way.²⁹

In this chapter, I shall reconstruct and explain the details of Heidegger's program. In §1.1, I will present two of Heidegger's methods for confronting the past in the present. Then in §1.2, I will outline Heidegger's characterization of modernity, including when and in which figures and movements it begins, its dichotomy between subject and object, the genesis of mathematized natural science that masters nature with technology, its transformed understanding of truth, an aestheticized relation to art, and finally late modernity's Nietzschean ontotheology of eternally recurring will to power. With that characterization as the background, I will present in §1.3 Heidegger's considered attitude toward modernity. Heidegger, though he occasionally lapses into a one-sidedly pessimistic anti-modernism, should be more charitably read as criticizing the modern age specifically for its reduced and impoverished sense of intelligibility. Finally, in §1.4 I will show how Heidegger's critique is not an end in itself but is rather in service to a positive vision for another beginning for Western culture. Heidegger calls for a new way of

²⁹ Employing a medical metaphor that I partly follow, Julian Young describes "Heidegger's thinking about the spiritual health of modernity" which "begins with an identification of what ails the 'patient' at the symptomatic level, proceeds from there to an identification of the fundamental cause of those symptoms, and from there to the prescription for an appropriate therapy" (*Heidegger's Later Philosophy*, 32).

thinking of being that would go beyond the modern age. Heidegger's theory and critique of modernity, and attempt to move beyond it, will be the essential touchstone for Gadamer's subsequent engagement with the modern age. Throughout the rest of this dissertation, I shall call this combination of a sustained and focused critique along with a decisive movement beyond the modern age Heidegger's *deconstruction of modernity*.

§1.1: Methods of historical confrontation

§1.1.1: Deconstruction

Heidegger's engagement with modernity is governed and guided by (at least) two methodological strategies that he employs for engaging with history.³⁰ Laying out these strategies will allow us to properly contextualize and grasp Heidegger's arguments concerning the nature and flaws of the modern age. He refers to the first method, explicated above all in *Being and Time* to describe his approach there to the history of ontology, as "*Destruktion*."³¹ The translation of this term has occasioned enormous controversy. Most frequently, as in the standard translations of *Being and Time*, *Destruktion* has been rendered as "destruction," while a minority position has advocated for "deconstruction."³² I shall adopt the latter translation. Explaining why will clarify what this Heideggerian hermeneutic strategy really means to accomplish. Gadamer insightfully underscores for us why *Destruktion* cannot only mean "destruction":

³⁰ Iain Thomson imputes methods to Heidegger because, though "Heidegger refuses to call his method a 'method,'" his "own resistance to 'method' stems solely from the term's dominant contemporary connotations" (*The End of Onto-Theology: Understanding Heidegger's Turn, Method, and Politics*, 171).

³¹ Well before *Being and Time*, the concept had its roots in Heidegger's early Lutheran theological studies. See Benjamin D. Crowe, *Heidegger's Religious Origins: Destruction and Authenticity*, 231-265.

³² For the best defense of "deconstruction" as the superior translation, as well as a discussion of Heidegger's approach to the history of metaphysics to which my own is indebted throughout what follows, see Thomson, *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education*, 7-43. Claude Romano also describes "*Destruktion*" in terms of "deconstruction" (*At the Heart of Reason*, 487).

Here it seems completely crucial to me that the profound message of “deconstruction [*Destruktion*]” that the young Heidegger brought to us never—at least for those who at the time really had an ear for the German language—had the negative tone of “destruction [*Zerstörung*]” that clings to the usage of this word in other languages. Deconstruction is for us a dismantling [*Abbau*], a dismantling of what has been covered up. When we mean “destruction,” we do not say “deconstruction,” but rather: “Destruction [*Zerstörung*].” (DD 121/GW10 132)

As Gadamer recognizes, Heideggerian deconstruction refers to a strategy of critically approaching the history of philosophy so as *both* to reveal the way history has negatively blocked us in the present from accessing something primordial, *and* to appropriate the positive potential of the tradition. Because of these complementary negative and positive moments, Heideggerian deconstruction cannot be reduced to its merely destructive side.³³

Deconstruction involves taking a critical approach to the philosophical tradition. As the title of the section in *Being and Time* that outlines the methodology of deconstruction puts it, the operative task is “The Deconstruction of the History of Ontology” (BT 41/SZ 19). Why is the tradition of ontology problematic such that it invites adopting a critical stance toward it? “Tradition [*Tradition*] ... blocks our access to those primordial ‘sources’ from which the categories and concepts handed down to us have been in part quite genuinely drawn. Indeed it makes us forget that they have had such an origin” (BT 43/SZ 21). Heidegger here likens philosophical tradition to layers of sediment that have covered over and blocked our access to a foundation or source. The history of philosophy covers up our ability in the present to appropriate this source from the past: “Dasein no longer understands the most elementary conditions which would

³³ In translating “*Destruktion*” as “deconstruction,” I do not take identify Heidegger’s project with that of Jacques Derrida. In distinguishing these two figures, however, Dermot Moran borders on the dogmatic when he asserts, “the two terms [destruction and deconstruction] are by no means identical and it will be necessary...to disentangle the strands of meaning and of influence” (“The Destruction of the Destruction: Heidegger’s Versions of the History of Philosophy,” 176). Irrespective of Derrida, “deconstruction” does usefully connote both the positive and negative valences Heidegger’s term conveys.

alone enable it to go back to the past in a positive manner and make it productively its own” (BT 43/SZ 21). Philosophical tradition appears so set in stone, as if it were so self-evidently coherent, rational, fixed, and structured, that we in the present are dissuaded from dynamically going back behind or beneath that tradition to see what made it possible in the first place. We think we cannot positively engage with the enabling experiences and sources of our own tradition. For even the later Heidegger, tradition amounts to “a pile of distortions” (EP 14/GA6.2 415). It does not recognize its contingency or how it covers up its own sources, and so we in the present get consequently caught up in its deceptions: “Dasein...falls prey to the tradition” (BT 41/SZ 21). The sedimented layers of tradition block full understanding because they prevent us now from grasping their contingent but formative influence on the present.

The task of deconstruction, then, means “positively making the past our own” (BT 42/SZ 21). This emphasis on the positive side of deconstruction is crucial to grasping Heidegger’s employment of the concept. Deconstruction is not only one-sidedly negative. Its activity involves interrogating and engaging tradition not merely to negate or dismiss it, but rather to get behind it in order to arrive at some primordial source that will enliven the tradition itself once again: “Construction in philosophy is necessarily deconstruction, that is to say, a dismantling [*Abbau*] of traditional concepts carried out in a historical recursion of the tradition. And this is not a negation of the tradition or a condemnation of it as worthless; quite the contrary, it signifies precisely a positive appropriation of tradition” (BP 23/GA24 31). When tradition appears like sediment, as firm and unyielding and incapable of movement, these sedimented and intervening historical points of view distort some original experience, encounter, or disclosure. Without

dynamic engagement, tradition appears immovable and we will not be able to do anything positive with it. Hence, “this hardened tradition must be loosened up” (BT 44/SZ 22). Deconstruction allows us to see tradition as the contingent, and hence changeable, but strongly conditioning forces at work in the present. The task of deconstruction “is *positive*”: To allow us now to engage with the past in order to make it our own and then arrive at something more primordial that it covers up (BT 44/SZ 23). In deconstruction, the philosophical past gets appropriated from the point of view of the present, which is itself conditioned by tradition. Deconstruction is not a disinterested scholarly activity, such as rigorously historicist attempts to methodologically reconstruct the past on its own terms. Rather, deconstruction means positively engaging with tradition in order to allow the present access to something from the past to which tradition blocked us. This is what Heidegger means by making the past our own.

What does tradition block or cover over? “We deconstruct the traditional content [*überlieferten Bestandes*] of ancient ontology until we reach into and recover those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of being—the ways that have guided us ever since” (BT 44/SZ 22). Deconstruction serves the question of being, the task of reawakening ourselves to the question of what it means for anything to be, because tradition blocks our route of access to the original meaning of being. The ontological tradition theorized ways of understanding the being of entities, but it closed us off to the primordially puzzling question of what it means for anything to be. Ontology requires deconstruction because it prevents us from experiencing the meaning of being as a live question: “The question of being does not achieve its true concreteness until we have carried through the process of the deconstruction of the ontological

tradition [*Überlieferung*]” (BT 49/SZ 26). Deconstruction reawakens us to being by “disclosing an even more primordial and more universal horizon from which we may draw the answer to the question, ‘what is *being*?’” (BT 49/SZ 26) The question of how intelligibility happens gets covered over by the history of ontology in its various attempts to think the being of entities. The critical stance toward and positive appropriation of that history, instantiated in deconstruction, allows us to rediscover and reconnect ourselves to the question of the meaning of being once again: “To fetch, to gather in, to bring together what is concealed within the old” (OWL 36/GA12 124). This task of reconnecting ourselves with and uncovering something primordial will, as we shall see, motivate much of Heidegger’s subsequent project of understanding modernity.

Part Two of *Being and Time* would have included the “basic features of a phenomenological deconstruction of the history of ontology, with the problematic of Temporality as our clue” (BT 63/SZ 39). Famously, *Being and Time* was never completed according to this ambitious vision.³⁴ But the methodology of deconstruction—subjecting the tradition to critique so as to positively uncover what the tradition blocked us from seeing—remained operative for Heidegger throughout the subsequent decades, subject to certain revisions.³⁵ As I shall argue, deconstruction in fact fairly characterizes the method and intent of his approach to the problem of the modern age in general.

§1.1.2: History of being

Heidegger’s later methodological approach moves from *Being and Time*’s deconstructive recovery of an origin to the recognition of the accessibility of that origin through

³⁴ For a recent collection of papers reckoning with the unfinished character of *Being and Time*, see Lee Braver, ed., *Division III of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*: The Unanswered Question of Being*.

³⁵ Moran convincingly argues that Heidegger “never revokes or revises the notion [*Destruction*] in his later writings. It remains something unthought in his thinking” (“The Destruction of the Destruction,” 175).

engagement with the great thinkers of the metaphysical tradition. How does Heidegger approach the history of metaphysics? Here we must define another Heideggerian methodological strategy for dealing with the past, namely, the “history of being (*Seinsgeschichte*)”: “The hidden history of being...makes possible Western man’s various fundamental positions” (EP 19/GA6.2 421). The term “history of being” should not mislead us into thinking Heidegger refers to something essentially past or removed from us that we can dispassionately reconstruct or methodologically explain for the enrichment of our historical consciousness. As he emphasizes, “the history of being is never past but stands ever before us” (P 240/GA9 314).³⁶ The history of being is not the object of scholarly reconstruction or disinterested inquiry, but is something that affects us profoundly in the present and will ultimately shape our future. Because the history of being shapes us, it is “necessarily hidden from ordinary view” (QT 72/GA41 106). As was the case with deconstruction, the history of being’s engagement with the past is performed from the point of view of, and will make a difference in, the present even if, or perhaps precisely because, it remains predominantly invisible or misunderstood.

Seeing how the history of being makes possible the present—but also conditions and limits its possibilities, including our ability to see the reality of the history of being—requires explaining its fundamental aspects. The history of being names Heidegger’s vision of how Western metaphysics since Greek antiquity has developed different understandings of the meaning of the being of entities over time, and of how these different understandings can be thought of as a sequence of overlapping but discrete epochs governed by or structured around a particular metaphysical understanding that

³⁶ On the connection of the history of being with the present, see Charles Guignon, “The History of Being,” 393; and Karl Löwith, *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, 71.

becomes, for a time, dominant.³⁷ What, then, is metaphysics? Heidegger understands metaphysics as ontotheology: “Western metaphysics...since its beginnings with the Greeks has eminently been both ontology and theology...metaphysics [is] the question about entities as such *and* as a whole. To those who can read, this means: metaphysics is onto-theo-logy” (ID 54/GA11 63). When Heidegger says metaphysics as ontotheology enquires into “entities as such *and* as a whole,” he suggests that metaphysics as ontotheology has two tasks: “Metaphysics thinks entities as such [and] as a whole” (ID 58/GA11 65-66). Heidegger means that metaphysics defines what all entities have in common—ontology, which defines the ground of entities; *and* what the highest instantiation of entities is—theology, which explains which entities matter most: “Metaphysics is both ontology and theology in a unified way” (ID 71/GA11 76). When a thinker provides answers to both these metaphysical questions—what all entities have in common *and* what counts as their highest instantiation—that thinker does ontotheology.

On Heidegger’s analysis, the history of being names the sequence of epochs in which different metaphysical thinkers have provided answers to these two questions of ontotheology, and this historical sequence ranges from Plato to Nietzsche. As Iain Thomson explains, Plato is the first ontotheological thinker because “he presents the forms both as the common element unifying all the different instantiations of a thing and also as the highest, most perfect, or exemplary embodiment of that kind of thing.”³⁸ In providing this dual answer, Plato crystallized his age’s understanding of the being of entities, allowing an entire epoch of Western history to organize and stabilize itself. Thus,

³⁷ This characterization of the history of being and of Heidegger’s understanding of ontotheology comes from Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 8-9; and *Heidegger on Ontotheology*, 7-43. See also Guignon, “The History of Being,” 399.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 13. See also *ibid*, 16 for Heidegger on Nietzsche.

he helps form one stage in the history of being.³⁹ For Heidegger, the most recent ontotheological paradigm—hence, our contemporary understanding—is provided by Nietzsche: “The two fundamental terms of Nietzsche’s metaphysics, ‘will to power’ and ‘eternal return of the same,’ determine entities in their being in accordance with the perspectives which have guided metaphysics since antiquity” (OBT 177/GA5 238). Nietzsche thought of the ground of entities as will to power, that is, as an endless swirling of conflicting forces without overriding purpose or significance. And the highest version of this kind of entity was the eternal recurrence of the same, that is, the most perfect example of will to power would mean willing one’s life, and the cosmos as a whole, to be lived infinitely over again. Nietzschean ontotheology, the late-modern age of the history of being in which we live, means eternally recurring will to power.

The critical thrust of Heidegger’s understanding of ontotheology centers on the inherent partiality of its way of approaching being: “The history of being begins—necessarily begins—with the forgetfulness of being” (OBT 196/GA5 263). Ontotheology, the different formulations of which get charted by the history of being, is paradigmatically an understanding of the being *of entities*, and so always overlooks being itself or being as such, the source of the intelligibility of all our understandings of entities. Ontotheology always means “a thinking that thinks being ontologically as entities and so submits to the essence of metaphysics” (OBT 188/GA5 252). Just as deconstruction gets us back in touch with the question of being, Heidegger believes the history of being reveals how no ontotheology “can...reach back to the incipient essential fullness [*anfängliche Wesenfülle*] of being” (EP 56/GA6.2 459). Insofar as ontotheology asks only about the being of entities, and never about being itself or as such, it can only

³⁹ On the history of being and the West, see Löwith, *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, 88.

be limited and one-sided, while at the same time totalizing in its claims to grasp the essence of the being of *all* entities. Thus, ontotheology must be called into question for blocking our access to being, both by insisting on only one understanding of how entities are and for overlooking being as the source of our historical intelligibility. There will always be that source of intelligibility that supersedes and escapes our understandings of it. Heidegger defines the history of being in the following terms: “That history of being which is historically familiar as metaphysics has its essence in that a progression [*Fortgang*] from the beginning [*Anfang*] occurs” (EP 79/GA6.2 486).⁴⁰ The beginning is being, which, though it makes all ontotheological understandings possible and partially informs them, can never be totally expressed by any one metaphysical expression. The error of ontotheology is that, at each point in its history, it sees itself as providing the final answer to the meaning of being, whereas Heidegger emphasizes that the excessive fullness of being means that every such answer can only be partial or one-sided.

In my subsequent discussion, I will say more about how Heidegger characterizes the modern age’s understanding of being. For now, I note that in the history of being, modernity represents a particularly problematic understanding: “Where entities have become objects of representation, there...a loss of being occurs” (OBT 77/GA5 101). In the modern distinction between subject and object, being gets overlooked and shunted aside. In this modern formulation, subjects get alienated even from other entities, let alone from the source of intelligibility about entities at all. In one of his “Sketches

⁴⁰ Richard Rorty criticized Heidegger’s history of being as “a downward escalator,” i.e., a conservative narrative of a regress in which modernity is worse off than its predecessors (*Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2, 28). Some commentators support this reading, such as Michael E. Zimmerman: “For Martin Heidegger, ‘modernity’ constituted the final stage in the history of the decline of the West” (*Heidegger’s Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, and Art*, 3). It remains a controversial interpretive question whether Heidegger’s history of being is consistently one of a *regress* or rather one of the *excessiveness* of being that is never fully captured by any one metaphysical understanding of it. For the latter reading, see Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 102-104.

[*Entwürfe*] for a History of Being as Metaphysics,” Heidegger conceives a progression within modernity to a stage of *late modernity* that bottoms out in the “will to will” and “Machination (Enframing) [*Die Machenschaft (Das Ge-Stell)*]” (EP 66/GA6.2 471). The fulfillment or end of seeing the ground of entities as will to power and their highest example as eternal recurrence is when all entities get viewed only as “standing by merely to be optimized, enhanced, and ordered for maximally flexible use.”⁴¹ Heidegger refers to this state of affairs as enframing. This reductive and flattening late-modern ontotheology equates being with endless becoming, and to that extent, forgets that it is itself an understanding of being, since it denies the existence of what it attempts to grasp: “The essence of the history of being of nihilism is the abandonment of being in that there occurs the self-release of being into machination” (EP 103/GA7 89). When being is dissolved by our ontotheology into becoming, it becomes all the harder to see the history of being. But that history enables our sense of reality, possibility, and importance.

§1.2: Theory of modernity

§1.2.1: Periodization

We have just sketched two strategies Heidegger employs for engaging with the past. With this methodological background in place, we can now appreciate the details of how he conceptualizes the modern age. As I mentioned, for Heidegger, modernity and late modernity are stages in the history of being, a narrative that tells us how the history of metaphysics makes the present possible. In this section, I shall explain in detail how

⁴¹ Thomson employs “late modernity” as a shorthand that I will also adopt for this transformation Heidegger sees *within* modernity (*Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 19). Andrew J. Mitchell makes a similar distinction, albeit in a different idiom, when he argues that “Heidegger’s mature conception of technology surpasses a thinking of objectification” (*The Fourfold: Reading the Late Heidegger*, 25).

Heidegger characterizes modernity, that epoch of the history of being in which we live.⁴² Let us first ask what Heidegger's understanding of modernity has to say about when and how the modern age began. This question might seem more relevant to historians than to philosophers. What philosophical interest could there be in the technical question of dating the beginning of an historical period? Philosophers concerned with modernity have a stake in this question. To define the modern age in terms of its historical boundaries is an essential part of formulating a thesis about (as we discussed in the Introduction) whether or not it is *unique* and *legitimate*. If *We Have Never Been Modern*, as Bruno Latour argues, then the desiderata of modernity have been illegitimate or hypocritical all along because we have never lived up to modernity's idealized self-understanding. In other words, if there is no such thing as a coherent "modern age" with relatively distinct temporal boundaries, a legible philosophical definition, and a conceptually delimited identity, then there is no such age as modernity that needs defending or criticizing. We would have to think about history without the category of "the modern," as indeed Latour suggests we should. On the other end of the spectrum of this debate, if modernity begins at a relatively distinct time—such as at the end of the late Middle Ages with prophetic boundary figures like Nicholas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno—then this discovery would be the first step on the way to establishing what Hans Blumenberg calls *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.⁴³ While Latour calls into question the coherence of the very idea of modernity on the grounds that it never lived up to its

⁴² Charles Bambach is on the right track when he asserts that Heidegger defined modernity "as the Western tradition of philosophical-scientific discourse initiated by Descartes, carried out by the Enlightenment, and dominant in the contemporary crises of scientism and historicism," but this definition demands to be fleshed out with additional detail and clarity (*Dilthey, Heidegger, and the Crisis of Historicism*, 51-52).

⁴³ For an overview of this debate about periodization, see Michael Edward Moore, *Nicholas of Cusa and the Kairos of Modernity: Cassirer, Gadamer, Blumenberg*, 1-28.

ideals and cannot be defined as a discrete historical period, Blumenberg thinks it can be defined as a distinct epoch genuinely different from what came before it, with presuppositions and a sense of significance that define it as a philosophical and cultural achievement. Periodizing means taking a stance on the legitimacy of the modern age.

Heidegger fits into the landscape of this debate surrounding the periodization of modernity.⁴⁴ As I will now argue, Heidegger periodizes. That is, unlike Latour, he thinks modernity has a beginning and boundaries. But unlike Blumenberg, Heidegger is a strong critic of modernity. In this respect, Heidegger stakes out a position less extreme than both Latour and Blumenberg. For Heidegger, modernity's temporal and historical coherence does not render it legitimate. While Blumenberg argues that modernity successfully differentiated itself from the medieval past through what he calls "self-assertion," the immanent human project of survival without relying on external sources like the transcendent or the sacred, Heidegger is skeptical that modernity is as self-enclosed and novel as its defenders insist. For Heidegger, the modern age unknowingly imports earlier values and concepts: "Both the contention that there are 'eternal truths' and the jumbling together of Dasein's phenomenally grounded 'ideality' with an idealized absolute subject, belong to those residues of Christian theology within philosophical problematics which have not as yet been radically extruded" (BT 272/SZ 229).⁴⁵ The modern age, with its proud achievements of subjectivity and scientific objectivity, has in fact merely

⁴⁴ For a response to critics of Heidegger's periodization, see Thomson, *Heidegger on Ontotheology*, 59. Recent Heideggerian periodizers include Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, who provide a narrative of the alienation of the subject/object dichotomy in the wake of the Scientific Revolution and modern epistemology (*Retrieving Realism*, 1-26).

⁴⁵ Karsten Harries calls attention to this important but often-overlooked passage to criticize what he sees as Heidegger's hasty rejection of the ideal of scientific objectivity (*Infinity and Perspective*, 123, 306-307).

secularized Christian theology. To the extent that it relies on ideals like eternal truth, modernity remains unwittingly tied up within the conceptual structure of Christianity.

Nonetheless, despite seeing such continuities between the modern age and what preceded it, Heidegger does think of modernity as a coherent historical epoch, referring repeatedly to “what is called the *modern age* [Neuzeit] in the historical calculation of epochs” (EP 22/GA6.2 424). Insofar as Heidegger engages in this “historical calculation of epochs,” he periodizes. His periodization of the beginning of modernity is, in fact, quite familiar to students of standard narratives of the history of Western philosophy: “One commonly asserts that modern philosophy begins with Descartes... In opposition to periodic attempts to locate the origin of modern philosophy with Meister Eckhart or sometime between Eckhart and Descartes, we must stick to the position held up to this point” (QT 67/GA41 98). As he underscores, Heidegger more or less understands Descartes as having founded modernity: “Descartes can only be overcome through the overcoming of that which he himself founded, through the overcoming, namely, of modern (and that means, at the same time, Western) metaphysics” (OBT 76/GA5 100). Heidegger claims that in Descartes we find “the basic trait [*Grundzug*] of modern thought” (QT 69/GA41 102). In addition to Descartes, Heidegger reserves a special place for the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century in his narrative of the emergence of modernity: “Only in the seventeenth century are the decisive clarifications and foundations [of modernity] achieved” (QT 52/GA41 77). In Heidegger’s periodization, modernity begins with the Scientific Revolution, and with Descartes especially.⁴⁶ Let us now examine why Heidegger thinks modernity emerges around the seventeenth century.

⁴⁶ On Heidegger’s understanding of the origin of modernity, see Graeme Nicholson, “Heidegger, Descartes and the Mathematical,” 216-217. Bambach argues that Heidegger engaged in “a confrontation with the

§1.2.2: Subject/object dichotomy

What did Descartes and the new science of the seventeenth century introduce into European consciousness such that they inaugurated a genuinely new epoch? For Heidegger, the modernity born with Descartes and the Scientific Revolution amounts to a multifaceted phenomenon. For the remainder of §1.2, I will explain these constitutive features of the modern age. This task will prepare us to subsequently understand Heidegger's critical attitude toward these developments. For Heidegger, among the most important contributions of the inaugural founders of modernity, and one that will prove to be a necessary premise for many of the other features, was its dichotomy between subject and object. "The subjectivity of humankind," Heidegger thinks, "characterizes modernity as such" (HB 40/GA69 44). How does Heidegger understand modernity's distinction between subject and object, and what significance does he attach to this dichotomy? Furthermore, what is the connection between the subject/object dichotomy and the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century?

For Heidegger, the theoretical attitude of the new science, in which an investigating, disengaged subject stands over and against an inert object of inquiry conceptualized in terms of the quantified language of the natural sciences, becomes in the modern age constitutive of what it means to be human in general. Heidegger regards this development as an epochal transformation of our self-understanding: "What is decisive is...that the essence of humanity altogether transforms itself in that man becomes the subject" (OBT 66/GA5 88). This movement of human beings into understanding

history of modernity itself, a history whose narrative was guided by underlying Cartesian assumptions" (Heidegger, *Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism*, 46). Finally, Robert Bernasconi concludes that for the later Heidegger, "Descartes stands at the beginning of the modern age (*Neuzeit*) which is a new era of philosophy" ("Descartes in the History of Being: Another Bad Novel?," 92).

themselves as subjects is crucial for Heidegger because it represents the new and increasingly dominant self-understanding of Western humanity. When we think of ourselves as subjects who represent the external world to ourselves all the time, in the same way that the mathematized natural sciences are capable of representing reality within the restricted context of scientific inquiry, we make the world into a picture: “That the world becomes picture [*Bild*] is one and the same process whereby, in the midst of entities, man becomes subject” (OBT 69/GA5 92). Modernity takes the real but limited scenario of a scientist graphically or mathematically representing an object in an experimental and theoretical context, and generalizes it into a conception of what it means to be human at large. Modernity took its cue for what it means to be human from the model of scientific inquiry developed in the seventeenth century. This model originally meant only to describe how scientific experimentation takes place (or ought to take place), but became increasingly central to Western human self-understanding in general. In modernity, human beings are now predominantly subjects. The new science provided the basis for this modern ontological conception of what it means to be human.

This transformation also includes a corresponding understanding of what stands outside human consciousness: “The human uprising [*Aufstand*] into subjectivity makes entities into objects” (OBT 195/GA5 261). The world becomes set before the subject as the object of representation, the process of forming mental images of whatever is external to consciousness, which Heidegger refers to as making the world into a picture. The whole field of the external world is now rendered as objects to be understood, mastered, and controlled by human subjects: “To be the subject now becomes the distinctiveness of man, of man as the being that thinks and represents...the sense in which man is, and must

be, the subject, measure, and center of entities: of, that is, objects [*Objekte*], things which stand over and against [*Gegenstände*]" (OBT 83/GA5 109).⁴⁷ If the human subject's predominant comportment toward the world is to think about and represent it in a highly theoretical and disinterested fashion, then that makes human beings the measure of all things. The external world is now rendered intelligible exclusively in terms of how we stand in relation to it. The subject/object dichotomy entails, then, an overvaluation of the human standpoint. When we become subjects, whatever stands outside our consciousness consequently becomes a field of objects comprehensible and significant only in relation to our representational and objectifying capacities.

An experimenter's interest in an object of inquiry concerns cognitively disclosing its relation to the purposes of the experimenter. Do the object and its behavior confirm or deny a hypothesis? Does the object successfully serve the purposes at hand? In the same way, in the distinction between subject and object, whatever lies outside the boundaries of human subjectivity becomes objects that stand outside and can be understood in relation to our cognitive stance toward them: "The 'I' becomes the preeminent subject, hence that in relation to which the remaining things come to be determined as such... Things are essentially what stand in relation to the 'subject,' and lie over and against the subject as *obiectum*. Things themselves become 'objects'" (QT/GA41 106) In a scientific context, external things matter and (in a significant metaphor) *count* only insofar as they can be intelligibly related to and understood by a disengaged

⁴⁷ See Dreyfus and Taylor's description of Cartesian "mediational" theories of the relation of mind and world: "The reality I want to know is outside the mind; my knowledge of it is within. This knowledge consists in states of mind which purport to represent accurately what is out there. When they do correctly and reliably represent this reality, then there is knowledge. I have knowledge of things only through... these inner states, which we can call 'ideas'" (*Retrieving Realism*, 2). On Heidegger's understanding and critique of Cartesian epistemology, see also Guignon, *Heidegger and the Problem of Knowledge*, 150-168.

experimenter. The modern distinction between subject and object makes this conception constitutive of our relation to reality in general: “All entities...are either the object of a subject or the subject of a subject...World becomes object” (OBT 191/GA5 256).

Modernity entails a specific understanding of human beings as subjects separate from objects and possessed of representational capacities, and of a reality of objects outside consciousness capable of being pictured or represented. Reality gets carved up into dual, exclusive spheres of conscious subjects and objects that stand outside consciousness.

§1.2.3: Modern natural science

I have explained Heidegger’s understanding of the modern distinction between subject and object. Crucial to that understanding is its connection with and foundation in the natural sciences whose founding allegedly constituted the beginning of modernity.

Modernity modeled its conception of what it means to be human, and of how humans relate to the world, on the activity of natural science: “We have characterized our Dasein, experienced here and now, as essentially determined by science” (P 95/GA9 120). Now we must take stock of Heidegger’s conception of modern natural science, which is central to how he thinks of the modern age in general.⁴⁸ When listing the “essential phenomena of modernity [*wesentlichen Erscheinungen der Neuzeit*]” at the start of “The Age of the World Picture,” the first feature that Heidegger mentions, the one that occupies pride of place, is “its science” (OBT 57/GA5 75). For Heidegger, the two most important features

⁴⁸ Scholars of Heidegger’s philosophy of science emphasize that for the later Heidegger, science is essential for understanding modernity in general. See Trish Glazebrook: “Science is not incidental, nor merely symptomatic of modernity for Heidegger. Rather, it is essential. It is that on the basis of which the modern epoch is determined” (“From φύσις to Nature, τέχνη to Technology: Heidegger on Aristotle, Galileo, and Newton,” 108); and Joseph Rouse: “[Science] is...an activity which makes sense only within the modern age, and which indicates what modernity is all about” (“Heidegger’s Later Philosophy of Science,” 76).

of modern natural science are that they are, first, mathematical in character and, second, designed to master and control nature.

In formulating one of the most famous metaphors in the history of science, Galileo claimed that the “Book of Nature” is written in the language of mathematics:

Philosophy is written in this all-encompassing book that is constantly open before our eyes, that is the universe; but it cannot be understood unless one first learns to understand the language and knows the characters in which it is written. It is written in mathematical language, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometrical figures; without these it is humanly impossible to understand a word of it, and one wanders around pointlessly in a dark labyrinth. (EG 183)

Galileo suggests that nature is meant to be accessed, read, and interpreted by human beings and the conceptual schemes appropriate for their understanding.⁴⁹ Heidegger assigns enormous significance to this essential connection between mathematics and modern natural science: “In the essence of the mathematical... there lies a distinctive will to the new formation and self-justification of the form of knowing as such” (QT 66/GA41 97). How does Heidegger understand the mathematical, and what significance does it contribute to the character of modernity? When Heidegger argues that modern natural science is distinguished by its mathematical character, he refers to its capacity for projection, the determination of “what and how [things] ought to be evaluated in advance” (QT 63/GA41 92).⁵⁰ He suggests that the mathematization of nature that occurs with modern natural science, in which we understand nature as completely comprehensible in terms of mathematics, means that we conceive of natural phenomena, in advance of our investigation, as legible by means of the concepts that we contribute:

⁴⁹ Harries lucidly explicates this crucial modern ideal derived from Galileo at *Infinity and Perspective*, 122, 265. See also Alexandre Koyré’s account of the new science’s “dream *de reductione scientiae ad mathematicam*” (*From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, 99).

⁵⁰ See Nicholson, “Heidegger, Descartes and the Mathematical,” 225.

“The mathematical is that ‘in’ things which we really already know; hence, what we do not first have to fetch from things, but what we bring along with us in a certain way” (QT 50/GA41 74). Projection means that modern natural science assumes in advance that nature will correspond to and confirm our mathematical concepts: “Something is specified in advance as that which is already known” (OBT 59/GA5 78). In the First Critique, Kant codified this line of thought from the Scientific Revolution when he claimed that “reason has insight only into what it itself produces according to its own design” (CPR Bxiii). We contribute our mathematical concepts in advance, and investigate nature on the assumption that it will be legible to us on those terms.

This conception of the relation between nature and mathematics entails making assumptions about nature. Assuming the legibility of nature in terms of the language of mathematics makes a totalizing claim about nature, referred to by Heidegger as “the grasping-in-advance [*Vorausgriff*] of the essence of things” (QT 63/GA41 93).⁵¹ Nature is now understood uniformly, as a whole, and in advance as a set of phenomena that will conform to the consistent and absolute mathematized laws of the natural sciences. Nature just is the way mathematics predicts for us that it will be. With this projected assumption of the essence of things comes a corresponding view of all of nature as possible objects of scientific investigation, as available for and to us: “The mathematical is that basic stance toward things in which we must take them up at the behest of that as which they already are, must, and should be given to us” (QT 51/GA41 76). Modern natural science assumes that phenomena are given to us in virtue of the concepts we contribute to our

⁵¹ This point is emphasized by Dreyfus, “How Heidegger Defends the Possibility of a Correspondence Theory of Truth with respect to the Entities of Natural Science,” 156. Latour follows Heidegger’s idea here when he argues that modernity “creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other” (*We Have Never Been Modern*, 10-11).

investigation. Science “posits conditions [*Bedingungen*] in advance to which nature must in some way answer” (QT 63/GA41 93). Nothing can escape the gaze of mathematics; all of nature becomes subject to its projected laws and concepts.

This consequence of the mathematical character of the modern natural sciences implies their second essential feature on Heidegger’s account. Recall the basis in the new science for the subject/object distinction: Whatever lies outside consciousness becomes an object that can be related to human subjectivity, on the model of a scientific investigator who approaches an object of inquiry. Thus, the second main feature of the modern natural sciences for Heidegger is their orientation toward controlling nature. In the 1637 *Discourse on Method*, Descartes crucially claimed that the new science would provide human beings with the practical power to give us mastery over nature:

Through this philosophy, we could know the power and action of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens and all the other bodies in our environment, as distinctly as we know the various crafts of our artisans; and we could use this knowledge—as the artisans use theirs—for all the purposes for which it is appropriate, and thus make ourselves, as it were, the lords and masters of nature. (CSM I 142-143)⁵²

We shall return to this epochally significant claim numerous times throughout this dissertation. Consonant with this Cartesian formulation, Heidegger understands modern natural science as “a way of objectifying entities in a calculative manner” (P 231/GA9 303). Since the mathematical character of the new science entails that nature is comprehensible in the language of mathematics, which makes the natural world available and given to us, it was not a stretch for modern natural science to construe nature as a set of opportunities for our practical usage. For the new science, on Heidegger’s understanding, nature lies in wait for us to do something with it: “The struggle for

⁵² In his Heideggerian account of early modernity, Harries also makes much of this aspect of the modern natural sciences with reference to this passage from Descartes (*Infinity and Perspective*, 292).

mastery over the earth [*Erdherrschaft*]...therefore determines all human transactions in this age, explicitly or not, hiddenly or openly” (OBT 185/GA5 247). Our age is determined by science, and our science in turn becomes determined by its guiding attempt to master and control a nature that lies open before us to be not only read and understood, but also technologically made use of.⁵³

This scientific attempt to control nature as a whole has the consequence that “nature appears everywhere as the object of technology” (OBT 191/GA5 256). The logic of modern natural science makes all of nature into its object, and this conceptualization sets the stage for technology as “the objectification of nature” (CPC 77/GA77 12). The connection between technology and science should not mislead us into thinking that technology is merely applied science: “One should not, however, misconstrue this [technology] as the mere application of modern mathematical science to praxis. Machine technology is itself an autonomous transformation of praxis, a transformation which first demands the employment of mathematical science” (OBT 56/GA5 75). Technology is, for Heidegger, though of course caught up with modern scientific developments, even more significant than that. It is equivalent to the essence of the late modern metaphysics identified with Nietzschean eternally recurring will to power: “Technology is in its essence a destiny within the history of being” (P 259/GA9 340).⁵⁴ In other words, technology follows from the understanding of being of modernity and late modernity and

⁵³ See Glazebrook, “Heidegger on Aristotle, Galileo, and Newton,” 96; and Rouse, “Heidegger’s Later Philosophy of Science,” 309. Thomson disputes this emphasis on science as control on the grounds that enframing means that subjects no longer control anything, including science and technology (*Heidegger on Ontotheology*, 60). I would emphasize that Heidegger clearly does think modern science is *intended* for mastery of nature, even if that process spins out of our control in our late-modern, technological age.

⁵⁴ The connection between Heidegger’s view of metaphysics and of technology has been developed by several commentators, including Thomson, *Heidegger on Ontotheology*, 44; Young, *Heidegger’s Later Philosophy*, 37; and Zimmerman, *Heidegger’s Confrontation with Modernity*, 248.

thus shapes our possibilities for thought and action without predetermining them or constituting an irrevocable fate.

Deriving from our contemporary ontotheological understanding of being, technology governs and undergirds scientific practice, relentlessly driving it to turn everything in nature, including human beings, into resources that be ordered, controlled, and made efficient and flexible: “Not at home in his own essence, [the human subject] arrogantly purports to master [*zu meistern*] the world and to rule over and bring to order the various realms of humanity” (CPC 67/GA77 104).⁵⁵ Technology follows the orientation and direction of modern science since Galileo and Descartes. The Cartesian attempt “to master the world” gives rise eventually to the attempt to master ourselves. But to think of technology as merely applied science would be to think of technology as something that human beings themselves control, as if we could choose whether or not to deploy technological applications of theoretical science. Heidegger warns against a scenario in which “we confirm our own opinion that technology is of man’s making alone [*nur eine Sache des Menschen*],” such as when technology is sanguinely and confidently trumpeted as the solution to, and never the source of, humanity’s existential threats (ID 34/GA11 43). Instead, technology is something that is no longer up to us; indeed, it is increasingly applied *to* us. Technology is, at this stage of late modernity, the essence of scientific practice, an essence with its own brutal and unyielding internal logic.

Everything in nature becomes seen as a chance not only to be understood in the language

⁵⁵ See Dreyfus: “The essence of modern technology...is to seek to order everything so as to achieve more and more flexibility and efficiency” (“Heidegger on the Connection,” 305); Rouse: “[Entities] are now revealed as standing on call (*Bestand*), pliantly and interchangeably at the disposal of ordering activity” (“Heidegger’s Later Philosophy of Science,” 307); and Thomson: The technological understanding of being “encourages us late moderns implicitly to understand, and so generally to treat, all the entities with which we deal, ourselves included, as intrinsically meaningless *Bestand*, mere ‘resources’ standing by to be optimized, ordered, and enhanced with maximum efficiency” (*Heidegger on Ontotheology*, 44).

of mathematics, but also to be an opportunity for the designs and purposes of a technological logic that seeks only to make everything more efficient and optimized.

§1.2.4: Transformation of truth

In the wake of the subject/object dichotomy and the methodology of natural science from which it derived arrives a distinctively modern and “transformed [*gewandeltes*] essence of truth” to which Heidegger attaches considerable significance (EP 16/GA6.2 417).

Understanding how this transformation occurs requires seeing what, on Heidegger’s analysis, truth meant before modernity and how the modern age, in light of its science, redefined truth. What was truth before the modern age? To cut a complicated story short, according to Heidegger, in the ancient Greek world we find a primordial understanding of truth: “Truth originally means what has been wrested from hiddenness. Truth is thus a wresting away in each case, in the form of a revealing. The hiddenness can be of various kinds: closing off, hiding away, disguising, covering over, masking, dissembling” (P 171/GA9 223).⁵⁶ This ancient understanding of truth was that of *alêtheia*, which Heidegger translates as *Unverborgenheit* or unconcealedness. Truth gets revealed from and uncovered out of nature to receptive human beings.⁵⁷ The crucial feature of this ancient concept was that truth belonged to entities, and it could be revealed to human beings under certain conditions. Heidegger calls this kind of truth “the shining (the self-showing) [*das Scheinen (Sichzeigen)*] that, within its essence and in a singular self-relatedness, may yet be called unhiddenness” (P 179/GA9 234). As what belongs to entities, truth reveals itself to human beings from within nature. Humans consequently

⁵⁶ One of numerous reasons why this narrative is so complex is that Heidegger thinks this transformation begins as early as Plato, a hermeneutic argument he develops in “Plato’s Doctrine of Truth” (P 155-182/GA9 203-238). There is also a decisive shift in how truth is understood *within modernity* in particular.

⁵⁷ See Mark A. Wrathall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment: Truth, Language, and History*, 11-34.

treat the natural world in which this truth resides, uncovers itself, and occasionally comes out of hiding, with the appropriate awe and wonder.⁵⁸ The natural world is that domain which occasionally reveals its hidden riches, which become manifest or evident to us. In encountering entities, human beings find truth uncovered and revealed to them.

For Heidegger, the modern age abandons this ancient and primordial concept of truth in favor of a new understanding. Blumenberg captures this modern transformation: “The truth does not reveal itself; it must *be revealed*.”⁵⁹ The operative change in the modern understanding of truth concerns the role of human agents in actively revealing truth. In the previous idea of truth as *alêtheia* or unconcealedness, truth revealed itself from out of entities to passive and receptive human beings. But in modernity, truth comes to be understood as an active accomplishment of human subjects: “What is everywhere essential is the fact that ‘presence’ is explicitly related back to a kind of ego, and is really accomplished by that ego as its own essential activity” (EP 45/GA6.2 450). Heidegger claims that constitutive of the particularly modern notion of truth is its “detachment from revelation as the first source of truth and the rejection of tradition as authoritative” (QT 66/GA41 97). Heidegger anticipates Blumenberg’s later formulation of this shift. For the modern age, the truth does not reveal itself, but instead human subjects must reveal the truth for themselves by means of their active contributions. Thus he emphasizes that the modern age treats truth as belonging to human beings as knowers of objects: “Truth is no longer, as it was qua unhiddenness, the fundamental trait of being itself. Instead... truth has become correctness, and henceforth it will be a characteristic of the knowing of

⁵⁸ David E. Cooper nicely and succinctly describes this attitude as things having a sense of “depth, resonance, and mystery” (“Truth, Science, Thinking, and Distress,” 57).

⁵⁹ “Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Concept Formation,” 52.

beings” (P 179/GA9 234). In modernity, truth does not belong to entities or to being but rather gets accomplished by a subject who wants to know an object.

In describing this shift, one must emphasize the role of the subject and its attendant model of scientific practice. The modern distinction between subjects and objects entails a new conception of truth. If the relationship between the human being and reality is understood on the model of a scientific investigator standing opposite an object of inquiry, then truth consequently gets conceived as the proper correspondence between the subject with what stands outside subjectivity in the world: “The I, as ‘I think,’ is the ground [*Grund*] upon which all certainty and truth are henceforth laid” (QT 72/GA41 106).⁶⁰ The new science brings a corresponding transformation of truth. The problematic of the “veil of perception” between a knowing subject and a field of objects outside the realm of consciousness entails an understanding of truth as the correct linkage between these two realms, when the subject’s mental representations, propositions, or ideas correctly hook onto the object in the world that it purports to be about. The veil of perception emerged paradigmatically with the epistemological and scientific project of modernity, and hence Heidegger explicitly associates this emergent understanding of truth as correspondence with Descartes: “It is in the metaphysics of Descartes that, for the first time, the entity is defined as the objectness of representation, and truth as the certainty of representation” (OBT 66/GA5 87).⁶¹ If the human relationship to the world is that of a subject standing against an object, or of a scientific inquirer against the object of investigation, then truth becomes the proper correspondence between two disparate

⁶⁰ For this reason, I cannot accept the ordering Cooper proposes: “It is, as Heidegger sees it, a momentous shift in our understanding of truth that has brought in its wake the dominance of science” (“Truth, Science, Thinking, and Distress, 58). It seems to me that truth gets redefined *in the wake of* a new understanding of science and the metaphysical understanding of being that science expressed.

⁶¹ See Wrathall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment*, 224.

realms, mind and world, representation and what is to be represented. Truth is now “certainty of representational thinking” (EP 23/GA6.2 425). When Heidegger refers to modern truth as representational correctness or certainty, he means the mode of truth proper to subjects representing objects.

We must recognize that Heidegger does not reject the correspondence theory of truth in general. As Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall argue, Heidegger accepts correspondence within the restricted realm of natural scientific investigation to which it is appropriate and argues that correspondence is not mutually exclusive with, but in fact depends on, the primordial revealing of truth characteristic of unconcealedness.⁶² Only because the world is capable of showing itself to us can we make assertions that can be true in the sense of correspondence. Unconcealedness makes correspondence possible; that the world is capable of occasionally revealing its truth to human beings means that sometimes our subjective ideas or representations can correctly correspond to reality. For this reason, Heidegger can be surprisingly laudatory of scientific practice—surprising relative to his confused and misleading reputation as critical of natural science in general—such as when he refers to “the greatness and superiority of natural science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,” precisely when this model of scientific practice was innovated and modernity was born (QT 45/GA41 67).⁶³ The greatness of science comes from its achievement of its own mode of access to the truth of entities. But modernity illegitimately generalizes this understanding into a reified conception applied to all

⁶² Dreyfus, “How Heidegger Defends the Possibility,” 153; and Wrathall, “Heidegger and Truth as Correspondence,” 70.

⁶³ Habermas provides the most egregious misreading of Heidegger as anti-science: “A further implication of Heidegger’s later philosophy is that the critique of modernity is made independent of scientific analysis” (*The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 139). Far from opposed to science, Heidegger wants merely to make sure that scientific knowledge and its concept of truth do not overstep their proper boundaries.

instances of truth. Heidegger does not reject modern natural science, then, but rather recognizes its legitimate claim to truth only within a restricted domain.

This argument about truth fits together with Heidegger's understanding of the subject/object dichotomy. That dichotomy may correctly model what it is like to be an experimenter standing opposite an object of inquiry, but it surely cannot properly describe what it is like to be a human being first of all and most of the time. Just as modernity makes subjectivity the model of the human relationship to reality as a whole, so too does it generalize correspondence as the paradigm of truth. Another consonance between the subject/object ontological divide and the modern understanding of truth as correspondence is the way both are rooted in the new science that emerged in the seventeenth century. For Heidegger, modern mathematized natural science has colonized or occupied our collective understanding of what it means to be human and of truth. In this way, the sciences prove decisive for modern Western humanity.

§1.2.5: The rise of aesthetics

In addition to natural science, art is another domain in which Heidegger writes extensively about truth. Like science, art for Heidegger importantly reveals how we moderns think about the truth of entities. Not coincidentally, after science and technology, "the process of art's moving into the purview of aesthetics" is third on Heidegger's list of the "essential phenomena of modernity" from "The Age of the World Picture" (OBT 57/GA5 75). Aesthetics, for Heidegger, names not just any neutral philosophical discourse about the arts, but a particular and distinctively modern approach

to art that has to be called into question.⁶⁴ What connects aesthetics to Heidegger's understanding of the modern age as we have been unfolding it? He provides the answer later in the same passage: "This [the movement of the artwork into the realm of aesthetics] means the artwork becomes an object of lived-experience [*Erlebens*] and consequently is considered to be an expression of human life" (OBT 57/GA5 75). For Heidegger, then, the salient feature of aesthetics amounts to the way it makes an artwork into an object. Aesthetics, like all the phenomena of the modern age, presupposes the distinction between subject and object. The paradigm of aesthetics on Heidegger's analysis involves a disengaged subject opposite an artwork viewed as an object outside of consciousness, something that must be approached as if it were across a bridge or a gulf. This general conception of the human relation to reality follows, as we have seen, from the scientific model of an experimenter standing against an object of inquiry.

Instead of approaching an aesthetic object in order to acquire scientific knowledge about it, aesthetic objects provide subjects with a particular kind of experience:

Aesthetics treated the artwork as an object, as indeed an object of...sensory apprehension in a broad sense. These days, such apprehension is called a "lived-experience." The way in which man experiences [*erlebt*] art in life is supposed to inform us about its essential nature. Lived-experience is the standard-giving source not only for the appreciation and enjoyment of art but also for its creation. Everything is lived-experience. (OBT 50/GA5 67)

Heidegger here expresses skepticism about the idea that our encounters with artworks paradigmatically constitute private experiences.⁶⁵ For aesthetics, since it presupposes the

⁶⁴ Thomson puts this point succinctly: "Heidegger is against the modern tradition of philosophical 'aesthetics' because he is for the true 'work of art' which, he argues, the aesthetic approach to art eclipses" (*Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 40). I follow the contours of Thomson's discussion, which here agrees with Gadamer's reference to "the prejudices that are present in the concept of a philosophical aesthetics...In the last analysis, we need to overcome the concept of aesthetics itself" (HW 100/GW3 253).

⁶⁵ On Heidegger's critique of private experience, see Dreyfus, "Heidegger on the Connection," 292; and Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 48-51.

modern distinction between subject and object, subjects approach artworks that stand outside and apart from them. Subjects come away from this encounter with not only a representation endowed with conceptual content, as in a scientific approach toward an object to produce knowledge, but also paradigmatically pleasure: “Our fundamental relationship to a work of art is one of ‘enjoyment’: the savoring of ‘stirrings in the soul’ and dabbling in nice feelings” (HH 4/GA39 5). In a lived aesthetic experience of an artwork, our perceptual apparatuses get affected by an external object, which consequently gets conceptualized by the capacities by which we form a mental representation. The salient feature of our experience of aesthetic objects is that they provide us with private and lived feelings of pleasure, enjoyment, and positive sensations that, in the history of aesthetics, have been provided by experiences of beauty that we then take away from our fleeting encounter with the object. This story is what Heidegger refers to when he talks about the aesthetic approach to art as one of a private and lived experience. What gets taken from the encounter with an artwork is something held within the consciousness of the experiencing subject. Aesthetic experience produces memories, feelings, and pleasures, which are all mental states held within the consciousness of an individual subject after an experience of some external and aesthetic object.

In its formulation of encounters with artworks as private experiences, aesthetics depends on the dichotomy between subject and object constitutive of modernity in general. In aesthetics, the subject/object distinction comes to colonize art, as it has all aspects of our culture. In this respect, aesthetics already counts as questionable because of its paradigmatically modern background. Heidegger also thinks aesthetics is impoverished because of the great importance he attaches to how art implicitly informs

our sense of truth and of what is important in a culture. For this reason, he thinks “lived-experience is the element in which art dies” (OBT 50/GA5 67). Understanding artworks as primarily allowing private experiences of pleasure diminishes the power of art to disclose truth: “The essential nature of art would then be this: the setting-into-work of the truth of entities” (OBT 16/GA5 21). On Heidegger’s understanding, truth dynamically happens in art. In art, we see what a culture takes the truth of entities to be. A pair of shoes rendered by van Gogh, one of the main examples Heidegger employs in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” shows the truth about what entities mean in our culture: “In the work, when there is a disclosure of the being as what and how it is, there is a happening [*Geschehen*] of truth at work...In the work, a being, a pair of peasant shoes, comes to stand in the light of its being” (OBT 16/GA5 21). In van Gogh’s painting, we catch an especially vivid and clarifying glimpse of what we take a thing to be.

Heidegger, against the modern understanding of truth as first of all and most of the time correspondence, thinks of truth as most primordially and fundamentally disclosure or unconcealedness. The being of entities reveals itself to us out of its hiding place within nature; human beings are able to witness how the world discloses itself to us. In great works of art like van Gogh’s, Heidegger thinks, what it means to be gets established. One possible sense of the excessive meaning of the being of entities gets closed off temporarily in a culture’s shared understanding of being, and art expresses that understanding for an age in a particularly vivid and influential way. Art has a world-disclosing function; it sets up a paradigm of how our culture understands the being of entities.⁶⁶ The truth about entities gets painted and expressed by great artists: “Art is,

⁶⁶ See Dreyfus, “Heidegger on the Connection,” 298; Gadamer, HW 103/GW3 256; and Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 43.

then, a becoming and happening [*ein Werden und Geschehen*] of truth” (OBT 44/GA5 59). This conceptualization of the significance of an artwork stands in contrast to the aesthetic understanding, which is paradigmatically concerned only with private feelings of pleasure. The dynamic happening of truth in art supersedes private experience because it reveals something about the truth of reality as a whole, which indeed exceeds and does not depend on subjective states. Aesthetics, meanwhile, thinks of art as merely reflecting and producing intense subjective states. The aesthetic understanding establishes a demarcation between appreciating subjects and aesthetic objects that produce feelings, whereas for Heidegger, art reveals truths about the world in a way that escapes or undermines this modern distinction and shows how an entire community of human beings can think about truth in an ontological sense that concerns being and reality as a whole.

For Heidegger, the most important thing about art is its connection to truth in the ontological sense of disclosure. That art and truth make a surprising pair in our culture is part of Heidegger’s central point. He holds art to a higher standard for what it can accomplish than thinking of artworks as merely enabling private sensations of pleasure: “This orientation toward ‘aesthetic pleasure’ is in fact a misunderstanding of art” (HH 4/GA39 5). This reductive but pervasive modern understanding of art, which depends on the subject/object dichotomy and the scientific invasion and takeover of our understanding of truth, cuts it off from its connection to truth and the power to disclose a world: “The poem does not ‘express’ lived-experience; rather, it takes the poet into the open realm of his essence, which was opened up as a poem” (EHP 172/GA4 151). The essence of a poem, as of every work of art, is to allow the truth that resides in the world and in entities to open itself up to us, which is quite different from the modern aesthetic

understanding that presupposes an ontological dichotomy between an appreciating subject and an aesthetic object, thus construing the purview of art as subjective states.

Thus, Heidegger calls aesthetics into question not only for its connections to the general aspects of the modern age that we have already outlined, but for the additional reason that it greatly reduces art's expansive and disclosive role with regard to truth.

§1.2.6: Late modernity and nihilism

Heidegger understands modernity as an epoch in the history of being. “Metaphysics grounds an age,” including our own (OBT 57/GA5 75). So far, we have traced the main features of how Heidegger understands this epoch in the history of being. I have referred several times to the fact that Heidegger sees a transformation *within modernity* to an understanding of the meaning of being that is not identical with the mainline modern one, identifiable with figures such as Galileo and Descartes, but rather builds upon and modifies that modern framework. This is Heidegger's understanding of *late modernity*, our contemporary understanding of being, which takes over features of modernity by radicalizing them in subtle but important ways. I shall now outline some of the main features of late modernity, which names our contemporary ontotheology.

In my outline of the history of being (§1.1.2), I discussed how Nietzsche's metaphysics of eternally recurring will to power is Heidegger's avatar for late modernity—the philosophical expression that he identifies as most clearly capturing how we think about the being of entities. Being is thought of here as equivalent to becoming, an endless swirl of competing forces without an overall purpose or goal and hence described as the “will to will” (EP 48/GA6.2 453). The expression “will to will” signifies that will to power, whose highest instantiation is the eternal recurrence of the same,

desires only its own continuance, which requires endless and pointless conflict. Now that we have more fully characterized how Heidegger understands modernity, we are better positioned to see how late modernity understood in this Nietzschean way is an outgrowth of the modern age: “In the age when the modern era enters its fulfillment [*Vollendung*] Nietzsche sharpens the previous thesis still further” (P 179/GA9 233). The best way to sum this transformation up is as a movement from subjectivism to enframing.⁶⁷ The subject/object dichotomy characterizes modernity most fundamentally, as evidenced by the way we have traced it across multiple domains of the modern age. Late modernity’s distinctive contribution to this framework is to see both objects outside of human subjectivity and human subjects themselves as resources to be controlled toward the end of maximum efficiency. Subjects now objectify themselves. Heidegger characterizes this movement as the consummation (*Vollendung*) of modern metaphysics:

The metaphysics of modernity begins with and has its essence in the fact that modern metaphysics seeks the absolutely undoubtable, what is certain, certainty...So the ego becomes *subiectum*, i.e., the subject becomes self-consciousness...In Nietzsche’s doctrine of the will to power as the “essence” of all reality, the modern metaphysics of subjectivity is completed. (OBT 178/GA5 238).

Late modernity moves from the subject/object dichotomy to the metaphysics of will to power. Not only do objects lie outside consciousness, but they now have no intrinsic meaning or autonomy apart from serving the interests of efficiency, optimization, and other such values. While the subject was understood by the earlier modern age as the master of the process of objectifying reality on the model of an experimenter with a desired end to which the object must answer, the decisive step constitutive of late modernity is to say that the purposes and goals to which objects as well as subjects are

⁶⁷ This is how Thomson frames the issue at *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 57-62.

put now lie outside the control of any subject. The only intelligible purposes and goals now belong to the internal logic of an understanding of being. This state of enframing is like a vehicle barreling along without a driver, which Heidegger refers to as “the hidden position of modern metaphysics that is bringing itself to completion” (OBT 185/GA5 248). This step forward within the modern subject/object distinction gets made on the basis of the modernity that began with Descartes and the Scientific Revolution; it is only within this framework that Nietzsche emerges. The leap is from a stage in which the meaning of entities is related wholly to the purposes of the subject to the related but importantly different enframing according to which even the subject has lost control. All that matters now is efficiency and forward motion for their own sake.

In our late-modern age, we are especially prone to thinking in the impoverished terms of values, which we mistakenly think accords worth to things independently of us but which is in fact the highest expression of this late-modern twist on the subject/object dichotomy.⁶⁸ Heidegger argues that it is “precisely through the characterization of something as ‘a value [*Wert*]’ [that] what is so valued is robbed of its worth [*Würde*]. That is to say, by the assessment of something as a value what is valued is admitted only as an object for human estimation” (P 265/GA9 349). To illustrate what Heidegger means, consider references to the value of the natural environment. In this conceptualization, we consider the meaning and worth of the environment in human terms by placing it under the rubric of values related to human conceptual schemes. Thus, thinking in terms of values encompasses both subjectivism and enframing; things become justified only on the basis of how they are connected to human interests and in human

⁶⁸ For Heidegger’s critique of value thinking and its connection with the way things lose their grip on us, see Dreyfus, “Heidegger on the Connection,” 291-293.

terms: “Every valuing, even when it values positively, is a subjectivizing” (P 265/GA9 349). Values are projected by human beings onto things. When we think in terms of values, we think in human-centered terms, in a vocabulary that thinks of things in terms of how they matter from the human perspective. In this way, we bring the worth of things into the human realm and make their meaning wholly dependent on, and important to, us.

According to Heidegger, in late modernity, things outside of or beyond human consciousness, subjectivity, and purpose have lost their grip on us. Everything is now related to human goals and designs, even if we no longer fully control those goals and designs ourselves. Nothing has worth apart from us and the totalizing ontotheological understanding we have lost control over, according to which the meaning of entities is expressed by will to power and their highest instantiation is eternal recurrence. The radical contingency of the worth of things understood as mere value means we could just as easily lose our interest in fulfilling and meaningful things, and hence they would thereby become meaningless for us. If all value depends on humanity, then under certain conditions, we could let all meaning slip through our fingers in the instance that we are insufficiently attentive or have simply lost interest. For this reason, Heidegger refers to “a nihilism that we invented for ourselves” (P 264/GA9 348). Through our radically subjectivistic ontotheology that grew out of the anthropocentric logic whose inauguration marked the beginning of modernity, we have infected ourselves with the disease of the possible meaninglessness of all things. The radical contingency of value is dangerous because it means that the meaning things possess could be lost at any time. This is

Heidegger's understanding of the nihilism constitutive of our age, and which will prove to be decisive for the argument that justifies his critique of modernity.⁶⁹

Heidegger thinks that modernity has a definite historical beginning around the time of the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century (§1.2.1), is governed by the dichotomy between subject and object (§1.2.2), models its ontology on a mathematized natural science operating with the ideal of mastering and controlling entities (§1.2.3), transforms the meaning of truth to be primarily correspondence (§1.2.4), and reduces our approach to art to an aestheticized relation (§1.2.5). With this theory of modernity as the backdrop, Heidegger argues that the internal logic of the modern age bottoms out in late-modern enframing and the corresponding threat of nihilism (§1.2.6).

§1.3: Critique of modernity

§1.3.1: Anti-modern reactionary or considered critique?

In this section, I want to answer two main questions. First, is Heidegger a totalizing reactionary opposed to the entirety of the modern age? Second, insofar as he is critical of modernity, as he surely is, what constitutes the main ground of his critique? The overall goal of §1.3 is to clarify Heidegger's attitude toward modernity in light of his methods for confronting the past and of his understanding of the modern age in particular. Turning now to my first question, a more ideologically neutral description of what I referred to as an anti-modern reactionary is provided by Charles Taylor, who refers to modernity's "knockers" who "condemn...modernity en bloc," by which he means they indiscriminately "condemn the whole movement of thought and practice" characteristic

⁶⁹ See Thomson, *Heidegger on Ontotheology*, 43.

of the modern age.⁷⁰ Such a totalizing attitude toward modernity fairly describes that of the conservative Christian novelist and medievalist C.S. Lewis, who sneeringly declared of the Renaissance, surely one of the early crowning achievements at the threshold of modernity: “The so-called Renaissance produced three disasters: the invention of gunpowder, the invention of printing, and the discovery of America.”⁷¹ Here we can discern the defining characteristics of what Taylor calls modernity’s “knockers”: A minimization (indeed, perhaps even erasure) of the achievements of modernity, the association of the modern age with “disaster” full-stop, and a tone of scornful contempt characteristic of an ideologue who wants to say that an entire age has been a mistake.

Would it be fair to describe Heidegger as belonging to this camp? Thomas Sheehan certainly suggests as much when he refers to Heidegger’s “Solzhenitsyn-like jeremiad against modernity.”⁷² For Sheehan, Heidegger’s sloppy and one-sided cultural criticism overlooks the fact that “modern subjectivity, in and of itself, is a glorious fact that should be celebrated, along with all its humanizing achievements, including calculative thinking, scientific discoveries, and technological advancements,” the failure to account for which what makes Heidegger’s work on modernity “outside the pale of serious discussion.”⁷³ Sheehan deems Heidegger’s thinking of the modern age unserious because it amounts to a kneejerk and reactionary rejection of modernity a reading shared by numerous other writers on Heidegger.⁷⁴ But Heidegger’s theory and critique of

⁷⁰ *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, 186.

⁷¹ Quoted in H.L. Wesseling, *A Cape of Asia: Essays on European History*, 106.

⁷² *Making Sense of Heidegger: A Paradigm Shift*, 283. See also see Zimmerman’s claim that Heidegger’s ideas “were consistent with those of certain other members of the ‘conservative revolution’” in Germany (*Heidegger’s Confrontation with Modernity*, 46).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 210 and 293.

⁷⁴ See Habermas: “Heidegger can so fundamentally de-struct modern reason that he no longer distinguishes between the universalistic contents of humanism, enlightenment, and even positivism, on the one side, and the particularistic, self-assertive representations of racism and nationalism, or of retrospectively oriented

modernity is both deeper and subtler than Sheehan gives it credit. Sheehan misses the mark in saying that Heidegger rejects “subjectivity.” This sweeping claim is unfortunately representative of many all too shallow readings of Heidegger’s critique of modernity. As we have seen, Heidegger does not criticize “subjectivity” as such. Indeed, he is keenly interested in human beings as agents. Rather, he criticizes the phenomenological inaccuracy of the ontological structure of the subject/object distinction and attendant phenomena in our culture such as modern technology. A sufficiently detailed reckoning with Heidegger’s critique of modernity requires coming to terms with these specific and detailed argumentative claims. In contrast to caricatures like Sheehan’s, and building upon the earlier sections of this chapter, I characterize Heidegger as developing a *considered critique* of modernity guided by specific methodological commitments, a detailed analysis of the nature of modernity, and grounded in a widely encompassing yet focused criticism of modernity’s stance toward being. Heidegger, then, counts as a critic of the modern age without being a “knocker” in Taylor’s sense.

Any analysis of Heidegger on modernity would be remiss, however, to omit the numerous moments where his characterizations of the modern age sound quite one-sided, totalizing, and indeed reactionary. Once again, I quote the following passage from *Being and Time*: “Both the contention that there are ‘eternal truths’ and the jumbling together of Dasein’s phenomenally grounded ‘ideality’ with an idealized absolute subject, belong to those residues of Christian theology within philosophical problematics which have not as

typological doctrines in the style of Spengler and Jünger, on the other side” (*The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 133-134). Latour makes a similarly overhasty claim: “Heidegger treats the modern world as the visitors treat Heraclitus: with contempt” (*We Have Never Been Modern*, 66). Finally, Peter Trawny falsely claims that, “If Heidegger uses the concept ‘modernity’ at all, he uses it in quotation marks,” explicitly associating Heidegger with a politicized “anti-modernism” (“Heidegger, ‘World Judaism,’ and Modernity,” 18). As I hope to show, this family of interpretations is one-sided at best.

yet been radically extruded” (BT 272/SZ 229). Here some of the main features of modernity—namely, subjectivity and truth as a timeless correspondence rather than unconcealedness—get linked in a fundamental way to a hidden Christian heritage lurking within the modern age. The unconscious unoriginality of modernity’s central concepts renders it illegitimate. The underlying and unseen Christian foundations of modernity must be “radically extruded.” Hence, Heidegger implies here in 1927 that, in virtue of their status as suspiciously Christian holdovers, modernity’s central features must be eliminated, suggesting a wholesale condemnation of the modern age.

Indeed, Heidegger frequently and hastily associates the main features of the modern age with historical developments to which he has an ambivalent or even outright hostile relationship, thus implying the questionableness of modernity in general. In 1939-1940, he makes the following surprising remark: “‘Communism,’ however, is no mere form of state, nor simply a kind of political worldview, but rather the *metaphysical* constitution [*Verfassung*] in which the humankind of modernity finds itself as soon as the consummation of modernity begins its final stage” (HB 174-175/GA69 206). Heidegger equates the essence of late-modern humanity with communism because, bereft of any robust, meaningful connection to being as such and caught up instead in the subject/object dichotomy, late-modern humans are left content to be cared for by the state. The subject/object distinction is transformed and generalized from applying to individual subjects to, instead, a nation or state counting as the site of meaning.⁷⁵ By radicalizing the subject/object dichotomy, Heidegger argues, late modernity bottoms out

⁷⁵ See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: “The infinitization or absolutization of the subject, which is at the heart of the metaphysics of the Moderns, here finds its strictly operational outcome: the community creating, the community at work creates and works itself, so to speak, thereby accomplishing the subjective process *par excellence*, the processing of self-formation and self-production” (*Heidegger, Art and Politics*, 70).

in communism, which is a politically contentious claim to make at any time, but especially in Germany circa 1939-1940: “The metaphysical token of the consummation [*Vollendung*] of modernity is the historical empowering of the essence of ‘communism’” (HB 171/GA69 201). He makes a similar association between modernity and twentieth-century politics in 1950: “Man as the rational being of the Enlightenment is no less subject than man who grasps himself as nation, wills himself as people [*Volk*], nurtures himself as race and, finally, empowers himself as lord of the earth” (OBT 84/GA5 111). Again, the modern subject comes in for harsh criticism for providing the model for a nation, people, or race as the site of meaning. While Descartes made the subject’s self-certainty constitutive of truth, Heidegger suggests that the same move is accomplished by collectivities that ground truth in themselves. The modern individualized subject mastered and controlled nature, but the earth is now dominated by political and social entities that function as *collective* subjects. Thus, this critique applies to Nazism, communism, and Americanism. We began this chapter with Count Yorck’s declaration that “the ‘modern man’ ...is ready for burial” (BT 452/SZ 401). Heidegger continues to agree with this sentiment, but expresses it in various ideological idioms and registers.

If passages like the ones I just cited expressed the sum total of Heidegger’s critical analysis of modernity, then I might agree with Sheehan that Heidegger is advancing little more than a “Solzhenitsyn-like jeremiad against modernity.” But I do not think we should take these passages as Heidegger’s most considered view of the modern age. One clue as to their lack of hermeneutic priority is their ideological incoherence. As I have shown in my readings of the preceding passages, between 1927 and 1950, Heidegger claims that modernity is essentially Christian (1927), communist (1939-1940),

and Nazi, communist, and American all at the same time (1950). A charitable reconstruction of Heidegger's critique of modernity should look beneath these culturally and politically polemical remarks to find the philosophical foundations that they mean to express. In other words, Heidegger makes these tendentious political comments on the basis of a sophisticated philosophical analysis of the fundamental concepts of modernity as he understands them, a reconstruction of which I attempted to provide in §1.2.

I will now provide textual support to say that, at his best, he is not an anti-modern reactionary, and from there, develop what I take to be Heidegger's most philosophically salient overall objection to modernity. In 1967, Heidegger identifies himself with the attempt at "thinking into a region [*Gegend*] this side of [*diesseits von*] pessimism and optimism" (P xiii/GA9 x).⁷⁶ This revealing self-description invites comparison with Nietzsche's title *Beyond Good and Evil (Jenseits von Gut und Böse)*. As the subtitle of Nietzsche's text intimates, Heidegger's later thinking also attempted to provide a "prelude to a philosophy of the future." Except for occasional moments of political despair such as the ones I cited, Heidegger's deconstruction of modernity is best understood as an attempt at thinking beyond pessimism and optimism. Heidegger wants to own up to the reality of the modern age, see what is wanting about it in light of an accurate and thorough analysis, and attempt to move beyond those problematic features of modern life and culture into something beyond them. Such a project, which I call the *deconstruction of the modern age*, importantly differs from condemnations of the sum total of the modern age or genuinely pessimistic jeremiads against all of modernity.

Taylor suggests that modernity's "knockers" are frequently motivated by their opposition

⁷⁶ See Thomson's characterization of Heidegger's position as "neither blind optimism nor fatalistic despair but, instead, real hope for the future" (*Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 212).

to its secular hostility toward Christianity.⁷⁷ I deliberately cited the Christian apologist C.S. Lewis as a paradigmatic “knocker” for this reason: Thinkers committed to reestablishing a Christian foundation for Western culture often condemn the *whole* of the modern and secular age because of its alleged irreconcilability with Christianity, understood in this context as a lost and past way of life to which our culture can and should return. Such a wholesale response is characteristically reactionary insofar as it attempts a complete rejection, and a consequent retrieval of a pre-modern past. Heidegger cannot be consistently committed to a complete rejection of—that is to say, a reactionary attitude toward—modernity, as anti-modern Christians are.

Heidegger is crucially and methodologically opposed to pure negation. He describes deconstruction as “not a negation [*Negation*] of the tradition or a condemnation [*Verurteilung*] of it as worthless; quite the contrary, it signifies precisely a positive appropriation of tradition” (BP 23/GA24 31). At his most careful, Heidegger engages in critique in order not merely to condemn, but rather to gain access to something more primordial or originary than the object of critique. Deconstruction means to accomplish this goal, which requires seeing how tradition or the present mode of intelligibility enables partial access to a source of meaning while blocking other features. As Leo Strauss insightfully summarizes this point, Heidegger wants “to disinter the roots [of tradition], to bring them to light.”⁷⁸ Mere negation, on the other hand, cannot accomplish this deconstructive goal of recovering the past’s enduring motivations because it so hastily and summarily rejects what it seeks to critique without fully examining it.

⁷⁷ *Dilemmas and Connections*, 186-187.

⁷⁸ “An Unspoken Prologue to a Public Lecture at St. John’s,” 2.

As Gianni Vattimo has argued, the mature Heidegger did not want directly to overcome (*Überwindung*) metaphysics by summarily rejecting it by mere declaration, but rather to attempt to overcome it in the sense of twisting free of it (*Verwindung*):

Metaphysics cannot be abolished like an opinion. One can by no means leave it behind as a doctrine no longer believed and represented...we may not presume to stand outside of metaphysics because we surmise the ending of metaphysics. For metaphysics overcome [*überwundene*] in this way does not disappear. It returns transformed, and remains in dominance as the continuing difference of being and entities. (EP 85/GA7 69-70)⁷⁹

To reject or oppose something as a whole—such as metaphysics, theism or indeed modernity—means being caught up in the logic of what is ostensibly opposed. To be anti-metaphysical, atheist, or anti-modern is to set oneself and one's own core commitments merely in opposition to something else, and thereby to remain firmly within its sphere of influence. If one's core identity is fixated against some concept, thesis, or movement, then one has not escaped that which is opposed but has allowed oneself to be locked in continued struggle against it: "Everything revolutionary remains caught up in opposition. Opposition, however, is servitude [*Knechtschaft*]" (CPC 33/GA77 51). Heidegger characterizes this project of direct overcoming, or fancying oneself as revolting against modernity, metaphysics, or religion, as naïve and self-defeating, as if one could free oneself from something merely by pronouncing one's disapproval of and separation from it. The later Heidegger suggests that a more promising strategy that he calls twisting free means opening oneself up to the meaning of what is questionable rather than merely opposing or negating it, and thereby allowing oneself to live through its effects and find something on the other side of that experience.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, 164-180.

⁸⁰ As Thomson argues, "Heidegger's conviction [is] that the only way to reach a genuine postmodernity is by transcending modernity from within" (*Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 170). Lacoue-Labarthe well

Heidegger adopts this methodological opposition to negation in his history of being, which shows how the present metaphysical epoch allows us some access to the intelligibility of entities while simultaneously closing off other possibilities. Faithfully following out the logic inherent in the history of being, then, Heidegger acknowledges that even as impoverished an understanding of the meaning of being as late-modern technology still constitutes a genuine mode of intelligibility, which he refers to as enframing (*Ge-Stell*), that provides us with our contemporary access to being:

Enframing [*Ge-stell*]...is the completion and consummation of metaphysics and at the same time the disclosive preparation of the events [*Ereignisses*]. This is why it is by no means a question of viewing the advent of technology as negative happening [*Geschehen*] (but just as little as a positive occurrence in the sense of a paradise on earth)...Positionality is, as it were, the photographic negative of the event. (FS 60/GA15 366)

The technological understanding of being characteristic of late modernity, impoverished as it is, still constitutes a disclosive mode of intelligibility. Through the lens of technology, things show up and appear for us as optimizable. Calling technology a “photographic negative” of the event suggests that we merely have to flip technology on its head in order to see things in a radically different way. For those of us living in the late-modern age, only through the mode of intelligibility of technology can we have a world at all. We cannot merely, then, pronounce ourselves anti-technology, because without it, we would not even have a world. Heidegger puts that point here by saying we cannot simply decide to declare technology to be a “negative happening.” We cannot pronounce ourselves anti-technology reactionaries, then, nor can we consider technology our savior. Eugen Fink well expresses this Heideggerian insight:

understands this lesson: “To be or call oneself ‘Heideggerian’ therefore has no meaning, no more than to be or call oneself ‘anti-Heideggerian.’ Or rather, both mean the same thing, namely that one has missed the essential point in Heidegger’s thinking, and one is condemned to remain deaf to the question which the age poses through Heidegger” (*Heidegger, Art and Politics*, 11).

The Western metaphysical understanding of being... cannot be arbitrarily abandoned, so to speak. We cannot simply “step off the trolley.” The historically transmitted understanding of being is the dimly lit house of the human being in the gloom of the world-night, as it were, which shelters and protects him and affords him a dwelling—a house, admittedly, that he must time and again repair, that remains exposed to continual ruin, that perpetually falls into disrepair.⁸¹

Like Heidegger at his deconstructive best, Fink thinks here beyond pessimism and optimism, suggesting that we must live through something like technology to construct a proper appraisal of what it is like and of what it is missing. Only then can we see through to the other side of it. But our historically inherited understandings, likened here by Fink to a house, provide us with our only route of access to being. That house provides us with the foundation out of which we might build a better understanding of being. That also means that we cannot simply abandon our only dwelling, our only access to being.

Significantly, Heidegger applies this general methodological opposition to pure negation to his discussion of the epoch of modernity in particular:

Negation [*Verneinung*] merely throws the negator off the track. Modernity requires, however, in order, in the future, for it to be resisted in its essence and on the strength of that essence, an originality and breadth of reflection [*Besinnung*] for which, perhaps, we moderns can prepare somewhat, but over which we can certainly never gain mastery. (OBT 73/GA5 97)

Here we again find Heidegger expressing serious doubts about mere negation, this time on the grounds that such a purely negative stance does not allow one to see the essence of what is being critically examined. If one presumes to stand outside something as fundamental and all-encompassing as modernity itself, then one will blind oneself to the details of how what must be critically examined shapes our way of life. Thus, negation is actually deleterious for future resistance because it fails to achieve a full and accurate depiction of its object, preventing one from seeing how to twist free of it. Mere negation

⁸¹ *Play as Symbol of the World and Other Writings*, 126.

also assumes a stance in which we fully control our relation to what is under discussion, presuming that we can choose to step outside or beyond what we oppose. The truth is, though, we actually have no choice about the way modernity seeps into every aspect of our existence—that it provides us with our dwelling, as Fink put it. The better option, Heidegger suggests here, is to allow ourselves to be open to what is critiqued in order to see its effects and thus put ourselves in position to see the reality of those effects and hence of what is questionable about them and how they can be subsequently moved past. The fact is that we live in modernity, and we must allow ourselves to see what that condition is really like in order to envision a different future. If we rejected modernity as a whole and from the start, then we would be unable to see what it misses and thereby allow ourselves to develop what it has left underdeveloped or totally ignored, which is ultimately Heidegger's own strategy for how to respond to modernity.

Based on this evidence, we should clearly reject Sheehan's misreading of Heidegger as an anti-modern reactionary or radical conservative who wants to naively retrieve the past. While there are passages where he evinces a reactionary attitude, such moments do not represent the full depth of his deconstruction of modernity. Since he opposes pure negation as hopelessly caught up in the logic and priorities of what that strategy negates, Heidegger opts for a methodologically guided engagement with an object of critique that allows us to grasp its effects and notice what it overlooks, rediscovering or preparing the ground for something to come after. Instead of confidently claiming we can stand completely outside what we oppose, we must expose ourselves to its effects to understand it and see how to move past it. This phenomenologically nuanced, deconstructive strategy guides Heidegger's considered critique of modernity.

§1.3.2: Radically impoverished and reduced intelligibility

Heidegger accepts neither the despondent pessimism of the reactionary who rejects the totality of the modern age, nor the sanguine confidence of the enthusiastic modernist who basically accepts and wants to extend the *status quo*.⁸² He opts instead to develop a considered and deconstructive critique in which we expose ourselves to, rather than shield ourselves from, modernity to grasp its full effects and move past them:

For others...the strange [*Seltsame*] becomes ever stranger. They no longer assess the strange by pulling it back into what has gone before, and still less do they replace strangeness with an apparently unquestionable “modernity.” They recognize, in what one initially feels merely to be “strange” and dissects as “modern,” an indication of that worthiness that radiates off into emptiness. If, however, the strange becomes question-worthy, then it is never what is simply “strange” any longer, still less what is simply “modern.” (HB 153/GA69 179-180)

As he intimates here in this insightful methodological reflection, Heidegger means to expose the strangeness and otherness of something fundamental to our entire way of life, namely, our background understanding of being or the character of our entire epoch, so that we might then recognize their constitutive features and see their eminent questionability. Modernity must be seen as strange, contingent, and worthy of questioning such that we will ultimately conclude that “all Western goals have been exhausted [*erschöpft*], and everything further can only be a jumbled modification [*vermischende Abwandlung*] of what already was” (BN2 109/GA95 141). The modern age must be brought to its end. Heidegger means to *deconstruct* modernity—that is, to see why it fails, and then to move definitively beyond it into a new and better future.

⁸² For the pro-modern position, see Habermas’s valorization of the prospect of “revising the Enlightenment with the very tools of the Enlightenment” (*The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 303).

What forms the argumentative basis of Heidegger's deconstructive critique of modernity? We have already seen specific criticisms, such as that an aestheticized relation to art prevents us from appreciating art's world-disclosing power, that the correspondence theory of truth is parasitic upon unconcealedness without acknowledging this fact, or his characterization of the damaging subjectivism inherent in thinking in terms of values. One could also mention his argument that the subject/object dichotomy is a phenomenologically inaccurate description of our relation to reality: "The human being is never first and foremost the human being on the hither side of the world, as a 'subject'" (P 266/GA9 350). Important also is his suggestion that modern natural science skips over the phenomenal qualities of things in favor of its own artificial and mathematized objectification and hence constitutes "a new assault [*Ansturm*] upon reality" (QT 68/GA41 100).⁸³ All these criticisms of modern phenomena certainly deserve consideration. But I shall suggest now that there remains one fundamental or major overall objection that Heidegger lodges against modernity as he understands it, and that this objection unites all of these more specific criticisms.

Heidegger's most fundamental objection to modernity is that it is oblivious to or forgetful of being as such: "Every path [*Weg*] toward the experience of being itself is obliterated [*ausgeslöscht*]" (OBT 193/GA5 258).⁸⁴ Being as such or being itself is the limitlessly rich, overflowing source of any understanding of being that enables all modes of intelligibility. For Heidegger, modernity is fundamentally characterized by its

⁸³ For a reconstruction of this argument that science represents an assault on things, see Mitchell, *The Fourfold*, 66. See also Stanley Cavell's insightful remarks regarding Heidegger's "interpretation of Western conceptualizing as a kind of sublimized violence" (*Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, 39).

⁸⁴ Young points to oblivion as crucial to Heidegger's analysis of modernity, but he explicitly considers it capturing only part, and not the whole, of Heidegger's analysis of the modern age (*Heidegger's Later Philosophy*, 36). I will try to make a stronger claim about the importance of the concept.

inattentiveness to and forgetfulness of this irreducible source of intelligibility, and this constitutes its most serious and damaging flaw:

What if the absence [*Ausbleiben*] of this relation [of being to humanity] and the oblivion [*Vergessenheit*] of this absence determined the entire modern age from afar? What if the absence of being abandoned man more and more exclusively to entities, leaving him forsaken [*verlassen*] and far from any relation to being to his (human) essence, while this forsakenness itself remained veiled? What if this were the case—and had been the case for a long time now? (P 281/GA9 371)

Heidegger claims that our distance from and obliviousness to being determines the essence of our modern age. I shall refer to this idea as our contemporary *radically reduced and impoverished intelligibility*. Our comportment toward being cuts us off, first of all and most of the time, from the inherent meaningfulness of being and of entities.

All of Heidegger's characterization of modernity falls under the heading of this oblivion that he identifies at the heart of our impoverished intelligibility. Employing the term "beyng [*Seyn*]," one of his numerous names for the polysemic referent of being as such, he says: "What is more unusual to the human being who, in modernity, is banished into entities and oblivious to being [*seinsvergessen*], than beyng?" (HB 48/GA69 54)⁸⁵ Being as such is irreducibly unusual and strange to those of us living in an age that is oblivious to it, an age that can only be called a time of "the abandonment of being [*Seinsverlassenheit*]" (EP 66/GA6.2 471). In modernity, "every path toward the experience of being itself is obliterated," and so in the absence of a meaningful connection to being, we are left with a "thinking that has remained oblivious [*uneingedenk geblieben*] of being itself" (OBT 193/GA5 258-259). What it means to live in the modern age is inextricably tied up with how we are related to being. Specifically, the subject/object dichotomy blocks our access to being's overflowing meaningfulness.

⁸⁵ On the identity of beyng and being as such, see Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 177.

The starkly negative, perhaps even frightening, connotation of the terms employed in this family of passages—“oblivion,” “oblivious,” “obliterated”; “abandonment,” “abandoned,” “absence”— indicates that Heidegger means to point toward a crisis at the heart of Western civilization. The centrality of our relation to being to Heidegger’s theory and critique of modernity was previously indicated by the motivations we adduced in §1.1 for Heidegger’s strategies for relating the past to the present within which his understanding of modernity must be contextualized:

Deconstruction gets us to see the question of being that was covered over by traditional ontology as a live and compelling one once again, while the history of being allows us to see how our contemporary understanding of being was preceded by other and different understandings, and hence that every epoch’s understanding of being is limited and contingent. Being lies at the heart of Heidegger’s strategies for thinking about the past.

Why does Heidegger view our reduced and impoverished intelligibility as such a crisis? His thinking about history’s relation to the present—indeed, his thinking in general—is concerned most profoundly with being. Thus, for Heidegger, it is of the utmost and frightening importance that in our modern age, being is not “ever able to be experienced” (EP 90/GA7 76). Being is not something that stands over and against a subject that we can experience like an object. That we are oblivious to being governs and structures all the features of modernity that we identified in §1.2, and exposes what makes them individually and deeply problematic. Through the subject/object dichotomy that modernity illegitimately and inaccurately generalized as constitutive of how we ordinarily relate to the world, we come to see ourselves as subjects and as the primary determiners of meaning; furthermore, we think of ourselves as related only to other

entities that stand outside us as objects. Our mathematized and modern natural science is motivated by our attempt to become masters and possessors of a nature that possesses no intrinsic meaning, only lying in wait for us to use for our own purposes. When truth is thought to be only correspondence, and when this conception forgets its intrinsic dependence on the unconcealedness of reality, then truth becomes the product of our thinking and its relation to a static reality with which we actively engage ourselves. In aesthetics, our experience of art is trivialized in terms of aesthetic appreciation instead of thinking of art as a relation of our modes of intelligibility to being as such. Finally, in the late-modern nihilism that fulfills all these modern tendencies, being gets equated with becoming, subjects objectify themselves as well as other entities, and the meaning of anything loses its grip on us, thus raising the prospect of nihilism.

How Heidegger critically characterizes these features of modernity follows from his claim that modernity can be identified with its impoverished intelligibility. The subject/object dichotomy forgets that we are related not only to entities, but also to a source of intelligibility that supersedes us and that we can never fully grasp. This also implies that the subject/object distinction overestimates our role as determiners of meaning, since meaning comes not always from ourselves but also from a source over which we possess little, if any, control. Natural science, in its project of mastering and controlling, also involves an overestimation of our agential influence over a reality that stands independent of us. The correspondence theory of truth robs reality of its power to reveal itself to us in making the revelation of truth dependent on thinking subjects. Aesthetics places the significance of art within the sphere of human feelings of pleasure, rather than in art's ability to partially express a wider source of intelligibility. And in the

late-modern problem of nihilism, the total dominance by subjects over meaning and intelligibility entails that all things eventually become meaningless to us. Nihilism follows from our total forgetfulness of the fact that there is a source of intelligibility and meaning that enables, informs, but always partially escapes all our understandings.

Heidegger's characterization of our impoverished intelligibility as the central feature and most problematic flaw of modernity can be reconstructed as follows:

- (1) The central features of the modern age, especially the subject/object dichotomy undergirding many of them, motivate and paradigmatically illustrate our radically reduced and impoverished intelligibility.
- (2) Modernity is fundamentally defined by this impoverished intelligibility.
- (3) Being as such or being itself is the all-important and principal source of intelligibility and understandings of the meaning of being,
- (4) It is possible for human beings to be in contact with being as such.
- (5) Therefore, our impoverished intelligibility constitutes a profound crisis.

According to this argument, our impoverished intelligibility is the most questionable feature of modernity, and for this reason, Heidegger understood our reduced sense of intelligibility as governing all the particular flaws he imputes to modernity. It amounts to his most sweeping—but also focused and specific—objection to and critique of the modern age. As I argued in §1.3.1, Heidegger does not count as a kneejerk anti-modern reactionary who rejects the whole of the modern age in favor of a pre-modern, past way of life. I have solidified this claim by showing that Heidegger's understanding and critique of modernity is guided by a specific problem with the modern age that he identifies and against which he develops an objection and for which he provides, as we shall see, a solution. Heidegger grounds his critique of modernity in the crucial phenomenon of our reduced and impoverished intelligibility that manifests itself in these multiple ways. He then uses that phenomenon to make an overarching critique of the modern age at large. This critique does not fall prey, however, to the one-sided

reactionary rejectionism of what Taylor calls modernity's "knockers," because Heidegger does not merely negate the modern age but rather brings out its worst and most damaging features so that we can live through them into a subsequent postmodern future. To say Heidegger *deconstructs* modernity, then, means that he identifies a fatal flaw at its very heart concerning the deficient way human beings relate themselves to being.

But one feature of this argument still requires discussion, namely, premise (4) above. If being as such were something with which we could *never* get into contact, then it would not follow that our impoverished intelligibility counts as a pressing problem that must be explained, called into question, and ultimately moved beyond. In fact, though, Heidegger thinks we can get back in touch with being. Given this possibility, our failure in modernity to achieve this attunement constitutes a profound and shamefully avoidable failure. We must turn now to this issue of how we can move past modernity, understood as the age of reduced intelligibility, into a future where we are alive to being once again.

§1.4: Another beginning

From out of his account of modernity, Heidegger formulates a positive vision of how we might reestablish contact with being as such in Western culture. A possible future lies beyond our current epoch to which we can aspire: "Beyng's poem, / just begun, is the human being" (PLT 4/GA13 76). Heidegger may not be an anti-modern reactionary, but he certainly thinks we must transcend modernity in favor of something else. In this sense, Heidegger's thinking of modernity—his deconstruction, a critique in service of a positive vision of a future we can build together—is revolutionary in its rejection of the modern age. My task now is to explain Heidegger's account of the thinking that will make this possible new stage in history possible, which will help clarify premise (4) of my

reconstruction of his critique of modernity: It is possible for us to regain contact with being as such. Earlier I quoted Heidegger's comment about "thinking into a region this side of pessimism and optimism," which I compared to Nietzsche's "prelude to a philosophy of the future" (P xiii/GA9 x). That Heidegger has in mind a future thinking, and that he is not content with a merely negative critique of modernity, is substantiated by his numerous references to the fact that "we will one day think differently than we have so far" (OBT 198/GA5 266). He does not make empty prophetic predictions in such passages, nor does he advocate for passive quietism in the face of our radically impoverished intelligibility.⁸⁶ Rather, Heidegger has in mind a vision for "effecting a transition from metaphysics to another kind of thinking" (P 289/GA9 381). This future thinking, the next stanza of being's poem, contains two crucial underlying premises.

The first essential presupposition of Heidegger's conception for a new thinking begins from the fact that our dominant way of thinking in late modernity, which must be superseded or problematized because it constitutes a crisis, is characterized as a "thinking that has remained oblivious of being itself," as we saw in the previous section (OBT 193/GA5 258-259). The salient aspect of what Heidegger means by a new thinking will concern, then, our relation to being. When he refers to "another kind of thinking," he thus suggests that it entails "a transition from metaphysics" to something else beyond it, which he refers to in as "the other *beginning* of the history of being, i.e., the *break* [Bruch] with the metaphysically determined history of the West" (BN2 269/GA95 345). What may possibly come after modernity, which Heidegger so often designates by the term *another*

⁸⁶ Terry Eagleton advances the latter thesis when he refers to the later Heidegger's "astonishing cringing before the mystery of Being. Enlightenment rationality, with its ruthlessly dominative, instrumental attitude towards Nature, must be rejected for a humble listening to the stars, skies and forests" (*Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 55). Young convincingly refutes the idea of Heidegger as a "fatalistic" thinker without positive prescriptions (*Heidegger's Later Philosophy*, 83-90).

beginning, will center itself around an understanding of being that acknowledges, embraces, and attends to the irreducible plurality of being as such. Heidegger envisions a post-metaphysical, post-ontotheological break with the modern age, which we might call postmodernity. As oblivious to being as such, our current ontotheological understanding of being is questionable and so we must think being differently. Out of Heidegger's focused critique of modernity as characterized by a reduced and impoverished intelligibility comes his equally focused prescription for a thinking that makes possible a newly reinvigorated and enriched relationship to being: "What is to be decided is whether being itself, out of its own proper truth, can come to pass in a relation appropriate to the essence of human beings" (P 280/GA9 369). This relation between humanity and being as such constitutes the provenance and goal of the new thinking Heidegger envisions.

Important also in this regard is the contention that being as such is not an ineffable we-know-not-what that necessarily lies beyond our conceptual reach. Heidegger denies the coherence of the ineffable: "Much is often for us ineffable, but only because the name that it has does not occur to us" (CPC 77/GA77 119).⁸⁷ If being were something we could never name or access, then Heidegger's vision for another beginning would be pointless. But no possible human understanding of being as such can fully capture it: "All events [*Ereignisse*] in the history of being which is metaphysics have their beginning and ground in the fact that metaphysics leaves and must leave the essence of being [*das Wesen des Seins*] undecided" (EP 56/GA6.2 459). No single epoch in the history of being ever permanently decides or names what it means to be, because being will always exceed any such understanding, leading to the development of a new dominant

⁸⁷ Rorty makes the interpretively controversial claim that Heidegger attempts to get in touch with the ineffable (*Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 64-65). On Heidegger's rejection of ineffability, see Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 20.

understanding that will attempt to capture what the previous understandings failed to see. But this fact about the endless richness of being as such, instead of dissuading us from thinking of it as irresolvable, should instead impel us continually to think being in new ways. A postmodern and post-ontotheological understanding of being would do justice to this fact. When Heidegger suggests that “the world’s darkening never reaches / to the light of being [Seyns],” he hopefully suggests that not even our nihilistic late-modern ontotheology exhausts our access to being (PLT 4/GA13 76). The feasibility of thinking of being as such, including the denial of its ineffability, is the first premise of Heidegger’s account of a new and future thinking.

Another crucial background assumption of Heidegger’s account of a new thinking concerns the fact that, on his understanding, the future remains undecided or open. If how we thought of being were already determined by fate, then the question of a positive future would be moot because it would be already decided in advance by some teleological structure. This is clearly not Heidegger’s view.⁸⁸ At the end of the essay “Overcoming Metaphysics,” he optimistically refers to a possible future that “brings mortals to the path of thinking, poetizing building” (EP 110/GA7 98). There is a path forward to the future that remains open. Such a future thinking would be importantly different from the late-modern technological enframing with which we currently live, which has no room for poetically acknowledging and continually re-describing the plurality of being as such, but instead sees all of reality as opportunities for enhancement and efficiency rather than for creative engagement with and inspiration from something

⁸⁸ Ryan Johnson nicely sums up Heidegger’s stance on historical teleology: “Heidegger speaks of the history of Being...as a ‘destiny’ (*Geschick*)...However, this is not destiny in the sense that a certain event had to happen, but that certain events produce a narrower frame for what future possibilities are available” (“Thinking the Abyss of History: Heidegger’s Critique of Hegelian Metaphysics,” 64).

that supersedes us. What I call the second presupposition of Heidegger's vision for a future thinking refers to the fact that he does not think we are locked either into our present and its persistent endurance or by some determined future. Instead, the future lies open before us such that it could be crucially different from the present: "We do not know what possibilities the destiny [*Geschick*] of Western history still has in store for our people and the West" (OBT 159/GA5 212). Our future may yet contain room for poetizing. In the history of being on Heidegger's construal, one ontotheological understanding has given way to another numerous times, from the ancient to the medieval to the modern and the late modern.⁸⁹ The postmodern future may yet break through with an understanding of being that poetically acknowledges the plurality of being.

Heidegger imagines, then, what that future could look like because it has not yet been decided. This openness of the future is another reason why Heidegger characterized his thinking in 1967 as beyond pessimism and optimism. An optimist sees that future as bright and on the way to inevitable progress, while a pessimist sees it as hopelessly closed. Heidegger's most considered view is that the future has yet to be decided, and represents instead what Jacques Derrida, at his most Heideggerian, calls "merely the penultimate crepuscular phase of a mutation as yet unheard of."⁹⁰ In his optimistic moments, as in his readings of van Gogh, Hölderlin, and even Nietzsche as pointing the way toward a new, non-ontotheological understanding of being, Heidegger sees a positive option for the future as already present at the margins, if we should only choose to seize it and actualize it more fully throughout our culture. This other beginning could

⁸⁹ See Thomson, *Heidegger on Ontotheology*, 25.

⁹⁰ *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Vol. II, 233. A full consideration of Derrida's radical approach to the problem of modernity, which is distinct from Heidegger's and Gadamer's, lies beyond the scope of this dissertation. In the Conclusion, I shall briefly consider one of Derrida's critiques of Heidegger.

sweep the globe and replace the late-modern enframing with which we predominantly live, if we but follow the lead of these prophetic figures and the interpretation of them suggested by Heidegger himself, according to which art and poetry impel us to see and accept the infinitely multiple meanings and valences of being.⁹¹

Heidegger's attempt at "thinking ahead (without prophetic proclamations) into the time which is to come" is governed by the presuppositions that a renewed relationship to being is possible, and that the future of our thinking of being remains open or undecided such that a new alternative can plausibly emerge as the dominant way of thinking in our culture (HC 110/GA16 676). With these premises, let us turn to how Heidegger characterizes this new thinking of being. He refers to a time to come in which humanity will find itself alive to being once again: "Being is still waiting for the time when it itself will become thought-provoking to the human being" (P 246/GA9 322). Our current epoch in the history of being fails to live up to this standard; we currently are oblivious to or forgetful of being, focusing instead on how we can technologically enhance the efficiency of entities relative to our purposes. In other words, we understand ourselves as subjects attempting to master and control objects, forgetting the primordial source of meaning that lies outside anyone's or anything's control. These features name our reduced and impoverished intelligibility. For Heidegger, though, that way of relating ourselves to entities could be dislodged: "Humankind's being a subject is not the only possibility of the incipient [*anfangenden*] essence of historical humanity there has ever been or ever will be" (OBT 84/GA5 111). We do not have to be subjects standing opposite objects; there are other possible ways humanity could situate itself relative to

⁹¹ For more additional details of this account of the later Heidegger's reading of the postmodern, see Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, especially chapters 3 and 7; and "Ontotheology," 326.

entities and toward being. Our relationship to being was different before the advent of the subject/object dichotomy, and could change again. Heidegger is committed to another, future, postmodern relation to being that has already been suggested by the most prophetic artistic and intellectual figures of the last couple centuries.

Heidegger suggests that another thinking will consider being as something worthy of thought rather than denying it in favor of forming optimal relations to entities or dissolving it by equating it with becoming. Being as such would, in another thinking, form the center of our attention: “Thinking, in its essence as thinking of being, is claimed by being” (P 275/GA9 363). The dominant thinking of modernity and late modernity is dominated by the subject/object dichotomy and its attempt to find optimal ways of relating to entities, but the thinking of the future will not be afraid to submit itself to an irreducibly multiple source of meaning and significance that is beyond all optimization and is instead the source of all intelligibility. This future thinking will attune itself to this plural source and pay attention to its multiple manifestations and the directions they point in. For this reason, Heidegger characterizes this other thinking as one that “responds to the claim [*Anspruch*] of being” such that “human beings may, in their relation to being, assume the guardianship [*Wächterschaft*] of being” (P 236/GA9 309-310). We would see ourselves as standing in relation to an overflowing and awe-inspiring source of meaning and intelligibility, and would attempt to poetically and philosophically cultivate our relationship to that fundamental source by seeing the multiple ways it shows up and makes possible all our conceptualizations.⁹² Our thinking would sustain and protect that

⁹² On this theme as leading to a form of ecological thinking, see Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, 125; and Young, *Heidegger's Later Philosophy*, 121.

source by never allowing us to forget being or how it enables all our understanding, and by keeping ourselves open to the many ways that source shows up for us.

In this postmodern future, we would also prevent the development of reductionistic and monistic ways of understanding entities that force us to forget that our access to those entities is made possible by a source outside our control. Hence, such a goal involves a new relationship also to entities, our intelligible access to which is made possible by being, according to which we would view them not as resources at our disposal but as worthy of respect and attention in virtue of the wealth of meaning and significance they possess independent of our willing and wanting.⁹³ Our attention to being entails a newfound protectiveness toward those entities that show up for us in virtue of an independent but multiply-manifest source of intelligibility. The new thinking would fundamentally reorient our relationship to being as well as to entities. We would see ourselves as subject to, even guardians of, being as such and view it as the source of how things show up for us, and we would in turn see entities as more than just at our disposal. Such a transformation would ultimately mean the end of enframing and its technological insistence that entities are merely set up over and against us and at our disposal. Instead, we would attempt to continually and poetically name, recognizing the necessary infinitude of such a task, that always-excessive source of intelligibility. Unable to control this source, we would instead attentively follow its hints and suggestions.

Importantly, Heidegger does not think human beings can force or will such a new thinking into existence.⁹⁴ Since the future thinking concerns our relation to being, it

⁹³ See Mitchell, *The Fourfold*, 261; Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, 126; and Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 211-212

⁹⁴ This important point has been emphasized by numerous commentators, including Dreyfus, "Heidegger on the Connection," 310; and Harries, "The Antinomy of Being: Heidegger's Critique of Humanism," 196.

follows from the nature of being that this issue is not entirely up to us. We can comport ourselves toward being in different ways, but ultimately being manifests itself in multiple ways that cannot be decided by humanity on our own. For this reason, Heidegger characterizes the new thinking he calls for as preparatory: “It is the concern of preparatory [*vorbereitenden*] thinking to clear a free space [*Spielraum*] within which being itself would again be able to take man with regard to his essence into an initial relationship. To be preparatory is the essence of such thinking” (OBT 158/GA5 210). Instead of willing an understanding of being into existence, preparatory or preliminary thinking anticipates a human comportment that attentively views being as the source of intelligibility that supersedes us and to which we are accountable. Heidegger suggests that the cultivation of this stance, taking inspiration from the prophetic figures who point the way to this new understanding being, is all we can presently hope for, since the other part of the equation is how being chooses to manifest itself to us: “At times being needs human being, and yet it is never dependent upon [*abhängig vom*] existing humanity...human being’s claim [*Zumutung*] upon being itself is not always granted [*ereignet*] by being” (EP 76-77/GA6.2 483). Being shows up in ways we cannot predict, control, or decide. What we can accomplish, then, is to cease to be oblivious to it so that we might achieve a stance that does it justice. Commentators on this issue underscore the details of various ways that our engaged social (Hubert Dreyfus), individual (Julian Young), and intellectual (Karsten Harries) practices could evince a comportment toward being other than enframing, beyond the nihilistic attempt to master and control.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Dreyfus construes Heidegger as advocating for “pretechnological practices that remain in our culture” that he calls marginal practices (“Heidegger on the Connection,” 311); Young calls for cultivating “cells of resistance” that allow individuals to develop comportments toward being that will encourage further resistance to our dominant nihilistic understanding (*Heidegger’s Later Philosophy*, 126); and Harries thinks

Since I wish in this chapter only to motivate a contrast, which I will spell out later, between Heidegger's and Gadamer's reactions to another beginning, I will not emphasize the details (such as they are) of Heidegger's vision of postmodernity. In general, though, Heidegger's considered view of a post-ontotheological relation to being is neither subjectivistic (completely under our control) nor quietistic (completely outside our control).⁹⁶ His view lies between these extremes. We can neither willfully decide to see (or indeed cease to see) being a certain way, nor ought we only passively wait for a new god to show itself. We can presently develop a properly attentive and responsive conceptualization of being that may guide our future practices and culture, and thereby bring about the end of the modern age: "Modernity cannot leap out of its rut [*Geleise*]...instead, the modern human being must carry out [*ausführen*] the ending [*Verendung*] of the modern age in one way or another as a purpose belonging to his own self" (BN2 146/GA95 188). Nonetheless, we cannot simply will a new culturally pervasive and dominant conceptualization into existence by ourselves. Instead, Heidegger suggests that the emergence of a new understanding of being requires two factors. These include the active contributions *both* of human beings, who see and poetically and philosophically express the excessiveness and independence of being as such, follow the prophetic figures who have pointed toward such a conceptualization, and bring to light modernity's flaws; *as well as* of being, which shows up for us in ways we cannot predict or control and thereby grants, enables, guides, and shapes that new understanding. Both humanity's activity and the manifestation of being provide the necessary ingredients of a

preparatory thinking can only show how "every metaphysics...presupposes a historically conditioned way in which beings have presented themselves to the thinker" ("The Antinomy of Being," 196).

⁹⁶ This formulation comes from Thomson, "Ontotheology," 325-326.

new understanding of being. When they work together in a properly harmonious way, a new understanding of being could sweep aside late-modern enframing forever.

Just as we cannot will the direct overcoming of metaphysics, modernity, or theism, we are also unable to merely decide that we are in the right relationship to being. But if we are equipped with Heidegger's critique of modernity, we could see the deficiencies of our impoverished intelligibility in the right light. This improved understanding of the character of the modern age would usher in postmodernity, shaping our thinking and our behavior. Thus, the motivation for Heidegger's development of a deconstructive vision of modernity ultimately derives from his positive turn to another thinking to come after the modern and late modern age that attempts to attune humanity to the unceasingly rich source of all intelligibility. Throughout our subsequent discussion of Heidegger's influence on Gadamer, we will frequently return to this theme of the *other beginning*. We must grasp now that Heidegger intends to provide a positive account of a future after the end of the modern age, and to bring that future about.

I attempted in this chapter to explain Heidegger's wide-ranging discussion of modernity, the distinctive accomplishment of his later work. First, I explained two methodological strategies he employs for confronting the past in the present (§1.1). These strategies suggested that, while he exposes what is questionable about our historical epoch, Heidegger cannot advocate for a simplistic rejection of modernity. The modern age must be properly seen for what it really is so that it can be questioned from within. This consideration of Heidegger's methodological orientation demonstrated the centrality of being to his approach to understanding the present age. Second, I reconstructed

Heidegger's account of the characteristic features of modernity, all of which suggested that modernity is worthy of questioning (§1.2). This *theory of modernity* frames the object of his critical discussion. Third, I argued that Heidegger is not an anti-modern reactionary but instead operates with a focused critique of modernity for its reduced sense of intelligibility (§1.3). This thesis represents Heidegger's considered attitude toward, and the ground for his critique of, the modern age. His critique of modernity's impoverished intelligibility unites the features of modernity under one broad heading, suggesting that modernity is characterized by the crisis of our deficient relationship to being. Finally, I showed that Heidegger's discussion of modernity does not end with a merely negative critique, but is instead in service of a positive vision that will redress modernity's impoverished relation to being (§1.4). Heidegger has in mind a future thinking that successfully reconnects humanity with being as such, the endlessly rich source of intelligibility to which we moderns have become oblivious.

Heidegger uses these arguments—which I have read as forming his *deconstruction of the modern age*—to buttress his endorsement of Count Yorck's dramatic and disturbingly earnest exhortation that “the ‘modern man’ . . . is ready for burial” (BT 452/SZ 401). Heidegger, then, deconstructs modernity, in the sense that he criticizes its deficient understanding of being, and then positively builds from there a vision of how to think about being in a new and postmodern way. My aim here of explaining Heidegger's theory and critique of modernity was ultimately to clarify how Gadamer importantly departs from Heidegger's deconstructive project of definitively moving beyond and splitting from modernity on the basis of his systematic critique.

Chapter 2: Gadamer's Post-Heideggerian Pathmarks

In his searching and wide-ranging autobiographical essay, submitted to the volume dedicated to his work in *The Library of Living Philosophers* when he was a few years shy of his centennial birthday, Gadamer writes, “I must leave it to others to decide whether the path [*Weg*] I have followed can claim to have kept up, at least to some degree, with Heidegger’s own ventures in thinking [*Denkwagnisse*]” (RPJ 47/GW2 11). Now that we presented the central features of Heidegger’s thinking about the modern age, we must turn to this important and difficult question of whether and in what manner Gadamer followed Heidegger’s path—a question that, in this passage, Gadamer leaves admirably open. I argued in Chapter 1 that Heidegger’s deconstruction of modernity centers on the modern age’s impoverished intelligibility, and I showed that this focused critique motivated the consequent inauguration of another beginning in which Western humanity would move beyond modernity by developing another way of thinking about being.

Here in Chapter 2, I will show how Gadamer challenges both central elements of the Heideggerian deconstruction of modernity. This claim may perhaps appear surprising given one widespread reading of Gadamer as a loyal disciple of Heidegger’s. For this reason, I will begin in §2.1 with a presentation of two dominant readings of Gadamer’s relation to Heidegger, as either *straightforwardly continuous with* or as *a conservative regression from* Heidegger’s thought. I will instead read Gadamer as *following the way or path* of what he saw as most deeply true in Heidegger. This conception involves Gadamer diverging from Heidegger’s development of his own central insights. Hence, Gadamer stands both *with* and *against* Heidegger on modernity. To support this reading, I shall present in §2.2 what is continuous between the two thinkers on modernity, namely, our

receptivity to history and characterizing modernity as marked by alienation and instrumental rationality. With that continuity established, I will discuss in §2.3 important divergences between the two, concerning the solidarities that persist in the modern age and the possibility of another beginning. I will bring out these differences by highlighting Heidegger's rootedness in Nietzsche and Hölderlin in contrast to Gadamer's starting points in Dilthey and Rilke. In all, I mean to suggest that Gadamer's differences from Heidegger point the way toward his own distinctive strategy of rehabilitating modernity.

§2.1: Reading Gadamer's relation to Heidegger

§2.1.1: Continuity thesis: Habermas and Honneth

To approach the question of what Gadamer positively inherits from Heidegger's deconstruction of modernity as well as where the two diverge, we must begin by establishing a sense of Gadamer's relation to his teacher in general. By gaining an understanding of this relation, we can orient ourselves toward how Gadamer follows as well as separates himself from Heidegger on modernity. In this section, I will present the two most prominent readings of the Gadamer–Heidegger relation in the secondary literature and say what I think each of them gets right but also importantly overlooks. I shall end §2.1 with a provisional thesis of my own about how to understand this relation that will provide the point of departure for our subsequent discussion. Arguably the best-known thesis on how Gadamer stands relative to Heidegger is what I will call the *continuity thesis*. According to this reading, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is a development out of Heidegger's project that builds upon, and does not on any deep level challenge, Heideggerian premises. This reading construes Gadamer's project as an application of Heidegger to cultural and intellectual domains into which Heidegger

himself did not often venture. Put another way, for these readers, Gadamer translates Heidegger into a new idiom, which suggests that Gadamer's hermeneutics offers a new formal presentation of the same philosophical content found originally in Heidegger.

The most famous expression of this interpretation was articulated by Jürgen Habermas in his *laudatio*, delivered when Gadamer won the Hegel Prize in 1979, entitled “Urbanizing the Heideggerian Province.”⁹⁷ According to Habermas, Heidegger is “a radical thinker who has dug a gorge about himself. I see the greatness of Gadamer’s philosophic achievement in this, that he has bridged over this gorge.”⁹⁸ Writing at a time when Heidegger was a politically and intellectually polarizing figure within German academic philosophy, unlike the canonical status now accorded to him, Habermas emphasizes the novelty, strangeness, and *sui generis* character of Heidegger’s philosophical language and his allegedly antagonistic relation to the philosophical tradition.⁹⁹ These features apparently make Heidegger unpalatable to the philosophical and intellectual mainstream. In this context, for Habermas, Gadamer contributes a translation of Heidegger’s profound but alienating ideas into an academically and historically comprehensible language. As Habermas recognizes, this reading of the relation between teacher and student entails a profound underlying continuity between their philosophical commitments. Someone who effects this translation of Heidegger into a more legible form “can only be someone who—at a certain distance, to be sure—still

⁹⁷ *Philosophical–Political Profiles*, 189-198.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁹⁹ This ambivalent attitude resulted from Heidegger’s political involvement with the Nazis. It is a testament to Gadamer’s enduring personal loyalty to Heidegger that he was instrumental in Heidegger’s reintegration into the academic community: By editing and ensuring the publication of a festschrift for Heidegger in 1950, advocating for Heidegger’s membership in the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences, and inviting Heidegger to Gadamer’s seminars at Heidelberg. See Jean Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography*, 269-271. Gadamer movingly describes how these interventions deepened their relationship: “I came to be completely and positively recognized by Heidegger only through my engagement for him after the war. He was simply thankful for that as a person” (HR 50-51).

follows Heidegger far enough to promote his thought productively and on a sound basis. I should say that Gadamer's productivity is of this type."¹⁰⁰ On this account, Gadamer can effectively translate Heidegger into a language acceptable to academic philosophy and intellectual culture more generally for two reasons. First, Gadamer basically accepts the core of Heidegger's thinking and can thus act as a capable and convinced spokesman and advocate for those ideas. Second, Habermas's metaphor of urbanizing suggests that Gadamer speaks in an urbane voice, one that capably articulates Heideggerian concepts—developed in the withdrawn and isolated context of Heidegger's solitary, even provincial path of thought, away from Europe's intellectual and academic milieu—to a larger and more cosmopolitan audience drawn from the arts and humanities. In interpreting Gadamer as effecting a translation of Heidegger into a new idiom, Habermas reads an underlying and fundamental philosophical continuity between the two thinkers.

Habermas's thesis has had an enormous influence on the reception of Gadamer's thought, proving to be the touchstone against which all subsequent interpretations of Gadamer's place in twentieth-century Continental European philosophy position themselves. As Donatella Di Cesare puts it in, Habermas ineluctably “contributed to putting Gadamer in Heidegger's shadows [*sic*].”¹⁰¹ Significantly, Habermas articulated his urbanization reading as a speech praising Gadamer upon his reception of a prominent philosophical prize: Habermas ostensibly meant the thesis that Gadamer urbanizes Heidegger as a compliment to Gadamer, since for Habermas, Heidegger's “self-chosen isolation” represents a flaw in his thinking because it renders him inaccessible to most

¹⁰⁰ *Philosophical–Political Profiles*, 190-191.

¹⁰¹ *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*, 198.

readers, a flaw the more cosmopolitan Gadamer does not share.¹⁰² As I will argue, however, this reading severely understates both Gadamer's originality and the genuine differences between him and his mentor. Habermas's reading of Gadamer additionally misunderstands Heidegger's position with regard to the philosophical tradition: "The regress into the historical foundations of thought, the thinking through of the questions which are still unasked since the time of Greek philosophy—that is not a cutting loose from the tradition [*Überlieferung*]" (HC 109/GA16 674). To call Heidegger an intellectually isolated thinker, who lives behind a self-dug gorge, fails to recognize his profound engagement with the history of philosophy, which we explored in our discussion in Chapter 1 of Heidegger's methods of deconstruction and the history of being, both of which require an intimate knowledge of and dynamic interaction with the history of metaphysics and can hardly be the products of an isolated and solitary thinker.

Habermas's reading has had the effect of construing Gadamer primarily as a translation of Heidegger, rendering Gadamer "a mere Heideggerian epigone."¹⁰³ Gadamer thus gets read by the continuity thesis as merely applying his mentor's core insights to the arts and humanities, cultural and intellectual domains where the more provincial Heidegger was loath to tread but where the urbane Gadamer could fluently translate and defend Heidegger's ideas. Positing this fundamental continuity between Gadamer and Heidegger also opens Gadamer up to the charge that he commits the same errors as his mentor, sometimes even to a greater extent. Axel Honneth, in an explicit

¹⁰² *Philosophical–Political Profiles*, 190.

¹⁰³ Rod Coltman, *The Language of Hermeneutics: Gadamer and Heidegger in Dialogue*, 1. For a critical account of the influence of Habermas's thesis, see also Adrian Costache, *Gadamer and the Question of Understanding: Between Heidegger and Derrida*, 1, 145. Walter Lammi explicitly takes over Habermas's thesis, arguing that "Gadamer's 'translation' of Heidegger also offers a fundamental corrective to Heidegger's thought" ("Hans-Georg Gadamer's 'Correction' of Heidegger," 488).

development of Habermas's metaphor, makes this claim when he argues that Gadamer is not merely engaged in the "urbanization [*Urbanisierung*]" of Heidegger, but even more strongly in the "reclamation [*Urbarmachung*]" of the field of Heidegger's thought: "While 'urbanization' is understood sociologically as the emergence of civilized forms of life, 'reclamation' since ancient times designates that arduous and time-consuming process through which economically useless land is changed into fruitful 'firm' ground, be it field, meadow, or forest," and so Gadamer should be understood to be "unfolding the productivity of what was originally meant" by Heidegger.¹⁰⁴ According to Honneth, not only does Gadamer translate Heidegger into a more cosmopolitan idiom, as Habermas suggested, he also actively develops and deepens Heidegger's insights in a field of thought that Gadamer cultivated into a more urban domain. In the interpretations of Habermas and Honneth, Gadamer gets construed as carrying out Heidegger's agenda, albeit in his own language and within new cultural and intellectual fields.

It is important to recognize, as some scholars have done, the extent to which Gadamer's own self-presentation motivates the continuity thesis.¹⁰⁵ The following passage represents a significant strand of Gadamer's presentation of his relation to Heidegger: "Our consideration of the significance of tradition in historical consciousness started from Heidegger's analysis of the hermeneutics of facticity and sought to apply it to a hermeneutics of the humanities" (TM 308/GW1 314). On this account, Gadamer takes the hermeneutics of facticity developed in *Being and Time* and applies it to research

¹⁰⁴ "On the Destructive Power of the Third: Gadamer and Heidegger's Doctrine of Intersubjectivity," 6. For another example of targeting Gadamer and Heidegger at once, this time with the controversial charge of linguistic idealism, see Cristina Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, 55-124. For a response to Lafont's critique on Heidegger's (though not Gadamer's) behalf, see Taylor Carman, "Was Heidegger a Linguistic Idealist?" 205-216. Significantly, both Honneth and Lafont were students of Habermas. That they follow up on and work within the framework of their teacher's reading of Gadamer with overtly negative objections reveals the critical edge to Habermas's reading.

¹⁰⁵ See Costache, *Gadamer and the Question of Understanding*, 1-2; and Di Cesare, *Gadamer*, 79-80.

in the arts and humanities. Such a self-understanding lends itself to Habermas's urbanization reading.¹⁰⁶ Gadamer construes his own philosophical achievement as not only essentially Heideggerian, but as in fact a translation of the arguments of *Being and Time* into the idiom of a philosophy of the humanities: "The task still remained of taking the philosophical awakening of Heidegger and applying it to the humanities [*Geisteswissenschaften*] and to show its validity there. This is the task to which I have tried to contribute" (GIC 39/GIG 12). In moments such as these, Gadamer affects a self-effacing conception of his own philosophical project. He sums this attitude up when, in correspondence with Leo Strauss in 1961, he quite modestly describes his project as "a transposition of Heidegger into an academic medium" (CWM 8). This misleading description affirms Habermas's judgment that Gadamer translates the dense, strange language of Heidegger into the conventional idiom of academic philosophy.

Consider also the way Habermas suggests that Gadamer is more cosmopolitan than the provincial Heidegger. Gadamer seems to confirm this part of the thesis too: "By studying poetry, the visual arts, architecture, and music I come to understand what Heidegger means by 'nearness to being'" (GIC 114). Just as Gadamer occasionally identifies his philosophical hermeneutics as applying Heidegger to the philosophy of the humanities, so too here he suggests he arrived at the same conclusions as Heidegger via his own fluency with the fine arts. This type of contrast with Heidegger is made evident also when Gadamer compares his writing style to Heidegger's: "Heidegger's language and style had a certain plastic power—boorish, barbarian, admittedly—like an elephant going through the primeval forest. My style is unfortunately not as powerful as

¹⁰⁶ Paul Redding provides an example: "Gadamer's achievement...was to flesh out Heidegger's suggestive ideas into a model of understanding" (*Hegel's Hermeneutics*, 44). See also Theodore Kisiel, "The Happening of Tradition: The Hermeneutics of Gadamer and Heidegger," 4-7.

Heidegger's, but it is smoother" (GIC 108). Gadamer revealingly equates Heidegger's writing style with a boorish and primitive barbarianism—that is, a language uncompromising in its demands on the reader and self-consciously rooted in primordial sources—while construing his own style to be smooth, suggesting that he considers his writing to be more palatable and conventional and also likely more cultivated, polished, and rooted in modern European culture than Heidegger's. Such a conception again implies a more urbane refinement in contrast to Heidegger's provincialism.¹⁰⁷

As I will show in §2.2.1, Gadamer's presentation of his relation to Heidegger is frustratingly inconsistent. Thus, it would be too quick to say that he confirms Habermas's continuity thesis. I highlight these passages only to show how Gadamer's comments seem to lend themselves to Habermas's thesis. The virtue of Habermas's reading is that it attempts to account for the enormous continuities that exist between Heidegger and Gadamer, many of which I will discuss in §2.2. The problem with the continuity thesis, however, is that it overlooks any substantive philosophical differences between the two, which I will outline in §2.3. According to the continuity thesis, the only significant differences between them are either formal: the brutal and primitive language of Heidegger as opposed to the urbane and refined style of Gadamer; or of audience: the monological and isolated Heidegger, whose essential ideas are unfolded and translated by Gadamer to the sophisticated world of the arts and humanities. This thesis severely

¹⁰⁷ Some Gadamerians evince this uncharitable attitude, such as when Grondin revealingly remarks of Gadamer's membership at the Heidelberg Tennis Club: "What skiing was for the Black Forest native Heidegger, tennis was for Gadamer the urbanite" (*Gadamer: A Biography*, 315). See also Peter E. Gordon's politicized characterization of Heidegger as "a provincial thinker who romanticized skills of the hand and looked with suspicion on the fruitless affairs of the deracinated intellect" ("The Critical Appropriation of Heidegger's Philosophy: Five Motifs," 30).

underestimates the real differences in philosophical content, and not only of presentational form, which separate teacher from student.

§2.1.2: Regression thesis: Caputo and Bernasconi

While the continuity thesis has been enormously influential in the reception of Gadamer's thought, it is not the only interpretative option. I turn to another paradigm for understanding Gadamer's relation to Heidegger, which I shall call the *regression thesis*.

This reading introduces an unfavorable comparison of Gadamer with relation to Heidegger, on the grounds that Gadamer's position represents a philosophical regression from Heidegger's. In other words, from his starting point in Heidegger's thinking, Gadamer goes in a direction that renders him vulnerable to objections to which Heidegger is not subject. Specifically, Gadamer fails to appreciate the radicality of Heidegger's approach, and so the problems to which Gadamer opens himself result from the philosophical conservatism of his approach when compared with that of Heidegger.

While the continuity thesis sees Heidegger and Gadamer as sharing the same philosophical commitments, the regression thesis thinks Gadamer twisted the latter's premises in an unnecessarily conservative direction. Hence, the regression thesis ostensibly credits Gadamer with more philosophical originality than the continuity thesis does, but at the expense of questioning the viability or cogency of his hermeneutics.

John D. Caputo advocates a position that he calls "radical hermeneutics," a moniker that suggests a contrast with the conservatism he identifies at the heart of Gadamerian—that is, non-radical—hermeneutics. Caputo reconstructs the history of twentieth-century hermeneutics as pivoting around Heidegger's ontological theory of understanding in *Being and Time*: "The hermeneutic project launched in *Being and Time*

thus moved in three directions: to the right, in Gadamer's more conservative 'philosophical hermeneutics'; to the left, in a Derridean 'deconstruction' of hermeneutics; and finally, let us say, straight ahead, in the direction of the late Heidegger's startling repetition of his own project in *Being and Time*.¹⁰⁸ How does Gadamer's hermeneutics represent a turn "to the right"? Caputo thinks Gadamer inherits Heidegger's account of historicity by developing Heidegger's arguments for the way tradition affects us in the present. But Gadamer fails to follow, according to Caputo, Heidegger's critical engagement with that tradition: "[Gadamer] lacked the heart for Heidegger's more radical side...he had no interest in the more deeply critical side of Heidegger which had inspired Heidegger's talk of destruction and overcoming."¹⁰⁹ Gadamer's inheritance from Heidegger is one-sided, acknowledging our reception of tradition but not the attempt to dynamically and critically engage with that tradition.

Like Caputo, Robert Bernasconi reads Gadamer as ignoring Heidegger's critique of tradition, specifically by not endorsing the history of being: "Without granting to Heidegger the legitimacy of the history of Being, we find ourselves wondering whether Gadamer has not opted for a one-sided interpretation of Heidegger's analysis, one which refuses his central insight," a refusal that "succeeds only in rendering [Gadamer's] own thinking incoherent."¹¹⁰ With this latter claim, we glean a further component of the regression thesis, namely, that Gadamer's conservative retreat from Heidegger's radicalism represents a critical flaw. In other words, the regression thesis not only claims that Gadamer does not follow all of Heidegger's thinking; it takes the further step of

¹⁰⁸ *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*, 97. Contemporary Heidegger scholarship disputes that he worked "straight ahead" from *Being and Time* in his later work.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹¹⁰ "Bridging the Abyss: Heidegger and Gadamer," 16 and 18.

claiming that this lack of correspondence between Gadamer and the full scope of Heidegger's thought decisively counts against Gadamer. Bernasconi suggests that Gadamer is not consistently Heideggerian in refusing to follow the history of being, robbing his arguments of the methodological basis that supported Heidegger's critique of the modern age. We will answer this objection in §2.3.1. Caputo suggests that Gadamer's hermeneutics is also deficient because of its disguised adherence to traditional metaphysics: "Gadamer's analytic of finitude cannot conceal a latent theory of essence, ideality, and infinity."¹¹¹ In holding onto metaphysical concepts like infinity (see §4.3.1), Gadamer opens himself up to objections to the metaphysical tradition.¹¹² Bernasconi and Caputo charge Gadamer with developing a weaker position in virtue of his unwillingness to follow Heidegger's radical commitments. According to the regression thesis, Gadamer fails to endorse Heidegger's development of the history of being (Bernasconi) and of overcoming metaphysics (Caputo). For these critics, the decidedly non-radical Gadamer falls prey to traditional metaphysical errors that the later Heidegger conscientiously avoided, as Caputo suggests, and also incoherently attempts "to reestablish Heidegger within the continuity of the philosophical tradition," as Bernasconi argues.¹¹³

Two points must be qualifiedly conceded to this interpretation. First, Gadamer sometimes intimates that he construes his own philosophical approach as more modest than Heidegger's wide-ranging claims about the history of being. This modesty may be interpreted as a form of conservatism. Consider Gadamer's comment, from a letter to Heidegger dated June 19, 1971: "I know very well that precisely my preference [*Neigung*] for moderation, an irresoluteness [*Unentscheidenheit*] almost elevated to a

¹¹¹ *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are*, 43.

¹¹² On Derrida as critic of Gadamer, see Maurizio Ferraris, "The Aging of the 'School of Suspicion,'" 150.

¹¹³ "Bridging the Abyss," 5.

(hermeneutical) principle, makes me accessible and acceptable, whereas the originality of your initiative is thought to make you inaccessible and unacceptable.”¹¹⁴ Gadamer reveals his self-effacing self-image when compared to his teacher. He suggests that his philosophical claims are more modest in scope and in presentation than the dramatic and original Heidegger. He makes a similar claim when, in a 1996 interview, he calls himself “one who stayed behind, who can be seen as lagging behind Heidegger” (GR 424).¹¹⁵ It is one of the maddeningly unavoidable features of Gadamer’s self-presentation with regard to Heidegger that he can variously bolster both the continuity and regression theses, which otherwise seem so opposed. Gadamer appears to confirm the regression thesis when he construes himself as a more modest version of the radical Heidegger.

According to the regression thesis, Gadamer’s modesty means he jettisons the central planks of the later Heidegger’s thought and makes problematic concessions to the metaphysical tradition. I read Gadamer’s modesty another way, however—not in terms of philosophical conservatism, but rather as motivated by a dynamic and robust disagreement with Heidegger. Gadamer grounds this disagreement in an alternative and independently viable view of our relation to history. His proposal suggests a humbler conception of the possibilities for present action, which may be seen as a form of philosophical modesty only in the sense of maintaining a more realistic conception of the possibilities for present activity and not a lack of philosophical courage about following the later Heidegger. I will make that case in §2.3 below.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Grondin at *Gadamer: A Biography*, 295. This passage can also be found at “Ausgewählte Briefe an Martin Heidegger,” 44.

¹¹⁵ Jeff Malpas insightfully suggests that Gadamer is “one of the few philosophers for whom the ‘interview’ has become a significant category of philosophical output” (“Hans-Georg Gadamer”).

My second qualified concession to the regression thesis is related to my suggestion that there is another way to read Gadamer's alleged conservatism. The regression thesis rightly detects that Gadamer does not share Heidegger's view of our relation to the metaphysical tradition. These readers, however, interpret this difference as entailing that Gadamer aligns himself with that tradition, and that he fails to be sufficiently critical of it. As I shall show, Gadamer's alternative view of history does not prevent him from adopting a critical attitude toward the past. Far from it, Gadamer is critical of our historical inheritance in modernity—but his grounds for and method of critique differ from Heidegger's. Too often, critics like Caputo and Bernasconi identify a distinction between Heidegger and Gadamer, and then tendentiously infer from this difference either an *ipso facto* inferiority on Gadamer's part or an automatically more subservient relationship to the metaphysical tradition.¹¹⁶ This strategy begs the question in favor of the Heideggerian position. In contrast to the regression thesis, I shall argue that such differences are signs of a robust disagreement between teacher and student in which Gadamer has motivated and defensible arguments to offer. The regression thesis fails to do justice to the substantive content of this disagreement, or to Gadamer's ability to stand on his own in a debate with Heidegger.

§2.1.3: Gadamer's path

Now I want to develop my own reading of Gadamer's relation to Heidegger, which will involve appreciable advantages over the continuity and regression theses. Both these readings suggest critiques of Gadamer: That he unoriginally takes over Heidegger's views (continuity), or that he misses Heidegger's best insights and arrives at a

¹¹⁶ James Risser also ably responds to Caputo's critique at *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 121-123.

traditionalistic position (regression). My reading will not be critical in this way. For me, Gadamer's most considered and insightful reflections on his relation to Heidegger reveal that he saw himself not as a mere translation of Heidegger into urbane or cultivated domains, nor as a conservative and modest version of Heidegger. Instead, Gadamer carries forth Heideggerian insights that he accepts while rejecting what is inconsistent with the former's own position.¹¹⁷ Gadamer always remained within the sphere of Heidegger's philosophy, but he attempted to push beyond his teacher's influence by resisting important elements of Heidegger's thought. By rejecting parts of Heidegger but retaining others, Gadamer sought *to forge his own way or path*. In other words, in a delicate balance elided by the extreme continuity and regression theses, Gadamer stands both with and against Heidegger.¹¹⁸ I intend for my reading now to reveal the complex relation between Gadamer and his mentor on the issue of modernity, a goal obviated by the more overtly critical agendas of the continuity and regression theses.

In the family of passages I draw upon to guide my reading, Gadamer crucially adopts the metaphor of the way or path (*Weg*) to describe how he conducts his thinking in the wake of what he recognizes as Heidegger's epochal contributions. In employing this metaphor, he follows the lead of Heidegger's well-known dictum "ways, not works [*Wege, nicht Werke*]" that serves as the epigraph Heidegger assigned for the ongoing

¹¹⁷ See Jermon Veith: "Gadamer avoids what he takes to be pernicious elements of Heidegger's thought" (*Gadamer and the Transmission of History*, 44). See also Coltman: "We must see Gadamer as neither simply carrying on his teacher's work nor merely taking from it what he likes and discarding the rest" (*The Language of Hermeneutics*, 124). Dennis J. Schmidt also makes this point well ("Introduction: Among the Ways," xxii-xxiii). The distinctive element of my presentation is the image of the way or path. Grondin refers to "dem spannenden Wege von Heidegger zu Gadamer" but does not thematize this metaphor, with reference to Gadamer's employment of it (*Von Heidegger zu Gadamer: Unterwegs zur Hermeneutik*, 10).

¹¹⁸ For the phrase "with and against Heidegger," see Theodore George, "Thing, Object, Life," 28.

critical edition of his collected works, the *Gesamtausgabe* (GA1 v).¹¹⁹ This expression suggests that the later Heidegger, rather than writing traditional philosophical treatises in the mold of *Being and Time* that form a systematic inquiry, instead builds signposts that illuminate multiple paths of thinking. Such signposts serve as indications or hints for directions of thought that Heidegger went down, and that we might in turn follow.

In the preface to his collection of essays *Holzwege*, Heidegger describes the enigmatic term he used as the title of that collection: “Each goes its separate way, though within the same forest. It often appears as if one is identical to another. But it only appears so” (OBT v/GA5 iv).¹²⁰ Heidegger’s extremely rich metaphor implies multiple facets. For one thing, ways are crucially plural. Unlike *Being and Time*, which proposes a fundamental ontology that attempted to provide a singular and ultimate answer to the question of being, Heidegger suggests with the plural “ways” that his later philosophy abandons any attempt at a totalizing or final answer.¹²¹ As he puts it in a discussion from 1963 of the question of being: “The path [*Weg*] of questioning became longer than I suspected. It demanded many stopovers, detours and wrong paths [*Aufenthalte, Umwege und Abwege*]” (T&B 79-80/GA14 99). Instead of a single and final answer, Heidegger’s later thinking settles for multiple and varied directions of inquiry that doggedly pursue the same question. In addition, likening ways to paths in a forest importantly suggests that we do not ourselves choose what path to walk. If one is already far along a forest path, one cannot just get off that path at will, or else one will end up lost in the midst of

¹¹⁹ See Franz Josef Wetz, “Wege, Nicht Werke: Zur *Gesamtausgabe* Martin Heidegger,” 444-445. It is significant that the title of the edition of Heidegger’s complete works—unlike that of other major German philosophers like Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and indeed Gadamer—does not contain the word “*Werke*.”

¹²⁰ On the term “*Holzwege*,” see Iain Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 83-84.

¹²¹ For later Heidegger’s recognition of the failure to deliver a fundamental ontology, see Thomson, “The Failure of Philosophy: Why Didn’t *Being and Time* Answer the Question of Being?” 286-310.

the forest. One must instead follow the path in some direction for a while before one can find a new path, or before leaving the forest entirely. Which path we are on, and where it leads us, is, therefore, not something we can completely decide for ourselves. In the same way, thinking along a way must be pursued far along in some direction before that line of thinking can be concluded or abandoned for another one.

Heidegger's notion of ways also crucially implies that no single one of them can ever completely exhaust the question they each independently attempt to address. This conception again suggests a contrast with the thinking of a systematic treatise like *Being and Time*, which attempted to answer the question of being once and for all. Conceiving of thinking as conducted along ways or paths implies that genuine thinking requires pursuing multiple possible ways, as Heidegger admits he himself has done:

I have left an earlier standpoint, not in order to exchange it for another one, but because even the former standpoint was merely a stopover along a way [*ein Aufenthalt war in einem Unterwegs*]. The lasting element in thinking is the way. And ways of thinking [*Denkwege*] hold within them that mysterious quality that we can walk them forward and backward, and that indeed only the way back will lead us forward. (OWL 12/GA12 94)

Here Heidegger pursues the metaphor of walking down or traversing a way or path. He suggests we must walk up and down a way for some time and some distance before we can make progress on the question that the way is tracking. Hence, ways are meant to be followed and walked down for oneself; we must vigorously and intently pursue a line of thinking for ourselves and see where it leads, and experience from our own perspective where and how the path guides us. That one must walk down a path for oneself will be important and suggestive for Gadamer's understanding of how philosophy should proceed in Heidegger's wake. In this passage, Heidegger also admits he has pursued different ways throughout his career, suggesting that he "left an earlier standpoint,"

namely, the fundamental ontology of *Being and Time*, because it “was merely a stopover along a way.” In other words, he pursued that way, its fruitfulness has been exhausted, and he finished walking along it. Hence, he now walks other paths to see where they will lead. Ways toward a deep philosophical question are multiple, and while they must be vigorously plumbed of their depths and fully pursued before one can change direction, ways can, after they have been pursued in some direction, eventually be exchanged for another. Only by pursuing several ways for oneself can one make genuine progress.

Gadamer takes the motto “ways, not works” so seriously that he titles his important 1983 collection of writings about his teacher *Heidegger’s Ways (Heideggers Wege)*, explicitly following Heidegger’s employment of this expression: “When the large edition of [Heidegger’s] writings, the one that followed his own arrangement, began to appear, he gave it the following epigraph: ‘Ways, not works’; and his later works did in fact present new ways and new thought experiments [*Denkversuche*]” (HW 11/GW3 183).¹²² The metaphor of the way or path surfaces in Gadamer’s most revealing comments about his relation to Heidegger. In his 1988 essay on Heidegger’s politics, Gadamer writes, “Just as Heidegger in the 1920s did not create blind followers for himself, likewise one must find one’s paths of thought, now more than ever” (HPP 82). Here he strongly distances himself from Heidegger’s “blind followers,” as he also does when he disparagingly refers to those from the Marburg period who merely imitated Heidegger’s odd and distinctive manner of speaking without philosophically comprehending what he meant (HW 62, 116/GW3 224, 266).

¹²² I cannot resist also appealing to the striking and undated photograph taken by Gadamer’s daughter Jutta Stöver of the elderly Gadamer walking with cane in hand down a long country path near Heidelberg lined with trees stretching into the background. One cannot mistake the Heideggerian resonances of this wonderful photograph, which adorns the cover of Grondin, *Gadamer: A Biography*.

In contrast to those who merely parrot Heidegger, then, Gadamer thinks of himself as forging a path that begins with Heidegger but which he forms into one that is distinctively his own. Numerous passages support this reading. In a suggestive text in which thinking after Heidegger is couched in terms of paths or ways, Gadamer claims that thinking cannot avoid Heidegger's provocative challenge:

But either way, Heidegger is there [*da*]. One cannot get around him nor—unfortunately [*leider*]¹²³—can one progress beyond him in the direction of his question. He blocks the path in a most disturbing way [*So ist er auf eine bestürzende Weise im Wege*]. He is an erratic block awash in a stream of thinking rushing toward technical perfection. But he is a block that cannot be budged from its place. (HW 27/GW3 196)¹²³

One cannot resist speculating about the extent to which this passage is autobiographical, particularly given the striking insertion of “unfortunately” into the sentence about how Heidegger can never be ignored, raising the possibility that Gadamer may at one time have attempted to think outside the bounds of Heideggerian thought but, to his disappointment, failed.¹²⁴ Autobiographically revealing or not, this quotation shows Gadamer emphatically insisting on the need to begin with Heidegger's thinking before one can press forward with one's own by deploying the metaphor of the way or path that starts from Heidegger. One's way of thought cannot avoid, but rather must begin with, Heidegger. This insight is rooted in Heidegger's own conceptualization of the way or path, which as we have seen requires that one walk down a path for oneself in order to

¹²³ This passage is good evidence for Robert J. Dostal's claim that “Gadamer's own characterization of the relationship between himself and Heidegger [is] as one of constant challenge and provocation” (“Gadamer's Relation to Heidegger and Phenomenology,” 247). I agree with this general assessment, but I attempt to fill in the idea of “constant challenge and provocation” with additional precision.

¹²⁴ This possible attempt at non-Heideggerian thinking may have occurred during Gadamer's self-imposed exile from philosophy to classical philology in the wake of Heidegger's harsh judgment of his abilities. Heidegger wrote to Gadamer in 1924: “If you cannot summon sufficient toughness toward yourself, nothing will come of you”; as Grondin reports of communications such as this one, “Gadamer was dashed to the ground” (*Gadamer: A Biography*, 117). Toward the end of his life, he summarized his movement to classical studies as follows: “I became a classical philologist, because Heidegger's superiority was such that I had to say to myself: ‘Now you have to learn something which he doesn't know’” (GIC 107).

see where it leads. One cannot accomplish such a goal by straightforwardly following a path already forged by someone else. Heidegger's image of the way or path, adopted by Gadamer, implies that, at some point, one must ultimately find one's own way.

Gadamer emphasizes that his way of thinking, while beginning with and rooted in Heidegger, should not be wholly identified with Heidegger's philosophy: "I first had to distinguish my own search for my way and footbridge [*Weg und Steg*] from my companionship with Heidegger and his ways" (HW vii/GW3 vi). How, if they are not identical, is Gadamer's way of thought to be characterized in relation to Heidegger's?

The eightieth birthday of a man whose thought has had its effect on us for fifty years is an occasion to give thanks. But how should that take place? Should one speak directly to Martin Heidegger?—certainly the issue of thinking has grasped him too strongly for such a direct access to his person to be appropriate. Does one speak with Martin Heidegger?—it sounds a bit presumptuous to dare such a partnership. Or does one speak about Martin Heidegger in front of Martin Heidegger? All of these possibilities are excluded. What remains is that one, who was there from early on, bears witness [*Zeugen*] to all others. A witness says what is and what is true. So the witness [*Zeuge*], who is speaking here, is permitted to say what everyone who has encountered Martin Heidegger has experienced: He is a master of thinking, of that unfamiliar art of thinking. (HW 61/GW3 223)

This revealing, even moving, passage invites close attention, for it points toward Gadamer's strategy for thinking after Heidegger. In expressing the need to "give thanks" to Heidegger, Gadamer intimates that, from his perspective, philosophy must take place from now on within the sphere of Heidegger's thinking. We cannot turn our backs on Heidegger; instead, we must directly confront his legacy. Simultaneously, however, this admission leaves ambiguous how post-Heideggerian thinking should "take place." To that end, Gadamer lists several possible options. The first is "[speaking] directly to Martin Heidegger." But this strategy obviates the need to achieve distance from

Heidegger, since it involves a direct involvement with his thinking, entailing a dangerous proximity to Heidegger's overwhelmingly powerful influence that could distort one's attempt to think for oneself. To "speak with" Heidegger is also dismissed, since his way of thinking is so distinctively his own that it cannot be aped or imitated if one wants to achieve anything philosophically of one's own. Finally, to "speak about Martin Heidegger in front of Martin Heidegger" bespeaks hagiography or mere commentary in the interest of pleasing, interesting, or flattering the thinker himself, an activity that does not own up to the need to actually think for oneself in his wake.

Gadamer refers to his own strategy for post-Heideggerian thought as acting as a "witness" to Heidegger, a figure who "says what is and what is true." Gadamer refers here to more than the biographical fact of his serving, as a matter of historical record, as a witness to Heidegger's teaching and mentorship, important as that fact undoubtedly is. Rather, I take him to mean that he bears witness to what is most true and disclosive in Heidegger's thinking. Note that the three other options rejected by Gadamer in this passage—speaking directly to, with, and about and in front of Heidegger—all involve thinking *toward* Heidegger, in his direction, either in dialogue with him or by conducting a conversation about him in his presence. Such an impression is made possible by the fact that they all metaphorically call to mind speaking, in some fashion, *in front of* Heidegger. We should thus understand all these possible strategies as spatial metaphors, as constituting an orientation in his direction, as orbiting around him.¹²⁵

When Gadamer describes himself as bearing witness, we should read this strategy as involving turning one's thinking from being directly oriented toward Heidegger into a

¹²⁵ Groundbreaking work by Malpas has brought out connections between hermeneutics and considerations of space and place. See his "Placing Understanding/Understanding Place," 379-391.

direction of one's own that builds upon the basis of Heidegger's way. While the rejected strategies metaphorically suggested physical proximity to Heidegger, bearing witness instead importantly invites the image of having previously been in the proximity of Heidegger's thinking but then subsequently moving on elsewhere by oneself, carrying within oneself Heidegger's memory or influence but taking it in a new direction. The spatial metaphor of the way or path that we have paid special attention to is so important for precisely this reason, as Gadamer emphasizes: "Ways [*Wege*] are there to be walked upon, such that one leave them behind and progress forward; they are not something static on which you can rest or to which you can refer" (HW 135/GW3 282). For Gadamer, Heidegger's thinking became a way that crucially provided him with the central orientation for his own path. Heidegger's thought opened a path on which Gadamer himself walked and that subsequently provided him with a crucial and unavoidable point of departure. But as he suggests, the metaphor of the way also crucially implies that Gadamer cannot rest content with merely staying on Heidegger's own path.

We have been following Gadamer's *Wegmarken*, or pathmarks, along his path of thinking through Heidegger's legacy and how to respond to it. For Gadamer, as for any genuinely post-Heideggerian thinker, following Heidegger's way ultimately leads somewhere else.¹²⁶ Indeed, Gadamer forges ahead from Heidegger's way in a direction that he chose for himself within the context of his own starting point. Given his intellectual biography, Gadamer cannot but start from along the Heideggerian path, but where that path ultimately leads was consequently up to him. Gadamer's description of bearing witness—to say "what is and what is true"—is crucial to grasping what is

¹²⁶ For a recent and philosophically diverse assemblage of perspectives on the question of post-Heideggerian thinking, see the essays collected in Gregory Fried and Richard Polt, eds., *After Heidegger?*

involved in this idea of the way or path. Gadamer's conception of bearing witness implies that the path that he cultivates begins with what he sees as most true in Heidegger, meaning that it begins with at least some of his central ideas. But this image suggests at the same time that Gadamer's path ultimately diverges from Heidegger, since otherwise Heidegger's and Gadamer's ways would be boringly indistinguishable. Hence, in another deliberately spatial expression, I will read Gadamer as standing both *with* and *against* Heidegger. His path begins from Heidegger, which means it also departs from him.

Both the continuity and regression theses (§§2.1.1-2.1.2) can also be understood in spatial terms. For the continuity thesis of Habermas and Honneth, Gadamer never left Heidegger's path; he merely urbanized it. My reading has two advantages over the continuity thesis. First, while there is textual evidence to support that thesis, there is also ample support for my reading that Gadamer forged a path that begins with but ultimately departs from Heidegger. Second, I shall show how not all of Gadamer's insights are identical with Heidegger's, and that in fact their views diverge on crucial topics, a possibility mostly excluded by the continuity thesis. The regression thesis, too, contains spatial resonances. For Caputo and Bernasconi, Gadamer walks backward along Heidegger's path, away from the latter's mature and radical conclusions and toward the metaphysical tradition from which Heidegger departed. The regression thesis shares a crucial flaw with the continuity thesis in their mutual assumption that Gadamer's path does not diverge from Heidegger's in any positive sense. My image of a path that begins with Heidegger but goes elsewhere makes better sense of Gadamer's philosophical development, because it acknowledges and seeks to explain Gadamer's robust disagreements with Heidegger to account for Gadamer's mature and novel insights.

Hence, in contrast to the regression thesis, I read Gadamer not as philosophically conservative, but rather as incisively critical of Heidegger.

§2.2: With Heidegger: Continuities

§2.2.1: Early or later Heidegger?

Throughout this section, I shall be concerned with tracking Gadamer's continuities with Heidegger. One difficulty of this task is that Heidegger's influence on Gadamer is so profound as to be almost incalculable: "One cannot think of my becoming who I am without Heidegger," as he revealingly admits (GR 425). One could begin accounting for Heidegger's influence on Gadamer with a discussion of how Gadamer unfolds Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity and ontology of understanding from the 1920s into the analysis of hermeneutic experience in *Truth and Method*.¹²⁷ My concern, however, is not with hermeneutics in general, where Heidegger's influence on Gadamer is generously admitted by Gadamer and well trodden by scholars, but rather with the hermeneutics of modernity in particular. In this latter domain, several themes stand out as particularly important. To uncover those themes, we must first tackle an exegetical puzzle: Does Gadamer primarily follow the early or later Heidegger?¹²⁸ Answering this question will orient us toward identifying the Heideggerian ideas that prove operative for Gadamer.

What makes differentiating the influence of the early as opposed to the later Heidegger on Gadamer an exegetical puzzle? As with so many other elements of their relation, the difficulty stems from Gadamer's inconsistent presentation. In §2.1, I pointed

¹²⁷ This issue is the locus of discussion in mine and Theodore George's overview of Gadamer's hermeneutics in our "Hermeneutics in Post-war Continental European Philosophy."

¹²⁸ Risser arrives at a similar point when he despairs that Gadamer's relationship to Heidegger is "decisively blurred" ("Hermeneutics Between Gadamer and Heidegger," 135). Risser also insightfully shows Gadamer does not only follow *Being and Time* at *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*, 12-14.

out how Gadamer provides fodder for both the continuity and regression theses, and I adduced textual evidence for my reading of Gadamer as following Heidegger's way of thought into his own path. These examples demonstrate Gadamer's unreliable accounting of his relation to his mentor. Gadamer was haunted by the considerable personal difficulties of his relationship with Heidegger and the power and influence of Heidegger's thought that he felt on an existential level. These biographical issues colored the shifting manner in which he couched his relationship to his teacher. For example, Gadamer makes the following emotionally resonant admission: "Writing remained a torment for me. I had this terrible feeling that Heidegger was standing behind me and looking over my shoulder" (RPJ 15/GW2 491). Gadamer felt enormously insecure in his intellectual relationship with his mentor, going so far as to say at the end of his life, "I still didn't know whether he thought I was any good at all" (HR 50). These biographical details help account for the extraordinarily long time it took Gadamer to arrive with his own *magnum opus* (*Truth and Method* was published when he was 60 years old), as well as for the way Heidegger's influence lurks like a shadow whose contours are not always fully manifest throughout Gadamer's work.¹²⁹ The felt presence of Heidegger over his shoulder, and his own feelings of philosophical inadequacy, encouraged Gadamer to not only produce excellent philosophical work that would meet the master's standards, but also to be circumspect and rigorous in his attempts to distance himself from his mentor.

That Gadamer felt Heidegger like a specter over his shoulder means also that he felt forced to be reticent about Heidegger's influence. Gadamer did not write explicitly about Heidegger until 1960 (the same year as the publication of *Truth and Method*, when

¹²⁹ Grondin reports that Heidegger was known to tell his students in the 1950s: "Ultimately Gadamer simply has to write a book" (*Gadamer: A Biography*, 268).

he emerged as a major thinker in his own right), when Heidegger commissioned his former student and assistant to write the introduction to the Reclam edition of “The Origin of the Work of Art.” In the preface to *Heidegger’s Ways*, Gadamer writes: “That these are all relatively recent works should not be taken to mean that my engagement with Heidegger is recent as well. Rather, I received impetuses for thinking from Heidegger very early on, and I attempted from the very beginning to follow such impetuses within the limits of my capabilities and to the extent that I could concur” (HW vii/GW3 vi). This deferred silence about his teacher—despite the long period during which Gadamer admits that he thought about Heidegger’s influence on his own thought—as well as his inconsistent and difficult to parse comments about Heidegger, make it difficult for scholars today to unpack Gadamer’s philosophically and personally charged relation to his teacher into a coherent interpretation.

In the case of what developmental phase in Heidegger’s thought he follows, Gadamer variously underscores the influence of both the early and later Heidegger.¹³⁰ As is well known, Gadamer studied with Heidegger first at Freiburg and then Marburg between 1923 and 1927.¹³¹ He also served as Heidegger’s assistant at Marburg, where he submitted his habilitation in 1928 under Heidegger’s supervision. In *Truth and Method*, when he describes his project as applying Heidegger’s ontological description of understanding to research in the arts and humanities, the focus of Gadamer’s discussion of Heidegger is almost exclusively *Being and Time*.¹³² Some commentators see

¹³⁰ On this point, see Stefano Marino, “Gadamer on Heidegger: Is the History of Being ‘Just’ Another Philosophy of History?,” 288.

¹³¹ On Gadamer’s classes with Heidegger, see Grondin, *Gadamer: A Biography*, 100-102.

¹³² See the references to *Being and Time* in the sections of *Truth and Method* “Heidegger’s Project of a Hermeneutic Phenomenology” and “Heidegger’s Disclosure of the Forestructure of Understanding” (TM 245, 268/GW1 258, 270).

Gadamer's reading of that text as filtered through his experience with Heidegger's teaching in the 1920s.¹³³ In any event, this prominent focus on *Being and Time* in Gadamer's own most important work has given rise to what he acknowledges as "the appearance that I remained captive to the standpoint of the early Heidegger, which took a Dasein concerned with its being and characterized by an understanding of being as its starting point" (RPJ 46/GW2 10).¹³⁴ When Heidegger construes understanding as an ontological component of human being, rather than a cognitive act restricted to interpreting texts or other historical artifacts, he provided Gadamer's hermeneutics with its definitive starting point. Gadamer inherits from Heidegger the central insight that we are beings who understand and interpret in all our engagements and projects.

It would be, for that reason, easy to suggest that Gadamer primarily follows the early Heidegger. As we have seen, Caputo makes this claim when he calls Gadamer a right-wing offspring of *Being and Time* who preserves the truths of tradition without challenging them. As with other themes of his relation to his teacher, Gadamer occasionally motivates this seemingly obvious but in fact facile reading. For example, he distances himself from a tendency or sensibility he critically identifies in the later Heidegger: "Later Heidegger also became monological. The early Heidegger, however, was not like that at all, but rather as I tried my whole life to remain: ready to listen to the other, to respond to him or her" (GIC 106). Gadamer claims that Heidegger ceased to

¹³³ Di Cesare argues that Gadamer only cites *Being and Time* in *Truth and Method* because the 1920s lectures were not yet available by 1960 in print, but that Gadamer implicitly draws upon the latter in *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 78). For an alternative view, see Günter Figal's interpretation of the divergences between Gadamer and the Heidegger of the 1920s (*Objectivity: The Hermeneutical and Philosophy*, 12).

¹³⁴ See Rodolphe Gasché: "What Gadamer retains of Heidegger's phenomenological philosophy is the early conception of a hermeneutics of facticity" ("Deconstruction and Hermeneutics," 139). Equally one-sided is the following claim from Malpas: "The work of Heidegger's one-time pupil, Hans-Georg Gadamer... takes as its starting point Heidegger's later rather than earlier thinking" (*Heidegger and the Thinking of Place: Explorations in the Topology of Being*, 199). I will split the difference between these two extreme theses.

fully listen to his students and instead preferred to meditate and make absolute proclamations.¹³⁵ As Gadamer sums up his many years of discussions with Heidegger, “I always learned an incredible amount when I listened to him—but it was not a conversation” (HR 50). According to Gadamer, appealing to his education from the 1920s, the early Heidegger was not subject to such unfortunate dialogical shortcomings. Furthermore, from the early Heidegger, Gadamer crucially learned that understanding is an ontological component of human being: “I can appeal to the ‘transcendental’ sense of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*”—that is, to the idea that an irreducible condition of our being is that we understand and interpret (CWM 8). Gadamer locates that insight in Heidegger’s writings from the 1920s, and he always remains faithful to that basic thesis. These passages, and the overwhelming emphasis on Heidegger’s early masterpiece in *Truth and Method*, suggest the plausibility of the view of Caputo and others that Gadamer only or primarily follows the Heidegger of *Being and Time*.

But as Gadamer repeatedly makes clear, his thought is also definitively marked by the influence of the later Heidegger.¹³⁶ In his correspondence with Strauss, Gadamer declares, “I believe really to have understood the late Heidegger, i.e., his ‘truth.’ But I must ‘prove’ it to myself—with the experience which is my own” (CWM 10). We see here further evidence for my interpretation that Gadamer blazes his own path that begins with what he sees as true in Heidegger. This passage also raises the question: What,

¹³⁵ See Grondin’s amusing description of Heidegger’s visits to Gadamer’s seminars: “What Heidegger offered were not seminars, but monologues, something very different from what the auditors were used to from Gadamer. Heidegger’s monomaniacal mode of self-dramatization (he would begin to speak after a small curtain was pulled aside), as well as their teacher Gadamer’s awe before Heidegger, were rather annoying to the students” (*Gadamer: A Biography*, 271). As Gadamer recounts, “I always fell under his spell, but my students did not! They were all angry that he didn’t let me speak enough” (HR 51).

¹³⁶ Veith nicely summarizes: “Gadamer evinces a far more complex and pervasive relation to Heidegger’s thought, making a sustained effort to grapple with his teacher’s entire corpus, not just with those ideas gleaned during his ‘philosophical apprenticeship’” (*Gadamer and the Transmission of History*, 42).

exactly, is the truth of the later Heidegger with which Gadamer identifies? When Gadamer talks about the philosophical substance of the later Heidegger, he tends to be quite laudatory: “Heidegger’s criticism of transcendental inquiry and his thinking of the ‘turn [*Kehre*]’ form the basis of my treatment of the universal hermeneutic problem” (TM xxxii/GW2 446). We must now identify how Heidegger’s turn provided Gadamer with his basis. Consider the following two passages: “Of course, the later Heidegger expressly tried to overcome the transcendental-philosophical view of the self found in *Being and Time*. My own intention in introducing the concept of historically effective consciousness, however, was precisely to blaze a path [*Weg*] to the later Heidegger”; “That which led Heidegger to his famous ‘turn [*Kehre*]’ I for my part sought to describe in terms of our self-understanding coming up against its limits, that is, as the ‘historically effective consciousness’ which is ‘more being than consciousness’” (RPJ 46, 27/GW2 10, 495-496).¹³⁷ In these passages, Gadamer aligns historically effective consciousness with the insights of the later Heidegger. What does this appeal to historically effective consciousness suggest about Gadamer’s understanding of the truth of the later Heidegger? Though some scholars tend to do so, encouraged by Gadamer confusingly identifying himself with both phases of Heidegger’s thought, we should not identify Gadamer’s thinking with exclusively either the early or later Heidegger. Instead, Gadamer’s thinking is informed by both phases. From the early Heidegger, Gadamer inherits the idea of understanding and interpretation as constitutive of human being, and he finds himself in sympathy with the early Heidegger’s dialogical sensibility from his

¹³⁷ Risser also discusses these passages to argue that Gadamer begins from the later Heidegger in the direction of “accounting for the communicative event” (*Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*, 13).

days as a student. But as we have just seen, Gadamer is also quick to credit the later Heidegger as inspiring some of his most important ideas about our relation to history.

§2.2.2: Receptivity to history

I previously quoted two passages where Gadamer indicates that he considers the later Heidegger's most important insights to have been those that informed his notion of historically effective consciousness. I want to explain why Gadamer would indicate a connection here. Doing so will not only uncover what Gadamer most prominently inherits from the later Heidegger; explaining Gadamer's Heideggerian view of history shall also point us toward how Gadamer theorizes modernity, and eventually how the way he does so importantly differs from Heidegger. As we saw in Chapter 1, Heidegger developed his most central insights about the modern age in his later work. I shall now demonstrate that Gadamer's conceptualization of modernity also takes its cue from by the later Heidegger by explaining what Gadamer means by "historically effective consciousness," and showing why he would tie that concept to the later Heidegger.

In arguably the central sequence of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer provides an analysis of what he calls *hermeneutic experience* as an account of how we understand texts, artworks, and history.¹³⁸ In the course of that analysis, he makes explicit the operative role of tradition (*Überlieferung*, literally what has been handed down) in all our acts of understanding: "That which has been sanctioned by tradition and custom has an authority that is nameless, and our finite historical being is marked by the fact that the

¹³⁸ My discussion here of tradition and historically effective consciousness draws upon the reconstruction in Liakos and George, "Hermeneutics in Post-war Continental European Philosophy." As we point out there, and as I alluded to in §2.2.1, in numerous respects these Gadamerian concepts crucially also draw upon *Being and Time*. I would emphasize thrownness here in particular. Given my purposes, however, I shall emphasize here, as Gadamer himself also does, the continuity with the later Heidegger.

authority of what has been handed down to us—and not just what is clearly grounded—always has power over our attitudes and behavior” (TM 281/GW1 285). Our finitude renders us open to the influence of factors beyond our control and knowledge. Tradition names our inheritance of historically conditioned forms of intelligibility, and this receptivity to tradition forms the essential background for all our acts of understanding. We never come to a text without some essential and inherited, albeit implicit, sense of meaning that comes down to us from the past and its confrontation with the present. We always understand on the basis of tradition. Gadamer emphasizes how tradition always binds and exercises power over us in our attempts to understand: “A happening of tradition [*Überlieferungsgeschehen*], a process of handing down, is a prior condition of understanding” (TM 308/GW1 314). What the past bequeaths to us as mattering and as intelligible is always operative when we try to understandingly come to grips with something. My acts of understanding essentially depend on this inherited sense of the intelligibility of things that Gadamer names tradition. My ability to understand is always enabled but also conditioned by this prior but dynamic sense of significance. Tradition comes down to us not as a static set of determinate laws, but rather as a living, fluid, and malleable sense for what matters and of what is capable of counting as significant for us. For this reason, Gadamer describes tradition as something that happens to us, which distinguishes it from a scientific dictate or an ironclad deductive law. Past and present, history and interpreter, dynamically challenge each other’s sense of significance.

Though this transcendental background for understanding can never be made fully transparent to us—as if we could ever delineate the entire collection of conditions that the past has handed down to the present, as fluid as tradition and its relation to the present

is—we can nonetheless develop an increased awareness of the way tradition operates upon us. Gadamer calls this recognition historically effective consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*), which he defines as “openness to tradition” (TM 355/GW1 367). While the misleading Cartesian ideal of pure scientific objectivity would have us believe we can understand on the basis of reason acting on its own according only to the correct procedure or method (see §3.2.1), historically effective consciousness instead develops a cultivated awareness of the role of historical tradition in all present attempts to understand. We never reason wholly independently; tradition always stalks our understanding. Rather than engaging in the self-defeating gesture of denying or ignoring the role of tradition, historically effective consciousness allows itself to be open to the voice of tradition and hence to make the role of tradition in our acts of understanding clearer and more explicit in an effort to understand better.

Historically effective consciousness listens to what tradition has to say, because whether we hear it or not, it always speaks to us: “We should learn to understand ourselves better and recognize that in all understanding, whether we are expressly aware of it or not, the efficacy of history is at work” (TM 300/GW1 306). Tradition irreducibly conditions our forms of intelligibility, and so the task of understanding responsibly and well (the goal of hermeneutics since its inception in biblical and legal interpretation) requires bringing that conditioning to as explicit a level of awareness as possible. We can understand responsibly only when we bring out the background conditions of our understanding: “We are always already affected by history. It determines in advance both what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation” (TM 300/GW1 305-306). Our rational inquiry is always bound by some

historically inherited sense of what matters and of significance. Left unnoticed, and without uncovering them, such factors could irrevocably and deleteriously distort our acts of understanding. The ongoing achievement of historically effective consciousness is to bring tradition to more explicit awareness so that we can interrogate it and see explicitly how it affects and shapes the way we understand. We can never wholly extricate tradition, but we can come to terms as best we can with its effects on us.

We must ask why Gadamer identifies this concept as his attempt to do justice to the later Heidegger. An important Gadamerian text will provide an answer. In the 1960 Reclam edition of “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger included a new preface in which he says: “The introduction composed by H.-G. Gadamer contains a decisive hint [*entscheidenden Wink*] for the reader of my later writings” (PLT xxiv/UK 5). In a contemporaneous letter to Gadamer, referring again to the latter’s introductory essay, Heidegger enthuses, “I find it excellent with repeated reading.”¹³⁹ My interpretive gambit is to suggest that we look to Gadamer’s introduction to Heidegger’s “Origin” to find the key to understanding how historically effective consciousness forms Gadamer’s path to the later Heidegger. Gadamer’s introduction reveals a crucial insight regarding how he reads the later Heidegger by revealing the crux of what he regards as most important from Heidegger’s later work.¹⁴⁰ This clue will show why historically effective consciousness expresses the truth of the later Heidegger.

¹³⁹ September 3, 1960 letter (“Ausgewählte Briefe Martin Heideggers an Hans-Georg Gadamer,” 37).

¹⁴⁰ Confusingly, Gadamer’s essay goes by multiple titles. In the *Gesammelte Werke*, it is titled “Die Wahrheit des Kunstwerks” (GW3 249-261), which is also the title it judiciously receives in the English translation of *Heidegger’s Ways* (“The Truth of the Work of Art”; HW 95-110). In another English volume, it is oddly called “Heidegger’s Later Philosophy” (PH 213-228), while in the Reclam edition of “Origin,” it goes simply by “Zur Einführung” (UK 93-114). To bypass this morass, I shall refer to it as the “introduction” or “introductory essay.”

In his introduction to “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Gadamer makes a valuable scholarly contribution by contextualizing Heidegger’s essay within twentieth-century philosophy, including Neo-Kantianism and phenomenology, and the larger milieu of German political and cultural history. In addition, he makes explicit the way Heidegger’s account of art in that essay forms a critique of Neo-Kantian and Idealist aesthetics by eruditely setting out the touchstones from the history of aesthetics against which Heidegger stakes the relation of art to truth. These features of the introduction may indicate that Gadamer urbanizes Heidegger’s “Origin” essay (see §3.1.1). Habermas suggested that Gadamer effectively translates Heidegger’s novel but elliptically formed arguments into the language of academic philosophy. Again proving the limitations of Habermas’s reading, however, transposing Heidegger’s insights into an academically palatable form is far from all that Gadamer accomplishes in his introduction. Indeed, perhaps the most striking feature of Gadamer’s presentation of Heidegger’s argument is the heavy emphasis he places there on earth (*Erde*).¹⁴¹ For the urbanization reading, this fact may be attributed to the fact that earth is the most profoundly original and exotic philosophical and semantic innovation of Heidegger’s “Origin,” and hence the most in need of explanation. Indeed, Gadamer hints that he agrees with this assessment: “What justification is there for this concept? What warrant does it have?” (HW 100/GW3 253) Gadamer indicates the need to elucidate what Heidegger means by earth.

Gadamer in his introductory essay attempts, though, more than merely a translation of earth into a more comprehensible lexicon. Rather, he stakes out the daring and distinctive interpretative claim that earth is the central contribution of Heidegger’s

¹⁴¹ This has been pointed out by Diane P. Michelfelder in her insightful study of Gadamer’s introductory essay (“Gadamer on Heidegger on Art,” 445).

“Origin” and perhaps of his later thinking as a whole: “The important insight that Heidegger’s ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ opened up is that ‘earth’ is a necessary determination of the being of the work of art” (HW 100/GW3 253). Gadamer signals that earth is not merely a concept that requires elucidation; it is one whose truth he ultimately also accepts. He identifies earth as the central motif of the “Origin” essay, and summarizes this Heideggerian insight as “the unfathomableness and depth [*die Unergründlichkeit und Tiefe*]” of an artwork’s meaning (HW 107/GW3 259). Earth is Heidegger’s name in “Origin” for the ultimate source and condition for the possibility of significance and meaning.¹⁴² Heidegger emphasizes the way earth both gives and withholds: “Its silent gift...its unexplained self-refusal” (OBT 14/GA5 19). Earth makes possible and enables modes of intelligibility, but any present signification cannot wholly capture earth’s meaning. Earth is always excessive, and points toward future ways of meaning. Hence, earth withholds meaning, never allowing itself to be fully expressed by any single mode of intelligibility. Earth is the background texture of meaning that modes of intelligibility attempt to express, a task they can only ever accomplish partially. Earth, identified by Gadamer as the most important contribution of Heidegger’s “Origin,” resists as well as enables intelligibility. Gadamer elsewhere restates Heidegger’s insight into the refusal of earth as acknowledging that which “is disregarded by the imperious human will to manipulate” and, referring to his introductory essay, importantly claims, “I have emphasized this idea as the systematic starting-point for Heidegger’s later work” (PH 72, 81n1/GW2 68, 68n9). Something outside human willing always enables understanding. Earth thus forms the basis of Gadamer’s reading of the later Heidegger in general.

¹⁴² My discussion of earth follows Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 79-90.

Gadamer attended Heidegger's lectures in Frankfurt in 1936 that formed the basis of the published "Origin" essay, and the experience of hearing the lectures made an enormous impression on him: "These three lectures so closely addressed my own questions and my own experience of the proximity of art and philosophy that they awakened an immediate response in me. My philosophical hermeneutics seeks precisely to adhere to the line of questioning of this essay *and the later Heidegger* and to make it accessible in a new way" (RPJ 47/GW2 10).¹⁴³ Here is what we have established so far: Gadamer professes to adhere to the later Heidegger and "The Origin of the Work of Art" in particular; in his introductory essay to the latter, he considers earth the operative concept of the overall argument of "Origin" and indeed as the starting point for Heidegger's later work; and he construes his own notion of historically effective consciousness as an expression of the central insight of the later Heidegger.

Now we are in position to render the following judgment: When he calls historically effective consciousness an expression of the truth of the later Heidegger, Gadamer links historically effective consciousness with what Heidegger calls earth. Gadamer aligns himself with what he regards as the most important truth of the later Heidegger, namely, that there are modes of intelligibility that we receive and to which we are receptive and open that lie largely outside our control and agency.¹⁴⁴ Historically

¹⁴³ For the context of Gadamer's appearance at the lectures within his evolving personal relationship to Heidegger and the scandal of Heidegger's Nazism, see Grondin, *Gadamer: A Biography*, 188-189. Gadamer attended without meeting with Heidegger, as he had assiduously avoided contact with his mentor since the latter's ascension to the rectorate in 1933. While attending the lectures did not prove the impetus for his reunion with Heidegger (that would come later), it did prove philosophically formative for Gadamer.
¹⁴⁴ Hubert Dreyfus does not acknowledge how tradition functions in this implicit way when he suggests that Gadamer "never seems to have taken a stand on Heidegger's claim that there is a level of everyday practice...beneath our theoretical presuppositions and assumptions" because he only ever talks about "an implicit belief or assumption" at the theoretical level (*Skillful Coping: Essays on the Phenomenology of Everyday Perception and Action*, 134). Gadamer aligning historically effective consciousness with earth suggests that the conditioning of understanding can be understood at the level of background practices.

effective consciousness and earth both express this basic insight.¹⁴⁵ Gadamer occasionally expresses this inheritance from Heidegger in terms of the happening of understanding: “I otherwise still appeal to Heidegger—in that I attempt to think of ‘understanding’ as a ‘happening [*Geschehen*]’” (CWM 8). Understanding happens to us; it is not something entirely up to our will or to our sovereign reason. The dynamic transmission of the past in the form of tradition conditions and shapes present understanding. This fact means that understanding happens to us; we do not force it to happen. How we engage in understanding is not entirely subject to our control. Tradition and understanding both happen to us. Crucially, Gadamer locates this insight into understanding as a happening in “The Origin of the Work of Art”: “It seems to me that Heidegger took a very important step in designating the work of art as a happening of truth” (HW 23/GW3 193). In these passages about the happening of truth, Gadamer refers again to the fundamental insight he takes from earth: We are crucially conditioned and informed by forms of intelligibility outside our control.

The central continuity between Gadamer and the later Heidegger, then, concerns our receptivity to history as the condition of the possibility of intelligibility.¹⁴⁶ Gadamer translates Heidegger’s earth into his own idiom and into the realm of his concerns and interests. For this reason, a Heideggerian may say Gadamer downplays the natural texture evoked by the vocabulary of earth with historically effective consciousness, which, in

¹⁴⁵ A striking anecdote by Richard E. Palmer, concerning Heidegger’s visit to a 1965 seminar at Heidelberg taught by Gadamer, suggests that Heidegger did not see historically effective consciousness in so positive a light, since he allegedly claimed at that time that historically effective consciousness was “straight out of Dilthey!” (GR 323) Grondin reports that Heidegger “was particularly taken aback by the fact that Gadamer retained the concept of consciousness typical of Idealist philosophy” (*Gadamer: A Biography*, 292).

¹⁴⁶ Hence, Bernasconi misses the mark when he ascribes to Gadamer the (mistaken) view that “Heidegger is somehow rejecting the tradition of philosophy begun by Plato” (“Bridging the Abyss,” 15).

typical Gadamerian fashion, is more linguistic and cultural in orientation.¹⁴⁷ But I emphasize, following Gadamer himself, the continuities between these two concepts. Gadamer inherits from Heidegger's "Origin" the insight that we are open to significances and meanings we cannot control and that can never be brought to completely explicit awareness, but which essentially inform and enable our understanding. Gadamer sees historically effective consciousness as expressing this Heideggerian insight into historicity and our openness to what comes down to us from the past: "There is no doubt that Heidegger saw ['a being-affected (*Betroffensein*)']...My own accomplishment, if one may call it that at all, goes exactly in this direction!" (HR 57) Tradition and understanding possess the dynamic character of a happening. Heidegger expresses this insight in terms of the withholding and giving of the earth, while Gadamer articulates it as the operative role of tradition in understanding that gets revealed and made more (but never wholly) explicit by historically effective consciousness. Despite their different formulations, both thinkers believe that we inevitably receive transmissions from the past that inform and happen to us in the present. We can only agree with Dennis J. Schmidt, then, that Heidegger and Gadamer "both regard it as the task of thinking to solicit, even to love, the limit."¹⁴⁸ Our finite receptivity to the past and its transmissions dynamically transform our rational inquiry and our sense of the significance of things. If this underlying similarity between Heidegger and Gadamer on our receptivity to history and tradition were the end of the story, then my exegetical argument might provide evidence for the continuity thesis of Habermas and Honneth. Gadamer would have only restated the notion of earth in a more traditional and urbane way. This continuity between

¹⁴⁷ See John Sallis: "Even more remarkable is Gadamer's silence about the earth" ("The Hermeneutics of the Artwork: 'Die Ontologie der Kuntswerks und ihre hermeneutische Bedeutung' [GW 1, 87-138]," 56).

¹⁴⁸ "Among the Ways," xx.

Gadamer and his teacher stands, however, alongside crucial differences, which I shall discuss in in §3, concerning our ability to transcend the transmissions of the past.¹⁴⁹

§2.2.3: Modern alienation and instrumental rationality

Now that we have laid out the continuity between Heidegger and Gadamer’s views on our relation to the historical past, we must say something about the similarities in how they characterize the modern age in particular. I shall claim that Gadamer agrees not only with Heidegger’s broad understanding of the way the past conditions the present, but also with numerous details of Heidegger’s characterization of our modern age. I reconstructed Heidegger’s conceptualization of modernity in §1.2 by presenting his theory of modernity, and now I shall demonstrate how Gadamer takes over some key elements of that theory. I will focus on two themes that unite Gadamer with Heidegger in their portraits of the modern age, namely, alienation and instrumental rationality. These themes that Gadamer inherits from Heidegger broadly concern the pervasive influence of natural science throughout modern life and culture.¹⁵⁰ We recall that in “The Age of the World Picture,” Heidegger identifies the modern age first of all with “its science” (OBT 57/GA5 75). Gadamer follows this characterization when he proclaims, “one calls our present age an epoch of the sciences [*Zeitalter der Wissenschaften*]” (EH 6/GW4 247). Because he conceptualizes modernity first of all in terms of natural science, Gadamer agrees with Heidegger in dating the inauguration of the modern age by the decisive developments of that science in the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century: “What developed

¹⁴⁹ See Veith, *Gadamer and the Transmission of History*, 43.

¹⁵⁰ Marino provides an excellent account of these features of Gadamer’s thinking in his argument that Gadamer’s “philosophy—despite the fact that it cannot be described as simply ‘anti-modern,’ or as ‘post-modern’—could be included in the...discourse concerning the crisis of modernity and the limits of its techno-scientifically oriented worldview” (*Gadamer and the Limits of the Modern Techno-Scientific Civilization*, 13). He does not situate Gadamer’s position relative to Heidegger, as I will, however.

with the new mechanics of Galileo and with the diffusion of the mathematical foundation of all empirical sciences, was the actual beginning of modernity [*eigentlichen Beginn der Neuzeit*]. It did not begin on a certain date—this game of the historian has been played enough—but with the methodological ideal of modern science” (EPH 198/HE 117). The development of the new mathematized natural sciences marks the distinctive birth of the modern age for Heidegger and Gadamer, who therefore both engage in the intellectual practice of periodizing the modern age (see §1.2.1).

What is the significance of the natural sciences for the character of modernity? In answering this question, the two central themes concerning our modern age that Gadamer prominently inherits from Heidegger come into focus. The first theme is Gadamer’s claim that modern humanity is marked by forms of deleterious “alienation.” In explicating this notion, Gadamer begins by providing an account of what he calls:

The central question of the modern age [Neuzeit]—a question posed for us by the existence of modern [modernen] science. It is the question of how our natural view of the world—the experience of the world that we have as we simply live out our lives—is related to the unassailable and anonymous authority that confronts us in the pronouncements of science. Since the seventeenth century, the real task of philosophy has been to mediate this new employment of human cognitive and constructive capacities with the totality of our human experience of life. (PH 3/GW2 219)

Here we see Gadamer echoing the Heideggerian periodizing claim that modernity begins with the development of the new science of the seventeenth century. Now we see more clearly why Gadamer follows Heidegger in dramatically assigning priority to natural science for the definition of the modern age. The ontology of the new science—which posits a world bereft of secondary qualities like color, taste, smell, and sound, and understands reality rather in predominantly quantified terms—is alienated from the

phenomenal features of everyday human experience.¹⁵¹ Secondary qualities, as Galileo famously argued, “do not really have any other existence except in us, and...outside of us they are nothing but names” (EG 188). Scientific truth enjoys a privileged intellectual status in our modern culture. We live in “our own scientifically grounded civilization [*unserer durch die Wissenschaft gegründeten Zivilisation*]” that looks to the sciences to tell us what is objectively the case (EH 105/VG 135). Yet it remains difficult to avoid feeling that the notion of truth suggested by Galileo’s dismissal of the objective reality of secondary qualities is divorced from what we humanly experience first of all and most of the time. The task of philosophy in the modern age becomes mediating between the truths of natural science and the phenomenologically felt qualities of human life.

Gadamer thinks modernity is distinctively marked by alienation—namely, the alienation of the terms in which we understand our lives by the overriding truths of natural science that, even if they do not directly contradict our common experience, are at least in tension with that experience. “*Verfremdung*,” the term translated here as “alienation,” may also be rendered as “distancing,” which usefully points to a gap or space between natural science and everyday human ontology. Gadamer’s hermeneutics then steps in to attempt “to overcome [*überwinden*]...the alienations” that come in the wake of natural science (PH 8/GW2 223). Here he picks out for special attention two specific alienations related to our experiences of art and history that have become distorted by the illegitimate importation of the standards and objectives of natural science into other domains of our culture. Gadamer’s hermeneutics is animated by his attempt at overcoming our alienated ways of experiencing art and history.

¹⁵¹ See Bernard Williams’s description of “the absolute conception of reality” offered by modern natural science at *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, 287-288; see also Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 101. I will return to Gadamer’s relation to scientific objectivity in §3.4.3.

What Gadamer calls “aesthetic alienation” finds its motivation in philosophical aesthetics since Kant, which encourages us to think of our experience with artworks primarily in the disinterested and objectifying terms of the formal qualities of an artwork and their interaction with our sensory capacities. A culture dominated by scientific ontology emphasizes our sensory experience in its description of art. But this paradigm ultimately represents an alienated departure from the overwhelming power that artworks can exercise over us when we set aside the terms of natural science, a power or effect that cannot necessarily be reduced to comfortably formal terms: “When a work of art has seized us it no longer leaves us the freedom to push it away from us once again and to accept or reject it on our own terms” (PH 4/GW2 220). Aesthetic alienation renders us unable to authentically or genuinely experience the shocking and disarming power of the beautiful that can wash over us. The second form of alienation Gadamer focuses on is our similar inability to authentically encounter history. Seized by the romantic–historicist ideal of methodologically reconstructing and pinning down the past, modern historians doggedly pursue the attempt to construct the best methodology by which to gain the maximally efficient and complete vantage point on the whole totality of historical facts. But in that methodological process, we lose our capacity to see the way history always and indelibly affects us now in the present: “Such control does not completely fulfill the task of understanding the past and its transmissions” (PH 6/GW2 222). This form of “historical alienation” treats the historical past like a mute object of academic study in an attempt at imitating the methodological rigor and objectifying flattening of the natural sciences, which ends up forgetting how the present gets conditioned and shaped by the

past. Our ability to genuinely feel and attend to the influence of history gets alienated by this ambitious but misguided scientific attempt to reconstruct the past.

In the case of both forms of alienation, Gadamer identifies a gap or distance between our phenomenologically felt ability to genuinely encounter art or history and the predominantly modern understandings of those phenomena that govern how our culture collectively grasps, conceives, and talks about them. In turn, we individually experience art and history primarily in terms of these impoverished modern paradigms. These alienations come as a result of the encroachment of ideals and methods proper to natural science into other areas of culture, and the understandings that come as a result of that encroachment stand at a decisive distance from how we would ordinarily experience phenomena like art and history without or before the decisive influence of modern natural science. These points suggest that we live in an age especially marked by the influence of natural science and that our experience is particularly alienated by that scientific spirit.

Gadamer fleshes out hermeneutical responses to this problem in Parts I and II of *Truth and Method* on “The Question of Truth as It Emerges in the Experience of Art” and “The Extension of the Question of Truth to Understanding in the Humanities” (TM 1, 173/GW1 7, 175). For now, we should see how Gadamer’s identification of “*the* central question of the modern age” derives from Heidegger. I identified the rise of aesthetics as central to Heidegger’s diagnosis of the modernity and showed how he thinks aesthetics derives from the modern scientific distinction between subject and object (§1.2.5). In his characterization of aesthetic alienation as following scientific ontology, Gadamer follows Heidegger, as he makes explicit in (among other places) his discussion of aesthetics in the introduction to Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art.” And while his

characterization of historical alienation calls to mind Nietzsche's second *Untimely Meditation* "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" more than any particular texts of Heidegger's, Gadamer's argument concerning the historical alienation in the wake of modern natural science certainly follows the same structure as does his Heideggerian formulation of aesthetic alienation.¹⁵² In sum, we must conclude that Gadamer's diagnosis of the alienations endemic to modernity that result from the dominance of the natural sciences in our culture is deeply indebted to Heidegger's overall conception of modernity.¹⁵³ For both thinkers, the modern age's scientific intelligibility colonizes all aspects of culture and forms of reason, indelibly driving us away from our human ability to genuinely encounter art and history.

I want to highlight another theme in Gadamer's characterization of modernity that is marked by Heidegger's decisive influence. The alienations of modernity come as a result, Heidegger and Gadamer agree, of the influence of natural science throughout modern culture. This pervasive scientific encroachment implies another modern problem that Gadamer frequently highlights, particularly in his later work, namely, instrumental rationality.¹⁵⁴ Gadamer contends that the methods, ideals, and objectives of natural science and its attendant technology have increasingly come to be applied to the control and administration of contemporary human life and society: "The rational regulation of the economy and politics, of our living together with other human beings, of our living

¹⁵² Michael N. Forster emphasizes Nietzsche's influence on Gadamer's conception of history at *German Philosophy of Language: From Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond*, 310-314. I shall say more about Gadamer's ambivalent relation to Nietzsche in §3.3.3.

¹⁵³ For this reason, I cannot agree with Dostal: "Gadamer does not paint a dark and apocalyptic picture of our age. He finds Heidegger's dismal view as overdramatized, dangerous, and hubristic" ("Gadamer's Relation to Heidegger and Phenomenology," 260). See also Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*, 113. It is true that Gadamer does not adopt the occasionally eschatological rhetoric of Heidegger, but we must also remember the important continuities that first of all exist between them.

¹⁵⁴ Gadamer's emphasis on instrumental rationality may be a consequence of his debate with Habermas and the Frankfurt School and the focus on political questions that emerged there. See Figal, *Objectivity*, 1-2.

together with other peoples, and of the interactions of the political power groups of today, defines the spirit of our age” (HW 15-16/GW3 186). Instrumental rationality names precisely this rapid, increasing, and alarming encroachment of natural science into ever more spheres of our concrete and lived existence. Therefore, it is not only the central topics of *Truth and Method*—namely, the arts and humanities—that find their desiderata threatened by natural science. Instrumental rationality calls our attention to the fact that our entire political and social life is at stake in the role of science in modern culture.¹⁵⁵

How Gadamer introduces and explains instrumental rationality mirrors Heidegger’s distinction between modernity as it begins with the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, in which nature becomes objectified and demarcated from human subjects to be mastered and controlled according to our purposes and goals; and then late modernity, in which this objectifying process extends to human beings as well, who get technology and its way of thinking applied to themselves (see §§1.2.3-1.2.6). Gadamer frequently deploys this Heideggerian characterization of modernity in terms of the attempt to master and control, summing the modern age up as “three centuries of an ever-increasing frenzy of making and being able to make” (EPH 191/EE 155). Modernity is marked by its technological–scientific attempt at developing tools, techniques, and instruments to manipulate and make use of nature. In characterizing the contemporary age specifically, Gadamer adopts Heidegger’s characterization of this modern process as reaching its final culmination in the manipulation finally of human nature and life: “What appears to me to characterize our epoch is not the surprising control of nature we have

¹⁵⁵ Gadamerian hermeneutics is not the refined discourse of the drawing room. It has vital political applicability. On this point, see, with regard to our ethical calling to respond to the other, George, “The Responsibility to Understand,” 103-120; on the critique of instrumental rationality as a response to fascism, Shawn Kelley, “Hermeneutics and Genocide: Giving Voice to the Unspoken,” 5-7; and on technology as ideological, Marino, *Gadamer and the Limits of the Modern Techno-Scientific Civilization*, 153.

achieved, but the development of scientific methods to guide the life of society” (EPH 165). Here he distinguishes, while at the same time crucially connecting, the modern scientific project of controlling nature from the rational administration of human life and society. The logic of modern natural science implies, but is not identical to, late-modern technology. In this way, Gadamer attends to and follows Heidegger’s distinction between modernity and its late-modern expression. Contemporary life is marked by the application of scientific rationality not only to nature but also to our political life: “We have developed our knowledge and technical abilities to such a pitch that they now represent a fundamental, all-embracing attitude towards nature *and the human world [der Menschenwelt]*” (EH 84/VG 112; my emphasis). Gadamer signals his adherence to the Heideggerian idea of enframing when he bemoans the fact “that man in his being could become a mere object, susceptible to being reconstructed and manipulated in all his social relationships by another man” (EPH 171). The objectifying attempt to master and control that gave birth to technology gets applied to human beings. We become the object of technological manipulation by the late-modern logic of instrumental rationality when, for example, centralized governing bodies such as corporations make decisions profoundly affecting human life on the basis of technological values like efficiency and optimization.

In characterizing modernity as marked by alienation, Gadamer argued that the methods and objectives of natural science encroached upon other domains of culture, including art and history. Instrumental rationality, and the Heideggerian picture of late modernity which it expresses, follows this logic of expansion: “The area where the rationality of calculation is practiced has necessarily continued to expand, thereby narrowing the free space of that rationality where ingenious improvisation and innovation

occur” (EPH 45/GW10 345). Modernity began with the methodological application of mathematical models to nature to satisfy practical ends. Our late-modern epoch is distinguished more specifically, and disturbingly, by the extended application of this way of thinking also to political life and human existence more generally: “The growing rationalization of society and the scientific techniques of administering it are more characteristic of our age than the vast progress of modern natural science” (TM xxvi/GW2 439). The distinctive way of thinking of modern science is no longer restricted to nature; instrumental rationality finally colonizes all aspects of human existence.

When we refer to instrumental rationality as the attempt to govern political and social life according to scientific methods, what exactly do we mean? Gadamer refers to “modern society [*heutigen Gesellschaftslebens*], with all of its automated, bureaucratized and technological apparatus” (EH 79/VG 106). Instrumental rationality should call to mind all bureaucratic and technical attempts at regulating human life. We should think of the centralized and planned administration of the economy, health, and education by governments and corporate entities; the increasingly prominent role of technical experts, such as social scientists, government officials, and university deans in administering our social life; and apps that constantly regulate our exercise, sleep, eating, and even dating habits.¹⁵⁶ Instrumental rationality operates not only by controlling society as a whole in terms of efficient overall outcomes, but also at the level of individual life: “The scientific culture of modernity [*der Wissenschaftskultur der Neuzeit*]...has developed...what is now a way of life. The life of each individual has now come increasingly to be regulated in an automated manner” (EH 112/VG 143). Instrumental rationality names this invasive colonization of modern natural science and its standards of intelligibility and desirability,

¹⁵⁶ See Gadamer’s critical essay, “The Limitations of the Expert” (EPH 181-192/EE 136-157).

whereby policies and practices aim primarily at maximally efficient outcomes, to all aspects of political and social life. Gadamer's understanding of instrumental rationality follows Heidegger's sharply critical characterization of late modernity as the application of the logic of technological control to human subjects and life.

The strong continuity between Heidegger's theory of modernity and these Gadamerian themes of alienation and instrumental rationality shows how Gadamer develops a highly critical account of the modern age rooted in the relation between modernity and natural science. This feature of his thinking is obscured by the imputation to him of a traditionalistic and weak philosophical conservatism by critics like Caputo and Bernasconi (§2.1.2). This link between Heidegger and Gadamer is related to the theme of the central place of natural science in modernity. But this emphasis raises the question of the role of being, so fundamental to Heidegger's analysis and heretofore largely unmentioned in connection with Gadamer. As we saw in §1.1, Heidegger's approach to the modern age means to reconnect humanity to being, or the source of all intelligibility. What is Gadamer's stance on the relation between the modern age and being? It is at this point that serious and substantively interesting divergences emerge.

§2.3: Against Heidegger: Divergences

§2.3.1: Radical split or radical continuity?

Until now, I have emphasized what Gadamer inherits from Heidegger. Now I shall show how Gadamer calls into question some central features of Heidegger's deconstruction of the modern age. For Heidegger, the most distinctive feature of modernity is its radically impoverished intelligibility, which marks it as a distinct historical epoch. Because the

modern age is cut off from the source of intelligibility, and we have lost our collective sense that things possess their own independent and inherent worth, modernity must be surmounted in favor of another beginning which will reconnect Western humanity to the polysemy of being (§§1.3-1.4). Its relation to being is, for Heidegger, what *defines* modernity and what *renders it most questionable*. I shall now contend that Gadamer importantly displaces the modern age's reduced intelligibility as the central motif of his own characterization and critique of modernity. I argue that Gadamer disputes Heidegger's characterization of the modern age as an epoch that is historically distinct in virtue of its particular relation to being. The ground for Gadamer's disagreement with Heidegger is his understanding of the radical and persistent continuities of history. This continuity of modernity motivates Gadamer's confrontation with Heidegger's claim that we can advance beyond the modern age and its deficient stance toward being.

Perhaps a good way to begin unpacking this distinction between the conceptualizations of modernity in Gadamer and Heidegger is to differentiate the interests or concerns they bring to that investigation. A common way of making this distinction, as we have seen, is between the urbane Gadamer and the provincial Heidegger. I have pushed back against this reading—but Gadamer calls attention to one aspect or instance of that contrast that may prove valuable in this context. In his voluminous writings about his teacher, Gadamer frequently emphasizes what he calls “The Religious Dimension” of Heidegger's thought (HW 167-180/GW3 308-319). In an interview conducted at the end of his life, Gadamer calls Heidegger “the Christian seeker after God who has not found him...And so it remained until the end” (HR 58). He further explains this characterization by contrasting it with his own self-image:

I would say that the attempt to understand religious questions is less important to me. It is not becoming *more* [as he ages]. Again and again I conclude: *ignoramus* is our function. That is what is correct, and so the idea of knowing about the afterlife is really not a human question. Furthermore, one would then have to include the whole question about what happens before the first cry of birth. So I would avoid both. We cannot understand them any differently than as we, as all humans, similarly deal with all cases of destruction. (HR 59)

This passage's invocation of the limits of human knowledge and comprehension in its bracketing of traditionally religious issues well displays Gadamer's humanism (see §3.4.1). The contrast he draws with Heidegger should be obvious, if controversial: Gadamer's thinking is marked by humanistic and worldly concerns, while Heidegger—who dropped out of the seminary, and throughout his career offered phenomenological analyses of what does not directly show up for us, namely, being—was motivated by his search for God, dovetailing with Habermas's characterization of him as provincial.¹⁵⁷ Gadamer implies that these religious roots of Heidegger's thinking motivate the latter's consistent interest in being. I do not impute to being a theological basis, nor do I equate being with religion. But I follow Gadamer in seeing Heidegger's thinking as concerned centrally with something beyond the modest bounds of human knowledge in the same way as birth and death: “But one must ask, does not the very existence of...[Heidegger's] critique of theology itself show that ‘God’—whether revealed or concealed—was not an empty word for him?” (HW 167/GW3 308) Gadamer's reference to Heidegger's religious thinking points toward being, his obsession from first to last and recognizably different from what we encounter first of all and most of the time. I will soon provide more details about Gadamer's conception of what does count as humanly knowable, but let me first

¹⁵⁷ Benjamin D. Crowe substantiates Gadamer's characterization of Heidegger (in his early period, at least) as a searcher after God in *Heidegger's Religious Origins: Destruction and Authenticity*; see especially his reference to the proximity of his thesis to Gadamer's reading at 267.n1.

underscore my provisional hypothesis. Gadamer maintains a more immanent and worldly set of concerns than Heidegger, whose primary focus in his conceptualization and critique of modernity is reconnecting us to being.

With that hint in mind, we shall see that Gadamer carefully but emphatically distances himself from Heidegger's understanding of the modern age as a discrete epoch marked by its impoverished intelligibility. He contends that Heidegger goes too far in positing that the modern age is split from the past and possible future in virtue of its uniquely deficient relation to being. For Gadamer, even in modernity, certain solidarities and continuities persist in our culture and way of life that Heidegger's excessively critical and totalizing characterization skips over and even obscures. Hence, Gadamer does not merely ignore the Heideggerian critique and its foundation in the history of being. Instead, he accepts parts of that critique, while disputing Heidegger's characterization of the modern age as something that we can transcend and move beyond.¹⁵⁸ In virtue of the continuities that exist as irreducible and ubiquitous features of modern life, we always belong to and can never totally depart from modernity. Gadamer thus does not simply ignore the history of being, as Bernasconi suggested (see §2.1.2), but rather replaces it with his own distinctive and hermeneutical conception of our belongingness to history.

Let us turn to Gadamer's argument for these claims against Heidegger. In a 1982 letter to Richard J. Bernstein, Gadamer makes an importantly revealing comment: "Don't we then run the risk of a terrible intellectual hubris [*Hochmut*] if we equate Nietzsche's

¹⁵⁸ Gianni Vattimo suggests Gadamer ignores these components of Heidegger's thinking: "Certain themes which are central to Heidegger, such as distancing oneself from metaphysics as the forgetting of Being, seem in Gadamer to have disappeared completely" (*Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, 3). See also Risser: "This shift to the history of the forgetfulness of Being is tantamount to a shift to a thinking of Being itself, which Gadamer explicitly draws back from" ("Hermeneutics Between Gadamer and Heidegger," 134). Such elements have not "disappeared," nor does Gadamer passively move away from them. Rather, they are actively disputed as a prologue to pursuing his own path.

anticipations and the ideological confusion of the present with life as it is actually lived with its own solidarities [*Solidaritäten*]? Here, in fact, my divergence [*Abweichung*] with Heidegger is fundamental” (LRB 263-264). This passage is programmatic for Gadamer’s critical confrontation with Heidegger on modernity (it is not often in that he baldly states a “fundamental” difference from his teacher), and invites close attention. He suggests that Heidegger’s diagnosis of modern nihilism, according to which our age is forgetful of and abandoned by being, lies at a remove from how modern human beings first of all and most of the time live. Gadamer claims that identifying our practical life with Heidegger’s understanding of modernity would be hubristic, because it imposes an abstract vision of the character of our historical epoch as a whole onto our ordinary existence in particular, in which totalizing claims about the nature of modernity are far removed from the conduct of life. In our lived and practical reality, which cannot be reduced to Heidegger’s abstract vision, we find what Gadamer terms “solidarities.” What does Gadamer mean by this idea, and how does his appeal to these solidarities amount to a critique of Heidegger?

Gadamer offers the following definition of solidarities, which is worth quoting at length given the importance of the concept for his dispute with Heidegger:

Unchanging and enduring realities—birth and death, youth and age, native and foreign land, commitment and freedom—demand the same recognition from all of us. These realities have measured out what human beings can plan and what they can achieve. Continents and empires, revolutions in power and in thought, the planning and organization of life on our planet and outside it, will not be able to exceed a measure which perhaps no one knows and to which, nevertheless, we are all subject. (EPH 180)

Solidarities name the fundamental reality of the finitude and limits of human life.¹⁵⁹ Such facts about the human condition as our mortality and rootedness in time and place constitute limits to which we are all subject, which implies two important consequences. First, solidarities are shared universally and equally by all human beings. Our facticity unites us, despite other important differences that arise in the course of our historical existence. When Gadamer contrasts Heidegger's religious thinking with his own secular concerns, his reference to what is humanly knowable points toward solidarities in this sense. The second implication of the existence of solidarities is that philosophical thinking must do justice to their existence: "To become conscious of what is could also mean precisely to become aware of how little things change, even where everything appears to be changing" (EPH 180). Thinking must take its point of departure from our knowledge of the finitude and limitations that exist as an irreducible, persistent, and universal feature of our factual lives, and that unite us in this shared condition.

But did not Heidegger himself develop the hermeneutics of facticity from which Gadamer drew inspiration? Does Gadamer deny that Heidegger is also attuned to what the former terms solidarities? On the contrary, Gadamer is quick to acknowledge Heidegger's groundbreaking analysis of facticity as the forerunner of his hermeneutical account of solidarities: "In my opinion—in an age in which all traditions dissolve and there is no longer an uncontroversial consensus—Heidegger is basically right to...[assume] no other ground for solidarity than the one in which all humans are necessarily united: the borderline situation of each individual's dying and death" (SI 283/GW10 96). But Gadamer suggests elsewhere that the later Heidegger's analysis of

¹⁵⁹ Marino well states what Gadamer has in mind here as "the current atomization or 'liquidification' of our lives, and the dissolution of such fundamental social institutions as culture, education, family and community relationships" (*Gadamer and the Limits of the Modern Techno-Scientific Civilization*, 125).

modernity does not live up to his own best insights into irreducible human solidarity or facticity:

From the perspective of hermeneutic philosophy, Heidegger's teaching of the overcoming [*Überwindung*] of metaphysics, with its culmination in the total forgetfulness of being in our technological era, skips over the continued resistance and persistence [*Widerstand und Beharrungskraft*] of certain flexible unities [*Einheiten*] in the life we all share, unities which continue to exist in the large and small forms of our fellow-human being-with-each-other [*mitmenschlichen Miteinanderseins*]. (DD 109/GW2 368)

Here we begin to see how Gadamer intends the notion of solidarities as a critique of Heidegger's characterization of modernity. While his analysis of solidarities remains of course indebted to Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity, Gadamer finds Heidegger's later critique of modernity to be in tension with Heidegger's earlier insight into our factual lives. Gadamer, in appealing to the persistent solidarities of facticity to undermine Heidegger's characterization of modernity, pits Heideggerian insights against Heidegger himself. Gadamer's analysis in this passage is consistent with my argument concerning Heidegger's critique of modernity from Chapter 1, namely, that it centers on our impoverished intelligibility. But as Gadamer points out in his letter to Bernstein and then reaffirms in this passage, that modernity is irredeemably forgetful of being, and to that extent uniquely questionable, remains an abstract claim radically removed from our ordinary existence. Heidegger's emphasis on the distinctive features of modernity, related especially to its relation to being, overlooks and comes at the expense of a recognition of the universal solidarities—related to our mortality, connections to place and time, and the basic features of social existence—that persist even in the modern age.¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ Marino makes the more interpretatively ambitious claim that Gadamer rejects the Heideggerian history of being: "It is precisely this *general*, basic conceptual framework that Gadamer (though accepting many *particular* themes of the later Heidegger) seems to question, and sometimes explicitly reject" ("Gadamer on

Gadamer thinks that late-modern technologization cannot disrupt ordinary life: “I am concerned with the fact that the displacement of human reality [*Entstellung menschlicher Wirklichkeit*] can never go so far that no solidarities exist any longer” (LRB 264). Gadamer suggests that Heidegger’s account of modernity’s reduced and impoverished intelligibility is too abstract and phenomenologically inaccurate because it is insufficiently attuned to the persistent, shared solidarities that undergird every historical phase of human life. Heidegger insists that modernity has a radically deficient relation to being that characterizes our entire epoch, while Gadamer moves his analysis to the continued and felt presence of factual solidarities that not even modern alienations and instrumental rationality displace. In the context of this analysis of solidarities, Gadamer proclaims, in a stunning rebuke of Heidegger, “My point of departure is not the complete forgetfulness of being, the ‘night of being,’ rather on the contrary...the unreality [*Unwirklichkeit*] of such an assertion” (CWM 8). We now infer that Gadamer’s point of departure in his account of the modern age is, instead of our impoverished intelligibility, rather the persistently real solidarities that modernity has failed to erase:

I do not believe *at all* that we live “between” two worlds. I can follow neither Heidegger nor Buber in this. Only the prophet who already sees the promised land would have, in my estimation, the possibility to say the like. — I *remember* [erinnere], instead of this, the *one* world [*die eine Welt*] which I alone know and which in all decay has lost far less of its evidence and cohesion than it talks itself into. (CWM 10)

We will discuss in detail Gadamer’s skepticism about another beginning in §2.3.2, which he alludes to in distancing himself from the Heideggerian claim that “we live ‘between’ two worlds,” that is, at the end of late modernity and on the cusp of another age beyond it. More important at this juncture is Gadamer’s reference to “the one world” that remains

Heidegger,” 288). I believe my more restricted thesis that Gadamer disputes the conceptualization of modernity has more textual support, and imputes to Gadamer a more modest, though defensible, position.

coherent and vital despite the degradations of modernity that Gadamer, like Heidegger, grasps and appreciates. But where Gadamer departs from Heidegger is in seeing the modern age as continuous with—rather than a disastrous epochal split from—the rest of human history and life: “The ‘nature’ of humans does not change” (EPH 218/GW10 235). This radical continuity follows from the solidarities of mortality, time, and sociality that remain, despite the modern onslaught of alienations and instrumental rationality.

In his careful and muted critique of the Heideggerian claim for the distinct epochality of modernity, Gadamer appeals to another category of solidarities that modernity cannot eliminate, this time concerning human language. Language always allows us to make ourselves at home in the world: “Is not language always the language of the homeland [*Heimat*] and the process of becoming-at-home [*Heimisch-Werdens*] in the world? And does this fact not mean that language knows no restrictions and never breaks down, because it holds infinite possibilities of utterance in readiness?” (HW 78/GW3 236) Gadamer emphasizes how features of our factual existence like mortality and time cement solidarity among human beings. Here we see that language gets identified as another feature of our facticity, because it always allows us to make the world into a home for ourselves. As linguistic beings, we constantly bring language with us in all our interactions with reality. Thus, our linguistic disclosing of the world means it is always brought before us as a place with which we are already familiar in virtue of the language that discloses it to us. In linguistic disclosure, we can recognize ourselves and our contributions to the world: “A restoration of at-homeness [could] come about in the sense that the process of making-oneself-at-home [*Sich-heimisch-Machen*] in the world

has never ceased to take place” (HW 78/GW3 236).¹⁶¹ This process of the linguistic disclosure of reality into a familiar and humanly livable place, even if it comes in degrees constitutes another irreducible and persistent feature of human life that not even modernity can displace. In the depths of late-modern technologization, Gadamer finds continuous solidarities of mortality, time, sociality, and language that unite us as a human species and that renders modernity continuous with the whole of human history and life.

Gadamer also refers to Heidegger’s characterization of the modern age’s impoverished intelligibility as systematic in some illegitimate way: “Heidegger in his later years was tempted to give *an unduly systematic form* to this vision of his, when he speaks, for example, of the growing forgetfulness of being, up to the all-encompassing sway of this forgetfulness” (EPH 127; my emphasis). What is the significance of framing the forgetfulness of being in terms of its systematicity? This charge suggests that not only does Heidegger’s thesis sidestep the persistence of solidarities, and is to that extent phenomenologically inaccurate insofar as it imposes an abstract account of the modern age removed from how we ordinarily live our lives. Gadamer also imputes to Heidegger’s account a major and distinctively *political* flaw. He contextualizes Heidegger’s critique of modernity within the malaise and disaffection of Germany before the Second World War, when many observers decried the decline of the West: “Heidegger saw it too. But he viewed it in the grand perspective of the whole of human history, and he concluded that there would have to be a radically fresh start, which would necessarily come about, and that is what he saw in 1933. It is hardly surprising that a great thinker should get it so badly wrong” (PIP 9/HE 40). Heidegger’s claim about the forgetfulness of being counts as dangerous not only because of its inaccuracy as a phenomenological description of

¹⁶¹ For more on these elements of Gadamer’s conception of language here, see Di Cesare, *Gadamer*, 148.

how we ordinarily live; even worse, its failure to account for the persistence of solidarities gave rise to the political error to which Heidegger himself infamously succumbed. If modernity is flawed down to its very foundations, then that implies the need to transcend it in favor of another beginning. Gadamer suggests that this illegitimately abstract and inaccurate vision provided the grounds for Heidegger's enthusiasm for the Nazi revolution, which seemed to promise just such a beginning. The phenomenological imprecision of the thesis of our reduced intelligibility and its political dangerousness produce a morally disastrous and disturbing inability to appreciate the political implications of the Heideggerian account of modernity: "I believe, for my part, that Heidegger was so obsessed by this vision, by the extent of this deviation and error of humanity, by the forgetting of being, he was so full of this vision that he did not open his mouth concerning this thing [the Shoah]—which, naturally, on the moral and political level, is breathtaking and leaves us speechless" (HPP 46).¹⁶² The abstraction and political hazards of Heidegger's account of the modern impoverished intelligibility encouraged him to overlook such monstrous features of Nazism as the Shoah. The coherence but also the abstraction of Heidegger's account of modernity allowed him to ignore the reality of the Nazi attempt to end the decadent modern West. We see here the incredibly high stakes of Gadamer's dispute with Heidegger's characterization of modernity. Gadamer introduces crucial cautions against the Heideggerian theory and critique of modernity that we would do well to appreciate at a time when the political flames of Heidegger's legacy are being fanned once again by the ongoing publication of the *Black Notebooks*.

¹⁶² For an assessment of the way the *Black Notebooks* complicate the previously commonplace view of Heidegger's silence about the Holocaust, see Peter Trawny, "Heidegger and the Shoah," 169-180.

In a late interview, Gadamer claimed that religious questions lie outside the bounds of what is humanly knowable, while what is absolutely within the realm of human intelligibility are phenomena like “all cases of destruction” (HR 59). We see now that he refers in passages such as this one to human solidarities that we always share and that persist even in modernity, a fact to which Heidegger does insufficient justice, with disastrous political implications. In an important passage, Gadamer contrasts two modes of doing philosophy. The one with which he aligns himself acknowledges the irreducible and ubiquitous finitude and limitations of human life, and attempts to never forget or exceed these solidarities that bound us all throughout history—including, as we have now established, in modernity. This names Gadamer’s way of thinking about modernity. Here is how he describes the other kind of philosophy: “Philosophy would then recognize itself as a kind of secularized eschatology, establishing a kind of expectancy of a possible reversal. It cannot say what it expects. But it becomes filled with the need for a reversal, a turning, as it radically anticipates the consequences of the present age” (EPH 180). In this passage, he explicitly associates this other way of doing philosophy with Heidegger.

We can now properly contextualize the contrast Gadamer draws as referring to two ways of positioning philosophy with respect to solidarities. Heidegger’s account rises above and overlooks the lived reality of solidarities to produce a comprehensive but totalizingly abstract conception of our historical epoch as fundamentally marked not by the persistence of solidarities, but rather by our impoverished intelligibility. On this understanding, with its enormous political hazards, the modern age becomes a delimited and discrete historical period, which for Heidegger suggests the possibility of moving beyond that epoch into “the time which is to come” (HC 110/GA16 676). Because he

rejects Heidegger's construal of the conceptual boundaries of our epoch, Gadamer also disputes the possibility of moving beyond or splitting from it into a postmodern future. He underlines the limitations of this conception in his alternative to Heidegger, which begins with the lived existence of persistent solidarities. Gadamer's analysis suggests rather fundamental and ubiquitous continuities in history, which implies that we cannot twist free and split ourselves from the history to which we inextricably belong.¹⁶³ With regard to modernity, Gadamer's distinctive approach includes the recognition that the modern age, despite its unacceptable and eminently questionable limitations, nonetheless remains continuous with certain ineliminable features of life and history as a whole. Thus, his analysis of modernity does not begin with our reduced intelligibility, as Heidegger's does, but rather with the existence of solidarities. This difference suggests a divergence between Gadamer's constructive and rehabilitative engagement with modernity and Heidegger's overtly critical analysis that moves toward another future.

§2.3.2: Against another beginning

Gadamer rejects Heidegger's characterization of the distinct nature of modernity's impoverished intelligibility. In our consideration of Heidegger's deconstruction of the modern age in Chapter 1, we saw how for Heidegger, the nature of modernity's relation to being implies the need to transcend it in favor of another time in which we will improve our attunement to being as such. In this vein, from Gadamer's rejection of the Heideggerian characterization of the modern age will follow his inability to envision another beginning. I want to explore this contrast here. I shall demonstrate that Gadamer envisions another response to the problem of modernity. Instead of beginning again as

¹⁶³ See Bernasconi, "Bridging the Abyss," 9 and Veith, *Gadamer and the Transmission of History*, 81. But these scholars do not pay sufficient attention to the theme of solidarities in Gadamer's argument here.

Heidegger would have us do, he wants rather to cultivate the remaining hidden resources within the modern age, a possible strategy that we shall explore in subsequent chapters.

Heidegger characterizes modernity as an exhausted age: “God is gone; things are used up; knowledge is in ruins; action has become blind. In short: *beyng* [Seyn] is *forgotten*” (BN1 169/GA94 231). For Heidegger, the modern age is forgetful of being, or as he will sometimes put it in even more overtly foreboding terms, we moderns experience “*abandonment by being* [Seinsverlassenheit]” (BN1 247/GA94 339). Without a full, healthy, thoughtful relation to being, we reside in a centerless, aimless, and fundamentally meaningless age that has, first of all and most of the time, lost its collective ability to stand in meaningful contact with the source of all intelligibility. The exhaustion of modernity is ultimately the consummation, completion, or exhaustion of the entire sequence of the history of being, which has brought the West to the lowest point of its capacity to see, appreciate, and celebrate the overwhelming plenitude and fullness of being. According to the most hopeful version of this Heideggerian perspective, however, we are living through the twilight of an age whose subjectivism has finally bottomed out in late-modern enframing, and—on the shoulders of visionary artists and thinkers who have seen beyond late modernity toward something else—we stand on the verge of another beginning when this state of affairs will finally be improved: “In the age of the world’s night [*Weltnacht*], the abyss [*Abgrund*] of the world must be experienced and must be endured. However, for this it is necessary that there are those who reach into the abyss” (OBT 201/GA5 270).¹⁶⁴ If we can see beyond the night

¹⁶⁴ On the connection between pessimism about modernity and optimism about what can come after it, see Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 192-196.

of the end of late modernity, then we may make it to a new dawn in which our culture will awaken to a new and more encompassing and pluralistic understanding of being.

In a crucial passage from the 1965 foreword to the second edition of *Truth and Method*, of which I shall now do a close reading, Gadamer explicitly rejects this Heideggerian conception of the movement out of modernity into postmodernity:

Like many of my critics, Heidegger too would probably feel a lack of ultimate radicality in the conclusions I draw. What does the end of metaphysics as a science mean? What does its ending in science mean? When science expands into a total technocracy and thus brings on the “world’s night” [“*Weltnacht*”] of the “forgetfulness of being [*Seinsvergessenheit*],” the nihilism that Nietzsche prophesied, then may one not gaze at the last fading light [*dem letzten Nachleuchten*] of the sun setting in the evening sky—instead of turning around to look for the first shimmer of its return? (TM xxxiv/GW2 447)

Gadamer prefaces this significant and complex commentary with a reference to the Habermasian critique of philosophical hermeneutics to the effect that it is unable to critically engage with tradition by properly differentiating its legitimate as opposed to illegitimate transmissions to the present (TM xxxiii-xxxiv/GW2 447). But we should not let that context disguise the fact that Gadamer here carefully and significantly distances himself not only from Habermas’s landmark objection to hermeneutics, but also from the Heideggerian critique of modernity. This passage has far less to do with Gadamer engaging in yet another riposte to the many early critics of his hermeneutics than it does with his ambivalent and complex response to Heidegger.

We should understand this passage’s references to “the end of metaphysics,” science and nihilism, and the metaphor of the setting sun all in terms of a response to Heidegger. This passage proposes a robust alternative to Heidegger’s movement out of the modern age. As is typically Gadamer’s way, this passage does not propose a one-

sided rejection of Heidegger's position. Instead, here he takes Heidegger's conception of modernity as his point of departure. In characterizing our epoch in terms of a scientific definition of intelligibility, the Nietzschean diagnosis of nihilism, and the consummation of metaphysics, Gadamer takes on board—or at least acknowledges—significant aspects of Heidegger's conception of the epochal nature of modernity in terms of the history of being. But, as is also typical of Gadamer's reactions to Heidegger, his response does not merely accept Heidegger's framing of this issue. In §2.3.1, we saw that Gadamer rejects Heidegger's claim that modernity constitutes a distinct and discrete epoch. This objection suggests that he cannot then accept what Heidegger calls “a *great leap* [Sprung],” that is, a movement into another time, another beginning (BN1 171/GA94 234). Since neither the modern age nor a hypothetical postmodern one to follow it can be coherently understood as discrete and cohesive historical epochs, the movement between them cannot occur as Heidegger envisions in his conceptualization of a history of successive ages of being. Gadamer's argument against Heidegger on this score was, as we saw, that solidarities of homeland, temporality, sociality, and language persist across human history and life.

In this passage from the second foreword to *Truth and Method*, Gadamer contrasts himself with Heidegger in terms of the striking visual metaphor of two ways of looking at the setting sun. On the Heideggerian view that he rejects, one “[turns] around to look for the first shimmer of its return.” That is, since we stand on the cusp of another beginning, we should turn our backs on the exhausted modern age whose twilight we are living through—what Heidegger, following Nietzsche, calls the “*Weltnacht*”—and look instead toward the dawning of the new age to come. This option refers to the “great leap” discussed in the *Black Notebooks* and in many of Heidegger's texts from the 1930s

onward grounded in his hope that “beyng’s poem, / just begun, is the human being” (PLT 4/GA13 76). Gadamer signals his rejection of another beginning by contrasting looking at the setting sun with another image: “May one not gaze at the last fading light of the sun setting in the evening sky...?” Modernity, in virtue of the radical solidarities that persist within it, is not the sort of thing we can simply leave behind, split off from, or turn our backs on, since we belong to it as we do to human history as a whole. While Heidegger enthusiastically moves forward into a time to come, Gadamer would have us instead cautiously stay behind and stare at the setting sun—that is, remain within the modern age to which we belong in virtue of the radical continuities and solidarities of history. Gadamer encourages us to remain not out of mere complacency or inertia, but because resources within modernity persist that we can work with rather than leave behind entirely. Heidegger tempts us to await the new dawn and embrace the other beginning it augurs, while Gadamer patiently looks for what the setting sun can still illuminate.

Because of this important difference from Heidegger, Gadamer does not typically employ the concept *Ereignis*, later Heidegger’s term for a unique and dramatic event in which being unexpectedly comes into its own and appears to Dasein and in entities, erupting into and transforming and expanding current intelligibility. Heidegger claims in this regard: “Only what occurs only once [*Einmaliges*] can effectuate this arising again of something unique [*Einziges*]. That is the innermost law of beyng” (BN1 202/GA94 276). In other words, a dramatic and singular event could disrupt the present and radically change the course of history. Tellingly, Gadamer prefers to talk about a happening (*Geschehen*) within history: “A happening of tradition [*Überlieferungsgeschehen*]...is a prior condition of understanding. *Understanding proves to be a happening*” (TM

308/GW1 314). This conception of the happening of history importantly differs from Heidegger's account of the event as a *sui generis* and disruptive *Ereignis*. I translate Gadamer's "*Geschehen*" as "happening" rather than as "event" because Gadamer does not accept the radical disruption in history of the Heideggerian event, but instead thinks of the happening of the gradual process of history crucially and ineluctably conditioning the present.¹⁶⁵ This happening in history names the dynamic interaction of past and present that makes intelligibility possible. Their different conceptions of the event is another way of describing this crucial difference between the Heideggerian proposal to await a new dawn as opposed to the Gadamerian project of gazing at the setting sun.

The passage about Heidegger from the second foreword to *Truth and Method* begins with the self-effacing claim that, "Like many of my critics, Heidegger too would probably feel a lack of ultimate radicality in the conclusions I draw."¹⁶⁶ My reading here suggests that Gadamer alludes in this context to Heidegger's likely disappointment at Gadamer's unwillingness to welcome the other beginning, which does indeed represent a genuine and significant difference between Gadamer and his teacher. But is there not something radical also in Gadamer's alternative project of staying behind to face the fading glow of the setting sun and trying to glean what it can still show us?¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ In his extremely insightful discussion of their subtly different conceptions of truth, Dostal puts this difference in the temporal terms of truth as sudden (Heidegger) as opposed to taking time (Gadamer) ("The Experience of Truth for Gadamer and Heidegger: Taking Time and Sudden Lightning," 49).

¹⁶⁶ Grondin reports that Heidegger personally considered Gadamer's starting point in the philosophy of the *Geisteswissenschaften* insufficient to confront modern technology (*Gadamer: A Biography*, 292).

¹⁶⁷ Schmidt well articulates the view that Gadamer is less radical than Heidegger: "Gadamer's conception of the end of philosophy lacks some of the 'radicality' that one finds in Heidegger, Nietzsche, or Hegel, each of whom finds the end of philosophy to be the signal of a radically new beginning" ("Gadamer," 439). But Vattimo's provocative conception of "left Heideggerianism" interprets Gadamer as a radical inheritor of Heidegger: "Left denotes the reading I propose of the history of Being as the story of a 'long goodbye,' of an interminable weakening of Being. In this case, the overcoming of Being is understood only as a recollection of the oblivion of Being, never as making Being present again, not even as a term that always lies beyond every formulation" (*Beyond Interpretation*, 13).

§2.3.3: Nietzsche/Dilthey, Hölderlin/Rilke

We gain additional insight into Gadamer's difference from Heidegger on this fundamental point with reference to his ambivalence toward and departure from two of Heidegger's crucial touchstones for thinking of postmodernity, Nietzsche and Hölderlin.¹⁶⁸ We can more fully appreciate as well as motivate Gadamer's proposal to "gaze at the last fading light of the sun setting in the evening sky" by juxtaposing his rootedness in Dilthey and Rilke with Heidegger's persistent and corresponding interest in Nietzsche and Hölderlin. This subtle but important difference in Heidegger and Gadamer's influences and historical and conceptual starting points will further demonstrate their competing approaches to the problem of the modern age. The importance of these contrasts ultimately concerns the possibility of another beginning after the end of the modern age that the later Heidegger was so concerned to investigate, explicate, and defend, frequently in dialogue with and taking provocation precisely from Nietzsche and Hölderlin. In avowedly departing from Heidegger's central starting points in these two writers, Gadamer correspondingly rejects the possibility of the other beginning in which these two visionaries inspired Heidegger to believe so fervently.

I shall first emphasize Gadamer's ambivalence toward Nietzsche. Strauss interrogates some of Gadamer's differences from Heidegger in their 1961 correspondence, and insightfully observes in this regard that in *Truth and Method*, "there is a chapter on Dilthey and none on Nietzsche" (CWM 5). Gadamer replies, "You are entirely right when you speak of...Dilthey instead of Nietzsche" (CWM 8). In an

¹⁶⁸ On Heidegger's appeals to Nietzsche, Hölderlin, as well as van Gogh (whom I do not discuss here, since as a painter he has no immediately obvious analogue in Gadamer's thinking) as postmodern touchstones, see Thomson, "Nihilism as the Deepest Problem; Art as the Best Response."

interview conducted in 1986, clearly still impressed by the insight contained in the correspondence of twenty-five years earlier, Gadamer admits, “I suppose that Leo Strauss was right when he said that my concern was to respond critically to Dilthey, just as it was Heidegger’s concern to respond critically to Nietzsche” (EPH 145). In both these comments, we see a pronounced and professed agreement with Strauss concerning the significance of the rootedness of Gadamer’s own thinking in the concerns of Dilthey rather than in those of Nietzsche. With regard to Heidegger’s relation to both Nietzsche, and as we will see Hölderlin as well, Gadamer proclaims a significant degree of doubt.

How should we understand this putative distinction between Nietzsche and Dilthey? In the interview in which he recalls his correspondence with Strauss, Gadamer’s interviewers press him on his ambivalence toward Nietzsche and he replies as follows:

In fact I have never understood the enthusiasm for Nietzsche, neither in those days [the 1920s and 1930s] nor in our own. I have never understood how one has come to see Nietzsche as an epochal figure, or perhaps now I do understand it. Nietzsche is the one, I suppose, who has expressed what it is about modernity that makes life impossible. But the productive use of Nietzsche which so many of my friends and later my students undertook has always been strange to me. (EPH 145)

This comment sounds rather extraordinary coming from a Heideggerian philosopher. Of course, in his own later readings, Heidegger forcefully and exhaustively articulated exactly the thesis that Gadamer professes here not to understand, namely, that Nietzsche counts as “an epochal figure.” In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer underscores the reason Nietzsche was epochally important from Heidegger’s perspective:

In raising the question of being and thus reversing the whole direction of Western metaphysics, the true predecessor of Heidegger was neither Dilthey nor Husserl, then, but rather *Nietzsche*. Heidegger may have realized this only later; but in retrospect we can see that the aims already implicit in *Being and Time* were to raise Nietzsche’s radical critique of “Platonism” to the level of the tradition he criticizes, to confront Western

metaphysics on its own level, and to recognize that transcendental inquiry is a consequence of modern [*neuzeitlichen*] subjectivism, and so overcome [*überwinden*] it. (TM 248/GW1 262)

Gadamer perceptively suggests here that for Heidegger, the struggle with Nietzsche meant the struggle with metaphysics. Heidegger considered Nietzsche the consummation of ontotheology. At the same time that Nietzsche crystallized the late-modern culmination of the entire metaphysical tradition, he also pointed toward how to twist free from that tradition and hence beyond the modern age. As Heidegger exclaims of Nietzsche in the *Black Notebooks*, we must “allow this endwork [*Endwerk*] to rest in itself as an impetus into the other beginning” (BN1 273/GA94 374). In other words, when we dwell with Nietzsche’s metaphysics of eternally recurring will to power, we see the nihilistic outcome or end of the ontotheological tradition, but we also glimpse how the end of the sequence of the history of being can consequently open up for us another beginning after metaphysics. In pointing to the way that Heidegger saw Nietzsche as a positive model for freeing ourselves from metaphysics, Gadamer signals his awareness of the motif in Heidegger of the double-sided nature of Nietzsche’s significance: “‘It is the question of overcoming [*Überwindung*] metaphysics.’ This is indeed the question which Nietzsche was asked by Heidegger to discuss, so to speak” (HE 137). Nietzsche represents both the height of metaphysics, and the hint as to how to escape from it.

Though Gadamer intimates his awareness of this theme in Heidegger, he does not devote any significant discussion to Nietzsche in *Truth and Method*, as Strauss insightfully noticed, and only in a few places elsewhere in his corpus. Both in his occasionally explicit uneasiness and more frequent silence about Nietzsche, Gadamer expresses hesitancy concerning the prospect of following Heidegger’s path of meditating

on the prospect of freeing ourselves from the thinking of modernity and consequently opening up a new, postmodern future.¹⁶⁹ I have attempted in this chapter to reconstruct Gadamer's considered objections to this Heideggerian project. His skepticism about Nietzsche and the Nietzschean influence on European intellectual culture amounts to a dramatic consequence of this objection. In the rest of this dissertation, I will motivate and defend his alternative to Heidegger. But we already see the outline of this alternative in the fact that he does not merely reject Nietzsche in a one-sidedly negative gesture, but rather claims a starting point of his own in Dilthey: "Dilthey instead of Nietzsche," as he expresses this point to Strauss. What, then, is the significance of Dilthey here?

As is well known, *Truth and Method* enacts a profound struggle against Dilthey's formative influence on the development of modern hermeneutics, as signaled by the title of an important chapter of that text: "Overcoming the Epistemological Problem Through Phenomenological Investigation" (TM 235/GW1 246). Dilthey's great ambition was to provide (as per the title of one of his many unfinished works) a *Critique of Historical Reason*, that is, to justify the cognitive achievements of the humanities and social sciences on the model of Kant's justification of the natural sciences in the First Critique. Following Heidegger, Gadamer strongly rejects this epistemological starting point: "Today's task could be to free ourselves from the dominant influence of Dilthey's approach and from the prejudices of the discipline that he founded" (TM 158/GW1 170). Nevertheless, Gadamer shares Dilthey's distinctive and hermeneutical orientation toward defending the humanities. As he explains in the introduction to *Truth and Method*, he admires and follows "the breadth of the historical horizon in which Dilthey has placed all

¹⁶⁹ The first of the two volumes of Gadamer's *Gesammelte Werke* dedicated to *Neuere Philosophie* bears the subtitle "Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger" (GW3). The omission of Nietzsche is striking. The second volume contains one essay on Nietzsche, a largely literary analysis of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (GW4 448-462).

philosophizing” (TM xxiv/GW1 5). Significantly, the later Heidegger expresses only muted respect for precisely this salient feature of Dilthey’s philosophical project: “*Dilthey*: does not belong among the philosophers, but still less among the historiologists [*Historikern*]; he is a historical thinker of the type whose greatest form was realized in the nineteenth century by Jacob Burckhardt” (BN1 374/GA94 514). We should understand Heidegger’s claim here that Dilthey “does not belong among the philosophers” as more than a merely petty swipe or insult. Rather, Heidegger suggests Dilthey is not an epochal metaphysician who reoriented our entire culture’s sense of what it means to be. Dilthey may certainly be an important thinker *about* history, but he is not a thinker who *formed* history through his own thought. Nietzsche, on the other hand, was for Heidegger just such a thinker. Nietzsche occupies an exalted position in the history of being and Dilthey does not. Indeed, in virtue of Heidegger’s orientation toward the development of a comprehensive history of being for the edifying and revolutionary purpose of freeing ourselves from the totalizing and one-sided way of viewing reality characteristic of metaphysics as ontotheology, Nietzsche became one of his most important later interlocutors while Dilthey ultimately did not.

For that reason, Gadamer sets up a sharp contrast between his connection to Dilthey and Heidegger’s to Nietzsche. Gadamer does not share Heidegger’s persistent, even obsessive, concern with the history of being for which Nietzsche stands as an avatar. Instead, as we saw in our close reading of his rebuke of Heidegger from the foreword to *Truth and Method* and in his claim on behalf of the solidarities that persist within the modern age, he wants to stay behind and bask in the setting sun of the twilight of modernity. Gadamer’s avowed starting point in Dilthey is crucially consonant with this

provocative imagery that dramatizes his dispute with Heidegger. In his systematic attempt in *Truth and Method* to dispute the epistemological, historicist, and romantic models of modern hermeneutics, a struggle signaled by his project “to respond critically to Dilthey,” Gadamer remains focused on and dwells within a modern intellectual tradition, albeit one he attempts to advance in a radical way very much rooted in Heidegger. But where Heidegger wants to move on to the other beginning after the exhaustion of modernity, past the distinctive intellectual movements and achievements of the modern age, Gadamer finds that not everything in modernity is worth abandoning.

For Gadamer, the modern tradition of hermeneutics is one resource that still demands thoughtful attention, whereas Heidegger in his later work ceases to identify his thinking with hermeneutics. As he provocatively and succinctly puts it in a 1973 letter to Otto Pöggeler: “Hermeneutical philosophy? Oh, that is Gadamer’s thing [*ist die Sache von Gadamer*]!” (quoted in GR 412)¹⁷⁰ The later Heidegger, in his persistent attempt to open up the other beginning, slyly twists free of any reductive or narrowing label for his thinking. “It is always risky [*verfänglich*],” as he puts it, “to give names to the basic positions of philosophical thinking” (BN1 206/GA94 281). This dictum applies especially to labels like hermeneutics that have their origins distinctively in the modern age, since such associations risk obviating or imperiling Heidegger’s maverick attempt to think another beginning free of any trace of the deficiencies and shortcomings distinctive of modern philosophy. When asked in 1953/1954 why he stopped identifying his thinking with either phenomenology or hermeneutics, Heidegger avers that he had “to abandon my own path of thinking [*Denkweg*] to namelessness” (OWL 29/GA12 114). But Gadamer,

¹⁷⁰ Grondin cites this remark in a 1996 interview (GR 409-427). The original source of the quotation, from a letter dated January 5, 1973, is Otto Pöggeler, *Heidegger und die hermeneutische Philosophie*, 395.

who freely placed his thinking under the banner of *philosophical hermeneutics*, decidedly does not share Heidegger's compunction about philosophical labels. Hermeneutics requires avowed rehabilitation and new life, not abandonment in favor of a mode of thinking irreducible to any name or label. I read Gadamer as gesturing toward this difference in his contrast between Dilthey, understood as a symbol for the hermeneutical rehabilitation but not abandonment of modern thinking, and Nietzsche, who represents the Heideggerian movement to another beginning after the modern age.

Seen from a certain angle, Gadamer's attitude toward Hölderlin seems markedly different from his predominantly negative characterization of and avowed distance from Nietzsche. Like Heidegger—perhaps even more so, since he places it at the center of his entire hermeneutics—Gadamer derives enormous inspiration from Hölderlin's motto that “we are a conversation” (TM 370/GW1 383).¹⁷¹ No such central concept from Nietzsche makes its way into the heart of Gadamer's hermeneutics in so dominant a fashion. While Nietzsche only infrequently appears in Gadamer's work, he devotes many essays to Hölderlin's poetry, several of which are collected in the volume dedicated to the hermeneutics of poetry in his *Gesammelte Werke* (GW9). Finally, one finds many approving and emotionally resonant allusions to and quotations from Hölderlin's poetry throughout Gadamer's corpus, including in a letter written less than two months before his death with the following distillation of the very essence of his hermeneutics: “In the constantly changing structure of our essentially finite languages, we might find, with Hölderlin, that we ‘still have access to much of the divine.’”¹⁷² It is difficult to imagine

¹⁷¹ On the effective history of this idea in the Heideggerian–Gadamerian traditions, and a robust defense of it, see George, “Are We a Conversation? Hermeneutics, Exteriority, and Transmittability,” 331-350.

¹⁷² “Hans-Georg Gadamer's Letter of Support.” Dated January 14, 2002.

Gadamer appealing to Nietzsche in such a movingly positive and appropriative gesture or under similar circumstances.

It is thus perhaps surprising that we observe a similar dynamic to Gadamer's ambivalence toward Nietzsche in his avowal that he does not follow Heidegger's path in the direction of Hölderlin's poetry. When he proclaims, "I did not follow him [Heidegger] on the path [*Wege*] of an inspiration from the poetic mythos of Hölderlin," Gadamer sounds the same note as in his avowed distance from Heidegger's obsession with Nietzsche (GR 339/GW4 477). Like his reaction to Strauss's insight concerning his distance from Nietzsche, Gadamer gestures here toward a difference with Heidegger in terms of a rejection of one of the latter's most important starting points and conversation partners. As he also does when considering the difference between Nietzsche and Dilthey, Gadamer repeats this point concerning Hölderlin multiple times, suggesting the importance of the point: "I did not need to follow Heidegger, who based himself on Hölderlin instead of Hegel [*der Hölderlin gegen Hegel*]...in order to recognize the hubris [*Hybris*] that resides in concepts" (RPJ 37/GW2 506). What significance should we attach to Gadamer explicitly taking leave from Heidegger's turn to Hölderlin?

Heidegger's relation to and interpretation of Hölderlin is a highly complex topic.¹⁷³ It suffices to say that Heidegger views Hölderlin's significance principally in terms of the way his poetry makes accessible a new relation to being, as he makes clear in the following programmatic statement: "A poetic turning toward his [Hölderlin's] poetry is possible only as a *thoughtful* altercation [*Auseinandersetzung*] with the *revelation of being* [*Offenbarung des Seyns*] that is achieved in his poetry" (HH 5/GA39 6). For

¹⁷³ On the crucial political and ethical valences of Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin, see Charles Bambach, *Thinking the Poetic Measure of Justice: Hölderlin—Heidegger—Celan*, 172-177.

Heidegger, Hölderlin envisions a radically new understanding of being. Hölderlin's poetry demands thoughtful attention and so Heidegger frankly dubs him "the poet of the other beginning" (BN1 182/GA94 248). Hölderlin points the way to a new and postmodern relation between humanity and being that goes beyond the impoverished, reductive, and ultimately nihilistic relation to being characteristic of late modernity. When Heidegger speaks about another beginning for Western culture and our relation to being, he upholds Hölderlin's poetry as the most profound and inspiringly hopeful account of that possibility for our culture. For Heidegger, Hölderlin shows us nothing less than the "crossing over [*Übergang*]" into another beginning outside or beyond the modern age (BN1 182/GA94 248).

Just as Gadamer expresses reluctance to follow Heidegger in his altercation with Nietzsche's metaphysics and the other beginning such a confrontation consequently opens up, so Gadamer's doubts about Heidegger's Hölderlinian turn should be read as motivated by a disagreement about another beginning. With regard to Nietzsche, I sketched Gadamer's alternative in terms of his preferred starting point in Dilthey, which signaled Gadamer's rehabilitation of modern thinking. A corresponding illustration can be adduced in the case of Hölderlin, with Rilke playing the role of counterweight to Hölderlin. Heidegger would agree with Gadamer's reading of Hölderlin as the poet of "the pain of separation [*Schmerz der Trennung*]" (EPH 98/GW9 235). Hölderlin articulates our abandonment by being, but he also positively indicates how to regain contact with the gods. When Gadamer signals his distrust of Heidegger's turn to Hölderlin, he refers to these Hölderlinian themes of abandonment and beginning again that became programmatic for the later Heidegger: "We are too late for the gods and too /

early for beyng” (PLT 4/GA13 76). To get a glimpse of another perspective on Gadamer’s alternative to this Heideggerian picture, we should turn to another of Gadamer’s poetic touchstones, namely, Rilke.¹⁷⁴ In the *Black Notebooks* circa 1938-1939, Heidegger compares Rilke unfavorably to Hölderlin: “Stefan George and Rilke deserve esteem, but they should never be employed as aids to the interpretation [*Auslegung*] of *Hölderlin*, for they are nowhere equal to or even close to his historical destiny [*Bestimmung*] and cannot at all be compared to him” (BN2 219/GA95 281). For Heidegger, Rilke fails to live up to the incredibly high poetic standard of Hölderlin because only the latter provides a picture of how to get out of modernity and back into contact with the gods: “Rilke stands, although more essentially and more poetically in his own proper course, as little as does Stefan George on the path of the vocation [*Berufung*] of the ‘poet,’ a vocation grounded by Hölderlin but nowhere taken up. Rilke has not—and even less has George—surmounted [*bewältigt*] Western humanity and its ‘world’ in a poetic-thoughtful way” (BN2 341/GA95 438). For this devastating reason, Heidegger ascribes to Rilke, in explicit contrast to Hölderlin, “the lack of essential *decision*,” referring to Rilke’s inability to be anything but modern (BN2 341/GA95 438).

These unpublished comments from the *Black Notebooks*, of which Gadamer would have been unaware, shed considerable light on Heidegger’s well-known interpretation of Rilke’s poetry in “What Are Poets For?” from 1946.¹⁷⁵ In that essay, as

¹⁷⁴ J.M. Baker, Jr., also articulates a Gadamerian contrast between Hölderlin and Rilke that anticipates mine (“Lyric as Paradigm: Hegel and the Speculative Instance of Poetry in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics,” 159). There are important and considerable continuities between Hölderlin and Rilke that my discussion obscures. For an exploration of the way these two poets both express a theory of community, see Hannah Vandegrift Eldridge, *Lyric Orientations: Hölderlin, Rilke, and the Poetics of Community*.

¹⁷⁵ For a view of Heidegger’s interpretation of Rilke as mostly positive, see Julian Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Art*, 143-147. On my reading, the *Black Notebooks* further support the view that Heidegger was quite negative toward Rilke. Also, I retain the earlier translation of the title “Wozu Dichter?” as “What Are Poets For?” from PLT rather than “Why Poets?” from the more recent translation in OBT.

in the *Notebooks* of several years earlier, Heidegger contends that Hölderlin exceeds Rilke in importance: “Rilke’s poetry, in its course within the history of being, remains behind Hölderlin in rank and position” (OBT 206/GA5 276). What accounts for Rilke’s lesser status as a poet in the terms of the history of being? For Heidegger, Rilke amounts to a poet of modern subjectivity who “remains moderately [*abgemilderten*] in the shadow of a Nietzschean metaphysics” (OBT 214/GA5 286). Heidegger claims that Rilke’s poetry valorizes the inner space of consciousness as a sanctuary to which we could turn as an attractive alternative to the onslaught of modern technology and scientific objectification and alienation. In this latter respect, Rilke admirably and perceptively identified many of the deficiencies of the modern age, but Heidegger views his turn to interiority as a deficient response to the problem of modernity. Rilke becomes, on Heidegger’s reading, merely a poet of consciousness, albeit of “the reversal [*Umkehrung*] of consciousness” (OBT 230/GA5 307). That is, Rilke correctly saw the damaging effects of modern–Cartesian subjectivism, in which conscious subjects become the only sites of meaning over against a world of inert and otherwise meaningless objects. But Rilke’s alternative to this distinctively modern horror is only to make the interior realm of consciousness a space to which we could retreat in order to freely discover and create meaning outside of subject/object relations. This heroic turn to the inner heart performs, however, merely a reversal of the modern metaphysics of subjectivity, and not a genuine escape from its structure. Because he still works “within the sphericity of modern metaphysics” in his turn to the interior, Rilke’s poetry fails to truly get out of modern subjectivism (OBT 230/GA5 307). In appealing to the inner world of consciousness as

the sovereign domain of meaning opposite an exterior world marked by technological objectification, Rilke remains entrapped by the logic of subjectivism.

Even worse than this subjectivistic character of his work, Rilke's poetry accords with the most deleterious aspects of Nietzsche's late-modern metaphysics of eternally recurring will to power. Heidegger justifies this provocative claim by arguing that Rilke's turn to the interior world of consciousness involves a strongly voluntaristic will to emphatically turn away from the outer world that remains the center of attention for most modern people: "Memory, making inward, inverts our essence that only wills assertively, and its objects, into the innermost invisibility of the heart's space" (OBT 231/GA5 309). Rilke has merely inverted the objectifying tendencies of modern technology in his willful turn to the subjective realm of the inner heart, and in doing so, he plays into the Nietzschean metaphysics of will to power by insisting on a strongly voluntaristic decision to turn inward. When Heidegger claims, in his indictment of Rilke's Nietzschean and modern tendencies, that "no poet of this era can overtake [*überholen*]" Hölderlin, he suggests that among poets, only Hölderlin produced a vision that goes beyond the limiting and dangerous dichotomy of subject and object and its attendant metaphysics of the will to power (OBT 240/GA5 320). Rilke remains entrapped within this late-modern metaphysical picture, while Hölderlin helps "blaze [*spuren*] a path [*Weg*] for [his] mortal relations, a path toward the turning point [*Wende*]" beyond modernity" (OBT 202/GA5 272). Rilke does not live up to this task and instead, as Heidegger suggested previously in the *Notebooks*, fails to meaningfully contest or go beyond modern Western culture.

Gadamer does not share Heidegger's dim view of Rilke's modern deficiencies, and it is in his own implicit disagreement with Heidegger's critique that we can

appreciate how Rilke functions for Gadamer as a balance to Hölderlin. As was the case also with regard to Hölderlin, Gadamer wrote extensive commentaries about Rilke, many of which are included in the volume on poetics in the *Gesammelte Werke* (GW9). But to appreciate how Rilke provides Gadamer with a compelling and competing alternative vision to Heidegger's Hölderlinian intimation of a postmodern future, we need look no further than the epigraph to *Truth and Method* that Gadamer chose from Rilke:

Catch only what you've thrown yourself, all is
mere skill and little gain;
but when you're suddenly the catcher of a ball
thrown by an eternal partner
with accurate and measured swing
towards you, to your center, in an arch
from the great bridgebuilder of God:
why catching then becomes a power—
not yours, a world's. (Quoted in TM vi/GW1 xii)¹⁷⁶

Insofar as commentators pay attention to Gadamer's citation of Rilke, they typically focus narrowly on the way it prefigures his theory of play and other prominent themes in *Truth and Method*.¹⁷⁷ For our purposes, the importance of these lines is implied rather by the fact that Heidegger himself comments on the poem in "What Are Poets For?" and suggests a reading of it at odds with how Gadamer deploys the poem as an epigraph. As I will now argue, we should see this epigraph in the wider context of Gadamer's

¹⁷⁶ Here is Rilke's original passage: "Solange du Selbstgeworfenes fängst, ist alles / Geschicklichkeit und läßlicher Gewinn—; / erst wenn du plötzlich Fänger wirst des Balles, / den eine ewige Mitspielerin / dir zuwarf, deiner Mitte, in genau / gekonntem Schwung, in einem jener Bögen / aus Gottes. großem Brückenbau: / erst dann ist Fangen-können ein Vermögen, — / Nicht deines, einer Welt" (*Uncollected Poems (Bilingual Edition)*, 138-139).

¹⁷⁷ See Richard Detsch: "Approximately the first half of this poem serves as a motto for Hans-Georg Gadamer's book *Truth and Method*, in which the renowned Heidelberg philosopher sought to formulate a non-subjective concept of play" (*Rilke's Connections to Nietzsche*, 113-114). Arnd Kerkhecher insightfully connects the Rilke poem to Gadamer's rehabilitation of modern humanism in the opening sections of *Truth and Method* ("Bedeutung der humanistischen Tradition für die Geisteswissenschaften [GW 1, 9-47]," 9).

conception of our belonging to historical tradition in a way that invites comparison with Heidegger's Hölderlin. Gadamer's choice of Rilke's poem as an epigraph to *Truth and Method* suggests an implicit but spirited confrontation with Heidegger.

Rilke contrasts two ways of catching: You can catch either "only what you've thrown yourself" or "a ball / thrown by an eternal partner." In the context of Gadamer quoting this poem to begin *Truth and Method*, I understand these images as metaphors for human understanding.¹⁷⁸ The first conception is strongly subjectivistic in character, suggesting that understanding is a sovereign act of will in which we rely only on our own individual capacities for reasoning. The line describing this conception ("Catch only what you've thrown yourself") recalls Kant's monumental claim that "reason has insight only into what it itself produces according to its own design" (CPR Bxiii). In other words, we can know with certainty only by means of the necessary concepts that we use *a priori* to organize experience; the resonance of Kant here also usefully highlights Gadamer's subsequent critique of the Enlightenment. Rilke, and following him Gadamer, suggests that this model is a narrowly deficient and one-sidedly reductive way of thinking about how, first of all and most of the time, we understand. Rilke writes that, when we realize we are playing catch with "an eternal partner" and not only by ourselves, we see that the power to catch belongs not only to ourselves, but to "a world." I suggest that the "eternal partner" here names tradition, which for Gadamer functions as the necessary background for all our acts of understanding and as a constant conversation partner for whoever wants to authentically understand. How is tradition "eternal"? It stretches far back into the past history of human consciousness and extends indefinitely into the future, insofar as whoever in the present engages with the past and what it has handed down to us carries

¹⁷⁸ Gadamer's intended title for *Truth and Method* was *Verstehen und Geschehen* (GW10 74-75).

tradition forward and keeps it alive. Once we see that we understand only thanks to tradition—that we play catch with an eternal partner encompassing the history of human languages and texts as well as the reality those human artifacts try to capture and describe—then we will correctly see our capacity for understanding as belonging to a wider, ineluctably rich historical context from which we can never wholly extricate ourselves but which provides us with all our capacities in the first place. Rilke evocatively calls this ineluctably deep background “a world.”

If my reading is right, then Gadamer quotes Rilke at the outset of *Truth and Method* in order to show that the voluntarist and subjectivist conception of human understanding that Rilke compares to catching a ball you have thrown yourself is at best only one stage or level of understanding. Like Rilke in his turn in the poem toward seeing catching as a power belonging to a world, Gadamer will in the course of *Truth and Method* go beyond subjectivist conceptions of understanding like Schleiermacher’s and Dilthey’s toward a conception of understanding as occurring only against the dynamic backdrop of tradition: “*Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in a happening of tradition [Überlieferungsgeschehen], a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated*” (TM 291/GW1 295). Rilke’s poem dramatizes precisely this distinction in conceptions of understanding. My reading suggests that Gadamer’s choice of the epigraph from Rilke implicitly disputes Heidegger’s reading of Rilke as a Nietzschean poet of the will to power who never transcended modern subjectivism. For Gadamer, Rilke is no voluntarist but is rather attuned to this very happening of understanding to which Gadamer, following Heidegger, calls attention. Even more significantly in this regard, Heidegger refers in “What Are

Poets For?” to the very poem that Gadamer uses as an epigraph when he elliptically suggests that the expression “eternal partner [*ewige Mitspielerin*]” names Rilke’s distinctively modern and hence deleteriously metaphysical understanding of “entities in their entirety [*Seienden im Ganzen*]” (OBT 211/GA5 282). On Heidegger’s analysis, Rilke understands the being of entities in terms of modern subjectivism and will to power. Gadamer subtly but convincingly contests Heidegger’s harsh critique by implicitly suggesting that Rilke goes beyond subjectivism toward a dynamic and phenomenological attunement to the way understanding happens to us—not as something we merely will, but rather as a bequest dynamically handed down to us by tradition.

How does Rilke’s poem function also as a rebuke also of Heidegger’s Hölderlin? Gadamer quotes these lines from Rilke because they evoke his conception of our radical belongingness to historical tradition. Although Rilke’s anti-Kantian picture of understanding suggests a radical critique of modern thinking with which Gadamer has profound sympathy, Rilke and Gadamer’s shared picture of the way we inextricably belong to history implies that today we also belong to the modern age. Heidegger was wrong to one-sidedly read Rilke as a Nietzschean poet of subjectivism, but for Gadamer, Rilke suggests that we do always already belong to modernity as the tradition we inherit and in which we live. I would concede this latter point to Heidegger’s interpretation. Gadamer argues that we can and must belong to the modern age—but without succumbing to its worst and most excessive and damaging features, such as the will to power Heidegger tendentiously reads into Rilke. Heidegger’s Hölderlin, on the other hand, evokes a world in which we have fallen away from the gods and from being. Both the thinker and his poet imagine a future in which we leave modernity behind. Rilke and

Gadamer reject this utopian hope. We cannot just move beyond an age that ineluctably claims us and that also always enables and makes possible all our understanding.¹⁷⁹

The contrast between Dilthey and Nietzsche suggested that Gadamer would rehabilitate modern thinking rather than leave modern thought behind entirely.

Gadamer's invocation of Rilke rather than Hölderlin, meanwhile, indicates that we always dwell within an existing historical tradition—including modernity—and cannot simply transcend that tradition. Not only does Rilke suggest an alternative to Heidegger; Gadamer subtly employs Rilke precisely against Heidegger's reading of him. In his appeals to Dilthey and Rilke, Gadamer carefully distances himself from Heidegger's postmodern touchstones in Nietzsche and Hölderlin—and, more importantly, the call to another beginning that they sound. Gadamer's relation to this family of figures suggests a sketch of how he proceeds to think modernity after Heidegger.

In this chapter, I provided an overview of Gadamer's relation to Heidegger insofar as that relation bears on the problem of the modern age. Dissatisfied with the one-sidedness of the dominant scholarly interpretations of this issue, I developed in §2.1 my own reading of Gadamer as beginning with Heidegger but forging ahead along his own way or path. I thus provided a picture of Gadamer as standing *with* and *against* Heidegger on. To that end, I gave an account in §2.2 of Gadamer's continuities with Heidegger. After showing that the starting point for Gadamer's thinking cannot be identified with either the early or later Heidegger, I demonstrated Heidegger's influence on Gadamer's conception of how

¹⁷⁹ Lammi refers to “Gadamer's orientation toward the historical past versus Heidegger's orientation toward the future” (“Gadamer's ‘Correction’ of Heidegger,” 501). But Gadamer is also oriented toward *the present*. This immanent focus in the context of Rilke is evoked by James D. Reid's study, which is responsive to but critical of Heidegger, *Being Here is Glorious: On Rilke, Poetry, and Philosophy*.

the past conditions present intelligibility and his characterization of the modern age as marked by alienation and instrumental rationality. Gadamer thus adopts numerous important aspects of Heidegger's radical critique of modernity. Since Gadamer forges his own way after Heidegger, however, these continuities cannot be the end of the story. Hence, in §2.3 I presented Gadamer's divergences from Heidegger. Against Heidegger's conceptualization of modernity as a distinct epoch with a deficient relation to being, Gadamer points to persistent human solidarities that modernity cannot eradicate. Because Gadamer disputes the epochal nature of the modern age, he also correspondingly rejects the idea that we can move beyond modernity into another beginning. Hence, Gadamer disputes Heidegger's critique of the modern age's impoverished intelligibility as well as his positive conviction that Western culture can begin again. I illustrated and motivated Gadamer's alternative to Heidegger by explaining his distrust of Heidegger's postmodern touchstones in Nietzsche and Hölderlin. In presenting Gadamer's rebuke of Heidegger's vision of another beginning, and in my discussion of Gadamer's appeals to Dilthey and Rilke, I sketched Gadamer's positive alternative to Heidegger. Gadamer stays behind to gaze at the setting sun at the end of modernity, where he hopes to discover and cultivate hidden resources that this sun can still illuminate—the themes, motifs, and images of the modern age that, unlike Heidegger, he does not wholly transcend.

Part II: Gadamer's Rehabilitation of Modern Guiding Metaphors: Preface

Part I investigated the Heideggerian background of Gadamer's engagement with the modern age by arguing that Gadamer does not fully follow Heidegger's thinking about modernity because he rejects Heidegger's movement to "another beginning." Gadamer's departure from Heidegger's approach to modernity indicates that, unlike Heidegger, Gadamer does not transcend our historical inheritances. Here in Part II, I shall provide my interpretation of Gadamer's own post-Heideggerian response to the modern age. To that end, Part II will reconstruct, motivate, and defend Gadamer's positive project of rehabilitating modernity. Gadamer cultivates the remaining and rich resources immanent to the modern age in order to discover and encourage a hopeful version of modernity by rediscovering what remains true and meaningful in the modern age's *guiding metaphors*.

What do I mean by guiding metaphors? Here, as readers of *Truth and Method* may expect, I take my lead from Gadamer's investigation in the opening sequence of that book of the "guiding concepts [*Leitbegriffe*] of humanism," namely, *Bildung*, *sensus communis*, judgment, and taste (TM 8/GW1 15). Gadamer appeals to these concepts, with their roots in Greek antiquity but enduring into modernity, as resources for his hermeneutical account of truth in the arts and humanities. My conviction is that this strategy of rehabilitation extends far beyond, but also includes, the guiding concepts of humanism. In his account of these humanistic ideas, Gadamer appeals to conceptual history: "Concepts such as 'art,' 'history,' 'the creative,' 'worldview,' 'lived-experience,' 'genius,' 'external world,' 'interiority,' 'expression,' 'style,' 'symbol,' which we take to be self-evident, contain a wealth of history" (TM 9/GW1 15). He also talks about rehabilitating concepts that have lost their validity in his discussion of prejudice and

authority: “The history of ideas shows that not until the Enlightenment does *the concept of prejudice* acquire the negative connotation familiar today” (TM 273/GW1 275).

Gadamer positively appeals to the background history of concepts to motivate his rehabilitation of ideas that he finds worthy of continued attention and reworking.

How could a history of concepts provide a positive philosophical point of departure? For an important hint, we can look to Gadamer’s contemporary Hans Blumenberg, who writes in 1960, the same year as the publication of *Truth and Method*:

By providing a point of orientation, the content of absolute metaphors determines a particular attitude or conduct [*Verhalten*]; they give structure to a world, representing the nonexperientiable, nonapprehensible totality of the real. To the historically trained eye, they therefore indicate the fundamental certainties, conjectures, and judgments in relation to which the attitudes and expectations, actions and inactions, longings and disappointments, interests and indifferences, of an epoch are regulated.¹⁸⁰

Blumenberg describes metaphorical ideas that shape the intelligibility of an age. Here he agrees with Richard Rorty: “It is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions.”¹⁸¹ By “absolute metaphors,” Blumenberg refers to conceptual structures or images that provide an age with its only faintly distinct yet recognizable sense of what is true and of what matters. Not always discursively self-evident or rationally definable, such images and shapes nonetheless form a positive and collective sense of intelligibility. They express, then, those background concepts that ground an age’s overall self-understanding.

My heuristic notion of the *guiding metaphors* of modernity follows both Gadamer’s “guiding concepts” and Blumenberg’s “absolute metaphors.” From Gadamer, I will develop the suggestion that modernity contains rich conceptual resources to which

¹⁸⁰ *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 14.

¹⁸¹ *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 12.

we can appeal against the modern age's worst impulses. From Blumenberg, I take the insight that we find within the history of concepts background themes, images, or motifs that guide and express what an age considers meaningful and true. Together, these insights point toward a strategy of discovering and cultivating resources within the history of concepts—*guiding metaphors*—to motivate an immanent reform of the modern age. Imputing such a project to Gadamer gains credibility when we suppose, as Part I suggested, that he does not follow Heidegger's deconstruction of the modern age.

In this part of the dissertation, I will outline my interpretation of Gadamer's accomplishment of this strategy first with regard to epistemic (Chapter 3) and then ocular metaphors (Chapter 4). Whereas Heidegger leaves modern thought behind, Gadamer refuses to give up in either of these domains on some of the modern age's guiding metaphors. Instead, Gadamer retains them by pushing them in new and surprising directions. I shall show how several guiding metaphors of the modern age, which helped shape its background sense of intelligibility, persist in Gadamer's thinking. Taking as our hint the suggestion from Part I that Gadamer departs from Heidegger's deconstruction of modernity, we will suggest the modern valence of these concepts by drawing intellectual histories that indicate their modern background. My way of clarifying Gadamer's strategy involves reading his employment of these guiding metaphors in light of their development in modern thought. This approach will then reveal how Gadamer twists significant modern guiding metaphors in a positive direction by emphasizing their most productive and positive features. Gadamer's more hopeful mode of rehabilitation, I will demonstrate, convincingly departs from Heidegger's deconstruction of modernity.

Chapter 3: Gadamer and the Epistemic

In Chapter 2, I contended that Gadamer stays behind Heidegger's movement into another beginning to discover what the setting sun of the modern age still positively illuminates. Here I shall investigate Gadamer's rehabilitation of a family of guiding metaphors that are distinctively epistemic in orientation. What I call *guiding epistemic metaphors* express themes, images, and concepts related to knowing and cognition that have developed in modernity. I shall argue that Gadamer remains invested in rehabilitating guiding metaphors of modernity having to do with knowledge. As I will suggest with selected historical detail, guiding epistemic metaphors are central to the self-understanding of the modern age, which has proudly held, as Heidegger argued, "its science" as fundamental to its own identity (OBT 57/GA5 75). Gadamer's decision to stay behind and gaze at the landscape the setting sun of modernity illuminates suggested that he would ultimately have to contend with modernity's crucial ideals of knowledge.

I will begin in §3.1 by distinguishing the epistemic, which I read Gadamer as rehabilitating, from epistemology, of which he is sharply critical. I will continue developing Gadamer's negative attitude toward the scientific nature of modernity in §3.2 by explaining his critiques of Cartesian method and of the gesture of beginning again. After seeing how Gadamer's point of departure is his criticism of epistemology, method, and modernity's new beginning, we can properly appreciate his rehabilitation of other modern guiding epistemic metaphors. To that end, I will present in §3.3 Gadamer's invocation of the Kantian transcendental for his hermeneutics, which sets the stage for my presentation in §3.4 of Gadamer's treatment of four other epistemic metaphors.

§3.1: Epistemology as opposed to the epistemic

§3.1.1: Against epistemology

Situating Gadamer alongside epistemic concerns will surely raise the eyebrows of some Gadamerians. As evidence for this prediction, consider Donatella Di Cesare's claim in her authoritative study: "*Understanding*, not knowing, is at stake in hermeneutic truth [for Gadamer]. Hermeneutics interrogates neither the conditions for the possibility of knowledge nor what kind of a method should be followed."¹⁸² In one of the most important early Anglophone treatments of Gadamer's philosophy, Charles Taylor sounds a similar note when he reads Gadamer as introducing a disjunction between "two kinds of operation: knowing an object, and coming to an understanding with an interlocutor."¹⁸³ Both Di Cesare and Taylor avow that Gadamerian hermeneutics excludes attention to knowledge. They situate Gadamer relative to other topics of central importance for his thinking, such as hermeneutic truth and understanding the other, which act as contrast cases with knowledge that his thinking attempts to define. I will now show that the distance between Gadamer and knowledge drawn by Di Cesare and Taylor is correct only when *the epistemic* and *epistemology* are properly defined and disambiguated. To that end, I will present Gadamer's critique of epistemology alongside what I shall call his invocation of the epistemic. Accomplishing these tasks will motivate the plausibility of my reconstruction of Gadamer's rehabilitation of guiding epistemic metaphors.

Let us first consider Gadamer's critique of and departure from epistemology. Here, as with so many other aspects of Gadamer's philosophy, we must take our lead

¹⁸² *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*, 37.

¹⁸³ "Gadamer on the Human Sciences," 127.

from Heidegger.¹⁸⁴ In *Being and Time*, Heidegger forcefully criticized what he called “the unexpressed presuppositions of attempts to solve the problem of reality in ways which are only ‘epistemological [erkenntnistheoretischen]’” (BT 252/SZ 208). On his analysis, the project of epistemology, defined as the attempt to establish the conditions of knowledge of a world external to the knowing subject, proceeds along illegitimate ontological premises.¹⁸⁵ The problem with epistemology in this particular sense is its assumed but illegitimate ontology of the subject/object dichotomy, which (as we saw in §1.2.2) for Heidegger helps constitute the modern age as such:

This orientation itself is the one that determines the philosophical tradition and, beginning with Descartes, starts from the ego, the subject. The motive of this primary orientation toward the subject in modern [*neuzeitlichen*] philosophy is the opinion that this entity which we ourselves are is given to the knower first and as the only certain thing, that the subject is accessible immediately and with absolute certainty, that it is better known than all objects. In comparison, objects are accessible only by way of a mediation. (BP 123/GA24 173)

Here Heidegger claims that the epistemological project has distinctively modern roots in the Cartesian subject/object dichotomy. Against this contingently modern ontology, Heidegger and the phenomenological tradition think of human beings as, first of all and most of the time, not disengaged subjects standing against a field of objects that we know only by means of mental representations putatively linked to external objects. Rather, in contrast to that modern epistemological conception, we are more typically absorbed in skillful, engaged relations with things with which we are intimately familiar, rather than

¹⁸⁴ On Heidegger’s critique of modern epistemology, see Charles Guignon, *Heidegger and the Problem of Knowledge*, 197-206; and Denis McManus, “Heidegger on Skepticism, Truth, and Falsehood,” 239-259.

¹⁸⁵ This may be too restrictive a conception of epistemology, which, after all, remains robustly alive in philosophy departments worldwide. But many thinkers influenced by phenomenology share this definition, such as Taylor: “If I had to sum up this understanding in a single formula, it would be that knowledge is to be seen as correct representation of an independent reality” (*Philosophical Arguments*, 2-3).

attempting to theoretically grasp them across an ontological gap.¹⁸⁶ Epistemology's subject/object dichotomy may be an appropriate description of restricted scenarios involving discovering theoretical knowledge of some entity, but it fails to describe our more typical and engaged involvement with the world. The problem of the external world that so preoccupied modern epistemology, and the specter of skepticism that it raised, is thus only a problem from the perspective of a particular and historically contingent ontological conception of the relation between human beings and the world, namely, that this relation must be understood as one between subjects and objects.

For Heidegger, modern epistemology is inattentive to its own ontological presuppositions: "What is needed rather is the basic insight that while the different epistemological directions which have been pursued have not gone so very far off epistemologically, their neglect of any analytic of Dasein has kept them from obtaining any basis for a well secured phenomenal problematic" (BT 250/SZ 207). Heidegger proceeds from his phenomenological analytic of Dasein rather than with the problematical assumptions of the subject/object relation characteristic of modern epistemology. Thus, he rejects the epistemological problematic of proving the existence of the external world for its reliance on the dichotomous modern definitions of "internal" consciousness and "external" world. Echoing Kant's invocation of skepticism as the "scandal of philosophy," Heidegger writes in a famous passage in *Being and Time*:

The "scandal of philosophy" is not that this proof [for the external world] has yet to be given, but that *such proofs are expected and attempted again and again*. Such expectations, aims, and demands arise from an ontologically inadequate way of starting with *something* of such a character that independently *of it* and "outside" *of it* a "world" is to be

¹⁸⁶ The formulation of Heidegger's alternative to modern epistemology as skillful coping derives, of course, from Hubert Dreyfus's landmark interpretation. See the papers collected by Mark Wrathall in Dreyfus, *Skillful Coping: Essays on the Phenomenology of Everyday Perception and Action*.

proved as present-at-hand. It is not that that proofs are inadequate, but that the kind of being of the entity which does the proving and makes requests for proofs has *not been made definite enough*. (BT 249/SZ 205)¹⁸⁷

Once the analytic of Dasein proceeds without the ontological presuppositions of the subject/object dichotomy illegitimately retained from modern epistemology, the seemingly urgent concern of the epistemological tradition to prove the external world to human subjects will ultimately appear as an unfounded, abstract, even absurd problem with which philosophy can finally dispense. Answering skepticism no longer counts as a live concern when we realize that human beings are, rather than subjects detached from a world of objects mediated by mental representations, always already skillfully engaged with and involved in reality. Heidegger's critique of modern epistemology attacks that tradition's most foundational and heretofore unquestioned ontological premises.

Gadamer's rejection of epistemology starts from this basic phenomenological critique of the unfounded assumptions and ontological prejudices of modern epistemology. In a discussion of Husserl, Gadamer repeats and endorses the phenomenological critique of epistemology whose outline I have just reconstructed:

When epistemological inquiry sought to answer the question of how the subject, filled with his own representations [*Vorstellungen*], knows the external world and can be certain of its reality, the phenomenological critique showed how pointless [*sachfern*] such a question is. It saw that consciousness is by no means a self-enclosed sphere with its representations locked up in their own inner world. On the contrary, consciousness is, according to its own essential structure, already with objects. Epistemology [*Erkenntnistheorie*] asserts a false priority of self-consciousness. There are no representative images of objects in consciousness, whose correspondence to things themselves it is the real problem of epistemology to guarantee. The image we have of things is

¹⁸⁷ For Kant's reference to "a scandal of philosophy," see his note in the B-preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*: "It always remains a scandal of philosophy and universal human reason that the existence of things outside us...should have to be assumed merely **on faith**, and that if it occurs to anyone to doubt it, we should be unable to answer him with a satisfactory proof" (CPR Bxxxix).

rather in general the mode in which we are conscious of things themselves. (PH 131/GW3 106)

Gadamer here rejects “epistemology,” defined basically according to Heidegger’s conception as the ontological dichotomy between a subject distinguished by its consciousness standing opposite a field of objects separated by a gap that must be bridged by our mental representations. Since Gadamer subscribes to the phenomenological conception of human beings as open to and engaged with the world, and not rather the modern conception of atomized subjects attempting to know objects mediated by mental representations, he regards the epistemological project as “pointless.”¹⁸⁸

The most important consequence of Gadamer’s rejection of epistemology comes in the context of his critique of Dilthey. Gadamer departs from Dilthey’s hermeneutics on the basis of his identification of its illegitimately epistemological orientation.¹⁸⁹

Following in the footsteps of Heidegger, Gadamer opposes phenomenology to Dilthey’s distinctively epistemological starting point, as signaled by the title of an important chapter of *Truth and Method*: “Overcoming the Epistemological Problem through Phenomenological Investigation [*Überwindung der erkenntnistheoretischen Fragestellung durch die phänomenologische Forschung*]” (TM 235/GW1 246). For Gadamer, Dilthey’s project is paradigmatically marked by its heroic but ultimately misguided attempt to establish “an epistemology of the humanities” (TM 196/GW1 202). Dilthey valiantly endeavored to legitimate the cognitive content of the arts and humanities, but because he “was not able to escape his entanglement [*Befangenheit*] in traditional epistemology,” he failed to show how history and art are not discrete entities

¹⁸⁸ See David Vessey’s illuminating discussion of Gadamer’s critique of subjectivity in “The Role of the Concept ‘Person’ in Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics,” 117-137.

¹⁸⁹ For a contemporary revival of Dilthey’s hermeneutics that is responsive to and critical of Gadamer’s reading of him, see Rudolf Makkreel, *Orientation and Judgment in Hermeneutics*, 34-52.

of which we gain objective knowledge (TM 278/GW1 281). Dilthey was ill equipped to grasp that art and history are, first of all and most of the time, not phenomena of which we have private experiences modeled on scientifically linking up our mental representations with the external objects they purport to be about. Gadamerian hermeneutics begins rather from the phenomenological starting point according to which human beings always already stand open to the felt truth claims of art and history, which is his hermeneutical corollary to Heidegger's conception of skillful coping. Hence, Gadamer's powerfully moving slogan—"In truth, history does not belong to us; rather, we belong to it"—functions as a rebuke of Dilthey's modern, and in that sense epistemological, hermeneutics (TM 278/GW1 281). Dilthey commits the same error as the modern epistemological tradition when he models our relation to art and history on the overly abstract conception of gaining scientific knowledge of objects standing over and against subjects, rather than more accurately conceiving human beings as skillfully engaged with and open to entities with which we are intimately involved.

Gadamer's departure from epistemology arises in the context of the phenomenological critique of the ontological presuppositions of the modern epistemological tradition generally, and in his objections to Dilthey's hermeneutics in particular. For Gadamer, epistemology signals an especially modern ontological conception, with all its attendant philosophical questions and priorities, of subjects standing opposite objects about which we can gain scientific knowledge through mental representations. As a phenomenologist, Gadamer considers this picture an ontologically inaccurate account of human beings generally, and wholly inadequate for the hermeneutical problem of how we understand art and history specifically. On the basis of

these features of his work, some commentators read Gadamer's hermeneutics as rejecting epistemology full stop in favor of more playful activities, such as self-formation or edification. In his enlistment of Gadamer into his own influential critique of modern epistemology, Richard Rorty defined hermeneutics as "an expression of hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled—that our culture should become one in which the demand for constraint and confrontation [of our mental representations by the world] is no longer felt."¹⁹⁰ Like Rorty, but in a sharply critical and not at all vindictory register, Tom Rockmore also ascribes to Gadamer the view that epistemology is "the polar opposite of hermeneutics."¹⁹¹ If we adhere to the relatively narrow, modern definition of epistemology established here, then Rorty and Rockmore are correct to see Gadamer as an enemy of the epistemological project. But does this fact mean, as we previously saw Di Cesare and Taylor insisting, that Gadamer's philosophy departs completely from modernity's investment in questions of knowledge?

§3.1.2: Invocation of the epistemic

I now wish to call attention to another prominent feature of Gadamer's thinking that stands alongside, and perhaps in tension with, this departure from modern epistemology. I am referring to Gadamer's professed alignment of his hermeneutics with issues concerning knowledge, which I shall call his *invocation of the epistemic*. In a 1996 interview, Gadamer says, "the true blindness does not reside in this [scientific] knowledge itself but in the fact that one regards it as the whole of knowledge. It is this viewpoint I would like to defend against" (GR 423). In construing his project in terms of a redefinition and expansion of knowledge, Gadamer echoes some of the most prominent

¹⁹⁰ *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 315.

¹⁹¹ "Gadamer, Rorty and Epistemology as Hermeneutics," 127-128.

articulations of the contours of his hermeneutical project that he provided more than thirty years earlier in his *magnum opus*, such as in the following programmatic passage:

The hermeneutic phenomenon is basically not a problem of method [*Methodenproblem*] at all. It is not concerned with a method of understanding by means of which texts are subjected to scientific investigation like all other objects of experience. It is not concerned primarily with amassing verified knowledge [*Erkenntnis*], such as would satisfy the methodological ideal of science—*yet it too is concerned with knowledge and with truth*. In understanding tradition not only are texts understood, but insights are acquired and truths known. *But what kind of knowledge and what kind of truth?* (TM xx/GW1 1; my emphases)¹⁹²

We shall consider Gadamer's critique of method later, but we already see in this passage why the interpretation of scholars like Di Cesare and Taylor, according to which Gadamer's thinking should be understood *in contrast to* the problem of knowledge, are so misleading. Far from ignoring knowledge and rather defining only hermeneutic truth (Di Cesare) or the understanding of another person (Taylor), Gadamer remains deeply invested in validating knowledge in the arts and humanities in terms of our openness to how phenomena like art, poetry, and history affect us and how they show themselves and disclose things to us.¹⁹³ Gadamer attempts to describe, understand, and communicate how our receptivity to those hermeneutical phenomena works. While it is right to say that Gadamer redefines truth in positive terms irreducible to the terms of the natural sciences, since he rejects the subject/object dichotomy that made epistemology seem necessary, it remains just as importantly the case that he also aims to redefine knowledge: "But the book does not rest content with justifying the truth of art; instead, it tries to develop from

¹⁹² The central importance of the theme of knowledge for Gadamer goes back at least as far as 1941. As he states in the early essay "Kant and the Question of God," "what is known in this way [in natural science] does not exhaust what truly is worth knowing [*Wissenwürdigen*]" (HRE 16/GW4 359).

¹⁹³ John Sallis highlights Gadamer's focus on knowledge in his discussion of art as a divergence from Heidegger's focus on truth ("The Hermeneutics of the Artwork: 'Die Ontologie des Kunstwerks und ihre hermeneutische Bedeutung' [GW 1, 87-138]," 56).

this starting point a conception of knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] and of truth that corresponds to the whole of our hermeneutic experience” (TM xxii/GW1 3; my emphasis). One cannot introduce an exhaustive disjunction between “hermeneutic truth” and “the possibility of knowledge,” as Di Cesare does: “[Hermeneutic] understanding is not a matter of knowing, but of being.”¹⁹⁴ Rather, Gadamer wishes to interrogate what counts as truth *and* what counts as knowledge. He does not leave behind the modern attempt to define knowledge, but rather *expands* the meaning of knowledge beyond the results of mathematics and natural science to also include hermeneutic understanding in the arts and humanities. When he aligns his project with the attempt to redefine knowledge in a way other than the scientific reductionism of modernity and its subject/object dichotomy, Gadamer should be understood as invoking the epistemic.¹⁹⁵ Gadamer invokes the epistemic when he signals his intention to dwell on topics broadly related to our experience of knowing (which I shall emphasize and discuss throughout the rest of this chapter), *without* remaining within the epistemological framework that he follows the phenomenological tradition and Heidegger in criticizing.¹⁹⁶ While commentators like Di Cesare exclude knowledge from the domain of hermeneutics, we should rather read Gadamer as *reworking the epistemic* in his thinking. Put another way, Gadamer’s departure from modern epistemology, which required the subject/object dichotomy he rejects on phenomenological grounds, does not preclude his description of how our openness to the hermeneutical phenomena of art and history enables us to know.

¹⁹⁴ *Gadamer*, 38.

¹⁹⁵ The epistemic may be understood on analogy with Günter Figal’s term “the hermeneutical”: “The matter at issue here is the hermeneutical, in that broad sense of the word that encompasses both hermeneutical experience as well as its objects” (*Objectivity: The Hermeneutical and Philosophy*, 47).

¹⁹⁶ Stefano Marino interprets Gadamer as jumpstarting “a rehabilitation of *all* those kinds of experiences and of that knowledge that seems to elude the control of scientific-methodical patterns” (*Gadamer and the Limits of the Modern Techno-Scientific Civilization*, 177). While I agree with this assessment, I want to go further than claiming only that Gadamer validates non-scientific knowledge.

While my emphasis on knowledge in Gadamer departs from writers like Di Cesare and Taylor, as well as from commentators focused on his abandonment of modern epistemology such as Rorty and Rockmore, I am far from the first reader of Gadamer to pick up on the prominence of knowledge in his hermeneutics. Numerous scholars—such as Linda Martín Alcoff, Paul Healy, Brice Wachterhauser, and Georgia Warnke—have emphasized Gadamer’s epistemological commitments, often in the interest of putting his work into dialogue with Anglo-American philosophy and/or of ascribing to him a particular conception of knowledge, such as coherentism.¹⁹⁷ Neither of these intentions is my own in this context. Rather, I wish only to motivate the idea that Gadamer remains alive to themes related to the role and definition of knowledge in modernity: “The domination [*Herrschaft*] of the scientific model of epistemology [*Erkenntnisvorbildes*] leads to discrediting all the possibilities of knowledge [*Erkenntnismöglichkeiten*] that lie outside this new methodology” (TM 73/GW1 89-90). Against the modern identification of truth and knowledge only with what can be produced and verified by the mathematized natural sciences, Gadamer validates other forms of knowing, particularly in the arts and humanities, as retaining their cognitive legitimacy. This strategy makes Gadamer, in contrast to reductionistic scientism, an epistemic pluralist.

How should we square his invocation of the epistemic with Gadamer’s phenomenological critique of epistemology? These two themes must be rigorously distinguished. On the one hand, Gadamer rejects modern epistemology, the ontological conception of subjects attempting to grasp external objects by means of mental

¹⁹⁷ Alcoff, *Real Knowing: New Versions of the Coherence Theory*, 19, 79; Healy, “Hermeneutic Truth as Dialogic Disclosure: A Gadamerian Response to the Tugendhat Critique,” 173-176; Wachterhauser, “Getting it Right: Realism, Relativism, and Truth,” 69-73; and Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason*, 4 and 161.

representations, as phenomenologically inaccurate and to that extent ontologically illegitimate. But numerous commentators have failed to see how, on the other hand, his phenomenological critique of modern epistemology does not jettison questions of knowledge in general. In fact, insofar as he makes a strong claim on behalf of the cognitive activity of the arts and humanities, Gadamer remains deeply invested in epistemic concerns, themes, and questions, as this chapter will demonstrate. Rejecting a particular modern construal of the definition of knowledge does not mean a lack of concern for knowledge at all. In contesting modernity's conceptions of these terms, he rejects only the distinctively modern project, rooted in a faulty ontology, of justifying mental representations in relation to an external world. Despite his departure from epistemology, he continues to invoke the epistemic by explaining the distinctive and positive *epistemic valences* of our hermeneutical experiences of the arts and humanities.

We must emphasize the delicate balance Gadamer walks here regarding knowledge, for it is indicative of how I interpret his overall project of rehabilitating the modern age. Reading Gadamer's relation to epistemic issues as wholly negative or dismissive risks misleading us into ignoring the way he continues gazing at what the setting sun of modernity can still illuminate. In this instance, Gadamer's critique of modern epistemology does not preclude his continued investment in questions of knowledge as they emerged in modernity. That he rejects modern epistemology on the one hand, and still insists on retrieving knowledge as a genuine description the arts and humanities deserve on the other, reveals Gadamer's strategy of not one-sidedly rejecting modernity. Instead, he attempts to rehabilitate what remains true and right in the modern age by retaining modern guiding metaphors—in this case, the importance of defining and

understanding knowledge as a pressing philosophical topic and term of approbation for hermeneutic experience. More specifically, Gadamer's continued investment in the epistemic concerns of modernity will come into focus subsequently in this chapter when I will explain how he positively rehabilitates four modern *guiding epistemic metaphors* that purport to explain and define elements of the human experience of knowing.

§3.2: Rejecting method and the prospect of beginning again

§3.2.1: Cartesian method

My discussion of Gadamer's relation to epistemic issues began with his critique of epistemology before I reconstructed his invocation of the epistemic. In a similar vein, my presentation of his rehabilitation of guiding epistemic metaphors take its point of departure from his rejection of two other central themes in the modern age, namely, method and the prospect of a genuinely new beginning. Gadamer's strategy of rehabilitation requires a movement that begins with a negative critique of some deleterious aspects of modernity—where Heidegger frequently serves as his point of departure—and then proceeds toward a positive retrieval of what we inherit from the modern age that we cannot now completely leave behind. In the epistemic realm, Gadamer rejects epistemology, method, and the gesture of a new beginning. These criticisms provide the backdrop for Gadamer's subtle and vigorous rehabilitation of what still remains compellingly true in the modern age's fixation on epistemic concerns.

Gadamer's understanding of method demonstrates the high stakes of his treatment of the modern age, because in his confrontation with method, Gadamer comes face to face with one of the most important intellectual ideals of modern European intellectual culture as a whole. As indicated by the title *Truth and Method*, and the fact that the book

opens with a section on “The Problem of Method,” method is evidently central to Gadamer’s project in that treatise (TM 3/GW1 9). Yet Gadamer’s precise attitude toward method remains clouded in controversy and confusion. Paul Ricoeur succinctly expressed the terms of this interpretative debate: “The question is to what extent the work deserves to be called *Truth AND Method*, and whether it ought not to be entitled instead *Truth OR Method*.”¹⁹⁸ In other words, does Gadamer suggest that method and truth are incommensurable? As the best recent scholarship on this issue, especially interventions by Kristin Gjesdal and Claude Romano, indicates for us, careful attention to Gadamer’s treatment of method reveals that he has a relatively specific definition of the concept in mind.¹⁹⁹ Ricoeur’s provocative suggestion that Gadamer’s *magnum opus* should rather have been titled *Truth OR Method* cannot hold, then, because we cannot defensibly introduce a disjunction between Gadamerian hermeneutics and the modern focus on the epistemic. I shall now contextualize Gadamer’s understanding of method within the concept’s development in the Early Modern Period, showing how he rejects one of the modern age’s central epistemic ideals only in one of its particular instantiations.

Gadamer’s critical conception of method derives from his view of the historical development of the modern natural sciences, specifically with what he controversially interprets as “the Cartesian foundation of modern science [*der cartesianischen Grundlegung der modernen Wissenschaft*]” (TM 457/GW1 465). We should look to the development of method in the Early Modern Period, by Descartes in particular, to grasp the stakes and terms of Gadamer’s discussion of the relationship between method and science. Gadamer picks out for special attention Descartes’s “real treatise on method, his

¹⁹⁸ *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, 71.

¹⁹⁹ Gjesdal, “Hermeneutics and the Question of Method,” 341-342; and Romano, “The Flexible Rule of the Hermeneut,” 400. Both commentators call for a return to methodological hermeneutics.

Rules, the veritable manifesto of modern science” (TM 456/GW1 464). He also accords historical priority to the *Meditations*, which was the subject of the first course he taught at Heidelberg in 1949 after being invited to assume the prestigious chair previously held there by Karl Jaspers (GR 69/GW2 115-116).²⁰⁰ Clarifying this background will illuminate Gadamer’s view. In the seventeenth century, we find the recommendation that scientific investigation should proceed along prescribed rules. Without reliable and binding strictures, we risk being misled into confusion and error. Descartes’s First Meditation begins along these lines in his reference to “the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and...the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them” (CSM II 12). Bacon also gestures toward the ubiquitous risk of error when he compares nature to a labyrinth: “The fabric of the universe, its structure, to the mind observing it, is like a labyrinth, where on all sides the path is so often uncertain, the resemblance of a thing or a sign is deceptive, and the twists and turns of natures are so oblique and intricate” (NO 10). In the face of dangerous falsehoods, among which we risk getting lost as if in a labyrinth, we must prepare ourselves. For this task, we need a method, or a set of rules and principles for thinking that we can apply to any intellectual situation. Bacon likens his method to Ariadne’s thread: “We need a thread to guide our steps; and the whole road, right from the first perceptions of sense, has to be made with a sure method” (NO 10). Descartes also employs the metaphor of the labyrinth to describe his method: “Anyone who sets out in quest of knowledge must follow this Rule as closely as he would the thread of Theseus if

²⁰⁰ On Gadamer’s course on Descartes, see Jean Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography*, 356.

he were to enter the Labyrinth” (CSM I 20).²⁰¹ A rigorous method will prevent us from losing ourselves in the labyrinth of error and confusion.

We cannot conflate Bacon’s inductive natural history with Descartes’s deductively-oriented procedure.²⁰² But, for our purposes, in both Early Modern thinkers, each of whom gets picked out for special attention in *Truth and Method*, we recognize the insistence on the need for a set of rules governing intellectual activity to guard against the tempting falsehoods of both nature and tradition: “It is absolutely essential to introduce a better and more perfect use and application of the mind and understanding” (Bacon); “*We need a method if we are to investigate the truth of things*” (Descartes) (NO 11; CSM I 15). This methodologically oriented conception of inquiry is Gadamer’s target in *Truth and Method*. Because of his insistence on “the Cartesian foundation of modern science,” I will adduce components of Cartesian method most salient for Gadamer’s characterization of the concept. Cartesian method seeks certainty. We find this theme repeated throughout Descartes’s writings, including in the early *Rules*: “By a ‘method’ I mean reliable rules which are easy to apply, and such that if one follows them exactly, one will never take what is false to be true or fruitlessly expend one’s mental efforts, but will gradually and constantly increase one’s knowledge till one arrives at a true understanding of everything within one’s capacity”; and in the so-called method of doubt in the mature *Meditations*: “Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false; and I will proceed in this way until I recognize something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least recognize for certain that there is no certainty” (CSM I 16;

²⁰¹ I am indebted to work by Karsten Harries for emphasizing both Descartes’s employment of these classical images as well as their resonance in Bacon’s thought (“Descartes and the Labyrinth of the World,” 307-330; and “Descartes: Seminar Notes,” 6-14).

²⁰² On the competing Baconian and Cartesian modes of science in the Early Modern Period, see Antonio Pérez-Ramos, “Bacon’s Legacy,” 312-314.

CSM II 16). Descartes thought of method as an induced and artificial—that is, not arising naturally in life—means of rising above the vagaries and inconstancies of ordinary experience to arrive at the bedrock of certainty. Cartesian method prescribes rules and principles in order to properly and strictly order the conduct of thought such that we avoid mistakes and restrict ourselves instead to that domain in which certainty is possible.

Where can we find certainty? Anticipating Gadamer's critique, we must look to the positive and negative answers Descartes provides to this question. In the *Meditations*, he appeals to clear and distinct ideas—beginning with the *cogito* and proceeding through God and eventually to mathematical propositions—which overwhelmingly force our assent and whose truth God guarantees. After the existence of God has been proven for a second time at the end of the Fifth Meditation, Descartes triumphantly proclaims: “Now it is possible for me to achieve full and certain knowledge of countless matters, both concerning God himself and other things whose nature is intellectual, and also concerning the whole of that corporeal nature which is the subject matter of pure mathematics” (CSM II 49). With God backing up the truth of clear and distinct ideas, we shall restrict our intellectual scrutiny only to them. Given method's goal of certainty, just those objects that contain or offer the possibility for certain knowledge deserve our intellectual attention: “The conclusion we should draw from these considerations is not that arithmetic and geometry are the only sciences worth studying, but rather that in seeking the right path of truth we ought to concern ourselves only with objects which admit of as much certainty as the demonstrations of arithmetic and geometry” (CSM I 12-13). The mathematical ideal of knowledge, buttressed by God and including bodies with mathematical properties, provides Descartes with a positive avenue for certainty.

As for where we cannot find certainty, let us return to the method of doubt from the *Meditations*. To achieve certainty, I must never accept anything that admits of the slightest reason for doubt. This prescription leads to focusing my attention on clear and distinct ideas as exclusively as possible. But this task, Descartes admits, is of enormous practical difficulty: “My habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief, which is as it were bound over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom” (CSM II 15). Habit and custom prove enemies of the methodologically guided quest for certain knowledge. It is all too easy to fall back onto judgments about which we are not absolutely certain and which are supported only by habits and custom, which leads Descartes to express a systematic mistrust toward the historical past and its traditional understandings of truth and of scientific knowledge:

A good man is not required to have read every book or diligently mastered everything taught in the Schools. It would, indeed, be a kind of defect in his education if he had spent too much time on book-learning... But he came into this world in ignorance, and since the knowledge which he had as a child was based solely on the weak foundations of the senses and the authority of his teachers, it was virtually inevitable that his imagination should be filled with innumerable false thoughts before reason could guide his conduct. (CSM II 400)

As Descartes underscores in this polemic against Scholasticism, method steers us away from the falsehoods of nature and of history. Custom and habit incline us to trust authority, but that human inclination can be combated by a proper methodological focus only on objects that admit of certainty. For this task, we need the right rules, and the discipline to abide by them, rather than education in the historical past and its mistaken views that had previously been accepted on authority alone. Descartes evinces a revolutionary and skeptical attitude toward the past and its science, whose dogmatic transmissions to the present are now viewed as *prima facie* illegitimate. Cartesian method

marshals forth strict rules for ordered thought, a prescribed focus only on objects that suggest the possibility of certainty, and a pervasive distrust of authority against custom and habit, which illegitimately incline us toward trusting tradition.

My historical presentation of Cartesian method sets the stage for Gadamer's critical account of the concept. Though he does not always say so, Gadamer has the Cartesian concept of method in mind throughout his critique.²⁰³ Thus, like Heidegger (see §1.1.2), Gadamer assigns to Descartes a foundational role in the development of modernity.²⁰⁴ He ascribes to modern science a "Cartesian foundation," and he says elsewhere that, "since Descartes, method has been understood as the way to make things certain" (SI 278/GW10 90). We should not interpret Gadamer as holding the historically implausible view that the modern natural sciences proceeded precisely along the lines set forth by Descartes in aiming at mathematical–deductive certainty in their investigation of nature. Instead, a more accurate and charitable reconstruction of Gadamer's position suggests that he means that natural science attempts *to objectify experience*:

The aim of science is so to objectify [*objektivieren*] experience [*Erfahrung*] in such a way that it no longer contains any historical element. Scientific experiment does this by its methodical procedure. The historico-critical method, moreover, does something similar in the

²⁰³ For this reason, I cannot agree with Joel Weinsheimer's claim that "Gadamer's argument is directed against method as such" (*Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method*, 20).

²⁰⁴ Heidegger's most explicit discussions of method occur too late in his career to have directly influenced Gadamer. See his 1959 discussion: "The sciences know the way to knowing [*Wissen*] by the term 'method.' Method, especially in today's modern science [*neuzeitlich-modernen Wissenschaft*], is not a mere instrument serving the sciences; rather, it has pressed the sciences into its own service" (OWL 74/GA12 167). More germane, perhaps, is Heidegger's 1973 claim that sounds as if it could have been written by Gadamer more than a decade earlier: "We need to learn to distinguish between *way* [*Weg*] and *method*. In philosophy, there are only ways; in the sciences, on the contrary, there are only methods, that is, modes of procedure [*Verfahrenweisen*]" (FS 80/GA15 399). On Heidegger and method, see Iain Thomson, *The End of Onto-Theology: Understanding Heidegger's Turn, Method, and Politics*, 170-190. In his typically generous spirit, Gadamer notes, "Since I am also acting here in the role of an eyewitness, I may report that in 1923, Heidegger had already described the modern age as the 'care of indubitable knowledge [*Sorge um die erkannte Erkenntnis*]" (BEP 20/HE 200). I believe Gadamer refers to Heidegger's 1923-1924 Marburg lecture course *Introduction to Phenomenological Research*, which speaks of "the care of knowledge in Descartes"—but not of Cartesian method as such (IPR 148/GA17 195).

humanities. Through the objectivity [*Objektivität*] of their approach, both methods are concerned to guarantee that these basic experiences can be repeated by anyone. Just as experiments in natural science must be verifiable, so too must the whole process be capable of being checked in the humanities also. Hence there can be no place for the historicity [*Geschichtlichkeit*] of experience in science. (TM 342/GW1 352)

I meant to motivate the plausibility of Gadamer's idea of the scientific objectification of experience by previously pointing out the way that Descartes's methodologically prescribed doubt in the *Meditations* set the stage for his reliance only on clear and distinct ideas as well as skepticism toward the historical past. Following Descartes, modern natural science, for Gadamer, posits a universe of qualities and objects that can be understood in strictly quantified, and hence maximally certain, terms. For Descartes, physics meant the study of extended bodies with mathematical properties. The aim of Cartesian method, for Gadamer, was then "to legitimate the mathematical natural sciences as the real knowledge [*eigentlichen Erkenntnis*] of the objective world" (PH 185/GW3 150). Seventeenth-century natural science radically reduced, in comparison with Scholastic science's vision of teleological ends and substantial forms within nature, the scope of its investigation through a mathematical objectification of what counts as cognitively intelligible. The new science thereby determined a new cognitive standard that would guide its activity as well as its minimal but powerful ontology. In positing a universe consisting only of external mathematizable objects and investigating subjects, the seventeenth-century revolution in scientific method set the stage for the ontology characteristic of epistemology disputed by Gadamer and the phenomenological tradition.

To ascribe strict certainty to such a standard as Gadamer often does—"Scientific certainty always has something Cartesian about it"—may overstate the cognitive scope of

the real practices of natural science (TM 232/GW1 243).²⁰⁵ As is well known, the inductive and probabilistic procedure of modern natural science does not operate with the same demands of certainty as in the mathematical and deductive sciences.²⁰⁶ Rather, Gadamer's ascription of a Cartesian foundation to modern natural science intends to describe *the ambition of natural science*. Hence, elsewhere he defines the quest for Cartesian certainty more amorphously as the "authentic ethos of modern [*modernen*] science" (H&T 37/GW2 48). By such a Cartesian ambition or "ethos," Gadamer refers above all to the drive to completely objectify experience and nature into minimal and mathematized terms that admit of the possibility of genuine knowledge through a methodologically guided, rigorous set of rules. Descartes's account of discovering certainty through the strict and rigorous focus on clear and distinct ideas plausibly motivates, then, Gadamer's characterization of this project or "ethos of modern science."

What, then, of the negative side of Descartes's account of methodological certainty? For Descartes, we cannot look to the past and its transmissions to the present to legitimate our scientific procedures and their claims to knowledge. The past makes no rationally legitimate claim upon reason: "Even though we have read all the arguments of Plato and Aristotle, we shall never become philosophers if we are unable to make a sound judgment on matters which come up for discussion; in this case what we would seem to have learnt would not be science but history" (CSM I 13).²⁰⁷ Cartesian method's denigration of the past in comparison with the sovereign use of reason in the present

²⁰⁵ Without properly motivating his view, Gjesdal takes Gadamer to task for his "strange generalizations" about method in this passage and others like it ("Hermeneutics and the Question of Method," 341).

²⁰⁶ For an account of how "causation is stolen from knowledge" into mere probability in the sciences, see Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference*, 181.

²⁰⁷ On Descartes's rejection of the relevance of history for his method, see Mary Domski, "Newton as Historically Minded Philosopher," 74-76.

provides Gadamer's critique with another of its principal provocations. For Gadamer, the Enlightenment that followed Descartes in positing "a mutually exclusive antithesis between authority and reason"—between science and history, as Descartes put it in the passage just quoted—robbed the historical past of its genuine authority for the present (TM 279/GW1 282).²⁰⁸ The historical past, which binds us, conditions us, and ineluctably enables our cognition, gets dismissively treated by the methodological concept of reason derived from Descartes as merely an inconvenient and rationally unjustified obstacle to the methodologically guided use of sovereign reason. Thus, Gadamer accuses Cartesian method of the cardinal sin of downplaying, even erasing, human historicity.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer disputes the colonization of the humanities, where this erasure of human historicity appears particularly egregious, by the Cartesian—methodological search for certainty. The aims of method—namely, the objectification of experience and its attendant ideal of mathematically certain knowledge of ahistorical truths—are completely alien to those of the arts and humanities, which are marked instead by their irreducible historicity, that is, by the fact that they emerge in historically conditioned forms and change over time. Methodological objectification risks rendering the claims to truth made upon us by the arts and humanities unrecognizable and seemingly unmotivated: "How difficult it is to harmonize the historical knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] that helps to shape our historical consciousness with this [Cartesian] ideal and how difficult it is, for that reason, to comprehend its true nature on the basis of the modern [*modernen*] conception of method" (TM 273/GW1 276). When the study of art and history gets judged by the standards of the scientific study of ahistorical objects, and

²⁰⁸ For a discussion of how the Enlightenment from which Gadamer distances himself is the one he identifies with Descartes, see Robert J. Dostal, "Gadamer, Kant, and the Enlightenment," 337-348.

we thus overlook the fact that art and history are ontologically rich phenomena to which, in our finitude and historicity, we belong and with which we are in endless conversation, then their making a genuine claim to truth upon us will seem hopelessly naïve and subjective.²⁰⁹ The steady encroachment of scientific method's ambition to discover ahistorical truth, which "as formulated by Descartes in his *Rules*... became the standard for all understanding" in the modern age, has thus robbed the arts and humanities of their entire force and motivation in modernity (EH 5/GW4 246).

In the passage from *Truth and Method* cited in the previous paragraph, we see an aspect of Gadamer's critique of method that has been insufficiently appreciated in the reception of his thought, namely, his insistence that the modern ideal of method has denied the arts and humanities any independent claim to *knowledge*. Descartes and Bacon broke with the past and put science on a new path on which they would achieve genuine, and in Descartes's case distinctively mathematical, knowledge. Gadamer describes this new modern ideal as "the phantom of a knowledge [*Erkennenden*] that has been freed from the standpoint of the knower" (H&T 29/GW2 40). Mathematized knowledge is in principle verifiable and repeatable by any independent observer. This feature marks the distinctive power of scientific knowledge of the natural world (see §3.4.3). But for Gadamer, the great disaster of the historical development of this conception was, in its application to domains beyond natural science, its consequent denial of distinct but equally valid claims to knowledge by the arts and humanities: "It is important to remember the humanistic tradition, and to ask what is to learned from it with respect to

²⁰⁹ Richard J. Bernstein emphasizes Gadamer's movement past the distinction between the subjective and the objective (*Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*, 109-169). Bernstein astutely identifies "the Cartesian legacy that serves as the backdrop for the drama that Gadamer unfolds," but does not sufficiently identify *Cartesian method* as central to that drama as I do here (ibid, 115).

the humanities' mode of knowledge [*Erkenntnisweise*]" (TM 17/GW1 24). Hermeneutics aims to revive knowledge and truth as resulting from human understanding in those domains of culture that stand apart from mathematics and natural science.

Gadamer's critique of method denies the universal scope of a particular modern definition of knowledge—namely, as equivalent to what the mathematized natural sciences discover according to their own method—while he still speaks positively of knowing in the arts and humanities. The ideal of knowledge in modern natural science, derived from Descartes's conception of method, is inappropriate in the domain of humanistic knowledge, where historicity is constitutive. Gadamer could only agree, then, with Giorgio Agamben's treatise on method: "Method shares with logic its inability to separate itself completely from its context. There is no method that would be valid for every domain, just as there is no logic that can set aside its objects."²¹⁰ Gadamer's rejection of method focuses on a pervasive modern instantiation of method—namely, the Cartesian conception which supported the epistemology Gadamer phenomenologically rejects—which stands alongside his claim on behalf of knowing in the arts and humanities, which method delegitimized.²¹¹ Gadamer targets, then, Descartes's reduction of experience to exclusively mathematical intelligibility as well as the corresponding Cartesian rejection of knowledge from the past. Ricoeur's confusion as to whether the book should have been titled *Truth OR Method* derives from the text's central puzzle, namely, its reluctance to precisely name the method it targets as its enemy. While a careful reading reveals the Cartesian object of *Truth and Method*'s critique, the influence of Cartesian method throughout modern culture means Gadamer grapples with one of the

²¹⁰ *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, 7.

²¹¹ Romano insightfully grasps this essential point ("The Flexible Rule of the Hermeneut," 399).

most central and hence amorphous intellectual phenomena of modernity. Gadamer's caginess about specifying Cartesian method as his *bête noire* derives from the fact that the pervasiveness of its ambition to mathematized intelligibility and its scorn for the past has so infiltrated our modern way of life that it is hard to pin down. Specifying what Gadamer means by method reveals the shocking breadth, and sharp focus, of his critique.

§3.2.2: The modern age as a new beginning

There remains another major modern motif that Gadamer must reject, namely, the idea that modernity represents a completely new beginning, a definitive break with the historical past. I do not refer here to the idea that the modern age contributed genuinely new and often problematic concepts, nor that the modern age can be viably periodized as beginning somewhere around, for example, the seventeenth century. Indeed, as we saw in §2.2.2, Gadamer endorses arguments along those lines from Heidegger. Rather, Gadamer rejects a key component of modernity's self-image. In "The Age of the World Picture," Heidegger described the platitude that modernity "is not only new in retrospective comparison with what has preceded it. It is new, rather, in that it explicitly sets itself up as the new" (OBT 69/GA5 92). Essential to modernity's self-image is its vindictory self-conception as a *bona fide* break or split with what preceded it.²¹² The modern age—*Neuzeit*, literally the new time—attempts to begin history over again.

In preparation for an account of Gadamer's relation to this idea, let us trace its development within the context of the origins of the modern age, and beyond, to get a

²¹² Compare this passage from Heidegger with Daniel Garber's analysis: "The long seventeenth century... was a remarkable period for its fecundity, something that was recognized even by those who lived through it. Figures such as Francis Bacon and René Descartes certainly recognized their own outstanding intellectual qualities and were eager to tell their contemporaries about the remarkable new start that they were providing, a new and deeper understanding of nature that broke sharply with that of past generations" ("Why the Scientific Revolution Wasn't a Revolution, and Why It Matters," 134).

grip on what we mean by a new and modern beginning. Here again we can take Bacon and Descartes as our points of departure. Both thinkers sought a definitive break with the Scholastic past, and proposed radically new methods that would guide the conduct of scientific inquiry and replace the Aristotelian legacy they inherited. Both writers deployed architectural metaphors to announce new beginnings.²¹³ Bacon promised a “Great Renewal [*Instauratio*]” for the sciences: “The only course remaining was to try the thing again from the start with better means, and make a general Renewal of the sciences and arts and all of human learning, beginning from correct foundations” (NO 2). Descartes echoes Bacon’s architectural imagery: “I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last” (CSM II 12). For Descartes, as for Bacon, the sciences of the past must be swept away and replaced with new edifices: “I would compare it [previous knowledge] to a badly constructed house, whose foundations are not firm. I know of no better way to repair it than to knock it all down, and build a new one in its place” (CSM II 407). After the rubble of Scholasticism has been cleared away, the architects of the modern age will build the grand and triumphant constructions of the new science that will provide the possibility of genuine knowledge. In these architecturally minded passages, Bacon and Descartes call for the radically new beginning that has been said to constitute modernity.

The significance of these architectural metaphors is the break with the past, and the radical inauguration of a new future, that they signal. Bacon calls our attention to this theme: “It is futile to expect a great advancement in the sciences from overlaying and

²¹³ In a passage that inspired my reflections here, Harries writes of “the changing role of the metaphors of architecture in philosophical reflection” (*The Ethical Function of Architecture*, 11). See also Abraham Akkerman, “Urban Planning in the Founding of Cartesian Thought,” 141-167.

implanting new things on the old; a new beginning has to be made from the lowest foundations, unless one is content to go round in circles for ever, with mean, almost negligible, progress” (NO 39). At the dawn of modernity, the founders of the new science saw themselves as beginning intellectual activity over again in order to engender genuine progress. The Cartesian and Baconian metaphor of foundations signals this theme of a fresh start in the service of a new scientific method. The edifice of the past will be demolished, and a new building will replace it from the ground up, as Descartes emphasizes: “Throughout my writings I have made it clear that my method imitates that of the architect” (CSM II 366). We find evidence for Heidegger’s astute observation that modernity saw itself as having the character of genuine novelty in Bacon and Descartes’s architectural metaphors of building science up all over again.

Modernity’s self-understanding as novel persists beyond the seventeenth century, as two relevant examples demonstrate. First, Kant modeled his Copernican Revolution in philosophy on then-recent advancements in the natural sciences and mathematics:

I should think that the examples of mathematics and natural science, which have become what they now are [secure sciences] *through a revolution brought about all at once*, were remarkable enough that we might reflect on the essential element in the change in the ways of thinking that has been so advantageous to them, and, at least as an experiment, imitate it insofar as their analogy with metaphysics, as rational cognition, might permit. (CPR Bxv-Bxvi; my emphasis)

Kant pitches his gambit of positing that objects conform to our cognition, replacing the previous assumption that our cognition should conform to objects, as an experiment that could radically and suddenly reorient philosophical activity in the same way that the heroes of the new science instantaneously and irrevocably transformed the scientific investigation of nature. The Kantian revolution of transcendental philosophy models

itself on the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, both in its specific methodological reorientation and in its general ambition at effecting total and instant transformation. Kant methodologically shifts metaphysics in order to open up the possibility of genuine knowledge. With Kant, metaphysics begins over again.

Another example of the modern gesture of beginning again comes in Husserl's claim on behalf of the novelty of his phenomenological method.²¹⁴ In a passage reminiscent of the boldness and anti-skeptical fervor of Descartes, Husserl claims that the phenomenological *epoché* will allow us "to discover the new world of pure subjectivity."²¹⁵ Husserl's phenomenology provides access to a "new world" in which we will gain a firm foothold after we abandon the hopeless groping about characteristic of ineffective philosophical methods that did not grasp, as phenomenology will, the essence of consciousness. The phenomenological method puts us on a new path toward true knowledge. In its ambition to the discovery of something new on the basis of which we can feel secure and gain certainty through a method, Husserl's phenomenology repeats the boldly confident modern gesture of laying claim to novelty and a new beginning.

The new science of Bacon and Descartes, the transcendental philosophy of Kant, and the phenomenological method of Husserl all evince the characteristic feature of modernity incisively identified by Heidegger as setting themselves up as the new. These movements claim for themselves a totalizingly revolutionary status, signaled by a novel method that will sweep away the intellectual missteps of the past and provide something

²¹⁴ Hans Blumenberg calls this motif "a curiously anachronistic self-confidence that would be more at home at the beginning of our epoch" (*Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 54). This anachronism is why we mention Husserl in the same breath as Bacon, Descartes, and Kant. See also Paul S. MacDonald's comparison of Descartes's reaction to skepticism with Husserl's to psychologism and relativism (*Descartes and Husserl: The Philosophical Project of Radical Beginnings*, 23-61). One might also consult on this score (as MacDonald does not) Heidegger's argument that "Husserl...stands within the uniform, basic tendency of Cartesian research" (IPR 199/GA17 258).

²¹⁵ *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 257.

new in the form of the possibility of genuine, sometimes even certain, knowledge. I took care to explain and reconstruct this modern gesture because in these claims to newness, we map out a cluster of issues—method, certainty, epistemology—of central importance to Gadamer’s post-Heideggerian critique of modernity. The theme of novelty arises in the form of a new method for the acquisition of knowledge. My historical presentation will once again contextualize and motivate Gadamer’s reaction to these modern themes.

As far as I know, Gadamer never explicitly addresses the modern claim to novelty, so I will have to imaginatively reconstruct his response. But this task should not prove too difficult because—in addition to the proximity of this issue to epistemology and method, topics about which Gadamer is explicitly critical—here, as in his response to Heidegger’s other beginning (§2.3.2), Gadamer must appeal to his core understanding of our belongingness to and continuity with history. The modern gesture of beginning again and sweeping away the past denies precisely this belongingness, and it is on that basis that Gadamer must dispute this prominent feature of modern thought. Let us clarify how Gadamer would respond to modernity’s claim to begin again first with regard to the imagery used to describe that beginning. I emphasized the architectural metaphors Bacon and Descartes deployed. Here Gadamer would be provoked to disagreement, as a consideration of his account of architecture from *Truth and Method* makes clear:

The special importance of architecture for our inquiry is that it too displays the element of mediation without which a work of art has no real presence [*Gegenwärtigkeit*]. Thus even where the work is presented in a way other than through performance (which everyone knows belongs to its own present time), past and present are brought together in a work of art. That every work of art has its own world does not mean that when its original world is altered it has its own reality in an alienated aesthetic consciousness. Architecture teaches us this, for it belongs inalienably to its world [*Weltzugehörigkeit*]. (TM 150/GW1 162)

Buildings serve as paradigmatic works of art to the extent that they demonstrate how artworks can never be extricated or abstracted from, but rather must in fact always belong to, the world out of which they emerged. In architectural works, a mediation of past and present takes place. One crucial aspect of the world out of which a building emerges is its history—the past styles influential on the architect; the place and community where the building stands; the traditions and beliefs of the people who built and then dwell in it; the natural history of the landscape and materials out of which the building is composed; the preserving that must occur for its continued existence. That complex historical background constantly fuses with the ever-changing present—its occupants, the purposes to which it is put, its natural and human-made surroundings, the events happening in the community where it belongs—and thereby continually provides the building with its significance. The building's meaning is always in the process of being formed.

Gadamer's conception of architecture provides the resources, then, for a rejoinder to the modern ideal of a new beginning. Bacon, Descartes, Kant, and Husserl saw themselves as constructing new scientific and philosophical methods after demolishing the edifices of past thought. Thinking along with this architectural imagery points toward an immanent critique. Buildings emerge out of historical worlds. Even when they are built anew (like the intellectual innovations of modernity were to some extent), architectural works cannot wholly escape the weight of the past that provides the necessary background conditions for intelligibility. Modern thought, insofar as it claims a new beginning, fails to pay sufficient attention to the factors that historically condition its own emergence, preservation, and continuation. Gadamerian hermeneutics offers the necessary historical correctives that will enable a proper account of understanding.

The claim to build thinking completely anew amounts to an illegitimate denial of the effects of tradition on the present. Indeed, throughout the movements to begin again that we traced, we discern the will to violently overthrow tradition. These writers persistently claim that thinking starts over again without the input of the past, which in fact they treat as a roadblock to intellectual progress. But for Gadamer, tradition always positively enables rather than hinders understanding and cognition: “That which has been sanctioned by tradition and custom has an authority that is nameless, and our finite historical being is marked by the fact that the authority of what has been handed down to us—and not just what is clearly grounded—always has power over our attitudes and behavior” (TM 281/GW1 285). We understand precisely on the basis of, and not in spite of, the past. Whenever I understand, I do so on the basis of historically inherited contexts of significance and meaning: “In all understanding, whether we are expressly aware of it or not, the efficacy of history is at work” (TM 300/GW1 306). What I inherit from tradition positively enables me to start thinking with intellectual priorities as well as an inchoate but potent sense of intelligibility.²¹⁶ I can and will work with, and thereby mold and creatively transform, that inheritance, but my reception of past tradition always constitutes my unavoidable starting point. Without these inherited constellations of meaning and significance, I would be initially adrift and without direction. Even if I do break with the past in some significant ways, I can never split from it definitively.

This argument does not deny the possibility of genuine intellectual or artistic innovation, but it does place limits, in virtue of our finitude and placement within tradition, on claims such as the modern ones cited here to begin thinking with a clean

²¹⁶ James Risser expresses this point well: “What we are given over to is not a set of ideas but tradition...In tradition there is the element of belongingness” (*Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-reading Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 95).

slate. In as clear a denunciation of the modern claim to new thinking as he offers, Gadamer states, “The freedom of reflection, this presumed being-with-itself [*Bei-sich-selbst-sein*], does not occur at all in understanding, so much is understanding conditioned [*bestimmt*] at every moment by the historicity of experience” (PH 125/GW4 18-19). I can no more renounce tradition than I can overcome my own finitude. Indeed, for Gadamer, these two features of the human condition ultimately amount to the same thing. Against modern attempts at building a new edifice of thinking, Gadamer responds that there exists “the beginning [*Anfang*] which has never begun but which always already is. It grounds the indissoluble proximity of thinking and speaking and so survives the question concerning the beginning and the end of philosophy” (BEP 28/HE 207). He critically refers in this passage to Heidegger’s eschatological conception of the end of philosophy, but we can read him as gesturing toward all claims to completely end *or* begin intellectual activity. Such projects will always run aground of the persistent effects of tradition and the historical past on all understanding. We can never escape or outrun tradition. The error and excess of the founders of modernity, and those subsequently influenced by them, was to think that they somehow could.

§3.3: Retention of the Kantian transcendental

We just reconstructed and motivated Gadamer’s forceful critiques of two of modernity’s most important epistemic images, namely, method and a new beginning. When considered alongside his departure from modern epistemology, it may appear that Gadamer “helps us move toward a ‘postmodern’ form of thinking.”²¹⁷ As I already indicated in arguing that Gadamer invokes the epistemic (§3.1.2), however, Gadamer’s

²¹⁷ Richard E. Palmer, “Moving Beyond Modernity: The Contribution of Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics,” 160.

rejection of these themes stand alongside *his rehabilitation of guiding epistemic metaphors* that persist in his thought. The common denominator of what Gadamer criticizes in modernity is the scientific character of the modern age: The subject/object ontology of epistemology generalizes the model of a scientific experiment to all human agency; Cartesian method undergirds the ambition of natural science; and Bacon and Descartes reestablished scientific practice by sweeping away the Scholastic past. In critically emphasizing these themes, Gadamer follows Heidegger (see §2.2.3) in ascribing to natural science a foundational role in modernity: “What give us food for thought today is the fact that we live in a culture in which for centuries science has been a determinant factor” (GW10 209). But his critique of these foundational features of the modern age does not entail a rejection of everything that makes modernity’s epistemic focus distinctive. I will now motivate that suggestion by reconstructing how Kant serves as one of Gadamer’s touchstones for his critique of the scientific excesses of modernity.²¹⁸

Gadamer’s Kant functions as a prophetic voice against overestimating the power of reason and of science: “The wisdom of the enlightenment of our century has the same limit as that of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. This can be learned from Kant” (GW3 369). I will now explain what Gadamer means in aligning himself with Kant’s transcendental critique of the Enlightenment. When I say Gadamer retains the Kantian transcendental, I operate with a deliberately broad definition according to which *the transcendental* refers, as Sebastian Gardner puts it, to the fact that:

Kant’s deepest insight should not be identified with any specific epistemological or metaphysical doctrine, but rather concerns the fundamental standpoint and terms of reference of philosophical enquiry.

²¹⁸ On Gadamer and the Third Critique, see Theodore George, “Gadamer and German Idealism,” 54-62; and Gjesdal, *Gadamer and the Legacy of German Idealism*, 9-80. Dostal’s “Gadamer, Kant, and the Enlightenment” presages my framing of Gadamer’s retrieval of Kant in terms of his theoretical philosophy.

To take the transcendental turn is not to endorse any of Kant's specific teachings, but to accept that the Copernican revolution announced in the Preface of the *Critique of Pure Reason* sets philosophy on a new footing and constitutes the proper starting point of philosophical reflection.²¹⁹

Gadamer also liberally construes Kant's decisive influence in terms of its powerful and negative prescriptions against an excessive and undue faith in the speculative and dialectical power of reason: "[Kant's] position can rightly be understood only if it is seen in polemical opposition to the Enlightenment thinking of the time" (HRE 159/GW7 394). Kant established strict limitations on the operations of reason, inquiring into what lies within the purview of cognition, averring that his transcendental project "does not aim at the amplification of cognitions themselves but only at their correction, and [means] to supply the touchstone of the worth or worthlessness of all cognitions *a priori*" (CPR A12/B26). For Gadamer, then, Kant's most important contribution came in the form of his transcendental delimitation of the scope of human reason and of the range of our knowledge, as well as his prescriptions concerning what do and do not count as humanly intelligible questions. Gadamer's retention of the Kantian transcendental, which contains this crucially epistemological valence, recalls his invocation of the epistemic.

Kant's transcendental philosophy attempted to establish that cognition is limited to the application of pure concepts of the understanding to what gets received in sensible intuition, thus defining the conditions for the possibility of our experience of objects and, ultimately, proving the possibility of scientific knowledge. Following Gardner's formulation above, the most salient aspect of the transcendental project is not, however, the particular formula for cognition for which Kant argued, but rather the general project of setting limitations on the domain and scope of cognition:

²¹⁹ "Introduction: The Transcendental Turn," 1.

That the understanding, occupied merely with its empirical use, which does not reflect on the sources of its own cognition, may get along very well, but cannot accomplish one thing, namely, determining for itself the boundaries of its use and knowing what may lie within and what without its whole sphere; for to this end the deep inquiries we have undertaken are requisite. (CPR A238/B297)

The distinctive contribution of transcendental philosophy, then, is its attempt to determine the boundaries of what we are capable of knowing and of the use and scope of reason. In establishing a delimited sphere or domicile in which our thought finds itself at home, and setting limits beyond which we cannot safely traverse, Kant follows the modern tradition traced earlier of defining thinking in terms of architectural metaphors.²²⁰ The task of precisely demarcating the sphere of cognition both prevents us from clumsily and hopelessly exceeding the limitations to which human reason is necessarily subject, while also positively providing us with real confidence that, when we correctly delimit our cognitive activity, we will be capable of genuine knowledge.

Gadamer retains the Kantian transcendental in this sense of setting limits on reason and discovering conditions for the possibility of experience.²²¹ While other facets of Kant's philosophy (especially his aesthetics and ethics, as commentators emphasize) are also of great importance to Gadamer, I shall focus on the prominent place he assigns to Kant's First Critique and hence to his theoretical philosophy.²²² In an essay commemorating the two-hundredth anniversary of the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Gadamer frames his discussion with reference to Goethe's reaction to the French

²²⁰ On Kant's frequent employment of architectural metaphors, see Daniel L. Purdy's study, which argues that, "Instead of building with endless expense and pretension, [Kant] advocates an epistemologically modest, bourgeois house" (*On the Ruins of Babel: Architectural Metaphor in German Thought*, 6).

²²¹ This feature of his thought gets overlooked in Michael Friedman's judgment that Gadamer is "a worthy recent representative" of German Idealism, though that claim may be true in other respects ("Exorcising the Philosophical Tradition: Comments on John McDowell's *Mind and World*," 466-467).

²²² I do not follow here Warnke's claim that Gadamer's thinking is surprisingly consistent with the Enlightenment in general. See her *Gadamer*, 138 and 168.

Revolution: “Here and now begins a new epoch in the history of the world, and you can say that you were there” (GW4 336). Following this dramatic declaration, Gadamer asks: “Can we also say that about the event [*Ereignis*] of the *Critique*? That we were there? That we are there?” (GW4 348) Gadamer refers to Kant’s epochal shift in philosophical inquiry. When Gadamer calls the transcendental turn a major event in whose shadow we live, he signals his active commitment to the Kantian transcendental framework. In a discussion of the phenomenological approach that he adopted in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer explicitly aligns himself with Kant’s transcendental philosophy:

This fundamental methodical approach avoids implying any metaphysical conclusions...I have recorded my acceptance of Kant’s conclusions in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: I regard statements that proceed by wholly dialectical means from the finite to the infinite, from human experience to what exists in itself, from the temporal to the eternal, as doing no more than setting limits, and am convinced that philosophy can derive no actual knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] from them. (TM xxxiii/GW2 446)²²³

Here Gadamer sounds an avowedly Kantian note in claiming not to exceed limitations on metaphysical knowledge.²²⁴ Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics thus takes one of its points of departure from Kantian strictures on philosophical activity. Elsewhere, referring now to dialectical approaches to philosophy, Gadamer again claims Kant as his touchstone: “I contend...that we have learned once and for all from Kant that such ‘obvious’ ways of thought can mediate no possible knowledge to us finite beings. Dependence on possible experience [*Erfahrung*] and demonstration by means of it remains the alpha and omega of all responsible thought” (PH 172/GW3 141). Gadamer’s hermeneutics does not exceed transcendental conditions for the possibility of experience. This Kantian conception of philosophy implies the impossibility of speculative

²²³ On the contentious issue of Heidegger’s relation to transcendental thought, see the essays collected in Steven Crowell and Jeff Malpas, eds., *Transcendental Heidegger*.

²²⁴ On this passage, see also Paul Redding, *Hegel’s Hermeneutics*, 45, 245.

metaphysics: “The real justification, not only of moral philosophy but of philosophy at all [*überhaupt*]...consists in this: for thinking beings the use of reason is always in need of critique. In theorizing it serves to prevent falling prey to the transcendental appearance that seduces one into the errors of metaphysics” (HRE 109-110/GW4 208). Gadamer’s thought decidedly dwells within the sphere of Kant’s transcendental turn by not exceeding its prescribed boundaries. For Gadamer, Kant’s First Critique signaled an epochal world event because it assigned to “responsible” philosophical thinking certain tasks it must fulfill (accounting for its own boundaries), and certain limits it cannot exceed (conditions for the possibility of experience). Gadamer’s allegiance to this transcendental framework runs so deeply in his philosophy that he does not always explicitly credit Kant himself with this insight. “It is a universal truth,” he confidently asserts as only a committed post-Kantian could, “that human imperfection precludes adequate knowledge *a priori* and that experience [*Erfahrung*] is indispensable” (TM 416/GW1 420). In these passages, Gadamer brandishes his Kantian credentials.

Gadamer’s commitment to Kant’s theoretical philosophy does not consist, however, only in negative admonitions and the establishment of limitations. It implies positive dimensions for Gadamer’s thinking as well. He indicates as much when he proposes a provocative analogy between his hermeneutics and Kant’s thought:

[Kant] asked a philosophical question: What are the conditions of our knowledge, by virtue of which modern science is possible, and how far does it extend? The following investigation also asks a philosophical question in the same sense. But it does not ask it only of the so-called humanities (which would give precedence to certain traditional disciplines). Neither does it ask it only of science and its modes of experience, but of all human experience of the world and human living [*Welterfahrung und Lebenspraxis*]. It asks (to put it in Kantian terms): How is understanding possible? (TM xxvii/GW2 439)

Gadamer declares that, far from only meekly dwelling behind Kantian boundaries against metaphysical speculation and only refusing to disobey Kant's prescriptions, he in fact seeks boldly and positively to establish conditions of possibility that have not yet been found. In this quest to discover the transcendental justification for the humanities, and hence for understanding more generally, we see again how Gadamer follows Kant's transcendental example. But we must also distinguish Gadamer's transcendental project from a closely related one, namely, Dilthey's. Dilthey attempted to write a *Critique of Historical Reason* on the model of Kant's validation of the natural sciences in the First Critique that would elevate the *Geisteswissenschaften* to the same cognitive stature as natural science. Gadamer heaps scorn on this broadly Diltheyan precedent:

As if when Kant raised the *quaestio iuris* he intended to prescribe what the pure natural sciences ought to be, rather than to justify their transcendental possibility as they already were. In the sense of this Kantian distinction, to think beyond the concept of method in the humanities, as my book attempts, is to ask the question of the "possibility" of the humanities (which certainly does not mean what they really ought to be!). (TM 513/GW2 394)

In this fascinating moment, Gadamer reads Kant's transcendental philosophy as a phenomenological justification of the already existing activity of natural science, in the same way that his own hermeneutics claims to phenomenologically describe the true practice of the humanities, even when humanists themselves see the ground of their activity in more methodologically oriented ways. Both Gadamer and Kant describe the existing and immanent practices of the intellectual fields that are their respective subject matters, rather than externally and clumsily prescribing how those disciplines ought to comport themselves in a future or ideal situation, as Gadamer claims Dilthey did.²²⁵

²²⁵ Objecting to Gadamer's argument in this passage, Lawrence Hinman correctly points out that Kant wanted not only to describe what the natural sciences in fact do, but also to prescribe against extending the

Gadamer sees in Kant's justification of knowledge in the natural sciences in the First Critique a precursor to his own phenomenological validation of the humanities. Both thinkers describe the conditions for the possibility of knowledge in their disciplines, and hence they provide intellectual justifications for those fields at a time when they find themselves in crisis and badly in need of validation—either because of the rising tide of skepticism and atheism, as in Kant's case, or because of the erosion of the reputation of the humanities, as in Gadamer's. And just as Kant, in his engagement with natural science, discovered the conditions for the possibility of experience in general, so too does Gadamer search for the conditions for the possibility of understanding *at all* (“*überhaupt*,” to adopt a Kantian expression Gadamer significantly employed in a passage quoted earlier) from his starting point in the humanistic disciplines. Kant's transcendental model provides Gadamer's hermeneutics with this goal of describing how the hermeneutical phenomena of the arts and humanities enable us to know. The exclusion of knowledge from the purview of Gadamerian hermeneutics by commentators such as Di Cesare and Taylor obviates this Kantian feature of his work.

Kant's transcendental philosophy also provides Gadamer with another point of inspiration concerning a confrontation with what Gadamer refers to as the “bad Enlightenment [*schlechten Aufklärung*]” (GW4 64). On Gadamer's analysis, Kant, often considered the paradigmatic Enlightenment thinker who provided the classical definition of that term, stands opposed to the worst excesses of Enlightenment modernity. Kant stands against the “bad Enlightenment” precisely because of his transcendental curbing of

concepts of the understanding beyond the limits of possible experience (“Quid Facti or Quid Juris? The Fundamental Ambiguity of Gadamer's Understanding of Hermeneutics,” 528). I hope to have shown that Gadamer is well aware of this Kantian theme. On Gadamer's purportedly anti-Kantian stance, see also Makkreel, *Orientation and Judgment in Hermeneutics*, 35-43.

speculative and dialectical thinking, cognitive acts about which the earlier Enlightenment, based in the exciting achievements of the Scientific Revolution that inspired faith in the power of human reason, felt sanguine and unjustified confidence. Gadamer defines this bad Enlightenment of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries as valorizing “theory independent of practice” (GW4 61). Kant’s transcendental delimitation of human reason, and consequent elevation of practical reason, put a stop to the excessive and naïve faith in reason characteristic of the Enlightenment in this earlier and “bad” sense: “Since Rousseau and Kant, this idol of the Enlightenment is over” (GW4 36).²²⁶ Because of Kant’s emphasis on the “critical consciousness of the limits of our human reason,” Gadamer argues that Kant provided the necessary counterweight to this extreme early-Enlightenment faith in rationality: “Kant’s critique of ‘theoretical’ reason is still a valid argument against all attempts to put technique in the place of praxis and to exchange the rationality of our planning, the certainty of our calculations, and the reliability of our predictions for what we are capable of knowing with unconditional certainty” (HW 59/GW3 221). Kant’s attack on the excesses of the Enlightenment functions as a precursor to Gadamer’s critique of the encroachment of theoretical science beyond its purview. Kant presciently saw the dangers of scientific rationality run amuck in making cognitively excessive claims—for example, about the world as a totality, or using scientific claims as a ground for morality—removed from the practical lifeworld and inattentive to the limits of the conditions for the possibility of experience. Gadamer enlists Kant as his surprising forerunner in opposing scientism, which we shall explore by delineating his hermeneutical investment in modern guiding epistemic metaphors.

²²⁶ Here Gadamer’s reading is consonant with that of Onora O’Neill, who argues that Kant “offers an account of what it is to vindicate reason quite different from the foundationalist account that critics of ‘the Enlightenment project’ target, and usually attribute to Kant” (“Vindicating Reason,” 281).

Gadamer derives enormous inspiration from Kant's transcendental turn. While he does not accept the transcendental subject or ego often identified with Kant, Gadamer follows the transcendental admonition not to exceed the conditions for the possibility of experience by indulging in speculative or dialectical metaphysics. Hence, he follows the negative prescriptions of Kantian transcendental philosophy. Gadamer also positively conceives his thought on analogy with Kant's in two senses. First, Gadamer's investigation into the conditions for the possibility of understanding and his validation of the cognitive achievements of the humanities follow the structure of Kant's discovery of the conditions for the possibility of experience through inquiring into the activity of natural science. Second, Kant's critique of Enlightenment faith in reason serves as an exemplar for Gadamer's arguments about the limits of scientific rationality. Gadamer accepts, in broad outline, one of modernity's characteristic epistemic frameworks.

In a discussion from 1963 of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, Heidegger writes, "Both terms, 'subjectivity' and 'transcendental,' show that 'phenomenology' consciously and decidedly moved into the tradition of modern [*neuzeitlichen*] philosophy" (T&B 77/GA14 96). In aligning his hermeneutics with transcendental philosophy, Gadamer signals, as Heidegger reads Husserl as having done, his proximity to modern philosophy. Gadamer's frank endorsement of elements of Kantian transcendental philosophy indicates his *investment in modernity's pervasive and thoroughgoing epistemic themes and motifs*, to which we now turn. My argument shall move, then, from Gadamer's critique of the scientific characteristics of modernity to his positive rehabilitation of metaphors that express certain epistemic concepts.

§3.4: Guiding epistemic metaphors

§3.4.1: Humanism

Gadamer rejects the modern age's conceptual roots in natural science, but departs from Heidegger in refusing to abandon modernity's epistemic orientation. That framework will guide my outline of Gadamer's rehabilitation of a family of modern guiding epistemic metaphors. The first such guiding metaphor I shall consider is humanism. Gadamer's discussion of humanism in *Truth and Method* counts among his distinctive philosophical achievements, not least because of its departure from Heidegger's critique of humanism. Opening his *magnum opus* with a treatment of humanism's "guiding concepts" of *Bildung*, *sensus communis*, judgment, and taste, and declaring his central project to be the validation of the arts and humanities, made Gadamer identifiable with a distinctive humanistic spirit, as Jean Grondin recounts: "He had been the last witness of an era, of a world based on the values of humanism, not on the spirit of technology that so permeates modern civilization. That he was still alive represented something like a hope that another type of culture, of grandeur, was still possible."²²⁷ Evoking this humanistic heritage in his obituary for his erstwhile rival, Jacques Derrida movingly dubbed Gadamer "my Cicero," thereby associating Gadamer with the classical erudition and eloquence characteristic of the humanistic tradition.²²⁸ Commentators have interpreted Gadamer's defense of humanism in terms of his departure from Heidegger, his ethical orientation, and his views of classical antiquity.²²⁹ Here, though, I will underscore the particularly epistemic valence

²²⁷ *Gadamer: A Biography*, 337. Relevant also in this regard is Rorty's celebration of what he terms "a Gadamerian culture" ("Being That Can Be Understood Is Language," 28-29).

²²⁸ "Wie recht er hatte! Mein Cicerone Hans-Georg Gadamer," 41.

²²⁹ On Gadamer's humanism as a critique of Heidegger, see Grondin, "Gadamer on Humanism," 161; George emphasizes the ethical valence of Gadamer's humanism ("The Responsibility to Understand," 103);

of Gadamer's humanistic orientation, which I shall argue places him in a modern tradition that appealed to and revived ancient Pyrrhonian skepticism by emphasizing the limits and finitude of human knowledge, and which also refuses to identify knowledge only with the results of the natural sciences.

To set the stage for Gadamer's treatment of humanism, let us first consider Heidegger's understanding of the concept to appreciate this contrast between the two thinkers. In his 1946 "Letter on 'Humanism,'" Heidegger brands humanism as a metaphysically essentialist and reductionistic understanding of human beings: "The first, Roman humanism, and every kind that has emerged from that time to the present, has presupposed the most universal 'essence' of the human being to be obvious" (P 245/GA9 322). Heidegger characterizes humanism as imposing a definition of what it means to be human—such as the classical doctrine of human beings as rational animals—that also finds itself unable to ask the primordial question of how humanity relates to being: "In defining the humanity of the human being, humanism not only does not ask about the relation of being to the essence of the human being; because of its metaphysical origin humanism even impedes the question by neither recognizing nor understanding it" (P 245/GA9 321). In its unquestioned assumptions about an unchanging human essence, and its consequent blindness to the question of how humanity stands in relation to being, humanism gets caught up inextricably with Western metaphysics. Heidegger articulates the radical thesis that humanism is at its core metaphysically essentialist.

As scholars like Ernesto Grassi and Karsten Harries have persuasively argued, Heidegger's characterization of humanism in many respects lacks historical rigor and

and Rocco Rubini harshly criticizes Gadamer's "disembodied and apathetic characterization" of humanism ("Petrarchan Hermeneutics between [and beyond] Gadamer and Betti," 370).

specificity.²³⁰ He does not clearly delineate the historical development of humanism, nor does he adequately distinguish among its different conceptual forms.²³¹ Precisely because of its sweeping and one-sided character, though, his critique has had an enormously negative impact on the reception of humanism in Continental European philosophy, which has been marked by its predominantly antihumanistic orientation. One scholar of Renaissance humanism underscores how “Gadamer may count among the few Continental philosophers not to have shared in Heidegger’s unwarranted antihumanism.”²³² As Theodore George has suggested, when Gadamer invokes humanism, he cannot have in mind the object of Heidegger’s critique—namely, the metaphysical assumption of a human essence—no matter how historically or conceptually distorted Heidegger’s characterization may have been.²³³ Despite his subtle but insistent contestation of elements of Heidegger’s thought, Gadamer never dismisses or rejects any of Heidegger’s insights. Yet it is also typical of his responses to Heidegger to demand a more sensitive treatment of a topic about which Heidegger is so sharply critical. Gadamer’s understanding of humanism exemplifies this pattern. In that vein, I will now emphasize one particular valence or register of Gadamer’s commitment to humanism as an expression of *the character of human knowledge*, a conception that I shall argue does not fall under the heading of Heidegger’s critique.

²³⁰ Grassi argues that Heidegger’s ignorance of and hostility to Italian Renaissance humanism meant that he missed the connections between that tradition and his own treatments of poetry and language (*Heidegger and the Question of Renaissance Humanism: Four Studies*, 50). Harries echoes Grassi’s assessment (“The Antinomy of Being: Heidegger’s Critique of Humanism,” 180).

²³¹ For an attempt to provide a genealogy of different forms of humanism from a broadly Heideggerian perspective, see David E. Cooper, *The Measure of Things: Humanism, Humility, and Mystery*, 7-17.

²³² Rubini, *The Other Renaissance: Italian Humanism Between Hegel and Heidegger*, 179. See also Donald Phillip Verene, “Gadamer and Vico on Sensus Communis and the Tradition of Humane Knowledge,” 142.

²³³ “The Responsibility to Understand,” 105.

What are the historical roots of Gadamer's humanism? We hear a hint as to an answer in Derrida's reference to Gadamer as "my Cicero." Modern humanism originates in the Renaissance engagement with Europe's classical past. In one of the few historically precise passages from the "Letter on 'Humanism,'" Heidegger recognized this fact: "We encounter the first humanism in Rome: it therefore remains in essence a specifically Roman phenomenon, which emerges from the encounter of Roman civilization with the culture of late Greek civilization. The so-called Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Italy is a *renascentia romanitatis*" (P 244/GA9 320). I will now adduce two precedents from the Renaissance humanist tradition for Gadamer's epistemically oriented humanism. Though that tradition predates the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century to which Gadamer and Heidegger assign so much importance, we can follow Hans Blumenberg in seeing the Renaissance as on the "threshold" of, or enabling and anticipating, the modern age.²³⁴ In treating Renaissance humanism as the development of a "hermeneutics of intimacy," Kathy Eden pointed to connections between Erasmus and Montaigne with Gadamer.²³⁵ I will now draw my own, but similar, such connections. In 1511, Erasmus articulates the humanistic attitude toward knowledge when he calls "man...the most unfortunate of animals, simply because all the others were content with their natural limitations while man alone tries to step outside those allotted to him" (PF 54). Crucial to the Renaissance humanist tradition was this emphasis on the irreducible finitude and fallibility of all human cognitive capacities.²³⁶ Human beings have a proper cognitive domain to which we are suited and beyond which

²³⁴ Blumenberg defines the "threshold" of modernity in the context of his discussion of Nicholas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno (*The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 469).

²³⁵ *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Intimacy*, 4-10, 86-89.

²³⁶ See Thomas Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought*, 127-128.

we should not travel, as Erasmus underscores: “It’s a true sign of prudence not to want wisdom which extends beyond your share as an ordinary mortal” (PF 45). There exist modes of knowing appropriate to the human way of being.

With the advent of the new science’s mathematical methods and models applicable to nature, this humanistic attitude of epistemic humility receded in favor of a startling new confidence in the power of human reason. As an example of this faith in reason, I quoted in Chapter 1 Descartes’s epochal pronouncement from the 1637 *Discourse on Method* that the new science would make us “the lords and masters of nature” (CSM I 143). For Descartes, reason, far from weak and assigning us only to a particular area beyond which we cannot stray, allows us to conquer heretofore alien and hostile domains. But in 1580, Montaigne heaps scorn on this overestimation of reason that half a century later would seem so obvious to Descartes: “Is it possible to imagine anything more laughable than that this pitiful, wretched creature—who is not even master of himself, but exposed to shocks on every side—should call himself Master and Emperor of a universe, the smallest particle of which he has no means of knowing, let alone swaying!” (ARS 12) Montaigne signals himself a member of the humanistic tradition in his profound skepticism about the efficacy of human reason, and suggests that human beings be more epistemically humble: “Man, stripped of all human learning and so all the more able to lodge the divine within him, annihilating his intellect to make room for faith...He is a blank writing-tablet, made ready for the finger of God to carve such letters on him as he pleases” (ARS 74). Renaissance humanists like Erasmus and Montaigne powerfully articulate a vision of the irreducible finitude, natural limitations, and vulnerability to error and confusion endemic to human thinking.

Montaigne's reference to "annihilating [man's] intellect to make room for faith" anticipates Kant's avowal in the First Critique "to deny **knowledge** in order to make room for **faith**" (CPR Bxxx).²³⁷ Delimiting or critiquing human reason engenders confidence in its proper as opposed to erroneous usage. We find the motivation for Gadamer's rehabilitation of humanism, then, in his retention of the Kantian transcendental framework. Crucial to Gadamer's allegiance to Kant's transcendental philosophy was, as we have seen, the delimitation of the pretensions of reason that Kant forced responsible thinking to undertake. The Renaissance humanist tradition also made the finitude of human cognition one of the credos of philosophy. Gadamer's humanism should not be identified, then, only with ancient Greek predecessors. To the extent that Gadamer rehabilitates humanism, he places this transcendental humility about the finitude and fallibility of human reason at the center of his thought.²³⁸ Once read in light of this Kantian and epistemic background, we should interpret Gadamer's post-Heideggerian allegiance to humanism against this distinctively modern background.

Against Enlightenment optimism about reason, Gadamer professes "a deep skepticism about the fantastic overestimation [*die unwirkliche Überschätzung*] of reason by comparison to the affections that motivate the human mind" (TM 570/GW2 466). Indeed, Gadamer claims that the crucial insight of twentieth-century philosophy as a whole was this recognition of the limits of reason: "What seems to me to be the most hidden and yet the most powerful foundation of our century is its skepticism over against

²³⁷ I owe this insight to Mary Domski's Spring 2017 course on Early Modern Philosophy. On continuities between the Renaissance and Kant, see the erudite study by David Summers, *The Judgment of Sense: Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of Aesthetics*, 106-108. Stephen Toulmin overstates what he sees as the dramatic differences between what he calls the humanist and rationalist phases of the modern age, exemplified by Montaigne and Descartes (*Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, 43-44). Like Blumenberg, however, Toulmin sees the Renaissance as continuous with modernity.

²³⁸ Grondin elliptically makes a similar point at "Gadamer on Humanism," 166.

all dogmatism, including the dogmatism of science” (PH 129/GW4 22).²³⁹ These invocations of skepticism against dogmatism—that is, renouncing as opposed to claiming certainty—recall the sixteenth-century skeptical humanism of Erasmus and Montaigne. So too does Gadamer’s meditation on our ineluctable ignorance concerning religious issues: “Again and again I conclude: *ignoramus* is our function. That is what is correct, and so the idea of knowing about the afterlife is really not a human question” (HR 59). Instead of pretending, in religion or in natural science, to high levels of knowledge that lie beyond our finite comprehension and capacities, Gadamer’s hermeneutics orients us to the historical conditionedness of human reason: “*To be historically* [Geschichtlichsein] *means that knowing oneself* [Sichwissen] *can never be completed*” (TM 301/GW1 307). Human knowledge is unavoidably limited in virtue of the natural constraints on our capacities and the historical conditions we can never escape and to which, in our finitude, we are always cognitively and existentially subject. This insight lies at the heart of Gadamer’s thought, as he underscores in his declaration of “a new anthropology [Anthropologie], which mediates in a new way between the mind of humankind [Geist des Menschen] in its finitude and the divine infinity. Here what we have called the hermeneutical experience finds its own, special ground” (TM 427/GW1 432). This demarcation between divine and human understanding is also reminiscent of the Renaissance humanists, as Montaigne shows again: “I make men feel the emptiness, the vanity, the nothingness of Man, wrenching from their grasp the sickly arms of human reason, making them bow their heads and bite the dust before the authority and awe of

²³⁹ Wachterhauser construes Gadamer as an enemy of skepticism, that is, of abandoning the possibility of knowledge in the face of an impossibly high cognitive standard (“Getting It Right,” 69-70). My sense of skepticism, which follows the modern humanists, means rather condemning dogmatism. See Richard Popkin’s classic discussion of the skepticism of Erasmus versus the dogmatism of Luther in the sixteenth-century “rule of faith” controversy (*The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*, 7-16).

the Divine Majesty” (ARS 12). Gadamer’s strong allegiance to the finitude and limitations of human reason firmly places him within the lineage of Renaissance humanism as well as of Kantian transcendental philosophy.

We should read Gadamer’s rehabilitation of humanism in this epistemic register. Our analysis clarifies Gadamer’s profession of an epistemically charged humanism in light of the theme running throughout his work of curtailing optimism about reason. He introduces his analysis of humanism with reference to the encroachment by natural science into other domains of culture: “It is to the humanistic tradition that we must turn. In its resistance to the claims of modern science it gains a new significance” (TM 16/GW1 23). Gadamer appeals to humanism, then, because its “mode of knowledge [*Erkenntnisweise*]” predates the development of natural science in the seventeenth century, while the humanistic disciplines crucially persisted within modernity, though their autonomy and validity eroded as natural science became our culture’s dominant standard of truth (TM 17/GW1 24). The humanistic tradition emphasized human fallibility and finitude, while advocating the attainment of classical wisdom as “knowledge of things human and divine.”²⁴⁰ For Gadamer, the salience of this humanistic mode of knowing comes in the form of its critique of the faith in reason characteristic of modern natural science, as well as in its advocacy of the “humanities’ claim to know something true [*der Wahrheitsanspruch geisteswissenschaftlicher Erkenntnis*]” (TM 21/GW1 29). Rather than naively believing that knowledge requires only beginning inquiry with a clean slate, with nothing other than the proper method, the modern humanistic tradition emphasizes “the epistemological priority of the human-made world of history” (TM 217/GW1 226). The irreducible historicity of humanistic knowledge and

²⁴⁰ See Verene, *Knowledge of Things Human and Divine: Vico’s New Science and Finnegans Wake*, 71-87.

understanding entails accepting “the truth claim of traditionary materials,” that is, of historical texts, cultural artifacts, and the whole tradition of their reception (TM 36/GW1 46). To the extent that human beings are capable of knowledge, we must accept and attempt to properly understand the factual and historical conditions to which we are cognitively subject. This humanistic humility about human understanding suggests that Gadamerian humanism may also bear comparison with recent attempts in feminist philosophy to situate human corporeal vulnerability within a “hesitant” humanistic register.²⁴¹ Gadamer’s treatment of the “guiding concepts of humanism” attempts, then, to point us toward appreciating our epistemic limitations and their positive role in the humanities and in human life more generally.

Gadamer’s recovery of humanism involves two epistemic claims: That human reason is irreducibly finite and limited, which natural science does not sufficiently appreciate, while at the same time enabled and activated in a limited but real sense by the humanistic disciplines. In arguing for these claims, Gadamer aligns himself with humanism. Though this tradition traces its roots to classical antiquity, its endurance within the modern age renders it of particular relevance for Gadamer’s contestation of the excesses of natural science. Gadamer retains the guiding metaphor of the humanistic disciplines as genuinely knowing something true; his eloquent emphasis on the humanity of our knowledge, and opposition to scientism, expresses the humanistic tradition’s concept of knowledge. Though modern natural science has marginalized this idea, its justification ultimately derives from the modern humanistic tradition that Gadamer revives. What Gadamer rehabilitates from humanism also escapes Heidegger’s totalizing rejection, which construed humanism as an essentializing conception of what it means to

²⁴¹ See Ann V. Murphy, “Corporeal Vulnerability and the New Humanism,” 588-589.

be human. For Gadamer, meanwhile, humanism means the abjuring of all claims to certainty by embracing the historicity of our human finitude.

§3.4.2: Experience

Themes from Gadamer's rehabilitation of humanism surface in his treatment of experience. What is the essential connection between modernity and experience? In his meticulous intellectual history of the concept, Martin Jay points toward an answer: "It was not really until the dawning of what we now like to call the modern age that the 'trial' of experience...ended in an acquittal for the defendant, or more precisely, with a hung jury that continues to debate its merits to this day."²⁴² According to Jay, appeals to the foundational and grounding validity of experience served a crucial role in the epistemological and scientific theories of the Early Modern Period. One need only think of the opening line of the 1787 introduction to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*: "There is no doubt whatever that all our cognition begins with experience [*Erfahrung*]" (CPR B1). Kant acknowledges the crucial insight of the classical empiricism of Locke and Hume—namely, the centrality of experience for knowledge—while going beyond them in seeking to discover within pure reason the conditions for the possibility of experience. Even Descartes, allegedly the *a priori* rationalist par excellence, does justice to experience, not only in his attentive analysis of our first-personal experience of the phenomenal force of clear and distinct ideas, but also in his scorn for "those philosophers who take no account of experience and think that truth will spring from their brains like Minerva from the head of Jupiter" (CSM I 20-21). Heidegger also lends support to Jay's assessment of the prominence of experience in the intellectual movements of the modern age when he

²⁴² *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*, 19.

refers to those “guiding notions which, under the names ‘expression,’ ‘lived-experience [Erlebnis],’ and ‘consciousness,’ determine modern [*moderne*] thinking” (OWL 36/GA12 123). To the extent that it names a conscious subject’s relationship to external objects, “experience” evidently lies at the very heart of modern philosophy and science.

Gadamer presents his understanding of experience, in a chapter in *Truth and Method* that he later claims to “in fact regard as the centerpiece of the whole book,” via a critical dialogue with modern scientific theories of experience (GIC 53/GIG 32). I shall argue that, despite his critique of modern treatments of experience, the way he retains that concept as central to his thinking betrays residues of the modern guiding epistemic metaphor of experience. Let us first reconstruct Gadamer’s departure from modern science’s treatment of experience. In *Truth and Method*, he develops that critique through a reading of Bacon’s concept of experience in the *Novum Organon*.²⁴³ Thus his discussion of experience arises in the context of his criticisms of epistemology and scientific method (§§3.3.1-3.2). Bacon’s prescriptions for scientific investigation, which I present to validate Gadamer’s reading, requires initially beginning with sense experience and then proceeding to establish principles on the basis of inductive generalizations. Gadamer emphasizes that, for Bacon, raw experience is alone insufficient for the scientific pursuit of knowledge. Instead, experience must be governed and regulated by methodological rules that will correctly produce objective knowledge: “What the sciences need is a form of induction which takes experience apart and analyzes it, and forms necessary conclusions on the basis of appropriate exclusions and rejections” (NO 17).

²⁴³ In addition to Bacon, Gadamer’s two other interlocutors on experience are Hegel and Aeschylus. Given my focus on Gadamer’s relation to Early Modern Philosophy, I shall leave aside his fascinating readings of those two writers, but for helpful summaries, see Marino, *Gadamer and the Limits of the Modern Techno-Scientific Civilization*, 192; and Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*, 86.

Bacon's focus on the methodological production of objective knowledge leads Gadamer to criticize his concept of experience as "an epistemological schematization that, for me, truncates its [experience's] original meaning" (TM 341/GW1 352). Bacon intended for his scientific method to structure and control experience to result in knowledge. Consequently, he disdains "the waves and windings of chance and casual, unregulated experience" (NO 67). Bacon truncates experience in the sense of conceiving of it solely in terms of how it can be regulated and controlled for the purpose of scientific knowledge. Gadamer elaborates: "It is the claim of science to overcome...the contingency of subjective experience [*Erfahrung*] through objective knowledge [*Erkenntnis*]" (H&T 38/GW2 49).²⁴⁴ From the point of view of natural science, represented by Bacon, experience on its own can only appear unduly chaotic. But once it gets ordered and structured by methodological rules that produce objective knowledge, experience becomes the necessary *sine qua non* of scientific practice.²⁴⁵

Bacon situated his new method for the natural sciences against the Aristotelian–Scholastic program for intellectual inquiry, which sought final causes in nature. Given this well-known feature of the historical development of Bacon's thought, it may sound shocking when Gadamer refers to "the teleological aspect which dominates this question [of experience] for Bacon" (TM 344/GW1 355). But Gadamer finds his motivation for calling the Baconian concept of experience excessively teleological in the fact that, for Bacon, "experience is related exclusively teleologically to the truth that is derived from it" (TM 342/GW1 353). In other words, Bacon thinks experience only counts as scientifically valid and relevant when it gets ordered toward the goal of producing

²⁴⁴ All quotations from Gadamer henceforth that include "experience" shall be renderings of "*Erfahrung*."

²⁴⁵ On this historical development, see Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 29.

objective knowledge. Gadamer readily concedes that this modern–Baconian conception “has a foundation in fact,” by which he means that sometimes we actually do orient our experience in such a way as to produce methodologically prescribed results (TM 342/GW1 353). Gadamer’s critique of Bacon recalls, then, Heidegger’s phenomenological critique of modern epistemology (§3.1.1): While we do sometimes find ourselves subjects standing against objects, just as occasionally we do specifically order and structure our experience so as to produce objective knowledge, these scenarios cannot accurately depict human experience first of all and most of the time. Bacon’s modern scientific theory of experience is not false, but rather “one-sided” (TM 344/GW1 355). Here we should also recall Gadamer’s treatment of method (§3.2.1): He rejects not method entirely, but rather Cartesian method’s particular encroachment beyond its proper, but limited, purview. Similarly, Gadamer rejects the Baconian theory of experience only insofar as it erroneously purports to describe experience in general: “The experimental sciences [*Erfahrungswissenschaften*] only grant space to an experience if they can obtain from it methodically guaranteed answers to questions. But on the whole, our life is not like this. Our lives are not lived according to scientifically guaranteed programs and secure from crises” (GIC 53/GIG 32). Gadamer rejects the modern–Baconian concept of experience as phenomenologically inaccurate.

Gadamer’s critique of the scientific concept of experience raises the question of how he thinks experience should be positively described. There we find Gadamer surprisingly retaining elements of conceptions of experience from early modernity. Gadamer characterizes experience as above all “a process. In fact, this process is essentially negative” (TM 347/GW1 359). Far from the structured experiments prescribed

by natural science to produce objective knowledge, human experience first of all and most of the time means rather an open-ended encounter with what surprises us. For this reason, Gadamer emphasizes the negativity of experience.²⁴⁶ To experience something means meeting the unexpected and lacking foresight into what exactly will happen next: “Experience is initially always experience of negation: something is not what we supposed it to be” (TM 349/GW1 360). He insists that experience thus means the frustration of our previous suppositions. Only when reality or circumstances push back against our expectations, and we have to some extent lost control of a situation, do we have a genuine experience: “Every experience worthy of the name thwarts an expectation” (TM 350/GW1 362). Without this negative quality, experience depends too heavily on our control and impositions. Experience requires something happening to us, as Heidegger emphasized in 1959: “To undergo an experience [*Erfahrung*] with something—be it a thing, a person, or a god—means that this something befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms us and transforms us. When we talk of ‘undergoing’ an experience, we mean specifically that the experience is not of our own making” (OWL 57/GA12 149). Genuine experiences, which go beyond the interiority of subjective consciousness, exceed our control. For example, I genuinely experience what a city is like when I wander through it aimlessly and without a specific goal, as opposed to approaching that same city according to a specific itinerary recommended to me by a travel expert. When the city frustrates my expectations—when I have a negative experience—I genuinely experience the city.

²⁴⁶ For a good discussion of this theme, see Chris Lawn, “Adventures of Self-Understanding: Gadamer, Oakeshott and the Question of Education,” 269-270.

Insofar as negative results prove salient for the experimental sciences, Bacon recognized this aspect of experience too, as Gadamer concedes: “Only through negative instances do we acquire new experiences, as Bacon saw” (TM 350/GW1 362). But the scientific–Baconian concept of experience, which designs experiments to maximally remove the possibility of chance, misses the open-ended element, likened by Gadamer to a process without an endpoint or goal, essential to genuine experience: “The truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience; for experience itself can never be science [*Wissenschaft*]” (TM 349/GW1 361). Negative experiences prove relevant for Bacon only insofar as they serve the teleological end of scientific knowledge, while experience as a process of thwarted expectations has no endpoint. Gadamer characterizes the Baconian concept of experience as one-sided, not false. First of all and most of the time, human experience means surprise and encountering the unexpected. Unlike scientific experiments, experience in this sense lacks a structure or a goal.

This emphasis on ubiquitous disappointment may make the Gadamerian phenomenology of experience sound disturbingly Sisyphian, as if experience meant only endless frustration. But the same insight can be more positively gleaned from Eugen Fink’s account of an enchanted experience: “As long as we are enthused, enraptured by human beings or things, as long as we see them with the eyes of love, they are, as it were, transfigured, elevated, glowing with a deep significance; we are as though affected by a spell, struck by a more secret beam.”²⁴⁷ Experience on Gadamer’s analysis means genuine openness to whatever we encounter, no matter how surprising or unexpected. Fink calls this element of experience looking at things with eyes of love that allow us to open ourselves up to what we encounter in experience. In this essential element of

²⁴⁷ *Play as Symbol of the World and Other Writings*, 108.

openness and acceptance of the unexpected, as opposed to structuring a scenario for a particular scientific goal, we return to themes from Gadamer's analysis of humanism.

For example, Gadamer argues that his concept of experience implies the traditionally modern distinction between dogmatism and skepticism. He refers to the "readiness for experience [*Erfahrungsbereitschaft*] that distinguishes the experienced man from the man captivated by dogma" (TM 355/GW1 367-368). He juxtaposes the openness characteristic of genuine experience, our readiness to encounter the new and surprising, with dogmatism. When we are open to new and surprising experiences, we renounce dogmatic claims to certainty: "The experienced person proves to be... someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and has learned from, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them" (TM 350/GW1 361). Experience positively teaches us something, providing the ground for genuine human knowledge, fallible and limited as it is. Someone who has learned from past experience and is open to further experiences will not close themselves off to new encounters by inflexibly or dogmatically claiming certainty. The opposition to dogmatism paradigmatic of genuine experience, reminiscent of humanistic skepticism, is essential to Gadamer's understanding of the idea: "But being experienced does not mean that one now knows something once and for all and becomes rigid in this knowing [*Wissen*]; rather, one becomes more open to new experiences. A person who is experienced is undogmatic. Experience has the effect of freeing one to be open to experience" (GIC 52-53/GIG 31-32). Gadamer's emphasis on the openness of genuine experience, as opposed to the dogmatism of closing oneself off from new experiences, recalls the proximity of his thinking to anti-dogmatic skeptical humanism. And his claim

on behalf of experience's positive capacity to teach us something means he follows the lead of modern thought in placing experience within the realm of epistemic concepts.

Gadamer further underscores the consonance of his conception of experience with humanism in this anti-skeptical sense when he argues that experience provides "insight into the limits [*Grenzen*] of humanity, into the absoluteness of the barrier that separates man from the divine" (TM 351/GW1 363). The humanists emphasized that we cannot claim certainty precisely because of this irreducible finitude that belongs to our factual nature. Human beings require experience in order to learn. As Kant put it, human cognition must begin with experience. We saw in §3.3 that Gadamer accepts Kant's claim that cognition cannot exceed the conditions for the possibility of experience. The more humanistic way to put Kant's point is to say we cannot be gods who possess infinite knowledge without suffering and toiling to acquire it. Experience reminds us of these features of our condition. Our knowledge suffers from the flaw of fallibility, and lacks the certainty unrealistically sought after by dogmatists: "In [experience] all dogmatism, which proceeds from the soaring desires of the human heart, reaches an absolute barrier. Experience teaches us to acknowledge [*anzuerkennen*] the real" (TM 351/GW1 363). By abjuring dogmatism, Gadamer again places his conception of experience in proximity to humanistic skepticism. Experience reminds us that we lack certainty and require new experiences, which often frustrate and disappoint our expectations, in order to learn. The skeptical opposition to dogmatism and the emphasis on the distinction between the human and the divine recall the sixteenth-century humanism of Erasmus and Montaigne.

That Gadamer's conception of experience echoes elements of modern thought may sound surprising, given that his discussion proceeds through a critique of Bacon, one

of the heroes of the Early Modern Period. But Gadamer recognizes the truth in Bacon's emphasis on the negativity of experience. And Gadamer's focus on the way experience allows us to learn recalls the Early Modern insistence that cognition must begin with experience: "Experience is experience of human finitude. The truly experienced person is one who has taken this to heart, who knows that he is master neither of time nor the future" (TM 351/GW1 363). This emphasis on our finitude and fallibility, reminiscent of sixteenth-century humanism, stands opposed to attempts in natural science to overcome the vicissitudes of time, to which Descartes gives voice: "Conclusions which embrace more than we can grasp in a single intuition depend for their certainty on memory, and since memory is weak and unstable, it must be refreshed and strengthened through this continuous and repeated movement of thought" (CSM I 38).²⁴⁸ Descartes worries that human thinking depends on memory, and hence on time. The proper mathematical and scientific method will minimize our all too fallible reliance on memory, until "memory is left with practically no role to play, and I seem to be intuiting the whole [mathematical formula] at once," thereby liberating us from our finite vulnerability to time (CSM I 38). In his theory of experience, Gadamer once again repudiates modern epistemology and method, now for their doomed attempt to overcome the rootedness of our experience in time. Gadamer insists that experience teaches us that not only are we irretrievably and factually dependent on the vagaries of time, as Descartes feared, but that we can nonetheless open ourselves up to the future and allow ourselves to positively learn from it. He regards this openness to future experience as constitutive of experience itself. This

²⁴⁸ See Rubini's discussion of "the conflation of Cartesianism and 'humanism'" for differences between those modern traditions (*The Other Renaissance*, 5). See also Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 48-88. On modernity as a flight from the "terror of time," see Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, 228-239.

openness means that Gadamer's understanding of our experience does not recall the self-enclosed Cartesian subject or ego criticized by Heidegger.

Experience leads us to acknowledge and appreciate our finitude, which means our historicity, because it provides "insight into the limited degree to which the future is still open to expectation and planning or, even more fundamentally, to have the insight that all expectation and planning of finite beings is finite and limited. Genuine experience is experience of one's own historicity" (TM 351/GW1 363). Since it forces us to confront our factual dependence on time, and encourages us to open ourselves up to the future, in experience we come face to face with our finite historicity. Gadamer's chapter on experience begins with this insistence: "This is precisely what we have to keep in mind in analyzing historically effective consciousness: it has the structure of *experience*" (TM 341/GW1 352). As I explained in my account of historically effective consciousness in §2.2.2, Gadamer refers with that concept to the way tradition affects our understanding and to our cultivated awareness of those effects. Gadamer likely referred to this chapter as *Truth and Method's* "centerpiece" because of its connection to historically effective consciousness. When he claims, "One learns through experience...in life we do not relate ourselves according to epistemological perspectives; rather we must live our own experience," it appears, as his reading of Bacon also seems to indicate, that he repudiates modern treatments of experience (HR 59). Even though he rejects the epistemological-scientific focus of Bacon, Gadamer's emphasis on how we learn from experience, and the consonances between his understanding of experience and humanism, indicate that he rehabilitates elements of modern thinking in his analysis of experience, including the

difference between dogmatism and skepticism, experience as a ground for learning and knowledge, and our finite separation from the divine.

§3.4.3: Objectivity

Experience emerged from the heart of modern science and epistemology to serve in a new and positive guise for hermeneutics. Objectivity fulfills a similar function to experience in Gadamer's thought. Like experience, objectivity is central to the development of modern natural science, and to that extent Gadamer is critical of its epistemological expression. But, I shall argue, Gadamer remains true to the best insights of the modern age's thinking of objectivity. By sketching the background of modern scientific objectivity, I will show how Gadamer deploys a related understanding of the objective in his own thought. What makes objectivity a guiding epistemic metaphor? Two recent writers provided philosophically sophisticated expressions of this intellectual desideratum. Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel construe and defend objectivity as an ideal point of view on reality that exceeds and goes beyond individual human perspectives.²⁴⁹ Williams provides a concise encapsulation of this ideal when he defines "a conception of reality as it is independent of our thought, and to which all representations of reality can be related. Such a conception would allow us, when we reflect on our representation of the world as being one among others, to go beyond merely assessing others, relativistically, from the standpoint of our own."²⁵⁰ According to Williams, modern natural science attempts to reach this so-called "absolute conception of reality" by providing a maximally wide and encompassing perspective that captures

²⁴⁹ Wachterhauser also briefly compares Gadamer's thought with the Williams–Nagel conception of objectivity ("Getting It Right," 52).

²⁵⁰ *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, 196.

reality as it is independent of any observer. The absolute conception will eventually include all limited and one-sided human perspectives within itself. In his treatise *The View From Nowhere*, whose title evokes the concept to which Williams also gave expression, Nagel defines objectivity as “the process of gradual detachment” that operates by “[forming] a new conception that includes a more detached understanding of ourselves, of the world, and of the interaction between them. Thus objectivity allows us to transcend our particular viewpoint and develop an expanded consciousness that takes in the world more fully.”²⁵¹ Like Williams, Nagel points to the way objectivity functions as an ideal point of view beyond any merely human and to that extent finite perspective, but that is nonetheless reachable by natural science. We achieve objectivity when we overcome our own contingent and one-sidedly limited perspectives, and replace them with a maximally wide and unbiased view that captures reality as it is independent of us.

The conception of objectivity articulated by Williams and Nagel proves salient for our purposes because of its historical roots. In her study of objectivity remains “intimately linked to the history of scientific practices and ideals,” Lorraine Daston underscores the way objectivity as “the flight from perspective”—valorized more recently by Williams and Nagel—emerged within the history of modern scientific practice.²⁵² It is important in this regard that Williams defined the absolute conception in the context of his landmark study on Descartes, while Nagel explicitly adheres to the modern primary/secondary quality distinction and to the correspondence theory of truth, insofar as he claims objectivity is a property not of reality but rather of our propositional

²⁵¹ *The View From Nowhere*, 7, 5.

²⁵² “Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective,” 598. See also Blumenberg’s discussion of objectivity as a metaphor in modern thought (*Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 47).

attitudes.²⁵³ This ideal of objectivity emerges historically in the development of modern science. Speaking in the idiom of analytic philosophy, Williams and Nagel give voice to one of the abiding and foundational intellectual ideals of the modern age—namely, that natural science can provide a neutral and aperspectival account of the world freed from and divested of limited and biased human points of view. In this guiding metaphor of aperspectival objectivity, modern natural science finds its principal goal and ambition.

Once we grasp how objectivity in this sense counts as an intellectual ideal particular to modernity that motivated its quest for scientific knowledge, we will see why Gadamer professes “to critique the concept of the objective [*Objektiven*]” (TM 457/GW1 465). Gadamer’s rejection of objectivity emerges in the context of his contestation of the scientific foundations of the modern age. Two central planks of his critique of modern science motivate his negative attitude toward objectivity. First, objectivity in the sense of an aperspectival point of view depends on the subject/object dichotomy that Gadamer rejects (see §§1.2.2 and 3.1.1): “Our line of thought prevents us from dividing the hermeneutic problem in terms of the subjectivity of the interpreter and the objectivity [*Objektivität*] of the meaning to be understood” (TM 309/GW1 316). How is the subject/object distinction, which Gadamer rejects as phenomenologically inaccurate and inappropriate for hermeneutics, related to the aperspectival view sought by scientific objectivity? We see a hint as to the answer in the emphasis both Williams and Nagel place on the concepts of consciousness and representation. Aperspectival objectivity rises above and maximally integrates individual and subjective points of view on an objective world. Hence, objectivity takes its point of departure from the modern ontological conception of human subjects who relate themselves to a world of objects through mental

²⁵³ See *The View From Nowhere*, 13, 101.

representations. Because objectivity in the sense of a perspective that is not itself merely a perspective involves overcoming subjective points of view on external objects, objectivity derives from the modern ontological account of human subjects representing an external realm of objects. Gadamer criticizes scientific objectivity first of all for its dependence on the epistemological subject/object distinction.

The second plank of Gadamer's rejection of objectivity relies on his argument that modern scientific method has been illegitimately expanded beyond its proper realm in natural science (§3.2.1). This argument explains why Gadamer professes to criticize "the objectivity [*Objektivität*] of science, understood as the objectivity of results" (TM 249/GW1 263). Gadamer disputes the application of the standards of research in the natural sciences to the arts and humanities. In the latter domains, we cannot objectify what we want to understand as we do for the objects of scientific experimentation. It would be unintelligible to construct an aperspectival view on art and history—to which we inextricably belong, and from which we cannot wholly separate ourselves—as natural science seeks to do in its investigations of nature that will hopefully culminate in an "absolute conception of reality" or a "view from nowhere." Gadamer finds scientific objectivity questionable also, then, to the extent that he vigorously disputes the importation of that ambition into the hermeneutical realm of the arts and humanities.

Despite these criticisms of scientific objectivity, Gadamer retrieves a different but related notion of the objective.²⁵⁴ Here we take our cue from Heidegger's dictum, meant to express the essence of the line of thought initiated by Husserl, that phenomenology attends "'to the things themselves [*Sachen selbst*]!" (BT 50/SZ 28) For the

²⁵⁴ I follow here Palmer's insightful suggestion: "Gadamer is not opposed to objectivity, per se; rather, he calls for a 'higher objectivity'—a *höhere Sachlichkeit*" ("Moving Beyond Modernity," 161).

phenomenological tradition to which Gadamer belongs, there are facts of the matter (*Sachen*)—aspects or features of experience—to which we must pay proper attention. This process sets aside theoretical and conceptual abstractions that get in the way of allowing what shows itself to us in our experience to appear as it is. Gadamer underscores the distinction between the phenomenological quest for the things themselves and scientific objectivity: “We will no longer confuse the matter-of-factness [*Sachlichkeit*] of language with the *objectivity* [Objektivität] of science” (TM 450/GW1 457). Here again Gadamer follows the lead of Heidegger, who referred to “the right kind of matter-of-factness [*die rechte Sachlichkeit*]” that holds between and among Dasein (BT 159/SZ 122). How does “matter-of-factness” differ but also importantly resemble scientific objectivity? Let us consider the differences first. According to Gadamer, “*The hermeneutical task becomes of itself a questioning of things* [eine sachliche Fragestellung über]” (TM 271/GW1 273).²⁵⁵ Hermeneutics demands properly getting in touch with its subject matter by paying attention and doing justice to something external to the questioner, and allowing it to genuinely tell us something. This activity involves opening ourselves up to the truth claim of the matter. In hermeneutical investigations into art and history, we enter into a dialogue with what we want to understand by listening to what it has to say to us. For Williams and Nagel, scientific objectivity, meanwhile, involves rising above and abandoning individual points of view to reach an ideal perspective. This flight from the human perspective prevents us from really listening to the matter at hand in favor of achieving a maximally wide and aperspectival account of reality. But hermeneutical inquiry involves the merging of perspectives, or the fusion of horizons,

²⁵⁵ In a 1945 letter of recommendation, Heidegger calls Gadamer “an excellent teacher” and “a noble [*vornehme*] professor” possessed of a “wide and open horizon and in the most immediate *contact* [*Fühlung*] with the subject matters [*Sachen*]” (GA16 407-408).

between oneself and the subject matter, rather than attempting to get beyond point of view completely. For Gadamer, hermeneutical attention to matter-of-factness involves a more genuine form of listening and openness than scientific objectivity permits.

On the basis of Gadamer's advocacy of a dialogical model of understanding, recent critics within hermeneutics have charged that he was, as Claude Romano provocatively suggests, "a bit quick to write off the ideal of objectivity."²⁵⁶ Günter Figal goes so far as to develop a systematic hermeneutical philosophy that begins with the insight that "hermeneutical experience is the experience of the objective [*das Gegenständliche*]... Objectivity [*Gegenständlichkeit*] is the principal matter of the hermeneutical approach to philosophy. If the context of Gadamer's thought and its influence cannot do justice to it, one must leave this context."²⁵⁷ Contemporary hermeneutics has thus undergone a turn toward objectivity. I cannot sufficiently engage here with the exciting innovations in hermeneutics advocated by Romano and Figal.²⁵⁸ Instead, I want only to suggest that Gadamer's advocacy of matter-of-factness does not involve a wholesale rejection of scientific objectivity, which implies the need to subsequently reappraise the objective turn in recent hermeneutical philosophy.

We begin to see the partial compatibility of Gadamer's matter-of-factness and scientific objectivity in the following description of hermeneutical understanding:

A person who is trying to understand is exposed to distraction from fore-meanings [*Vor-Meinungen*] that are not borne out by the things [*Sachen*] themselves. Working out appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed "by the things," is the constant task of understanding. The

²⁵⁶ "The Flexible Rule of the Hermeneut," 394.

²⁵⁷ *Objectivity*, 2.

²⁵⁸ On these writers, see Steven DeLay, *Phenomenology in France: A Philosophical and Theological Introduction*, 145-170; and George, "Günter Figal's Hermeneutics," 904-912. On contemporary hermeneutics, see also Liakos and George, "Hermeneutics in Post-war Continental European Philosophy."

only “objectivity [*Objektivität*]” here is the confirmation of fore-meanings in its being worked out. (TM 270/GW1 272)

Though Gadamer is at pains not to equate these two intellectual activities, he reveals that his theory of the role of prejudices in understanding (whose connection to the phenomenological method he makes especially evident here) entails consonances with scientific objectivity. In understanding, we find ourselves responsible to the subject matter; to understand well, we question whether the facts of the matter confirm or deny the pre-judgments with which we began. In determining if we can still maintain our concepts, we find ourselves accountable to something outside ourselves. Our concepts and pre-judgments are insufficient for responsible or adequate understanding. We must submit our own horizon or perspective to that of something external to ourselves, and proceed to abandon what the subject matter refutes, or revise what the matter challenges. In understanding, we thus attend to the things themselves and allow them to speak to us. Even more strongly, Gadamer calls prejudices “biases of our openness to the world [*Weltoffenheit*]” (PH 9/GW2 224). We find that our conceptual apparatuses are accountable not only to the given subject matter, but also to reality itself. In intellectual inquiry and in experience at large, we discover whether the ideas and concepts we previously acquired can still be tenably maintained in virtue of their confrontation by an external world: “In language the reality beyond every individual consciousness [*was über das Bewußtsein jedes einzeln hinaus wirklich ist*] becomes visible” (TM 446/GW1 453).²⁵⁹ Though he cannot share the ambition of abandoning all perspectives distinctive of modern scientific objectivity, Gadamer does accept that our horizons are accountable to, and at least partly reveal, both a common world beyond all perspectives as well as the

²⁵⁹ On the role of objectivity in Gadamer’s line of thought here, see Lee Braver, “Davidson’s Reading of Gadamer: Triangulation, Conversation, and the Analytic-Continental Divide,” 151.

subject matter at hand.²⁶⁰ In light of Gadamer's contributions to a concept of objectivity, the objective turn in contemporary hermeneutics appears unknowingly Gadamerian.

That Gadamer's notion of matter-of-factness bears resemblances to scientific objectivity gets further clarified in his passionate defense of the ideals of the modern liberal university in his 1947 rectoral address at the University of Leipzig, "On the Primordially [*Ursprünglichkeit*] of Science."²⁶¹ Delivered in the wake of the subordination of German intellectual life to Nazi ideology, and the disturbing support the former lent the latter, Gadamer attempts to reintegrate modern science and the lifeworld in his call to "preserve the original relationship between this tremendous human means of power, which modern [*moderne*] science presents, and the highest goals of humanity, the goals of human advancement" (EPH 17/GW10 289). Though this fact may be obscured by his objections to modern science, Gadamer demonstrates what he still holds as true and admirable in natural science. He points to matter-of-factness as one of the tools modern science could have offered against fascism: "Had the strength of this matter-of-factness [*Sachlichkeit*] been strong enough in all men of German science, the meek accommodation to the National Socialists' regime would never have become a temptation for them" (EPH 20/GW10 293). The political value of matter-of-factness calls attention to its practical applicability: "It is not the opinions and interests of a dominant society which should be cultivated [*gepflegt*] nor justified by science, but rather the truth should

²⁶⁰ John McDowell enlists Gadamer as an ally in his case for realism in the sense of openness to the world ("Gadamer and Davidson on Understanding and Relativism," 176). On the case for Gadamer as a realist, see also Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 102-130; and Wachterhauser, "Gadamer's Realism: The 'Belongingness' of Word and Reality," 150.

²⁶¹ This text, because of its topic as well as its historical and political context, bears comparison with Heidegger's 1933 rectoral address. See Grondin, *Gadamer: A Biography*, 241-244.

be stated and taught no matter how it reveals itself” (EPH 18/GW10 290). Gadamer evinces his faith in the possibility of an apolitical objectivity within the university.

Crucially, Gadamer underscores in this 1947 essay the connection between matter-of-factness and scientific objectivity. He emphasizes this consonance in his definition of the matter-of-factness to which the university must strive: “The true man of science [*der wahre Mann der Wissenschaft*] is the one who...stands above [*darüberstehen*] the pure cognition [*Erkennen*] of reality” (EPH 19/GW10 291). The image Gadamer conjures of standing above should call to mind the metaphor for scientific objectivity as an “absolute conception of reality” or a “view from nowhere.” In both cases, one seeks to rise above contingent and limited points of view. Gadamer connects the ambition to stand above with the mathematized natural sciences: “Since [the scientist] understands something of mathematics, he therefore stands above the subject matter [*Sache*]. This standing above [*Darüberstehen*] is what constitutes the position of science” (EPH 19/GW10 291).

Matter-of-factness does not stand totally opposed to and separate from scientific objectivity in the sense of an aperspectival account of reality. Indeed, both intellectual ideals share an ambition to stand above their subject matter by providing a superior view than one could possess from within their own merely personal standpoint. As phenomenology attempts, science “considers carefully the subject matter itself [*die Sache selbst*] and its true foundations [*Gründe*]” (EPH 20/GW10 292). Common to both matter-of-factness and scientific objectivity is this commitment to investigating a subject matter external to the inquirer. While matter-of-factness, with its roots in phenomenology and hermeneutics, cannot attempt to find a perfectly aperspectival view, it strives for a superior and more than one-sided account of the matter at hand. Gadamer sums up the

connection between matter-of-factness and scientific objectivity with his exhortation to strive for “unconditional involvement [*Eingehen*] in the subject matter, thereby forgetting every consideration due to others and even oneself, God, and the world” (EPH 20/GW10 293). This vocational ideal of “unconditional involvement,” common to phenomenological hermeneutics and natural science, requires paying attention to the subject matter to understand it apart from personal interests and points of view. Gadamer does not subscribe to an aperspectival independence, but rather calls us to be open to encountering truths disclosed to us by phenomena under investigation.

Modern natural science strives for objectivity as an “absolute conception” or a “view from nowhere.” Because of his opposition to the subject/object dichotomy and the illegitimate encroachment of scientific method beyond its proper purview, Gadamer disputes that the arts and humanities should imitate this scientific ideal. But in his advocacy of phenomenological matter-of-factness, Gadamer recovers aspects of scientific objectivity. In both intellectual ambitions, inquiry remains steadfastly responsible to something external to the inquirer, who attempts to do justice to a subject matter with its own horizon. The difference between these two ideals lies in the fact that scientific objectivity wants an aperspectival account of reality, while hermeneutical inquiry seeks a fusion of horizons between the inquirer and the matter at hand. Nevertheless, both modern natural science and Gadamer’s phenomenological hermeneutics acknowledge and attempt to capture an external reality beyond individual points of view.

§3.4.4: Curiosity

The final guiding epistemic metaphor Gadamer substantially rehabilitates comes in the form of an intellectual passion that motivated the modern quest for scientific knowledge.

Historians and philosophers frequently link curiosity to the emergence of modernity. These scholars suggest an essential connection between the development of modern natural science, and the human self-confidence that science inspired, and the desire to learn and know new things called curiosity. Hans Blumenberg, the most famous advocate of this basic thesis, proceeds “to understand the process of the legitimation of theoretical curiosity as a basic feature of the history of the beginning of the modern age.”²⁶² According to Blumenberg, writers and scientists at the dawn of modernity—between the late Middle Ages and the height of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment—audaciously validated curiosity against the backdrop of the pervasive association, found in traditional Christian thinkers like Augustine, between *curiositas* and the sin of pride.

Bacon serves as the primary antagonist in Blumenberg’s narrative of the emergence of curiosity as an intellectual virtue rather than an ungodly temptation. Bacon construes his methodological innovations in terms of the innate right of human beings to gain knowledge of the natural world, as he underlines in the extended subtitle for the preface to the *Novum Organon*: “On the state of the sciences, that it is neither prosperous nor far advanced; and that a quite different way must be opened up for the human intellect than men have known in the past, and new aids devised, so that the mind may exercise its right over nature” (NO 6). This passage recalls the theme of modernity as a new beginning (§3.2.2), but unlike that feature of Bacon’s work, Gadamer will find some important truth in this bold endorsement of our curious inclination to learn about the natural world. For Bacon, natural science provides the tools with which humanity will finally claim its

²⁶² *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 240. See also the essays in R.J.W. Evans and Alexander Marr, eds., *Curiosity and Wonder from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*. Gadamer reviewed Blumenberg’s book in 1968, writing that Blumenberg “overstates the case, it seems to me, of the results of his studies of the concept of *curiositas*” for the wider meaning of modernity (GW4 52).

rightful place as privileged knowers of nature. Bacon validates our desire to acquire knowledge of nature, triumphantly proclaiming that the new science will “let man recover the right over nature that belongs to him by God’s gift, and give it scope” (NO 101). Bacon’s idea that we must scientifically establish our rightful sovereignty over nature anticipates Descartes’s claim, published seventeen years later, that the new science will transform us into “the lords and masters of nature” (CSM I 143). Armed with the new science, humanity will conquer the natural world. These moments in Bacon’s text support Blumenberg’s conclusion: “The idea of an essential human right to knowledge, a right that has to be recovered, dominates Bacon’s *Novum Organon*.”²⁶³ For Blumenberg, Bacon’s validation of curiosity helped provide the intellectual rationale for the inexorable march in the modern age toward scientific and technological progress. Our quest for scientific knowledge ultimately has its ground in the fact that we have an inalienable right to acquire knowledge of the natural world for no other reason than that we want to do so.

Gadamer retrieves the core of this modern legitimation of the intellectual passion for acquiring theoretical knowledge. But his attitude toward curiosity must be understood within the context of Heidegger’s critical treatment. Heidegger associates curiosity with inauthentic everydayness, emphasizing how curiosity (*Neugier*) etymologically signals “the craving for the new [*die Gier nach dem Neuen*]” (BT 397/SZ 346). He characterizes curiosity as a superficial pursuit of novelty for its own sake, likening curiosity to a wandering eye that darts toward whatever shiny new object it fancies at a given moment.²⁶⁴ Heidegger finds curiosity’s fundamental inattentiveness its most objectionable feature: “It does not seek the leisure of tarrying observantly, but rather

²⁶³ *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 384.

²⁶⁴ See William McNeill, *The Glance of the Eye: Heidegger, Aristotle, and the Ends of Theory*, 121-123.

seeks restlessness and the excitement of continual novelty and changing encounters. In not tarrying, curiosity is concerned with the constant possibility of *distraction*. Curiosity has nothing to do with observing entities and marveling at them” (BT 216/SZ 172).

Heidegger contrasts marvel or wonder—which pay sufficient attention to entities—with curiosity, which restlessly wanders in search of new experiences and pleasures. Instead of genuinely paying attention to entities and lingering with them, curiosity looks for what is new and carelessly moves on when something else replaces it: “Curiosity is so little devoted to the ‘thing’ it is curious about, that when it obtains sight of anything it already looks away to what is coming next” (BT 398/SZ 347). Curiosity’s insatiable and greedy desire for novelty does not come with a corresponding capacity to gain a genuine understanding of the entities it restlessly seeks out: “It concerns itself with seeing, not in order to understand what is seen...but *just* in order to see” (BT 216/SZ 172). Curiosity wants only new experiences, as opposed to grasping entities as they really are. Heidegger also associates this shallow mode of engagement with seeing, an ocular bias that Bacon betrays in his description of scientific method: “The whole secret is never to let the mind’s eyes stay from things themselves, and to take in images exactly as they are” (NO 24). Similarly, Heidegger connects the superficiality of scientific curiosity with seeing when he contrasts mere curiosity with true understanding.

Though this connection is not often noted, Heidegger’s critique of curiosity also anticipates his later critique of the modern age (*Neuzeit*). Just as curiosity chases after the new simply because it is new, so the modern age distinguishes and valorizes itself by appeal to its own alleged novelty: “[Modernity] is new...in that it explicitly sets itself up as the new” (OBT 69/GA5 92). When Heidegger talks about curiosity in *Being and Time*,

he refers to something crucially connected to modernity. Both curiosity and the modern age value novelty for its own sake. He contrasts the shallow inattentiveness of curiosity with marvel, wonder, or awe—just as he will later charge modernity with forgetfully passing over being as such. In labeling curiosity insufficiently attentive to entities, Heidegger anticipates his later argument that modernity—marked first of all by “its science,” a science crucially linked with the passion of curiosity, as we see in the case of Bacon—has passed over the inexhaustible source of all intelligibility in favor of technological mastering and controlling (OBT 57/GA5 75). These themes of novelty and attention link the wandering eye of curiosity to modernity’s reduced intelligibility.

While Heidegger’s discussion of curiosity in *Being and Time* may not be explicitly directed at modern science, the criticisms he offers there anticipate his later critique of modernity’s inattentiveness toward being. Heidegger rejects the valorization, found in modern writers like Bacon, of curiosity as a scientific ideal and intellectual passion. For Heidegger, we cannot accept the values of an age that blocks our connection to being, and on that basis, we must reject curiosity. In his 1980 essay “Praise of Theory,” Gadamer departs from Heidegger’s one-sidedly negative characterization of curiosity, and in the process rehabilitates the concept.²⁶⁵ As is typically Gadamer’s way, he seems at first glance to uncritically adopt Heidegger’s argument when he calls modern curiosity “the mindless gaping that is always drawn in by the newest thing and never dwells on or gets absorbed in anything” (PT 22/GW4 41). Heidegger could only agree. But Gadamer does not rest content with this negative appraisal, wanting instead to go deeper by doing justice also to what curiosity gets right about the human condition. Referring to the

²⁶⁵ In an insightful paper, Corey McCall also contrasts Gadamer’s conception of curiosity with Heidegger’s, but without reference to “Praise of Theory,” which I regard here as the key text (“Some Philosophical Ambiguities of Curiosity in the Work of Heidegger, Foucault, and Gadamer,” 189-190).

Augustinian condemnation of curiosity and the etymological roots of *Neugier* in a way reminiscent of Heidegger, Gadamer notes, “it is still significant that this devaluation of the new is rarely encountered among the knowledge-hungry Greeks” (PT 22/GW4 41). In claiming that Greek science acknowledges a felt human need in a way the Christian tradition did not, Gadamer signals here his recovery of what remains compelling about curiosity, namely, its disinterested pursuit of theoretical knowledge of the natural world.

For Gadamer, the intellectual passion for knowledge of reality for its own sake is fundamental to human life. The modern concept of curiosity found in Bacon imperfectly expresses this intrinsic need, even if in a “devalued sense [*abwertenden Sinn*]” (PT 22/GW4 41). We should recall Bacon’s exhortation to claim our right to learn about nature. Echoing this modern scientific desire to find the truths of nature, Gadamer defines theory as “looking and wondering [*Beschauen und Bestaunen*] at something” (PT 17/GW4 37). In its ocular resonance and in its reference to a naïve desire to take in the truths of nature, this characterization resonates with modern articulations of curiosity.

Consider also the following passage, which expresses his mature stance toward curiosity:

What was most important to Augustine was contemplation directed toward God—he condemned the desire for worldly knowledge [*weltgerichtete Wissenverlangen*] as curiosity [*Neugier*]. But all the other ways we resist looking for the useful and behave “purely [*rein*] theoretically,” all the areas we call art and science (but certainly not just those), belong here too. Whenever we find something “beautiful,” we don’t ask about the why and wherefore [*Wozu*] of it. — Would a human life that failed to participate in this kind of “theory” seem human to us at all? (PT 32/GW4 48)

Here Gadamer recognizes the connection between the curiosity condemned by the Christian tradition and then subsequently revalued by modernity with theory as he valorizes it. Both intellectual passions express the same ineluctable aspect of the human condition, because both articulate our fundamental desire to see and learn irrespective of

any other concern, which Gadamer defines as “demonstrable knowledge which one became aware of to enjoy for its own sake...a primary curiosity about the world [*Weltneugier*]” (EH 5/GW4 246). Hence, all disinterested acts of human contemplation—including all the arts and sciences, in an endorsement that echoes his 1947 defense of the modern liberal university (§3.4.3)—fall within the sphere of curiosity in this sense.

Gadamer does not endorse Bacon’s robust claim that we have a right to acquire knowledge of nature, by force if necessary. Instead, the deflationary Gadamerian sense of curiosity rests on the assumption that human beings have an innate desire to learn new things. In rehabilitating curiosity as the theoretical passion for contemplating things for the sake just of knowing and learning about them, Gadamer walks a delicate balance. He faithfully follows Heidegger’s condemnation of the wandering and greedy eye of modern scientific curiosity, because the theoretical curiosity Gadamer retrieves does not mercurially flit from one object to the next. Instead, his rehabilitated theoretical curiosity means “seeing what is”—that is, contemplating things just for the sake of learning about them—which is why his conceptualization of theory means attentively taking in all things and not merely whatever pleases one’s fancy at a given moment (PT 31/GW4 47). Furthermore, unlike Heidegger’s characterization, Gadamer’s conception of theoretical curiosity does not include a greedy motive, since this inquiry is performed for the sake of seeing things as they really are (recall again his rehabilitation of modern objectivity) and not for the satisfaction of any suspiciously egoistic desire. Hence, Gadamer does justice both to what is right in curiosity, as expressed in Bacon’s call to learn about nature just because we have the innate right to do so, and also to Heidegger’s critique of modern scientific curiosity. In his rehabilitation of theoretical curiosity, Gadamer acknowledges

both the poverty of modern curiosity as well as the truth in the human desire for scientific–theoretical knowledge of which modern curiosity is a questionable and yet particularly potent expression. Yet again, in this subtle movement away from Heidegger’s excessively totalizing account and toward some insight at the core of an ideal of knowledge, Gadamer rehabilitates a modern guiding epistemic metaphor.

In this chapter, I provided a reading of Gadamer’s treatment of our human experience of knowing. While he criticizes elements of the scientific foundations of the modern age, he also persistently claims that the arts and humanities enable forms of knowing. His approach to questions of knowledge rests on his retrieval of key elements of modern thought. Hence, I reconstructed his retention of the Kantian transcendental framework, which served as the first instance of his cultivation of what remains right in modernity’s guiding metaphors for our experience of knowing. I showed that he preserves within his own thought many of the modern age’s distinctive epistemic images and ideals, namely, the transcendental, humanism, experience, objectivity, and curiosity. Gadamer’s strategy requires shunting aside modernity’s most damaging features, while simultaneously cultivating the hidden resources the modern age contains that express deep human needs and ambitions. Gadamer follows Heidegger in rejecting what remains questionable about the modern age, but cautions against transcending its central concepts and ideals wholesale. The guiding metaphors I dealt with here serve as examples of modern ideals that Heidegger was too quick to recommend we forget. Gadamer would have us instead remember what remains profoundly right about these guiding metaphors.

Chapter 4: Gadamer and the Ocular

In Chapter 3, I presented my reconstruction of Gadamer's rehabilitation of guiding epistemic metaphors. I contended, through arguments drawing upon the history of modern philosophy and science, that the human experience of knowing was central to the characteristic intellectual movements of the modern age. This fact became significant for our purposes when I demonstrated that Gadamer remained thoroughly invested in reworking modernity's guiding metaphors for describing human experiences and ideals related to knowledge. I concluded that Gadamer rehabilitated crucial elements of modernity's ways of thinking about our epistemic nature by retrieving and cultivating the truth he found at the core of these guiding metaphors. My argument here in Chapter 4 shall follow a similar structure, this time concerning metaphors I refer to as ocular in orientation—that is, having to do with human vision—that remain central to Gadamer's thought. Just as my claim that Gadamer rehabilitated epistemic concepts was surprising because of his reputation as a phenomenological critic of epistemology, so too my argument that Gadamer remains within the sphere of ocular metaphors should sound interpretatively unexpected. Martin Jay, whose intellectual history of modern ocular concepts and metaphors will help provide us with our point of orientation, gives voice to this intuition concerning Gadamer's relation to the ocular: "Hermeneutic thinkers from Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey to Gadamer have trusted more in the word than the image."²⁶⁶ I will argue in this chapter that Gadamer is not opposed, hostile, or inattentive to the ocular as such, but in fact reworks and cultivates a number of crucial modern guiding metaphors related to human vision for his own thinking.

²⁶⁶ *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, 265.

In §4.1, I shall present the view, which Jay expresses in the passage just quoted, that Gadamer's hermeneutics is anti-ocular. Though I admit that there is ample textual support for this approach, the rest of this chapter will subsequently complicate and call this pervasive reading into question. Next, by appealing to Heidegger's account of modernity as "the age of the world picture," I will present in §4.2 the connection between, to borrow the title of a landmark collection of papers, modernity and the hegemony of vision.²⁶⁷ That is, I will give a brief account of ocularcentrism, a term for the bias toward the faculty of vision and its attendant metaphors, in the modern age. This sketch of modernity's pervasive ocularcentrism will show the stakes of Gadamer's intervention. Finally, in §4.3 I shall present Gadamer's rehabilitation of three guiding ocular metaphors, namely, infinity, perspective, and mirroring. For all of these guiding ocular metaphors, I will suggest their importance within modern thought, and then show how Gadamer distances himself from their most deleterious forms while retrieving the truth at the core of these concepts that he still finds consonant with hermeneutical thinking. Gadamer's relation to the ocular will once again demonstrate his robust and rehabilitative engagement with the intellectual currents of modernity.

§4.1: Hermeneutics against the ocular

§4.1.1: Word, voice, and ear

I shall now present, as a foil to the view I will develop in this chapter, the exegetical argument that Gadamer's thought stands opposed to the ocular. This view finds pervasive, although sometimes only implicit, support from commentators who focus attention on Gadamer's appeals to the figures of the voice, the word, and the ear, which

²⁶⁷ David Michael Levin, ed., *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*.

are all certainly non-ocular concepts *par excellence*. Some commentators read his thinking in terms of the grammatical structure of either the “middle voice” to emphasize mediation between the act of understanding and the person who understands (Philippe Eberhard), or the closely related “inner word” situated astride distinctly humanistic and scientific modes of cognition (Andrew Fuyarchuk).²⁶⁸ Furthermore, in one of the first major studies in English of Gadamer’s entire corpus, James Risser reads Gadamer’s thinking as centrally concerned with hearing the voice of the other: “In the end a philosophical hermeneutics is about self-understanding; but this, as Gadamer insists, has little to do with a philosophical subjectivity. Rather, it has to do with our being at home in the world that we are awakened to in the voice of the other.”²⁶⁹ For all these scholars, the voice, as either a grammatical example that conceptually points the way, or as a motif that provides hermeneutics with its chief ambition, serves as a skeleton key for understanding the heart of Gadamer’s thinking.

A similar exegetical strategy emerges in the growing, if also puzzling, literature on Gadamer and the word. I call this body of scholarship puzzling because it focuses on just one short and quite difficult late chapter of *Truth and Method* entitled “Language and Verbum” (TM 418/GW1 422).²⁷⁰ In their commentaries on this section, John Arthos and Mirela Oliva each attach considerable weight to Gadamer’s retrieval of the medieval and Christian philosophy of language of Augustine and Aquinas, in which God gets

²⁶⁸ Eberhard, *The Middle Voice in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics: A Basic Interpretation with some Theological Implications*, 30; and Fuyarchuk, *The Inner Word in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics: Mediating Between Modes of Cognition in the Humanities and Sciences*, 222-223.

²⁶⁹ *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-reading Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 17.

²⁷⁰ This attention received its motivation from the fact that Jean Grondin, Gadamer’s biographer and famed pupil, anecdotally reports that, in a 1988 conversation with Gadamer at a pub in Heidelberg, he was told by the master himself that the inner word was the key to his hermeneutics (*Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, xiii-xiv). For a helpful survey of this literature, see also Mattias Solli, *Towards an Embodied Hermeneutics: Gadamer, Merleau-Ponty, and Nondirective Meditation*, 33-39.

incarnated in the Word, as providing resources for overcoming the modern subject/object dichotomy.²⁷¹ Allow me to cite one final non-ocular figure to which commentators give pride of place. In calling attention to Gadamer's metaphor of the inner ear (to which we will return later), Jean Grondin argues that this concept permits Gadamer to combat "subjectively experienced reason" and "modern types of rationality."²⁷² Grondin's interpretation points toward an overall pattern throughout this sequence of readings.

As this brief survey of the secondary literature shows, the tendency among Gadamer scholars is to focus on non-ocular metaphors and concepts like the voice, word, and ear as playing prominent roles in his thinking. In turn, these aural and auditory figures get read as Gadamer's weapons in his struggle against modern thought. These scholars interpret Gadamer's aural and auditory focus in terms of his opposition to modernity. It should not come as a surprise, then, that Gadamer's hermeneutics might be seen as avowedly anti-ocular. Jay articulates this view when, upon describing hermeneutics as crucially involving "a renewed respect for the ear over the eye as the organ of greatest value," he asks: "If we pose the good hermeneutical question, 'to what question is hermeneutics the answer?,' a plausible candidate would be: on what sense can we rely, if vision is no longer the noblest of the senses?"²⁷³ Against the modern valorization of vision (which we shall explore in §4.4.2), Gadamer's hermeneutics, according to Jay, elevates aural and auditory figures. The trend among Gadamerians to emphasize the voice, the word, and the inner ear as most crucial for his thought follows

²⁷¹ Arthos, *The Inner Word in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, 354; and Oliva, *Das innere Verbum in Gadamer's Hermeneutik*, 156.

²⁷² "Das Innere Ohr: Distanz und Selbstreflexion in der Hermeneutik," 334.

²⁷³ "The Rise of Hermeneutics and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism," 309.

this interpretative structure. For all these commentators, Gadamer is an anti-ocular thinker and, to that extent, a thinker opposed to the main currents of modern thought.

§4.1.2: The hermeneutical priority of hearing

Many moments in and features of Gadamer's thinking genuinely lend themselves to this widespread appraisal of his relation to vision and the ocular. I will now consider why so many commentators interpret him this way. We begin with the obvious observation that hermeneutics traditionally refers to the study of the interpretation of texts. As Gadamer emphasizes, this undeniable fact places hermeneutics firmly within the aural and auditory realm: "I would define hermeneutics as the skill to let things speak which come to us in a fixed, petrified form, that of the text" (EPH 65). In its inextricable link with reading, hermeneutics involves hearing and listening. Gadamer could only agree, then, with Heidegger's provocative exhortation: "Thinking is a listening that discerns [*Das Denken ist ein Erhören, das erblickt*]" (PR 46/GA10 69). For the phenomenological hermeneutics of faith or trust of Heidegger and Gadamer, to interpret and understand mean above all to listen faithfully and attentively to what some phenomenon, such as a text, has to say.²⁷⁴ This metaphorized and strikingly beautiful model of hermeneutical understanding as a sort of listening strongly suggests, as Jay identified, a preference for the ear over the eye. This aural and auditory predilection leads Heidegger to make claims such as, "all questioning may well be a kind of hearing [*Hörens*], and for the most part even a kind of wanting to hear [*Hörenwollens*]" (CPC 16/GA77 25). The hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer demands attentively listening to phenomena that demand understanding.

²⁷⁴ Paul Ricoeur famously distinguishes between the *hermeneutics of suspicion*, identified with Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, on the one hand, and the *hermeneutics of faith or trust*, exemplified by phenomenology, on the other (*Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, 20-36). Gadamer appears to accept the basic structure of Ricoeur's distinction (HS 312, 318).

For that reason, Gadamer underscores “the primacy of hearing [as] the basis of the hermeneutical phenomenon” (TM 458/GW1 466). Here he evinces more than a personal preference for one sense organ over another.²⁷⁵ Rather, his claim, following Heidegger, is that hermeneutics fundamentally means, and even gets identified with, the faculty of and capacity for listening: “The hermeneutical experience also has its own rigor: that of uninterrupted [*unbeirrbar*] listening” (TM 461/GW1 469). Gadamer argues for and explains this extraordinary idea in the following salient passage:

The meaning [*Sinn*] of the hermeneutical experience is rather that...language opens up a completely new dimension, the profound dimension from which tradition comes down to those now living. This has always been the true essence of hearing, even before the invention of writing: that the hearer can listen to the legends, the myths, and the truth of the ancients. In comparison, the written, literary transmission of tradition, as we know it, is nothing new; it only changes the form and makes the task of real [*wirklichen*] hearing more difficult. (TM 458/GW1 466-467)

Here Gadamer elaborates that the demand to listen dutifully to the weight of the authority of the past, even when it appears alienated from and foreign to us, is even more primordial than the hermeneutical attention to written texts. This human openness to the past predates, or at least is more elemental to human beings than, the historical innovation of the written word. Hermeneutics in Gadamer’s mold does justice to precisely this primitive and fundamental need to hear what the past history of human consciousness has to say. It is the task of hermeneutics to listen to this history.

Listening metaphorically captures, then, our unavoidable openness and receptivity to the past, a feature of hearing recognized in another context by Hans Jonas’s detailed phenomenology of the senses. As Jonas points out, seeing—which we to some extent

²⁷⁵ Though he does make the following autobiographical claim: “I had a real talent for listening and replying and believe that that remains my talent: to listen even to the silent voice of an audience” (EPH 66).

control, not only when we willfully open and close our eyes, but also when we actively or spontaneously direct our sight toward what we actively desire to see—cannot involve the sort of passivity or receptivity inherent to hearing.²⁷⁶ Just as our ears, when functioning correctly, are uncontrollably and unavoidably open to whatever sounds lie within range, so too are human beings always vulnerable to the transmissions of the past whose call we must hear. Gadamer gestures toward this difference between modes of perception when he proclaims “the priority of hearing over sight” (TM 458/GW1 466). To the extent that hermeneutics names our attempt to understandingly come to grips with the past whose transmissions we must receive, then hearing, which is always more open and receptive than vision, is the hermeneutically primary sense. Thus Gadamer, following Husserl and Heidegger’s delineation of the intentional structure and anticipating Richard Rorty’s later critique of Western philosophy’s epistemological fixation on “our glassy essence,” rejects the idea that human beings passively reflect the nature of reality:

Sense perception is never given. It is rather an aspect of the pragmatic approach to the world. We are always hearing, listening *to* something and extracting *from* other things. We are *interpreting* in seeing, hearing, receiving. In seeing, we are looking *for* something; we are not just like photographs that reflect everything visible. A real photographer, for instance, is looking for the moment in which the shot would be an interpretation of the experience. So it is obvious that there is a real primacy of interpretation. (HS 318)²⁷⁷

Vision, like all perception, involves interpretation and not mere receptivity, as the example of photography means to show in its emphasis on intentional framing. Here Gadamer follows Kant’s transcendental framework (see §4.3.3). Despite the

²⁷⁶ *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, 139-140. This passivity led to the traditional association of listening with femininity, as Sandra Lee Bartky explains: “A sustained sympathetic listening . . . conveys to the speaker the importance of what he is saying, hence suggesting that he himself is important” (*Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, 103).

²⁷⁷ For Rorty’s discussion of “our glassy essence,” see *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 42-45.

interpretative quality inherent to vision, though, Gadamer still thinks hermeneutics should not be grounded in vision, either as a metaphor or as a primary exemplar. Vision cannot serve in this capacity because hearing counts as the more receptive mode of human perception, and so evokes the proper connotation of listening to what the past has to say.

I mentioned in §4.1.1 how Grondin points to the inner ear, a metaphor Gadamer employs in his discussions of art. I will now explore what Gadamer means by this metaphor, which will further bolster his purported anti-ocular credentials. He claims that “every speaker of a ‘text’ knows that no possible vocal realization—not even his own—can ever completely satisfy our inner ear” (RB 146/GW8 148). The inner ear names a phenomenological description of our encounter with artworks. When we develop a relationship to an artwork, we develop our own entrenched and personally certain sense for what the work must “sound” like. Gadamer claims that we develop a feel for the register or tone in which artworks should be performed, read, heard, or seen. His term for our personal sense for what any artwork should metaphorically sound like is the inner ear: “The constituent elements with which we construct the work are not provided by the reproduction, the presentation, or the theatrical performance, as such, but by the work that has been raised to ideality in our inner ear” (RB 44/GW8 134). Artworks that I know on a profoundly intimate level have, for me, an ideal instantiation that no external realization can match. I have my own idea for how a poem should be read aloud or how a piece of music should be performed. My inner ear provides me with this certainty about what an artwork should sound like, so to speak. This inner sense becomes so certain that “there is always something embarrassing [*Peinliches*] about hearing a poet reading his own works” (RB 146/GW8 148). We might think here of a new cover version of an

original song that one long ago internalized as having a definite performative profile. Even a poet reading his own poem, then, cannot match how that same poem is “supposed to” sound according to my inner ear once it has acquired, for me, an idealized autonomy.

The metaphor of the inner ear follows the conception of hermeneutical phenomena as speaking to us, and our corresponding need to listen. We must take seriously the auditory and aural register of these metaphors of speaking and listening. Gadamer suggests that hearing is hermeneutically prior to seeing. The inner ear names a particularly dramatic version of this general hermeneutic phenomenology of listening to what a hermeneutical object has to say. It is no coincidence that, when he wants to describe how we paradigmatically experience works of art, Gadamer reaches first for an auditory, and not an ocular, metaphor. This predilection for auditory and aural metaphors and concepts is, it would seem, consistent across Gadamerian hermeneutical thinking.

§4.1.3: The conservatism of listening

In this rest of this chapter, I shall call the widespread imputation to Gadamer of an overwhelming auditory and aural bias into question. But before making that argument, I want to emphasize that the stakes of my dispute with this anti-ocular reading are more than just exegetical. That is, whether Gadamer evinces an anti-ocular orientation is more than a question of a correct understanding of his thought. As Hans Blumenberg makes clear in a highly critical, albeit veiled, discussion, the purportedly anti-ocular orientation of hermeneutical thinking opens that tradition up to a serious political objection:

Metaphors of “hearing” are also significant for grasping the phenomenon of *tradition*. . . In judging the value of tradition, a teleological moment is always implied, namely, that “truth” is *intended for man* and that it is for that reason that it reaches him via the precarious stream of cultural transference. The denial of

vision that is entailed in listening to tradition always includes an element of teleological trust that “theoretically” cannot be justified. For this reason, in the attitude of “hearing” (i.e., in being dependent on tradition), there is often a hidden insufficiency.²⁷⁸

This passage, rich with criticisms of hermeneutics but elliptical in its articulation of them, invites close attention. First, Blumenberg implies that an orientation toward auditory and aural metaphors entails a “denial of vision.” In other words, the auditory/aural and the visual are mutually exclusive. But the existence of that disjunction requires additional argumentation. Second, Blumenberg suggests that metaphors of listening and hearing go hand in hand with a conservative acceptance of, and even obedience to, tradition. Though Blumenberg’s paper was published in 1957, meaning this passage was likely not directed at Gadamer *per se*, this criticism would certainly apply to Gadamer’s hermeneutics since, as we discussed, his conception of listening does involve a positive stance toward tradition.²⁷⁹ Furthermore, Blumenberg claims that this acceptance of tradition cannot be justified, and even hints that such an acceptance would be irrational. Perhaps, taking our cue from the phenomenology of the senses alluded to earlier, we could liken this passive acceptance of tradition to the experience of feeling overwhelmed by a particularly loud sound. Listening to a loud sound that you cannot stop yourself from hearing is not the same as assenting to hearing that sound, let alone finding the sound aesthetically pleasing or rationally subscribing to what the sound says. Heidegger seems to lend credence to Blumenberg’s criticism when he describes “hearing [*Hören*]” as “an obedient heeding of what appears [*das gehorsame Achten auf das Erscheinende*]” (P 59/GA9 74). Gadamer

²⁷⁸ “Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Concept Formation,” 48-49. Another version of this criticism, more explicitly directed at Heidegger and Gadamer, is offered by Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory*, 285-286.

²⁷⁹ The major difference between Gadamer and Blumenberg, personally and intellectually, concerned Heidegger. As Gadamer wrote to Blumenberg in a letter dated August 13, 1967, “What I regret is that you appear to have no idea of what the late Heidegger is doing” (quoted in Joe Paul Kroll, *A Human End to History? Blumenberg, Karl Löwith and Carl Schmitt on Secularization and Modernity*, 37).

sounds a similar note when he construes phenomenology as “faithful to givenness” (HS 318). These formulations accord with the auditory model of a phenomenological hermeneutics of faith or trust that we elucidated in §4.1.2, and furthermore, these invocations of obedience and faithfulness support Blumenberg’s politicized characterization of hermeneutics. For Blumenberg, auditory and aural metaphors at bottom imply a fundamentally conservative acceptance of tradition.

These are powerful and potentially far-reaching criticisms. Once read in light of the prevailing trend among commentators to interpret Gadamer as anti-ocular, Blumenberg’s critique of metaphors of listening suggests that Gadamer’s predominantly aural and auditory hermeneutics is by implication conservative in the face of the call of tradition. His predilection for aural and auditory metaphors and concepts signals this putatively conservative valence to Gadamer’s work. But what if Gadamer’s hermeneutics were not, in fact, anti-ocular?²⁸⁰ As I showed in §4.1.2, his writings certainly contain a great number of importantly aural and auditory metaphors. But Blumenberg’s suggestion that metaphors of listening and seeing can only compete with one another does not stand up to scrutiny. In fact, I will show that, alongside these aural and auditory elements of his thinking, Gadamer retrieves numerous important guiding metaphors that are crucially ocular in orientation. I hope finally to show that this overlooked ocular valence of Gadamer’s thought rebuts Blumenberg’s critique of the aural and auditory conservatism of hermeneutics. To that end, we will revisit Blumenberg’s objection in more detail at the very end of this chapter. To the extent that Gadamer’s hermeneutics is not hostile to the ocular, his position ultimately avoids the charge of conservatism advanced by

²⁸⁰ Georgia Warnke argues that Gadamer develops a mode of “social and ethical perception” that is ocularcentric in a non-deleterious form (“Ocularcentrism and Social Criticism,” 289). Warnke’s idea that Gadamer’s thought is compatible with ocular metaphors helped inspire my argument in this chapter.

Blumenberg. But before I make that case, I must demonstrate the connection between ocular metaphors of vision and modernity, a connection that will further clarify the stakes of Gadamer's rehabilitation of the ocular. Let us now turn to that issue.

§4.2: Modern ocularcentrism

§4.2.1: Ocularcentrism and the Western tradition

In this section, I shall defend, as a premise in the overall argument of this chapter, the following proposition: If Gadamer retrieves guiding ocular metaphors, then that signals his wider rehabilitation of the modern age. In other words, since modernity evinces a visual bias, Gadamer remains within the bounds of modern thought to the extent that his thinking continues to contain ocular themes and concepts. Like his retrieval of epistemic figures, Gadamer's positive invocation of guiding ocular metaphors functions within his larger project of positively engaging with the intellectual movements of the modern age. My goal now, then, is to explicate the visual orientation of modernity as another aspect of the context and background of Gadamer's employment of ocular concepts and metaphors.

Intellectual historians refer to the hegemony of vision in Western thought and culture as *ocularcentrism*. According to many writers, ocularcentrism pervades the entirety of the Western tradition and so provides our intellectual culture with many of its guiding metaphors. Heidegger influentially articulated this provocative and expansive thesis in *Being and Time*: "From the beginning [*Anfang*] onwards the tradition of philosophy has been oriented primarily toward 'seeing' as a way of access to entities *and to being*" (BT 187/SZ 147). Vision provides metaphysics with its model for how we achieve contact with what matters. David Espinet affirms this claim in his study of ocularcentrism, which he defines as "a vast and fundamental philosophical investment of

visual experience.”²⁸¹ As Hans Jonas puts this point in his phenomenology of vision, “Since the days of Greek philosophy sight has been hailed as the most excellent of the senses. The noblest activity of the mind, *theoria*, is described in metaphors mostly taken from the visual sphere.”²⁸² According to Heidegger’s narrative, followed by Espinet and Jonas, from Plato’s Allegory of the Cave to Descartes’s attention to clear and distinct ideas appearing before the mind’s eye and beyond, Western philosophy privileges sight as human beings’ chief avenue toward knowledge, truth, and freedom: “Ever since [Plato], there has been a striving for ‘truth’ in the sense of the correctness of the gaze [*Blickens*] and the correctness of its point of view [*Blickstellung*]” (P 179/GA9 234). The allegedly ocularcentric orientation of Western metaphysics means that the tradition employs metaphors of vision to describe our relationship to and investigation of the fundamental nature of reality. Ocularcentrism refers to what Heidegger criticizes as “the remarkable priority of ‘seeing’” in the Western intellectual tradition (BT 215/SZ 171).

For his part, Gadamer evokes the classical Greek heritage of ocularcentrism in his phenomenology of the beautiful at the end of *Truth and Method*: “Beauty has the mode of being of *light*. This means not only that without light nothing beautiful can appear, that nothing can be beautiful. It also means that the beauty of a beautiful thing appears in it *as light*, as a radiance” (TM 477/GW1 486). Gadamer employs these ocular metaphors of radiance and light as descriptions of the beautiful to connect his theses of the speculative character of language and of understanding as having the character of a happening (see §2.2.2 and §4.3.3) with a Platonic, and therefore pre-modern, historical and conceptual background. In this invocation of light, we already see how Gadamer’s purportedly anti-

²⁸¹ “In the Shadow of Light: Listening, the Practical Turn of Phenomenology, and Metaphysics of Sight,” 184.

²⁸² *The Phenomenon of Life*, 135. See also Blumenberg, “Light as a Metaphor for Truth,” 46.

ocular stance appears simplistically one-sided. This phenomenology of the radiance of beauty demands attention.²⁸³ I will not, however, provide such an analysis in this chapter, for two reasons. First, *radiance* and *light* constitute metaphors that are far more amorphous, and harder to locate historically and specify conceptually, even than the three other ocular metaphors I will analyze in this chapter. This fact makes the metaphors of radiance and light difficult to fit into my analytical scheme. Second, I intend to place Gadamer's thought within the context of ocularcentrism understood not as a feature of Western culture in general—which, if Heidegger and other writers are to be believed, traces its origins at least as far back as Plato—but rather of the modern age in particular.

§4.2.2: Modernity's ocularcentric world picture

To what extent, then, does ocularcentrism qualify as a specifically modern phenomenon—and hence as a source of some of the guiding metaphors of the modern age? In his extensive and magisterial treatment of the reactions against ocularcentrism in twentieth-century thought and culture, in which both Heidegger and Gadamer figure as prominent protagonists who contribute original ways of thinking about the meaning of human vision, Martin Jay underscores the ocularcentric orientation of the modern age:

The dawn of the modern era was accompanied by the vigorous privileging of vision. From the curious, observant scientist to the exhibitionist, self-displaying courtier, from the private reader of printed books to the painter of perspectival landscapes, from the map-making colonizer of foreign lands to the quantifying businessman guided by instrumental rationality, modern men and women opened their eyes and beheld a world unveiled to their eager gaze.²⁸⁴

²⁸³ For an excellent discussion of this issue, see Daniel L. Tate, "Renewing the Question of Beauty: Gadamer on Plato's Idea of the Beautiful," 21-41.

²⁸⁴ *Downcast Eyes*, 69. See also his "The Rise of Hermeneutics and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism," 308-309.

The widespread valorization of vision that was born with ancient Greek thinking persists well into the European modernity that began with the Renaissance, finding expression not only in philosophy but also in politics, commerce, and even leisure. Furthermore, as Jay points out, the arts and sciences, in particular, paradigmatically exemplify this ocularcentric character of Early Modern culture.²⁸⁵ In his theoretical writings outlining painting as a science (*scientia*) of vision, for example, Leonard da Vinci explicitly argues that “the eye is less deluded in its workings than any other sense.”²⁸⁶ And in his reorientation of the natural sciences in the *Novum Organon*, Bacon proclaims the need to ground scientific activity in perceptually grounded inductive observation, citing the eyes as a paradigm: “For we use the evidence of our own eyes, or at least our own perception, in everything, and apply the strictest criteria in accepting things” (NO 21). Attention to the intellectual and philosophical currents of modernity reveals this shockingly widespread bias toward vision that gets called ocularcentrism.

While the account I have sketched so far hints at the pervasiveness of ocularcentrism in modern culture, it still lacks sufficient analytical detail and precision. To fill in this lacuna, let us turn to Heidegger’s critique of ocularcentrism. As we have seen, Heidegger identified an ocular bias in the history of Western metaphysics in *Being and Time*, leading Jonas to recall: “The appearance of *Being and Time* in the year 1927 turned out to be [the] earthquake affecting the philosophy of our century...It shattered the entire quasi-optical model of a primarily *cognitive* consciousness, focusing instead on the willful, striving, feeble, and mortal ego.”²⁸⁷ But it was not until the appearance of “The

²⁸⁵ In addition to other sources, Jay also highlights Leonardo and Bacon at *Downcast Eyes*, 44 and 64.

²⁸⁶ *Leonardo on Painting*, 18.

²⁸⁷ *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good After Auschwitz*, 44.

Age of the World Picture” in 1938 that Heidegger would provide a detailed historical account of the role of the ocular in modern culture in particular:

Where the world becomes picture, entities as a whole are set in place as that for which man is prepared; that which, therefore, he correspondingly intends to bring before him, have before him, and thereby, in a decisive sense, place before him. . . Understood in an essential way, world picture [*Weltbild*] does not mean picture of the world [*ein Bild von der Welt*] but, rather, the world grasped as picture [*die Welt als Bild*]. (OBT 67/GA5 89)

The world picture refers, then, to the ontology characteristic of modernity that depicts subjects standing separate from objects mediated by mental representations. When Heidegger talks about the modern world picture, he thereby means that the world external to my subjective consciousness is understood as mediated to and present before me only as a series of mental representations of objects. Reality is comprehended, then, primarily in terms of my access to it as a representational picture. Heidegger’s account of the modern world picture avowedly charges modernity with ocularcentrism in the sense that the overwhelming emphasis of this ontology is on the particularly ocular concepts of *representation* and *picturing*. And to the extent that ocularcentrism names an illegitimate bias, this also means that the modern world picture crowds out other legitimate but marginalized ways of understanding the nature of reality—such as, for example, in terms of the hermeneutical metaphors of hearing and listening.²⁸⁸

When entities get set before me as representations distinct from my subjective domain of consciousness, those entities become open to my will to manipulate and control them: “The fundamental occurrence of modernity [*Der Grundvorgang der Neuzeit*] is the conquest of the world as picture. From now on the word ‘picture’ means: the collective image of representing production. Within this, man fights for the position

²⁸⁸ Suggestions to this effect are given by Blumenberg, “Light as a Metaphor for Truth,” 48-49; and Jay, “The Rise of Hermeneutics and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism,” 315.

in which he can be that entity who gives to every entity the measure and draws up the guidelines” (OBT 71/GA5 94). Conceiving of entities as intelligibly accessible to my consciousness as mental representations, as part of a picture, provides the ontological distance between subject and object that makes theoretical knowledge of objects possible. Since entities stand separate from me, they become, from my point of view, objective. Jonas succinctly makes this point: “The gain [involved in sight] is the concept of objectivity, of the thing as it is in itself as distinct from the thing as it affects me, and from this distinction arises the whole idea of *theoria* and theoretical truth.”²⁸⁹ The overwhelming emphasis on vision in the modern conception of the world as a picture or representation is therefore of a piece with seventeenth-century scientific innovations.

Since the subject/object dichotomy of the modern world picture provides an ontological foundation for the distance between a detached observer and the object observed and mediated through a mental representation, this conception provides the proper conceptual framework for the modern quest for theoretical knowledge, and subsequently practical manipulation, of that object. Vision lends itself to the ideal of objective and theoretical knowledge of entities, which further indicates the possibility of manipulating and controlling entities: “The essence of value [*Wertes*] is based on its being a viewpoint [*Gesichtspunkt*]... Value is the point of sight [*Augenpunkt*] for a seeing that has its eye on something [*ein Sehen, das es auf etwas absieht*]” (OBT 170/GA5 227). When entities are referred to me through my local and contingent point of sight, then their significance and worth becomes a value, which for Heidegger means that their reason for being now depends on my subjective point of view. Without my access to them through sight and mental representations, entities would not matter for me at all.

²⁸⁹ *The Phenomenon of Life*, 147.

This ocularcentric ontological conception suggests the desirability of approaching entities to manipulate them for my own purposes. In this way, ocularcentrism implies modern nihilism (see §1.2.6). In connecting it with the subject/object dichotomy and with natural science, Heidegger identifies a distinctively modern instantiation of ocularcentrism.

§4.2.3: Gadamer's persistent ocular metaphors

Heidegger's account of modern ocularcentrism as "the age of the world" picture provides, as Gadamer admits in recognizing the importance of that essay, the context within which to understand Gadamer's treatment of the ocular (RPJ 28/GW2 496). In Heidegger's idea of the world picture, we detect a number of themes from Gadamer's inheritance of Heidegger's critique of modernity. The ocularcentrism Heidegger criticizes, which conceives the world in terms of representations, forms part of the tapestry of the features of modernity Gadamer joins Heidegger in criticizing—epistemology, the subject/object dichotomy, scientific method, and the technological manipulation of nature. Gadamer's emphasis on listening and hearing must be understood against the backdrop of this account of modernity's ocularcentric bias. But as we shall see, Gadamer ultimately does not evince as intensely an anti-ocular attitude as Heidegger does. Rather, in his constructive engagement with ocular metaphors and currents of thought, most of which simply get ignored by the strongly anti-ocularcentric Heidegger, Gadamer strays from his teacher's path so as to forge his own. (Recall §2.1.3.)

In the modern age of the world picture, as in every epoch of Western thought, ocular metaphors and concepts—such as variations on *looking*, *insight*, *shining*, *point of view*, *clarity*, *imagery*, to name only a few—emerge as remarkably dominant throughout

our philosophical, intellectual, and cultural lexicons.²⁹⁰ It should not come as a surprise, then, that even in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics ocular metaphors and concepts should recur. For example, mere paragraphs before he describes hermeneutics as rigorous and uninterrupted listening in *Truth and Method* (a passage I considered in §4.1.2), Gadamer describes Platonic dialectic, which he evokes to outline his conception of hermeneutical experience, in ocular terms: "Here, then, the dialectic is *negative*; it confuses one's opinions. But this kind of confusion means at the same time a clarification [*Klärung*], for it opens one's eyes to the matter [*denn sie legt den angemessenen Blick auf die Sache frei*]" (TM 460/GW1 468). In this passage, which recalls his theory of the negativity of experience (see §3.4.2), Gadamer, who allegedly conceives of hermeneutics in terms of listening, employs *clarity* and the *opening of one's eyes* as ocular terms of approbation for understanding. Furthermore, at significant autobiographical moments, Gadamer appeals to ocular metaphors, such as in the following moving passage from 1999: "Between the year 1900, when Nietzsche closed his eyes and I saw the light of day [*in dem Nietzsche die Augen schloß und ich das Licht der Welt erblickte*], and today lie the lifetimes of four generations, the historical upheavals and catastrophes of our century" (HE 134). Gadamer describes the movement of his own life, and his ambivalent attitude toward Nietzsche's life and legacy (§2.3.3), with images of light and of the eye. He again employs ocular imagery in 1964 to describe one of the most crucial events in his entire life and career, namely, his first encounters with Heidegger:

If one wants to stick with the physiognomical, the first time one caught a glimpse of [Heidegger's] eyes one knew who he was and is: a visionary [*Sehender*]. A thinker who sees. Indeed, as I see it the basis for Heidegger's uniqueness among all of the philosophical teachers of our

²⁹⁰ See Jay's discussion of this pervasiveness at *Downcast Eyes*, 2. See also Lars-Olof Åhlberg, "Modernity and Ocularcentrism: A Second Look at Descartes and Heidegger," 9-10.

times is that the things, which he portrays in a language that is highly unconventional and that offends all “cultivated [*gebildeten*]” expectations, are always depicted in a way in which they can be seen intuitively. And this “seeing” occurs not only in momentary evocations in which a striking word is found and an intuition flashes for a fleeting moment. The entire conceptual analysis is not presented as an argued progression from one concept to another; rather, the analysis is made by approaching the same [thing] from the most diverse perspectives, thus giving the conceptual description the character of the plastic arts, that is, the three-dimensionality of tangible reality...He saw what he was thinking, and he made us see. (HW 17-18/GW3 188)

In this richly literary and evocative passage, Heidegger’s reputation as an anti-ocularcentric thinker appears in an entirely new light. Gadamer professes to understand Heidegger’s identity as a teacher, a practitioner of the phenomenological method, and a writer in ocular terms. For Gadamer, Heidegger enabled his students to see in a new way; he provided them with radically new perspectives; he gave phenomena a concreteness comparable to three-dimensional objects before one’s gaze. Gadamer’s description applies not only to the intellectual way of seeing Heidegger’s phenomenology made possible, but also more literally to Heidegger’s physical eyes, which evidently moved Gadamer so much that he remembered them more than four decades after his first encounter with his mentor. Gadamer’s incredibly poignant portrait of Heidegger is radically ocular in orientation. For Gadamer, Heidegger is “a thinker who sees.”

Given the anti-ocular tendencies in Gadamer’s thought, how should we understand his continued employment of ocular concepts and metaphors? I mention this at least occasional ocular strain in his writings in the context of my discussion of modern ocularcentrism because the overwhelmingly ocularcentric character of modern thought could potentially explain these passages. Using that line of argument, Jay reconciles the anti-ocularcentric positions of Heidegger and Gadamer with the persistence of ocular

concepts and metaphors in their writing, which he claims “might be attributed more to the pervasiveness of ocular metaphors in Western languages than to any deep-seated affinity between vision and interpretation.”²⁹¹ Any ocular concepts or metaphors in Gadamer can be explained as more or less coincidental, ascribed perhaps to the amorphous currents of modernity I pointed toward earlier and not to any specific and substantive features of his thought. Such a reading finds support in the widespread understanding of Gadamer as actively anti-ocular. In the remainder of this chapter, I shall demonstrate that Gadamer’s ocular imagery is much more than merely incidental. As Heidegger argued, guiding ocular metaphors help shape modernity’s self-image. Thus, Gadamer’s employment of ocular figures functions within his rehabilitation of modernity.

§4.3: Guiding ocular metaphors

§4.3.1: Infinity

I shall now argue that Gadamer rehabilitates three modern guiding metaphors that possess a distinctly ocular valence. For all of these guiding ocular metaphors, I will proceed, first, to motivate their rootedness in the history of modern thought, then suggest the way Gadamer criticizes what he identifies as their most damaging features, and finally demonstrate how he nonetheless positively evokes these modern guiding metaphors within his own thinking by cultivating what he finds most true in them. I shall begin with the concept of infinity. Here we take our cue from the notion that the modern age in Europe represents a shift, to borrow the title of the landmark study by Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*. According to many readers, Nicholas of Cusa evoked this epochal cosmological shift in 1440 with his metaphor of a moving ship:

²⁹¹ “The Rise of Hermeneutics and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism,” 320.

It is already clear to us that the earth, in truth, is moved, yet it may not appear this way to us, since we detect motion only by a comparison to a fixed point. How would a passenger know that one's ship was being moved, if one did not know that the water was flowing past and if the shores were not visible from the ship in the middle of the water? Since it always appears to every observer, whether on the earth, the sun, or another star, that one is, as if, at an immovable center of things and that all else is being moved, one will always select different poles in relation to oneself, whether one is on the sun, the earth, the moon, Mars, and so forth. Therefore, the world machine will have, one might say, its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere, for its circumference and center is God, who is everywhere and nowhere. (OLI 160-161)

Unlike the medieval Christian model of a universe in which human beings find themselves at home because they stand at the natural center of all things as ordained by God, Cusa proposes instead that this all too human perspective (already we see hints of the second ocular metaphor we shall consider subsequently) is limited and arbitrary.²⁹² That self-conception with which we ordinarily operate, according to which the earth stands at the center of the whole universe, is as false and one-sided as the perceptual illusion that a ship on which we are sailing is the unmoving center of a landscape. Such a world picture illegitimately elevates human beings and our perspective on reality as cosmologically primary. The fact of the matter, Cusa insists, is that the universe, like the God who made it, has no center at all. The universe is, rather, an unbounded space. This move, as Gadamer recognizes in his discussion of Cusa, anticipates modern cosmological science by providing “a spiritual preparation for the new astronomy and physics” (NCP 72/GW4 298). In a crucial addition to this cosmology, an infinite and boundless space can have no center, as Descartes would come to conclude two centuries later:

We recognize that this world, that is the whole universe of corporeal substance, has no limits to its extension. For no matter where we imagine the boundaries to be, there are always some indefinitely extended spaces

²⁹² On Cusa's argument, see Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, 32-33; Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, 13-25; and Paul Redding, *Hegel's Hermeneutics*, 24-28.

beyond them, which we not only imagine but perceive to be imaginable in a true fashion, that is, real. And it follows that these spaces contain corporeal substance which is indefinitely extended. (CSM I 232)

Any limit or boundary that we attempt to assign to the universe from our contingent and limited human point of view always already implies the exceeding of that boundary.²⁹³

Our own partial perspective does not permit us a privileged or fixed point of view on a limitless whole. Proposing a limit suggests the possibility of something that exists beyond that limit. Cusa's claim that the world "cannot be conceived as finite, since it lacks boundaries within which it is enclosed" eventually helped provide modernity with its principal guiding metaphor of an infinite, open, and unbounded universe (OLI 158). The modern age thus thinks the universe as boundless and infinite, and this boundlessness implies the lack of an absolute or privileged point of view that humans could access.

As Cusa's metaphor of the ship indicates in its reference to a putatively false human point of view, and as Descartes also suggests when he points out that no boundary we imagine can be metaphysically definitive, this cosmological shift has enormous implications for our human self-understanding. In his classic study of the Copernican Revolution, Thomas Kuhn encapsulates these ramifications: "An infinite space has no center: every point is equally distant from all points on the periphery. And if there is no center, there is no preferred point... Thus the earth's uniqueness vanishes; the peripheral force that drives the whole disappears with it; man and the earth cease to be at the focus of the universe."²⁹⁴ On the basis of scientific advances in cosmology and an accompanying anthropological shift, human beings at the dawn of modernity became unable to conceive of themselves as at the center of the universe, either physically or

²⁹³ See Harries, "Descartes: Seminar Notes," 167-168; and *Infinity and Perspective*, 42-43.

²⁹⁴ *The Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought*, 89.

metaphorically.²⁹⁵ Rather, we collectively came to see ourselves as belonging to a universe that, instead of being our ordained home or the cosmological center, was indifferent to us. An infinite space without a center implies this indifference and this inability to conceive the universe as a home, as Koyré emphasizes: “An indefinite and even infinite universe...implies the discarding by scientific thought of all considerations based upon value-concepts, such as perfection, harmony, meaning and aim, and finally the utter devalorization of being, the divorce of the world of value and the world of facts.”²⁹⁶ By the lights of modern cosmological science, we are drifting within an endless and centerless space devoid of any metaphysical hierarchy or prescribed order, and thereby indifferent to human beings and their particular way of life.

This historical sketch provides the essential background against which I shall situate Gadamer’s treatment of infinity. Before turning to Gadamer, I wish also to underscore the ocular valence of infinity. The quoted passages from Cusa and Descartes both crucially explicate infinity in terms of human perception. Making a salient phenomenological point, Hans Jonas further underscores the connection between our concept of infinity and vision: “This indefinite ‘and so on’ with which visual perception is imbued, an ever-ready potential for realization, and especially the ‘and so on’ in depth, is the birthplace of the idea of infinity.”²⁹⁷ The eye furnishes us with the possibility of a horizon that extends indefinitely into space. Jonas argues that vision enables human beings to think of a space without limit or boundary. While the eye may never glimpse true or literal infinity (if such a concept is indeed even humanly intelligible, an issue to

²⁹⁵ On the historiography of conceiving of Cusa as auguring the end of the medieval period and the beginning of the modern one, see Michael Edward Moore, *Nicholas of Cusa and the Kairos of Modernity: Cassirer, Gadamer, Blumenberg*, 1-28.

²⁹⁶ *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, 4.

²⁹⁷ *The Phenomenon of Life*, 150.

which we shall return), nonetheless the ordinary visual perception of horizons stretching out into the distance implants in us the concept of a horizon without limit. The cosmology codified by Cusa and Descartes demonstrates the modern roots of infinity, while this phenomenological observation about the way vision enables us to think infinity points to its ocular resonances. Infinity serves as a modern and ocular guiding metaphor.

How does Gadamer react to infinity in this dually modern and ocular sense? Before explaining his positive rehabilitation, let us begin with any negative critique Gadamer might have of infinity. One point of departure for addressing this issue could be the ubiquitous emphasis in Gadamer's thinking on human finitude: "What I believe to have understood through Heidegger (and what I can testify to from my Protestant background) is, above all, that philosophy must learn to do without the idea of an infinite intellect. I have attempted to draw up a corresponding hermeneutics" (CWM 10). Against any striving for transcendence—that is, contact with an infinite God—hermeneutical thinking insistently begins, following Heidegger, rather from the facticity of human nature. This negative stance toward infinity remains, for our purposes, however, insufficiently precise, since it does not appear to be directed toward the specifically modern and ocular notion of infinity that we previously emphasized.

A more promising beginning for understanding how Gadamer critically approaches infinity would proceed from his phenomenological conception of the relation between the human lifeworld and scientific knowledge: "But we cannot escape the lifeworld as a fundamental condition [*Bedingtheit*]. Our task remains to integrate and subordinate the theoretical knowledge and the technical possibilities of human beings to their 'praxis'" (EPH 216/GW10 233). As we have discussed, Gadamer follows Heidegger

in thinking that the findings of modern natural science frequently represent an alienation from how human beings typically experience things (§2.2.3). Philosophy, on Gadamer's account, must integrate the legitimate conclusions of the natural sciences with the ordinary human practice that we cannot escape: "*The central question of the modern age—a question posed for us by the existence of modern science... is the question of how our natural view of the world—the experience of the world that we have as we simply live out our lives—is related to the unassailable and anonymous authority that confronts us in the pronouncements of science*" (PH 3/GW2 219). As Husserl stressed in *The Crisis of European Sciences*, philosophy can neither ignore natural science nor uncritically accept its findings as definitive for or constitutive of our experience. Instead, whenever a chasm opens up between these two domains, philosophy must responsibly integrate them.

The infinity of space represents one such conclusion of modern natural science that confronts and challenges our ordinary experience, as Descartes emphasized: "For the idea of the infinite, if it is to be a true idea, cannot be grasped at all, since the impossibility of being grasped is contained in the formal definition of the infinite" (CSM II 253). Descartes acknowledges that our finite understanding cannot, by definition, genuinely grasp the idea of infinity. The more phenomenological way to put Descartes's point, to which Gadamer would assent by his own lights, is to say that in ordinary experience, we do not encounter infinite space. Rather, we more typically find ourselves occupying spaces whose dimensions we consider humanly intelligible, such as an ordinary room or a visual landscape in which we stand. In contrast to precisely quantified measures of distance, furthermore, we often speak of distance in terms of human measures, such as a stone's throw. Such examples constitute what we might call the

phenomenological concept of space. A universe of infinite and boundless scope, on the other hand, which we can identify as part of a *scientific concept of space*, may become intellectually intelligible to us by means of the idioms of modern cosmology and physics, but the idea of infinite space still does not constitute a domain with which we are phenomenologically and ordinarily acquainted. This Gadamerian response to modern science's thinking of infinite space does justice to the feeling of a loss of at-homeness that many other writers have observed at the heart of the movement from the closed world to the infinite universe.²⁹⁸ Gadamer could only agree with the claim that the infinite universe does not represent a place in which we can genuinely feel at home.

From Gadamer's point of view, the modern concept of infinity could represent only an alienation from our recognizable and ordinary experience of space in the lifeworld: "The sun has not ceased to set for us, even though the Copernican explanation of the universe has become part of our knowledge" (TM 445/GW1 452). While emphasizing the phenomenological experience of orienting ourselves in the universe, Gadamer stresses that we still cannot abandon or delegitimize the findings of cosmological science. How, then, shall we philosophically integrate the scientific and phenomenological concepts of space?²⁹⁹ To answer this question, we must turn finally to Gadamer's positive retrieval of infinity, where we find echoes of the modern scientific-ocular concept. Gadamer appeals to the figure of infinity at key moments throughout his corpus, including as a way of underlining the overall goal or ambition of his thinking:

²⁹⁸ Here I follow Harries: "We moderns no longer experience our world as a well-ordered cosmos, resembling a house that shelters and grants us place" (*Infinity and Perspective*, 5). As examples of this dissatisfaction, he cites texts by Nietzsche, Pascal, Rilke, Schopenhauer, and Turgenev.

²⁹⁹ Gaston Bachelard asks a similar question in his discussion of the "intimate immensity" of daydreaming that brings forth a notion of infinity that is not geometrical or scientific (*The Poetics of Space*, 190).

I could, in fact, say, as a first determination of the site of my own effort at thinking, that I have taken it on myself to restore to a place of honor what Hegel termed “bad infinity [*schlechten Unendlichkeit*]”—but with a decisive modification, of course. For in my view, the infinite [*unendliche*] dialogue of the soul with itself which is thinking is not properly characterized as an endlessly refined determination of the objects that we are seeking to know... Rather, here I think Heidegger showed me a new way [*Weg*] when, as a preparation for posing the question of being in a new way, he turned to a critique of the metaphysical tradition—and in so doing he found himself “on the way to language.” This way [*Weg*] of language is not absorbed in making judgments and examining their claims to objective validity; rather, it is a way of language that constantly holds itself open to the whole [*Ganze*] of being. (RPJ 37/GW2 505-506)

Since this lengthy passage’s invocation of the “bad infinity” points the way toward Gadamer’s appeals to infinity in general, it demands our attention. What is meant by the Hegelian “bad infinity”? For Hegel, infinity in the bad sense, exemplified in an infinite number line in mathematics, simply goes on and on without end (*un-endlich*).³⁰⁰ Hegelian dialectic seeks to capture an allegedly fuller and more conceptually faithful and positive understanding of the infinite as more than the mere negation of finitude. Gadamer, meanwhile, professes rather to positively reclaim this idea of a process without end in his hermeneutical account of understanding. His alignment of his position with the bad infinite names this reclamation. Gadamer rejects the possibility that understanding can have a teleological end, such as in absolute knowing or in scientific knowledge. For that reason, he follows the later Heidegger’s path in conceiving of thinking as always on the way and never complete or consummated. To that extent, understanding counts as endless or infinite—and always linguistic. Let us now turn to that latter issue.

Gadamer’s invocations of infinity often come paired with references to conversation or dialogue. He refers elsewhere, for example, to the “infinity of the

³⁰⁰ See Wayne Martin, “In Defense of Bad Infinity: A Fichtean Response to Hegel’s *Differenzschrift*,” 168-187. See also Robert B. Pippin, “Gadamer’s Hegel,” 230.

dialogue [*Gesprächs*] in which understanding is achieved [*vollzieht*]” (TM xxxi/GW2 444). We should read such references to the infinity of dialogue in two senses. First, Gadamer models understanding as a metaphorized conversation between a person attempting to understand and the object of their attention, such as a text, artwork, or historical event. In this image, Gadamer combines the aural notion of dialogue with the ocular metaphor of infinity, defying Blumenberg’s claim that these two families of metaphor can only compete with one another (§4.1.3). The fusion of horizons that takes place between a text or artwork and a person (which I shall discuss in more detail in §4.3.2) can be thought of, according to Gadamer, as a kind of dialogue in which both partners challenge each other’s assumptions and surprise each other’s expectations. Unlike in natural science, which aims for unambiguous results, knowledge can never be definitively achieved in hermeneutical dialogue. Instead, as in the Hegelian bad infinity, they simply go on without end, as we see in great works of art that elicit different interpretations and reactions throughout history and even across the course of a human life. Dialogue or conversation thus functions as a model for how understanding works.

The second way to think about Gadamer on the infinity of dialogue refers to his idea that all understanding is linguistic, which he calls “linguisticity” (TM 391/GW1 393). Understanding means attempting to bring meaning into words. Here too infinity plays a role: “The word that interpretatively fits the meaning [*Sinn*] of the text expresses the whole of this meaning—that is, allows an infinity of meaning to be represented within it in a finite way” (TM 461/GW1 469). Our struggle to understandingly come to terms with a text or artwork takes place as grasping for the right word to express that object’s meaning in the course of our conversation with it. For Gadamer, our attempts to articulate

meaning will be endlessly ongoing: “The exhaustion [*Ausschöpfung*] of the true meaning [*Sinnes*] of a text or a work of art never comes to an end somewhere [*kommt nicht irgendwo zum Abschluß*]; it is in fact an infinite [*unendlicher*] process” (TM 298/GW1 303). Here again the Hegelian bad infinite provides a model. The conversation between an object of understanding and the person attempting to understand and put its meaning into words can never end. Gadamer thus claims that human language, or the ongoing attempt to articulate the meaning of some hermeneutically rich and polysemic object, is infinite. He refers to this idea when he discusses “the infinity of possible expression”:

Any language in which we live is infinite in *this* sense, and it is completely mistaken to infer that reason is fragmented because there are various languages. Just the opposite is the case. Precisely through our finitude, the particularity of our being, which is evident even in the variety of languages, the infinite dialogue is opened in the direction of the truth that we are. (PH 16/GW2 230)

Here Gadamer follows the later Heidegger in thinking of human language as irreducibly polysemic.³⁰¹ The “conversation that we are” (Hölderlin) or the “conversation of mankind” (Rorty) is an endless, ongoing, and multi-partnered dialogue in which new meanings constantly emerge, challenge old ones, and find themselves eventually contested in turn (TM 370/GW1 383).³⁰² To the extent that human language, expression, and creativity count as ineluctably multiple and diverse, Gadamer aligns this pluralistic conception of conversation or dialogue with infinity, as Jacques Derrida underscores in an admiring reflection on Gadamer’s hermeneutics of poetry: “This response, this responsibility, can be pursued to infinity, in uninterrupted fashion, going from meaning to

³⁰¹ See Iain Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 68-72.

³⁰² *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 389-394. Rorty refers to Michael Oakeshott’s “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind” (*Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 197-247). Gadamer quotes Hölderlin’s “*Seit ein Gespräch wir sind*” in the passage referred to above. See also Theodore George, “Are We a Conversation? Hermeneutics, Exteriority, and Transmittability,” 331-350.

meaning, from truth to truth, with no calculable law other than that which the letter and the formal arrangement of the poem can assign to it.”³⁰³ As we collectively and constantly struggle to put into words the meaning of history, artworks, texts, and human experiences at large, we find that no word is final or can wholly express these meanings.

The Hegelian bad infinite provides Gadamer with a model for the infinite task of understanding and for the infinity of dialogue. To the extent that Gadamer thinks of human understanding as an infinite dialogue—as an image for hermeneutical understanding, or as a metaphor for the claim that understanding is fundamentally linguistic—we appreciate the centrality of the concept of infinity for Gadamer’s thinking. But we do not yet see the connection between his distinctive version of infinity and the modern–ocular concept we traced earlier in this section. To accomplish this task, we must pay special attention to the particularly spatial resonances contained in Gadamer’s understanding of infinity.³⁰⁴ He draws an important connection between infinite dialogue and the modern concept of space: “The infinite perfectibility [*unendliche Perfektibilität*] of the human experience of the world means that, whatever language we use, we never succeed in seeing anything but an ever more extended aspect, a ‘view [*Ansicht*]’ of the world” (TM 444/GW1 451). This moment recalls the passage quoted earlier in which Gadamer followed Heidegger in thinking that language “holds itself open to the whole of being” (RPJ 37/GW2 506). Now Gadamer emphasizes that language never allows us a complete view of the whole world, but only a partial (albeit genuine) glimpse into it. Language only ever offers human speakers particular perspectives on or views of a reality that necessarily exceeds our finite comprehension and point of view. We shall continue

³⁰³ *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, 152.

³⁰⁴ On hermeneutics and place, see Jeff Malpas, “Placing Understanding/Understanding Place,” 379-391.

exploring this claim in greater detail in our discussion of perspective in the next subsection. (See also my discussion of Gadamer and modern scientific objectivity in §3.4.3.) In the present context, we must grasp the connection that this passage hints at between the infinite task of hermeneutical–linguistic understanding and space. The language we use to continually articulate meaning hence opens up for us a view on reality whenever we try to come up with words to express how and what we perceive. Gadamer likens our articulations of the meaning of the world to seeing a slice of space.

In a text from 1990, Gadamer even more explicitly connects this idea of language as a view on reality with the infinity of space as established by modern science:

The world is there as a horizon. “Horizon” evokes the living experience [*Erfahrung*] we all know. The gaze [*Blick*] is directed to the infinite distance [*Unendliche der Ferne*], and this infinity [*Unendliche*] retreats from every effort, no matter how great. And at every speeding march, new horizons open up. In this sense, the world is a boundless space [*grenzenloser Raum*] for us that we are in the midst of and in which we seek our modest orientation. (GW8 345)

We should hear in this passage’s reference to “boundless space” a distinct echo of modern scientific infinity. This passage phenomenologically describes the way that the world that stands before our gaze can never be taken in with any single human glance. As we repeatedly shift and adjust our point of view, the fact of the world’s enormity that necessarily exceeds our finite and limited perspective becomes increasingly apparent to us. We must conclude that, at least outside of the natural sciences, then, there is no God’s-eye point of view like the one that Thomas Nagel describes in *The View From Nowhere*. Yet Gadamer emphasizes in this passage how the infinite space of the universe can, nevertheless, still become a home for us to the extent that we adjust our points of view, accept our finitude, and attempt to see things as best we can from our standpoint of

unavoidable and linguistic partiality. Gadamer suggests here that the only thing equal to the infinity of space as modeled by modern natural science is the infinity of the dialogue that we are as articulated by philosophical hermeneutics. The infinite conversation that we are measures up, then, to the task of endlessly struggling to put the meaning of an infinite universe into words. Language affords us glimpses into infinite space.

Gadamer's invocation of "boundless space" recalls the modern scientific concept of infinity, and his framing of that issue in terms of our "gaze" on reality evokes the oclarity of infinity. Thus we find Gadamer engaging with both the scientific and ocular valences of infinity. By integrating the phenomenological and scientific concepts of infinity, he comes to terms with the natural sciences *without* eliminating or erasing our phenomenological experience. In a phenomenological vein, he emphasizes our ongoing attempt to articulate meaning in the infinite dialogue of understanding that, like Heidegger, he frequently emphasizes. This infinite task means coming to terms with a world that always exceeds any finite point of view. To that extent, Gadamer accepts and underscores the infinity of space, which is crucially consonant with the scientific and ocular treatment of infinity. In this way, Gadamer rehabilitates the modern scientific and ocular concept of the infinity of the universe by integrating it with the recognizably phenomenological and hermeneutical side of infinity, which finds its basis in our ordinary experience of space and in our dialogically oriented understanding. The infinite task of understanding and dialogue ultimately means coming to terms with infinite space.

§4.3.2: Perspective

Now that we appreciate Gadamer's engagement with infinity, we are ready to consider his treatment of perspective, an ocular concept intimately linked with infinity in the

development of modern thought. As the infinite universe conceptually emerged in science and theology in early modernity, so did the corresponding innovation of the technique of linear perspective in Renaissance painting.³⁰⁵ (On Gadamer and Renaissance humanism, see §3.4.1.) G.E. Lessing provided the definitive definition of perspective when, in the eighteenth century, he called it “the science of representing a number of objects together with the space around them, just as these objects dispersed among various planes of the space, together with their space, would appear to the eye from a single standpoint.”³⁰⁶ This definition points to a number of issues salient for Gadamer’s treatment of perspective. First, Lessing declares that perspective is a science and, indeed, perspective has long been considered a technical device or construction. In 1638, Galileo even lists perspective among the paradigmatic mathematical sciences (EG 349). Gadamer for this reason characterizes the Renaissance as “a time of a vigorous upsurge of enthusiasm for all scientific and mathematical construction [*naturwissenschaftlicher und mathematischer Konstruktionsfreude*]” (RB 7-8/GW8 99). The purpose of perspective, as Lessing intimates, is representational—specifically, to represent nature as it appears to embodied human vision at particular points in space. Erwin Panofsky thus defines perspective, following Lessing, as the construction of “a ‘window,’ and...we are meant to believe we are looking through this window into a space.”³⁰⁷ A painting composed with linear perspective means to scientifically construct an artificial window that gives the viewer a glimpse into one slice of the universe’s infinite space as it would be viewed by the human eye. As cosmological science and theology moved from the closed world to the infinite universe, painting developed a technique for constructing windows onto infinite space.

³⁰⁵ The best treatment of this issue, which is my starting point, is Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, 22-40.

³⁰⁶ Quoted in Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 76-77n5.

³⁰⁷ *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 27.

Gadamer confronts linear perspective in several places, including in a chapter in *Truth and Method* on “The Ontological Valence of the Picture [*Bild*]” (TM 130/GW1 139). This chapter contains a reference to Leon Battista Alberti, the Renaissance theorist of painting who developed a mathematized theory of and philosophical rationale for perspective in his treatise *On Painting* (1435). Reconstructing Gadamer’s discussion of Alberti will uncover his critique of linear perspective. In his chapter on the picture, Gadamer announces his intention to challenge a distinctively modern understanding: “The concept of the picture prevalent in recent centuries cannot automatically be taken as a starting point. Our present investigation seeks to rid itself of that assumption” (TM 132/GW1 141). Gadamer’s discussion is indebted to Heidegger’s “The Age of the World Picture,” which contains one allusion to perspective in painting: “The artwork of the Middle Ages and the absence of a world picture [*Weltbildlosigkeit*] during this age belong together” (OBT 77/GA5 102). For his part, Gadamer identifies the modern conception of the picture with the framed painting in an art gallery: “Thus we make every work of art, as it were, into a picture. By detaching all art from its connections with life and the particular conditions of our approach to it, we frame it like a picture and hang it up” (TM 131/GW1 140). Such a picture is framed in the sense of not only having a physical enclosure, perhaps added by art restoration teams, but also of being meaningfully cut off from the rest of its life as an artwork. A modern picture is independent and separated from the culture that produced it and which it might itself exemplify. A framed picture, fit to be hung on the wall for a detached observer to examine and aesthetically appreciate, lives in the sterile environment of the museum or gallery, tagged with the appropriate title, date, biographical information about the artist,

and historically sensitive description written by a professional curator. That mode of existence is quite different from the context in which, say, an early Renaissance painting of the Madonna by Giotto once lived: “Such a picture, we know very well, has lost its place-in-life [*Sitz im Leben*] in a church or palace or wherever it was once at home” (GR 200/GW8 378). According to Gadamer, the picture in this modern sense entails a problematic conception of the sovereignty of an artwork, namely, its separation from its context as something that exemplifies a culture’s sense of meaning and significance.

In the context of this discussion of modern pictures, Gadamer refers to Alberti:

Contemporary research into the history of art gives us ample evidence that what we call a “picture” has a varied history. The full “sovereignty of a picture” [*Bildhoheit*] (Theodor Hetzer) was not reached until the stage of Western painting that we call the high Renaissance. Here for the first time we have pictures that stand entirely by themselves and, even without a frame and a setting, are in themselves unified and closed structures [*einheitliches und geschlossenes Gebilde*]. For example, in the *concinnitas* that L.B. Alberti requires of a “picture,” we can see a good theoretical expression of the new artistic ideal that governs Renaissance painting. (TM 131/GW1 140)

Gadamer identifies Alberti as articulating a distinctively modern and deleterious form of sovereignty. To clarify this critique, I turn to Alberti’s *On Painting*. He claims the mythological figure Narcissus as the founder of painting: “I used to tell my friends that the inventor of painting... was Narcissus, who was turned into a flower; for, as painting is the flower of all the arts, so the tale of Narcissus fits our purpose perfectly. What is painting but the act of embracing by means of art the surface of the pool?” (OP 61) Alberti emphasizes the connection between painting and surfaces.³⁰⁸ He also says of painters that “their sole object is the representation on this one surface of many different forms of surfaces, just as though this surface which they color were... transparent and like

³⁰⁸ On Alberti’s invocation of Narcissus, see Hubert Damisch, “The Inventor of Painting,” 306-307.

glass” (OP 48). Painting aims to accurately represent nature, as if the painting were a transparent piece of glass. Alberti invokes Narcissus because the surface that painting embraces is one that acts like a mirror. (We shall pursue this idea in §4.3.3.) Perspective in painting serves, as Lessing will also emphasize, a representational function.

Gadamer claims that pictures in Alberti’s mode “stand entirely by themselves” because such paintings constitute accurate and autonomous representations. Perspective paintings construct scenes or images that aspire to be self-enclosed and precise representations of nature. Alberti was so revolutionary in the history of art and aesthetics because he identified the perspectival nature of aesthetic concepts like “accuracy” and “precision.” A painting is accurate and coherent only from the human point of view: “The function of the painter is to draw with lines and paint in colors on a surface any given bodies in such a way that, at a fixed distance and with a certain, determined position of the centric ray, what you see represented appears to be in relief and just like those bodies” (OP 87). Alberti’s mathematical theory of perspective crafts representations that appear realistic from the point of view of the human eye, not as they are apart from human observers.³⁰⁹ Alberti’s pictures follow a representational logic by appearing fully accurate from the human point of view, which makes them complete images that stand on their own when humanly perceived. Perspective mathematically constructs a unitary viewpoint on a scene so it appears as an image would to the human eye, which sets the stage for the problematic form of sovereignty Gadamer imputes to modern pictures. If a picture is a perspectivally accurate representation that stands on its own, then the logical conclusion of such a conception is the gallery painting hanging on the wall that requires no other connection to the outside world than the human observer who appreciates it.

³⁰⁹ See Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, 66.

Gadamer takes perspective as the distinctive innovation of Renaissance painting, but also claims that it “certainly is not the final consummation [*Vollendung*] of pictorial art as such” (GR 198/GW8 375). Perspective counts as an only ambiguous aesthetic triumph because it emphasizes the subjective standpoint at the expense of letting the artwork speak for itself. In making this argument, Gadamer asks us to imagine trying to find the right angle at which to look at a painting or sculpture, and appeals to the experience of circling around an artwork at a museum or gallery to find the optimal vantage point for viewing: “Who dictates the right distance [*Abstand*]? Does one have to choose one’s own standpoint and firmly hold to it? No, one must seek out the point from which ‘it’ best comes forth. This point is not one’s own standpoint” (GR 214/GW8 390). For perspective, the “right distance” is certainly dictated by the limitations and needs of the eye, as Alberti emphasizes: “With change of position, the properties inherent in a surface appear to be altered. These matters are related to the power of vision” (OP 39). The best vantage point at which to view an artwork is the one suited to the human body. But Gadamer suggests that constructing a painting only so a viewer with particular capacities and limitations from some vantage point can see it is subjectivistic. On Gadamer’s understanding, the artwork possesses its own truth that it seeks to communicate. Such a truth is not beholden to the contingencies of human physiology. The point at which the artwork should be viewed is not whatever happens to best suit the human subject, but is rather the one from which the artwork itself demands to be seen.

What does Gadamer mean when he says, “one must seek out the point from which ‘it’ best comes forth”? He repudiates the modern idea, which he imputes elsewhere to Alberti, that a picture is a representational copy of reality: “We are dealing here with

something quite different from the relationship of original and copy [*Abbild und Original*]” (GR 207/GW8 383). Pictures aspire to more than represent: “The picture is an occurrence of being [*Seinsvorgang*]—in it being appears, meaningfully and visibly. The quality of being an original is thus not limited to the ‘copying’ function of the picture” (TM 138/GW1 149). A helpful example that Gadamer provides, even Alberti would recognize, is a portrait, a picture that seems to aim at representational accuracy if any does. But Gadamer insists: “Even when one is dealing with a portrait, and the person portrayed knows and finds the picture to be a likeness, it is still as if one had never seen the person before in quite this way. So much *is* the person it [*So sehr ist er es*]. One has, so to speak, been seen into [*hineingesehen*], and the more one looks, the more ‘it’ comes forth [*herausgekommen*]” (GR 216/GW8 392).³¹⁰ A form of rightness comes forth in a picture, a fundamental truth about what is portrayed that is viewable for the first time in light of the picture. A genuinely revealing portrait presents its subject in a truly new way, but one that reveals something deeply true about the subject that one recognizes. This is what Gadamer means when he calls a picture an “occurrence of being.” Something true comes forth in our viewing of it: “Works of art possess an elevated rank in being [*erhöhten Seinsrang*], and this is seen in the fact that in encountering a work of art we have the experience of something emerging [*Es kommt heraus*]—and this one can call truth” (GR 207/GW8 383-384). Revealing truth in a genuinely new way amounts to more than just accurate representation. It requires bringing something forth that could not be seen any other way. The being of the thing—something true about it that we recognize, but had never quite seen that way before—appears in the picture.

³¹⁰ This passage’s use of “*hineingesehen*” calls to mind Albrecht Dürer’s formulation of perspective from the early sixteenth century: “*Perspectiva* is a Latin word which means ‘seeing through [*Durchsehung*]’” (quoted in Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 27).

A representational copy in Alberti's sense is true to our human mode of vision and experience. But on Gadamer's analysis, pictures reveal things the human eye on its own cannot see for itself under ordinary circumstances:

The divine becomes picturable [*Bildhaftigkeit*] only through the word and picture [*das Bild*]. Thus the religious picture has an exemplary significance. In it we can see without any doubt that a picture is not a copy of a copied being, but is in ontological communion with what is copied. It is clear from this example that art, as a whole and in a universal sense, increases the picturability of being. Word and image are not mere imitative illustrations, but allow what they present to be for the first time fully what it is. (TM 137/GW1 147-148)

The thing portrayed in a picture only achieves its full being in its portrayal. A picture does not just accurately represent reality, but improves our ability to perceive or discern reality. Recall Gadamer's example of the portrait: I can see the subject of a portrait in an improved and deeper light thanks to the painting. By viewing the painting, I now perceive the subject in the fullness of its being; it will be, for me, for the first time fully what it is. Pictures bring a deeper truth to light than could be accessed by human physiology and its attendant perspectival ideal of representational accuracy.

For Gadamer, Alberti's theory of perspective makes paintings into structures that are self-enclosed when they fulfill their function of accurately representing nature according to the limitations of the human body. Gadamer argues that this problematic conception ultimately cuts the picture off from its meaningful context. Such a picture will be an image that exists only in relation to the eye. Yet Gadamer, too, credits pictures with a form of sovereignty: "The picture has its own sovereignty [*Hoheit*]. One says this even about a wonderful still life or a landscape, because in the picture everything is just right [*alles so stimmt*]. This causes one to leave behind every relation to what is copied. This is its 'sovereignty' as a picture [*Bildhoheit*]" (GR 216/GW8 392). Pictures are sovereign, in

a sense different from Alberti's, insofar as they possess their own truth that is more than representational accuracy but is rather a presentation of the being of the thing, which exists independently of human vision. Gadamer's positive notion of sovereignty emphasizes that the picture demands to be seen a certain way because it contains a truth that speaks for itself. On Alberti's view, the best way to view a picture was the optimal vantage point for the human eye, while Gadamer's sovereignty accords preeminence rather to the truth of the picture and whatever way of viewing it requires.

For Alberti, paintings serve as vivid and realistic representations for a human subject. This has the consequence that painting does not represent the features of things as they really are apart from human observers: "Large, small, long, short, high, low, wide, narrow, light, dark, bright, gloomy, and everything of the kind...all these are such as to be known only by comparison" (OP 53).³¹¹ It is only from the perspective of an embodied human perceiver that an object will be "large," "wide," "dark," and so on, and so a convincing painted representation has to accurately depict these qualities only as they appear to us. Alberti readily recognizes that this suggests that perspective entails relativism. In a notable passage, he invokes Protagoras: "As man is the best known of all things to man, perhaps Protagoras, in saying that man is the measure of all things, meant that accidents are duly compared to and known by the accidents in man" (OP 53).³¹² Perspective means the artistic recognition that the human is the measure of all things.

Gadamer departs from Alberti in his opposition to subjectivism. How we view an artwork must not be dictated by the demands of human physiology, but rather by the truth

³¹¹ See Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, 76.

³¹² In a discussion of the many allusions to Protagoras by Renaissance humanists, Charles Trinkaus concludes that Alberti invokes Protagoras because of "the anthropocentric character of Alberti's conception of the artistic act" ("Protagoras in the Renaissance: An Exploration," 198).

the work conveys to us: “The unconcealment of what comes forth is of something that is hidden in the work itself and not in whatever we may say about it” (GR 214/GW8 390). Gadamer emphasizes the conditioning of human understanding by history and language. For him, such factors enable understanding, whereas the limitations of perspective in painting reflect only the arbitrary demands of the human body and the inability of individual human to perceive the whole truth of a scene. Gadamer claims that a scene constructed with perspective represents nothing more than “the contingent [*zufälligen*] selection of reality presented to our view” (RB 88/GW8 319). The truth of a painting rendered with linear perspective is contingent on human physiology. Perspective is also partial in the sense that it constructs a scene to be viewed by a single human observer; the scene of a perspective painting unfolds before the eyes of an individual, situated, embodied observer, which implies the existence of further possible perspectives. In this way, Gadamer provocatively links perspective with the subjectivism of modernity:

Here we truly stand at a beginning of the entire essence of modernity [*an einem Beginn des ganzen neuzeitlichen Wesens*]. One needs only to think of perspective, the great discovery of the age, that worked to shape Western painting up until the threshold of our century. It is more than a discovery of fine art. It attests to a way of thinking. The thought of point of view, of finite, fluctuant, interchangeable point of view, gives an entirely new meaning to the thought of the individual-singular. The individual becomes the complementary concept to the universal. (NCP 76/GW4 302)

Here Gadamer crucially identifies modernity with the emergence of perspective. That a scene should be constructed relative to the limited and arbitrary point of view of an individual human viewer means that perspective expresses the subjectivism of the modern age in general. Perspective embraces the contingent and partial point of view of the atomized subject, which can never fully capture the complete truth of any scene or

image. To that extent, perspective is a harbinger of our subjectivistic modern culture that valorizes individualized forms of human consciousness as constitutive of what counts as intelligible. For this reason, Gadamer is quick to emphasize that linear perspective represents just one episode in the history of painting, preceded and succeeded by compelling alternatives like medieval and modernist art (RB 7-8, 88/GW8 98-99, 319-320). The stakes of Gadamer's sustained confrontation with perspective theory can be traced ultimately to his larger concerns with and objections to modernity in general—namely, its subjectivism, representationalist epistemology, and scientific construction.

Yet Gadamer does not reject the concept of perspective. Indeed, I want rather to insist that he positively retrieves something true from perspective to the extent that his central concept of the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) contains consonances of perspective. Some commentators read Gadamer as a perspectivalist who abjures any absolute point of view.³¹³ He condemns an absolute viewpoint in the strongest possible terms: “Herein lies the limit [*Grenze*], but also the legitimacy, of all ‘practical philosophy’: namely, that it does not claim to raise us to the point where we can freely survey an overarching heaven of values; rather, it exposes the supposed search for such a thing as a self-deception” (HRE 75/GW4 202). “An overarching heaven” amounts to an illusion not only in practical philosophy, where we will not find any final set of moral truths, but also in theoretical philosophy as well, where Gadamer rejects the possibility of the “absolute conception” or “view from nowhere” of modern scientific objectivity. Rather, Gadamer's hermeneutical theory of understanding takes its point of departure from the insight that we always approach objects of interpretation from within our own horizon, a concept that he defines in explicitly ocular terms: “The horizon is the range of

³¹³ For example, see Robert J. Dostal, “In Gadamer's Neighborhood,” 173.

vision [*Gesichtskreis*] that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking consciousness [*Bewußtsein*], we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons, and so forth” (TM 301/GW1 307). Our “range of vision” is always already conditioned by linguistic and historical traditions, or webs of signification and intelligibility, that we inherit and bring to acts of understanding (see §2.2.2). As Alberti’s theory of perspective knew all too well, human vision is limited, partial, one-sided, and embodied. In construing our embeddedness within tradition in terms of horizons, Gadamer aligns his conception of our capacity for understanding with that crucial perspectival insight.

The fusion of horizons is central to Gadamer’s overall conception of understanding, which takes place as a collision between the constellation of intelligibility initially possessed by the understanding person and the tradition embodied by the object of understanding: “*Understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves*” (TM 305/GW1 311). Gadamer thinks of this collision or fusion as a conversation between the person and the object—a text, artwork, or historical event—out of which my understanding dynamically emerges. Gadamer construes the two partners in this hermeneutical fusion in the ocular terms of horizons, that is, as ranges of vision that are partial and incomplete, but that enable us to see a certain delimited field.³¹⁴ Though Gadamer rejects the subjectivism of Alberti, one cannot avoid hearing echoes of perspective theory in his conception of horizons: “Every language is a view of the world [*Weltansicht*]” (TM 438/GW1 445). The language I speak and with which I understand enables me to understandingly come to grips with reality by handing down to me a

³¹⁴ For helpful definitions of Gadamerian horizons, see Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 110-111; and David Vessey, “Gadamer and the Fusion of the Horizons,” 538.

tradition, a situated mode of intelligibly seeing things. I deliberately adopt the ocularcentric language of *seeing* precisely because of Gadamer's own invocation of the ocular metaphors of horizons and of views. Unlike Martin Jay (§4.2.3), I would insist, then, on the more than mere occasionality of these metaphors for hermeneutics.

The fusion of horizons importantly suggests that my way of seeing and understanding does not provide an absolute point of view. We cannot genuinely make sense of a God's-eye viewpoint in terms of horizons: "Those views on the world [*Weltansichten*] are not relative in the sense that one could oppose them to the 'world in itself [*Welt an sich*],' as if the right view from some possible position [*Standorte*] outside the human, linguistic world could discover it in its being-in-itself" (TM 444/GW1 451). The repudiation of this ideal is distinctive of Gadamer's thought.³¹⁵ I would place this passage side-by-side with Alberti's insistence that perspective paintings cannot represent objects as they really are in themselves independently of human observers. Just as perspective can only ever represent things from the point of view of the human eye, so can we only ever understand in virtue of the partial hermeneutical perspectives afforded by language and tradition. In both these formulations, we find an insistence, couched in ocular terms, on the necessary incompleteness and partiality of human points of view as well as on the impossibility of total objectivity. As Karsten Harries insightfully suggests, "the theory of perspective teaches us about the logic of appearance, of phenomena. In this sense the theory of perspective is phenomenology."³¹⁶ Employing ocular metaphors, Gadamerian phenomenological hermeneutics and Albertian perspective theory count as cousins in their mutual insistence on the situatedness of human understanding and vision.

³¹⁵ An outstandingly clear discussion of why Gadamer rejects the possibility of abandoning all perspectives is in Taylor's paper "Comparison, History, Truth" (*Philosophical Arguments*, 146-164).

³¹⁶ *Infinity and Perspective*, 69.

As my delineation of Gadamer's forceful objections to Renaissance perspective and to Alberti's theory shows, I do not identify Gadamerian hermeneutics with perspective theory. Rather, I suggest that Gadamer's repudiation of perspective does not go all the way down since he, too, emphasizes the perspectival nature of understanding:

Just as the individual is never simply an individual because he is always in understanding with others, so too *the closed horizon* [geschlossene Horizont] *that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction*. The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint [Standortgebundenheit], and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving. Thus the horizon of the past [*Vergangenheit*horizont], out of which all human life lives and which exists in the form of tradition, is always in motion. (TM 303/GW1 309)

Gadamer stresses that we should not be misled into thinking that horizons denote closed off or atomized points of view.³¹⁷ Rather, the fusion of horizons names a dynamic interplay between perspectives, which is why he construes the concept in terms of motion and movement. In understanding, horizons move toward (or away from) one another. He once again phenomenologically evokes the ocularity of horizons when he says that they “change for a person who is moving,” and refers in particular to standpoints. This passage usefully also highlights the difference between Albertian perspective theory and Gadamerian hermeneutics. Renaissance perspective “may be said to help usher in what Heidegger called ‘The Age of the World Picture,’” as Harries proposes, because of its presaging of a subject/object dichotomy in its conception of a representing eye opposite objects in nature.³¹⁸ The fusion of horizons repudiates this modern dichotomy by insisting

³¹⁷ This claim bears comparison with Donald Davidson's rejection of conceptual schemes. On parallels between Gadamer and Davidson, see the essays collected in Malpas, ed., *Dialogues with Davidson: Acting, Interpreting, Understanding*.

³¹⁸ *Infinity and Perspective*, 77.

on the interactive and dynamic dialogue and mutual challenging and interchange that take place between points of view in genuine understanding. Gadamer calls attention to these aspects of understanding in his emphasis on movement and motion. Individual or subjective perspectives do not exhaust what is real or true; rather, the dynamic fusion between horizons produces understanding and overcomes our relegation to subjectivism.

In his development of the fusion of horizons and discussions associated with that concept, Gadamer prominently deploys ocular metaphors. Here again we find evidence that complicates the anti-ocular reading of Gadamer with which we began this chapter. Furthermore, though he repeatedly criticizes perspective in painting and Alberti's philosophical–mathematical rationale for it, Gadamer shares with Alberti an emphasis on the perspectival limitations of human understanding and vision, respectively. We should conclude in the case of perspective, then, that Gadamer yet again rehabilitates a distinctively modern guiding metaphor, this time with its roots in the Italian Renaissance. Gadamer repudiates the valences of perspective theory that he associates with modern subjectivism and scientific construction, but then retrieves from perspective theory its emphasis on the perspectival partiality and the finitude of human cognition.

§4.3.3: Mirroring

Gadamer prominently rehabilitates a third and final guiding ocular metaphor, namely, mirroring. Like infinity and perspective, the ocular motif of the mirror recurs throughout the development of modern thought. The prominence of the mirror as a metaphor in scientific, philosophical, and theological writings from early modernity owes itself to the technical innovation, and eventually the proliferation among the European merchant classes and aristocracy, of glass crystal mirrors during the Italian Renaissance, which

replaced older and less accurate metal mirrors.³¹⁹ This striking technological invention, which impressed so many observers at the time, signaled a significant metaphorical shift in human self-understanding, which Benjamin Goldberg summarizes as “a worldly outlook exemplified by the newly discovered looking glass, which reflected nature clearly and accurately.”³²⁰ We have already mentioned this theme in reference to Rorty’s critique of the “mirror of nature,” the modern ocular ideal of human consciousness as accurately reflecting an external world of objects. The innovation of glass mirrors counts as significant, then, because it permitted European modernity to realistically imagine human technical constructions that would accurately reflect the external and natural world, thus furnishing modern science with arguably its central ambition.

For Gadamer, perhaps the most important philosophical expression of this pervasive modern intellectual ideal of accurately reflecting nature like a mirror comes from Leibniz. In outlining his deterministic metaphysics in 1686, according to which God programs the fate of every individual substance and thus of the universe as a whole, Leibniz conceives of individual substances as mirrorlike: “Every substance is like a complete world and like a mirror of God or of the whole universe, which each one expresses in its own way, somewhat as the same city is variously represented depending upon the different positions from which it is viewed” (L 42). According to Leibniz, God creates the entire universe such that every substance within it is individuated from, while also at the same time connected to, each other. Substances thus individually express the overall plan determined for each one of them, and also for the universe as a whole, in advance by God. The metaphor of the mirror conveys this wildly speculative

³¹⁹ See Samuel Y. Edgerton, *The Mirror, the Window, and the Telescope: How Renaissance Linear Perspective Changed Our Vision of the Universe*, 50-52.

³²⁰ *The Mirror and Man*, 145.

metaphysical claim: Leibniz likens every substance to one particular way of seeing or reflecting reality. Every substance mirrors the whole from its own vantage point. In other words, every substance forms part of and expresses God's plan, just as a mirror reflects one point of view on an object. In this way, the Leibnizian mirror recalls the previous guiding ocular metaphor that we considered, namely, perspective. In a later revision of his early metaphysical picture into the strictly deterministic order of a system of individual, simple, and immaterial substances that he famously calls monads, Leibniz retains the metaphor of the mirror when he writes that "every monad is a mirror of the universe in its own way" (L 221). Monads, like the unnamed simple and mirrorlike substances of Leibniz's earlier metaphysics, individually express and reflect God's predetermined order for the whole universe. Leibniz again couches this metaphysical idea in the ocular terms of mirrors that reflect the harmonious and divine order of the whole.

Gadamer engages with the metaphor of the mirror that arises in modernity in a number of different contexts and registers. In particular, he betrays a fascination with what he poetically describes as Leibniz's vision of "the world as a room full of mirrors [*als Spiegelkabinett*]." ³²¹ My presentation of Leibniz's metaphysics of mirrors will help explain Gadamer's departure from Leibniz. As Gadamer quips in an essay composed in 1946 in commemoration of Leibniz's three-hundredth birthday, the theory of monads can only strike us today as "a fantastical [*phantastischer*] idea" (GW10 300). ³²² In a discussion of Leibniz's mirror metaphor, Gadamer argues that, in fact, "there is a whole series of...questions that can be posed to Leibniz's system and that do not find a

³²¹ Quoted in Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography*, 449n49.

³²² Grondin provides the political context for Gadamer's speech in commemoration of Leibniz, which he gave as rector of the University of Leipzig, in Leibniz's hometown, as part of a wider effort at rehabilitating German culture after Nazism (ibid, 247-250).

satisfactory answer” (GW10 300). As we saw in §3.3, Gadamer hews closely to Kant’s transcendental admonitions against dogmatic metaphysics. Unsurprisingly, then, Gadamer rejects Leibniz’s metaphysics of monads, specifically for its reliance on the ontology of subjects and objects characteristic of the modern age, which he refers to in this essay as “a dualism of the conception of the world in accordance with a reality which can be controlled by mathematical methods, and a completely different kind of reality which arises in the inner view of self-consciousness” (GW10 301). Though Gadamer recklessly obviates here the fact that Leibniz’s immaterial metaphysics of substance rejects Cartesian dualism, Leibniz’s metaphor of substances as mirroring the universe as a whole nevertheless recalls, according to Gadamer, the generally modern metaphysical distinction between subjects and objects and the attendant threats of subjectivism and relativism (GW10 305). Perhaps the exegetical justification for Gadamer’s suspicion about Leibniz’s ontology can be found in the fact that Leibniz’s *Monadology* does imply a firm distinction between appearance (a world of only seemingly material objects) and reality (the fact that all substances can actually be reduced to immaterial and simple monads). Despite appearances to the contrary, “monads are the true atoms of nature” (L 213). Hence, again anticipating Rorty’s critique of the epistemological ideal of “a mirror more easily and certainly seen than that which it mirrors,” Gadamer appears to criticize Leibniz’s metaphor of mirroring for the way it implies a dualistic distinction between human consciousness and (only apparently) material nature.³²³

Gadamer’s early discussion of Leibniz anticipates his critique of mirror imagery in several passages from *Truth and Method*. As we discussed in §4.1.2, he follows Heidegger in rejecting the possibility of pure perception that passively receives a mind-

³²³ *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 181.

independent reality without any human cognitive contribution: “Perception... would never be a mere mirroring of what is there. For it would always remain a taking [*Auffassen*] of something as something” (TM 79/GW1 96). All perception necessarily involves an intentional and interpretative element. As Gadamer recognizes, this fact implies, in particular, a rebuke of representationalist epistemology, which construes perception as a kind of mirroring. Gadamer thus repudiates the ocularcentrism that evinces a bias toward conceptualizing perception on the purportedly passive model of vision. He criticizes mirroring in another context in *Truth and Method* as well, in his discussion of pictures. As we pointed out in §4.3.2, Gadamer construes pictures as *occurrences of being*, which means that they bring forth or present for the first time the truth of the person or thing that they represent in a new and ontologically revealing way. Hence, he distinguishes pictures in this ontologically robust sense from mere mirror images or reflections:

The mirror picture [*Spiegelbild*] is a mere appearance—i.e., it has no real being [*wirkliches Sein*] and is understood in its fleeting existence as something that depends on being reflected. But the picture [*Bild*] has its own being [*eigenes Sein*]. This being as presentation [*Darstellung*], as precisely that in which it is not the same as what is represented, gives it the positive distinction of being a picture as opposed to a mere reflected image [*Abbild*]. (TM 135/GW1 144)

Before this passage, Gadamer concedes the phenomenological point that mirrors distort and therefore do not always merely reflect or copy (TM 134/GW1 144). Here he echoes Descartes’s *Optics*: “If our eyes see objects through lenses and in mirrors, they judge them to be at points where they are not and to be smaller or larger than they are, or inverted as well as smaller” (CSM I 173). Gadamer, like Descartes, warns against readily accepting the veracity of mirror images.³²⁴ As Gadamer reminds us, however, there could

³²⁴ On the basis of such passages about the dangers of perspective and distortion, I cannot agree with Harriet Stone, in her study of Descartes and seventeenth-century art, that Descartes failed to appreciate how “the frames that we build to identify things also mark the limits of our understanding” (*Tables of*

be no mirror image without the existence of what the mirror reflects, and a well-functioning mirror means to reflect accurately. Gadamer insists that the salient feature of mirror images in this context is their essential ontological dependence on what they reflect. But as he argues in the long passage quoted above, pictures in his positive sense possess an autonomous existence independent of what they represent. Pictures, such as a particularly revealing portrait that shows something true about its subject that did not reveal itself before, possess their own independent ontological status to the extent that they genuinely present the being of the thing for the first time.³²⁵ If a mirror were lost or damaged, we could console ourselves with the continued existence of what the mirror meant to reflect. But if a genuinely moving portrait were burned in a fire or stolen by a thief, the persistence of the people or things depicted could hardly replace the loss of the painting. Gadamer uses the contrast between mirrors and pictures to make this point.³²⁶

As these passages demonstrate, Gadamer employs the ocular motif of the mirror as a way of critically distinguishing and emphasizing his own views. The intellectual metaphor of the mirror evolved alongside the scientific ideal of accurately representing nature. When Gadamer critically deploys mirror metaphors, then, he does so in order to underscore and call into question modernity's emphasis on subjects standing opposite objects so as to mentally represent and acquire scientific knowledge about them. Gadamer underscores the intimate connection between the metaphor of the mirror and the modern subjectivism and scientific epistemology that he criticizes. These themes serve as

Knowledge: Descartes in Vermeer's Studio, 130). For a useful corrective, see Mary Domski, "Imagination, Metaphysics, Mathematics: Descartes's Arguments for the Vortex Hypothesis," 13-14.

³²⁵ On the connection between the mirroring function of portraits and self-knowledge, which invites comparison with Gadamer's theory of the picture, see Christopher S. Wood, "Self-Portraiture," 296.

³²⁶ For a good reconstruction of Gadamer's often confusing line of argumentation in these passages on mirror images, see Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*, 143-151.

the common denominator in the passages from *Truth and Method* that critically mention mirroring, and they motivated Gadamer's earlier critique of Leibniz. He sums up the negative role of the mirror in his own thinking: "The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror [*Zerrspiegel*]" (TM 278/GW1 281). A situated account of human reason, which acknowledges the conditions of language and tradition, will replace the atomized and subjectivized biases of mainstream modern thought. But Gadamer's emphasis on the subjective distortions endemic to mirrors in fact recalls discussions of mirrors from the Early Modern Period. In declaring the need for a strict method to regulate the conduct of science, Bacon likens the vicissitudes of human nature to a mirror: "The human understanding is like an uneven mirror receiving rays from things and merging its own nature with the nature of things, which thus distorts and corrupts it" (NO 41). To minimize the influence of human subjectivity, which distorts nature as if it were an unreliable mirror, we need a scientific method that will accurately capture the nature of things. Bacon's deployment of the metaphor of a distorted mirror echoes the young Descartes's Baroque fascination with illusion, perspective, theater, and even magic:

In a garden we can produce shadows to represent certain shapes, such as trees; or we can trim a hedge so that from a certain perspective it represents a given shape. Again, in a room we can arrange for the rays of the sun to pass through various openings so as to represent different numbers or figures; or we can make it seem as if there are tongues of flame, or chariots of fire, or other shapes in the air. This is all done by mirrors which focus the sun's rays at various points. (CSM I 3)³²⁷

Since Descartes, like Bacon, considers the extant sciences to be "at present masked" and dangerously unreliable, he demonstrates an uneasy curiosity about technical devices capable of deceiving and fooling human perception, including mirrors, which call into

³²⁷ On these themes in Descartes, see Harries, "Descartes and the Labyrinth of the World," 307-330; and Dalia Judovitz, "Vision, Representation, and Technology in Descartes," 63-86.

question the veracity of the existing sciences (CSM I 3). Hence, while Leibniz may not have evinced sufficient skepticism about the capacity of monads to accurately mirror God's divine plan, other Early Modern writers did not always employ mirrors as ocular metaphors of perfectly crystalline reflection. In this way, Gadamer's critical use of the metaphor of mirroring surprisingly echoes writers like Bacon and Descartes who insist on the distortions endemic to human perception, which mirrors usefully dramatize.

Even more unexpected than this consonance, however, may be the outright positive use to which Gadamer puts the image of the mirror in two areas of his thought. Here we once again find evidence that Gadamer constructively rehabilitates a guiding ocular metaphor. Mirroring recurs, first, in Gadamer's conception of the speculative character of language. As Donatella Di Cesare emphasizes, when Gadamer refers to language as "speculative [*spekulative*]," we should recall that "the etymology of the word points to *speculum*, a mirror that can reflect an image"³²⁸ (TM 453/GW1 460). What connection does Gadamer draw between language and mirroring? Here we must begin with Gadamer's doctrine that "*being that can be understood is language* [Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache]" (TM 470/GW1 478). Gadamer does not mean with this sentence to imply an unacceptable form of linguistic idealism, although both sympathetic and unsympathetic commentators have construed this well-known passage that way.³²⁹ Rather, following Heidegger, his philosophical hermeneutics insists only that human beings primarily comport themselves toward reality in an understanding manner.

³²⁸ *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*, 154. Di Cesare helpfully unpacks the Hegelian background to Gadamer's discussion, which I will forgo in what follows.

³²⁹ Gianni Vattimo embraces Gadamer's alleged linguistic idealism (*The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, 10-12). Cristina Lafont develops a thorough objection to linguistic idealism in hermeneutics (*The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, 55-124). Even more demanding of future attention is Claude Romano's challenging phenomenological critique of linguistic idealism in twentieth-century philosophy as a whole, including hermeneutics (*At the Heart of Reason*, 60-61, 485-503).

In other words, in our dealings with entities and with other Dasein, we continually disclose meaning and attempt to make sense of reality such that we can cope with it. To the extent that we successfully understand the meaning of things, we disclose that meaning by trying ever anew to put it into words for ourselves and for others. Language is the paradigm of understanding. For Gadamer, language therefore serves an essentially mediating function: “Language is a medium where I and world meet or, rather, manifest their original belonging together” (TM 469/GW1 478). We have intelligible worlds only to the extent that we linguistically disclose and experience things, which is another way of saying that we always mediate the world through language. This feature of our experience makes for one half of the mediation that Gadamer claims in saying that “being that can be understood is language.” The other side of this mediation comes in the fact that the world only discloses or intelligibly shows itself to us through language. Since understanding means putting things into words, and since we only ever experience our worlds understandingly, then that suggests that the world shows up for us only in a linguistically *articulable* (even if not always *fully articulated*) fashion. A phenomenon that does not lend itself to any form of linguistic expression whatsoever, even in principle, does not count as humanly intelligible, on this account. Hence, for Gadamer, language’s speculative character means acting as the medium or site of the meeting that continually takes place between human beings and the world.

In construing this mediation in terms of speculation, Gadamer explicitly aligns his conception of language with the metaphysics of mirroring: “The word ‘speculative’ here refers to the mirror relation” (TM 461/GW1 469). Language and world mirror each other. Defining language as speculative means likening language to a mirror image:

When something is reflected in something else, say, the castle in the lake, it means that the lake throws back the image of the castle. The mirror image is essentially connected with the actual sight of the thing through the medium of the observer. It has no being of its own; it is like an “appearance” that is not itself and yet allows the thing to appear by means of a mirror image. It is like a duplication that is still only the one thing. (TM 461/GW1 469-470)

This passage recalls the discussion in Part I of *Truth and Method* of mirror images, which Gadamer rigorously distinguished from his conception of the picture. But here, now in Part III of the same text, he positively compares language to mirroring.³³⁰ Just as mirror images ontologically depend on what they reflect, so too does our intelligible world only appear for us through linguistic mediation. We disclose the world through language, and the world appears to us through linguistically articulable experiences. The medium of language acts like a mirror. The mirror relation explains the doctrine that “being that can be understood is language.” He also defines the mirroring of language in these terms: “The reflection is nothing but the pure appearance of what is reflected, just as the one is the one of the other, and the other is the other of the one” (TM 462/GW1 470). The mirror image of the castle appears in the lake, and the mirror image requires the physical fact of the castle for its existence. Just as artists, magicians, and scientists can invent creative variations on the mirror, so can our human linguistic practices permit us to contribute novel ways of seeing and reacting to reality, such as in the sciences and in the arts. The metaphor of mirroring permits Gadamer, then, to illustrate his conception of language as disclosing the world, and in turn for the way that the world requires human language and creativity in order to intelligibly appear to human beings.

³³⁰ For a helpful discussion of the role of mirroring in the speculative theory of language, see Joel Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method*, 252-253.

Human beings can no more willfully impose their language onto the world, for example by designating names for content that precedes our linguistic acts, than could a mirror reflect an image without there being some real entity the mirror reflects. Such a case cannot, at least, be a paradigm of the human linguistic capacity. Heidegger, too, criticizes such a conception of language as one that “already presupposes the idea of something internal that utters or externalizes itself” (PLT 190/GA12 12).³³¹ The fact that language does not merely project or impose itself onto reality implies also, in a rebuke now of linguistic idealism, that just as a mirror cannot invent its own image wholesale, so too language does not construct the world on its own, but rather reflects and partially discloses a reality independent of us. This speculative character lies, then, at the very heart of Gadamer’s conception of language: “Language itself...has something speculative about it...as the realization of meaning [*Vollzug von Sinn*], as the happening of speech [*Geschehen der Rede*], of mediation, of coming to an understanding” (TM 464/GW1 472-473). Language discloses the world, and the world reveals itself to human beings through linguistically articulable and hence intelligible experiences. The interplay between mirror image and what the image reflects captures this complex relationship. The speculative happening of language recalls the intricate ontological interdependence between an entity and its mirror image. Furthermore, the speculative mirroring of language recalls the ocular motif of infinity from §4.3.1, insofar as Gadamer emphasizes that this mutual disclosure of word and world goes on without end (TM 464-465/GW1 473).

Gadamer makes positive use of the metaphor of mirroring in at least one other context. In one of several essays on the topic, Gadamer defines friendship by recourse to

³³¹ Here I follow Taylor’s recent Heidegger-inspired critique of designative as opposed to constitutive views of language (*The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity*, 3-50).

the metaphor of the mirror: “The other, the friend...is like the mirror of self-knowledge. One recognizes oneself in another, whether in the sense of taking him as a model [*Vorbildes*], or—and this is even more essential—in the sense of the reciprocity between friends, such that each sees a model in the other” (HRE 138/GW7 404). True friendship, Gadamer argues in revivifying the Aristotelian conception, means taking inspiration from my friend who inspires me to be the best version of myself through my recognition of his admirable qualities.³³² I recognize in my friend my own potential when I contemplate how I stand in relation to him, which is why Gadamer insists on the mirroring role that friendship at its best enacts. I find something about myself, whether a reflection of my virtue or a call to improve my character on the basis of my friend’s example, reflected in my image of him. This feature of friendship distinguishes the mirroring function of the friend from the inward self-involvement of Narcissus’s gaze, which Alberti employed to define painting as we discussed in §4.3.2 (OP 61). The narcissistic mirror implied the subjectivism that Gadamer wants to move beyond. Rather, what the friend reflects “is not the particularity of one’s own being but what is binding for oneself as well as for the other, and what one recognizes in the mirror is what otherwise cannot be seen clearly because of one’s weakness” (HRE 139/GW7 404). The mirror metaphor contributes the insight that the self-knowledge gained in friendship could not be gained in any other way. This feature distinguishes the mirror of the friend from Narcissus because only through interaction with the particularity of another person, and all the character features that they express, and not merely with one’s own self, can one gain increased clarity about one’s character. The mirror of friendship crucially involves more than mere navel-gazing.

³³² In his discussion of the influence on Gadamer of Aristotle’s theory of friendship, Walter Brogan also notes the function of mirroring in this relationship (“Gadamer’s Praise of Theory: Aristotle’s Friend and the Reciprocity Between Theory and Practice,” 153-154).

For example, the selflessness expressed by my friend may reveal and bring into relief my own selfish habits. But, Gadamer continues, this experience could encourage me to change thanks to my encounter with the reflection of my friend: “Encounters in the mirror of the friend are...not experienced as a demand, but rather as a fulfillment [*Erfüllung*]...Because this other, this counterpart [*Gegenüber*], is not one’s own mirror image, but rather the *friend*, all powers come into play of increasing trust and devotion to the ‘better self’ that the other is for oneself” (HRE 139/GW7 404-405). In other words, my flaws that I see thanks to my encounter with a friend who inspires me will call me to change, and thereby fulfill the best version of myself that I could potentially become. This feature of the mirror function of friendship on Gadamer’s account means that friendship does not risk the dangers of distortion that Bacon and Descartes also warned of in their deployment of mirror metaphors, and to which Leibniz’s metaphysics of monads could be vulnerable. But this is not all. As Gadamer says in the passage just quoted, the friend calls me also to enter into the communion of my relationship with them. What I see in the mirror of friendship is not only the truth about how to improve, but also how to calmly accept and even take mutual joy in my relationship with that other person. I see what we have in common, much like I recognize myself in my own reflection, and this fact impels me to ultimately invest myself in that relationship. Gadamer suggests that the mirror of friendship suggests calmly embracing the commitment necessary for friendship.

The modern ocular metaphor of the mirror, which provided science with one of its central ambitions, surfaces throughout Gadamer’s writings in positive and negative registers. In *Truth and Method*, in particular, mirroring occupies a special prominence. In keeping with other features of his thought, Gadamer criticizes mirroring as a motif of

representationalist epistemology and of the subject/object dichotomy on which it depends. Leibniz's *Monadology* stands in here as a target for criticism. Gadamer also deploys the mirror as an image of self-involved subjectivity, which his hermeneutical account of reason repudiates. But in this theme, Gadamer recalls cautious admonitions against trusting mirrors, which always distort as well as reflect, from Early Modern writers like Descartes and Bacon. Furthermore, the mirror serves as a richly evocative image for Gadamer's notions of the speculative character of language and of the meaning of true friendship. In his positive hermeneutical appeals to mirroring, Gadamer once again constructively rehabilitates one of the guiding ocular metaphors of the modern age.

This chapter disputed the widespread reading of Gadamer as an anti-ocular thinker. Though he prominently employs aural and auditory metaphors, in particular when he defines hermeneutics as a mode of listening, this fact does not preclude Gadamer from also constructively engaging with numerous ocular metaphors. This observation becomes significant for us when we appreciate the importance of ocularity for modernity, which Heidegger called "the age of the world picture," marked by its deleterious ocularcentrism as paradigmatically exemplified by its emphasis on representation. Gadamer's anti-ocularcentrism, then, purportedly shows his confrontation with and even rejection of the modern age. I have argued, however, that Gadamer also constructively rehabilitates three distinctively modern guiding ocular metaphors, namely, infinity, perspective, and mirroring, which all contributed to making modernity the age of the world picture. With these three guiding metaphors, Gadamer criticizes their mainstream interpretations as destructive in ways that reflect his general criticisms of modern thought and culture. Yet

he does not abandon these guiding metaphors, but actually employs them as positive motifs for his own thinking. This strategy represents how I have read Gadamer's engagement with the modern age at large.

Now I want finally to respond to Hans Blumenberg's objection to hermeneutics that we considered in §4.1.3. Blumenberg argued that the preference for aural and auditory metaphors in hermeneutics, and its attendant rejection of the ocular, suggested a conservative acceptance of tradition. My retrieval here of Gadamer's employment of infinity, perspective, and mirroring already shows that Gadamer by no means accepts Blumenberg's overly simplistic dichotomy between the aural and the auditory on the one hand and the ocular on the other. In replying more specifically to Blumenberg's political critique of the conservatism and anti-ocularcentrism of hermeneutics, allow me to cite a passage from a 1998 essay by Gadamer entitled "On Listening":

For all of us, we still have something to learn in listening [*Hören*]. Just as we must learn to see, which unfortunately we do not practice enough in our schools, we also have to learn to listen. We have to learn to listen in order not to ignore the subtler tones of what is worth knowing [*die leiseren Töne des Wissenswerten*]—and perhaps also obeying [*gehörchen*]. But everyone should think about this on their own. (HE 55)

Here, in comparing the need to learn how to see with learning how to listen, Gadamer explicitly repudiates any imputation to him of a disjunction between the aural and auditory versus the ocular and visual. As we have shown, he considers both faculties important. Just as he does when describing hermeneutics as a form of listening, Gadamer in this passage underscores the need to listen, and even hints at the connection between listening and obedience to which Blumenberg critically called attention. I would insist, however, that Gadamer does not recommend an uncritical, passive acceptance of the past. His call to learn *how to properly listen* suggests, rather, that we can discriminate among

our inheritances from the past. But this task requires first being open to hearing what tradition has to say to us so that we can subsequently think for ourselves, as he insists in the final line of this passage that we must do. Gadamer is not reflexively in favor of tradition, just as he is not reflexively against the ocular. Blumenberg also implied, we recall, that any acceptance of tradition would be irrational and unjustified. Answering this charge may lie outside the scope of this chapter, and even of this dissertation. But here Gadamer, too, would strongly disagree, since he calls us to engage constructively and critically with the traditions we have inherited, including from the modern age.

Conclusion: Gadamerian Hope

This dissertation has charted Gadamer's response to the modern age from out of Heidegger's deconstructive approach. I argued that Gadamer, taking inspiration from but without completely accepting Heidegger's critique of modernity, developed his own hermeneutically rehabilitative engagement with the intellectual currents of the modern age. Rejecting Heidegger's account of the possibility of transcending our historical epoch and the corresponding "other beginning" for Western culture, Gadamer dwells with the historical and philosophical resources that the tradition of modernity contains. To make this case, I showed how Gadamer cultivates, develops, and reworks many of the modern age's distinctive guiding metaphors—motifs and images that shape our age's sense of intelligibility and priorities—like transcendental thought, humanism, experience, objectivity, curiosity, infinity, perspective, and mirroring. Whereas Heidegger, even though he stops short of a fully reactionary negation of modernity, nevertheless still decidedly wants our culture to move toward a wholly other and "postmodern" understanding of being, Gadamer remains within the orbit of modern thought by constructively elevating elements of it into a hermeneutical register.

Now I shall conclude by answering the following question about my project: If I am right to understand Gadamer as rehabilitating modernity, then to what end does he accomplish this task? What is the ultimate payoff or purpose of this rehabilitation? Within the context of our discussion, this question attains greater urgency because Heidegger's approach, whatever else one may think of it, entails an obvious rejoinder: Heidegger deconstructs modernity in order to move toward another age, which he thinks might already be on the horizon. It may appear less obvious, then, why Gadamer's

rehabilitation should seem compelling by comparison with Heidegger's bold movement beyond modernity, especially if one grants the political promise of Heidegger's thought. Explaining the ultimate goal of Gadamer's rehabilitation of the modern age could also suggest, then, why we might prefer it to the Heideggerian deconstruction of modernity.

In approaching this issue, I take as my point of departure the following insight from Martin Jay: "If the study of intellectual history is to have any ultimate justification, it is its capacity to rescue the legacy of the past in order to allow us to realize the potential of the future."³³³ I have read Gadamer's thinking as a project in intellectual history, as a constructive engagement with currents of thought from throughout the modern age. His approach is neither antiquarian nor reconstructive, but rather means to make a difference for us now—to realize a certain potential, as Jay suggests intellectual history should do at its best. Let us now consider how the modern intellectual history we have recovered from Gadamer permits us to speculate about the future. More specifically, we take as our hint what Kant regarded as the most speculative of all questions: "**What may I hope?**" (CPR A805/B833) I will now suggest that Gadamer retrieves the core of modernity's guiding metaphors and cultivates their latent hermeneutical insights so as to inspire hope that modernity still has something positive to offer us, including in the domain of politics, as we collectively move into an uncertain future. Like Heidegger's deconstruction that brings about another beginning, Gadamer performs his rehabilitation of the past history of the modern age toward the fulfillment of the future.

One could examine the distinction between Heidegger and Gadamer as I have interpreted them, and parse their difference in terms of a political metaphor. Heidegger develops a decidedly radical response to modernity, arguing that the modern age, like a

³³³ *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*, 20.

corrupt political regime or a rotten economic system, is beyond saving and should be transcended completely. This construal of Heidegger's radical reaction to the modern age gains credence from his disastrous endorsement of the political revolution of National Socialism, which promised to overthrow the modern West. Gadamer sounds, perhaps, more like a reformist liberal who cautions against radical change and suggests instead incremental modifications within the framework of the existing system. In short, on this provisional reading, Gadamer wants progress, while Heidegger wants revolution. Without dismissing the crucially political contours of any response to modernity, and while admitting that Heidegger was indeed a political radical and Gadamer certainly a more conventional liberal, I would insist that Gadamer did not believe in facile forms of political or historical progress: "After the liberal period's optimism about progress was shattered following the catastrophe of the First World War," he recalls in 1985, "we needed to construct a new understanding of human (and also civic) community" (HRE 128/GW7 396).³³⁴ In response to this milieu, one imagines, Gadamer found himself, as a young student, attracted to Heidegger's philosophical radicalism in the first place.

The liberal faith in progress connotes mere optimism, that is, a superficial and all too easy conviction, so vague as to be empirically unfalsifiable, that things will head in the right direction, provided only that we operate according to the best form of rationality, the optimal set of rules and norms, or the correct method. As a critic of the Enlightenment and its Cartesian background, Gadamer rejects this optimistic outlook,

³³⁴ I am convinced by Jean Grondin's analysis that Gadamer's personal political proclivities were liberal (*Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography*, 153, 225). See also Gadamer's frank self-identification: "I would see myself not as a right-wing conservative but rather as a liberal" (GIC 120). Raymond Geuss provides an opposing and tendentious account of Gadamer's politics in his acerbic assertion that Gadamer was "a reactionary, distended windbag" ("Richard Rorty at Princeton: Personal Recollections," 86). The interpretative evidence in this dispute, in my view, decisively favors Grondin's side.

still held by defenders of modernity like Jürgen Habermas, who claims to be “revising the Enlightenment with the very tools of the Enlightenment.”³³⁵ Instead, I suggest, Gadamer believes in hope: “I am very skeptical of every kind of pessimism. I find in all pessimism a certain lack of sincerity...because no one can live without hope” (GIC 83/GIG 71). At the age of 102, he even more dramatically repeats this claim: “People cannot live without hope; that is the only thesis I would defend without any restriction.”³³⁶

What I call Gadamerian hope involves two valences. First, Gadamerian hope contests Heidegger’s negative assessment of the modern age. Heidegger’s attitude toward modernity sometimes suggests the pessimism Gadamer rejects in favor of hope: “We are too late for the gods and too / early for beyng [*Seyn*]” (PLT 4/GA13 76). Our radically impoverished intelligibility predominantly cuts us off from being. Yet Heidegger harbors hope for another beginning.³³⁷ In response to that Heideggerian ideal, we find the second element of Gadamerian hope, namely, its confidence not in an uncertain age to come, with all the portentous political hazards such a yearning involves, but rather in the resources of the times in which we already live. As I demonstrated in the last two chapters, Gadamer charitably rereads and hermeneutically *listens to* the history of modern thought. Performing this rereading, I now suggest, motivates hope for modern life and culture without either imagining another beginning or simply accepting the mainstream currents of the age. It is not too late to save the modern age, as Heidegger darkly insists; nor can the Enlightenment be maintained provided only a series of local and perhaps

³³⁵ *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, 303.

³³⁶ Quoted in Grondin, *Gadamer: A Biography*, 335.

³³⁷ See Iain Thomson’s compelling formulation of Heideggerian “hope for the future” (*Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 212). But not even Thomson’s reading can plausibly deny that Heidegger has no hope *for modernity itself*. On situating Gadamer alongside both Habermas and Heidegger, another notable scholarly contribution comes from Ingrid H. Scheibler, *Gadamer: Between Heidegger and Habermas*, 159-169.

cosmetic reforms, as Habermas optimistically suggests. Gadamer argues rather that modernity provides opportunities to immanently but genuinely improve its worst features by thinking through and then building upon its best moments. Gadamerian hermeneutics teaches that we can best think against modernity only by thinking along with its tradition, by refusing to give up on the rich resources for thought and action we inherit from the modern age, including those that crucially bear on the political realm.

We must acknowledge why some of the most original artists and public intellectuals of recent decades—such as Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt, Stanley Cavell, Paul Celan, Michel Foucault, Michael Fried, Luce Irigaray, Hans Jonas, Terrence Malick, Herbert Marcuse, Christian Norberg-Schulz, Charles Taylor, and Gianni Vattimo, to name a few of the most politically and artistically outstanding—take Heidegger as their crucial point of departure. In an age of political discontent, ecological devastation, economic injustice, and cultural upheaval, the Heideggerian vision of another time to come may strike us as tantalizingly attractive, even with its foreboding political overtones and associations. For a certain sequence of political theorists, in fact, the polysemy of being will bring in its wake a pluralistic and tolerant politics. Grounded in Heidegger's deconstruction of the modern age, *post-Heideggerian radical liberalism* has emerged as the most compellingly positive vision in this field of political thought. Heidegger's account of the irreducible multiplicity of being constitutes his vision of another beginning for Western culture. Jean-Luc Nancy vigorously defends an account of liberal politics grounded in Heidegger's later pluralistic ontology:

The last "first philosophy," if one dare say anything about it, is given to us in Heidegger's fundamental ontology. It is that which has put us on the way to where we are, together, whether we know it or not. But it is also why its author was able to, in a sort of return to *Destruktion* itself,

compromise himself, in an unparalleled way, with his involvement in a philosophical politics that became criminal. This very point, then, indicates to us that place from which philosophy must recommence: it is necessary to refigure fundamental ontology (as well as the existential analytic, the history of being, and the thinking of *Ereignis* that goes along with it) with a thorough resolve that *starts from the plural singular of origins, from being-with*.³³⁸

Rejecting the benighted but contingent political path that Heidegger himself took, Nancy stays true to Heidegger's ontological insights by developing a politics of radical liberal tolerance. In a gesture that recalls Nancy's, Iain Thomson validates this version of radically liberal politics when he argues that Heidegger's later pluralistic ontology "convincingly underwrites an ethico-politics of strong tolerance, that is, a robust, universal tolerance that is intolerant only of intolerance."³³⁹ The most politically palatable form of Heideggerian postmodernity optimistically predicts, then, not the right-wing fascism Heidegger himself endorsed in 1933, but rather a radical postmodern liberalism that takes ontological pluralism as its political point of departure.

Should we not remember, though, that the phenomenon of liberalism distinctively derives from the modern age, not only in its historical origins but also in its conceptual apparatus, especially its reliance on categories like subjectivity and autonomy? The postmodern age to come, Heidegger believes, will transcend the mistakes of modernity and amount to a wholly other way of thinking and acting, different from the modern age in ways we cannot even yet fathom. The most radically new form of politics introduced in the 1930s—namely, fascism—struck Heidegger as the other beginning he was waiting for just as he began thinking about the possibility and meaning of postmodernity:

"Thinking purely 'metaphysically' (i.e., in heeding the history of being), during the years

³³⁸ *Being Singular Plural*, 26.

³³⁹ "Heideggerian Phenomenology and the Postmetaphysical Politics of Ontological Pluralism," 30.

1930-1934 I saw in National Socialism the possibility of a crossing over [*Übergangs*] to another beginning and gave it this meaning [*und ihm diese Deutung gegeben*]" (BN2 318/GA95 408). Though Heidegger would later ground his understanding of postmodernity in careful readings of Hölderlin, Nietzsche, van Gogh, and other visionaries, we cannot know what the age to come will look like until it fully manifests itself. The undecided nature of postmodernity, which should strike us as its most disturbing quality, means we do not yet know whether the politics it will introduce will be utopian or horrific.³⁴⁰ Certainly, however, there is little reason to think that the dominant mode of political organization of the modern age will persist into any possible future postmodern age, as Heidegger admits in 1966: "A decisive question for me today is: How can a political system accommodate itself to the technological age, and which political system should this be? I have no answer to this question. I am not convinced that it is democracy" (HC 104/GA16 668). Postmodern Heideggerian radical liberals think that postmodernity will be more radically liberal even than liberal modernity. But the best, albeit most unsettling, prediction to make about a putative postmodernity is that it will be decisively *other than* modern—not a deepening of the past, which Gadamer teaches us to hope for, but rather something else. Heidegger thought as much, as Gadamer critically suggests when he refers to the "eschatological mood [*Stimmung*]" of Hölderlin's poetry and, implicitly, also of Heidegger's later thinking (EPH 95/GW9 231). This eschatology surfaces in Heidegger's provocative exhortations for another beginning.

As Jacques Derrida perceptively suggested more than fifty years ago, the photographic negative of what he calls "Heideggerian *hope*" is something much

³⁴⁰ Gregory Fried makes a similar point in his study of Heideggerian politics (*Heidegger's Polemos: From Being to Politics*, 238).

darker.³⁴¹ Derrida rejects Heidegger's nostalgia for the forgotten beginnings of Western metaphysics in the shrouded past of ancient Greek thinking, while I have criticized Heidegger's disturbingly pessimistic and totalizing account of our entire epoch's impoverished intelligibility. Heideggerian hope for the postmodern appears fragile and unsustainable as soon as we realize that it necessarily rests on pessimism about modernity that bottomed out, for Heidegger, in fascist revolution. This fact also implies the difficulty of projecting modernity's dominant political category onto a hypothetical postmodern time to come. What postmodernity will recognize as coherent and viable political categories may well look radically different from anything presently recognizable within the spectrum of debate surrounding liberal democracy and its future. For this reason, Heideggerian hope fails to inspire us today. In his poem "Todtnauberg," in which he describes his visit to Heidegger's hut in 1967 and the message he recorded there in Heidegger's guestbook, Paul Celan elliptically expresses this dissatisfaction: "in this book / the written line of / a hope, today, / for a thinker's / coming / word" (quoted in EPH 121/GW9 375-376). In a remarkable reflection on Celan's poem, which he reads as about waiting in vain for Heidegger to speak concretely about Europe's future, Gadamer mutedly but poignantly endorses this despairing reaction: "[Celan's poem] is a reference to Heidegger's not claiming *and not being able to have* a coming word, a hope for today—he tried to take a few steps along a risky path [*gewagten Wege*]...It became a poem because the experience expresses him [Celan] *and us all*" (EPH 123/GW9 377-378; my emphases). Like Celan, Gadamer intimates here that Heidegger's later thinking—which remained tied up with his inability to apologize for his involvement with Nazism

³⁴¹ *Margins of Philosophy*, 27.

(his “risky path”), an involvement that may even have been motivated by his vision of the radical change postmodernity requires—could not engender real hope for the future.

Gadamer, though his admirable but frustratingly misleading philosophical modesty prevented him from speaking in these terms, rises to the challenge of inspiring hope for modernity. Gadamerian hope enables a more psychically livable and philosophically tenable response to the all too many deficiencies of the modern age that will positively move us to make our age better. With the help of Gadamer’s hermeneutically sensitive response to modernity, we should clearly glimpse what the modern age has to offer, without blithely missing what about our epoch we must still vigorously contest. Gadamer provides, then, the resources for participating in today’s globalized and multilingual conversation of humankind, in which the Western modern age rightly appears as merely one cultural option, perhaps especially unattractive in light of its numerous critics, among many.³⁴² As befits his reputation as a thinker of dialogue, Gadamer equips us with a highly charitable and clear-eyed account of our complex inheritances from Western modernity that we can offer into global cultural exchanges with other ways of life and understandings. My contribution has been to construe this project in terms of the hermeneutical rehabilitation of modern guiding metaphors, which might add new and surprising directions to contemporary debates about the modern age.

The consonance of his rehabilitation of modernity with global dialogue lends credence to the possibility of *Gadamerian democracy*, which would provide better

³⁴² Theodore George develops this line of thought from Gadamer with regard to world literature and translation (“The Promise of World Literature,” 128-143). Charles Taylor similarly appeals to Gadamer to answer “the great challenge of the coming century, both for politics and for social science...of understanding the other” (“Gadamer on the Human Sciences,” 126). Finally, Georgia Warnke has long argued for the complementarity of philosophical hermeneutics and feminist politics (“Feminism and Hermeneutics,” 81-98).

support for radical liberalism than Heidegger's risky postmodernity can. Perhaps Gadamer's rehabilitation of modernity could cultivate democracy's accomplishments and correct its worst mistakes, as I suggested he does for other theoretical foundations of the modern age. Heidegger's deconstruction of modernity impels him to transcend the modern age's accomplishments, including liberal democracy, in favor of another, postmodern beginning. By contrast, Gadamer calls himself "one who stayed behind, who can be seen as lagging behind Heidegger" (GR 424). While Heidegger awaits the dawn of the postmodern future to come, Gadamer patiently stays behind to see what the setting sun of the modern age still illuminates. That finding of this study finds its relevance in this context in the possibility that Gadamer's hermeneutical strategy of charitably and hopefully rereading modernity's past might unearth the latent promises of liberal democracy that Heidegger too quickly overlooked. Here we finally appreciate one truth within Habermas's controversial thesis that Gadamer urbanized the Heideggerian province: Gadamer succeeds at being both a Heideggerian and a democrat, not only in his personal conduct but also in his philosophical commitment to charitably engaging with modern thought and culture. Though this fact has not been recognized by post-Heideggerian political theory, Gadamer's thought, more so than Heidegger's, offers the genuine possibility of a humble and open form of democratic politics in its discriminate and judicious rereading of the history of modernity. Gadamer develops such a hopeful vision of the past and its potential for the present, though, that his version of the modern age may appear unrecognizable to anyone all too familiar with its many flaws.

Heidegger, on the other hand, hoped for another beginning for Western, if not global, Dasein that required transcending the last five hundred years or so of modern

Western history. He explains his distinctive approach to modernity in uncompromising terms: “You must be able to refrain from being measured [*gemessen*] with the measures [*Maßen*], even the highest ones, of that which is destined to be overcome [*Überwindung*]” (BN1 342/GA94 472). In other words, we must leave behind even the modern age’s greatest exemplars if we want to follow postmodernity’s prophetic visionaries on the path toward a wholly other set of cultural and intellectual ideals. But Heidegger’s indiscriminate response means leaving behind modernity’s accomplishments, which may still function as fertile ground for global debates about our human future. The Gadamerian rehabilitative approach to the modern age, meanwhile, motivates us to hope for a possible future phase of Western modernity that builds upon worthy and exemplary modern achievements that still demand our thoughtful attention, such as the Italian Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, and German Idealism.

While Richard Rorty’s antirealist and idealist reading of Gadamer encounters many other interpretative problems, he insightfully grasped this essential point: “In a future Gadamerian culture, human beings would wish only to live up to one another, in the sense in which Galileo lived up to Aristotle, Blake to Milton, Dalton to Lucretius, and Nietzsche to Socrates.”³⁴³ I can think of no more perfect summation of how I have interpreted Gadamer’s vision of the modern age. Gadamerian hope grounds itself in hermeneutically robust readings of modernity’s guiding metaphors, going deeper in its engagement with our inheritances from the modern age than either the shallow optimism of faith in science and method or the misguided desire for the future that ultimately requires pessimism about the present. This positive invocation of the best the modern age has to offer could guide us toward a positive vision of an achievable future on the basis of

³⁴³ “Being That Can Be Understood Is Language,” 29.

modernity's proudest past exemplars without having to yearn for another, uncertain, and dangerous time to come. Though Heidegger explicitly denied this fact, we cannot avoid measuring ourselves by the best accomplishments we have inherited from modern thought and culture. By providing a nuanced and appreciative rereading of our modern age's past, Gadamer enables us now to recall, rework, and thereby *live up to* the modern age's true and authentic achievements. This mode of intellectual history could then allow us to think how best to move toward a genuinely better future for modernity—one that may well take the form of what Rorty prophetically called a Gadamerian culture.

In his appropriation of the potential of the past to make a difference in the present, Gadamer stays true to and furthers Heidegger's best deconstructive insights. Gadamer's inheritance of Heidegger's legacy, though, also involves a contestation of the radical Heideggerian transcendence of the modern age and the consequent movement toward postmodernity. It is in that domain that I see Gadamer's most promising advancement beyond Heidegger. Gadamerian hope dreams for a deepened and improved future version of modernity that would recognize and celebrate ontological pluralism, which Heidegger sought in a postmodern future, by discovering the hermeneutical insights *within paradigmatically modern achievements*. A future Gadamerian culture would retain, then, the insights of liberal democracy. I do not want, however, to reduce my interpretation of Gadamer and his relation to Heidegger to a merely political meaning. Gadamer's thinking, it seems to me, convincingly suggests, in his only intermittent focus on the political and in his reference to "the political incompetence of philosophy," that politics amounts to merely one, and not the central, feature of human life (PIP 3/HE 35). Politics takes its rightful place alongside the sciences, the arts and humanities, religion, family

and friendship, commerce, sex, and leisure, as only one of the many ways human beings give significance to their lives. Modernity admirably made possible the compartmentalization of politics by formulating the liberal public/private distinction, which would allow public life to properly function in such a way as to encourage individuals to freely pursue their private passions. The postmodern Heideggerian radical liberals perceptively grasp that contemporary political life is moving toward a new phase, one that may well erase the public/private distinction. But these thinkers risk missing the mark in looking to Heidegger's politically hazardous thinking for resources to conceptualize this future. Politics has spun out of control, dominating our everyday lives, conversations, and thoughts by ceaselessly focusing our attention on the details of governance, the fates of competing factions and policies, and the supposedly political meaning of all aspects of existence. Today we have forgotten, and many of us have even vociferously denied, that politics is, as Michael Oakeshott suggests, ultimately uninspiring and banal compared to other human endeavors.³⁴⁴ Gadamerian hope points the way past this impasse. Encouraging cultural inventiveness and tolerant, democratic openness by continually and charitably rereading our modern past, a Gadamerian culture would not follow the exhausting and totalizing contemporary primacy of the political. The infinite conversation that we are will encompass many topics, including but not exclusively democratic politics, of relevance to modern humanity's future. Gadamer calls us to keep our enduring and persistent conversation, during which we unendingly retrace and mine our own history in order to see the future directions toward which that history points us, as *politically inclusive* and as *hermeneutically open* as possible.

³⁴⁴ *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 202-203.

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Abbreviations for texts by Early Modern writers

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- CPR. Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. and eds. P. Guyer and A. Wood. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. [Cited by A and B]
- CSM. Descartes, René. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Volumes I and II. Trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984 and 1985.
- EG. Galilei, Galileo. *The Essential Galileo*. Trans. and ed. M. Finocchiaro. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2008.
- L. Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *Philosophical Essays*. Trans. and eds. R. Ariew and D. Garber. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989.
- NO. Bacon, Francis. *The New Organon*. L. Jardine and M. Silverthorne, eds. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- OLI. Nicholas of Cusa. *On Learned Ignorance*. In *Selected Spiritual Writings*. Trans. and ed. H.L. Bond. New York: Paulist Press, 1997.
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- GW3. *Gesammelte Werke 3: Neuere Philosophie I. Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1987.
- GW4. *Gesammelte Werke 4: Neuere Philosophie II. Probleme, Gestalten*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1987.
- GW7. *Gesammelte Werke 7: Griechische Philosophie III. Plato im Dialog*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1991.
- GW8. *Gesammelte Werke 8: Ästhetik und Poetik I. Kunst als Aussage*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1993.
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- CPC. *Country Path Conversations*. Trans. B. Davis. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010.
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