LABYRINTH Vol. 24, No. 2, Winter 2022

THE HERMENEUTICS OF TRADITION: POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF A PHILOSOPHICAL LEGACY

Daniel Ambord (Claremont)

Abstract

The interrogation of the problematic character of established traditions has become an increasingly dominant feature of contemporary political and social discourse. Gadamer's discussion of tradition takes on an often-unacknowledged utility in light of these discussions by both observing the subtle ways in which tradition persists even in times of social change while also placing an emphasis on the volitional (hence, risky and contingent) character of engagements with tradition. Gadamer's approach allows for a fidelity to tradition that nonetheless allows for a critical, emancipatory engagement with it, a precursor to the more explicitly political projects of hermeneutic thinkers such as Luigi Pareyson and Gianni Vattimo. This hermeneutic lineage offers our modern age a chance to embrace a new and more authentic relationship with the traditions in which we always-already find ourselves situated by giving us the opportunity to make those traditions speak to the challenges of our tumultuous present.

Keywords: Hans-Georg Gadamer, Gianni Vattimo, Luigi Pareyson, tradition, politics

As we reflect, some 20 years after his passing, upon the influence of Hans Georg Gadamer, we find ourselves called to consider, with a critical eye, our own situatedness. We are confronted by myriad crises: environmental destruction, the resurgence of authoritarian political movements around the world, the specter of pandemic, and economic inequity. Our ability to interpret and respond to these forces has become an increasingly pressing concern of various philosophical schools, including the strain of contemporary hermeneutics which Gadamer was so instrumental in inaugurating. In Gadamer, we confront a thinker whose political character and utility are frequently called into question, even as his broader influence is acknowledged. To the extent that he is regarded as a political thinker at all, Gadamer tends to be regarded as fairly conservative in character, articulating barriers to the criticism of authority that would seem to present an obstacle to political reform. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that

Gadamer's thought, particularly his discussion of tradition, contains a surprising emancipatory element that fits quite well with the more explicitly political hermeneutic projects of thinkers such as his Italian contemporary Luigi Pareyson and his perhaps most influential and provocative student Gianni Vattimo.

If the line of contemporary hermeneutics originates from Heidegger, Gadamer is surely the figure who gave it articulation and elevated it to a robust and prolific philosophical tradition. We can find no better a summation of Gadamer's influence than that found in Lorraine Code's introduction to the collection *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer*:

> In the course of a philosophical journey that traverses an entire century, Gadamer was, inter alia, elected to Academies of Arts and Sciences in Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, Belgium, England, and the United States; elected to the "highest academic honor given in Germany," knight of the "Order of Merit" for the Arts and Sciences and received Doctorates "Honoris Causa" in Germany, Poland, the United States, and Canada. His was a towering philosophical presence. (Code 1994, 3)

Some portion of this influence must be attributed to Gadamer's particular timeliness. Gadamer lived and worked in a period of time in which he was confronted by the horrors of fascist and communist totalitarianism, the demise of colonialism, the rise of modern communications technology, and the dawning of a new era of economic globalization. If the previous era of hermeneutics (of which Schleiermacher stands as a central figure) was occasioned by the burgeoning questions of a growth in literacy and scholarship coupled to a confrontation with religious difference, Gadamer's own hermeneutics likewise found fertile ground in an era defined by an explosion of information and cross-cultural contact occurring beneath the shadow of a political violence which threatened to consume the entire world (Vattimo 2010, 283).

The influence of any great teacher is, of course, not limited to the construction or unleashing of ideas, understood as autonomous things drifting about in intellectual space, but is also found, and perhaps more robustly, in that teacher's students. In 1963, a young Italian scholar names Gianni Vattimo came to Heidelberg on a two-year Humboldt Fellowship. He was to become Gadamer's lifelong friend and pupil and one of the figures (alongside Gadamer himself) most directly responsible for the global surge in interest in hermeneutic thought. Indeed, Vattimo was instrumental in promoting interest in Gadamer's own thought outside of Germany, completing the first translation of *Truth and Method* in 1969. For his

part, Vattimo refers to Gadamer as his "other great maestro" (along with Pareyson, who we shall consider later) and credits his tutelage with his articulation of his own distinct approach to hermeneutics (Vattimo 2009, 28). Like his mentor, Vattimo went on to become an influential intellectual, receiving various awards and honorary degrees, not just in his native Italy, but in Cuba, Peru, Spain, and Argentina, as well as visiting professorships at various schools in the United States where he inspired such thinkers as John Caputo and Richard Rorty. Today, Vattimo's influence can be felt not only in Europe and the United States, but also in Central and South America, the Caribbean, and East Asia.

If Vattimo has played an important role in establishing hermeneutics as a global topic of philosophical interest, he likewise has gone a long way towards establishing its credentials as a thoroughly political project with real emancipatory utility. For Vattimo, the rise of communications technology and globalization occasions an encounter with difference (cultural, sexual, religious, and so on) that calls into question the absolutism of the canon of Western metaphysics. Concurrently with this, the progression of the ethical and aesthetic message of Christianity finds itself reconfigured as a call to reject metaphysical violence in favor of charity, mercy, and followship. Hermeneutics, for Vattimo, stands as a recognition of the political implications that are always-already present in thought; our recognition of our situatedness and finitude is desirable because it frees us from the violent necessities of an (always imposed and never truly neutral) metaphysical notion of "the way the world is" and allows us, instead, to voluntarily and authentically engage with our traditions and contexts. This capacity for authentic engagement is, for Vattimo, of a decidedly political and emancipatory character:

> In the end, hermeneutic thinkers are more or less explicitly accused of being crypto-terrorists and fomenters of social disorder. Confronted by the tightening of the social order that accompanies globalization, hermeneutics becomes aware of its own nihilistic vocation; and it takes note of the menace that every pretense of absolute truth represents for freedom and thus for the history of Being. This nihilistic declination of hermeneutics is not a pure theoretical turn, or the contrivance of some eccentric disciple of Heidegger and Gadamer… We are aware that a philosophical assertion that has always claimed to have an application to concrete historical reality, but without ever abandoning (save, perhaps, in Marx) the metaphysical persuasion of being theory that speaks from a place not immediately and completely historical- undoubtedly, the Platonic ideas and fundamental truths have always been conceived as outside of time. (Vattimo 2010, 286)

For Vattimo, hermeneutics at once accomplishes a move of weakening (calling into question strong, violent, metaphysical structures) and a promotion of community (via the creation of intellectual space, particularly for the disenfranchised, into which discourse can emerge and from which, if necessary, resistance can be undertaken). It is in this sense that Vattimo can speak variously of a terroristic vocation for hermeneutics, understood as a productive disorientation directed against systems of oppression, but also hermeneutics as *koine*, understood as a shared philosophical method whereby the diverse groups within a community can come into productive engagement with their own traditions and with those of the never-entirely-other (Vattimo 1988).

At the risk of dwelling too long on matters biographical, we can likewise observe that, for Vattimo, political emancipation is not merely a philosophical or theoretical enterprise. Indeed, Vattimo's life is just as much one of political activity as of scholarship. As a young man, he was involved in Catholic Action, followed by an involvement in leftist politics that resulted in his being targeted by the Red Brigades in the 1970s and that culminated in his service in both the Italian and European parliaments. Indeed, Vattimo is no less prolific a writer in the popular press as he is in more academic venues and remains, even in semi-retirement, an outspoken commentator on issues ranging from gay rights, to Israel, to the European refugee crisis. Notably, far from separating his public life from his academic work, Vattimo has repeatedly avowed that they represent but different dimensions of the same hermeneutic project.

Gadamer presents a striking contrast to Vattimo's image of the hermeneutic thinker-as-public-intellectual. As Lorraine Code puts it,

> Yet it would be strangely incongruous to think of [Gadamer] as a public intellectual, for his was a more politically sequestered life than that of many thinkers of comparable stature: Sartre, Foucault, and Derrida come to mind. Despite having lived through a century that witnesses and participated in two world wars, and having experiences the upheavals and new social movements of the interwar and post-World War II years, Gadamer lived a remarkably insular, scholarly life. His account of his quietistic, intentionally unobtrusive pursuit of scholarship throughout World War II and his silence on matters of political ferment and social-political change during the latter half of the twentieth century are striking for what they fail to address. (Code 1994, 3)

The apolitical character of his life mostly preserved him from ideological contamination after the fashion of his mentor Martin Heidegger in the aftermath

of the Second World War. Likewise, we should acknowledge the possibility that Code's concern here is somewhat lacking in nuance. Subtraction of oneself from political life is itself a political gesture and Gadamer does identify himself as a belonging to a generation that attempted, purposefully and as a form of protest, to distance itself from bourgeoisie urban culture (Gadamer 1983, 2). At the same time, it does leave us, as Code observes, with the question of why we do not find, in Gadamer, more explicit confrontations with the many and varied political issues that confronted the world during his lifetime.

With these concerns in mind, we can reconfigure our intuition somewhat: Gadamer is perhaps less an apolitical figure than one possessed of a politics which appears to be contrary to the project of emancipation. Central to the political dimension of Gadamer's work is his much-discussed analysis of tradition. Gadamer, as we shall see, follows Heidegger in affirming the human subject's situatedness within historical and cultural contexts, hence the subject's fundamental finitude and condition of dependence. Gadamer observes that "[u]nderstanding is, essentially, a historically effected event" in the sense that the condition for the possibility of our understanding is our situatedness within pre-existing systems of meaning, by which we are delimited and against which we react. (Gadamer 1989, 209). For Gadamer, tradition provides a necessary context within which thought, judgements, and political activities are able to occur:

> We do not choose or assent to tradition so much as it makes a claim on us. We do not possess tradition in the sense of hanging on to it; instead tradition delivers these things we take for granted, against and within which we exercise judgments. (Walhof 2017, 85)

Radical escape from these traditions is not possible and, indeed, the presumption of such an escape (for instance, in certain strains of revolutionary theory emphasizing discontinuity) is deeply problematic, in the sense that it blinds us to the ways that our traditions continue to influence us, even in times of supposed newness.

In this focus on the persistence of tradition, we find a shared resonance between Gadamer and his Italian contemporary Luigi Pareyson. These two thinkers, men of the same era who share the contexts of post-fascism, yet never come into direct discourse with one another, both follow Heidegger's lead in regarding our condition of always-already being situated within history and culture as both a limiting condition (insofar as it frustrates our impulse at radical discontinuity,

an exit, as it were, from history) and an opportunity (for the carrying on of tradition and its utilization as a resource). The revolutionary impulse towards discontinuity becomes, for Pareyson, merely the bearing out, in an uncritical way, of forces extent in the tradition from which a revolutionary politics emerges. Tradition, on the other hand, calls to us for loyalty and transmission insofar as it exists as an emergence of Truth into history (but in such a way that it never dissolves into the purely historical and contingent):

> Tradition has an essentially originary and ontological nature. It does not simply suggest loyalty to the past and transmission of a heritage; it indicates the very condition of such a loyalty and transmission, freeing them from a merely temporal dimension and returning them to their originarity… Tradition is the opposite of revolution not because it opposes revolution with conservation, but precisely because the originary and ontological regeneration that tradition demands differs completely from the regeneration advanced by revolution, regeneration that only has a temporal and secondary nature. (Pareyson 2005, 41-42)

Traditions, for Pareyson, persist not because of mere accident or cultural momentum, but precisely because they tap into (but never exhaust) the wellspring of Truth[1]; they represent, in a word, Truth's expression within history. The individual interpreter assumes a central role in this scheme, standing as a mediator between the Truth understood as inexhaustible (capable, that is, of an endless plurality of expressions) and the historical contexts into which Truth necessarily emerges: if one is to do justice to a tradition, one must labor to make it speak to the listening of the present area (what Pareyson refers to as "[making] Truth speak to the listening of time.") (Pareyson 2005, 106). As we shall see, this crucial element of the volitional action of the individual in articulating Truth within history is not alien to Gadamer's thought and has profound implications for emancipatory politics.

To consider what the volitional action of an interpreter means and what it looks like in practice is one of Gadamer's most important contributions to contemporary philosophical hermeneutics. For Gadamer, interpretation of the text becomes dependent upon an assumption of the potential completeness and truth of an object under consideration; even if this assumption must later be withdrawn

[1] Where Truth is used to refer to this ontological wellspring of meaning, we use the capital "T." Where truth is used to refer to more localized truths (as that of the specific claims of a figure or text), the lowercase "t" is used.

after consideration of a text, it stands as the condition for the possibility of understanding (up to an including the understanding necessitating such a withdrawal; and here we see an echo of the phenomenological tradition) (Warnke 1987, 89). It is not difficult to see why this approach, when extended beyond textual or artistic interpretation, might raise the specter of a profound and dangerous conservatism: prejudice (understood in the literal sense of pre-judgements) or the voice of authority is extended the same concession of possible coherence as a necessary precondition for cultural engagement and any subsequent critical move is predicated upon this initial concession.

Gadamer, again, noting the situatedness and finitude of the human subject, holds a particular suspicion of efforts to leverage metaphysical principles in the critique of established power structures. Warnke provides us with an interesting discussion of Gadamer's dispute with Habermas regarding the possibility of an axiomatic (linguistic) grounding for criticisms of authority:

> The point here is that reflection may lead one to realize that one can find no independent grounds either for legitimating or for criticizing authority that, indeed, one's understanding of what is legitimate is finite, bound to a historical position and hence fallible…This thesis goes beyond his hermeneutic claim that in any attempt to overthrow tradition (whether artistic, epistemological or political) we accept more than we deny and more, perhaps, than we are willing to admit. Here [Gadamer's] position is that since we cannot justify revolutionary practice absolutely, through recourse to trans-historically valid principles, we ought to dispense with it entirely. (Warnke 1987, 135-136)

For Warnke, Gadamer's move here flows both from his recognition of our situatedness within history and culture (hence of our inability to have an objective and universally accessible "view from nowhere"; we note here an antecedent of Vattimo's rejection of metaphysical violence) combined with a particular reading of the "assumption of completeness" discussed previously. Warnke notes that Gadamer's reading is, in its own right, a contingent one, as we could just as easily *reject* authority on the grounds that authority's claims too are contingent and finite (although, Gadamer might well answer, *in favor of what alternative?*): "Gadamer overlays his account of hermeneutics with a conservative thesis that does not necessarily follow from it" (Warnke 1987, 136). We might say here that Warnke is seeking after a completeness and enclosure that Gadamer's thought does not (again, in its focus on situatedness and finitude) allow. All the same, he leaves us with the crucial insight that hermeneutics, as a method, entails an openness that

must always include an element of risk, a fact that must be kept firmly in mind if we are to consider its emancipatory potential.

In one sense, we can at least concede that we find in Gadamer's acknowledgement of the persistence of tradition a sort of political caution. We need to be aware of our contexts and of the sometimes subtle influence of that which came before. Absent this, we risk becoming detached from history, losing our grasp on our own situatedness, and falling victim (as we shall see) to the worst intellectual and political excesses. As Walhof puts it,

> The relatively modest aim of Gadamerian democratic theory instead is to draw our attention to political and social realities that have become hard to see or that are taken for granted. At times, this involves reminding us that things have *not* changed; even when everything appears to be in flux, and here we find the conservative bent of Gadamer's approach. It is important to note, however, that this is not a call for *keeping* things the same, which Gadamer has sometimes been accused of, but a call for an occasional readjustment of our consciousness' to what is- a readjustment, in Gadamer's view, that both conservatives and progressives need from time to time. (Walhof 2017, 10)

Gadamer, in a word, is not advocating for an uncritical effort to preserve the past (which would, in any case, involve a metaphysical positioning of oneself outside of the flux of history and of discursive space) but rather, warns us that we need to keep the past in mind as we travel forward into the future.

Warnke's reading notwithstanding, it is worth asking whether Gadamer's discussion of contingency and the "assumption of completeness" is as conservative as it might first appear. After all, as Warnke himself notes, the latter functions not as a thoroughgoing refusal to question the truthfulness or coherence of a text but rather functions as a precondition for an understanding of the text that may, in the end, allow for its rejection. In other words, a certain open-mindedness, a willingness to entertain the possibility of the truth of a text is a necessary first step in engaging critically with it; if we approach a text initially from the perspective of its untruth, we are unable to give it the fair consideration necessary to make a reasonable judgment. Our recognition of our finitude and situation, likewise, marks the beginning, rather than the end, of the critical gesture: "questioning is what enables us to own up to our finite contingency and to the limitedness of our knowledge, interpretation, and foresight; in short, through it, we own up to the human situation in the world" (Gadamer 1983, 12). This recognition of situatedness, in turn, allows us to continually expand our capacity for critical thought.

What is at play in the recognition of our embeddedness within contexts is not dogmatism or an uncritical view of the world, but precisely an openness conditioned by a recognition of our own limits; one, indeed, that seeks to promote understanding by removing barriers to it. More specifically (and here we see clearly Gadamer's influence on Vattimo), when we acknowledge that our conceptions are not transhistorical absolutes (before which all discussion must come to a halt) but are necessarily delimited products of our (contingent) historical and cultural positioning, we both refuse the violence of the imposition of our beliefs on others while embracing discourses capable of broadening our perspectives:

> We [philosophers] do not speak in the name of reason. Anyone who speaks in the name of reason contradicts himself. For it is reasonable to acknowledge that one's own insight is limited and for just that reason to be capable of better insights, wherever they may come from. (Gadamer 1983, 48)

We find in this passage a political statement as significant as any in Vattimo's work. The refusal to speak in the name of reason (after the fashion of the virtual entirety of the Plato to Kant canon) is, in fact, a refusal to silence others and a willingness to recognize, explore, and expand our connection with others (who are, perhaps, not so *other* after all).

The rejection of the metaphysical imposition of a "way the world is" upon the multitude leads to a productive, if chaotic, unleashing of plurivocity. As Vattimo so memorably expresses it,

> With the demise of the idea of a central rationality of history, the world of generalized communication explodes like a multiplicity of "local" rationalities- ethnic, sexual, religious, cultural, or aesthetic minorities.- that finally speak up for themselves. They are no longer repressed and cowed into silence by the idea of a single true form of humanity that must be realized irrespective of particularity and individual finitude, transience, and contingency. (Vattimo 1992, 9)

Indeed, further analysis reveals that the imposition of univocity upon plurivocity by way of metaphysics was always of a deeply political character. It is, by now, an established feature of post-colonial philosophies of all stripes that intellectual colonialism, understood as the normalization of particular cultural, philosophical, aesthetic, and religious perspectives, the reification of ideas privileging dominant groups over marginalized ones, and so on, has had a no less destructive influence on the world than has institutional colonialism:

> Deprived of the right to interpret, human beings are worldless, yet their deprivation is not an immutable political given so long as this right remains contestable […] The historical horizon of interpretation in the present is never homogenous but fractured and split against itself, handed over to polemical appropriations, expropriations, and reappropriations. This is the political core of hermeneutics. (Marder 2015, 310)

Subjects are rendered worldless by metaphysics insofar as it deprives them of the capacity to engage productively with the contexts in which they find themselves (by acknowledging those contexts as finite and contingent) and impedes discussion and community (by making us fall silent in the face of a supposed truth). More specifically, the worldviews of the privileged are presented as the only permissible worldviews, while those of the disenfranchised (those whom Vattimo refers to in his body of work as the weak) are systematically ruled out; these groups find themselves deprived of intellectual resources just as surely as armies, missionaries, imperial functionaries deprive them of material resources. Hence, when the world is restored for us, in all of its chaosmic plurivosity, it quickly becomes a site of contestation, collaboration, and resistance to systems of oppression. Yet for Gadamer, as for Pareyson, this construction of social space does not represent the collapse into a mere pluralistic historicism. Rather, these perspectives represent, for these thinkers, differing perspectives on a Truth that no one point-of-view emerging from within history is ever capable of fully exhausting (Truth understood in the Heideggerian sense of unconcealedness). Pareyson and Gadamer remain metaphysicians in a more robust, classical sense, than does Vattimo, for whom the specter of even this sort of Truth carries the risk of a collapse into political totalitarianism. As Walhof summarizes,

> It is the thing itself we understand, but this understanding is always, unavoidably partial and always, unavoidably historical. Truth is revealed differently in different historical circumstances, or an aspect of its being is revealed in different moments. There is a *there* there, but since we have no means for accessing all of it at once, it does not make sense to talk about any particular manifestation as imperfect. (Walhof 2017, 29)

Where Vattimo is inclined to think of Truth as "an affair of consensus" and, hence, reducible to an emergent property of discourses that remain very much defined by historicity and contingency, Gadamer and Pareyson regard Truth as something independent of but always manifesting in the history which

becomes present to us in its fullness only in our experience of a discursive pluralism that reveals its essential inexhaustibility (Vattimo 2014).[2] Truth does not disintegrate into history or into discourse but gives life to those things by functioning as a principle of ontological richness (understood as the refusal of conceptual enclosure) made to speak to the listening of historical particularity (Pareyson 2005, 106).

If tradition persists because it draws from ontological richness, rather than because of mere cultural momentum or continent consensus, it reinforces the importance of the interpreter understood as an agent of political action. Specifically, what is necessary in order to perform the regeneration to which tradition calls us is a constant negotiation between theory and practice:

> My Thesis: theory is just as primordial an anthropological datam as is practical and political power. So everything depends on constantly renewing the balance between these two human forces. And I am convinced that human society exists only because and as long as there is a balance of this kind. (Gadamer 1983, 68)

What Gadamer has in mind here is the curious union of the practical dimension of human life, which is focused on objectives and practical consequence, with the more open-ended dimension of life manifest in theory (and we should note that this would include things like the fine arts as readily as scientific fallibilism). This balance is what allows the human subject to be both free and situated within the world.

To unpack the full political implications of Gadamer's thoughts on the balance between theory and the practical sphere of life, it is helpful to put him, once again, into discourse with Pareyson. Pareyson makes the sort of free human agency outlined by Gadamer central to his own discussion of the role of the interpreter in mediating between historical situatedness and Truth. Pareyson makes a distinction between Truth, understood as an inexhaustible ontological wellspring of meaning, and mere ideas, which, to use Gadamer's phrasing, merely involve a directedness towards ends (Gadamer 1983, 68). Unlike Gadamer, Pareyson renders very explicitly the dire political consequence of the loss of balance between

[2] Whether the charges of anti-realism (with all of their accompanying political implications) leveled at Vattimo by commentators like Thomas Guarino, Matthew Harris, and Anthony Sciglitano are justified is an interesting question well beyond the scope of this work. For our purposes, it will suffice to say that, in Vattimo's thought, there is a greater suspicion of realism than in that of Pareyson or Gadamer.

theory and practice (or, as he would put it, the domination of man, not by Truth, but by ideas):

> Not only does truth grant human beings the initiative, but in fact it claims and demands such an initiative… When deprived of truth, however, the constructs of reason overwhelm human beings, and grow larger until they become their masters and evert on them an appalling and terrible power that reduces humans to the most monstrous slavery… Truth inspires human beings, whereas ideas master them. Truth lifts and exalts human beings beyond themselves, making even the humble capable of great things; ideas take possession of humans, subjugate them to the realization of their programs, and reduce them to mere tools, whether as cosmic-historical heroes or as faceless masses. (Pareyson 2005, 26).

Engagement with and regeneration of tradition is a volitional act, but insofar as tradition provides us an access point for Truth (and this is what Pareyson means by the originary character of tradition), it likewise becomes the condition for the possibility of our free activity within history. If Truth confronts us as Truth only insofar as we experience its plurality, as we shall see, it calls to us to embrace a new and broader account of community. At the same time, the free and volitional character of hermeneutic interpretation means that it is a process that entails intellectual and political risks.

What is often excluded from Gadamer's reading of tradition as persisting in time of apparent change is precisely the agency that he ascribes to interpreters. Indeed, for Gadamer, is the transmission of tradition, no less than the attempted discontinuity manifest in revolution, is a *voluntary* move. As Gadamer memorably puts it,

> The fact is that in tradition there is always an element of freedom and of history itself. Even the most genuine and pure tradition does not persist because of the inertia of what once existed It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated. It is, essentially, preservation and it is active in all historical change. But preservation is an act of reason, though an inconspicuous one. For this reason, only innovation and planning appear to be the result of reason. But this is an illusion. Even when life changes violently, as in ages of revolution, far more of the old is preserved in the supposed transformation of everything than anyone knows, and it combines with the new to create a new value. At any rate, preservation is as much a freely chosen value as are revolution and renewal. (Gadamer 1989, 282)

What we should acknowledge here is that hermeneutics represents a diminution of the intellectual necessities which characterized more violent forms of

metaphysics. It confronts us, in other words, with the possibility of a productive engagement with our tradition, the chance to renew it by bringing it into a productive discourse with the circumstances of the present. The risk, of course, is that this call is itself subject to rejection; as we shall see, some choose to respond to the breakdown of metaphysical absolutisms, not with emancipatory and communitarian efforts but with new forms of violence.

The removal of barriers to understanding represented by a new hermeneutic openness to cross-cultural discourse prefigures Vattimo's later discussion of weakening, with all of its political implications. For Gadamer, as for Vattimo, a recognition of one's situatedness within contexts serves as a precursor to one's critical engagement with those contexts, which, in turn, marks a movement from an active to a passive participant within history. As Gadamer observes, "What drives young people to intolerance is not certainty about their new values but a mysterious lack of orientation" (Gadamer 1983, 91). Vattimo, in a Nietzschean move, would associate this condition of disorientation with the forgetting of the contingency of contingent ideas, with the employment, as it were, of metaphors that we have forgotten are metaphors. Yet, as Gadamer's provocative phrasing suggests, there is more at play in this disorientation than the misguided certainty that has characterized the canon of Western metaphysics (which is perhaps more misorientation than disorientation). Trying and failing to engage with one's tradition is not the only source of intolerance; rater, the disorientation brought about by postmodernity, by the callings-into-question of metanarratives and absolutisms of all stripes, also prompts an unleashing of new, identitarian and violent manifestations of the will to power. If our contingency is, as Vattimo observes, "our only being," and we cling to it all the more firmly as a result of this realization, the question that confronts us becomes whether we lapse into an identity-driven violence (one thinks here of white supremacist groups) or, with Vattimo, Gadamer, and Pareyson, attempt a more open and life-affirming articulation of the traditions that we carry on (Frascati-Lochhead 1998, 82).

Crucial, then, to the articulation of this more open alternative, is a discussion of the role of community and community building in tradition. Indeed, Gadamer observes that the process of self-formation does not occur in a social vacuum. On the contrary, the condition of its possibility is precisely our productive engagement with those with whom we share social space. As Gadamer puts it,

> That we come to know ourselves by exchanging ideas with our fellow men, by living together in society and in the state, that we come to common convictions and decisions, is certainly not conformism. On the contrary, it constitutes the very dignity of being a self and of self-understanding. (Gadamer 1983, 58-59)

What Gadamer has in mind here is no passive Foucauldian subjectification. Rather, our pursuit of self-cultivation is something that occurs alongside and with the collaboration of our fellow beings; as Walhof puts it, "it is not just that we understand differently or confront our own limitations through the presence of the other; without the presence, we do not understand at all" (Walhof 2017, 106). Relatedly, any social group is founded on some sort of common ground, some condition for the possibility of the solidarity undercutting this understanding.

The common ground that is at play here is, at least partially, conditioned by the irreducible but extant world which confronts us. Specifically, humanity is confronted by political realities, material conditions, and so on, which hermeneutics finds itself charged with interpreting:

> Reason demands the proper application of knowledge and ability- and this application always involves submitting at the same time to the common ends that apply to us all. The commonality of these ends has begun more and more to encompass the whole of humanity. If that is the case, then hermeneutics as the theory of application- that is, of the bringing of the universal and the individual together- is in fact a central philosophical task. Not only does it have to mediate between universal theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge, it must also see whether the ends to which we put our abilities measure up to the common ends that support our culture and that of humanity. (Gadamer 1983, 61)

The hermeneutic mediation between the practical and theoretical spheres of life and the concession of a reality beyond mere interpretation (but which always becomes present to us through interpretation) combine in this passage to suggest an (again, irreducible,) common ground for human culture (in our shared need to mediate these forces and to confront the world in which we always-already find ourselves). Hermeneutics, in other words, can become *koine* in Vattimo's sense, precisely because it represents a response to a shared human need for interpretation as a mechanism for a productive confrontation with both our particular cultural contexts and our shared world. Just as important, this shared

response to a shared need is consummated precisely in an ever-broadening expansion of the hermeneutic project to include as many perspectives, past, present, and future, as possible (Vattimo 1988).

The social implications of this sort of intellectual openness and humility is no dogmatic conservatism but, on the contrary, a communitarian impulse that prefigures that found in Vattimo's later thought. Indeed, this approach to texts and institutions conditions Gadamer's understanding of cross-cultural discourse understood as a "fusion of horizons" characterized by a willingness not just to influence but to be influenced. Indeed, this is a move that represents the very opposite of metaphysics understood as an imposition upon plurality:

> Hermeneutics in the sphere of philology and the historical sciences is not "knowledge as domination"-i.e. an appropriation as taking possession; rather, it consists in subordinating ourselves to the text's claims to dominate our minds. Of this, however, legal and theological hermeneutics are the true model. To interpret the law's will or the promises of God is clearly not a form of domination but of service. (Gadamer 1989, 310)

This subordination of ourselves to the text, our willingness to be influenced, is precisely a refusal of metaphysical closure, a form of self-cultivation as openness. Gadamer further extends this philosophy to our discourses with others. Even as we allow ourselves to be influenced, we nonetheless remain marked by the origins that shaped us:

> Thus, we hold, the fact that the experience of the world is bound to language does not imply an exclusiveness of perspectives. If, by entering foreign language worlds, we overcome the prejudices and limitations of our own previous experience of the world, this does not mean that we leave and negate our own world. Like travelers we return home with new experiences. Even if we emigrate and never return, we still can never wholly forget. (Gadamer 1989, 445)

It is the interaction between our origination from our particular contingencies and our contact with the particular contingencies of others which produces our encounter with Truth in all of its glorious plurivocity and which allows for the fruitful expansion of our own perspectives.

Gadamer, no less than Vattimo, asserts that our quest for a fuller understanding necessitates an ever-broader encounter with plurality. The various dawnings of anthropology, communications technology, and exploration serve to shrink the world and make the question of a hermeneutic confrontation with the questions of plurality and meaning as urgent for Gadamer as they are for Vattimo.

We recall that, for the latter, these forces confront humanity with plurivocity and render transhistorical global narratives impossible to take seriously (as was observed initially by Nietzsche). On a more positive note, this calling into question allows the emergence into discourse of new or previously silenced voices. Vattimo is known for the explicit religious turn in his later thought (starting from such works as *Belief*), but Gadamer too is not averse to the employment of religious language when called to describe the hermeneutic impulse towards community:

> Since we are a conversation and can hear from one another- in these lines of Hölderlin, mankind's conversation with one another and with the divine sound like a single conversation. Because we are a conversation, we are the one story of mankind. In constantly discovering more early cultures and pre-cultures, more of the oldest traces of human life, and in investigating ethnic islands hitherto unreached by the stream of world historical tradition, we come to know more and more of this story. (Gadamer 1983, 3-4)

If we encounter the divine in the voice of the other, it is insofar as we encounter the irreducibility of Being in the diversity of perspectives and ways of living that become clear to us as we attain an ever-greater understanding of the human story. As time and circumstances change, and as our narratives combine and recombine, this grand tapestry continues to unfold, defying any full and final annunciation and giving us an immanent and messy glimpse of the infinity of possibility previously attributed to metaphysical conceptions of the divine.

We should recognize here that this focus on collaboration, sharing, and reciprocal influence stands in contrast to both identity-supremacist groups and well-meaning progressives concerned with issues of cultural appropriation and contamination.[3] What these groups have in common is precisely an impulse to restrain (albeit for different reasons) cross-cultural engagement in favor of the separation of cultural groups. Against this impulse, Gadamer asserts "So by way of beginning, culture can be understood as the domain of all that becomes more by sharing it" (Gadamer 1983, 6). Gadamer adopts the traditional formula of regarding culture as that which elevates human beings beyond savagery and

[3] We should, of course, acknowledge a distinction between more and less violent forms of cultural appropriation and interaction. What we seek to address here is the well-intentioned impulse to prevent cross-cultural violence by attempting to isolate cultural groups from one another.

conflict, that which restrains our lower impulses (Gadamer 1983, 10). This formulation is, of course, deeply problematic, shot through with the very worst forms of colonialism. What salvages this formulation somewhat is the fact that, for Gadamer, there is an emphasis here on culture understood as sharing, cooperation, and openness to one another. Indeed, chauvinistic cultural enclosure is, for Gadamer, something of a self-contradiction; a weaponization of the idea of culture against the function and purpose of culture itself. We recall again Gadamer's observation that fanaticism and intolerance are functions, not of a real authentic embrace of one's cultural provenance but precisely stem from the condition of being dangerously unmoored from it (we recall here Zizek's observation that fanaticism is, after all, the last refuge of those dangerously *lacking* in certainty) (Zizek 2018, xiv).

We have, so far, engaged in what might seem to be an act of intellectual sleight of hand: Gadamer, we might say, certainly ties hermeneutics to cross-cultural interaction and to community, but are these things really the same as a politics, still less a specifically emancipatory one? To some extent, these concerns are answered by our recognition of a critical engagement with our contexts being a precondition for free agency within those contexts and between our contexts and those of other, which is turn would be necessary for emancipatory political activity. If our instinct, likewise, is to focus on Gadamer's discussion of the persistent and regeneration of tradition is to picture an effort at keeping things the same and untouched, his focus on cross-cultural discourse certainly seems to embody a contrary impulse. Likewise, the bounds of solidarity, for Gadamer, are not merely those of shared affection:

> Ability founds solidarity. Solidarity in ability, responsibility in one's profession, and the knowledge that I share with others and allow others to control, are all forms of solidarity that refer back to the one inherent, fundamental possible that man has of aligning himself with, or even of making friends with himself and the world, by working. (Gadamer 1983, 113)

The image of friendship presented here is as forward-looking and activity-oriented as any found in the canon of modern philosophy; we could just as naturally refer to this self-cultivation as a means of grounding solidarity through work (understood as an addressing ourselves, collectively, to the challenges that confront us) as *comradeship*. The point here is not to turn Gadamer into a revolutionary, still less a Marxist; his suspicion of revolutionary discontinuity remains an important, grounding principle of his thought. Rather, we should acknowledge

here that this notion of solidarity as connected to the work of an ever-advancing human culture, combined with the drive to constantly expand our perspectives via the ongoing fusion of horizons, wonderfully prefigures the more explicitly political projects of thinkers like Vattimo.

We have, in our discussion of Gadamer's writings on tradition, uncovered a treasure trove of emancipatory potential. Indeed, Gadamer and Vattimo, both, hold in common a critical gesture capable of calling into question the absolutisms of traditional metaphysics by way of a recognition of our situatedness and contingency. At the same time, these thinkers share a communitarian impulse that recognizes that the breakdown of metaphysical violence precisely allows for the establishment of voluntary communities capable of tackling political problems (and here also we see a shared resonance with Pareyson's focus on individual agency). Indeed, if Vattimo's communitarian focus emphasizes the opening up of discursive space, Gadamer's focus on the fusion of horizons, on the willingness to influence and be influenced, might represent a still more strident and ambitious project. Vattimo, focusing on a situatedness within the Christian tradition, envisions community as forming on the basis of the bearing out of the Christian virtues of charity and hospitality (as an antidote to the colonialisms of the past), whereas Gadamer and Pareyson have in mind the advancement of a shared human story (admittedly, viewed from within situated, hence delimited, perspectives) and the articulation of (an admittedly inexhaustible and irreducible) Truth.

Our reading of Gadamer as a thinker of emancipatory potential entails its own sort of hermeneutic risk. As a result, it is worthwhile to consider the work that remains to be done, the imperfections and dangers that persist within the political dimensions of Gadamer's thought. If Gadamer, alongside Pareyson, regards the world as something which confronts us (albeit always mediated by history, culture, and our theoretical frameworks), and imparts to it an irreducibility that prevents its employment as a source of metaphysical absolutisms (naturals laws and so forth), it nonetheless remains strangely voiceless. Non-human animals, for instance, represent pure immediacy; they function out of instinct and hence lack the negotiation between the theoretical and the practical that defines human culture (Gadamer 1983, 114-115). Where they communicate, it is only to refer directly (that is, without abstraction) to objects that they encounter in the world (as in warning cries) (Gadamer 1983, 128). Writes Gadamer, "Man is alien to himself and his historical fate in a way quite different from the way nature, *which knows*

nothing of him, is alien to him" (Gadamer 1989, 278, emphasis mine). A productive engagement with the world may entail the cultivation of a receptivity to the demands of practical life which break in upon us (we recall here Gadamer's description of the relationship between theory and practical life as an ongoing negotiation) no less than to the voice of the other with whom we enter into and configure shared discursive space, but the former receptivity decidedly lacks the element of give-and-take which defines the latter one. In this way, then, a troubling imperialism persists, as the world of the more-than-human breaks in on us but does not speak, does not possess agency, and does not permit of our speaking back (although it may passively receive our responses to its mysterious movements, through our work of human, all too human projects upon it).

There is no easy answer to this resurgent and persistent form of ecological imperialism. We should not, however, despair of Gadamer's capacity to inform an answer to ecological concerns no less satisfying than the one he provides to concerns associated with progressive political action and cross-cultural discourse. Indeed, one possible way to address Gadamer to the concern of the more-than-human world entails precisely in a focus on receptivity: perhaps we, after all, can regard the more-than-human world, not as pure passivity but as possessed of a voice and a capacity for listening that allows for its inclusion in the discursive space. Perhaps we can attempt to speak meaningfully of solidarity with non-human animals (as embodied in the process-inflected thought of Donna Haraway [2003]) and plants (as does Gadamer's commentator and Vattimo's collaborator Michael Marder [2013]). Perhaps Gadamer's notion of friendship as a cultivation of a capacity for shared work can be applied to meeting the unique challenges of these proposed newer and broader models for discourse and the unpacking of their ethical implication that humans should learn to regard themselves as part of a shared world with a plurality of other beings (as embodied in the groundbreaking work of thinkers like Val Plumwood [2012]). In consideration of these possible avenues for growth, we can observe that Gadamer's thought, with its concession to the independent existence of the world and the irreducible wellspring of Truth, would seem to have an advantage over Vattimo's, with its suspicion of any residue of metaphysics and its tendency to reduce the world to a purely discursive (hence, human) space, with respect to the issue of ecology.

As Gadamer's thought robustly and repeatedly shows us, openness to possibility is, in our ever-shifting engagement with the world in which we find ourselves, infinitely preferable to efforts at an enclosed, dogmatic finality. It is fitting that we observe that our inquiry into the emancipatory utility of Gadamer's thought itself bears indelibly the stamp of Gadamer's unique methodology. To start, we consider Gadamer's work and confront our originating prejudices and intuitions. We situate ourselves based on what that work, explicitly, has to offer our effort. Finally, we consider the ways in which Gadamer's work might itself benefit from a receptivity to the work of others. Gadamer's hermeneutic legacy, it would seem, is not exhausted in the insights, however profound, of his student Vattimo, or rendered superfluous by the rediscovery of the more explicitly political work of his contemporary Pareyson. On the contrary, this great maestro, even twenty years after his passing, clearly has plenty still to teach those of us adventurous enough to follow in his footsteps.

Dr. Daniel Ambord, Claremont Graduate University,
daniel.ambord[at]cgu.edu

References

Code, Lorraine. 1994. "Introduction: Why Feminists Do Not Read Gadamer." In *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer*. University Park: Pennsylvania University Press.

Frascati-Lochhead, Marta. 1998. *Kenosis and Feminist Theology*. New York: SUNY.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1983. *In Praise of Theory*. Translated by Chris Dawson. London: Yale University Press.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1989. *Truth and Method*. Second, Revised Edition. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. London: Continuum.

Haraway, Donna. 2003. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness.* Edited by Matthew Begelke. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.

Pareyson, Luigi. 2005. *Truth and Interpretation.* Translated by Robert Valgenti. New York: SUNY Press.

Plumwood, Valerie. 2012. *The Eye of the Crocodile*. Edited by Lorraine Shannon. Canberra: ANU Press.

Marder, Michael. 2013. *Plant-Thinking.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Marder, Michael. 2010. "Political Hermeneutics, Or Why Schmitt is not the Enemy of Gadamer." In *Consequences of Hermeneutics.* Edited by Jeff Malpas and Santiago Zabala. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Vattimo, Gianni. 2014. *A Farewell to Truth.* Translated by William McCuaig. New York: Columbia University Press.

Vattimo, Gianni. 1999. *Belief*. New York: Polity Press.

Vattimo, Gianni. 1988. "Hermeneutics as Koine." *Theory, Culture, and Society*. 5 (2-3): 399-408

Vattimo, Gianni. 2009. *Not Being God*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Vattimo, Gianni. 1992. *The Transparent Society*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Vattimo, Gianni. 2010. "The Political Outcome of Hermeneutics." In *Consequences of Hermeneutics.* Edited by Jeff Malpas and Santiago Zabala. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Walhoff, Darren. 2017. *The Democratic Theory of Hans-Georg Gadamer.* London: Palgrave.

Warnke, Georgia. 1987. *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Zizek, Slavoj. 2018. *Living in the End Times*. New York: Verso.