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Gadamer's Historically Effected and Effective Consciousness

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Abstract

Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that consciousness not only historically constrains experience but also allows strangeness to intelligibly speak to it. This historically effected and effective consciousness features in Gadamer's idea that a common language is unearthed for the interpretive horizons of those involved in dialogue with each other through a logic of question and answer. I argue, however, that this reveals a conceptual uncertainty about evaluating progress in interpretive understanding. Gadamer's failure to escape from this uncertainty risks the possibility of a problematic relativism. Effectively, even if sufficient interpretation occurs when horizons are infinitely structured, this does not preclude incoherence between a horizon's elements.

Résumé

Hans-Georg Gadamer soutient que la conscience non seulement contraint historiquement l'expérience, mais permet également à ce qui est étranger de lui parler intelligiblement. Cette conscience historiquement effectuée et effective figure dans l'idée de Gadamer selon laquelle un langage commun se dégage, par une logique de question et de réponse, pour les horizons interprétatifs de ceux qui dialoguent entre eux. Je soutiens, cependant, que cela révèle une incertitude conceptuelle quant à l'évaluation des progrès dans la compréhension interprétative. L'incapacité de Gadamer à sortir de cette incertitude risque d'engendrer un relativisme problématique. En effet, même si une interprétation suffisante se produit lorsque les horizons sont infiniment structurés, cela n'exclut pas l'incohérence entre les éléments d'un horizon.

Keywords: Gadamer; hermeneutics; dialogue; horizon; infinity; logic of question and answer

1. Introductory Remarks: Historically Effected Consciousness

For Hans-Georg Gadamer, prejudice is integral to our subjective experience of the world (Cf. Gadamer, 1976, p. 9; 2004, p. 272ff.). If the perspectives that inform our experiences can change over time without losing this condition of prejudice, then we can infer some obvious consequences. First is that, if a change in perspectives over time entails a corresponding change in the content of the prejudices underlining

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them, then we would be greatly restricted in our capacity to recreate an original experience — this is what Joseph Cunningham (2017) hints at when discussing how “the temporality of experiences enforces this restriction” (p. 51). Second, even without this change in our prejudices, our perspectives would remain subjectively limited and partial. What I argue for in this article is that even with time’s passage making it difficult to re-attain an original perspective, there is a more pressing issue of our partial subjectivity incapacitating us from ever ascertaining an authentic understanding of that perspective (Cf. Gadamer, 1985, pp. 281–282; 2004, p. 159), even if we happen to stumble upon it.¹

The interpretive powers that capacitate understanding are therefore conditioned in a dual manner. First, they highlight the *causal historicity* of one’s subjectivity, the latter’s being caused by inherited tradition and culture. Second, these powers are also characterized by a present perspectival baggage (Leiviskä, 2015, p. 591), influenced in part from said tradition and culture and partially informing what one’s understanding can viably be about. As such, despite a temporal distancing from the past, one may still intelligibly mediate between the past and present to give us epistemically relevant, albeit uncertain, “ways back to the past” (Cunningham, 2017, p. 35. Cf. Leiviskä, 2015, p. 589; Schuster, 2013, p. 198). In short, just because one is perspectively limited by tradition and culture does not imply that one is *epistemically impotent*.

One way of coming to terms with this limited yet potent epistemic conditioning of our interpretive powers is through what Jürgen Habermas (1988) regards as our partial knowledge of “the tradition with which we are confronted” in every instance of appropriating the tradition to engage in interpretation (p. 152. Cf. Gadamer, 2004, pp. 280–281). This knowledge both is partial and is *itself* traditionally informed, in that it allows us to be aware not only “of the ways in which we are effected by history,” but also “of our inability to be fully conscious of *all* the ways in which we are preconditioned” (Leiviskä, 2015, p. 591). More generally then, any knowledge ‘preconditioned’ by one’s culture and ‘effected by history,’ whether it attends an awareness of its preconditioning/effectedness, is what Gadamer (2004) would call a “historically effected consciousness,” or HEDC. Here, what may be ‘historically effected’ is a consciousness of “the human aspect of things, the system of man’s needs and interests” (pp. 301, 433).²

Furthermore, that the HEDC includes awareness of one’s historical effectedness, and not just non-self-aware historically effected knowledge, is integral to understanding subjectivity’s historicity. Chung-Ying Cheng (2015) similarly corroborates:

The basic idea is that we belong to this history and I can be aware of the history and this fact makes it possible for me to understand what is historically handed. Our understanding is of a historical object and yet it is reflected in my understanding in awareness of its historical backing and source. (p. 36)

¹ I am not claiming that Gadamer himself seeks certainty in interpretive judgements. Indeed, this would be against his stance on the hermeneutic process as *disclosive* of truth, not *certifying* thereof (Cf. footnote 21). As I introduce in Section 2, I argue that Gadamer espousing a hermeneutics-as-disclosure conflicts with an interpretation of him disavowing even the possibility of hermeneutic relativism.

² Other readers of Gadamer, such as Xinli Wang (2018), ascribe to the HEDC an integral role in language’s capacity to grant a linguistic culture its conceptual presuppositions (p. 565), which are inescapably anthropocentrically imbibed.

One reading of Cheng's statement can be couched in terms of a moderated receptivity: I can understand *that* my prejudices are historically handed, but not *what* they are, *mutatis mutandis*, their originating pasts *exactly* are.

However, this historicity of subjectivity is only one factor capacitating interpretive accuracy in our understanding of other perspectives that share in a similar historical inheritance. Indeed, although Gadamer (2004) initially notes that one can legitimately "see the past in its own terms" and "in its true dimensions" by "acquiring an appropriate historical horizon" (p. 302. Cf. Vessey, 2014, p. 372), he is weary of this being all that there is to genuine understanding. This is because endeavouring to fully recreate a historical horizon amounts to a denial of the temporally present bias of the HEdC, thereby rescinding *meaningfulness* in any such 're-creative' understanding and ultimately making it irrelevant to one's *own* subjectivity (Cf. Gadamer, 2004, pp. 302–303). Thus, if the acquisition of an accurate understanding — of the past or any other perspective in general — cannot be but a subjectively meaningless one, then how the HEdC mediates between these demands of accuracy and meaningfully subjective relevance for our interpretations may be as follows: clarifying and understanding one's own horizon — i.e., the set of prejudices informing our perspective — aids in understanding the horizons of others. In other words, without knowledge of one's own perspective *as it is presently situated*, understanding that of another, although possibly 'accurate' in a superficially factual sense, becomes *subjectively meaningless* in some other sense.

However, the hermeneutic process goes the other direction as well: by coming to understand the horizon of, for instance, a past other, we inevitably allow for the "emancipation from our own" (Wang, 2018, p. 569). Of course, such emancipation is not tantamount to attaining an objectified point of view, for in learning about another's perspective we are still informed by our own biases (Cf. Odenstedt, 2005, p. 46; Segev, 2007, p. 324). Nevertheless, becoming aware of other points of view is edifyingly emancipatory since we thereby acquire potentially shareable knowledge of other *valid* ways of interpreting the world (Cf. Gadamer, 2004, p. 303; Lynch, 2014, p. 374) — ways that are derived from the horizons of contemporary and past interlocutors.³ Therefore, although I may be unable to perfectly understand the perspective of another due to my own historically informed perspectival situatedness, in communication with another, I can come to a new epistemic stance regarding my own perspective.

There are thus two poles to the hermeneutic process *involving the HEdC*: on the one hand, in understanding my own historical effectedness, I come to better, albeit not fully, understand the other in a subjectively *meaningful* manner; on the other hand, in engaging with the other, I come to *more accurately* grasp how I am so effected. These two poles always concertedly function in the hermeneutic process, since understanding oneself cannot do without understanding other past/contemporary

³ The shared nature of this intellectual exercise is perhaps most apparent between contemporaries engaged in conversation, presumably because the dynamic nature of in-the-moment responses better facilitates mutual understanding of when points of interpretive commonality are arrived at — a dynamism that is naturally more elusive when engaging with a past interlocutor.

perspectives, and vice versa. This accords with Gadamer's fundamentally dialogical view of understanding (Cf. Section 6).⁴

It is here where we can ask the guiding question of this article's main inquiry: 'of what can hermeneutic goals viably consist?' We obviously want to extricate ourselves from our own situatedness enough to recognize alternative discourses, but not in such a way that we become misguided on how our subjectivity's historicity informs our ways of understanding such discourses (Cf. Marshall, 2003, pp. 125–126). This corresponds to the previously discussed first pole of subjectively meaningfully understanding the other. Nevertheless, what about *accurately* understanding the other? While the second pole compels considerations of accuracy in one's *self*-understanding through engaging with the other, how would we then gauge accuracy in our interpretations of others when trying to see them from their own horizons, past or present?⁵

2. Historically Effective Consciousness

Gadamer attempts to answer this through the idea of a historically *effective* consciousness, or HEvC, involved with the HEdC in more substantially informing the hermeneutic process. To set up the discussion, briefly, the HEvC is a state of being open to the possibility of different interpretations hinging on a shared subject matter undergirding the horizons of different interlocutors.

To be more precise, Gadamer does not outright state 'historically effective consciousness' in his discussion of the hermeneutic process. However, he does hint at an implicit notion thereof when noting that "[t]he general structure of understanding is concretized in historical understanding, in that the concrete bonds of custom and tradition and the corresponding possibilities of one's own future become effective in understanding itself" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 254). Therefore, understanding another's horizon hinges on both our *effected* biases as well as their *effective* capacity for intelligible speculation in our interpretations (Cf. Cheng, 2015, pp. 38–39; Wang, 2018, p. 567).

We can concretize the idea further: in interpreting a past text or perspective, we project other possibilities of understanding it by engaging our own horizons with those of others as sources of novel meaning and interpretation; for contemporary perspectives, we can project other possible ways of understanding them by letting them speak about themselves and acknowledging that our reception of what they have to say is conditioned by our own biases. It is this possibilization of different understandings of an object of interpretation, whether situated in the past or present, that is the

⁴ Gadamer, in keeping with his theme of our inability to fully recreate perspectives *other* than our own (Gadamer, 1976, p. 6), does spend some time spelling out this apprehension of these past and contemporary perspectives (Cf. Gadamer, 2004, pp. xxix–xxxi, 299–301, 579).

⁵ Cf. Günter Figal (2010, pp. 13–15), for another criticism of Gadamer regarding the transcending of one's own tradition for the sake of self-critique. Georgia Warnke (2014) argues similarly, in that if the notion of transcending one's tradition requires at least the recognition of the tradition of another, then this notion conflicts with that of such recognition being inescapably conditioned by one's tradition as also shared by that other, since in transcending one's own, we would thereby transcend that of the other. Although it is not the purpose of this article to address these specific criticisms, a response to Warnke's main thesis can be found in Iñaki Xavier Larrauri Pertierra (2020, pp. 55–58).

main function of the HEvC, but this possibilization is parameterized by the HEdC that is our own familiar horizon. Importantly, these functions of the HEdC and HEvC do not subsist within distinct phenomena but are essentially two sides of the same coin that is our interpretive horizon. Our horizons therefore exhibit a dual functionality of familiarity (HEdC) as well as expansion of said familiarity by the aforementioned possibilization (HEvC). In summary, the enterprise of interpretation necessitates a shared endeavour of self- and other-recognition that must not comprehend both the self and other as fundamentally separated phenomena.

In addressing Gadamer's attempt to rescue a capacity for gauging accuracy between different interpretations, we ought to begin by asking whether the same interpretive object is even involved in the endeavour. This is because, on the face of it, there would be less reason to regard an interpretation as accurately interpretive *of* an object the less it can be said to be *about* that object. To be concise, we will regard an object of interpretation — either a past text or even a contemporary horizon — as attaining a subject matter, something that can be interpreted and further understood *about* said object. Consequently, what makes the shared endeavour of self- and other-recognition for interpretive understanding worthwhile is a shared subject matter between different horizons (Cf. Leiviskä, 2015, pp. 589, 599–600; Segev, 2007, p. 325). This common subject matter allows for a veritable community of horizons situated not only contemporarily-spatially but also historically-temporally. Therefore, there is more reason for both the historically connected, yet temporally distant, and contemporary horizons to be accurately interpretive of their objects when they are brought to bear on a shared subject matter.

For my purposes more specifically, it is the interrelation between the HEvC and HEdC (the HEdC-HEvC relation) and how it is meant to undergird a hermeneutic process that potentiates accuracy in understanding other interlocutors, past or present, on which I primarily focus in this article. I contend, however, that how Gadamer develops the HEdC-HEvC relation yields troubling confusions, in that if Gadamer's espousal of interpretive accuracy is meant to be a denial of a kind of hermeneutic relativism, then his construal of the HEdC-HEvC relation allows us to weaken the force of that denial. To substantiate this argument, I interpret Gadamer's HEdC-HEvC relation in terms of said and unsaid elements shared by both *relata* to highlight how the interrelation of the elements contributes to a *conceptual uncertainty* that resurfaces relativism's *possibility*. To my mind, this interpretation of Gadamerian thought is novel, so I motivate it by comparison with other interpretations in the literature and by its capacity to naturally analyze other Gadamerian concepts — e.g., 'fore-conception of completeness' and 'logic of question and answer.'

The structure of the rest of this article is as follows: in Section 3, I discuss how Gadamer grounds the hermeneutic process on 'a polarity of familiarity and strangeness' that capacitates that very process's supposedly truthful communication to us regarding interpretive objects. In Section 4, I introduce the notion of said/unsaid elements as it pertains to the HEdC-HEvC relation to cash in on the idea of interpretive truth being conditioned by coherence in the hermeneutic disclosure of truth. For Gadamer, this disclosure, first, involves a 'common language' that meaningfully links together both interpretive act and object (Section 5), and second, is itself a disclosure of the very *being* of the interpretive object that is permitted by the 'logic of

question and answer' undergirding the common language's involvement in the hermeneutic process (Section 6). In Section 7, I introduce my main contention with how Gadamer appropriates this logic to combat against hermeneutic relativism by first noting the logic's role in a never-ending hermeneutic process, and how this never-ending, 'infinite dialogue' potentiates incoherence between horizons meant to be interpretive of the *same* object. I then analyze how Gadamer's notion of an 'infinite horizon' may resolve this incoherence, and thereby avoid the problem of relativism (Section 8), before addressing a potential weakness of such a resolution: the concept of an infinite horizon is perfectly consistent with the mere *possibility* of a hermeneutic relativism (Section 9). I conclude in Section 10 by motivating this possibility of relativism as germane to what some interpreters of Gadamer take to be his acceptance of a kind of relativism-friendly 'hermeneutic game.'

3. Encountering the Thou

Note that, given our inability to fully conceptually surmount our own historical preconditioning (Leiviskä, 2015, pp. 588–589, 596), we often must rely on an other-oriented approach to aid us in this task. For Gadamer (2004),

[i]t is impossible to make ourselves aware of a prejudice while it is constantly operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, provoked. The encounter with a traditionary text can provide this provocation. For what leads to understanding must be something that has already asserted itself in its own separate validity. (p. 298)

This provocation is possible because tradition is both familiar when informing one's own horizon *and* strange when acting as the subject matter with which we interpretively grapple (Dybel, 2011, pp. 473–474). This encounter of the familiar with the strange and foreign is essentially the impetus for genuine interpretive understanding and is why Gadamer (2004) considers "[h]ermeneutic work [to be] based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness" (p. 295. Cf. Odenstedt, 2005, p. 42).

These foreign elements permit greater understanding through the HEvC's acknowledgement of them as both constitutive of and possibilizing different interpretations about a shared subject matter. On the one hand, horizons and subject matters, when registered as foreign elements, *both* function as objects of interpretation that, through the HEvC, provoke our biases *and* alternative understandings besides those apparent from our HEdC. On the other hand, how one understands a foreign horizon differs from that of a subject matter by virtue of how that initial provocation is actualized into a viable interpretation: for a horizon, interpretive actualization happens in part through a shared *subject matter* between the horizons involved, while for the subject matter itself, it happens through shared *conceptual similarities* between the horizon and the subject matter in question.⁶ Stated differently, the subject matter

⁶ Remember that, for Gadamer, interpretation should escape a rampant relativism that sees any understanding of horizons and subject matters, no matter how dissimilar the conceptual elements are, as legitimate. Hence, there being distinct interpretive functions of the sameness (actualizing) and difference

is a *direct* object of interpretation while foreign horizons are only *indirect* objects of interpretation, in that we interpret subject matters by their own terms that are shared with our own horizons, but we interpret other horizons in terms of a shared subject matter.

It is this shared assertion of difference and strangeness that is integral to how foreign horizons and subject matters *begin* speaking to us hermeneutically, since by this assertion we are at once both distanced from ourselves and made aware of foreign elements *as* different from us (Leiviskä, 2015, pp. 590, 597). Indeed, one's capacity to form validly insightful interpretations necessitates encountering the strange through the HEvC, for that is how one appropriates their own biases, situated within the HEdC-given horizon, to regard the strange *as* strange (valid appropriation) and not *as* familiar (misappropriation). Following Gadamer (2004), we will collectively call whatever asserts such strangeness to our horizon the "Thou" (p. xxxii), whether as horizon or subject matter. In essence, the alterity of the Thou forces us to reconsider our own horizon as a guarantor of authoritative interpretations, to see our horizon's prejudices for what they really are, historically effected and subject to reevaluation.⁷ Michael Pickering (1999) calls this a dialectical process of othering both ourselves and the Thou (pp. 184, 194) — i.e., along with the otherness of the Thou, our hitherto familiar horizons can be *other* than what we had previously regarded as authoritatively interpretive. The Thou thus validly asserts itself as another legitimate voice, one that addresses itself to us but nonetheless one that we cannot fully understand (Cf. Vilhauer, 2010, p. 84).

Importantly, *how* the Thou is revealed to us has been variedly understood in the literature — e.g., as an awareness of the Thou's "historical contexts" (Cheng, 2015, p. 35) or its "productivity" in possibilizing different interpretations to our own (Leiviskä, 2015, p. 597) — but generally what is agreed upon is that what is revealed is revealed as *not immediately familiar*. Indeed, even if I may "see the [Thou] from a point of view constituted by [my horizon]" (Fristedt, 2010, p. 491 n 14), this *horizontal* constitution is exactly what potentiates my seeing the Thou as strange in the first place. We can therefore say, in terms of Gadamer's 'polarity of familiarity and strangeness,' the Thou occupies a position of strangeness that gives the HEvC its characteristic potentiating power, yet the position of familiarity, occupied by the familiar horizon as the HEdC, engages the Thou and interacts with it. This interaction gets us closer towards interpretive truth if by the Thou's assertion of strangeness we rescind whatever authoritative self-consciousness we possess (Cf. p. 491 n 14), which is how the Thou speaks of itself "as a potentially valid claim of truth made upon oneself and one's own world" (Leiviskä, 2015, p. 595. Cf. Barthold, 2020, p. 49ff.).

The Thou's revelation, however, does not necessarily remain wholly strange to us. According to David Vessey (2014), our HEdC already "limits the alterity of the [Thou] and therefore what we have to learn from it" (p. 372). As such, the transition

(possibilizing) between horizons and between horizons and subject matters, as otherwise interpretations could be actualized on mere conceptual difference alone, which is relativism through and through.

⁷ This is related to what Ben Vedder and Gert-Jan van der Heiden (2014) call putting prejudices "to the test" (p. 353).

from the Thou's strangeness to a partial understanding thereof is limited by how one's historical conditioning, one's HEdC, constrains that strangeness to within *one's horizon's perspectival jurisdiction*. Effectively, the HEdC grants the HEvC an *attenuated* possibilizing capacity, regulating the range of applicable and *non-authoritative* interpretations concerning a shared subject matter between a familiar horizon and the Thou.

However, whether this regulative function backs up Gadamer's revocation of hermeneutic relativism is yet to be settled. After all, an attenuated possibilization of the Thou's meaningfulness by the HEvC does not by itself preclude one's HEdC constraining the Thou's interpretability in mutually *contradictory* ways — ways that can be licensed as true given a hermeneutic relativism. Part of how Gadamer famously resists this worry of relativist truth is by a *structural* restriction of coherence whereby interpretations become viable when, approximately, the interpretive act coheres with its object. In Section 4, I analyze this restriction according to an account of the said/unsaid elements in the HEdC-HEvC relation interpreted from Gadamer's own words. This account will greatly aid our ability to evaluate Gadamer's denial of hermeneutic relativism *a la* this structural restriction of coherence, which forms part of the basis of his more penetrating treatment of interpretive accuracy and hermeneutic progress. However, this account also offers a natural analysis of the other portion of said treatment: an additional *methodological* restriction on attaining interpretive truth by a logic of question and answer. This additional restriction, as will become clearer starting at the end of Section 6, manages to re-motivate the worry of relativism. To prepare for this discussion, as well as an adjudication on whether Gadamer's own solution to this latter worry succeeds, we must first go over the requisite conceptual groundwork.

4. Coherence of Horizons

Remember that the HEdC constitutes one's awareness of one's historical conditioning and how one cannot fully transcend it. Regarding the linguistic formation of our HEdC, Gadamer (2004) has this to say:

[E]very word breaks forth as if from a center and is related to a whole, through which alone it is a word. Every word causes the whole of the language to which it belongs to resonate and the whole world-view that underlies it to appear. Thus every word, as the event of a moment, carries with it the unsaid, to which it is related by responding and summoning. (p. 454)

The unsaid becomes what the HEdC is projected towards by the HEvC's possibilizing tendencies. Nonetheless, because the HEdC is never fully transcended, whatever is unsaid cannot be so significantly different from what has been said that the former, presumably, contradicts the latter. Why this must be the case is because the recognizability of the HEdC's said is conditioned by a mandate on logical coherence, expressed in Gadamer's sense of the "fore-conception of completeness" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 294. Cf. Vessey, 2014, p. 371). Here, anything logically bound to a coherently apparent horizon, such as a shared subject matter, must not *at the very least*

contradict it lest we enter a state of incoherence in which interpretations start to lose their relevance for our understanding of a subject matter (Cf. Cheng, 2015, p. 16).⁸

Moreover, this coherence between the unsaid and said is hermeneutically potent, in that it allows the said to take up the unsaid for the expansion of one's familiar horizon, thereby causing that horizon to reveal itself more to the one possessing it (Cf. Fristedt, 2010, p. 476). More precisely, by this *horizontal* expansion, one translates the HEDC's *own* unsaid elements into a broader set of said elements, or, from elements yet to be brought into a formed interpretation into those so formed. This is how a hitherto unconceptualized subject matter, shared between the familiar horizon and the unfamiliar Thou, becomes revealed to one within one's horizon.

Indeed, the concept of horizontal expansion *as revelation of subject matter in the HEDC's unsaid* may be read from Gadamer's (2004) claim that "everything that is language has a speculative unity: it contains a distinction, that between its being and its presentations of itself, but this is a distinction that is really not a distinction at all" (p. 470). Here, the 'being' of language can be interpreted as the unsaid of one's familiar horizon (HEDC) unearthed in subsequent 'presentations' via an encounter with the Thou. More precisely, we may regard the HEDC's unsaid as the conceptual potentiality in our HEDC that becomes actualized through interaction with the HEvC. This fusion between the HEDC and HEvC via their shared subject matter thus leads to a subsequent expansion in the HEDC's said (Cf. Vessey, 2009, p. 540). The 'speculative unity' in language therefore is one shared between all elements, actual and potential, of both our HEDC and HEvC, wherein what is potential in the HEDC is further actualized by interaction with the HEvC, specifically with the actual and potential features of the Thou.

I am not being needlessly pedantic in interpreting Gadamer's claim of speculative unity here, for this interpretation can illuminate how others have come to understand this very claim, and how, as is explored in Section 5, Gadamer comes to mean what he does in making statements elsewhere. For instance, Peter Fristedt (2010) argues that,

in experience I treat the things I come across as though they were things in themselves, as though they constituted immediate reality. To speculate is to rise above this "dogmatism", and thus to recognize that how things present themselves to me is not necessarily how they are. However, the distinction between being and presentation is both made *and superseded* in speculation. (p. 477)

Here, actuality/potency is couched in terms of presentation/being. Consequently, the relation between an experience's being and presentation is differently construed depending on whether the familiar horizon or Thou is experienced. Let us be specific. The *said* of our HEDC *presents* a horizon to us as familiar, while the *said* of the HEvC *presents* the Thou to us as strange — the non-familiarity of what is being said

⁸ Regarding the way logical terms are used in this article, contradiction entails incoherence, but not vice versa. Incoherence in horizons simply entails a lack of coherence among its elements, in that it is not yet established whether they can coherently fit into a broader structure or are ultimately separate elements. Consequently, incoherence can occur regardless of contradictions obtaining.

perturbs the familiarity of what has already been said. The HEvC's unsaid corresponds to the *being* of the Thou, which, following Gadamer's disavowal of interpretive relativism, also corresponds to the as-of-yet unelucidated but applicable interpretations of the Thou's being that *cohere* with one's familiar horizon.⁹ The hermeneutic process is therefore as follows: what is *initially* said by our HEDC's familiar presentation coherently expands into what is *subsequently* said, or *hitherto* unsaid in the HEDC's being, and this is done by engaging with what is left unsaid in the HEvC's being after the initially strange presentation of the Thou through the HEvC's said.

Simply, the speculative unity of interpretation is constitutive of a 'distinction between being and presentation' that is both made in the *said* of the HEDC-HEvC relation and superseded in the *unsaid* of that relation: the account of the HEDC's said is couched in terms of the identity of a familiar horizon while the said of the HEvC is in terms of the difference of the Thou. However, both accounts of the unsaid for the HEDC and HEvC deal in terms of a coherently enlarging horizon by which a subject matter is better understood, wherein the HEvC's unsaid contains conceptual resources from which we can meaningfully venture into the unsaid of our own HEDC. As such, this speculative unity establishes horizons as functioning both in a coherent and open-ended fashion (Cunningham, 2017, p. 35; Cf. Fristedt, 2010, p. 475), expressive more of a disclosure of subjectively *insightful* — perhaps, novel yet coherent — rather than objectively *correspondent* truths by our limited understandings of some subject matter (Vessey, 2014, p. 361 n 2. Cf. Weinsheimer, 2003, pp. 159–160).¹⁰

This discussion of speculative unity in the coherence of horizons situates us favourably to evaluate how Gadamer accounts for interpretive accuracy. This is integral for our purposes because how such an account plays out in detail will give us a better grasp on whether it succeeds in motivating Gadamer's disavowal of hermeneutic relativism — this disavowal requires a fuller analysis of how Gadamer treats accuracy and progress in interpretation, and so far we have only explored an initial explanation for why the disclosure of truth can preclude at the very least contradiction without forgoing an accuracy norm for hermeneutic insight. As I will discuss in the upcoming sections, how Gadamer understands our capacity to evaluate hermeneutic progress, and therefore to make good on said accuracy norm, is intrinsically involved with his idea of the speculative unity of language in dialogical understanding. Particularly, Gadamer comprehends this capacity as potentiated by a common language both informing and manifested by a process of question and answer unearthing the being of the Thou. What will hopefully become clear is that this question-and-answer process is the very methodological centre of the HEDC-HEvC relation, and consequently deserves space for explication thereof.

⁹ If we do not follow Gadamer here, then hermeneutic relativism would allow for the Thou's being to include elements that in principle contradict anything our horizons could say about the Thou, but which would still count as valid interpretations of it even if they were embraced by our horizons.

¹⁰ Some, like Lynch (2014, p. 370 n 32), take this disclosure to be one whereby initially strange facets of our experiences become subsequently disclosive of reality itself as linguistically and conceptually construed.

5. A Common Language

Of significance here is Gadamer's (2004) famous claim that "[e]very conversation presupposes a common language, or better, creates a common language" (p. 371), signifying that, during dialogue, one's engagement with the Thou furthers one's understanding insofar as a common language is involved. As such, a common language can in some way function as a barometer for evaluating progress in one's understanding. In this sense, there is commonality between a shared language and a shared subject matter, for both are unearthed in the process of dialogical understanding without necessarily being fully understood at any point therein. However, when already conceptualized, a common language acts more like a horizon in its familiarity. Therefore, a common language's function may be further specified in line with Gadamer's above claim: as a *presupposed* language, it functions as the shared subject matter, while as a *created* language, it functions as the coherently extended horizon that better understands the subject matter.¹¹

The function of a common language concerning the HEdC-HEvC relation is now clearer as well: a common language undergirding both a familiar horizon and object of interpretation (the Thou as horizon and/or subject matter) is obfuscated from the perspective of the *divergence* between the said elements of the HEdC and HEvC, but is uncovered from the perspective of the *convergence* between their unsaid elements.¹² Divergence of the said represents distinct languages conceptually conflicting with one another, while convergence of the unsaid represents an unearthing of the underlying linguistic ground shared between otherwise distinct languages from which an understanding of their subject matter develops (Cf. Fristedt, 2010, p. 475). Therefore, why such linguistic unearthing functions as a way of evaluating interpretive accuracy concerning the Thou is because truth-as-disclosure expresses a movement from the

¹¹ This connection between common-language-as-subject-matter and common-language-as-horizon is concordant with Gadamer's notion of understanding as fundamentally linguistic (Gadamer, 1976, p. 15; 2004, p. 435ff.), an espousal mirrored to varying extents elsewhere in the literature (Davidson, 2005, p. 133; 2001b, p. 130; Fristedt, 2010, p. 479). This is not to say that understanding is incontrovertibly linguistic — alternative viewpoints of the non-linguistic basis of understanding also exist (Cheng, 2015, pp. 19, 36; Cunningham, 2017, p. 47; Wang, 2018, p. 568) — merely that we have a better argument for conceiving understanding as structured by language inasmuch as our horizon-contingent interpretive faculties and objects are linguistically construed. Said another way, we can more accurately describe the linguistic connection between horizon and subject matter as both the act and object of interpretive understanding, respectively. Davidson (2005) agrees as much here when noticing that "[c]oming to an agreement about an object and coming to understand each other's speech are not independent moments but part of the same interpersonal process of triangulating the world" (p. 275).

¹² This may be motivating Gadamer's (1976) claim that even in misunderstanding, there is still presupposed between the interlocutors a "deep common accord" (p. 7), that being the convergent un-sayings persisting despite divergent sayings. However, elsewhere in his *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Gadamer refers to language's dependence on the unsaid as its 'occasionality,' which he defines as "dependency on the situation in which an expression is used" (p. 88), to explain how the same sentence (the same said) can mean different things in different contexts. This can apply to interlocutors misunderstanding what is meant by the same said, thereby indicating the presence of *divergent*, not *convergent*, un-sayings factoring within the different contexts of each interlocutor that perpetuates this misunderstanding. My response is simple: that the unsaid converges and diverges is not an irrational claim, for whether *ultimate* convergence or divergence obtains depends on how the relation between subject matter and horizon is understood. This is taken up starting in Section 7.

potency of what is yet unsaid to the actuality of what can *both* be coherently said by the familiar horizon and the Thou. Interpretive accuracy becomes a function of whether the interpretive act says something that the disclosed language permits to be *about* the interpretive object. If the language does not permit this, then accuracy is denied because the interpretation is no longer *about* its supposed object.¹³

How this ‘aboutness’ relation obtains between the interpretation and its object is in part conditioned by the abovementioned structural requirement of horizontal coherence. However, Gadamer proposes an additional *methodological* condition as to what constitutes a proper interpretation: coming to interpret a subject matter is not just informed by a ‘fore-conception of completeness,’ but also necessitates a shared logic of *question and answer*. This logic supposes a dialogical mode of appearance of meaning and is integral to Gadamer’s sense of understanding in general, but more specifically, it clarifies what sharing a common language means in terms of presupposing and creating one *as a function of said/unsaid elements in the HEDC-HEvC relation*. Nonetheless, as will hopefully become clearer in Section 7, there are residual tensions between the logic of question and answer and the logic of horizontal coherence that bear negatively on Gadamer’s denial of hermeneutic relativism. However, the details are nuanced and subtle, which is why we must spend some space analyzing the precise meaning of Gadamer’s question and answer logic in the upcoming section.

6. The Logic of Question and Answer

For Gadamer (2004), the Thou *as subject matter* is best known “only when we have understood the question to which it is an answer” (p. 363. Cf. Marshall, 2003, p. 123). The process of questioning helps one pick out relevant interpretations of a subject matter precisely because these interpretations amount to appropriate answers to whatever question we may be asking about it. Undeniably, the way in which Gadamer avoids interpretive relativism is by limiting interpretive applicability to within the context of posited questions. More importantly though, it is the subject matter, not the horizon, that provides answers to the questions asked of it,¹⁴ meaning that questions about interpretive objects are provided by our horizons (Cf. Gadamer, 2004, p. 367).¹⁵ Given this, and the ubiquity with which horizons inform our

¹³ This does not mean that inaccurate interpretations can never be about their object, after all, claiming that a pot is red when it is blue is still to claim something about the pot’s colour. It is just that calling a blue pot red is more accurate than claiming its colour to be the number two, because the latter is not even about colour anymore.

¹⁴ Gadamer (2004) uses the term, “text,” to label an answer to a real question (p. 363). If we interpret ‘texts’ as objects of interpretation, then they count as subject matters to be interpreted.

¹⁵ Note that we are still working with ‘subject matter’ as what something is *about*, so it is not definite in the way a concrete entity, like a book, is. Therefore, subject matters count as answers in a similarly less definite manner — i.e., in the opening-up of its being to possibilize a set of answers. This is clarified further in this section. Lastly, to avoid confusion, note that common usage of ‘interpretation’ dictates that interpretive objects are usually concrete entities: I interpret the meaning of a book, art piece, etc. However, insofar as *questions* about interpretive objects are motivated by the horizons that engage with them, the answers become sourced from the interpreted objects, *not* in their capacity as specific entities, but from their subject matters — e.g., questioning a book about justice will have its answers derived from the justice that it is

orientation to the world, it is thus no wonder that, for instance, Vessey (2014) remarks that “[t]he way texts contribute to contemporary philosophizing rests more on the questions the text addresses than the answers it provides” (p. 362). Generalizing to the hermeneutic process more broadly, our processes of interpretation and understanding are characterized more extensively by the questions we can ask than by the answers we can receive (Cf. Cheng, 2015, p. 34).

Furthermore, Gadamer (2004) regards “the real and fundamental nature of a question [as what makes] things indeterminate,” as what brings “out the undetermined possibilities of a thing” (pp. 367–368). One could thus understand a question as breaking “open the *being* of the thing in question — [the question] reveals the thing [i.e., subject matter] to be open to many possible interpretations or beliefs” (Fristedt, 2010, p. 486; emphasis added. Cf. Gadamer, 2004, p. 356). Nonetheless, this *opening-up* is not done arbitrarily, as the origin of any process of questioning must begin with the horizons we already possess, meaning that the subject matter’s provision of interpretive answers is constrained by the questions being asked of it.

Proper questions must therefore cohere with and be delimited by one’s own biases and perspectives — they are what Gadamer (2004) calls, “real question[s]” (p. 367), and it is to them that interpretive claims must be directed lest they become subjectively meaningless for us. Specifically, any claim not contextualized to a real question sourced from one’s own horizon acts both as an interpretation without any rational association to an immediately accessible horizon and as an answer to a question we have yet to ask ourselves. As such, answers not question-contextualized in this way remain irrelevant, *for us*, to the subject matter the question is meant to probe. Nevertheless, these cannot persist as *objectively* irrelevant, for there remains an open possibility that the interpretation can be perpetually re-motivated as an answer to an as-of-yet unasked real question, partaking in what Gadamer calls an ‘infinite dialogue’ (Cf. Section 7).

Consequently, no one seemingly true interpretive answer can be safe from a process of questioning circumscribed by the biases we already possess *and may possess in the future*. This is how Gadamer means to resist hermeneutic relativism, based on denying *not* a substantial relation between horizons and one’s capacity to make good on an accuracy-*cum*-relevance norm for hermeneutic insight, but an enduring *settledness* regarding the truth-value of any single instance of actualizing said capacity. Ascribing a function of questioning to horizons is simply to say that one either sources questions relevant to their biases and perspective or recontextualizes questions asked by others in ways that make them more intelligible to oneself in the context of the questions one asks. Yes, legitimate answers derive from subject matters, but we can only *really* understand an answer if we have its corresponding question. Indeed, letting a subject matter provide us with the answers to our questions is essentially how we properly *and non-relativistically* encounter it as the Thou.¹⁶

about. However, the process of questioning delimits what can count as valid answers. This is also clarified further in the section.

¹⁶Gadamer (2004) also claims that the question to which the Thou as subject matter acts as an answer “can be derived solely from the [subject matter itself]” (p. 364). This implies that subject matters act as sources of *both* questions and answers. However, given Gadamer’s later comment regarding the *merging* of the subject matter’s and “our own” questioning (p. 367), it should not cause us problems to interpret

It ought to be clearer now that a process of questioning, meant to disclose the being of the object of one's questioning *in a way still intelligible to the one asking the question*, presupposes a discoverable common language that grants this disclosure its intelligibility. The process of answering therefore crystallizes this intelligibility by filling/picking out that language's retinue of interpretive truths. When this occurs, a question/answer hermeneutic can effectively bring together different interlocutors under the banner of a common language, a shared linguistic horizon.¹⁷

Lastly, our analysis of the HEDC-HEvC relation in terms of its said/unsaid elements helps outline the finer details of this question-and-answer logic: the process of questioning is hermeneutically potent due to our HEvC's unsaid possibilizing how a subject matter is revealed to us meaningfully, while the task of picking out answers within this context of questioning is how our HEDC's said grows and expands in the horizons that make those answers intelligible to us. Specifically, we have three further considerations.¹⁸ First, the engagement of the familiarity of the HEDC's said with the initial strangeness of the HEvC's said motivates the questioning process meant to unearth more of the HEvC's unsaid. Second, the capacity for this questioning to open up the being of what is being questioned for the bequeathal of possible answers *relevant to all those party to the question/answer process* is a proper power belonging to the relation between the HEDC's and HEvC's unsaid.¹⁹ Third, the transition from mere possibilization of answers to answers *judged* as true interpretations of a subject matter expresses the taking-up of the HEvC's unsaid by the HEDC

the subject matter's own questions as meaningful for our interpretations of a subject matter once these questions cohere with familiar horizons. Indeed, since we are emphasizing subject matters as sources of answers, then *their* own questions could influence the questions *we* ask by proxy of the answers that our questions render intelligible (Cf. Pickering, 1999, p. 192). Said in another way, a subject matter's questions factor into the hermeneutic process *indirectly*, through the *direct* influence of the subject matter's answers on the questions we therefore must ask in order to understand them at all.

¹⁷ This is one way of conceiving dialogue as more effectively permitting the understanding of a subject matter by interlocutors than what is achievable via non-dialogical understanding (Gadamer, 2004, p. 361; Leiviskä, 2015, p. 590; Lynch, 2014, p. 376; Wang, 2018, p. 574).

¹⁸ Before delving into the details, on a more general account of the HEDC-HEvC relation, we can use what has been discussed so far to account for why Gadamer (1986) likens the unearthing of a subject matter to the "free play between the faculties of imagination and conceptual understanding" (p. 29. Cf. Gadamer, 2007, p. 253). Here, our familiar horizon, our HEDC, informs our conceptual understanding, while the application of our concepts to novel experiences and situations potentiates conceptual modulation, which is tantamount to the possibilizing function of our HEvC in its imaginative capacity. Relativism is avoided because imagination is not unbounded — what the act of questioning allows one to deem as potential interpretive answers is constricted by what one can imagine, which Gadamer delimits through coherence and subject matter considerations. Moreover, if we want to authentically engage with the Thou, our imagination in its interpretive functionality must be informed by how the Thou speaks to us, through its initial strangeness and the subsequent possibilities of its presentation as informed by our biased questionings thereof. A similar position is outlined by Adam Adatto Sandel (2018, pp. 367–369) in terms of a relation present between one's mindful openness to novelty and one's prior understanding that meaningfully potentiates and qualifies this openness.

¹⁹ This relevance outcome lines up with Gadamer's insistence that subject matters be shared in the question-and-answer process, in that answers that do not share the same subject matter as that of the question do not count as relevant answers to that question. Indeed, the process of using answers question-contextualized in one way to rebut answers question-contextualized in another way is, for Gadamer (2004), "pure shadow boxing" and not pertinent to genuine understanding (p. 364).

to actualize the latter's unsaid elements in the process of coherently expanding the said of the HEDC — i.e., expansion of one's horizon.²⁰

7. Infinite Dialogue

Despite this *horizontally* constrained opening-up of a subject matter's being, or limited possibilization of its interpretability, do these processes still function to express *new conceptual value* (Cheng, 2015, p. 11; Leiviskä, 2015, p. 596)? Andrew Fuyarchuk (2015) similarly considers that the possibilities of the Thou's presentation through the HEvC “announce themselves in language without being mistaken for anything actually said which in turn moves thinking forward” (p. 584). What we therefore have is a specific dialectic present throughout the question/answer process: the subject matter, through the HEvC's possibilized answers, conditions an interpreter's questions about it, thereby expanding the latter's horizon (HEDC) and permitting the interpreter's engagement with a further process of questioning that makes intelligible even more answers from the subject matter; hence, the process iterates continuously, in what Gadamer (1976) calls an *infinite dialogue* (Cf. pp. 15–16). This is why, in addition to Gadamer's *structural* condition on coherence within horizons and between subject matter and horizons — his ‘fore-conception of completeness’ — we have a further *methodological* condition of coherence for the question/answer process itself.²¹

²⁰ Coherent horizontal expansion as the result of attaining legitimate answers to questions harkens back to Gadamer's ‘fore-conception of completeness’ requirement. This is usually seen as a condition on coherence between a subject matter and horizons meant to be interpretations of it, as well as a requirement of self-coherence for individual horizons themselves (Cf. Gadamer, 2004, p. 294). However, we can also regard it as a coherence condition between the horizons themselves that are meant to inform interpretations of the *same* subject matter, because it would help explain Gadamer's (2004) argument that legitimate answers to a question, those that are valid interpretations of a subject matter, cannot be made intelligible by different horizons in a manner that renders these answers contradictory (pp. 467, 535).

²¹ An anonymous reviewer has noted a key consequence of these two conditions, so I will relay the essence of that remark directly:

[A]lthough language can open up and disclose the world and the things in it, this is not a process over which any individual can exercise full control. If inquiry or advocacy is conducted as a genuine dialogue, ... [this] will mean that the conversation will naturally unfold on its own from one point to the next until my perspective, or that of my interlocutor, or a perspective that is shared, shines forth of itself. So for Gadamer truth is something getting said or coming to (self) presentation in a convincing and self-evident way. In the event of truth something becomes clear, but this experience is the encounter with what is immediately evident to the *sensus communis*, rather than the clarity of Cartesian certainty.

This is consistent with what Gadamer (2004) says about the dialectic of hermeneutic experience (pp. 460–461). I do not disagree with anything being said here. Notwithstanding, this merely allows for my main contention, discussed in the following paragraphs, to be reapplied, since the attaining of self-evidence in one's interpretations does not make interpretive relativism impossible. Indeed, mutually incoherent answers to questions about the same subject matter may even be self-evident to different interlocutors. The disclosure of truth in the world may shine forth as an incoherent light, and at worst this may constitute the unearthing of contradictory interpretations. In any case, I discuss an interesting attempt at resolving this issue in Section 8, but I ultimately conclude that it fails to forestall relativism completely.

Nonetheless, the immediate issue that arises from this is an unsettledness about the truth-value of answers possibilized through the act of questioning. If answers are only intelligible when contextualized within questions, and the logic of question and answer constitutes a dialectically interminable process, then it is entirely possible for two interpreters to come up with contradictory interpretations about a subject matter even if they are both equally internally coherent in doing so. Does Gadamer just simply presuppose that no two such interpretations will remain mutually contradictory? In other words, if contradictions can arise between interlocutors' interpretations due to an interminable dialogue, would it then be more rational to judge that further coherence-imbuing clarification of their interpretations will obtain, or rather, that any subsequent coherence will just devolve into further incoherence? *Are these concerns indicative of a deep-seeded conceptual uncertainty, if not relativism, in Gadamer's logic of question and answer?*

Indeed, despite the structural and methodological dimensions of attaining hermeneutic truth about a shared subject matter, the potential for subsequent incoherence is worrying. Cheng (2015) acknowledges this worry in his discussion of a tension in the dialectic between theory as disclosive of truth and theory as presupposing a method:

[T]he essential problem about the method is that it is always relative to a theory, and what is named truth could be simply what our theory defines to be truth and discovered by our method. Hence what [truth] we may arrive at ... by using our method can be always questioned, because our theory of truth and its way of discovery can be always questioned. (p. 16)

This perennial questioning of truth *as discovered* and truth *of the process of discovery* constitutes an infinite dialogue between these modes of truth, such that the possibility of incoherence between them is always open due to the interminable questioning thereof. Incoherence thus features in linguistic understanding more generally since its dialogical nature places modes of understanding in a similar inter-questioning process: in one sense, we understand the meaning of both sentences through dialogue and dialogue through its constitutive sentences (Cf. Cheng, 2015, p. 19), while in another sense we understand both another's language by first clarifying our own and our own by engaging with that of the other (Cf. Wang, 2018, p. 567).²² As such, in terms of the fusion and expansion of horizons, if this questioning process becomes interminable, then it would manifest a perpetual possibility of incoherence by the production of "a difference of horizons rather than their fusion" (Cheng, 2015, p. 28. Cf. Marshall, 2003, p. 138; Vessey, 2009, p. 532).

²² Notice that this interminable questioning process is not resolved by conceiving of the initial encounter of another's language as simply different from our own for the sake of coming "to a more sensitive and critical understanding of our own" (Wang, 2018, p. 567). This is because, just like for the dialectic within the logic of question and answer, there is always the possibility for incoherence to obtain between the languages, even after the initial perception of the other's language as merely different from one's own, which, for Gadamer, would stall progress in manifesting an interpretively undergirding common language. I address other hermeneutic ramifications of this incoherence in Sections 9 and 10.

8. Infinite Horizons

Gadamer's solution to this potential for interpretive incoherence, and thus the relativism inherent when two contradictory interpretations are taken to both be true of the same subject matter, is intriguing. For him, coherence is eventually safeguarded when horizons are placed within a broader, coherently *infinite* horizon that fully understands the subject matter at hand. By virtue of this infinite horizon, all apparent contradictions in ostensibly distinct horizons are to be overcome (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 467, 535), to pass into "a single historical horizon" that contains all of "historical consciousness" (p. 303) and expresses an infinite totality of meaning (pp. 464, 469).²³ Fristedt (2010) similarly notes that "a subject matter can appear in potentially endless ways to those who understand it," such that "everything that could possibly be said about the subject matter ... is just what the subject matter *is*" (p. 478). In short, "all interpretations of a thing determine the thing together" (p. 487).²⁴

In practice, this can only remain an ideal task, for an infinite horizon expresses an impossibly comprehensible interpretation of a subject matter for those with limited cognitions (Cf. Beiner, 2003, p. 152; Fristedt, 2010, pp. 491–492 n 22). Still, the notion of an infinite horizon perfectly corresponding to a subject matter allows Gadamer a convenient out, because the possibility for further horizontal coherence trumps that of horizontal incoherence since the horizon itself is presupposed as *ultimately* coherent. We could thus gauge progress in our understanding of a subject matter and be confident in our ability to make good on the accuracy norm for hermeneutic insight by tending to the infinite horizon as an interpretive *telos* — i.e., the coherence of the infinite horizon acts as a guiding principle whereby any ostensible contradictions between interpretations will eventually be dialogically processed to unearth a common linguistic ground and ultimately transcend that incoherence (Cf. Fuyarchuk, 2015, p. 580). Therefore, any *ultimately contradictory* interpretations would both subsist within mutually incoherent and ultimately distinct horizons and be interpretive of different subject matters altogether. This would therefore motivate Gadamer's resistance to relativism since the latter permits the association of contradictory interpretations with the same subject matter.

Before moving on, let us first substantiate the argument that mutually incoherent horizons really do deal with distinct subject matters. Fristedt (2010) for example argues that if

those referents [i.e., subject matters] are radically different from how we understand them then it makes little sense to say that we "understand" or "describe" *those referents*. ... For an interpretation to be said to be *of* something, it must be the case that that interpretation has access to the thing that it is

²³ This is not to say that, for Gadamer, there are no such things as ultimately distinct horizons, just that distinct horizons would be infinitely meaningfully structured in the full sense of its being. More on this in the upcoming paragraphs.

²⁴ This is not to say that Gadamer *necessarily* espouses some form of anti/non-realism about hermeneutic truth; as will be clearer later in this section, just because what a subject matter corresponds to is a coherently infinite horizon informing what can be said about it does not entail that *any arbitrary thing* can be included within any one horizon. After all, two different infinite horizons can coherently comprehend distinct subject matters.

interpreting — that the thing appears as itself in the interpretation. But this means that interpretation, as interpretation, must have access to being, and not merely to presentation. (p. 480)

Donald Davidson (2001a) makes a similar comment when discussing the coherence within sets of beliefs:

Before some object in, or aspect of, the world can become part of the subject matter of a belief (true or false) there must be endless true beliefs about the subject matter. False beliefs tend to undermine the identification of the subject matter; to undermine, therefore, the validity of a description of the belief as being about that subject. And so, in turn, false beliefs undermine the claim that a connected belief is false. ... It isn't that any one false belief necessarily destroys our ability to identify further beliefs, but that the intelligibility of such identifications must depend on a background of largely unmentioned and unquestioned true beliefs. (p. 168)

We could interpret the point of Davidson's comment to be that, because subject matters are infinite, an endless number of true beliefs (interpretive answers to questions) can apply to them, in which case a false belief would be incommensurable with the set of true beliefs constituting a horizon of accurate interpretation. Having false beliefs be part of a set of otherwise true beliefs would therefore simply prevent *ideal* identification of that set with its subject matter, for the false belief may instead cohere with and thus be included in a different set of true beliefs identified with a different subject matter.

We can couch this discussion in terms of the HEDC-HEvC relation to clarify matters further. For instance, why mutually incoherent horizons deal with different subject matters has to do with how interpretations of a subject matter are intelligible to those who ask about it. Remember that, according to Gadamer, interpretive answers can only be understood in relation to a corresponding questioning process that expands one's horizon to conceptually incorporate these answers. Horizontal expansion translates facets of the HEDC's unsaid into an expanded set of said elements by coherently incorporating elements of the HEvC's unsaid into the now expanded horizon, wherein such incorporation is brought on through an elucidation of the shared subject matter between the HEDC and HEvC. As such, any answer not comprehensible within a particular question-context will not be about what *that particular* question is about — both the answer and question will pertain to different subject matters. This is because the (subject matter)-sharing between the HEDC and HEvC, which conditions the intelligibility of an answer to a question, would thus not obtain. This would be the case at least until that answer becomes recontextualized by a new questioning process whereby it is understood that the answer *can* be possibilized through that initial HEvC's unsaid, and not through some other one dealing with a different subject matter altogether.²⁵

²⁵ Nevertheless, this alone does not entail that subject matters necessarily preclude true interpretations being contradictory. See, footnotes 28 and 30, and Section 10.

Lastly, if this recontextualizing process goes on indefinitely to produce an infinitely structured coherent horizon, then the possibilizing capacity of the HEvC's unsaid, which functions to motivate this question-recontextualizing, becomes *fully actualized*. In this case, the distinction between the familiar and strange elements of, respectively, the HEdC's and HEvC's said essentially dissolves. However, if this recontextualization fails to make answers to our questions comprehensible, then these answers must ultimately be about subject matters distinct from that undergirding one's own horizon. This occurs when the above distinction persists, when the HEvC's said resists incorporation within the HEdC's expanding set of said elements. Nevertheless, such a failed recontextualization can even involve an already infinitely structured horizon, one wherein a questioning process fully comprehends *all* answers possibilized by an HEvC whose unsaid elements become *indistinct* from our HEdC's said elements. This is because any persistently incomprehensible answer can only be possibilized by a *different* HEvC, one whose unsaid elements remain *distinct* from our HEdC's said elements.

9. Incommensurable Horizons

However, this attempt to avoid relativism by positing horizational infinity for the resolution of horizational incoherence does not actually revoke relativism completely; Gadamer may not be able to avoid a conceptual *uncertainty* in his hermeneutics, one that precludes principledly ascertaining whether interpretive truth is relativist or not. The issue is: how could one ever know if one's supposedly true beliefs about a subject matter are settled? If beliefs can themselves involve subject matters that are up for interpretation — after all, beliefs are intelligible within the context of horizons that can act as objects of interpretation — then could these beliefs be interminably interpretable as well? An unhelpfully easy response, based on the prior discussion, would be as follows: the way one rescues an interminably interpretable belief's truth from being conceptually uncertain is by identifying truth with coherence and arguing that, first, interpretation always ideally progresses in the direction of coherently expanding horizons, and second, subject matters are ultimately comprehended by a coherently infinite horizon. This would then guarantee that any genuine interpretation of a belief would entail the belief's transformation into a coherently expanded belief located within an expanded horizon, thereby retaining the truth value of the initial belief by its coherent incorporation within said horizon.

However, this answer fails because there is a fundamental limitation caused by our restricted interpretive capacities, i.e., that of an uncertainty as to whether true facets of a subject matter can ever *conclusively* enter the coherent purview of even an infinitely structured horizon. To motivate this concern, notice that once we require that distinct subject matters do exist, we must also necessitate the existence of horizons that are both distinct and infinite. As such, from this, we infer the possibility that different infinite horizons are ideally attainable. However, because they are *practically* unobtainable, two limited interlocutors can never ascertain whether seemingly contradictory interpretations can be coherently resolved within a more grounded common language or if they do truly belong to incommensurable horizons dealing with distinct subject matters comprehensible by distinct languages.

This worry applies even when *seemingly* contradictory interpretations are *actually* non-contradictory. Greg Lynch (2014) explains this through an example that, although targeted towards Davidson's account of interpretation, is nonetheless germane to Gadamer's thought:

Consider a relatively straightforward case of asymmetrical interpretation: Alice employs a simple predicate Φ that expresses a concept that is alien to Brian, but which is coextensive with the disjunctive predicate $F \vee G$ in Brian's language. Φ , in other words, expresses some property that Fs and Gs have in common but to which Brian is insensitive. Suppose, however, that Brian constructs a theory of meaning T that renders Φ as simply equivalent to F and concludes that in those utterances where Alice applies Φ to Gs, she has made an error — she has mistaken a G for an F. ... *Ceteris paribus*, T is just as empirically adequate as any rival theory T' that treats Φ as expressing a concept that is alien to Brian. ... [H]owever, T misinterprets Alice, while T' does not. (p. 380)

Approximately, the empirical adequacy between T and T' represents two horizons engaging with the same phenomenal data. In terms of the HEDC (familiar horizon), this implies that the horizons of Alice and Brian both engage with the same *unsaid* between their respective HEDCs — a shared implicit language — while difference obtains between the *said* elements within their HEDCs — distinct explicit languages. Here, both T and T' could theoretically be subsumed within a larger coherent semantic system without either T or T' losing their identities, given that Φ , as used by Brian, and Φ , as used by Alice, express different, although non-contradictory, predicates that just happen to nominally share the same symbol.²⁶ Nonetheless, practically speaking, the lack of horizontal fusion between T and T', which would expand them into a coherently extended horizon thereby allowing Brian to conceptually distinguish between T and T', explains Brian's current inability to make such a distinction. Additionally, *ceteris paribus*, if T and T' instead were empirically distinct theories, which we take here as dealing with distinct subject matters, then theoretically *and* practically, Brian would be unable to tell them apart conceptually.

The above case motivates the worry of whether true facets of a subject matter can ever coherently *and conclusively* factor within an infinitely structured horizon by illustrating the possibility that two interlocutors may possess concepts that always seem alien to each other. According to Lynch (2014), "if an interpreter cannot tell ahead of time whether a given *utterance* expresses an alien concept, neither can he tell whether a given *speaker* possesses any alien concepts" (p. 381). However, the worry can be motivated even if both interlocutors possess *equivalent* concepts, for not only does Brian not know that T misinterprets Alice's use of Φ , but Brian could also not know that T' correctly interprets Alice's use of Φ *even if he uses T'*. This is true iff $T' = (F \vee G) = \Phi$, and Brian knows that $T' = \Phi$ but not that $T' = (F \vee G)$ nor that $\Phi = (F \vee G)$.²⁷ In other words, despite the properties of Fs

²⁶ Of course, Brian does not *know* this, so he would still regard his and Alice's use of the predicate as incompatible.

²⁷ This follows from plausible hyperintensionality constraints for knowledge. Cf. Stephen Yablo (2014, Chapter 7).

and Gs not being identical, their disjunction determines T' as Φ , and Alice knows of this fact while Brian does not. Here, both Alice and Brian use equivalent concepts of Φ , although they differ in how they may be epistemically accessing this equivalency. In any case, regardless of the type of concepts employed by Brian and Alice, whether alien or equivalent, the mere fact that Brian is none the wiser regarding which type is instantiated means that, generally, no interpreter can fully ascertain what concept is being employed by another (Cf. Beiner, 2003, p. 156 n 21).²⁸

10. The Hermeneutic Game and Concluding Remarks

The prior considerations are damaging for Gadamer's denial of hermeneutic relativism, given that the above-discussed worry of conceptual uncertainty prevents ideal identification of interpretive truth being relativist or not. In fact, even if the appropriate horizon is infinitely structured, one's ability to gauge interpretive progress towards the truth would still be contravened in two respects: first, granted persistently apparent interpretive contradictions claimed to be about the same subject matter, one would be unable to distinguish between these interpretations necessarily cohering within a more general linguistic framework or the subject matters of these interpretations being necessarily distinct; and second, granted the *absence* of such persistently apparent contradictions, one would still be unable to ascertain the impossibility of eventual contradiction within an interminable hermeneutic process. Thus, whether we discuss infinitely structured horizons or not, there is always the open possibility for even contradictory truths about the same thing, and within an internally incoherent horizon, to exist.

That this is a feature of Gadamer's question/answer logic of hermeneutic understanding in general may be a contentious outcome, especially when contrasted with Gadamer's notion of the fore-conception of completeness and the methodological constraint of coherence circumscribing horizontal structure and the dialogical process of horizontal expansion. However, this is a natural outcome of the account of the said/unsaid elements in the HEdC-HEvC relation given above.²⁹ Notwithstanding, Gadamer has even described understanding in other terms besides that of coherence. For example, in discussing the relation between the values of rhetoric and logical coherence, Thorsten Botz-Bornstein (2013) understands Gadamer to be assuaging us that

²⁸ In terms of the HEdC-HEvC relation, from the standpoint of the said of one's HEdC, yes, one's encounter with the HEvC's said cannot lead, via the HEvC's unsaid, to the possibilization of different interpretations without them also being intelligible in their coherence with one's HEdC. However, this does not entail, first, that possibilized interpretations, *in principle* made intelligible within a question-context, can never contradict each other as true answers to questions posed to a subject matter, even if *in practice* such contradictory answers are unintelligible; or second, that possibilized interpretations eventually *coherently* actualize as answers to questions about the *same* subject matter. The first case refers to the open possibility of the HEvC's unsaid possibilizing, even unintelligibly so, contradictory answers to the questions posed to it, while the second refers to the strangeness of the HEvC's said possibly never fully being reconciled, in the manner of transitioning from strangeness to familiarity, within even an infinitely structured horizon dealing with one subject matter.

²⁹ See footnote 28, for instance.

“[n]obody will doubt that real conversations (...) can contain logical mistakes and imprecisions but are still capable of rhetorically suggesting the right and the true.” What counts is the “philosophical knowledge in [the conversation] and not in those things that are covered by the logical grid.” (p. 260, quoting and translating Gadamer, 1991, *Plato im Dialog* (Tübingen: Mohr), p. 110)

This throws into question the relative importance that Gadamer ascribes to logical coherence in one’s interpretations over and above their mere rhetorical suggestions. This is relevant here, as the implementation of rhetorical rules, or just practical rules for understanding in general, is not necessarily a *theoretical* safeguard against interpretive relativism.

Furthermore, the aforementioned conceptual uncertainty even features within Gadamer’s discussions on both the theoretical and practical rules of hermeneutic understanding itself, such as when he claims that “[t]here are no rules governing the reasonable use of rules” (Gadamer, 2007, p. 253). This would imply there being no principled way of choosing between different rule-sets utilized for interpretive purposes, a somewhat *meta-hermeneutical* position that Botz-Bornstein (2013) ascribes to Gadamer, in that, for Gadamer, “[t]he process of understanding is deprived of its (theoretical or methodological) ground and ... can look like a game” (p. 253). This hermeneutic game would still attain rules for interpretation, expressing the semantic/linguistic rules informing an interpreter’s horizon, but these cannot be determined anywhere but within the game itself (p. 261). In short, how one interprets some subject matter cannot be meaningfully operationalized unless one is already engaged in the act of interpretation itself; so, only within the act can the rules of engagement in principle be adjudicated on, for outside the act the rules make no sense.

This brings relativism back into the picture since, theoretically, different rule-sets can validly inform the same interpretive act from which contradictory interpretations become licensed. Since contradiction implies incoherence, we have the following ramification: whether a particular interpretive act is the *accurate* one for a subject matter can never be a decision that is in practice conclusively settled. This is the case whether the interpretive rules conditioning the act forbid contradictory interpretations or just merely incoherent ones — i.e., whether the rules can already comprehend a subject matter as to truthfully license from the outset the impossibility of contradictory interpretations, or they are such that the mere uncertainty of whether an interpretation can be identified with some shared subject matter or a different one entirely is forbidden.

Gadamer may be content with the fact that interpretive acts can never be practically conclusively settled, but this finding is exactly what allows for relativism’s possibility, by expressing a conceptual uncertainty regarding the prospect of interpretive relativism within the hermeneutic process. This leads, according to Botz-Bornstein (2013), to the truth of the subject matter always hiding “behind itself ... in a circular gesture” (p. 257), one which forecloses upon any recognition of a genuine correspondence between a horizon and the subject matter it interprets (Cf. p. 250). Consequently, we are denied any principled adjudication on whether subject matters can or cannot be legitimately comprehended incoherently via contradictory

interpretations thereof, unless we just analytically stipulate that they cannot from the outset.³⁰ As such, Gadamer's avoidance of hermeneutic relativism without revoking conceptual uncertainty in interpretive progress simply brings relativism back into to the foreground of possibility.

The worry is not just that one cannot tell when one has adopted an authentically representative understanding of a subject matter, but that even the very idea of evaluating one's progress towards that understanding becomes suspect. It seems then that we can point to a minimal condition on horizontal self-coherence as constitutive of Gadamer's sense of interpretive truth: attend to what is being said by some object of interpretation via asking questions that are relevant to your own perspective and render what is being said intelligible for you. This, however, suggests a controversial implication that Gadamer may be unable to rationally avoid: the act of questioning and answering, the functional HEDC-HEvC dynamic, amounts to a *practical trajectory* towards an interpretive truth that must express one's subjectivity while also permitting the possibility of irreconcilable incoherence, perhaps even contradiction, with others' subjectivities. Relativism may be avoided stipulatively, but whether interpretive truth is indeed non-relativist cannot ever be practically certified.

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³⁰ Indeed, just because we cannot rationally describe or understand subject-matter interpretations as contradictory does not mean that true interpretations must be coherent, unless we stipulate that truth implies coherence. This may be how to respond to Fristedt's and Davidson's comments at the end of Section 8.

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