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**The Relevance of
Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics
to Thirty-Six Topics
or Fields of Human Activity***

by

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My paper will address five key questions. If you are already familiar with hermeneutics, you may wish to skip the first two or three sections:

I. What is hermeneutics?

II. What is philosophical hermeneutics?

**III. What are some key concepts in
Gadamer's hermeneutics?**

**IV. What is generally meant by the term
"relevance"?**

**V. How is philosophical hermeneutics
relevant to the disciplines?**

I. What is hermeneutics?

(outline)

A. Hermes - Notes from my essay on the liminality of Hermes.

B. Aristotle's **Peri hermeneias**, On interpretation, narrowly defined

C. The theory of interpretation broadly defined, especially of texts, and especially of biblical texts, laws, literary works, and dream texts

D. **A Hermeneutics Compendium** in 6 volumes

The term "hermeneutics" seems to be related etymologically to the Greek god Hermes. Hermes, you will recall from the **Iliad** and the **Odyssey**, was the messenger of the gods. He carried messages from Zeus to everybody else, especially from the divine realm and level down to the human level. In doing so, he had to bridge an ontological gap, a gap between the thinking of the gods and that of humans. According to legend, he had (1) a mysterious helmet which could make him invisible and then suddenly reappear, (2) magical wings on his sandals to carry him swiftly over long distances, and (3) a magical wand that could put you to sleep or wake you up. So he not only bridged physical distances and the ontological gap between divine and human being, he bridged the difference between the visible and the invisible, and between dreams and waking, between the unconscious and the conscious. He is the quicksilver god ["Mercury" in Latin] of sudden insights, ideas, inspirations. And he is also the trickster god of thefts, highway robbery, and of sudden windfalls of good luck. Norman O. Brown wrote a book about him titled *Hermes the Thief*. Hermes is the god of crossroads and boundaries, where piles of rocks (Herms) were placed to honor him. As psychopomp, Hermes led the dead into the underworld, so he "crossed the line" between the living and the dead, between the living human world and the underworld of Hades. Hermes is truly the "god of the gaps," of the margins, the boundaries, the **limins** of many things. He is a "liminal" phenomenon. In the late 1970s I was invited by the Philosophy Department to give a talk at Michigan State University at Kalamazoo; I titled the talk "[The Liminality of Hermes and the Meaning of Hermeneutics](#)." They later published it in their departmental philosophy journal [full text reprinted here , click title, with permission of the Kalamazoo Philosophy Department].

Although Aristotle's treatise **Peri hermêneias** defined hermeneutics very narrowly in terms of determining the truth and falsity of assertions, the words **hermêneuein**, **hermêneia**, and their cognates were widely used in ancient Greek to mean interpretation in several senses: first, the **oral interpretation** of Homer and other classic texts-the interpreters of Homer were called "hermeneuts"-second, **translation** from one language into another was a hermeneutical process, and third, the **exegesis of texts**. This exegesis brought out the meaning, sometimes a hidden meaning. Hermeneutics as the exegesis of texts of course related in antiquity to **rhetoric**, which had a much broader scope in ancient times than it generally does today, but also it applied to explicating dreams, oracles, and other difficult texts, plus **legal texts** and precedents, and **literary** and **religious texts**. Traditions of interpretation of rules for how to interpret literary, legal, and religious texts have come down from antiquity, and these furnish the subject matter of hermeneutics broadly defined as related to the interpretation of texts.

In 1978 I received a summer research grant from NEH to compile a "Hermeneutics Compendium" that would collect the most important of these texts. I came up with six volumes

and submitted a proposal to Yale University Press. They respectfully declined the honor on the grounds that a project of that magnitude would tie up their editorial staff and presses for years. Today, with computer and information technology, the whole **Compendium** could easily be put on the internet. For starters I offer here [the table of contents for the Compendium](#), which was originally published in an article that distinguished three major streams of interpretation theory: "Allegorical, Philological, and Philosophical Hermeneutics: Three Streams in a Complex Heritage" (see [Articles](#), 1980) the philological or literal, and the philosophical. For me, hermeneutics is both an endlessly suggestive liminal discipline taking its character from Hermes and a discipline of the rules for interpreting various kinds of texts stretching back to antiquity. My article on [the liminality of Hermes](#) (click on title for full text) explains this first dimension of hermeneutics; the table of contents for the [compendium](#) (click on title for table of contents) spells out the second.

This brings us to our second question: What is "philosophical hermeneutics"? We know, for instance, that there is a **legal** hermeneutics, a **literary** hermeneutics, and a hermeneutics of **religious texts**, even a hermeneutics of **dreams**, but what about "philosophical hermeneutics"?

II. What is "philosophical hermeneutics"?

(outline)

A. Schleiermacher's "Allgemeine Hermeneutik"

B. Dilthey's *Hermeneutik als "Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften"*

C. Heidegger's "hermeneutics of Dasein," existential interpretive horizon of Being: Historicality, Authenticity, Response to the Call of Being

D. Gadamer's [Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik](#) (1960)

Hermeneutics in its various historical forms from antiquity to modern times in general offered methodological help in solving interpretive problems that arise with certain kinds of texts: dreams, laws, poetry, religious texts. But in the early 19th century (1805ff.), Friedrich Schleiermacher wondered whether there could be a hermeneutics that was not a collection of pieces of ad hoc advice for the solution of specific problems with text interpretation but rather an [allgemeine Hermeneutik](#), a "general hermeneutics," which dealt with "art of understanding" as such, which pertained to the structure and function of understanding **wherever it occurs**. In 1805, he made an aphoristic note, "What every child does in construing a new word it does not know-is hermeneutics." (See the posthumous translation of his [hermeneutics fragments](#).) Following the universalism of Kant, one might say, he looked for "the universal conditions" of all understanding in language. *Allgemeine* can be translated as "general," but also as "common" to all, or "universal," so Schleiermacher, although he was a theologian concerned with the biblical text, was interested in a "universal hermeneutics." His project and lectures on it did not attract a great following, but posthumously in 1840 a volume

of his writings on hermeneutics and criticism was published: *Hermeneutik und Kritik*. For theologians, however, the procedures of classical philology and what were called the "historical-critical method" remained adequate to their task.

Schleiermacher's biographer, **Wilhelm Dilthey**, a half-century later, began to see real possibilities for continuing Schleiermacher's general hermeneutics project as a "general methodology of the humanities and social sciences"—an "**allgemeine Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften**." As part of a much larger outline of Schleiermacher's system as philosophy and theology, he undertook a history of hermeneutics as it developed since the Reformation, basically a theological hermeneutics, which can be found in the posthumously published volume 2 of Dilthey's *Leben Schleiermachers* (pp. 595-677). This has not been translated into English, but it is a very helpful history of modern hermeneutics (although not without debatable interpretations). Hermeneutics was for Dilthey still a methodology, but now a general methodology he hoped would become the theoretical foundation for all the humanities and social sciences. It didn't, but still it represented an interesting, even noble ideal, an unrealized dream later taken up in 1955 by Emilio Betti in his three-volume **Teoria della interpretazione** (also untranslated into English, but translated by Betti into German in his 750 page *Allgemeine Auslegungslehre*, a 1967 publication by J. C. B. Mohr now out of print, but **his pamphlet attacking Gadamer is still available**). (See also the Betti inspired critique by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., in an appendix to his book, *Validity in Interpretation*, 1967.) One can assume that the liberal and generous Gadamer had a hand in allowing Betti, his academic opponent, a place at his own publisher. He figured he had nothing to lose in the comparison, which I think is correct. The Betti volume, so far as I know, was not even reviewed in German, at least in the philosophical journals, did not provoke wide interest, and in due course passed out of print. Maybe the topic of understanding and interpretation is too universal? At least Betti did go systematically from discipline to discipline to show the application of his own general theory of interpretation. The problem was that from a philosophical point of view, Betti's standpoint was a relic of the past. Interpretation was for Betti the **reproduction** of the original text, a point Gadamer argued was impossible. Every interpretation, according to Gadamer, was a combination of the present horizon and the past, so that the dream of a meaning coming objective and unchanged out of the past is impossible.

The next stage in the development of a philosophical hermeneutics was the articulation of a radical hermeneutics of existential understanding. Heidegger was influenced by the historically based **life-philosophy** of **Dilthey**, but he was in disagreement with making consciousness or the life-force the basis of his thought about interpretation. Instead, he chose "being" as his universal component. Being, as it occurs in the everyday existence of human beings, he said, is understanding. Understanding is the basic way for a human being to exist in the world. To "be" is to understand, it is to interpret the world in terms of one's own possibilities for being. In his *Being and Time*, Heidegger worked out the conditions for the possibility of human being in the world, and in this sense he offered a Kantian universalistic analysis. Every human being finds himself/herself to be a "**geworfene Entwurf**", a "thrown project." That is to say, one finds oneself already thrown into a world at a certain time and place, and one finds oneself always already with a past that cannot simply be forgotten, since it provides the basis for one's project into the future. We cannot go here into the authentic call of Being as it constitutes the conscience of the human being, or the relation of language to understanding and interpretation. We can only say that hermeneutics took a major step forward in being once again articulated as a general, universal description of what understanding is and does, but this time in terms of the being of the being that is always "there"—somewhere—the

Dasein.

I would like to pause here to point out the significance of Heidegger's contribution to hermeneutics: Human understanding become the universal door, process, filter, through which all thought of whatever kind must pass. The being of the world, the being of Truth, the being of one's own existence are **understood**. They are "always already" understood before they are linguistically articulated, i.e., **before they are interpreted**. There is a prior having, a prior grasp, **and then** a seeing of something **as** something—the "hermeneutical as" is the universal element found in every act of understanding in every discipline in every mundane act whatsoever. Understanding is not a transparent medium; it is complexly structured, and one ignores this structure at one's peril. This is a little like Einstein discovering the atom—the universal structure making up everything else in the physical universe. In the mental universe, or better, in the structure of being, understanding is the process present everywhere, the process by which everything is apprehended, placed, understood *as* something. Hermeneutics seeks to define this process.

Then a German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, who had been Heidegger's assistant for five years in Marburg, from 1923-1928, while Heidegger was writing *Being and Time*, came to see in Heidegger's thought—both in *Being and Time* and in the 1935 essay, "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes" ("The Origin of the Work of Art," pp. 139-212 in Heidegger, *Basic Writings*) the basis for a "philosophical hermeneutics." It was Gadamer who first used the term "philosophical hermeneutics" in reference to his philosophy, and indeed this appears in the German subtitle of *Truth and Method*, which was dropped in the English translation! This subtitle reads: **Elements of a Philosophical Hermeneutics—*Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik!*** I am not sure why they did this.

Due to the exigencies of war and his non-membership in the Party, Gadamer did not get a permanent full-time position until 1937, when he was 37 years old, finally at Marburg, and the next year he was called to Leipzig, where he spent the years of the war as a Professor of Ancient Philosophy and chairman of the department. Due to the war and the extremely hard conditions after the war, Gadamer did not have an opportunity to develop his project of a philosophical hermeneutics until his Heidelberg period (1948-1968, but continuing after retirement), working on it piece by piece in lectures during the 1950s and publishing it in 1960, when he himself was 60 years old. It brought him instant fame—and controversy. Essentially, his life since that date has been a series of articulations, explanations, further developments, even changes, in this masterwork, *Truth and Method*.

It would be a daunting task to give an account of the philosophical position put forward in Gadamer's 500-page masterwork, and yet at least something of the specifics involved are necessary here if we are to argue persuasively for the "relevance" of philosophical hermeneutics. I have chosen just to suggest twenty key terms in Gadamer's hermeneutics, and to define them each in a phrase, so far as possible. This list is basically a checklist, and clearly incomplete.

III. Twenty key terms in Gadamer's philosophical

hermeneutics

1. **understanding** - **Verstehen** and **Selbstverstehen** - understanding as the universal link in all interpretation of any kind, thus what Gadamer calls "the universal claim of hermeneutics."
2. **play** - *Spiel* as a distinguishing characteristic of the ontology of underst.
3. **ontology** - takes it from Heidegger as a method of overcoming the S-O schema
4. **Wahrheitsgeschehen** - the eventing of truth in art.
5. **Horizontverschmelzung** - fusion of horizons -
6. **Wirkungsgeschichte** - effective history -
7. **phronesis** - practical wisdom
8. event - **Ereignis** and **Geschehen** - something happens **to** you
9. **Gleichzeitigkeit** - simultaneity or contemporaneity -
10. **die Sprache spricht!** - language: the speaking of language -
11. **immanent text**: poetry as paradigmatic of language at its most powerful
12. **reading** as a paradigm of interpretation - cf. End of *TM*
13. **application** as a moment in all understanding - to understand is to apply
14. **experience** as essentially negative, shattering, transforming
15. **tragedy** as paradigmatic - the shattering of expectations
16. **legal interpretation** as a paradigm
17. **conversation** and dialogue
18. **eumeneis elenchoi** - the hermeneutical attitude of openness; the other could be right!
19. **wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein** - consciousness in which history is at work, our language is shaping our understanding
20. **Vorurteil/Vorverständnis** - the fruitfulness of prejudgment, of preunderstanding

IV. What is meant by the term "relevance" in relation

to hermeneutics?

The term "relevance" can have a number of meanings. First, there is the relevance of a new tool, a new method that accomplishes a purpose you want accomplished. This is the relevance of a tool that is suitable for a given task. The term is often used with regard to information—"relevant information." Webster's **Unabridged Dictionary** emphasizes this dimension: "bearing upon or relating to the matter at hand; to the point; pertinent, applicable, as 'the testimony is **relevant** to the case.'" I am sure lawyers have even more stringent rules for determining relevance of testimony, the "rules of evidence."

I would like to suggest three further dimensions of the word relevance as it pertains to hermeneutics. **First**, the German word, **Aktualität**, which appears in the title of Gadamer's important essay and little book on art, *Die Aktualität des Schönen*, is translated into English as "relevance" in the title, *The Relevance of the Beautiful* (1986). This German word, **Aktualität**, which is translated as relevance, suggests the first of these three dimensions: **Aktualität** refers to today, something that is **currently** meaningful, here and now. The translation of **Aktualität** into English is difficult because there really is no single word in English that captures the multiple overtones of the German word. Our translator chose "relevance," but I think one misses in the English word, as I hear it, the dimension of **time**, of **meaningfulness here and now**, that is so important in hermeneutics. But certainly, once one brings it up, the meaning for today, for people living now, may be considered a dimension of the word relevance. Let's call our first additional explicit dimension of relevance—the **temporal** dimension.

The **second** of the further dimensions I would add as associated with a stronger sense of relevance is that of **critique**. A critique is especially "relevant" when it calls one's worldview into question, one's approach, one's presuppositions, so that after it one cannot see the same topic in the same light.

The third dimension of relevance is that of **transformation**. A thing or text we encounter may be relevant **if it redefines what we are doing**, such that we understand it and ourselves in a new light, a new way. We begin to place different requirements on what we do. We do things differently. We see the value and goals of our work differently. It may smash our present horizon and force us to form a new one, to become more aware of ourselves. In this case, relevance is not just the relevance of critique. It offers an alternative possibility for seeing and doing. It may change our self-understanding, and the self-understanding we have as interpreters. This is the **transformative** dimension.

These last three--current meaningfulness, critique, and transformation--are dimensions that I have in mind in relation to defining the meaning of "relevance" in my title, "The Relevance of Hermeneutics," for to study hermeneutics, I believe, is ;look for what is meaningful now, not yesterday; it is not antiquarian. It puts our present approaches in question by its critique of **our present horizon**. And it transforms the basic way we see things. It is not just something that supports a given point of view--not that kind of relevance at all--but that changes it. One could call this the **therapeutic dimension**. It does not just criticize, it offers an alternative to the present perspective. I call this the **transformative dimension** of the relevance of hermeneutics.

Of course, these are "claims" that have to be made good. In a sense, the last two already support the claim of relevance here and now, for the claim that hermeneutics is relevant in its temporal dimension is supported or implied by the critique of the horizon that I have now, and the transformation of my present horizon. Contemporaneity, critique, and transformation—these are three important dimensions of the "relevance of hermeneutics" in Gadamer. It could easily be shown that they figure importantly in several of the twenty Gadamerian themes we have just discussed.

But let's turn now to the final section, a list of three dozen topics for which I find some dimension of philosophical hermeneutics may be "relevant." Because of the large number of topics, I will offer only a few provocative sentences for each.

To be even more provocative, I will end by listing twelve philosophers who are relevant to philosophical hermeneutics without specifying in what way. No time, sorry!

V. How is Philosophical Hermeneutics

"Relevant" to the following 36 topics?

1. The Humanities - Gadamer's hermeneutics is a systematic philosophical defense of the relevance of the humanities. It shows why the study of art, literature, and poetry, are important. Here I would like to structure a short summary of Gadamer's hermeneutics according to the logic of the "Four Noble Truths" in Buddhism. The first Noble Truth, as you recall, describes the nature of the problem, the second the cause of the problem, the third the solution to the problem, and the fourth, the path of right belief and living.

A. In Buddhism

1. **Dukha:** Life is suffering -the description of the problem
2. **Trishna:** Suffering is caused by neurotic attachment-the cause of the problem
3. **Nirvana:** Liberation, extinction of desires, is possible-the cure for the problem
4. **The 8-Fold Path:** The way to proceed.

B. In Gadamer's hermeneutics:

1. **Description of the problem:** The fine arts, literature, religion, philosophy, poetry are no longer valued.
2. **The cause of the problem:** They no longer are viewed as "true" because the Scientific Perspective, furthered by Kantian aesthetics, has pre-empted the definition of truth as what is scientifically

verifiable.

3. The cure for the problem: A transformation of our understanding of truth by looking at the occurrence of truth in our experience of works of art.

4. Buddha's 8-Fold Path starts with "complete view" and "complete understanding." What we need is a complete change in thought, in perspective and understanding about the truth of art. The next two steps in the Buddha's 8-fold path are "complete speech" and "complete action." Here, Gadamer would point to the need for a more adequate view of language and art and truth in action and of their embeddedness in the pragmatic context of our lives. The next steps, of right vocation and right application suggest the importance of Gadamer's listening and a right view of application. The 7th step on the path, **smriti**, complete recollection may with a great deal of stretching suggest the right understanding of the role of the past in all understanding. And the final 8th step, **samadhi** or "right contemplation" is a state of mind which eliminates subject and object, because both come together. It is an important point of Gadamer's hermeneutics that it claims to be neither "subjective" nor "objective." I hasten to say this playful set of parallels is my own invention and not Gadamer's. Especially questionable are the parallels to the 8-fold path, but I think the first three Noble Truths do help me to suggest the direction of his approach.

2. Art and aesthetics - Hermeneutics offers a new way to understand the experience of art as a way that truth emerges. It also offers a carefully argued critique of "aesthetic consciousness" since Kant. See [*Truth and Method*](#), part I.

3. Reading - Gadamer sees the scanning and construing processes of reading as paradigmatic of the understanding-process in general. I would direct readers to the discussion of this at the end of [*Truth and Method*](#). In spite of his later emphasis on the spoken word, Gadamer still holds that the processes of reading remain important. Here, the relevance runs the other way: reading is relevant to hermeneutics.

4. Poetry - Gadamer follows Heidegger in [*Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*](#) ("The Origin of the Work of Art" pp. 139-212 in his [*Basic Writings*](#)) in seeing poetry as an "eventing" of truth. **Aletheia**, the Greek word for truth invoked by Heidegger refers to disclosure.

5. Theology - Gadamer finds in the structure of encountering sacred texts important dimensions for all interpretation of texts. Here he is indebted to dialectical theology (Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann) for their emphasis on the address of the text to the reader and the claim of the text on the reader instead of the other way round. In Gadamer's hermeneutics the priority of subjectivized, subject-centered interpretation is overcome (even "objective" interpretation is based on the subject's standards of objectivity and thus is subjectivity-centered).

6. Music - Because hermeneutics traditionally involves reading a text and in effect

vocalizing it as one reads, there is basically a performative element in the hermeneutical process. One brings a text to life in the same way a conductor or pianist brings a score to life. I even ventured to present some ideas on performance and hermeneutics at a conference on postmodernity and the arts some two decades ago. (See my [articles](#), 1978.) A colleague, Melanie Jacobson, is exploring the relevance of hermeneutics to choral performance for her doctoral dissertation at the University of Iowa. There are many connections between musical theory and hermeneutics.

7. Antiquity - Gadamer's hermeneutics points to the relevance of classical Greek antiquity-their philosophy, literature, and language-as food for thought. See his concept of **Gleichzeitigkeit** (contemporaneity, simultaneity), where the text from antiquity speaks as if it were speaking here and now. This is also theologically important (see Kierkegaard).

8. The Enlightenment - Gadamer criticizes the Enlightenment presupposition that the beliefs of the past are dogma and reason must be used to eliminate them. He calls this an Enlightenment prejudice that restricts the scope of our thinking.

9. Technology - Gadamer goes back to the Greek interpretation of **technê**, which refers to using reason to produce things. But there are limits to such a use of reason, as Aristotle's discussions of **phronesis** show us.

10. Modernity - As I have indicated in my [boundary 2 essay on Postmodernity and Hermeneutics](#), hermeneutics itself represents a postmodern standpoint.(See also my 1976 [Article](#), "The Postmodernity of Heidegger.")² In offering a critique of the limits of technological reason and Enlightenment arrogance, philosophical hermeneutics goes beyond the presuppositions and illusions of Enlightenment modernity.

11. Sociology - Interpretation theory in sociology and the social sciences should find hermeneutics instructive as a critique of objectivizing modes of interpretation. There is an affinity here with **participant observation**, which makes use of non-objective criteria in understanding. More recently (1987), see Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan, [Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look](#).

12. Nursing and health sciences - Patricia Benner, a professor of nursing in San Francisco, has applied hermeneutics and phenomenology to her phenomenology of nursing in her book. [The Primacy of Caring](#), and more recently, with Hooper-Kriakides and Stannard, [Clinical Wisdom and Interventions in Critical Care](#). Gadamer's hermeneutics has clear ties to holistic medicine in its critique of objectivizing modes of interpretation stemming from Cartesian views of the body as a machine. But even I was astonished when, in 1993, Gadamer published a book of his essays on the subject of health: [Die Verborgenheit der Gesundheit](#)-or in English, [The Enigma of Health](#) (1996).

13. Law - A young graduate student from Norway wrote me by e-mail just this week to ask about programs in the U.S. where he could get a master's degree that would relate Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and law. I had to tell him I did not know of any. He was concerned

about the climate of positivism in Norwegian legal interpretation. He reads English, French, and German. Although Gadamer takes the process of application in legal interpretation as something that really applies in all understanding, there are many concepts in Gadamer that could de-positivize legal interpretation. In the first place, there is no privileged access to the original understanding of a text, and if there were, it would be most relevant to the time of the original writing of the text. A Connecticut Yankee, if he time-travelled back to the medieval court of King Arthur, would understand things by the standards of a Connecticut Yankee and not the people of that time. Literary critic [Hans-Robert Jauß](#) invokes the concept of an **Urpublikum**, but while this can function as an ideal, the claim of the text is ultimately on our understanding, not that of someone dead long ago.

14. Psychology - Again, the relevance of hermeneutics to psychology lies first of all in its critique of scientism, but the existential analysis of Dasein in Heidegger has been applied in psychoanalysis. Dilthey and Schleiermacher viewed hermeneutics in psychological terms, even referring to psychological understanding. Heidegger and Gadamer, however, tried to avoid subjectivism and the terminology of consciousness, although Gadamer did use it when he could find no other term adequate to his meaning, such as in his famous term **wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein**. One of my students here in the audience, [Robert Zellmann](#), started his graduate work in a **Seattle University** program for Existential and Phenomenological Psychology, which unfortunately has now been phased out for lack of students being drawn to the program. Apparently there were not enough supporters of it other than myself, i.e., supporters within traditional psychology.

15. Psychiatry - Gadamer has an essay, "Hermeneutics and Psychiatry" in [The Enigma of Health](#), but unfortunately I have not read it. Gadamer does make a remark on psychiatric interpretation in his debate with Habermas, as not the model for interpretation in general because the doctor holds a superior power position and is not treating his partner in conversation as an equal. (See his "Hermeneutics, Rhetoric and Ideology-Critique," pp. 313-334 in [Rhetoric and Hermeneutics in our Time](#))

16. Lesbianism - In her book [Lesbians and Lesbianism: A Post-Jungian Perspective](#) (New York: Routledge, 1997, 237 pp.), Claudette Kulkarni attempts to combine a Gadamerian interpretive methodology with a Jungian practice. Her interest in Gadamer is in his emphasis on dialogue and not making the analyst the supreme arbiter of a pregiven meaning. "The methodology I have chosen, hermeneutics, is an interpretive methodology, that is, a methodology which expects knowledge to emerge from dialogue and in the form of 'an unpredictable discovery rather than a controlled outcome.'" (149) For Kulkarni, and for many persons in the social sciences, hermeneutics definitely has methodological consequences, even when as philosophical hermeneutics it is not itself a methodology.

17. Languages & Translation - The process of translation is paradigmatic for hermeneutics, and the process of understanding as described philosophically would be relevant to the teaching of modern languages and to the nature of translation. [Dennis Schmidt](#) has two very insightful articles on translations; they are informed by Gadamer's hermeneutics.¹

18. Rhetoric - Rhetoric is a very important factor in Gadamer's thinking. He is especially interested in the broader scope of rhetoric in antiquity. His essay, "Rhetoric and Hermeneutics,"

appears in *Rhetoric and Hermeneutics in Our Time: A Reader*, pp. 45-59. Also see my contribution to that volume, "What Hermeneutics can Offer Rhetoric," pp. 108-131. In that essay, I found twenty points where hermeneutics could offer something to rhetoric, but Gadamer after reading it, advised me to reduce it to ten by combining some points. Unfortunately it was already at the publishers and really not practical to change. But I agreed with him that it would have been more effective with ten or twelve points rather than twenty.

19. Theater - Hermeneutics is typically interpretation from a script. It comes to life in oral interpretation. In a later writing Gadamer also reinterprets the Greek term **mimesis** to mean something quite other than merely copying. It produces the meaning in sound and gesture. In principle the act of reading is a performance of the text even when the reading is internal, and this reading supplies emphases and meanings not necessarily evident in the text merely as written.

20. Postmodernity - Gadamer's hermeneutics contains a critique of the thought-forms of modernity. As such it marks a turn to postmodernity, as I have pointed out in my article "Postmodernity and Hermeneutics" in *boundary 2* (see *Articles*, 1977) and elsewhere. A recent conference arranged by Eugene Gendlin at the University of Chicago on the topic, "After Postmodernity" (see the report at www.focusing.org/conferencereport.html) reflected many of the themes of hermeneutics.

21. Phenomenology - The question of phenomenology is inseparable from the development of hermeneutics. Gadamer was Heidegger's assistant from 1923 to 1928, during precisely Heidegger was making a double move of using phenomenology to free himself of life-philosophy and neo-Kantianism and at the same time adding jibes in class about Husserl. Here, his logic lectures of 1925, recently translated, are relevant. For the view of their split from Husserl's perspective, see the recently published volume 6 of Edmund Husserl's collected writings in English from the period 1927-1931, *Psychology and Transcendental Phenomenology: Husserl's Britannica Article, Amsterdam Lectures, and Marginal comments in Being and Time and Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. (1997). Also, see G. B. Madison's view that a phenomenological hermeneutics is the solution to the problems of postmodernism (see his Web page). It is significant that Dermot Moran's *Introduction to Phenomenology* includes a 48-page chapter on Gadamer. Gadamer's thought is phenomenological and inextricably intertwined with the development of 20th century phenomenology. (See his conversation on phenomenology with Alfons Grieder in *JBSP* (published May, 1995), which will be included in my forthcoming *Gadamer in Conversation* (Yale, 2001).

22. Ontology - Gadamer's hermeneutics in *Truth and Method* follows the lead of Heidegger in making hermeneutics an ontology of understanding. This avoids both the subjectivizing involved in making interpretation a psychological process, and an objectivizing which omits/denies the interpretive moment in the reader.

23. Existential self-understanding - Gadamer also follows Heidegger in defining understanding as self-understanding. While Gadamer avoids the terminology of existentialism, he continues to take the view that understanding is not just of an external object or subject but rather involves a moment of self-understanding as one understands. To understand in a way

that transforms one's view of the world and oneself, as often happens in encountering a great work of art, also results in an enhanced self-understanding.

24. History - The ongoing discussion in hermeneutics from a methodological point of view is regarding the claimed objectivity of historical understanding. Along with Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Habermas, Gadamer in his philosophical hermeneutics argues that there can be no disinterested understanding or even presuppositionless understanding of anything. Nietzsche even seeks for the interest-guiding factors in interpretation, as Habermas has noted in his collection of Nietzsche's **Erkenntnistheoretische Schriften** (o.p., Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1968) and carried over into his own theory in his *Knowledge and Human Interests* (see especially the appendix on three major types of knowledge-guiding interest). What separates Heidegger and Gadamer is Gadamer's concept of **wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein**, a consciousness in which history is always at work. For Gadamer there is no escape from history or from prejudices, although one must continually become aware of them. But they are the basis of our understanding at all, so "prejudgments" are always already there. Habermas and Gadamer are not so antithetical as some Habermas followers assume. Habermas used Gadamer's hermeneutics in critiquing the logic of research in the social sciences. See my [article](#) published in 2000, "Habermas versus Gadamer? Some Remarks."

25. Literary Criticism - The process of literary criticism **presupposes** the understanding of the text, which is the arena of hermeneutics, yet American literary critics frequently assume what philosophically must be described as an Aristotelian realism, as Neal Oxenhandler points out in an article from the 1950s. In the concluding manifesto in my book, *Hermeneutics*, I mention some 25 dimensions of relevance in an effort to trace out the significance of hermeneutics for literary interpretation. My original hope in studying hermeneutics was to develop an existential/ontological literary criticism that would sense the way of being-in-the-world that comes to expression in the text. While I did not find in Gadamer's hermeneutics a method of textual analysis, it did unfold the ontological being-for-me of the text. Also, the "hermeneutical quartet at Yale" (as I called Geoffrey Hartmann, Paul deMan, Harold Bloom, and J. Hillis Miller in an unpublished lecture I presented in Tennessee in the seventies) all have an interest in hermeneutics, though not always of the Gadamerian kind! While **hermeneutics** focusses on the problem of **understanding** what is being said in the literary text, **literary criticism** goes beyond this to compare it with other texts and to apply standards of literary value, literary history, etc. Yet in all this, literary criticism **must presuppose the understanding of the text**, thus both literary criticism and literary theory cannot escape hermeneutics, and theorists sometimes refer to the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer (especially Geoffrey Hartman [see his collection, *A Critic's Journey: Literary Reflections, 1958-1998* and many earlier books, but also Stanley Fish's *Is there a text in this class?* and *Doing What Comes Naturally*). [George Karnezis](#) explored the debate between Hirsch and Gadamer in his dissertation.

26. Understanding - As I have noted above, understanding, like Being, is ubiquitous. The process of understanding is a prerequisite process in all disciplines. It may seem that understanding takes many different forms, each determined by a particular discipline. But the fact is that the philosophical analysis of understanding should have priority over all disciplinary hermeneutics. To ask what understanding is in general and universally is to ask a question that affects all questioning in every discipline. Like philosophy itself, hermeneutics is truly universal. Thus Gadamer controversial essay, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical

Problem." (included in [Continental Philosophy: An Anthology](#) (1998), pp. 186-193.)

27. Method - It is a mistake to see Gadamer as the arch-enemy of method. Method is basic and indispensable to every area of human investigation. He recognizes this. The problem arises when method is viewed as the best and only avenue for obtaining knowledge. Here, hermeneutics attempts to show through philosophical analysis the limits and liabilities of method, its non-universality. It is hermeneutics which is universal, according to Gadamer, not method. Methodically generated truth closes the investigator to other forms of truth, and thus Gadamer's title, *Truth and Method*. And even the universality of hermeneutics is a major point of contention in the debate with Jürgen Habermas. [See *Hermeneutik und Ideologie-Kritik*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971, o.p.]

28. Reception aesthetics - One of the consequences of phenomenology, and also hermeneutics, is the **aesthetics of reception**. This focuses not so much on the text as rather how that text is perceived/received. In America we have the "reader response" criticism of **Norman Holland** (*Dynamics of Literary Response* and *5 Readers Reading*) **Jane Tompkins** (*Reader Response Criticism: From Structuralism to Formalism*, and **Stanley Fish** (cited in #25 above) among others. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics sees in reception-aesthetics a step beyond the Aristotelian realism of the New Criticism (although Aristotle's analysis of tragedy in the *Poetics* is an early example of reception-aesthetics) in that the aesthetics of reception realizes that the happening of the work occurs in the reader and thus it is pointless to exclude what the perceiver brings to the act of encountering a work of art. But hermeneutics articulates this happening ontologically as an event of disclosure of truth. What hermeneutics can offer reception-aesthetics, then, is a philosophical basis that goes beyond subjectivism. Philosophically speaking, reader response criticism does not solve the problem that hermeneutics tried to solve, namely the perception that art is an untruth, the tendency to view art in a utilitarian way as a pleasurable "experience." But many experiences can be pleasurable, such as eating ice cream. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, with its claim that works of art and poetry bring truth to stand, can enrich reception aesthetics without contradicting their point that the happening of art is in the perceiver.

29. Deconstruction - There is no denying the power of deconstructive literary interpretation. It has an entirely different philosophical basis than reader response literary criticism. Poststructuralism puts forward a theory of language and a hermeneutics of suspicion that reads between the lines for where the action going on contradicts the words. We see this illustrated with particular brilliance in [Barbara Johnson's great essay](#) on Melville's "**Billy Budd**." In my article comparing four texts of Gadamer and four of Derrida (see [Articles](#), 1994), I conclude that the two approaches to the phenomenon of reading and of interpretation are supplementary, not mutually exclusive. Both offer light on the event of understanding that we would not otherwise have.

There are some who regard deconstruction as a passing fad, but the tremendous fruitfulness of Derrida's writings witnesses to its philosophical insights into the logocentrism of structural linguistics, the structure of writing as having what Rudolf Gasché calls an "infrastructure" of presence and absence, and a link with Heidegger's critique of Platonic metaphysics. Nor, on the other hand, do I see hermeneutics as a fad that has been superseded by poststructuralism. It is a hermeneutical principle of Gadamer that one's interlocutor could be right, and should be treated with appreciation and respect. Like Socrates, one seeks the truth

that resides in the arguments of one's critics. But as Gadamer's efforts at dialogue with Derrida, another follower of Heidegger, have shown, Derrida regards the structure of dialogue itself as presupposing a common ground that does not exist. (See [*Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*](#) 1989.) But as those seeking to evaluate the contributions of both, I would say that hermeneutics has been misunderstood by most American deconstructionists. In this respect, the book that best deals with these contrasts is James Risser's [*The Voice of the Other: Re-reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics*](#) (1997).

There are some literary critics who argue that hermeneutics is irrelevant, because deconstruction and French literary theory, especially Foucault, have gone far beyond it (see [*Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*](#)). After all, [*Truth and Method*](#) dates from 1960. Or, one can disregard hermeneutics as basically a German phenomenon, anyway, so don't import it. We have done perfectly well without it so far, so why bother us? We have all the methods we need, so why waste time on methodology? In reply to this, I would say, first, that you can't know what you're missing till you've tried it, and most of them have not. Hermeneutics is not a fad; it is not going to fade away. It is the composite of theorizing and rules about interpreting texts dating back thousands of years, plus valuable philosophical insights into understanding as a process and event that have been offered by Heidegger and Gadamer. As for hermeneutics being some sort of methodology, this is a misunderstanding. It may be hermeneutics as defined by [Emilio Betti](#), but it is not methodology in Heidegger's analysis of existential understanding; and in Gadamer hermeneutics is a critique of methodology. That is why Betti is so upset with Gadamer. Gadamer has redefined hermeneutics as philosophy of understanding and interpretation, not as an interdisciplinary methodology of interpretation. Unfortunately Betti's compendious [*Allgemeine Auslegungslehre*](#) of 1967 is long out of print, but see [Verena Essmann's book](#) on it.

30. The "Hermeneutik und Poetik Arbeitsgruppe" - The German "Hermeneutics and Poetics Workgroup" has been in existence since about 1960. Its biennial volumes are an interesting collection of speculation by literary researchers from universities all over Germany. One would expect them to take Gadamer as their mentor, but they have seemingly chosen Hans Blumenberg, who is more of a social theorist than a philosopher. They could learn a great deal from Gadamer, but they have chosen not to do so. I mention them here only because you may have the impression that Gadamer's hermeneutics is being carried forward by in Germany by this group. In his conversation on "aesthetics" with Carsten Dutt in his little book, [*Hans Georg Gadamer im Gespräch*](#) Gadamer reproaches members of this group with having misunderstood his concepts even when they tried to apply them. His hermeneutics is being carried forward by individual critics outside that group, such as slavist [Horst-Jürgen Gerigk](#) at the University of Heidelberg, especially his [*Unterwegs zur Interpretation: Hinweise zu einer Theorie der Literatur in Auseinandersetzung mit Gadamer's Wahrheit und Methode*](#) (1989) and [*Die Bruder Karamazov*](#) (1997) but not so much by the Hermeneutics and Poetics group, who define hermeneutics in its more general sense as the interpretation of texts, in this case, literary texts.

31. Yale Hermeneutics Series - The interest in hermeneutics is not something new at Yale University. Geoffrey Hartmann, Paul DeMan, Harold Bloom, and others have found things they could use, but the fascination with Derrida has eclipsed for the time being the

influence of Gadamer. Still, Yale University Press is now offering a series of books in hermeneutics, such as Gerald Bruns' *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* and *Rhetoric and Hermeneutics in our Time: A Reader* (1997), and various books by Hans-Georg Gadamer, which promise to continue making the hermeneutical tradition more widely known. And this includes the forthcoming book on *Gadamer in Conversation: Hermeneutics, Aesthetics, Practical Philosophy, the Greeks, Phenomenology, and the Nazis* (2001).

32. Postcolonial literature - The task of understanding other cultures is a "hermeneutical problem" and hermeneutical reflection sheds light on this task. A major factor in this is the invisibility of one's own cultural presuppositions. Here, encountering other cultures helps to shed light on one's own prejudices—if one is hermeneutically open to this. Again, we need to be more aware of how our prejudices condition our judgments, and hermeneutical reflection makes us aware of this need. Gadamer has drawn a great deal of criticism in arguing for the fruitfulness of prejudice, or I would prefer the term "prejudgments," but his point has been misunderstood. We cannot approach any problem totally free of prejudice or prior judgments on a subject, for this is where our questions come from, this is the reason we may have an interest in asking questions at all. We cannot understand anything new except on the basis of what we already know, and this causes us to have certain expectations which may be contradicted by what we encounter. Gadamer by no means is arguing we must make our prejudices the measure of everything we perceive—that is the precisely the problem with method! Method usually already has its questions and standpoint constructed, and the inquirer only to substantiates or refutes a theory given in advance. Gadamer's approach is one of dialogical openness, trying like Socrates, to learn the truth, even if it contradicts his own expectations.

33. Asia - It is probably no accident that the author of the **definitive bibliography of Gadamer's writings** (*Gadamer-Bibliographie*, 1994) is Japanese—**Etsuro Makita**—and a great deal of Gadamer's and Heidegger's writings have been translated into Japanese. Nor is it without significance that Gadamer has been invited to speak in Japan several times, and accepted the invitations. Gadamer is not arrogant about Western philosophy. He acknowledges that Asian philosophies, especially Chinese and Japanese, but also Indian, perhaps have a great deal to teach us.

34. Education - As a teacher, Gadamer is himself in the business of education, so it is not surprising that he has commented occasionally on the task of education. But there is more to it than that. Hermeneutics deals with encounters that shatter horizons, and educational experiences, when meaningful, leave one's understanding transformed. That's what hermeneutics is all about and that is what education is all about, too: growth and transformation. Here, I would refer you to the collection, *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History* translated by Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss, and more especially the 400-page book by Shaun Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and Education* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

The role of interpretation in education is one of Gallagher's topics, and of course an educated person senses the interpreted character of all he or she is learning.

35. Communication Theory - I would like to enter into dialogue with

communication theory people. It may be that such things as Gadamer's emphasis on dialogue or his criticisms of the ideal speech situation in Habermas, or his emphasis on living language, might be of interest. I should also say that Gadamer did not stop developing his theory with **Truth and Method**. On the contrary, he entered into dialogue with all kinds of fields. His 1981 encounter with Derrida might be of interest, where he continues to defend the claims of living language against Derrida's assertion of the priority of written language as showing us how language works. I need to do more reading to pick up possible connections.

36. Historic Sites - Although books interpreting historic sites in America and abroad generally do not specifically make a connection to hermeneutics, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is very relevant to their task. To interpret a site is not just to explain objectively what happened there, who was involved, etc. It is also to sense why we should find it significant today. Hermeneutics definitely relates to the problem of understanding monuments and historic sites. It is not just about texts, although the problem of understanding a legal, literary, or sacred text can be relevant to understanding an historic site. And as Ricoeur notes, it can interpret events and actions as well as texts and works of art.

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P.S.: Twelve Philosophers and the Relevance of Hermeneutics

Another topic of interest would be what different **philosophers** have contributed to contemporary reflection on the interpretive problem, and how hermeneutics would be related interpreting their thinking. I will defer this discussion to another time, but I will list twelve philosophers I immediately think of in relation to this topic:

1. **Plato**
2. **Aristotle**
3. **Hegel**
4. **Husserl**
5. **Heidegger**
6. **Wittgenstein**
7. **Adorno**
8. **Habermas**
9. **Derrida**
10. **Foucault**
11. **Rorty**
12. **Davidson**

*Just as I was putting this on the web, Jon Awbrey called my attention to a senior honors project in applied hermeneutics directed by Shaun Gallagher at Canisius College. This project looks at the potential practical applications of hermeneutics. The web page for seeing the results of this project is <http://www.canisius.edu/~gallaghr/ahnf.html>.

1. Dennis Schmidt, "The Hermeneutic Dimension of Translation" in *Translation Perspectives IV*, edited by M. G. Rose (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988): 5-17, and

"Some Reflections on Translating Philosophy" in *Perspectives: Selected Translation Papers II* (1984): 28-34.

2. See also my "Towards a Postmodern Hermeneutics of Performance" in *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, ed. Michel Benamou and Charles Caramelo (Madison, WI: Coda Press, 1978), 19-33, and "Postmodern Hermeneutics and the Act of Reading," *Notre Dame English Journal* [now *Religion and Literature*] 15 (Summer 1983): 55-84; both are in *Articles*, 1978 and 1983

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