

## GADAMER'S ASPECTIVAL REALISM

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Gadamer claims that human beings are capable of understanding only 'aspects' of reality, yet he also holds that, through these aspects, we understand reality itself. In this sense he is an 'aspectival realist.' This paper considers two attempts to explain Gadamer's aspectival realism: the 'schematization' reading defended by Charles Taylor, and the 'holist' reading of Brice Wachterhauser. I criticize these views on two fronts: that they are at odds with Gadamer's texts, and that they fail to reconcile aspectivalism and realism into a consistent philosophical position. I articulate an alternative reading that I call the 'presentational' account. At the heart of this account is the claim that, on Gadamer's view, the 'occasionality' that characterizes language also characterizes being itself. I argue both that this interpretation fits Gadamer's texts better than the views currently on offer in the literature and that it avoids the philosophical difficulties those views encounter.

ONE of the most well-known features of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics is the claim that human understanding is always embedded within a particular 'horizon.' Human beings do not and cannot have a God's-eye perspective on reality; rather, our grasp of the world is ineliminably shaped by the particular traditions we occupy and the particular 'prejudices' [*Vorurteile*—pre-judgments] we inherit from them. For this reason, our experience necessarily discloses only one perspective on the world, or as Gadamer prefers to put it, one *aspect* of it (Gadamer 1989: 447, 473).<sup>1</sup>

Many other philosophers who acknowledge the aspectival character of our understanding take this to imply the skeptical idea that we are capable of grasping only a reality that exists for us, while reality itself lies beyond our

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1. Hereafter cited in text as TM

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cognitive reach. But not Gadamer. On his view, to experience an aspect of a thing is not to experience something other than the thing itself; instead, we experience the thing in and through its aspects. As he puts it, “the multiplicity of . . . worldviews does not involve any relativization of the ‘world.’ Rather, what the world is is not different from the views in which it presents itself” (TM 447). For lack of a less ambiguous term, in what follows I will call this idea—the idea that human understanding discloses reality itself, not a mere ‘reality-for-us’—*realism*. So defined, Gadamer is not just an aspectualist, but an aspectual realist.

With few exceptions, Gadamer’s interpreters have recognized that he is an aspectual realist in this sense, but this (near) consensus masks a good deal of underlying disagreement. It’s one thing to say that we have genuine access to reality through its various ‘aspects’; it’s quite another to explain what an aspect is supposed to *be* and how it is supposed to be related to the thing of which it is an aspect. There are nearly as many answers to these questions as there are interpreters of Gadamer, but the views in the existing literature tend to fall into one of two general camps.

The first of these camps seeks to explain aspects through the notion of ‘schematization.’ An aspect of a thing, on this view, is what results from construing the thing in terms of a particular, historically variable, conceptual scheme. Since we cannot understand things without schematizing them, on this view understanding is inescapably aspectual. But since schematizations are always schematizations *of* an underlying, mind-independent reality, this view may also be plausibly viewed a version of realism.

The second camp interprets the notion of an aspect in mereological terms. An aspect, on this reading, is a *part* of the thing whose aspect it is, and the thing itself is the *whole* formed by the totality of the various aspects. According to this holist interpretation, as I will call it, to say that understanding is necessarily aspectual is to affirm that our finite minds can only ever grasp part of a thing, never the whole. And since parts are not distinct entities, but belong to their respective wholes, it is reasonable to think of this view as also a form of realism.

Part of my aim in what follows is to unpack and critique these two interpretations of Gadamer. To keep the discussion manageable, I will focus on just one representative of each camp: Charles Taylor for the schematistic interpretation, and Brice Wachterhauser for the holistic one. While there is much to appreciate in each of these views, I will argue that they both face important difficulties—both as interpretations of Gadamer and as philosophical positions in their own right.

After this, I will lay out a third way of interpreting what Gadamer means by ‘aspect’ that has not, to my knowledge, been previously defended in the literature. I’ll argue that it both does better justice to Gadamer’s texts and is more

philosophically compelling than the other two options. At the heart of this interpretation is Gadamer's claim that understanding is essentially 'occasional' and that an 'aspect' of reality is to be thought of as what understanding discloses on a particular occasion. For this reason, I would like to call my view 'occasionalism,' but that name, it turns out, is already taken by an unrelated early modern theory of causation. So instead I will (for reasons that will become clear later) call it the *presentational* interpretation.

## 1. Aspects as Schematizations

Though the term 'conceptual scheme' owes its popularity to Donald Davidson's famous rejection of the 'the very idea' of such a thing (see Davidson 1974), the idea itself has a much older provenance. The thought that human beings make sense of the world by imposing a conceptual apparatus onto it, or, more generally, that the intelligibility we find in our experience comes from us and not from the experienced objects, finds its most influential historical expression in Kant—though Kant does not use the term 'schematization' to describe it.<sup>2</sup>

Kant famously held that the categories by which we make sense of reality are necessary features of human cognition and thus are the same in everybody. For that reason, while it is possible to describe Kant's view as 'aspectival,' it is so only in a very weak sense.<sup>3</sup> It is true, on this view, that our minds capture only an aspect of reality, but there is only *one* aspect that any of us are, or even can be, in touch with.

It is easy, however, to develop a more thoroughly aspectival version of Kant's basic account. In its crudest form, this view simply replaces Kant's single set of necessary categories with a plurality of contingent conceptual schemes. These schemes vary from one culture to the next, and perhaps even from individual to individual. They emerge not from the necessary, universal features of human cognition, but rather from contingent cultural, historical, and linguistic forces that shape individuals in ways beyond their control and of which they are generally unaware. Each of these schemes construes, in its own way, the same underlying reality—in Davidson's terms, the same underlying body of 'empirical content.' The resulting picture is that there are two factors on which the truth of a description depends, not, as non-aspectival views would have it,

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2. Kant does use the terms 'schema' and 'schematization', but in a completely different sense from Davidson's. A Kantian 'schema' is not a conceptual apparatus but rather an intuitive presentation of a category (thanks to an anonymous referee at this journal for this way of putting it). Taylor, however, uses 'scheme' in the Davidsonian sense of a framework for construing experienced reality so as to render it intelligible. I will also use it in this way in what follows.

3. The most influential 'aspectival' reading of Kant is found in Allison (2004).

just one. Whether a description is true or not depends both on the nature of the object being described (the content) and on the conceptual scheme to which the description belongs.

Charles Taylor (2002: 290–94)<sup>4</sup> agrees with this basic picture. The idea that there are multiple schemes which differently construe “the same X,” he claims, is “inescapable.” However, like most of Gadamer’s schematistic interpreters, Taylor recognizes that the crude view must be modified if it is to work as a reading of Gadamer. There are two problems that must be addressed. The first is that the crude view is often taken to imply the possibility that alternative conceptual schemes can be *incommensurable* with one another, in the sense that their respective possessors will find one another mutually unintelligible. Gadamer, however, famously holds that there is no culture so alien to our own that we cannot come, with some effort, to understand it. Taylor thinks that the way to avoid this pitfall is to follow Gadamer in thinking of conceptual schemes as ‘horizons.’ As Taylor understands it, “Gadamer’s notion of ‘horizon’ has an inner complexity that is essential to it. On one hand, horizons can be identified and distinguished. . . . But on the other hand, horizons evolve, change. There is no such thing as a fixed horizon.” The malleability of horizons allows us to affirm the notion of conceptual schemes while denying their incommensurability. It allows for the possibility that “the horizons of A and B may . . . be distinct at time *t* and their mutual understanding imperfect. But A and B by living together may come to have a single common horizon at *t + n*.” This, Taylor contends, is what Gadamer means by his celebrated image of the ‘fusion of horizons.’

The second problem Taylor finds with the crude picture is its notion of ‘empirical content.’ While there must be something that “the concept ‘scheme’ contrast[s] with . . . The term ‘content’ is certainly bad, as though there were stuff already lying there, to be framed in different schemes.” Gadamer clearly has no truck with this idea. As he makes clear, our linguistic views of the world “are not relative in the sense that one could oppose them to the ‘world in itself,’ as if the right view from some possible position outside the human, linguistic world could discover it in its being-in-itself” (TM 447). Taylor, however, argues that we can accommodate this by replacing the notion of ‘content’ in scheme-content

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4. This has since been reprinted, with some minor modifications and additions, as a chapter of Dreyfus and Taylor (2015). The latter embeds Taylor’s reading of Gadamer within a larger account of what an acceptable ‘realism’ would amount to. At the center of this larger account is “a realist view of science as describing the things in the universe as they are *in themselves*, independent of their relation to our bodily capacities and coping practices” (2015: 132). In other words, on this view realism is secured by the idea that science provides us with a non-aspectival view of things. This wider view is certainly not one Gadamer would subscribe to, nor do Taylor and Dreyfus claim that it is. For that reason, I will restrict my focus to Taylor’s earlier essay.

dualism with an undefined "X." He notes that "in a general proposition, we might say that what we put in place of the X is a dimension, or aspect of the human condition. In the particular case, it is much more dangerous to specify." Ultimately, Taylor contends, the point is to "beware of labels." While it is essential that we recognize the existence of the 'X,' we must also recognize that it refers to "a dimension of the human condition for which we have no stable, culture-transcendent name."

It is not clear how, exactly, Taylor thinks his ineffable 'Xs' differ from the more traditional 'empirical contents,' but we can put that problem to the side for the moment. For now, what I want to emphasize is that, whatever we call it, the idea of something like an ineffable X is essential to the schematization view. We might ask, first, why this view requires the idea of an X, ineffable or not, in the first place. One simple answer is that the idea of 'schematization' makes sense only if there is something that *gets* schematized. Taylor provides an additional reason: Gadamer claims to be a realist, and realism requires, at a minimum, that *the way the world is* plays some non-trivial role in making our beliefs true and false. As Taylor puts it, reality must be able to 'talk back' to us. Thus, Taylor reasons, there must be something that lies outside our conceptual schemes to which they are answerable. If it were schemes all the way down, we would be left, as John McDowell (1994: 11) puts it, with a "frictionless spinning in a void." This frictionless spinning is philosophically distasteful in its own right, but it seems especially intolerable for anyone committed to realism.

So, for the notion of 'schematization' to accomplish the tasks Taylor sets for it, there must be something like unschematized 'content', or an underlying 'X', in the picture. But why think that this X must be, as Taylor suggests, *ineffable*—a mere X "for which we have no stable, culture-transcendent name"? The idea that the X lies outside any particular scheme already answers this question. Languages are, or are at least part of, conceptual schemes. So to name something is already to locate it within a particular scheme, already to conceptualize it. The pre-schematized reality, *qua* pre-schematized, cannot be captured by any particular language. Put differently, to name the X with a word drawn from some particular scheme would be to *privilege* that scheme, to say that it gets at the being of the X in a way that other schemes do not. It would be to say that what that scheme reveals is not simply an aspect of the thing, but the unvarnished thing itself. We would thus have abandoned the very aspectivalism that the schematization view is designed to explain.

It not a mere accident of Taylor's view, then, that it contrasts the notion of 'scheme' with that of 'ineffable X.' The former notion demands the latter. However, precisely because it demands the idea of an ineffable X, it is difficult to square Taylor's interpretation of Gadamer with what Gadamer actually says. We already noted that Gadamer rejects the Kantian notion of a 'world in itself' with

which our linguistically-structured worldviews might contrast,<sup>5</sup> and that for this reason he would have no truck with the idea of ‘empirical content.’ But Taylor’s ineffable Xs fare no better in this regard. Insofar as they are ineffable, Taylor’s Xs would quite clearly lie “outside the human, linguistic world” to which Gadamer refers. They are brute ‘givens’ of the mythical sort that Wilfried Sellars (1997) describes and as such are genuinely knowable, if at all, only by a mind uninhibited by human language. Taylor’s Xs thus resemble Kant’s things-in-themselves at least as closely, if not more so, as uninterpreted ‘contents’ do. In short, the view that Taylor attributes to Gadamer appears to be one that the latter flatly rejects. This, together with the fact that Taylor provides no textual evidence to support his reading of Gadamer’s ‘horizons’ as conceptual schemes, should lead us to doubt its accuracy as an interpretation of Gadamer.

But perhaps we are being too quick here. While the schematization view can’t be made to square with everything Gadamer *does* say, it might nevertheless square with what he *should* have said. Gadamer’s texts do make it clear that he wants to be an aspectival realist, and one might think that the best—perhaps the only—way to pull that off is to adopt something like the idea of schemes and Xs. If that is right, then Taylor’s reading might be seen as sacrificing truth to the letter of Gadamer’s work in order to be truer to the spirit.

Unfortunately, however, Taylor’s account faces philosophical problems that are at least as pressing as the interpretative ones. Put succinctly, it fails to square realism with aspectivalism. An ambiguity allows the account to be interpreted as either aspectival or realist, but insofar as it is one, it is not the other.

The ambiguity at play here resides in the notion of ‘ineffability.’ Taken in a strong, literal sense, ineffability implies the impossibility of describing something truly in language. So understood, the claim that reality consists in an ineffable X (or a set of Xs) is incompatible with realism. Consider an example. Suppose there is some X which I, on the basis of my conceptual scheme, describe as a *dog*. We might now ask: *is* the X a dog, or not? The answer cannot be yes, because then the X would not be ineffable. Dogs, whatever else they might be, are describable in words—the word ‘dog,’ in fact, does the job quite well. So if the X is ineffable in the strong sense, we must conclude that it is not a dog and thus that my description of it as such was untrue. After all, how could it be *true* to call something which is *not* a dog, a dog? Whatever is true of ‘dog,’ of course, will be true of every other human word or concept, as well. When understood in the strong sense, therefore, the notion of an ineffable X entails that we can never speak truly of reality, and thus contradicts realism.

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5. This is far from a one-off claim; it is a consistent theme in Gadamer’s work. See (TM 450, 473, 476) and (Gadamer 1976a: 80). I will discuss many of these passage in more detail below.



However, there is also another, weaker sense of 'ineffability' according to which calling something 'ineffable' does not entail that it cannot be *truly* described in language, only that it cannot be *completely* or *exhaustively* described. If we interpret Taylor in this way, then his view is not at odds with realism. For example, while it might be true that some X is a dog, that surely is not all there is to say about it. It might also be a beloved pet, a faithful guardian, a home for fleas, and the reason why Mrs. Conway next door can't get a good night's sleep. Each of these, we might think, represents an 'aspect' of the X. Each predicate is true of it, but none exhausts it. Further, it is highly plausible to suppose that *which* of these aspects one is in a position to appreciate will depend on the set of concepts one has at one's disposal. Someone from a culture in which dogs play a different role than they do in our own—like ancient Egypt, for example—might be armed with concepts that allow her to recognize aspects of the X that I, given only my current concepts, cannot. In this respect, we might say, our conceptual schemes allow us to give *accurate* descriptions of things, but never *adequate* ones.<sup>6</sup>

This line of thought is not only plausible; it seems to be obviously true. Who could deny that there are innumerable many true things to be said about any given object, and that we often need to master new concepts in order to recognize and appreciate them? Nobody—and that's the problem. If *this* is all that is meant by the thesis that human understanding is horizon-bound and aspectival, then the thesis is utterly uncontroversial and uninteresting. More to the point, if this is all that Gadamer's thesis amounts to, then he is mistaken in supposing that it offers an alternative to Enlightenment accounts of understanding and knowledge. Descartes, for example, is well aware that God knows many facts about the world of which he (Descartes) is ignorant. And there is no reason why he would have denied that learning some of these facts might require him to acquire new conceptual schemes—like, for example, the exciting new schemes that were emerging from the natural sciences in his own day.

In short, the view in question, while true and compatible with realism, is not aspectival in any robust sense. This is clear from the fact that we can remove even the appearance of aspectivalism from the view simply by identifying our Xs more precisely. Suppose I describe a dog as 'brown' and you describe it as 'purebred.' It is of course sensible to say that we have here identified different 'aspects' of the same thing—the dog. But in another, equally

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6. At times Taylor appears to endorse just such a view. For example, he distinguishes the schematistic view from relativism by noting that the latter, but not the former, entails that a given proposition might have different truth values in different schemes. For relativism "proposition p would be true from perspective A, false from perspective B, indeterministic from perspective C, and so forth." By contrast, on his view if two schemes differ from one another, this will not be because they assign different truth values to the same propositions, but because "different questions will be asked, different issues raised, different features will stand out as remarkable, and so forth" (Taylor 2002: 288).

obvious sense we are not talking about the same thing at all. I am talking about the dog's *color*, you about its *pedigree*. Put this way, the temptation to describe what you and I are doing in aspectival terms dissipates. It becomes clear that you and I are not 'differently construing the same X'; we are simply discussing different topics.<sup>7</sup>

The interpretative and philosophical problems here are related. The argument I just articulated is not new; it's just a spin on the general Hegelian case against the coherence of the phenomenal/noumenal distinction. Either the noumenal is genuinely beyond reason, in which case we could not be in a position to know that there is such a thing, or even to refer to it—or it is not, in which case the distinction between it and the 'phenomenal' world collapses. This same critique applies to Taylor's Xs. Gadamer, of course, is deeply indebted to Hegel, and this line of thought lies behind his own rejection of the idea of a 'world-in-itself.' The problem with the schematistic interpretation, then, is that it seeks to make room for aspectivalism by going back behind Hegel to Kant. Gadamer, by contrast, recognizes that "Hegel has thought through the historical dimension in which the problem of hermeneutics is rooted" (TM 346), and thus recognizes that aspectivalism can be secured, if at all, only by going through Hegel and out the other side. A Gadamerian version of aspectival realism, in short, must be a post-Hegelian one, and this means that it must be one in which the idea of a brute reality-in-itself, indifferent to human language and concepts, plays no role.

## 2. Aspects as Parts

There is perhaps nobody who has emphasized the realist dimension of Gadamer's hermeneutics more directly and forcefully than Brice Wachterhauser. He notes, perceptively, that there is a widespread tendency "to assume that 'hermeneutics' points to essentially one position (such as the one with which Rorty identifies himself, for example) and then to insist that Gadamer must conform to this picture because he is, after all, a preeminent hermeneutical philosopher" (Wachterhauser 2002: 54). To counter this tendency, Wachterhauser calls us to draw our understanding of Gadamer not from our pre-existing notions about what 'hermeneutics' must be, but from a careful reading of what Gadamer actually says in his extensive *oeuvre*. When we do this, Wachterhauser contends, we discover that "although Gadamer says that we always understand the world in a language that is our own . . . what we understand is not simply our own world,

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7. I develop this point in relation to Davidson's notion of 'scheme' elsewhere. See Lynch (2018).



but the world, the one world we all have in common." Stated bluntly, what we find is that "Gadamer is an uncompromising realist" (Wachterhauser 2002: 66).<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to Taylor and other proponents of the schematistic reading, Wachterhauser recognizes that Gadamer's realism is incompatible with the Kantian idea of an ineffable thing-in-itself standing over against our linguistically structured takes on the world. He notes that while "hermeneutical thinkers like Rorty seem to be, broadly speaking, Kantian in their basic assumption about the position of mind in the world," Gadamer has been convinced by Hegel's arguments against the phenomena/noumena distinction. In fact, Gadamer takes these arguments to have a more wide-ranging import. Wachterhauser (1994: 152–53) explains,

Gadamer's position can best be approached on the assumption that he has generalized the lesson of the incoherence of a phenomenon-noumenon dualism to all dualisms which draw a principled distinction between some reality-for-us and some unknowable reality-in-itself. . . . [S]uch dualisms always collapse. Apropos Gadamer's position this implies that Gadamer rejects a strict dualism between our linguistically mediated knowledge-claims and an alinguistic reality.

Gadamer thus rejects any form of scheme/X dualism. Language is not a 'scheme' that stands between us and a thing-in-itself; it is not a barrier or "shroud" that obstructs our access to the truth (Wachterhauser 2002: 66). Rather "Gadamer's position [is] that we know the things themselves (*die Sache selbst*) in and through history rather than without or despite history" (Wachterhauser 1994: 150).

Borrowing a page from McDowell (and ultimately, again from Hegel) Wachterhauser notes that the key to understanding Gadamer's hermeneutic realism is to recognize that there is a fundamental *isomorphism* between language and the world which language describes. Language does not impose an alien conceptual structure onto a meaningless reality; rather, it discloses an inherent intelligibility that is already there (Wachterhauser 1994: 73; 1999: 101). This, Wachterhauser contends, is the import of Gadamer's enigmatic claim that "being that can be understood is language" (TM 474). This should not be interpreted as saying that "everything is a text or linguistic construct" but rather that "the intelligibility of language and intelligibility of reality are, in principle, compatible. . . . The intelligibility of the world is reflected in language. What can be intelligibly said in words parallels what is intelligible in the world" (Wachterhauser 1999: 97–98).

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8. As the preceding quotation makes clear, Wachterhauser uses 'realism' in the same sense that I have been using it throughout this paper.

As Wachterhauser (1994: 162) notes, this parallelism is expressed (perhaps more clearly) in Gadamer's frequent claim that language and reality 'belong together' (TM 426).

While this belongingness thesis (as we might call it) expresses a strong form of realism, Wachterhauser recognizes that it does not entail a simple, naïve realism. Traditional realists have supposed that there exists a straightforward, one-to-one correspondence between thoughts and words on the one hand and worldly objects and facts on the other. What these too-easy views miss, Wachterhauser argues, is the essential *finitude* of human understanding. Gadamer recognizes this finitude, and that is what makes his brand of realism aspectival. To explain this, Wachterhauser draws a helpful distinction between 'strong' and 'weak' conceptions of finitude. The weak conception, which is what has been affirmed throughout most of the history of metaphysics, understands finitude in merely quantitative terms. As Wachterhauser (1999: 107) explains,

On this model, God knows *all* true propositions and has an exhaustive and infallible grasp of their various logical relationships. By contrast, we as finite knowers know only *some* true propositions and have only a very limited and fallible view of the logical interrelationships that obtain between them. Thus our knowledge and God's seem to differ only in degree and not in kind.

This is the picture of finitude that we encounter, for example, in Descartes' third meditation. We may add that it is also the sort that we encountered in the 'weak' reading of Taylor's view above. There the appeal was not to God, but to other (actual or possible) human knowers, but the upshot was the same: our knowledge is finite (i.e., aspectival) simply in the sense that there are lots of features of reality that we might know about, but don't.

Wachterhauser notes that this weak conception of finitude assumes an essentially atomistic picture of knowledge and meaning. It supposes "that we are capable in principle of understanding each proposition on its own, of judging its truth in isolation from other propositions." In contrast to this, Wachterhauser (1999: 108) contends, Gadamer follows Hegel and Heidegger in endorsing

the now familiar 'holistic' point that there are no meaningful propositions in isolation from the web of propositions . . . Every proposition, every 'bit' of language, every linguistic 'unit' has a meaning only in terms of the whole range of semantic relations of the sphere of discourse in which it is formulated.

Gadamer refers to these 'spheres of discourse' under a number of different headings, including 'horizons,' 'traditions,' and, the one Wachterhauser himself prefers, '*logoi*.'

This thoroughgoing holism, Wachterhauser continues, leads Gadamer to a more radical conception of finitude, one according to which "finitude is a permanent and irrevocable characteristic of human thought." Wachterhauser identifies two components of this. The first is that, while the meaning of any particular 'bit' of language we might employ is dependent on the wider *logos* to which it belongs, we can never have a fully articulate or explicit grasp of this *logos*. For Gadamer,

history and language function as conditions of our knowledge that out-strip our ability to identify and justify fully our dependence on them. They are known partially, but our knowledge cannot encompass all the possible ways these factors function as conditions of knowledge.

The factors which shape our conscious understanding of reality cannot themselves be rendered fully conscious. The result is that "there is a certain ineluctable inarticulacy and inescapable opacity in all our knowing" (Wachterhauser 2002: 57–58).

However, even if we *could* fully and explicitly grasp the *logoi* on which we draw, our knowledge would still be finite, because the *logoi* themselves are finite. This is a second, more fundamental component of our finitude. Wachterhauser (1999: 113) explains,

To say that we know reality *through* the *logoi* is to say that we never know it as a whole, all at once, immediately and exhaustively. Our finite knowledge is not like this at all. We know only 'parts' or aspects of the world; we only know it discursively, mediated by a variety of rich, unwieldy, and historically conditioned spheres of discourse. Thus our view of reality is relative to these *logoi* and never a definitive or timeless perspective on the real.

As Wachterhauser makes clear here, the finitude of *logoi* can be understood in contrast to the infinitude of reality considered as a 'whole.' As such a whole, reality is infinite in the qualitative sense that it is not limited or conditioned by anything else. It has no outside. It is a 'totality' in the Hegelian sense. (Thus it deserves to be capitalized: the Whole.) None of this is true of *logoi*. No single sphere of discourse, tradition, or vocabulary can exhaust the Whole of reality; each illuminates only a part of it. *Logoi* are thus always conditioned—by history, by other *logoi*, and, ultimately, by the Whole itself.

The asymmetry between the finitude of *logoi* and the infinity of the Whole means that ‘finitude’ in the strong, Gadamerian sense is not just a synonym for ignorance. It leaves its mark even on the things that we do know and understand. To return to the earlier example, though I can truly understand a dog, I cannot understand it in the way God does. Because holism is true, both God and I understand the dog by situating it within a wider context. The dog’s relationships to the other things in this context are what give it its meaning, its intelligibility. For God this context is the unconditioned Whole of reality, and God thus understands the dog completely and absolutely. Obviously, none of this is in the cards for me. I can understand the dog only by situating it within one or another of the various *logoi* with which I am familiar. Since the *logoi* are not the Whole, they enable only a conditioned, partial, incomplete grasp of the dog. However, since these *logoi* are also themselves parts of the Whole, they correspondingly illuminate genuine parts—aspects—of the dog. *Logoi* “disclose some range of phenomena as intelligible and meaningful in real but limited ways” (Wachterhauser 1999: 110). Gadamer, therefore, is not only an ‘uncompromising realist,’ he is an uncompromising *aspectivalist*, as well.

Wachterhauser’s holism is a marked improvement over the schematization view. It rightly emphasizes the central role that the belongingness thesis plays in Gadamer’s thought, and it is, in general, far more faithful to the actual language and argument of Gadamer’s texts. Despite all that, however, I do not think that Wachterhauser ultimately succeeds in reconciling aspectivalism with realism, and I do not think he gets Gadamer’s view quite right.

The interpretative problem with Wachterhauser’s account will be easier to see once we have identified the philosophical problem it faces, so let’s begin there. The central tension is most easily spied in Wachterhauser’s claim that “Gadamer shows himself someone who (like Hegel) thinks that the truth is the whole but (unlike Hegel) thinks that the whole is never arrived at” (1994: 170). Though Wachterhauser does not draw the inference, these two ideas obviously entail a third: that *the truth* is never arrived at. That, of course, is bad news for realism.

What comes to light here is a tension between the aspectival dimension of Wachterhauser’s account and the realist dimension. The latter, as we have seen, is secured by the belongingness thesis—the idea that there is an essential isomorphism between language and reality. This isomorphism partially consists in the fact that both words and beings are contextual. Both depend in some way on a wider context to which they belong—words for what they mean, beings for what they *are*. The aspectival dimension of Wachterhauser’s view, however, introduces a fundamental *dismorphism* lurking behind this similarity, because it posits that words and beings depend on fundamentally different contexts. The meaning of a word depends on the *logos* to which it belongs; the being of a being,

however, depends on the Whole of reality of which it is a part. These two contexts are not, and cannot be, the same, since the former is a proper part of the latter. This entails that our words do not, and cannot, reveal beings *as they are*.

To help clarify the problem here, indulge me in an attempt at a fable: A literary critic is spending his sabbatical sailing far out in the Pacific. To pass the time, he has brought a substantial library with him, including a copy of *Moby Dick* which, to his great embarrassment, he has never read. A storm arises, the boat capsizes, and he and his books are spilled into the ocean. He washes up on an island with only the clothes on his back and a few Jane Austin novels that survived the ordeal in his (surprisingly waterproof) briefcase. After a few days, the critic finds his copy of *Moby Dick* washed up on the shore—but, alas, it is soaked through and the ink has bled. Only a single sentence remains legible. Not to be deterred, he resolves that if he cannot read the whole book, he will at least understand this one sentence. Our critic, however, knows that he cannot understand the sentence all on its own; it must find a place within a wider context if it is to have a determinate meaning. After thinking for a while, he hatches on a plan. He tears the line from *Moby Dick* and judiciously places it, in what seems to him the very best spot, in his copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. There he reads and interprets it.

What are we to say about this bizarre hermeneutic technique? Not, I think, that it must fail to yield a coherent meaning. The critic might well find that he is able to make sense of the sentence in the context of Austin's novel. He might even find that it there expresses something profound and illuminating. Nevertheless, however insightful it might be, the meaning he assigns to the sentence through this procedure will not be the right one. It will not be *its* meaning. *Qua* sentence from *Moby Dick*, its meaning depends on a specific context—the one provided by the rest of Melville's novel. Since that context is unavailable to the critic, so too is the sentence's real meaning.

Wachterhauser's account implies that we are doing something very much like the critic whenever we use language. The thing we aim to understand has a context that is proper to it: the Whole. It is *this* context that fixes what it is. When we use language to try to understand the thing, however, we situate it in a different context from its proper one. Instead of the Whole, we place it in the context of some particular *logos*. This context might make the thing appear meaningful, but since the context is the wrong one, what is thereby revealed will not be what it *is*. Language will yield understanding, but only in the form of *mis*understanding.

Like the schematization view, therefore, Wachterhauser ultimately fails to reconcile the realist dimension of his account with the aspectival one. In light of this tension, it's not surprising to find that, despite his insistence that Gadamer is not a Kantian, Wachterhauser backslides when it comes time to explain the aspectival side of Gadamer's thought. While realist Wachterhauser assures us

that “dualisms which draw a principled distinction between some reality-for-us and some unknowable reality in itself” are “incoherent” and “always collapse,” aspectival Wachterhauser admits that for Gadamer “what we know is in a certain sense a distinctively human reality, a reality ‘for us.’ Reality in itself, understood as what Hegel calls ‘the whole,’ we can never know” (1999: 113). Whereas before we were told that Gadamer follows Hegel in thinking that “the Kantian distinction between phenomenon and noumenon cannot be maintained” (1994: 152), now we learn that “if noumenal reality is defined as ‘the whole,’ as it is by Hegel, Gadamer would agree with Kant against Hegel that such a grasp of reality is beyond us” (1999: 113).<sup>9</sup>

We can view the tension in Wachterhauser’s position as arising from the conjunction of three claims that he attributes to Gadamer: (1) that language and being are isomorphic, (2) that language is finite, and (3) that being is infinite (i.e., that it constitutes a Whole). What I have tried to show is that what is finite cannot be isomorphic with what is infinite. If that is the case, then 1–3 cannot all be true.

Of course, the problem we have noted with Wachterhauser’s account does not necessarily mean that it is mistaken *qua* interpretation of Gadamer. It could be that his reading simply mirrors a tension that is present in Gadamer’s own view. I do not think that is the case, however. The textual evidence Wachterhauser provides does, to my mind, put it beyond question that Gadamer affirms (1) and (2). The support for (3), however, is much weaker. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that Gadamer actively denies this claim—not least of which is his clear, if enigmatic, affirmation of the “fundamental finitude of being” (TM 458). I will try to unpack what this means later in the paper. For now, I want to focus on two key passages that Wachterhauser cites in favor of his view.

The first such passage is as follows:

There is no possible consciousness—we have repeatedly emphasized this, and it is the basis of the historicity of understanding—there is no possible consciousness, however infinite, in which any traditionary

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9. To be fair, the seemingly contradictory statements in this paragraph are taken from two different texts, the former of which predates the latter by five years. Perhaps Wachterhauser changed his mind in the interim; he is certainly entitled to do that. However, that doesn’t seem to be the case. The realist moments of the later text (*Beyond Being*) are not noticeably different from his earlier view. The idea that language and reality ‘belong together’ and are ‘parallel’ is still there (1999: 103), as is the insistence on the ‘inherent intelligibility’ of reality (34). In short, if Wachterhauser did change his mind about Gadamer’s view, he neglected to tell us about it. More to the point, he neglected to explain how realism, which he earlier assured us requires abandoning any form of phenomenon/noumenon dualism, can be squared with the new, decidedly Kantian form of aspectivalism he describes.



'subject matter' would appear in the light of eternity. Every appropriation of tradition is historically different, which does not mean that each one represents only an imperfect [*getrübt*<sup>10</sup>] understanding of it. Rather, each is the experience of an "aspect" of the thing itself. (TM 473)

Wachterhauser glosses this passage with the claim, cited above, that

What we know is in a certain sense a distinctively human reality, a reality 'for us.' Reality in itself, understood as what Hegel calls 'the whole,' we can never know. . . . If noumenal reality is defined as 'the whole,' as it is by Hegel, Gadamer would agree with Kant against Hegel that such a grasp of reality is beyond us.

It seems to me, however, that this interpretation runs entirely counter to the point Gadamer is making. Wachterhauser reads it as a point about the limits of *human* understanding; the lesson to be drawn is that 'reality in itself,' 'noumenal reality,' 'the whole,' lie beyond our merely human cognitive reach. But that is not what Gadamer says. His claim is not simply that there is no human consciousness that can view things *sub specie aeternitatis*, but that there is no *possible* consciousness—not even an 'infinite' one—that could do this. His point is not that the view from nowhere is inaccessible to us, but that no such view does, or even could, exist. Thus Gadamer is not claiming that what we experience is a 'distinctively human reality,' but precisely the opposite, that there is nothing 'distinctively human' about the aspectival reality we encounter. It's not that finitude characterizes the way we human beings happen to experience the world, but that finitude is a necessary feature of *any* possible way of experiencing it. There is no other, non-aspectival take on reality to which our aspectival one might unfavorably compare.

In this passage, therefore, Gadamer is not siding with Kant over against Hegel as Wachterhauser claims. Rather, he is distancing himself from *both* Kant and Hegel in favor of a more radical philosophy of finitude. Both Kant and Hegel conceive of what is ultimately real as the correlate of an infinite, eternal perspective. Kant's noumenal is what appears to God's intellectual intuition; Hegel's Whole is what is known by Absolute *Geist*. So in declaring that an eternal perspective is impossible, Gadamer is dispatching with the ideas of the noumenal and of the Whole, as well. To repeat, the point is not that the noumenal or the Whole are unknowable by human beings, but that there are no such things for us to know in the first place.

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10. Wachterhauser alters Weinsheimer and Marshall's translation here from 'imperfect' to 'distorted.' The most literal translation would be something like 'cloudy.'

Gadamer reiterates this point elsewhere. For example, we have already noted that he asserts that the aspects of reality that language reveals to us “are not relative in the sense that one could oppose them to the ‘world in itself,’ as if the right view from some possible position outside the human, linguistic world could discover it in its being-in-itself.” The person who does attempt to “oppose ‘being-in-itself’ to these ‘aspects,’” Gadamer continues, “must think either theologically—in which case the ‘being-in-itself’ is not for him but only for God—or he will think like Lucifer, like one who wants to prove his own divinity by the fact that the whole world has to obey him” (TM 447–48). The former, ‘theological’ view is precisely the one that Wachterhauser attributes to Gadamer. But Gadamer makes it clear that he considers *both* of these to be bad options.<sup>11</sup>

In a second passage to which Wachterhauser refers, Gadamer expresses his debt to Kant. In the foreword to the second edition of *Truth and Method*, he writes,

This fundamental methodical approach [the one operative in *Truth and Method*] avoids implying any metaphysical conclusions. In subsequent publications, especially in my research reports “Hermeneutics and Historicism” and “The Phenomenological Movement,” I have recorded my acceptance of Kant’s conclusions in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: I regard statements that proceed by wholly dialectical means from the finite to the infinite, from human experience to what exists in itself, from the temporal to the eternal, as doing no more than setting limits, and am convinced that philosophy can derive no actual knowledge from them. (TM xxxvi)

Wachterhauser (1999: 112) reads this passage as Gadamer voicing his agreement with Kant that “an unmediated view of reality is at best a regulative ideal that we can no sooner dispense with . . . than we can achieve.” In other words, he reads it as an affirmation (albeit a qualified one) of the phenomena/noumena distinction.

Unlike the previous passage, Wachterhauser’s interpretation of this one is not at odds with the language of the passage itself. However, while the passage does admit of the reading Wachterhauser gives it, it by no means demands it. The specific reference Gadamer is making here is to the Antinomies, in which Kant argues that when Reason tries to move from the conditioned to the unconditioned, or vice-versa, it comes to grief. Kant himself (1998: 511–14) takes this observation to constitute an argument for the phenomena/noumena distinction, since he contends that it is only by drawing this distinction that the paradoxes can be resolved. We need not suppose, however, that Gadamer follows Kant in

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11. The idea that we must replace a ‘theological’ understanding of being and truth with a finite, linguistic one is a common theme in Gadamer’s work (see TM 456–57; 1976a: 74–75; 2006: 46).

this second step. Gadamer could agree that the Antinomies disclose a real limit inherent in reason, but draw a different moral from this than the one Kant draws. Here is one possibility: rather than thinking that the Antinomies arise from the failure to systematically distinguish the conditioned ('appearances') from the unconditioned ('things-in-themselves'), one could conclude that the problem lies with the idea of the unconditioned itself. Rather than simply concluding that the unconditioned cannot be given in experience; one could conclude that there is ultimately no sense to be made of the idea of 'the unconditioned' in the first place.

This, I want to suggest, is the conclusion that Gadamer does draw. One reason for thinking so is that it sheds light on why it might be that Gadamer, in the passage discussed above, declares the idea of a view from nowhere to be 'impossible.' If idea of the unconditioned makes no sense, then *a fortiori* neither does the idea of an unconditioned intellect. A second reason is that it seems to fit well with what Gadamer says in the 'research reports' (or, at least, in one of them<sup>12</sup>) to which he refers in the passage at hand. In "The Phenomenological Movement" he writes,

It seems to me that it is essential for taking finitude seriously as the basis of every experience of Being that such experience renounce all dialectical supplementation. To be sure, it is "obvious" that finitude is a privative determination of thought and as such presupposes its opposite, transcendence, or history or (in another way) nature. Who will deny that? I contend, however, that we have learned once and for all from Kant that such "obvious" ways of thought can mediate no possible knowledge to us finite beings. Dependence on possible experience and demonstration by means of it remains the alpha and omega of all responsible thought.

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12. It is less than clear which part of "Hermeneutics and Historicism" Gadamer is alluding to in the passage above. That text contains only two brief references to Kant, and neither seems well described as an instance of Gadamer "recording [his] acceptance of Kant's conclusions in the *Critique of Pure Reason*." Nevertheless, of the two references to Kant in that essay, the second is more likely the one Gadamer is thinking of. The context there is a discussion of the "transcendental historicism" that can be found in Husserl and, purportedly, early Heidegger. Gadamer notes that it is easy to object to this view if one takes up the perspective of "theological metaphysics," because this perspective brings with it the idea of a "being-in-itself" that "appears to an infinite spirit [*Geist*]" (TM 527/GWII 412). However, Gadamer contends, this sort of critique is rooted in a "Christian account of creation" that many thinkers (such as Karl Löwith) are rightly unwilling to take on board. In a roundabout way, then, this passage does affirm the Kantian conclusion that we should not make direct appeals to the notion of 'being-in-itself.' Regardless, the passage offers little help in deciding the interpretive question currently at hand. There is certainly nothing in here to support Wachterhauser's claim that for Gadamer the notion being-in-itself is a "regulative ideal" that we cannot "dispense with," but there is nothing that directly contradicts that claim, either.

But the basis of such demonstration is universal and, if one can so express it, infinite in a finite way. All our ways of thinking are dependent on the universality of language. (Gadamer 1976c: 172)

Kant, in Gadamer's view, is right to insist that all our thinking remain rooted in what is actually experienced. This is required for thought to be 'responsible.' But this means that certain theoretical moves that seem 'obviously' justified from the perspective of speculative reason, but which have no basis in experience—like the idea that finitude can only be understood derivatively, on the basis of a prior conception of infinity—must be 'renounced.' The problem with such ideas is not so much that they are *false* as that they lead nowhere; they 'mediate no possible knowledge' to us. The reason, it seems to me, is that they yield no concepts that we can ultimately make sense of. All of our concepts begin in experience, and our experience is always finite. And since (as Wachterhauser correctly emphasizes) the difference between finitude and infinity is qualitative, not merely quantitative, this means that we cannot move, through a progressive series of conceptual or imaginative steps, from the finite thing we experience to the concept of an infinite version of it. We cannot, for instance, start with our experience of material things, then gradually strip away all the marks of their finitude until we arrive at a coherent idea of Infinite Substance. Or, more to the point, we cannot start with the finite, situated perspectives on the world that we occupy and then gradually remove all the finitude until we get to the idea of an Absolute Perspective. Such ideas might initially seem to make sense, but they ultimately do not. When we push on them, they fall apart. The reason is that finitude is not, as the metaphysical tradition has supposed, a merely accidental feature of what we experience (substances, perspectives, etc.), but an *essential* one. That is why, as Gadamer says, learning from Kant on this point is 'essential to taking finitude seriously.'

If this is right, then Gadamer's response to the Antinomies is not, as Wachterhauser suggests, to posit as a 'regulative ideal' the idea of an 'unmediated view of reality' that lies beyond language. Rather, it is to locate the 'infinity' that reason seeks in language itself—which, as 'universal', is 'infinite in a finite way.' Despite its essential finitude, language is also, in another sense, 'infinite.' It is infinite precisely because there is 'no possible consciousness' beyond language, because it is not bounded by a non-linguistic 'outside.' As Gadamer states elsewhere, "verbal experience of the world is 'absolute.' It transcends all the relative ways being is posited because it embraces all being-in-itself" (TM 450). If this is right, then it opens a way beyond both Kant and Hegel. The challenge, of course, is to make sense of how the idea that language is 'infinite' in this sense can be reconciled with its essential finitude. It's to that task that I'll now turn.

### 3. The Finitude of Being

Here's where we find ourselves. Realism, of the sort that concerns us here, requires that there be an essential "belongingness," "correspondence,"<sup>13</sup> or isomorphism between language and reality. This isomorphism entails that the idea of a 'noumenal' world or inaccessible 'thing-in-itself' can have no place in our thinking. There can be no necessary gap between the way language presents reality to us and the way reality is. Language, in this sense, is 'absolute.' At the same time, however, aspectivalism requires that language be finite. It must be the case that language never gives the last word on any subject, that it never reveals more than one among many aspects of the thing. This has the look of a paradox.

The solution to the paradox that I have been gesturing toward is this: that *being itself* is finite in just the way that language is. If that is the case, then we can affirm both that language is finite and that it is isomorphic with being. There is reason to think that this is the Gadamer's own solution, too. We have already noted his reference to "the fundamental finitude of being, which is wholly verbal in character" and his dictum that "being that can be understood is language." To this we may add his claim that language determines not only the "hermeneutic act" but also the "hermeneutic object" (TM 389), as well as his assertion that the distinction "between a being and its presentations of itself [in language] . . . is a distinction that is not really a distinction at all" (TM 475). However, it's one thing to cite these claims, quite another to give a coherent account of what they are trying to say. This section is an attempt at the latter. In the first part of it, I will try to spell out what I take the finitude of language to consist in. In the second I will consider how this finitude might be thought to also characterize being itself.

#### 3.1. Occasionality

At the heart of Gadamer's notion of finitude is his frequent claim that language, along with the meaning it discloses and the understanding it enables, has the character of an *event* (see TM xxiii, 290, 419, 463, 470–71). By this Gadamer means more than just the obvious and uncontroversial point that uses of language always happen at particular times and places. Beyond this, his claim is that the situation in which language is used plays an ineliminable role in shaping its *content*. In other words, what I say something to be cannot be fully separated from the particular occasion on which I say it to be that. As Gadamer puts it, "a person

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13. See Gadamer (1976a: 74).

who speaks—who, that is to say, uses the general meanings of words—is so oriented toward the particularity of what he is perceiving that everything he says acquires a share in the particularity of the circumstances he is considering” (TM 428–29). In this respect, understanding and language are essentially *occasional*. Gadamer explains,

The occasionality [*Okkasionalität*] of all speaking . . . plays an important role in establishing the meaning of what is said. By occasionality I mean dependency on the situation in which an expression is used. Hermeneutical analysis is able to show that such dependency on the situation is not itself situational, like the so-called occasional expressions (for instance, ‘here’ or ‘this’) that obviously possess no fixed content in their semantical character, but rather are applicable like empty forms and in which, as is the case with empty forms, changing content can be inserted. Hermeneutical analysis is able to show, rather, that such relativity to situation constitutes the very essence of speaking. (Gadamer 1976d: 88, translation modified)

A sentence is ‘occasional,’ in the sense Gadamer intends here, when its meaning is apt to change from one occasion of its use to another. Nearly everyone acknowledges that some sentences are occasional in this sense. For example, it is uncontroversial that ‘My dog has fleas’ is occasional, because the referent of ‘my dog’ will change depending on who the speaker is. Gadamer claims here, however, that the phenomenon is more ubiquitous than philosophers have tended to suppose. It does not merely characterize a few, exceptional sentences; it ‘constitutes the very essence of speaking.’

This is a radical and, at least initially, counter-intuitive claim. We might begin to understand its import by noting that, on Gadamer’s view, occasionality is not limited to obvious cases like possessives (‘my’) and demonstratives (‘here’ and ‘this’). It is also present in a host of forms we tend not to notice. Unfortunately, Gadamer provides no concrete examples to illustrate the non-obvious ways in which language can be occasional. However, in recent years Charles Travis—who inherits the idea of occasionality from Wittgenstein, rather than Gadamer—has provided scores of them. Here are just a couple:

Pia’s Japanese maple is full of russet leaves. Believing that green is the colour of leaves, she paints them. Returning, she reports, ‘That’s better. The leaves are green now.’ She speaks truth. A botanist friend then phones, seeking green leaves for a study of green-leaf chemistry. ‘The leaves (on my tree) are green,’ Pia says. ‘You can have those.’ But now Pia speaks falsehood. (Travis 2008: 111)



Suppose that a refrigerator is devoid of milk except for a puddle of milk at the bottom of it. Now consider two possible speakings, by Odile, of the words, 'There's milk in the refrigerator.' For the first, Hugo is seated at the breakfast table, reading the paper. And from time to time looking dejectedly (but meaningfully) at his cup of black coffee, which he is idly stirring with a spoon. Odile volunteers, 'There's milk in the refrigerator.' For the second, Hugo has been given the task of cleaning the refrigerator. He has just changed out of his house-cleaning garb, and is settling with satisfaction into his armchair, book and beverage in hand. Odile opens the refrigerator, looks in, closes it and sternly utters the above words. (Travis 1989: 18)

As these examples nicely illustrate, occasionality is rooted in something deeper than the convenience and concision that indexicals provide. It stems from the fact that language-use is never an isolated phenomenon but always part of a larger, ongoing social activity. These activities take different forms for different types of utterances. Promises, apologies, blessings, and requests all have their characteristic settings in which their utterance makes sense. In the case of statements, Gadamer contends that the background activity is always one of answering some *question* that matters to us—like the question of whether certain leaves will work for a chemical study, or whether one's partner has adequately completed his chores. These questions structure the occasion from which statements draw their meaning. As Gadamer (1976d: 88–89) writes, "No statement simply has an unambiguous meaning based on its linguistic and logical construction as such, but, on the contrary, each is motivated. A question is behind each statement which first gives it its meaning."

In the passage cited above, Gadamer's claim is not just that occasionality is more common than we thought, but that it is an *essential* feature of language. This entails, first, that it is universal. *Every* sentence, Gadamer thinks, is occasional; none is capable of expressing a determinate meaning all on its own, independently of any particular situation in which it might be used. Since truth depends on meaning, this entails that "there can be no statement that is true *per se*" (Gadamer 1994: 41, translation modified).<sup>14</sup> Statements may, of course, be true (or false), but only when they are properly related to some particular occasion or situation. None achieves truth-aptness all on its own.

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14. Wachterhauser's translation renders *Aussage* as 'proposition.' I think 'statement' is better, for two reasons. First, it brings it in line with Weinsheimer and Marshall's translation of the term in *Truth and Method*, which is quoted below. Second, 'proposition' is ambiguous in a way that 'statement' is not. 'Proposition' can mean simply a declarative sentence, but it can also refer—as it typically does in contemporary semantics—to an ideal representational object that is expressed by a sentence. Gadamer does not think that there are any such things as 'propositions' in this latter sense.

Secondly, and relatedly, the claim that occasionality is an essential feature of language entails that it is *ineliminable*—not just in fact, but in principle. We cannot, for example, devise a kind of chart that would map pairs of sentences and occasions onto meanings. We cannot tame occasionality by capturing its operations in a system of occasion-insensitive rules of the form: when sentence S is uttered in response to question Q, it will have meaning M. One reason for this, as Gadamer explains, is that there is no occasion-insensitive way of specifying *which* question a given statement is answering. As he explains, “even the question is not a simple first that we can shift to at will. For every question is itself an answer. . . . Every question is motivated. Even its meaning is never totally encountered within it” (1994: 42). Just as the meaning of a statement depends on the question to which it is an answer, so too the meaning of a question depends on the wider conversational and practical situation in which it is posed. A second reason is that there is no occasion-insensitive way to specify *which* meaning a sentence expressed on a given occasion. Consider the first of Travis’s examples above. We might clarify what is going on in the second of Pia’s utterances by saying something like: in this situation, the expression ‘is green’ means ‘is *naturally* green.’ This clarification might prove useful in avoiding misunderstandings that arise as she talks to her botanist friend. But such clarifications do not eliminate occasionality from the picture; they only relocate it. The clarifying expression will be no less occasional than the one it clarifies. Consider ‘is naturally green.’ Would it be true to say this of a tree whose leaves are naturally green, but whose trunk and branches are naturally brown? Of a chameleon that is green at the moment, but, naturally, can change to red in the next? Of some algae that is naturally chartreuse? Just as before, the answer is: on some occasions, yes, on others, no. Of course, we might try to identify distinct meanings expressed in each of these occasions, but if Gadamer is right that language is essentially occasional, then the result will be the same. The sentences that express those meanings will be occasional in their turn.

It is difficult to find a sentence that cannot, with a little creativity, be revealed to be occasional, and this difficulty provides some initial evidence in support of Gadamer’s claim that occasionality is an essential feature of language. But of course no mere consideration of examples, no matter how many, could establish this. To adequately argue for this thesis would require a lengthy and complicated discussion, but thankfully no such task is required for present purposes. My aim here is simply to identify what Gadamer’s view is, not to show that that view is right. For that, I need only show *that* Gadamer thinks occasionality is essential to language and to spell out what that means.

We can sum up the meaning of Gadamer’s thesis in a slogan: occasionality goes *all the way down*. At no point in the analysis of language do we arrive at

something that carries its meaning within itself. At no point does the analysis bottom out into something capable of expressing a determinate meaning all on its own, independently of a context. As Gadamer puts it,

Every word, as the event of a moment, carries with it the unsaid, to which it is related by responding and summoning. The occasionality of human speech is not a casual imperfection of its expressive power; it is, rather, the logical expression of the living virtuality of speech that brings a totality of meaning into play, without being able to express it totally. (TM 458)

*Every* word draws its meaning from an 'unsaid' background, and none is able to express it totally. Thus wherever there is language—which for Gadamer means: wherever there is thought, meaning, or representation, since these are essentially linguistic on his view—there is occasionality. It cannot be overcome through any amount of conceptual analysis or semantic formalization.

The claim that language, and so understanding, is inescapably occasional points to a more radical conception of 'finitude' at work in Gadamer's thought than his interpreters have tended to notice. Citing a point of agreement with his teacher, Gadamer (1976c: 125) writes that

Heidegger was no longer concerned with conceiving of the essence of finitude as the limit at which our desire to be infinite founders. He sought instead to understand finitude positively as the real fundamental constitution of Dasein. Finitude means temporality and thus the 'essence' of Dasein is its historicity.

Occasionality constitutes just such a 'positive' conception of finitude. It is a type of finitude that does not merely consist in the absence of some unreachable infinity, but in the presence of temporality and historicity. To understand occasionally is to understand *in* time and history, in the Heideggerian sense of 'in' that implies being bound-up or involved with something (see Heidegger 1962: §12). This conception of finitude, I want to suggest, provides the interpretive lens through which we should understand Gadamer's notion of 'aspect.' But before defending that claim; a little more needs to be said.

### 3.2. *Presentation*

As the idea that 'being that can be understood is language' suggests, for Gadamer the radical finitude of language has ontological implications. As he

puts it, “the phenomenon of language and understanding proves to be a universal model of being and knowledge in general” (TM 489). The key step in the move from a merely epistemological or semantic account of finitude to an ontological one is recognizing what Gadamer calls the ‘speculative unity’ of language and being, the idea that there is no ontological distinction to be drawn between the being of a thing and the way it presents itself in language. He explains,

The speculative mode of being of language has a universal ontological significance. To be sure, what comes into language is something different from the spoken word itself. But the word is a word only because of what comes into language in it. Its own physical being exists only in order to disappear into what is said. Likewise, that which comes into language is not something that is pregiven before language; rather, the word gives it its own determinateness. (TM 475)

Language, on this view, does not simply reflect a ‘pregiven’ order of being; it actively “constitutes” (TM 284) that which comes to presentation in it.

It is not until the penultimate section of *Truth and Method* that Gadamer explicitly discusses this ‘speculative mode of being’ and declares it to be a universal characteristic of understanding, but the basic idea recurs throughout the text. Most notably, it appears in his earlier discussion of art under the heading of ‘aesthetic non-differentiation,’ the idea that the way something is presented in works of art ‘belongs to the being’ of that which is presented. This occurs at two levels; it characterizes the relationship of a worldly phenomenon to an artwork that depicts it, and it characterizes the relationship of a work of (performance) art to particular performances of it. The latter case is particularly illustrative of the general idea. Consider Bach’s *Italian Concerto*. Whatever else we might say of it, this much seems clear: as a work of music, it is an essentially *audible* thing. It is something that can, in principle, be *heard*. For this reason, we cannot identify the concerto with any idea or intention in Bach’s mind, nor with the written score. Those are at best blueprints for bringing the concerto into existence, not the concerto itself. The latter exists only when it “resounds,” only when it is performed (TM 116). It is equally certain, however, that no two performances of the *Italian Concerto* will be exactly the same. Different performances will be played on different instruments, at a different tempo, improvised and accented in different ways, and heard by a different audience. Each performance brings the work into being in its own way, one that is geared to the particular occasion on which the performance occurs. Further, while some performances may be better than others, there is no one performance that carries any inherent priority. There is no more reason to

identify the concerto uniquely with its first performance than with the second or 1,264th. The concerto, then, exists as a determinate, audible thing (which is to say: exists at all) only in and through a variety of different, occasion-sensitive performances.<sup>15</sup>

In affirming the 'speculative unity' of language and being, Gadamer is claiming is that what is true of concertos is true of being in general. Just as concertos exist only in and through their various performances, being exists only in and through the various, occasion-sensitive events of understanding in which it presents itself. Being, in other words, is no less occasional than the language that discloses it. To illustrate, let's return to Travis's 'green' example. If *greenness* is what the word 'green' discloses (and if it's not that, what could it be?), then there is no occasion-independent fact of the matter about what it is for something to be green. The being of greenness is not, as Gadamer says, 'pregiven' in that way. For, as Travis's examples show, things that count as green on some occasions (like Pia's leaves) do not count as green on others. What it is for something to be green—and so, whether a given thing is green or not—depends on the occasion of our asking about it.<sup>16</sup>

It is in terms of this ontological occasionality, I submit, that we should interpret Gadamer's notion of an aspect. What 'green' expressed on the first occasion on which Pia used it is one aspect of greenness; what it expressed on the second occasion is another. In general, we may say that an aspect of a being is a way it presents itself in a particular, occasional event of understanding. The relationship between an aspect and what it is an aspect of, then, is not an instance of the schematization-schematized relationship, nor of the part-whole relationship, but of the presentation-presented relationship, understood in the ontologized way we have been tracing. Aspects are to the things they are aspects of what particular concerts are to the musical works they perform.

This account of aspects differs from the schematization view in claiming that aspects, in their entirety, belong to the being of that of which they are aspects. An aspect is not the result of throwing a subjective cloak or filter (a 'scheme') over an objective entity (an 'X'). Just as there is no inaudible thing, 'the real concerto', that stands behind each of the particular performances, so too there is no unnameable 'X' standing behind the linguistically-structured presentations of things.

This account of aspects differs from Wachterhauser's holism in that it denies that aspects add up to a Whole. There is, for example, no way of synthesizing all the various aspects of greenness into a single concept or predicate. This is

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15. Gadamer also identifies this structure in recurrent festivals and discusses it at length. See TM 122–24, Gadamer (1986: 41–42).

16. Travis (2008: 121) draws this ontological conclusion himself.

not just impossible for us, but impossible in principle, and it is easy to see why. A conception of greenness that included both of the aspects that Pia's words (on the two different occasions) expressed would have to be one which either (a) both does and does not apply to her leaves (in which case it would be self-contradictory) or (b) neither does nor does not apply to them (in which case it is hopelessly indeterminate).

To be clear, denying that aspects add up to a Whole does not entail eschewing mereological concepts altogether. Gadamer can, and does, appeal to the part-whole relationship, most centrally in his affirmation of the traditional hermeneutic maxim that one must 'interpret the part in light of the whole.' According to the presentational interpretation, however, the sense of 'whole' at work here is that of a *unity*, not a totality. Something is a whole in this sense because it is complete or finished, not because it is comprehensive or absolute. To interpret a performance of the *Italian Concerto*, for example, you must understand the parts—the particular notes and phrases—in terms of a larger whole. But that whole is not one that consists of all possible performances of the concerto (whatever that would mean), still less is it the Whole of reality; it is the whole of the performance itself, the whole that you will experience if you attend the concert and listen attentively from beginning to end. What is crucial is that, unlike totalities, wholes-as-unities are given *in* our finite, aspectual experience. Thus we can acknowledge them without having to countenance a noumenal reality forever beyond our grasp.

These differences can be traced back, at least in part, to the fact that the presentational account I have sketched rejects a fundamental assumption that Taylor and Wachterhauser share: that being is to be equated with *objectivity*. They assume, in other words, that what a thing *really* is must be completely mind-independent. Taylor's conception of reality as an X that lies behind every schematization quite clearly implies this. Wachterhauser voices the assumption more explicitly, stating that for Gadamer,

The 'things themselves' are primarily real essences, or intelligible structures discoverable in history and language and not constructed through history or language. Thus, such essences have an independence from a *particular* time and place which enables them to inhere in many times and places, perhaps even across all times and places. (Wachterhauser 1994: 150)

Gadamer's affirmation of the speculative unity of language and being, however, belies this reading. It asserts quite clearly that the 'intelligible structures' of reality *are*, in some sense, 'constructed' or 'constituted' through language and history. As he says in the passage quoted above, 'that which comes into language is



not something that is pregiven before language; rather, the word gives it its own determinateness.<sup>17</sup>

### 3.3. An Objection

At this point, however, it might seem that the presentational view falls prey the same difficulty noted with the other interpretations we have discussed: namely, that it can preserve aspectivalism only at the expense of realism. After all, doesn't the claim that reality is constructed through language imply some form of subjectivism? And isn't subjectivism inconsistent with realism? This line of thought, I suspect, is the reason why Taylor and Wachterhauser attribute to Gadamer the objectivist (mis-)interpretations they do. Gadamer is clearly a realist, after all, and this seems to require that he acknowledge, somewhere in his view, the existence of a fully mind-independent world—even if certain passages seem to suggest otherwise.

This line of thought rests on the assumption that that which is not objective must be subjective, and vice-versa. At the heart of Gadamer's notion of 'speculative unity,' however, is the claim that this dichotomy is a false one. Neither language itself, nor the things that come to presentation in it, fall on either side of it. Language and being are characterized neither by subjectivity nor by objectivity, but by what Gadamer calls 'factualness' [*Sachlichkeit*] (TM 445). The key to grasping this concept is to recognize that there are two different senses in which a truth or a fact can be said to be 'independent' of human understanding. In one of these senses, to say that a truth is 'independent' is to say that it reflects a way things are regardless of whether we believe they are that way or not. In the second sense, to say that a truth is independent is to say that it is cast in terms of concepts whose content can be specified without reference to human interests and practices. What is 'factual,' in Gadamer's sense, is independent in the first of these senses, but not the second. As factual, language allows us to recognize the "independent otherness" of reality, and so "presupposes a real distance between

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17. Wachterhauser attempts to accommodate passages like these with the idea that "words do not create the intelligibility of the world, but they do more than simply mirror it in a representation. Words make the world more intelligible and accessible than it would be without words" (Wachterhauser 2002: 67). The idea seems to be that, for example, the existence of the English word 'dog' adds to the being of dogs by making it the case that the being of dogs is intelligible to English-speakers. This strikes me as utterly unsatisfying. It is like saying that adding a window to an art gallery improves the artworks inside, because it makes them visible to those walking by on the street. In other words, on Wachterhauser's view, language plays no role in shaping *what* is understood, it only makes it possible *that* it is understood. I fail to see how this amounts to anything more than a 'simple mirroring.' Gadamer's claim that words 'give things their determinateness' is clearly making a stronger claim than this.

the speaker and the thing” (TM 445). At the same time, however, the factuality of language is not to be equated with the sort of ‘objectivity’ [*Objectivität*], often thought to characterize natural science (TM 445), which consists in employing a special set of terms that uniquely carves nature at its joints, a vocabulary that is uniquely forced on us by the nature of being itself and has no essential relation to human interests. On Gadamer’s account no such vocabulary exists. As he puts it, “the language that things have—whatever kinds of things they may be—is not the *logos ousias*, and it is not fulfilled in the self-contemplation of an infinite intellect; it is the language that our finite, historical nature apprehends when we learn to speak” (TM 476).

To illustrate, consider *being green* again. As we have seen, Gadamer would say that this property is occasional and therefore, in a specific sense, constituted by language. But this does not imply the absurd idea that we can make things change colors with our minds, or that things necessarily are whatever color we say them to be. What depends on the occasion is *what it would be* for an object to be green, not whether any particular object *is* that way.<sup>18</sup> For this reason, it is still perfectly possible for us to speak falsely about things, for them to fail to be the way our words say that they are—as was the case with the second of Pia’s utterances.

Further, on the interpretation I am recommending even what does depend on the occasion of an utterance depends precisely on the *occasion*—not on the subjectivity or consciousness of the speaker. If ‘green,’ on the occasion of Pia’s second utterance, means something like ‘is naturally green,’ that is not because Pia wants it to mean that. Her intentions are irrelevant. The meaning of ‘green’ is dictated by the occasion—it is a function of *what would make sense* given the question under discussion. To be sure, this is not something objective, since ‘what makes sense’ is itself a function of the human institutions, habits, and projects at play. But neither is it ‘subjective.’ What makes sense in the situation is not up to Pia or her botanist friend. They could not have made *being green* amount to something different in that situation if they wanted to.

#### 4. Conclusion

I have tried to accomplish two things in this paper. First, I have attempted to show, through a close examination of Gadamer’s texts, that he affirms the

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18. Heidegger (1962: §39) makes this same point in terms of the difference between a being and its Being: “Entities *are*, quite independently of the experience by which they are disclosed, the acquaintance in which they are discovered, and the grasping in which their nature is ascertained. But Being ‘is’ only in the understanding of those entities to whose Being something like an understanding of Being belongs.”

'presentational' version of aspectival realism that I have outlined. Second, I have tried to show that, unlike the schematization and holistic views, the presentational account manages to hold realism and aspectivalism together in a consistent position. What I have not attempted, at least not to any significant degree, is to establish that the presentational view I have attributed to Gadamer is the *right* account of how understanding and reality are related. As a result, there are significant objections to the view that I have not addressed. Nevertheless, I hope to have indicated that, at the very least, Gadamer offers an intriguing and deeply *original* answer to this question, one that deserves further attention not just as a reading of Gadamer, but as a philosophical view in its own right.

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