IS PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS SELF-REFUTING?

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ABSTRACT: One of the fundamental theses of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is that all knowledge is historically conditioned. This thesis appears to be self-refuting. That is, it appears to contradict itself insofar as its assertion that every knowledge claim is historically conditioned seems to assert an absolute, unconditionally true knowledge claim. If the historicity thesis does, in fact, refute itself in this way, then that spells trouble for philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer was well aware of this, and so he attempts in several passages to respond to this charge of self-contradiction. Those passages, however, are brief and difficult to understand. They consequently have been either neglected or inadequately understood. This paper makes better sense of those passages in order to defend Gadamer's historicity thesis as coherent.

I.

Philosophical hermeneutics "takes as its task the opening up of the hermeneutical dimension in its full scope, showing its fundamental significance for our entire understanding of the world in all its forms."[1] By this Hans-Georg Gadamer means that his philosophical hermeneutics is a theory not just of textual interpretation, but of how we understand and find meaningful the world in all its richness. This is an ambitious project, and it has rightfully attracted attention from both adherents and detractors since its initial articulation in *Truth and Method*

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[1] Gadamer, "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection," 18, trans. slightly amended.

(1960). Chief among the criticisms raised against philosophical hermeneutics is the "specter" of relativism.[2] Indeed, philosophical hermeneutics seems to entail relativism in just about every sphere of human experience that it propounds to explain. In the eyes of many it reduces to subjective caprice our understanding of laws, artworks, texts, history, and even language itself.

This paper will not weigh in on these debates assessing the extent and tenability of relativism in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. The paper instead takes as its starting point a claim to which nearly all in the debate should agree, namely that Gadamer is committed to "relativism" insofar as he holds that our grasp of the truth necessarily depends on, and so is in some sense relative to, our particular historical situation. As Gadamer himself puts it: "it is not only the case that when we recognize truth we always simultaneously cover and forget truth, rather it is the case that we are of necessity caught within the limits of our hermeneutical situation when

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[2] The term "specter" is taken from the title of the volume dedicated to the topic: Schmidt, *The Specter of Relativism*. Worries about relativism are raised by many. See, for example: Hoy, *The Critical Circle: Literature, History and Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 68–72; Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method*; Grondin, "Hermeneutics and Relativism"; Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*; Weberman, "A New Defense of Gadamer's Hermeneutics"; McDowell, "Gadamer and Davidson on Understanding and Relativism"; Wachterhauser, "Getting It Right: Relativism, Realism and Truth"; Echeverria, "Gadamer's Hermeneutics and the Question of Relativism"; Di Cesare, *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*; Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*. Only Weinsheimer, Grondin, and Di Cesare address the worry that Gadamer's relativism is self-refuting, and so only their views will be discussed at some length in this paper.

we inquire into truth."[3] Whatever else Gadamer might mean here, at the very least he is claiming that our understanding something to be true depends on our hermeneutical situation, and that situation for him is inescapably historical. This historicity thesis is central to his philosophical hermeneutics, and on account of that thesis alone the theory can be considered relativist.[4]

Like other relativist claims, Gadamer's historicity thesis is subject to self-refutation arguments. Self-refutation arguments aim to show that a claim or argument somehow contradicts

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[3] Gadamer, "What Is Truth?," 40.

[4] Brice Wachterhauser is accordingly quite right to say that "'relativism' or 'interpretation' is simply our intractable condition as knowers," and to attribute the view to Gadamer. See "Getting It Right: Relativism, Realism and Truth," 53. This is not to conflate relativism and interpretation. Interpretation is an act of understanding, while relativism, we might say, is a theory that all acts of understanding, or all knowledge claims resulting therefrom, are in some sense relative to the persons performing those acts. The two notions are nevertheless related for Gadamer insofar as his hermeneutic theory of interpretation is relativist in a certain sense: it contends that interpretive acts of understanding are always context-dependent. Maria Baghramian and Annalisa Coliva call Gadamer's form of relativism "alethic." It refers to the relativism of truth claims. They cite another passage from Gadamer as evidence for it: "Reason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms – i.e., it is not its own master but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates," quoted from *Relativism*, 55. The Gadamer quote is from *Truth and Method*, 288. Heidegger, to whom Gadamer is likely indebted for this view, expresses the alethic relativism they share in explicit terms: "In accordance with the essential kind of being appropriate to Da-sein, all truth is relative to [*relativ auf*] the being of Da-sein," quoted from *Being and Time*, 208.

itself and is therefore self-refuting. Gadamer's thesis appears to contradict itself insofar as its assertion that every knowledge claim is historically conditioned seems to assert an absolute, unconditionally true knowledge claim. Whether or not the thesis is, indeed, self-refuting is a question that does not seem to have exercised many – perhaps because readers have been more troubled by other specters of relativism in Gadamer's thought. The question is still worth asking, though, since the historicity thesis is fundamental to philosophical hermeneutics.

Gadamer himself was well-aware that his historicity thesis might be regarded as self-refuting, and in several passages he responds to this charge. Unfortunately, as we will see, his responses are rather brief and difficult to understand, and as a result they have been either neglected or inadequately understood.[5] But, given the fundamentality of his historicity thesis, we should nevertheless attempt to get clearer on how Gadamer addresses this charge of self-refutation. Only then can we justifiably decide whether philosophical hermeneutics deserves outright acceptance or rejection.

II.

The difficulties in understanding Gadamer's response to the charge of self-refutation become apparent in the following passage from *Truth and Method*:

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[5] For a recent argument that these responses by Gadamer are "naïve and unconvincing," see: Forster, "Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Critical Appraisal." If nothing else, the present paper aims to demonstrate that Gadamer's responses, although less clear than they should be, reflect a position that is hardly naïve.

Even if, as people who know about history, we are fundamentally aware that all human thought about the world is historically conditioned, and thus are aware that our own thought is conditioned too, we still have not assumed an unconditional standpoint. In particular it is no objection to affirming that we are thus fundamentally conditioned to say that this affirmation is intended to be absolutely and unconditionally true, and therefore cannot be applied to itself without contradiction. The consciousness of being conditioned does not supersede our conditionedness. It is one of the prejudices of reflective philosophy that it understands as a relation of propositions [*Sätzen*] that which is not at all on the same logical level. Thus, the reflective argument is out of place here. For we are not dealing with relationships between judgments to be kept free from contradictions, but with relations of human life [*Lebensverhältnisse*].[6]

Here Gadamer repeats the thesis that all human knowing is historically conditioned; there is no perspective we can take, and no act of knowing from that perspective, which is not historically conditioned. He then acknowledges that this affirmation of the conditionedness of all understanding seems itself to be an absolute, unconditional affirmation. Hence the charge of self-contradiction.

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[6] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 464–65, trans. slightly amended. Original German from *Wahrheit und Methode*, 452.

Gadamer's response to this charge is perplexing. The response goes roughly like this: there is no self-contradiction because our historical conditionedness does not entail transcending or "superseding" that very conditionedness. The force of this false charge depends upon mistakenly seeing the historicity thesis as committed to two propositions that are "on the same logical level" and contradictory.[7] But the thesis apparently does not involve a commitment to contradictory propositions, but only to "relations of human life" which are, presumably, not contradictory. This all invites a number of questions: What does it mean for propositions to be on "the same logical level"? What is "reflective philosophy"? Why is it a prejudice of reflective philosophy to fail to recognize when propositions do not lie on the same logical level? What exactly are "relations of human life"? And how do such conditions preclude Gadamer from holding a position that is self-contradictory?

Further questions arise when we consider a footnote at the end of the passage quoted above. In that footnote, Gadamer offers the following elaboration to his response to the charge of self-contradiction:

> Karl-Otto Apel, "Der philosophische Wahrheitsbegriff einer inhaltlich orientierten Sprachwissenschaft," *Festschrift* for Weisgerber, pp. 25f. (repr. in Apel, *Transformationen der Philosophie* [2 vols.; Frankfurt, 1973], 1, 106–37), shows correctly that what humans say about themselves is not to be understood as an

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[7] On an alternative reading the passage, the problem is that the relation of propositions lies on a different logical level than the relations of human life. But, as we will see, this reading is ruled out by another passage in which Gadamer is more precise.

objectively fixing assertion about a particular being [*gegenständlich fixierende Behauptung eines Soseins*]. Hence it is meaningless to refute such statements [*Aussagen*] by showing their logical circularity or contradictoriness.[8]

In this footnote Gadamer suggests that his claim about the historical conditionedness of human knowing is, like other things humans say about themselves, not an "objectively fixing assertion."[9] What does he mean by this? Gadamer cites Karl-Otto Apel as providing an answer. Unfortunately, in the Apel essay Gadamer cites, there is no mention whatsoever about this matter. It seems that Gadamer incorrectly cited Apel. To make matters more confused, Apel only ever seems to discuss Gadamer's historicity thesis in order to criticize it. For example, in the essay "Regulative Ideas or Truth Happening?" Apel takes issue with the very passage from *Truth and Method* quoted above. We need to look elsewhere for help in understanding what Gadamer means.

There seems to be only a few scholars – chief among whom are Jean Grondin, Donatella Di Cesare, and Joel Weinsheimer – who have attempted to give an account of Gadamer's puzzling response to the charge of self-contradiction. Their accounts, however, are lacking in a few respects. First, their explanations of Gadamer's response do not satisfactorily answer all our questions related to what Gadamer means by the different logical levels and why there is no self-

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[8] *Truth and Method*, 511 n.85, trans. amended; *Wahrheit und Methode*, 452 n.85.

[9] It is unclear what is meant by "objectively fixing assertion," but this footnote does suggest that for Gadamer what is allegedly contradictory are declarative statements or propositions. These senses of *Aussage* have to be kept distinct from the "eminent" sense in which Gadamer also uses the term. For this distinction, see Gadamer, "On the Truth of the Word."

contradiction.[10] Second, the explanations do not fully capture the motivation behind these charges of self-contradiction. Shoring up both deficits will bring into clearer view Gadamer's historicity thesis and why, on his view, it is not self-contradictory.

In *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, Grondin contends that Gadamer outright denies the charge of self-contradiction. There is no contradiction in Gadamer's position because, according to Grondin, the position "is content to name, to talk of – in our own terms and times – the *condition* in the midst of which is deployed the experience of truth for human beings."[11] According to Grondin, Gadamer not only denies that there is any contradiction, but he wants us to see that this charge of self-contradiction is motivated by a problematic pursuit of certitude. This pursuit of epistemic certainty motivates a turn to the tools of logic, the "instruments of reflexion," in order to refute any claims about the historicity of understanding. Such efforts fail to understand Gadamer's claim and see how it could be true. As Grondin puts it: "Succumbing to its quest for security, the refuge of reflexion does not see or does not wish to see what historicity means."[12]

This explanation has some truth to it, but it is not entirely satisfying. It is difficult to understand why, exactly, Grondin does not think that Gadamer's position entails self-

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[10] Consider, for example, the gloss offered by Paul Fairfield ("Rationality, Knowledge, and Relativism," 185): "A statement can contradict another only if the two are "on the same level' in this sense or if they belong to the same language game." What does it mean to belong to the same language game? And what evidence do we have that Gadamer means the levels to refer to different language games?

[11] Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, 114.

[12] Grondin, 114.

contradiction. How does being "content to talk" of the historical condition in which we experience truth not involve self-contradiction? And how does it relate to Gadamer's appeal to the relations of human life rather than propositions? Moreover, we should wonder whether Grondin has correctly identified what Gadamer takes to be the philosophical motivation behind the charge of self-contradiction. Why, after all, must the worry about self-contradiction be motivated by the desire for certainty? Suppose the person worrying about self-contradiction is agnostic about the nature of understanding and truth. Is it not possible for such a person to worry that Gadamer's position contradicts itself? And is it not possible for them to be committed to some principle of non-contradiction without thereby being committed to the pursuit of epistemic certainty? It seems that the most Gadamer can plausibly say is that the desire for epistemic certainty may, but need not, motivate the charge of self-contradiction.

The explanation offered by Di Cesare in her *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait* leaves us with similar outstanding questions. Like Grondin, Di Cesare contends that Gadamer's position regarding the historicity of understanding is not self-contradictory. On her telling, the hermeneutic position does not contradict itself because "it simply limits itself to speaking of finitude with the finite tenses and words in which the experience of truth occurs for people."[13] But what is meant by speaking with "finite tenses and words"? How does speaking in such a manner allow Gadamer to avoid self-contradiction? How does this manner of speaking relate to what Gadamer says about logical levels and relations of propositions? Further questions arise when we consider Di Cesare's account of what, according to Gadamer, motivates the charges of self-contradiction. According to Di Cesare, these charges are motivated by a desire not for truths that are certain, but rather for

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[13] Di Cesare, *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*, 103.

truths that are "absolute." An absolute truth is one that "has been freed from every condition that would condition it."[14] But this purported motivation seems unlikely for the same reason that made the motivation identified by Grondin seem unlikely. Must someone really have a robust conception of truth – as apodictic or absolute – in order to worry that a claim is self-contradictory?

In *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, Weinsheimer offers an alternative account of Gadamer's response to the charge of self-contradiction that is more appealing in certain respects, less so in others. Weinsheimer explains that the "logical levels" to which Gadamer refers are similar to the first- and second-order propositions in Bertrand Russel's theory of types: first-order propositions are about the world, whereas higher-order propositions are about lower-order propositions. Russell distinguishes these different levels of proposition in order to prevent self-contradictions in his set theory. Gadamer, by contrast, supposedly distinguishes logical levels in order to show that refutations demonstrating genuine self-contradiction are not possible. As Weinsheimer reads him, then, Gadamer denies that he commits self-contradiction because there is no such thing as genuine self-contradiction. Genuine self-contradiction is allegedly rendered impossible by the limits of self-consciousness: "A perfect, exhaustive self-refutation would be only possible if self-consciousness knows itself as objectively as its objects."[15] This is presumably because in order to be self-consciously aware of a self-contradicting proposition, self-consciousness needs to be completely self-aware; and because self-consciousness never possesses complete self-awareness, it cannot be aware of its own self-contradictions. But this train of thought is dubious, since it seems quite possible for us to be aware of ourselves being caught in self-contradictions. Shortly we will

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[14] Di Cesare, 102–3.

[15] Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method*, 49.

offer phenomenological descriptions of how this is possible. For now, though, we should wonder: does Gadamer really deny the possibility of genuine self-contradiction? And does he really think that the charges of self-contradiction against him depend on epistemic ideals of complete self-knowledge or absolute truth?

All three scholars argue that Gadamer responds to charges of self-contradiction by challenging some sort of presupposed absolute conception of truth. That, however, would be a weak response, and we should be weary of attributing it to Gadamer. We can see why the response is weak by considering two prominent sorts of self-contradiction. There is "formal self-contradiction," according to which the form of a proposition is such that the proposition contradicts itself. The proposition that the number 2 is even and not even, at least when taken literally, has a logical structure such that it necessarily contradicts itself. Not all contradictory propositions are contradictory in this way. Others, for example, exhibit what Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas, drawing upon J.L. Austin's speech act theory, call "performative contradiction." Habermas characterizes a performative self-contradiction as occurring "when a constative speech act $k(p)$ rests on noncontingent presuppositions whose propositional content contradicts the asserted proposition p."[16] A constative speech act is an assertion of a proposition as true. A constative speech act yields a performative self-contradiction when the speech act cannot assert p without presupposing something that entails $\sim p$.[17] For example, a speaker cannot assert that they do not

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[16] Habermas, *Moral Conciousness and Communicative Action*, 80.

[17] Here we will set aside the distinction as to whether the speech act is intended or actually performed.

exist without presupposing that they exist, which contradicts the proposition asserted.[18] These two types of self-contradiction are not intended to be exhaustive, but only two very likely sorts of self-contradiction to be charged against Gadamer. Regardless of which sort Gadamer is, in fact, charged with, there seems little reason to suspect that the motivation for that charge lies in some underlying conception of truth as apodictic or absolute. Worries about formal or performative self-contradiction only presuppose, if anything, a bivalent conception of truth. That is to say, worries about self-contradiction may presuppose that every proposition only has one of two possible truth values: true or false. But someone can be committed to a bivalent conception of truth without insisting that such truths be certain or absolute in the sense that Grondin, Di Cesare, and Weinsheimer all have in mind.

III.

We can get clearer on Gadamer's understanding of self-contradiction and his response to charges of it by considering first a passage from his essay "Hermeneutics and Historicism" (1965). Just before this passage, Gadamer distinguishes two sorts of historicism. There is a "naïve" historicism, which involves "the development of a historical sense in the study of tradition."[19]

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[18] This notion of performative self-contradiction seems to be what J.L Mackie has in mind with his own notion of "operational self-refutation," although limited to constative speech acts at the exclusion of others. See his "Self-Refutation - A Formal Analysis." Like Habermas, Mackie thinks that this is how Descartes secures the truth of the *cogito*.

[19] Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Historicism," 552. Original German from "Hermeneutik und Historismus," 415–16.

There is also a "refined" historicism, "which takes account of the existence of the knowing subject in his historicity."[20] Whereas a naïve historicism will appreciate how, say, the conception of justice has changed in the history of western philosophy, a refined historicism will consider how our own historical situation shapes our understanding of the developments in that tradition. Gadamer clearly prefers the refined historicism, but that need not concern us here. Having drawn this distinction, Gadamer then raises and responds to the charge of self-contradiction often made against these historicisms:

> Although this is unquestionably correct, so is the conclusion that the historical phenomenon of historicism, just as it has had its hour, could also one day come to an end. This is quite certain, not because historicism would otherwise "contradict itself," but because it takes itself seriously. Thus we cannot argue that a historicism that maintains the historical conditionedness of all knowledge "for all eternity" is basically self-contradictory. This kind of self-contradiction is a special problem. Here also we must ask whether the two propositions [*Sätze*] – "all knowledge is historically conditioned" and "this piece of knowledge is true unconditionally" – are on the same level, so that they could contradict each other.[21] For the thesis is not that this proposition will always be considered true, any more than that it has always been so considered. Rather, historicism that takes itself seriously will allow

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[20] Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Historicism," 552.

[21] Here Gadamer is being a bit imprecise. What are contradictory are the propositions expressed by these two sentences.

for the fact that one day its thesis will no longer be considered true – i.e. that people will think "unhistorically." And yet not because the unconditional assertion that knowledge is conditioned is meaningless, but rather because it contains "logical" contradiction.[22]

This is another difficult passage. In very short order Gadamer attempts to demonstrate why historicisms both naïve and refined (or at least most of them) are internally consistent, and why the charge of self-contradiction is consequently unfounded. His defense their internal consistency seems to be this: Historicism is a kind theory that articulates in language the historical nature of human understanding. Historicism "has its hour" when it articulates the historicity of understanding adequate to the question for which the theory is intended as an answer. This is a feature of any theory, since the logic of question and answer guides all theorizing: the meaningfulness of any theory is always dependent on the question motivating the historically situated inquirers. A theory is therefore the result of inquirers attempting to articulate some

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[22] Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Historicism," 552 trans. slightly amended. The last sentence of the passage in German reads: "Aber ganz gewiß nicht deshalb, weil die unbedingte Behauptung der Bedingtheit aller Erkenntnis nicht sinnvoll sei, sondern >logischen< Widerspruch enthalte." Weinsheimer and Marshall translate *sondern* as "and." But this misrepresents what Gadamer says. The sentence does not mean that the thesis of historicism will one day no longer be considered true, but not because the thesis is meaningless *and* contradictory. The meaning of the sentence is rather that the thesis of historicism will not be considered true because it is "logically" contradictory, not because it is meaningless.

phenomenon under investigation in a way that addresses the question motivating their inquiry. Any theory, however, as it finds articulation, will not be adequate to all inquirers for all time. This is because the historical contexts in which inquirers find themselves, and the question that is consequently motivating them, will inevitably be different. When a theory as it first finds articulation is no longer adequate to address the questions of later inquirers, the theory "comes to an end." But this does not necessarily mean that the theory becomes false. Nor does it mean that the phenomenon theorized necessarily ceases to exist, or ceases to exist as it was theorized. It only means that the phenomenon theorized must be articulated anew, in a way adequate to the novel question of those inquiring. This also holds for theories of historicism, including Gadamer's own historicity thesis. Theses about the historicity of human understanding must inevitably be articulated anew. A historicism that "takes itself seriously" will acknowledge that it is likely to fall out of favor, however true it may be.[23]

According to Gadamer, charges of self-contradiction are often leveled by critics of historicism who think about its thesis "unhistorically." It is unclear what all is involved in thinking

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[23] A similar point is made by Wachterhauser, *Beyond Being: Gadamer's Post-Platonic Hermeneutical Ontology*, 53–54. It might be argued that this response to the charge of self-contradiction is inadequate, since it hardly makes any reference to Gadamer's own hermeneutic theory. It fails to show how Gadamer's own substantive view avoids self-contradiction. But Gadamer's argument here is that many theories of historicism, including his own, can respond to this charge of self-contradiction in the same way. That by no means implies that Gadamer thinks that all historicisms are thereby true. Indeed, Gadamer thinks that *he* has the right historicism, while others – especially historicisms of the "naïve" stripe – are not true, or at least not adequate.

"unhistorically." At the very least, such thinking treats the thesis of historicism as meaningful, but nevertheless self-contradictory. The thesis seems self-contradictory because it seems to entail two contradictory propositions: (i) "all knowledge is historically conditioned"; and (ii) "this piece of knowledge is true unconditionally."[24] Gadamer does not say as much, but this would seem to be a charge of performative self-contradiction. The unhistorical thinker is interpreting the historicist as making an unconditional assertion that "all knowledge is historically conditioned." From their so-called unhistorical perspective, the contradiction seems real. But Gadamer contends that if the thesis is interpreted properly – that is to say, from a historically-minded perspective – there is no such contradiction. From that perspective, the two propositions do not, in fact, stand on "the same level," whatever exactly that means. Here again Gadamer repeats – and in fact references the puzzling *Truth and Method* footnote in which he appeals to Apel – this distinction between different logical levels of propositions.

It is worth noting that the way Gadamer characterizes the apparent self-contradiction suggests that what is prone to generate the self-contradiction is not the universality of the thesis of historicism.[25] To hold something as unconditionally true is to hold that it is true in a way not conditioned by, and so not relative to, the historical situation of the person grasping that truth. To hold something as universally true is to hold that it is true for all objects or instances of a certain class. "Jupiter is the largest planet in our solar system" can be intended to express an unconditional truth claim, but not a universal one. Likewise "All knowledge is historically conditioned" can be intended to express a universal truth claim, but not an unconditional one. When the historicist

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[24] *Pace* Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 10–11.

[25] Thanks to [**REDACTED**] for this helpful point.

makes such a claim, that is what they intend. However, the critic who misunderstands historicism misunderstands that thesis as expressing a truth claim that is both universal *and* unconditional. The unconditionality of the thesis of historicism is what seems, in the eyes of the critic, to generate the self-contradiction.

Thus far we have a glimpse as to why Gadamer would deny accusations that philosophical hermeneutics, by virtue of its historicity thesis, is self-contradictory. But this still leaves outstanding many of our questions about Gadamer's response to the charge of self-refutation. For example, we still do not have an answer as to what it means for propositions to lie on different "logical levels" and thereby not contradict. Nor do we have an answer as to what "reflective philosophy" is and why it often fails to understand those propositions as so related.

IV.

We find the clue to addressing these outstanding questions in another passage from *Truth and Method*. The passage is part of Gadamer's account of historically effective consciousness. That account is what Gadamer himself would characterize as a refined historicism. It does not intend to show how historically effective consciousness can inquire into the historical effects of objects of tradition like artworks or laws. It intends, rather, to explain how historically effective consciousness experiences such objects of tradition, and thereby itself has an effect on history. However, all consciousness has the ability to rise above what it is immediately conscious of and reflect on its consciousness of that object. As a form of consciousness, historically effective consciousness is therefore also able to rise above its experience of objects of tradition and reflect on its own experience. Historically effective consciousness seems thereby able to reflect on and know all of history, and this resembles the infinite knowledge attained by Hegel's Absolute Spirit.

As a result, Gadamer is worried that his account of historically effective consciousness will be subject to the same critique raised by the young Hegelians against Hegel. In the passage of interest to us, Gadamer explains what he takes to be wrong with Hegel's argumentation and other such "arguments of reflective philosophy." The term "reflective philosophy" (*Reflexionsphilosophie*) is coined by Hegel in order to identify a family of problematic philosophical positions held by the likes of Jacobi, Kant, and Fichte. Gadamer uses the term more expansively to refer to these German idealist thinkers, as well as Hegel himself and neo-Kantians like Heinrich Rickert. Whatever exactly Gadamer himself means by the term, all reflective philosophy seems to use the ability of consciousness to reflect on its consciousness of an object in order to make arguments that often fail.[26] Critiques of relativism are among these bad arguments made by reflective philosophy, and Gadamer says the following about such critiques:

> However clearly one demonstrates the inner contradictions of all relativist views, it is as Heidegger has said: all these victorious arguments have something of the attempt to bowl one over. However cogent they may seem, they still miss the main point. In making use of them one is proved right, and yet they do not express any superior insight of value. That the thesis of skepticism or relativism refutes itself to the extent that it claims to be true is an irrefutable argument. But what does it achieve? The reflective argument that proves successful here rebounds against the

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[26] This seems consistent with Ralf Elm's remarks on this very point. See "Schenkung, Entzug und die Kunst schöpferischen Fragens," in *Hans-Georg Gadamer: Wahrheit und Methode*, ed. Günter Figal (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2007), 156.

arguer, for it renders the truth value of reflection suspect. It is not the reality of skepticism or of truth-dissolving relativism but the truth claim of all formal argument that is affected.

Thus the formalism of such reflective argument is of specious philosophical legitimacy. In fact it tells us nothing. We are familiar with this kind of thing from the Greek Sophists, whose inner hollowness Plato demonstrated. It was also he who saw clearly that there is no argumentatively adequate criterion by which to distinguish between truly philosophical and sophistic discourse. In particular, he shows in his *Seventh Letter* that the formal refutability of a thesis does not necessarily exclude its being true.[27]

Gadamer asserts that critiques of relativism in general, like critiques of historicism in particular, "miss the main point." Plato's *Seventh Letter* can help us see how these critiques miss the point, since in that letter Plato apparently shows how a thesis can be "formally" refutable and yet still true. How a thesis could be both refutable and true seems contrary to basic tenets of logic. Apel took Gadamer in this passage to be renouncing reason altogether: "I must confess that I can regard this plea for the acceptance of self-contradiction only as a fashionable capitulation of reason and

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[27] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 353–54 trans. slightly amended; *Wahrheit und Methode*, 350.

as the breaking-off of argumentative discourse."[28] Weinsheimer, as we saw, took Gadamer to be renouncing the existence of self-contradiction. But Gadamer is guilty of neither. To see why, we will need to turn to his essay "Dialectic and Sophism in Plato's *Seventh Letter*" (1964). Gadamer's discussion therein will demonstrate that he is not trying to abdicate the possibility of self-contradiction in particular or argumentative discourse in general.

V.

In "Dialectic and Sophism in Plato's *Seventh Letter*" Gadamer's offers an interpretation of the philosophical "digression" in the *Seventh Letter* (342a-345c) in order to clarify how Plato understands dialectic and how it is distinct from sophistry.[29] According to Gadamer, Platonic dialectic is principally concerned with finding the truth of some subject matter. To do this, dialectic employs a variety of techniques; it not only advances accounts of some subject matter by means

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[28] Apel, "Regulative Ideas or Truth Happening?: An Attempt to Answer the Question of the Conditions of the Possibility of Valid Understanding," 82. See also: Apel, "Regulative Ideas or Sense Events?: An Attempt to Determine the Logos of Hermeneutics," 165–66.

[29] Gadamer believes the *Seventh Letter* to be genuine Plato, but its authenticity has been much disputed. For a recent opposing view, see Burnyeat, "Pseudo-Philosophical Digression." This question of the letter's authenticity, however, is unimportant for our present purposes. So, too, are questions about the accuracy of Gadamer's interpretation of the letter. As will be noted, aspects of his interpretation are rather controversial. But all that matters for us is how his interpretation of the *Seventh Letter* informs his response to the charge that philosophical hermeneutics is self-refuting.

of hypothesis and division, but also examines views that oppose an account advanced. How the various techniques of dialectic hang together is a difficult question that Gadamer sidesteps. He instead focuses his discussion on a weakness of dialectic that is explored by Plato in the philosophical digression. That weakness is the inability of dialectic to compel someone else to see the truth that dialectical argument attempts to present. This weakness is exploited by sophists, and so Gadamer explains this weakness partly in order to distinguish dialectic from sophistry.

In his letter, Plato gives the example of someone trying to acquire knowledge of the circle. He identifies three means necessary for someone to acquire this knowledge: (i) the name (*onoma*); (ii) the definition (*logos*); and (iii) the image (*eidōlon*). According to Gadamer, Plato makes it clear that this attempt to acquire knowledge takes places in a communicative, pedagogical context. Someone is trying to learn about the circle from the spoken or written words of someone else.[30] In that context the name is used to refer to the circle, the intended object of knowledge. The image is used to provide a sensible appearance of the circle that the learner may reflect on. The definition is used to characterize the true being, the essence, of the circle. All three means are necessary for conveying knowledge (342a). In addition to these three, Plato also identifies a fourth means necessary for communicating knowledge, namely: "knowledge, reason, and right opinion"

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[30] This reading of the philosophical digression as an argument about the communication or imparting of knowledge is perhaps best defended by von Fritz, "Die Philosophische Stelle." The reading, however, is controversial. Even though the letter makes clear references to the communication of knowledge, those references do not exclude the possibility that the arguments of the philosophical digression do not equally apply to contexts in which learners aim to acquire knowledge on their own.

(*epistēmē kai nous alēthēs te doxa*, 342c). The relationships among these three are not entirely clear, but, according to Gadamer, they all refer to a "state of the soul when it knows."[31] A teacher must presumably be or have been in one of those states in order to communicate knowledge.[32]

Plato aims to show that all four of these necessary means for conveying knowledge possess a weakness that precludes them from guaranteeing that someone will, indeed, acquire knowledge of the intended object. Gadamer explains this weakness of the four means in the following way:

> So long as the thing should present itself in them [i.e. in the four means], they are subject to the necessity of being something for themselves. What intends to present something may not itself be what it presents. It lies in the nature of these means of knowing that in order to be able to be such means, they must have something nonessential about them. It is, so to speak, their essence to be the nonessential of what is presented. Therein, according to Plato, arises the confusion. We are time and again misled into taking the nonessential for the essential. It is something like

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[31] Gadamer, "Dialectic and Sophism in Plato's *Seventh Letter*," 112.

[32] Gadamer's interpretation of the fourth as a means is also controversial. For those who deny that the argument of the philosophical digression is exclusively about the *communication* of knowledge, his interpretation of the fourth will not do. An alternative reading is to see the cognitive states comprising the fourth as corresponding to levels of knowledge acquired by the first three means. See, for example: Andreae, "Die Philosophische Probleme," 61; Brisson, *Platon: Lettres*, 226–27. Other scholars think the Plato's conception of the fourth is simply confused. See, for example: Maddalena, *Platone: Lettere*, 289–91.

a falling away from the actual intention, i.e. from the direction of view [*Blickrichtung*] which these four means offer upon the thing itself.[33]

The means by which the object of knowledge are presented are different from the object of knowledge itself. Because these means have their own being, they are prone to present something other than the object of knowledge.[34] An image (or "likeness," Gadamer: *Erscheinung*, *anschauliches Bild*, *Beispiel*, *Figur*) can present the circle, but because the image of a circle is by nature an imperfect likeness, it can also present something non-circular. Likewise the word "circle" (*kuklos*) can present the circle, but the meaning of the word is not unambiguous. It can also mean

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[33] Gadamer, "Dialectic and Sophism in Plato's *Seventh Letter*," 112–13 trans. amended. The translation omits an entire sentence. Original German from Gadamer, "Dialektik und Sophistik im siebtenten platonischen Brief," 107.

[34] Gadamer explains the point a bit more clearly here: "They [viz. the four means] all have an intrinsic distortion-tendency, so to speak. In the process of bringing something else into (presence) they would assert themselves as whatever particular thing they are instead of fading out of view. For they all are something besides the thing they are presenting. They all have a reality of their own, a character which differentiates them from that thing. The word circle is not the circle itself, nor is the statement which defines what a circle is, nor is the circle which is drawn. My opinion regarding the circle and even my insight into that which a circle is, is not the circle itself. Plato's thesis is this: all these means assert themselves as whatever they are, and in pushing to the fore, as it were, they suppress that which is displayed in them," quoted from "Dialectic and Sophism in Plato's *Seventh Letter*," 105.

a ring, a wheel, or a disk, among other things. Such ambiguity belongs to the being of the word, and it allows the word to present something other than what a speaker intends.[35] The definition of a circle suffers from the same weakness, since even though a definitional expression can give a particular word in that expression more fixity and less ambiguity, any definitional expression is still subject to ambiguity. Lastly, even the cognitive states of knowledge, reason, and right opinion are prone to present something other than the intended object of knowledge. Plato does not explain exactly how this is so, but Gadamer argues that this is possible because in the context of an argument such states of the soul can prevent their possessor from recognizing the speaker as saying something true.[36] The knowledge, insight, or correct belief that one has can prevent them from acquiring additional knowledge. It belongs to these states of the soul to instill their possessor with confidence in their being correct, and that confidence can get in the way of acquiring new knowledge. For example, the true convictions one may have about the circle may preclude them from being persuaded that the circle cannot, in fact, be squared.[37]

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[35] See, for example, what Dionysodorus and Euthydemus do with the word *epistēmē* (Pl. *Euthyd.* 278a-b).

[36] All that Plato says is that these cognitive states comprising the fourth, like the three means of acquiring knowledge, present "the particular quality" (*to poion ti*) no less than than "the being" (*to on*) (342e2-3). What Plato means by "the particular quality" and "the being,", how the cognitive states present both, and how those impede the acquisition of knowledge, is left unspecified.

[37] One is reminded of the comment by the Eleatic Stranger: "if someone thinks he is wise, he will never learn anything of the things about which he thinks he is clever" (*Soph.* 230a).

According to Gadamer, because of this "weakness" shared by the four means of conveying knowledge, arguments employing these means can always be refuted and consequently fail to convince. When someone puts forth an argument and their argument is criticized on account of the inherent weakness of the means by which they argue, those listening might mistakenly take the arguer to be ignorant. But such criticisms show no such thing. They demonstrate not the weakness of the argument, but rather the weakness inherent in the means necessary for argument. Plato considers these criticisms, or at least many of them, to be sophistic, and their family failing is not attending to what the arguer is proving and instead exploiting the weakness intrinsic to all argumentation.

How does this all show, as Gadamer contends, that for Plato "the formal refutability of a thesis does not necessarily exclude its being true"? Plato does not explain this explicitly in the *Seventh Letter*, but we can see how it follows from his discussion about this weakness common to the different means of argumentation. For not only can these means fail to present the truth, but they themselves can even generate contradiction. The image of the circle, insofar as it is imperfectly circular, depicts something that is both circular and straight. The ambiguity of a word can convey contradictory meanings. A contranym like "oversight" means both the supervision of something as well as the failure to do so. The ambiguity of words also generates contradictions in definitions. Consider the definition of the sophist as an expert who uses words in order to make appearances of things which seem to be, but which are not (cf. *Soph.* 232a-236d). The expression "are not" is ambiguous insofar as it can mean either "are not in every respect" or "are not only in some particular respect." Taken in the former sense, the definition seems to generate a contradiction insofar as it is impossible to make an appearance of something which is not in every respect – that is, of something which is nothing whatsoever. Like images and words, knowing

states of the soul can also generate contradiction. These states can do so by leading someone to be convinced that they are correct when they are not. As a result, states of knowing make it possible for someone to hold inconsistent beliefs.

For Gadamer these examples from Plato reveal an important truth: any means of argumentation can intend something true and yet be understood as contradictory and therefore refutable. The same holds true for the assertion of a proposition. An assertion consists of a set of spoken or written words used in order to present an intended proposition. Insofar as those words have a being distinct from the proposition they are intended to present, those words can always present something other than what the speaker (or author) intended.[38] This is particularly so given that Gadamer, like Wittgenstein and others, believes that words in natural language necessarily possess a multiplicity of meanings.[39] As a result, it is always possible for a proposition to be misunderstood, and therefore fail "to compel" someone else to see what the assertion was intended

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[38] The term "object" in this paper is meant in the broadest sense, including states of affairs, ideas, and so forth.

[39] See Gadamer, "Dialectic and Sophism in Plato's *Seventh Letter*," 109. The multiplicity of meanings intrinsic to all words is due to what Gadamer calls the "occasionality" of language. Language is occasional in the sense that its meanings depend on the occasions in which it is understood. Unequivocal meaning is impossible because language has different meanings on different occasions. For more on the occasionality of language, see Lynch, "Gadamer and Analytic Philosophy."

to show.[40] This is true even for assertions which, when stated, seem to give rise to a performative self-contradiction. This is because those words can be intended by the speaker to convey something which is, in fact, true, and yet the ambiguity of those words allows for them to be understood not only differently than they were intended, but in a way that commits performative self-contradiction. This, according to Gadamer, is precisely what happens to his thesis about the historicity of understanding. That thesis is intended to show something about the nature of human knowledge, but the words by which that thesis is expressed can be misconstrued as asserting a truth about the historically conditioned nature of all human knowing that is itself not historically conditioned, and thereby a performative self-contradiction. This charge of self-contradiction, however, "is of specious philosophical legitimacy" because it does not gainsay the historicity thesis, but only the means by which that thesis is articulated and justified.

Gadamer sees this Platonic insight about the weakness of dialectic as having implications not just for understanding arguments, but for understanding in general. That is to say, this truth about dialectic is a truth Gadamer takes up and incorporates into his own hermeneutic theory. According to Gadamer, understanding a text suffers from the same weakness of dialectic because language, the medium through which a text presents its meaning, is always able to present something other than the meaning of that text. This allows for honest misunderstanding as well as sophistic misuse. In either case, the text can be misconstrued as possessing formal or performative self-contradictions. The way to avoid such misconstruals is also a lesson Plato teaches. That lesson

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[40] Gadamer, "Dialectic and Sophism in Plato's *Seventh Letter*," 114 n.34. Gadamer is referring to 343d of the *Seventh Letter*.

involves the logic of question and answer that is to guide the dialogue in which dialectic takes place:

> We understand the sense of the text only by acquiring the horizon of the question—a horizon that, as such, necessarily includes other possible answers. Thus the meaning of a sentence is relative to the question to which it is a reply, but that implies that its meaning necessarily exceeds what is said in it. As these considerations show, then, the logic of the human sciences is a logic of the question. Despite Plato we are not very ready for such a logic.[41]

Plato teaches us the logic of question and answer, but we have been slow to learn it. If we were, indeed, "ready" for this logic, we would see that what Socrates and the other Platonic interlocutors show is that the meaning of a statement always depends on the question for which it serves as a response. This holds for texts as much as for interlocutors. Just as the answer given by a participant in dialogue depends on the question posed to them, so, too, does the meaning of a text depend on the question motivating it. By reflecting on the question underlying statements in dialogues or texts, we can more reliably avoid misconstruing them, and therefore be more likely to avoid wrongly accusing those statements of self-contradiction. Indeed, as we have seen, this is the very strategy Gadamer himself employs in responding to charges of self-contradiction levied against historicism.

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[41] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 378.

It might be suggested that Gadamer could better avoid such charges of self-contradiction if he were more cautious and rephrased his thesis in a way that made clear that he was not, in fact, trying to assert some universal truth that is not historically conditioned. In his defense, Gadamer does offer this clarification in the aforementioned passage from "Hermeneutics and Historicism." Recall that in that passage Gadamer insisted that the historicity thesis is not intended as making an unconditional truth claim. But Gadamer does not offer this clarification each and every time he states or alludes to his thesis. Given the importance of the thesis for his philosophical hermeneutics, why does Gadamer not clarify his position more often? It seems that he does not because he recognizes that doing so will never guarantee that others will correctly understand what he means. Suppose he were to preface every text he wrote by saying: "every time I assert a truth, I mean that truth to be historically conditioned." This prefatory remark could itself be understood as asserting a universal truth that is not historically conditioned. So misconstrued, Gadamer would still seem guilty of performative self-contradiction. Suppose Gadamer instead prefaced his texts by saying: "every time I assert a truth, including this truth, I mean that truth to be historically conditioned." Even this remark could be construed as asserting a universal truth and consequently guilty of self-contradiction.[42] There is simply no way for Gadamer to ensure that he will not be misunderstood. Gadamer understands this, and it is why he can at times seem so casually dismissive of the charge of self-contradiction.

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[42] In this way refutations can avoid the kind of regress worries that have been raised against relativist positions. See, for example: Burnyeat, "Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's Theatetus," 194–95; Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*, 56.

VI.

According to Gadamer, reflective arguments often generate illegitimate charges of self-contradiction against relativist and skeptical positions, among others. The arguments do this by failing to recognize that the contradictory propositions allegedly entailed by some position do not, in fact, lie on "the same logical level." What might Gadamer mean by this? We can now propose an answer, although the proposal will rely primarily on Gadamer's phenomenological commitments. We need to rely on these commitments because, beyond the passages we have already considered, Gadamer seems to have written nothing else about logical contradiction.

Gadamer, like Russell and others, distinguishes logical levels by their intended propositions or objects.[43] As a phenomenologist who maintains that phenomena are made present to our understanding by means of language, Gadamer would say that the lowest level is that at which we operate when we attend to some object as it is made present to us in language. Consider, for example, the sentence "The tasty dinner is served." We operate on the lowest logical level when we attend to the object intended by that sentence, namely dinner's being tasty and served.

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[43] Gadamer speaks of propositions (*Sätzen*) in the passages under consideration in this paper, but he generally prefers not to speak in such a manner because he denies that there are, in fact, propositions whose meaning is independent of the context and language in which they are expressed. So, for example, Gadamer will say elsewhere: "Are there such pure propositions [*reinen Aussagesätze*]? When and where?" quoted from "Language and Understanding," 102 trans. slightly amended. Gadamer denies the existence of such propositions because he insists that the meaning of an utterance necessarily depends in part on the context in which it is expressed. He is accordingly what some call a "radical contextualist."

Gadamer sometimes refers to our operating on this lowest logical level as an *actus exercitus* – a scholastic term Gadamer picked up from Heidegger's lectures.[44] However, we can always reflect on that expressive act and make it the object of our understanding. This is the *actus signatus*, which is operative on a second, higher logical level. If we attend in this way to the sentence itself, we can come to understand it as an assertion, in English, consisting of five words, and so forth. It is always possible to operate on still higher logical levels by reflecting on such lower-level expressions.

Genuinely self-contradictory assertions generate contradictions on the same logical level. They do so because assertions are intended to present objects as being in some determinate way, and an assertion is genuinely self-contradictory when it intends an object with two determinations that cannot both obtain. "The number 2 is even and not even" expresses a formal contradiction, since it intends the number 2 as having two determinations – namely, being both even and not even

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[44] Gadamer characterizes the distinction as follows: "Heidegger was concerned with a scholastic contradiction and spoke of the distinction between *actus signatus* and *actus exercitus*. These scholastic concepts correspond roughly to the concepts *reflexive* and *directe* and refer, for example, to the distinction between the act of questioning itself and the possibility of concentrating on a question as a question. The transition from one to the other can be easily made," quoted from "The Marburg Theology," 33 (trans. slightly amended). For helpful discussion of this scholastic distinction and its role in Gadamer's thought, see Vessey, "Gadamer, Augustine, Aquinas, and Hermeneutic Universality," 159. A similar distinction can be found in Husserl, but Gadamer never explicitly references Husserl on this point. Thanks to Pavlos Kontos for help in drawing these connections.

– that cannot both obtain.[45] This contradictory object could be described by the contradictory statements "The number 2 is even" and "The number 2 is not even." These statements lie on the same logical level since they intend the same object.

Performative contradictions arise similarly, although their contradiction can be apparent on any logical level. For some performative contradictions, their self-contradictory character becomes apparent at the first logical level. Such contradictions are explicitly self-referential. Their self-referentiality enables them to present themselves with contradictory determinations. When I assert "I do not exist," I present myself as both existing and not existing. This contradictory object could be described by the contradictory statements "I exist" and "I do not exist." The contradictory propositions expressed by those statements lie on the first logical level. They are about the same object, namely: me. Admittedly, we may not always readily recognize such a contradiction. Students of Descartes sometimes need to reflect a bit before they see that asserting "I do not exist" is self-contradictory. But this further reflection does not itself constitute rising to a higher logical level, since the same object is still under consideration. We would only operate at the second logical level if we reflected on the assertion instead of the object it intends to present.

Other performative contradictions are not explicitly self-referential, and as a result they do not wear their contradiction on their sleeve. As self-refuting they are still self-referential, but only

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[45] Of course, insofar as the the contradiction is formal, it does not matter what exactly the object is that possesses these contradictory determinations, nor does it matter what exactly its determinations are.

implicitly so.[46] Their self-referential and self-contradictory character needs to be made explicit. We make them explicit when we rise to a higher logical level and reflect on the language in which the self-contradicting claim or argument is expressed. Such a self-refutation argument is an example of a "reflective argument," as Gadamer calls it. Reflective arguments of this sort are needed when the self-contradiction cannot be made evident simply by attending to the object presented by the claim or argument. For example, the claim "Nothing is certain" is not obviously self-contradictory. Yet, if we reflect upon the language in which that claim is made, it might become apparent that the language expresses a certain truth. Our reflections in this instance, operative at the second logical level, might make apparent to us that the claim "Nothing is certain" is claiming a truth as certain. By reflecting in this way, we attend to a different object, namely "it is certainly true that no truth is certain." That object, so presented, does possess contradictory determinations. It is a proposition that is both certain and uncertain. The claim "Nothing is certain" would therefore be self-refuting, although the self-contradiction only becomes apparent when one reflects on the language in which the claim is expressed.

Gadamer would contend that his historicity thesis fails to generate a self-contradiction on *any* logical level. The thesis is not explicitly self-referential, and so no self-contradiction is apparent on the first logical level. Indeed, when we operate at that logical level, we intend a

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[46] For this distinction between explicit and implicit self-referentiality, see: White, "Self-Refuting Propositions and Relativism," 85–86. This line between explicit and implicit self-contradictions will inevitably be somewhat fuzzy. Consider a few examples: "All statements, including this very one, are false"; "All statements like this are false"; "All statements are false"; "No statement can really be true."

coherent object, namely: human knowledge as historically conditioned. It follows that if the historicity thesis were still somehow self-contradictory, the self-contradiction would need to be made apparent by reflecting on the language in which that thesis is expressed. Such reflection would need to determine correctly that the thesis "all knowledge is historically conditioned" asserts a knowledge claim as unconditionally true. If that were correct, then our reflections at this second logical level would bring to presence an object possessing contradictory determinations, namely: the unconditional knowledge claim that all knowledge claims are conditional. The self-contradictory character of that knowledge claim could accordingly be described by contradictory statements "this knowledge claim is a historically conditioned truth" and "this knowledge claim is an unconditional truth." Given that "historically conditioned truth" and "unconditional truth" refer to contradictory determinations, the statements express contradictory propositions.

However, as has been argued, Gadamer's historicity thesis is neither unconditionally true, nor so intended by Gadamer. There is consequently no genuine self-contradiction, and self-refutation arguments against the historicity thesis are in vain. Such attempts to show that the historicity thesis is self-contradictory end up identifying propositions that not only do not contradict, they do not even lie on the same logical level. One of those propositions is, of course, the historicity thesis itself. That proposition lies on the first logical level, since it is about the historically conditioned character of human knowledge. The second of the supposedly contradictory propositions can be expressed by the statement "this piece of knowledge is true unconditionally." That proposition lies on the the second logical level, since it is about the statement by which the historicity thesis is expressed. Because the historicity thesis is not unconditionally true, no amount of reflection will bring it about that these two propositions lie on the same logical level and articulate contradictory determinations about one and the same object.

According to Gadamer, reflective arguments that raise illegitimate charges of self-contradiction are commonly made by philosophers in the German idealist tradition. These philosophers do so at least in part because they are motivated to find absolute, even indubitable truths. In this respect, Grondin, Di Cesare, and Weinsheimer are correct that charges of self-contradiction can be motivated by the pursuit of absolute truth. But this is not a necessary feature of such reflective arguments. Reflective arguments are reflective insofar as they involve reflecting on the statements rather than the phenomena intended by those statements. But the motivation to reflect on the statements themselves need not have anything to do with specific philosophical commitments. It belongs to the very being of language to be capable of presenting something other than what it is intended to present. It is therefore always possible for someone to attend to the unintended meaning of a linguistic expression, and we cannot compel them to understand the expression otherwise. The sophists often exploited this feature of language not in order to defend their philosophical commitments, but in order to wreak argumentative havoc.[47] This seems at least in part what Plato's Theaetetus has in mind when he laments that the sophist "seems to have a whole supply of roadblocks" (*Soph.* 261a; see also *Euthyd.* 295c).

If someone offers an unsound self-refutation argument, there is no way to compel them that they are wrong. Surely something can and often should be said to persuade them. But there is

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[47] "It is characteristic of this form of speech [viz. sophistry] also that it is cut off from speech's substantive intention, from letting what it refers to be seen, in such a way that it sticks to the ambiguous possibilities of what is said, possibilities that (precisely) conceal the facts of the matter and thus frustrate the genuine pursuit of a substantive shared understanding," quoted from *Plato's Dialectical Ethics*, 50–51.

no way to guarantee that they will be persuaded. This is because there is no way to compel them to stop misunderstanding the language of the claim or argument and instead and to see what that claim or argument really intends. They cannot be forced to "see it." Apel is consequently wrong to accuse Gadamer of giving up on reason and argumentation. Quite the contrary. Gadamer is trying to prevent abuses of reason that can undermine even cogent arguments.

Some philosophical positions more readily invite these illegitimate self-refutation arguments. Relativist and skeptical theses have been frequent targets, but they are not the only ones. Gadamer thinks that all accounts of human experience – accounts expressing "relations of human life" (*Lebensverhältnisse*) – are prone to such objections: "As if one could automatically give a straightforward account of experience that contained no contradictions!"[48] By this remark Gadamer does not mean that we cannot uncover philosophical truths about the nature of human experience, or at least not without generating contradiction. He means, rather, that it is difficult to articulate those truths in a way that will not be subject to charges of self-contradiction. *Lebensverhältnisse* seem to be the relations between us and the world that constitute human experience.[49] Truths about those relations are especially easy to misconstrue because, while human experience and its relations of life are essentially finite and conditioned, the language by which we express that finitude and conditionedness is easily misunderstood as meaning the very opposite. A claim like Gadamer's historicity thesis can accordingly be misunderstood as a claim expressing an

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[48] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 361.

[49] Gadamer rarely uses this term, and so it is not entirely clear what he means by it. He uses it almost exclusively when discussing the thought of Peter Graf Yorck von Wartenburg. See Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 256–58.

unconditional truth. This potential for misunderstandings cannot be completely removed. Indeed,

it is part of the human condition: whenever we articulate truths about ourselves, our words can

readily become the target of self-refutation arguments. Yet often those arguments do not impugn

the truth of the theses we defend, but only the means we have to convey them.[50]

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