

On the relationship between the concept of text in Gadamer's theory of hermeneutics and the concept of light in Einstein's theory of relativity: toward a fusion of horizons

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Abstract: By identifying the formal role of light in relativity theory with the formal role of text in Gadamer's theory of hermeneutics, the two theories are brought into relationship. Through this fusion, the privileging of "space" in physics and the privileging of "time" in hermeneutics are reciprocally interrogated as horizons of truth.

Introduction

In the Special Theory of Relativity (STR), *Light* becomes a window on the absolute, replacing the traditional notions of space and time that were integral to the classical physics heralded by Newton's *Principia Mathematica* [Bohm 1996]. Whereas in classical physics the totality of the universe acquires its universality as a consequence of being embedded in the inert theatre of empty space and time, in STR the presenting of the "universe" is partial and particular to the frame of reference in which it is presented. Although each particular reference frame in STR has its own relative space and time, the theory is not simplistically relativistic (in the philosophical sense described by Grondin, for example [1990]). The special status of light allows the synchronization of multiple, particular reference frames to shared, invariant forms, often called *events*. An event will manifest differently in different reference frames and therefore will be differently "interpreted". Yet the different interpretations of the event share in a common "meaning". This common meaning is more than a relative construction that might come from and apply to a finite set of particular reference frames. The common meaning implicates interpretations of the event in all potential frames of reference.

How is light to be understood in STR? The tradition of physics bears a prejudice towards the notion of space [Bergson 1976] that potentially obscures the import of light. This prejudice implicitly and explicitly guides an understanding of ontology. In *De Gravitatione* Newton wrote, "Space is a disposition of being *qua* being. No being exists or can exist which is not related to space in some way. God is everywhere, created minds are somewhere, and body is in the space that it occupies; and whatever is neither everywhere nor anywhere does not exist. And hence it follows that space is an effect arising from the first existence of being, because when any being is postulated, space is postulated." [cited by Huggett 2002, 112]. In STR, the traditional approach to ontology involves re-inscribing a description of the world that presents to us in a "spatialized" container or manifold called space-time. This interpretive move recaptures the objectivity of classical physics, while at the same time eliminating a creative notion of

becoming. The spatially-prejudiced conceit ends in the belief that a “physical reality” can be understood a-temporally, that it can be conceptualized from an assumed vantage point *exterior* to the space-time manifold, and that from this (universal) vantage point a complete mathematical description is possible. While various approaches to the ontology of STR, and its extension to the General Theory of Relativity, engage and refute this conceit, there remains the possibility that the conversation brought about by these approaches still fails to grasp a deeper meaning of Light as a window on the absolute.

This étude is a preliminary exploration how Gadamer’s text, *Truth and Method*, brings into question the prejudice of space for the physical sciences. The approach turns on a metaphorical identity between the relation of *language to understanding* in Gadamer’s theory of hermeneutics and the relation of *light to matter* in STR. This identity might be framed as:

Being that can be understood is language;
Being that can be materialized is light.

The exploration begins with a discussion of the nature of a written text. As the language of a text mediates the temporal rupture of an assumed “subjectivity” according to *Truth and Method*, so light might be interpreted to mediate the temporal rupture of an assumed “objectivity” in STR. Gadamer calls this mediation through temporal distance the fusion of horizons. As a consequence of interpretations of a written text that come from the fusion of horizons, *Sache*—the “subject matter” of the text—unfolds in time. However, the unity or “thingliness” of *Sache* is radically other than the “thingliness” of the object in classical physics. To the extent that the identity of light and language holds, Gadamer’s notion of *Sache* may have much to say about event-objects and objectivity in STR.

The exploration ends with a discussion the nature of dialogue in *Truth and Method*. Unable to locate within living dialogue an enduring presence like the body of a written text, I question whether Gadamer’s approach to contemporaneous understanding holds together. His privileging of time-like separation as the primary challenge to the authority of tradition seems to distort the distinct nature and functioning of space-like resonance for meaning formation. This distortion marginalizes the importance of reference for language. However, if the presenting of matter through light has formal equivalence to the presenting of understanding through language, then the process whereby light participates in an invariant *metric* may provide new insight into universality in language. Through (hermeneutical) cycles of return, two or more particular worldviews, like two or more particular frames of reference, can be synchronized by language/light to progressively disclose a fixed and bounded referent (*Sache* or event-object) that lies beyond the fusion of their individual horizons. In this process of engagement, subjects and their worldviews, as well as referents as fore-grounded objects may be different and subject to change *in-themselves*. Yet perhaps invariance is to be found in the (infinite/infinitesimal) identity-difference operator *Return*, which engages referent and inter-subjectivity at the fusion of horizons. *Return* has the form of an irreducible threefold relationship. I propose that through *Return*, the *Sache* of texts and the *Sache* of things-in-the-world both disclose truth in a formally similar and communal way. The boundary between

language and light, understanding and matter becomes blurred and the debate of realism as pitted against anti-realism loses its sting.

The fusion of horizons and singularity

In some interpretations of STR, light brings forth a relatedness that enables our world to exist or at least be described. Through light a source and receiver are brought into proximity¹, even though they may be separated by large intervals of time and space. The proximity obtains because, for light, there is no space-time interval between the sending of light from a source and its reception by a receiver. Yet light also interacts with both source and receiver. Thus, light stands *both outside and inside* any particular space-time context, bringing that particular context into relationship with other particular contexts. It might be interpreted as a dynamic at the threshold of any system of entities, continually deferring its own presence, and in so doing, granting presence to inter-related systems, structures, entities [Bohm 1996; Grandy 2001; Levinas 2002].

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer explores a similar approach for language as it occurs in a written text. The bodily form or pattern of a text—the sequence of words—can be transmitted through time unaltered. Therefore, a text has the property that it can bring the author (source) and reader (receiver) into a relationship of proximity—a relationship to the same words—despite a temporal separation that might mean, for example, that the author and reader live in different historical periods. With the author, a text is created or brought into the present of his or her situation or con-text. For the reader, a text brings the past into the present and makes itself available for interpretation, for re-con-textualization. The written text both stands *outside* of the particular contexts of author and reader and interacts *within* those contexts:

What is stated in the text must be detached from all contingent factors and grasped in its full ideality, in which alone it has validity. Thus, precisely because it entirely detaches the sense of what is said from the person saying it, the written word makes the understanding reader the arbiter of its claim to truth. The reader experiences what is addressed to him and what he understands in all its validity. What he understands is always more than an unfamiliar opinion: it is always a possible truth. This is what emerges from the permanence that writing bestows. [Gadamer 2004, 395-6].

For Gadamer all understanding is contextualized and therefore is always understanding in the particular present of the one who understands. He refuses to “spatialize” language and meaning, by assuming consciousness has access to a universal vantage point in which language and meaning are fully exteriorized or disclosed. Thus, he rejects what he calls the universal claim of the scientific method, and with this he rejects a simplistic scientific notion of an objective truth (as a universally observable state-of-affairs, for example). In the introduction to

¹ The term “proximity” is borrowed from Levinas’ *Otherwise than Being*.

Truth and Method, Gadamer writes that his investigations “are concerned to seek the experience of truth that transcends the domain of scientific method wherever that experience is to be found, and to inquire into its legitimacy” [Gadamer, xxi]. When it comes to a written text, Gadamer claims that the author, reader and text interact in a mutual relationship of openness or self-giving. The intentions of the author do not fully determine the meaning of the text that is brought into presence. Rather the text continually remains open to a process of being brought into a new presence as understanding by a reader. The intentions of the reader, as interpreter, also do not fully disclose the meaning of the text. Yet, in this irreducibly three-fold relationship, Gadamer seems to be saying that the infinity of truth obtains, *despite the finitude of author, reader and bodily form of the text*. He calls this the miracle of understanding.

In *Truth and Method*, both the author and the reader are embedded in the separate contexts of their own present moments—their “situations”. Because their understanding is always determined by the particular present context or situation, understanding in each present moment is limited by a “horizon” and can never be complete.

Every finite present has its limitations. We define the concept of “situation” by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence essential to the concept of situation is the concept of “horizon”. The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. [Gadamer 2004, 301].

Gadamer’s concept of “horizon” seems formally similar to the concept of “event horizon” in STR. In STR, each particular present (as “vantage point” or “origin”) has its own frame of reference (or “situation”) and its own event horizon which is determined by the speed of light. Within the event horizon of a particular situation, to use Gadamer’s terminology, lies the causal past that is particular to that situation. Beyond the event horizon lies an “elsewhere” that is not accessible in any causal² way to the vantage point of the present situation. The past and future of elsewhere are ambiguous or indefinite to the present of the situation. As a result, every situation is only a partial slice of “reality” and the “past” is always epistemically incomplete. In describing the limitations of a particular situation (or frame of reference) in STR, Bohm writes:

Even if we have some fairly reliable knowledge about the general laws of nature, as abstracted from past experience, observation, and experiment, it seems clear that we cannot avoid contingencies, just because we cannot know completely and with certainty what is in the absolute elsewhere. [Bohm 1996, 176].

In the absence of an external vantage point, the “past” is also ontologically incomplete—“the past that never was” to borrow Levinas’ phrasing [Levinas 2002]. The limitations of the situation, which is bounded by the event horizon, arise because *the observer is part of the universe*. In STR, it is traditional to assume that there is a universal vantage point that stands outside of space-time (i.e. outside of the so-called “universe”) and from which all situations can

² In this context, the term “causal” refers to effective causality, which is the causal focus of the Scientific Method.

be known and described by consciousness, at least potentially (this is what I am calling the prejudice of spatiality to emphasize that the assumed vantage point is *space*-like). However, Gadamer takes the position, which I claim is also consistent with STR, that it is constitutively impossible to exteriorize the observer from the observed³. “The very idea of a situation means that we are not standing outside it and hence are unable to have any objective knowledge of it” [Gadamer 2004, 301].

Instead of invoking a universal, *space*-like vantage point, Gadamer focuses attention on the “fusion of horizons” of the author and the reader, both of which are bounded. When the written text draws author and reader into a relationship of proximity, the temporal flow is ruptured. In this rupture, the text stands *between* the two horizons (centred around the “present” of the author and the “present” of the reader), participating in each situation. While the reader cannot enter into the situation of the author (because the reader cannot experience the “present” of a past situation), the text can speak to the situation of the reader. The reader experiences a tension between the present situation and the text that brings the reader into question (of self and situation), because the text brings the past into the reader’s present situation.

To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion ... a truly historical consciousness always sees its own present in such a way that it sees itself, as well as the historically other, within the right relationships ...it is constantly necessary to guard against overhastily assimilating the past to our own expectations of meaning. Only then can we listen to tradition in a way that permits it to make its own meaning heard. [Gadamer 2004, 304]

The concept of horizon veils an infinity—the finite experiencing the infinite from within—and suggests movement. “The horizon is ... something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for the person who is moving.” [Gadamer 2004, 303]. As a *dual* relationship of finite to infinite, a horizon would always imply an exterior vantage point “beyond”. Therefore, the existence of a present (event) horizon, in and of itself, does not overcome spatial prejudice. What is remarkable in Gadamer’s treatment of the fusion of horizons is that he conceives the formation of horizons through an *irreducibly three-fold relationship*. The reader stands within his own present horizon, while imaginatively projecting himself into the historical horizon of the author, and while remaining in relation to the matter of the text (*Sache*). All three are co-formed and interdependent.

... the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all of our prejudices. An important part of this testing

³ Interestingly, the claim that the observer and the observed cannot be separated is accepted for the theory of quantum mechanics, which is a theory without a traditional interpretation. This raises the question of whether the challenge in reconciling relativity theory with quantum mechanics is a direct consequence of the prejudicing of spatiality, and is fundamentally a problem of hermeneutics.

comes from encountering the past ... the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves. [Gadamer 2004, 305].

This threefold relationship is *irreducible* in the sense that it cannot be analyzed into sets of dualities and therefore does not reduce to binary or oppositional logic. Through this trope Gadamer claims that understanding comes to finite consciousness by coming into language.

The formal concept of an irreducible threefold relationship is described elsewhere in this collection of *études*. Hegel's notion⁴ of thesis, anti-thesis, synthesis is an example, in which the logic of binary opposites (space-like) is "frustrated" (time-like) by an excluded synthesis that might lead into a higher plane of determination. The notion of the branch point in complex analysis⁵ is a mathematical formulation in which any circle (space-like) of the origin of the branch cut is opened to a "higher plane" forming (in simple cases) a type of helix (whose axis is time-like). Levinas' notion of the *Third Party*⁶ is another articulation of this concept, where the *Third Party* is "the other of the *Other* who is also another to me [*the Same*]". The way in which light establishes an irreducibly three-fold relationship in STR (which does not reduce to the two-fold relatedness that characterizes the mathematical description of space and time) is also discussed elsewhere⁷. In *Truth and Method*, however, Gadamer explores a finite limit of this threefold singularity in a new and interesting way.

In reading Gadamer, it is important to remain attuned to the subtleties that come from the fact that the singularity is not reducible to binary opposition and the logic that flows therefrom. This further involves attunement to how we are thinking about finitude and the *Infinite* because we may inadvertently take finitude to mean limited *in every way* or *closed*. With Gadamer, finitude should not be taken as the *opposite* of Infinity or the *binary negation* of infinity. To be finite is to be limited. In the completeness of binary negation, to be *completely* finite would imply an image of *closure*. However, to be finite is not necessarily the same as to be *completely or totally* limited (i.e. *closed*). A limit may participate in the Infinite differently than the null image that leads to closure. Finitude may be *incomplete*. For example, the finitude of the Natural Numbers does not restrict their extension to indefinitely large values without bound, nor does it reduce to axiomatic completeness within a totalizing system. The Natural Numbers are both limited *and open*. Similarly, consciousness may be said to be finite and limited, but what is potentially masked, for some readers, by using the term "finite" to describe consciousness is the way in which an *open* interiority may exist whose limiting form rests upon a dynamic that does not equate to a null or empty image. In other words, we must remain sufficiently attuned to the possibility of engagement with another *kind* of image for "infinity" and another *kind* of image

⁴ See 16. A physicist's guide to *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*.

⁵ See 19. A thought experiment with light.

⁶ See 5. The proximity of light.

⁷ See 21. Spacetime as a formal semiotic process.

for “limit” than the closed images we may be accustomed to in mathematical theories of physics.

“What a man has to learn through suffering is not this or that particular thing, but insight into the limitations of humanity, into the absoluteness of the barrier that separates man from the divine.” [Aeschylus as paraphrased by Gadamer 2004, 351].

Sache and interiority

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer develops the notion of *Sache*—the subject matter of the text—as a bounded entity which is set over and against the concept of the object-in-itself that dominates scientific discourse. Through the interpretations of a text, the *Sache* of the text is always in the process of coming-into-language. Yet the unity of *Sache* is never fully disclosed or totalized by interpretations. The understanding of a text is never *completed*. Unlike the scientific object which is said to exist completely in-itself, *Sache* always comes into existence as understanding *for* a particular reader or interpreter. The relatedness of *Sache* to reader is constitutive because the reader must apply the *Sache* of the text within a present situation or context:

All reading involves application, so that a person reading a text is himself part of the meaning he apprehends. It belongs to the text he is reading. The line of meaning that the text manifests to him as he reads it always and necessarily breaks off in an open indeterminacy. [Gadamer 2004, 335].

Core to Gadamer’s notion of *Sache* is the concept of “play”. Play, as presentation or bringing into structure, is a form of distancing that Gadamer locates in language. The players are drawn into the playing, which is greater than any determination of self. The concept of play involves an essential indeterminacy and dynamic set over and against the passive void of spatiality that conceptually grounds the scientific method. Through the play intrinsic to language, Gadamer seems to be saying, reader and author are distanced from the text such that they creatively bring the *Sache* into understanding through a structure (or formal re-presentation) that belongs to the particular context of each. Yet this does not result in a subject-object divide. “The distance involved in a linguistic relationship to the world does not, as such, produce the objectivity that the natural sciences achieve by eliminating the subjective elements of the cognitive process.” [Gadamer 2004, 450].

Although Gadamer applies *Sache* to all aspects of language, it is in the discussion of the written text that he develops the notion most carefully. *Sache* is like an *interiority* of the written text which is open to infinite disclosure into different present situations. Although each disclosure is a different understanding, all understandings are connected through the (undisclosed) unity or integrity of *Sache*. Gadamer conceptualizes a written text like a work of art that thereby possesses a mysterious wholism:

Texts ... always express as a whole. Meaningless strokes that seem strange and incomprehensible prove suddenly intelligible in every detail when they can be interpreted as writing—so much so that even the arbitrariness of a corrupt text can be corrected if the content as a whole is understood. [Gadamer 2004, 392].

But what guarantees this integrity? Gadamer initially draws a notion of unity from a discussion of drama. He claims that the performance of a dramatic play *rests absolutely within itself*. “Certainly the play takes place in another, closed world” [Gadamer 2004, 111]. Yet this *closed image* of unity is not necessarily the case with texts. In literary theory, as Eagleton points out, there are many reasons for arguing that literary works may be “diffuse, incomplete and internally contradictory” [Eagleton 2008, 64]. He points to Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* as an example. From this point of view, unity does not come from the work *itself* independently of its relationships to the contexts of interpretation. Unity irreducibly involves the threefold relation between author, text and reader.

As unity is later applied to written text and then living dialogue, Gadamer does not carefully trace the fate of the closure he associates with drama. Yet ultimately the *openness* of language to world constitutes *Sache*: “From the relation of language to world follows its unique *Sachlichkeit*” [Gadamer 2004, 442]. The openness obtains because there is no vantage point in which language can be said to be *closed*. Over and against the notion in science of a world of objects-in-themselves, Gadamer posits a wholistic unity:

Each science, as a science, has in advance projected a field of objects such that to know them is to govern them. We find quite another situation when we consider man’s relationship to the world as a whole, as it is expressed in language. The world that appears in language and is constituted by it does not have, in the same sense, being-in-itself, and is not relative in the same sense as the object of the natural sciences. It is not being-in-itself, insofar as it is not characterized by objectivity and can never be given in experience as the comprehensive whole that it is. But as the world that it is, it is not relative to a particular language either ... every language has a direct relationship to the infinity of beings [Gadamer 2004, 449].

The difference between *open* and *closed* images of unity—which is directly related to how finitude and the *Infinite* are imagined—signifies a core insight of Gadamer’s text. What is at stake here is how we are to understand “unity” in *Truth and Method*. Within a closed image of unity, the whole reduces to a formal, *space*-like structure of inter-related parts that are ultimately reducible to timeless analytical elements related through deterministic law. The portrait of Number Theory presented by Whitehead and Russell in *Principia Mathematica* is an example of such a closed image⁸. This is not the proper category of image Gadamer is proposing to reference unity or *wholeness*. With Gadamer, relationality is open and creative. Any image of unity must involve an irreducible threefold relation between language, author and reader. In the case of a written text, the unity-in-time comes from the enduring pattern in bodily form,

⁸ See 12. On the embodiment of space and time.

the sequence of words that constitutes the written text. This *space*-like, interior pattern of relations *constrains* the freedom of interpretation to the formal structure of the text while also *opening* interpretation to creative play within the formal determination of the text. In this way, the text is partially determined and partially indeterminate and so it draws author and reader into a process of coming into understanding. A process that also involves the intentionality of author and reader, an intentionality that *seeks* unity *through* the written text.

Suppose, with this open image of unity in mind, we interpret *Truth and Method* as saying that the unity of *Sache* is an interiority that participates in openness. Might Gadamer's notion of *Sache* then be applied to STR? If light is related to matter like language is related to understanding, then the materialized event-objects of light might also be expected to contain an "interiority" that is open to the experience of world. Things experienced—the subject matter of a written text or the interiority of an "event-object"—disclose their interiority in being experienced. At the core, however, is a fundamental indeterminacy—a rupture of objectivity that is open and adaptive. Light draws the interior of an entity into a wholistic relationship to its own exterior through interaction with other entities. This relational holism is constitutive of the entity as participating in the experience of world.

Just as understanding, for Gadamer, is not a relation to a given "object", but rather to the history of its effect, so in a more general sense the interiority of all matter interacts with "material things" which carry the history of their effects. This process leads to a deepening, or condensation, of interiority into new levels of order. Through engagement and responsiveness mediated by light, entities give themselves to mutual disclosure and, in so doing, they change and are changed. No entity is ever fully disclosed. The notion of interiority, derived from *Sache*, becomes an opening for bringing into question the privileging of space in modern interpretations of STR.

If we were to apply Gadamer's notion of the fusion of horizons to STR, it might then go something like this: Light condenses into temporally enduring material forms (event-objects), which we are calling "entities" and which are analogous to written texts in Gadamer's theory. Entities, which are foregrounded by interactions with world, remain essentially contextualized and interconnected—they exhibit wave-particle duality. By virtue of its temporally enduring, yet limited form, an entity formed in the past can bring that past situation into a new present situation as a rupture of the temporal flow, just as a written text can bring the past into a new present. At the place where the event horizons of the past situation and the present situation overlap, the *interiority* of the entity formed in the past is disclosed to and engages with the present situation, projecting it into the future. This process is timebound (non-Markovian)—the interiority of an entity carries the memory of its past in such a way that the past and future cannot be absolutely divided. With this interpretation of STR, time resists the prejudice of spatiality and the ontology of objectivity. The condensing of light is a process of coming-into-word. Increasingly complex interiors disclose higher levels of temporally-preserved language-like forms in an evolutionary process. Elementary particles disclose material *identity*. Molecular replication (RNA) discloses *information* (copies are materially different, yet identical in their information). Cells disclose the capacity to manipulate information through (DNA) *code*.

Multicellular organisms disclose the capacity to manipulate the expression of code to *signal*. Animals disclose the capacity to *communicate* and to manipulate reference through *cognition*. Humans disclose the capacity to manipulate *language* and *thought*. What connects light and language is life as experience, which according to Gadamer has its fulfillment in “the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself” [Gadamer 2004, 350]. Experience is handed down and becomes part of language. “Experience teaches us to acknowledge the real” [Gadamer 2004, 351].

Beyond relativism and absolutism

The question of truth in *Truth and Method* can be seen as performative, allowing interpreters to bring into question their relation to truth and in so doing enter into the experience that is the truth-claim of the text. This raises the challenge that any discussion of what Gadamer might mean by “truth” is situational and comes into focus as over and against a prior concept of truth. The resulting duality is vulnerable to distortion—we might say what truth is not, but when it comes to making a positive claim we can only speak *about* truth.

Gadamer rejects “the universal claim of scientific method” and with this he rejects the metaphysics of a universal vantage point for Absolute Reason from which all things are objectified and to which facts, as descriptions of states-of-affairs in the world, must correspond in order to be “truthful”. In this sense, Gadamer is said to reject absolute truth [Widdershoven 1992, 1]. Yet it is important to keep in mind that it is this particular concept of *absoluteness* which is the target of his critique, rather than Truth. For Gadamer, there is a wholistic aspect to truth that refuses objective parsing into discrete objects and isolated states-of-affairs. That is to say, *truth is essentially relational*. The polar opposite of absolutism is the concept of relativism. Through the lens of relativism comes the argument that, if there are no objective facts, then everything seems to be permitted. Relative truths are contingent and heterogeneous, all truth claims are equal and *anything goes* [Widdershoven 1992]. This extreme concept of relativism is constructed over and against the concept of absolutism. According to Grondin, “... hermeneutics strives to show that the question of relativism only makes sense if one presupposes an absolutist point of view. Only one who claims an absolutist standpoint can speak of relativism” [1990, 46]. Nonetheless, Grondin argues that it is possible to ascribe a positive connotation to the notion of relativism. In this sense it is possible to read *Truth and Method* as being concerned with a wholistic aspect of truth, called *aletheia* (or disclosure), that is not readily apparent to the absolutist standpoint.

More than that a rejection of absolutism, I read *Truth and Method* as a critique (which is to say a bringing-into-question) of this conceptual opposition between absolutism-relativism. Through this critique, although truth recedes as an “object” of investigation, it remains present as disclosure. In the process, however, the absolutistic expectation for truth to be completed in the finitude of propositional truth claims shimmers into mirage. Just as that which is seen by virtue of light is not “light”, so that which is understood by virtue of truth is not “truth”. More

subtly the relativistic claim of the power of human reason to construct reality is thwarted. Truth shines forth when reason is brought up short in the face of experience.

In the absence of an absolutist vantage point and in the presence of limited human reason, where are we to locate unity and common understanding? Widdershoven [1992] brings this question into focus by comparing three forms of hermeneutics: anthropological, critical and historical. For anthropological hermeneutics, concepts only have meaning within a form of life; common understanding comes through shared forms of life. Unity or invariance is connected with the interiority of the human subject (human nature), which determines the way in which people live. Widdershoven associates this approach with Wittgenstein. “The natural history of mankind provides human thinking and acting with a certain unity. This does not mean that various patterns of thought and action, various forms of life are identical. Forms of life are culturally varying expressions of the same human life.” [Widdershoven 1992, 3-4]. For critical hermeneutics, understanding—as communicative action—occurs within the implicit background of a common life-world. Unity or invariance is connected with the exteriority of the situation for which participants seek a common definition. Habermas follows this approach. “In each speech-act the speaker raises a claim to truth, justice and sincerity. With the claim to truth the speaker contends to describe the facts as they are. The claim to justice regards the proposed adequacy of the interpersonal relation between speaker and listener. The claim to sincerity entails the speaker be genuine.” [Widdershoven 1992, 7]. The third form, called historical hermeneutics, Widdershoven associates with Gadamer.

My intention here is not to unpack Widdershoven’s schema as much as to use his categorization to introduce another conceptual opposition between interiority-exteriority. While the two extremes of anthropological and critical hermeneutics above may not do justice to Wittgenstein or Habermas (or Widdershoven), they can help us stay in sight of the “between” that Gadamer seems to be pursuing in *Truth and Method*. Through the intersubjective experience of the *Real*, subjects and their worldviews change. Neither human nature nor ways of life are invariant, according to Gadamer. Likewise, a worldview, as the exteriority to which subjects relate, is constantly changing. For historical subjective consciousness, there is no common “life-world” nor “facts as they are”.

In *Truth and Method* Gadamer seems to be saying that understanding comes from our experience of the *Real* combined with the coming-into-language of that experience. This process, which is intersubjective and temporal, he calls *Tradition*. Unity, for Gadamer, can be located in what he calls *World*. *World* can be experienced, although it cannot enter into consciousness and therefore is also essentially nameless. *World* is both one and many:

- “Thus the world is a common ground, trodden by none and recognized by all, uniting all who talk to one another” [Gadamer, p443].
- “The world is not different from the views in which the world presents itself” [Gadamer, p444].

For Gadamer, a particular language is a world-view, which he describes as an orientation towards *World*. Particular languages are incommensurate with one another because they emerge from different histories of experience. Because there is no universal vantage point, particular languages do not completely translate one into another—there is no isomorphism connecting two particular languages. Particular languages, unlike spatiality, do not possess the symmetry of translational invariance. Yet a common understanding between particular languages can obtain because each particular language interpenetrates all other languages. Each worldview “potentially contains every other one within it ... [a worldview] can understand and comprehend, from within itself, the ‘view’ of the world presented in another language” [Gadamer, 445]. “Verbal experience of the world is ‘absolute’. It transcends all the relative ways being is posited because it embraces all being-in-itself, in whatever relationships (relativities) it appears.” [Gadamer, 447]

Does this resolve the question of Truth? Perhaps not, but then I don’t think resolution is Gadamer’s intention. There are two significant challenges to Gadamer’s proposal:

- What does Gadamer mean when he says that each worldview potentially contains every other within it? What is the nature of this potentiality? If a worldview *actually* contained all other worldviews within it, would it not then be a universal vantage point? Isn’t the eschaton of Gadamer’s potentiality the very absolutism he denies? This challenge leads us more deeply into the question of language and the mystery of the Word.
- Can we legitimately introduce “world” into the discussion, given its extraordinary properties? Does Gadamer’s proposal *make sense*? This challenge leads us more deeply into the question of finitude and limits.

Gadamer’s approach to truth also contains significant weaknesses. His notion of error or misunderstanding is not well developed. As Vanhoozer points out, with Gadamer “the interpreting subject is caught up in a process that transcends his or her individual agency” [2006, 16]. The same can be said of any community of tradition. In *Truth and Method*, the rupture that comes from temporal distance plays an important role in the discernment of error because it can bring the prejudices of a present tradition into question. The harmony of co-presence (which is space-like) also plays a role, at least in written text, in the sense that a text is to be read as a coherent whole. Yet Gadamer does not elaborate on the limits and inter-relations of such time-like and space-like intervals.

Gadamer’s notion of *negativity* is also not well developed. In *Truth and Method*, negativity is located in experience:

experience ... inevitably involves many disappointments of one’s expectations and only thus is experience acquired. That experience refers chiefly to painful and disagreeable experiences does not mean that we are being especially pessimistic, but can be seen directly from its nature. Only through negative instances do we acquire new experiences, as Bacon saw. Every experience worthy of the name thwarts an

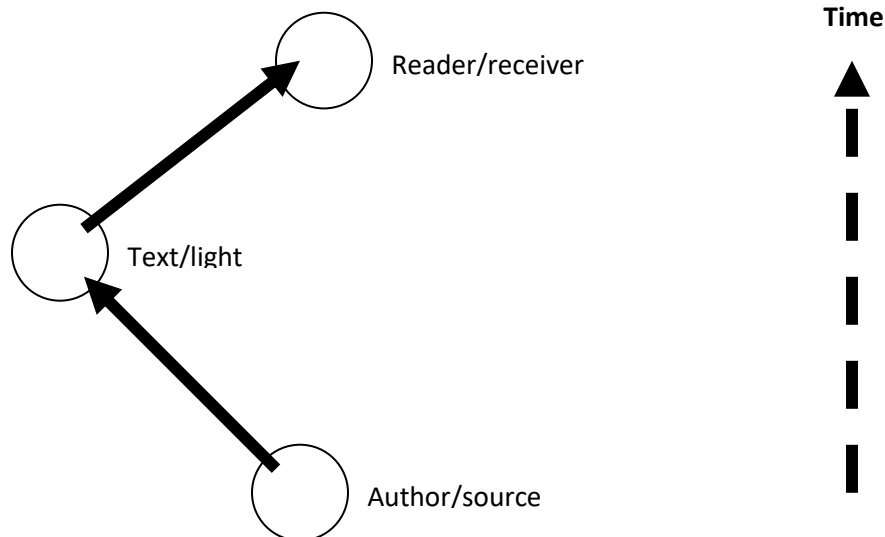
expectation. Thus the historical nature of man essentially implies a fundamental negativity that emerges in the relation between experience and insight [350].

Unlike Kristeva [1984], as a counterexample, Gadamer seems to have a naïve faith that does not question negativity, power and their relationships with error.

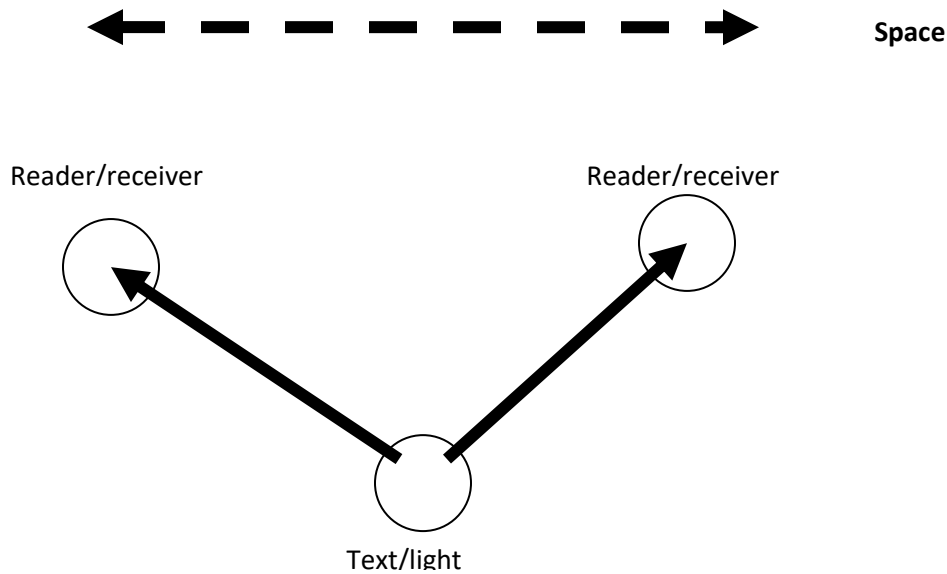
Foregrounding and resonance

My claim of understanding through *Truth and Method* is the following: language and light are the medium in which *Sache* makes itself known. *Sache* becomes a notion of thingliness that displaces the *closed* image of the *object* from classical physics. The limit of *Sache* is *otherwise* than spatial.

In *Truth and Method*, *Sache* is most carefully articulated as it applies to the written text. Text brings author and reader into an irreducible threefold relatedness that ruptures temporality as shown in the schematic below:



This relationship, which Gadamer equates with the fusion of horizons, is *time-like* and is formally the same as the relationship that obtains between source and receiver of light. But now, by referring back to STR, it becomes apparent that there is another possible form of distancing which is not taken up in *Truth and Method*. Light and language can draw two different receivers/readers into a relationship of interior “resonance” even when there is no temporally-causal path between them. This relationship, shown in the diagram below, is *space-like*:

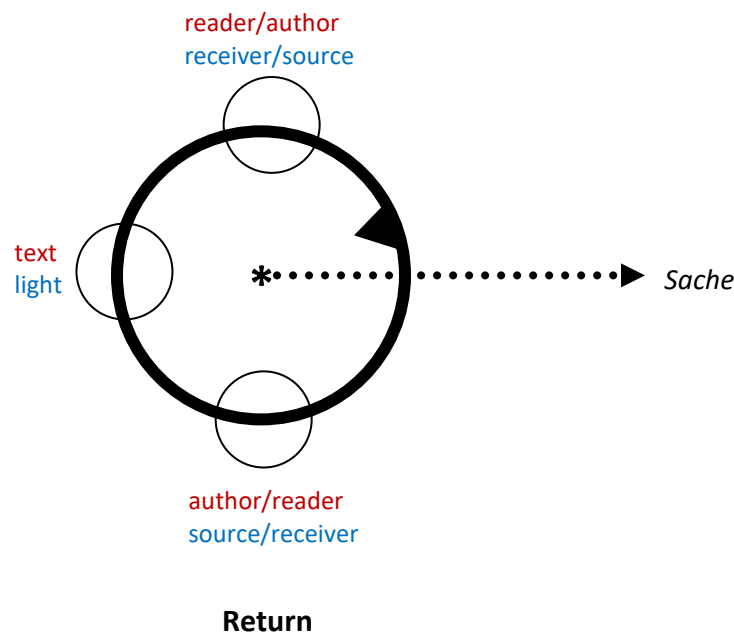


Space-like relationships are fundamental to the processes of *synchronicity*. However, Gadamer does not question synchronicity in *Truth and Method*. It is the assumption of synchrony that allows Gadamer's claims of unity for extended entities which are taken as "gestalts" presenting as whole. Through synchrony, space-like relationships resonantly foreground finite entities as *whole forms*. The written text has formal unity, for example, by way of its synchrony. In STR, on the other hand, synchronicity is brought into question and synchrony (simultaneity) is also found to be relative to the situation in which it presents. My claim is that space-like relationships (of synchrony) establish *correlation of interiority*. In the case of light, this correlation is exemplified in the quantum correlation of photon-pairs which bring spatially separated events into synchrony even though they are causally unconnected. In the case of the written text, interior correlation would manifest as an inner resonance between two interpretations of the *same text* by different readers.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer relies heavily on the way that a written text presents synchronously. The written text maintains a temporally enduring gestalt that allows author and reader to distance themselves from the text. In this respect, the approach of *Truth and Method* falls short in the discussion of living dialogue because there is no synchronically presented gestalt in dialogue. Written text is like a painting that presents its unity all-at-once (seeing); dialogue is like music in which unity, although never presented, is experienced *in time* (hearing)⁹.

⁹ The fusion of language/light would ultimately be found in the fusion of hearing/seeing.

To resolve the problem of unity in living dialogue, Gadamer appeals to “*World*”. But is this appeal successful? The term itself already suggests a prejudice towards synchronous co-presence. In order to avoid unintentional connotations I will use the term ‘*’ to designate what Gadamer might mean by *World*. According to Gadamer, * is not a concept that can enter into consciousness. Even to name * would seem to violate its proper function. As such, * is not a word among words. * is an *inscription of infinity*—a pure sign whose referent is null-infinite. Gadamer claims * brings unity. Since * is pure sign its name is non-determinate. Therefore * maintains identity across all languages and provides the common basis for understanding. It functions ubiquitously, like a differential operator. As pure sign, * is the abstraction of referencing or pointing itself [Gadamer, 413]. * is the act of pointing, the act that potentially breaks the hermeneutical circle by referencing *beyond* the horizon of language. But Gadamer states: “the sign acquires meaning as sign only in relation to the subject who takes it as sign” [Gadamer, 413]. Through *, the subject’s intentionality therefore stands over and against language. Gadamer sees this relation as the subject opening to the truth claim language makes. But doesn’t this also raise the challenge that, through refusal, the subject may also lay claim on language and in so doing stand outside of it and dominate it? I suspect that if we continue this path of deconstructing * we will be led either to a form of Derrida’s *différance* (which would unravel *Truth and Method*) or to a form of modern analysis *à la* Newton (which would crystallize STR) because * *cannot be presented through dualities*. Instead, I propose that through * we can foreground the return that comes from combining space-like and time-like intervals as shown in the figure below:



Return is increase: the same is expanded into the other through the (endless) cycles of *Return*. *Return* fore-grounds or references or actualizes *Sache* from the scintillating, bubbling, almost-differentiated-but-not-quite, sea of potential. *Return*, which is the limit of *Sache*, is a new kind of “differential operator” that is irreducibly threefold. It is the essence of the hermeneutical circle and of the creative potential to break through that circle. Because Gadamer did not question negativity, synchronicity and holism in *Truth and Method*, the importance of *Return* in allowing *Sache* to come into being was not disclosed.

Return is the stem of character.

Return is small yet different from external things.

Return leads to self-knowledge.

[I Ching, #24]

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