

Possibility of Hermeneutic Conversation and Ethics

Abstract

In this paper, I aim to defend Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics against what I call the radical hermeneutic critique, specifically the critique developed in Robert Bernasconi's article "You Don't Know What I'm Talking About': Alterity and the Hermeneutic Ideal" (1995). Key to this critique is the claim that Gadamer's account does not rise to the ethical task of embracing the alterity of the Other, but instead reduces it to a projection of one's self. The implication is therefore that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics has to be rejected on ethical grounds, as it does not appreciate but assimilates the alterity of the Other. In contrast to this radical hermeneutic critique, I argue that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics can accommodate an Other that is not assimilated but appreciated, on the condition that the unique status of a dialogue with the Other as a person is no longer neglected, as Gadamer does, but instead truly distinguished from a dialogue with the Other as a text.

KEYWORDS: *Hans-Georg Gadamer, Dialogue and Alterity, Fusion of Horizons, Robert Bernasconi, Radical Hermeneutic Critique*

Constantin-Alexander Mehmel
Continental Philosophy
University of Warwick

Introduction

My aim in this paper is to defend Hans-Georg Gadamer against what I call the *radical hermeneutic critique*¹, specifically the critique developed in Robert Bernasconi's article "You Don't Know What I'm Talking About': Alterity and the Hermeneutic Ideal"². Key to this critique is the claim that Gadamer's theory of understanding via the fusion of horizons does not rise to the ethical task of embracing the alterity³ of the Other, but instead reduces it to a projection of one's self. The implication is therefore that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics has to be rejected on ethical grounds, as it does not appreciate but assimilates the alterity of the Other. In contrast to this radical hermeneutic critique, which rests on an equivocation of the Other both as a text as well as a person, I argue that Gadamer can accommodate an Other that is not assimilated but appreciated. My claim is thereby not that Bernasconi's reading of Gadamer is completely misplaced. Rather, I suggest that we should no longer neglect the unique status of a dialogue with the Other as a person, as Gadamer himself does, but instead truly distinguish it from a dialogue with the Other as a text. In the absence of such a clear distinction, both certain Gadamerian insights that appreciate the other person's ethical status, on the one hand, but also radical hermeneutic insights that illuminate the

problematic and limited role of the text as the Other, on the other hand, are misinterpreted if not altogether dismissed. Once this special status of the interlocutor and more generally the dialogue between two people is realised, I argue, we are in a position to distinguish between a fusion of horizons with the Other as a text and with the Other as a person. I conclude that it is the latter that opens up the possibility of a dynamic, constant dialogue between the self and the Other, where the Other's Otherness will never be fully appropriated. Hence, instead of reducing the Other to a projection of one's self, its ethical status is respected. The radical hermeneutic critique thus ultimately does not succeed in undermining Gadamer's attempt to appreciate the Other's alterity whilst preserving the claim to understand the Other.

Radical Hermeneutic Critique

According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, we can reconcile the alterity of the Other and the claim to understand the Other by following the path of philosophical hermeneutics. The starting and focal point of this endeavour is an analysis of the dialogical structure of understanding the alien in a text. Only by being open towards the Other, thus putting ourselves at risk, we can "experience the other's claim to truth"⁴. In other words, without such openness to the Other, thus its Otherness, we cannot attain understanding. The radical hermeneutic critique questions the extent to which Gadamer manages to reconcile these two different commitments, namely to appreciate the Other's Otherness whilst preserving the claim to understand the Other. Robert Bernasconi's paper "You Don't Know What I'm Talking About': Alterity and the Hermeneutic Ideal" questions both of these commitments. He does not only call into question whether Gadamer's "notion of otherness ... [is] sufficiently other to put me *radically* in question?"⁵, which however would be required to attain true understanding of the Other. He also, and in response to this question, argues that Gadamer's concept of understanding via the fusion of horizons "seems fundamentally antagonistic to alterity"⁶. In Bernasconi's critique, and in radical hermeneutics more generally, we can identify two distinct levels of debate. The first is about the Other's ethical status and its recognition thereof. We can call this the general normative level. There is something to the Other which is different to one's self and denotes the Otherness of the Other, which ought not to be assimilated but appreciated. The second follows from the former and denotes the extent to which Gadamer's theory of understanding via the fusion of horizons is able to appreciate the Other's ethical status. We can call this the particular interpretative level. This two-fold distinction helps to assess whether Gadamer meets Bernasconi's standards, whether Bernasconi meets Gadamer's standards and ultimately, where and why both of their standards converge and or diverge.

We can divide Bernasconi's critique into three different parts: firstly, a critique of Gadamer's account of tradition against which we come to understand texts; secondly, a critique of Gadamer's model of dialogue based upon such an account; and finally, an alternative conceptualisation of what a dialogue ought to look like. The principal reason for Gadamer's failure to appreciate the Other's Otherness, Bernasconi claims, is his Hegelian concept of tradition as a single historical horizon that underlies his model of how we are to understand the Other in general. He writes that on the Gadamerian view "I can recognize myself in what appears to be other only insofar as the other is a reflected other, the other of myself"⁷. Put in context, this passage refers to Gadamer's account of how one can fuse horizons with a text, which turns out to be the paradigmatic case upon which understanding any Other is modelled.⁸ For Bernasconi, a Gadamerian interpreter can reconstruct the texts voice and make it speak to her on the condition that she is able to recognise the text as 'the other of herself'. Such recognition of the text from the standpoint of the interpreter, he continues, is made possible if not inevitable because of the all-encompassing reach of tradition, something Gadamer captures

with “the unity of the One and the Other”⁹. What this reveals, Bernasconi argues, is that Gadamer himself has not managed to preserve alterity. Instead his paradigmatic model of how to understand a text runs risk of what Gadamer himself elsewhere rejects as a “form of self-relatedness ... reflectively [outdoing] the Other”¹⁰. Bernasconi’s reading of Gadamer thus problematises what we might call the ‘violent’ force of tradition in that, albeit bridging the historical distance between the text and the interpreter, it does not provide room for an “sufficiently other to put me radically in question”¹¹. That is to say, it reduces alterity to familiarity.

It is in light of this that Bernasconi, it seems to me, takes issue with Gadamer’s model of dialogue. It is certainly the case that Bernasconi’s main focus of analysis lies on a critical reading of Gadamer’s account of tradition against which we come to understand texts. Furthermore, it is Gadamer himself, as Bernasconi rightly points out, that draws on different ways of experiencing another person so as to illustrate what a hermeneutic approach to tradition and texts looks like: “The indications are, therefore, that Gadamer employs the parallel between dialogue and the hermeneutic text in order to diminish the sense of alterity and thereby maintain his resolution to the problem of historical distance.”¹² Underlying Bernasconi’s critique of Gadamer’s account thereof, I nonetheless contend, we can locate a separate critique of a dialogue between two people. In fact, it is this critique that forms the basis for his alternative conceptualisation of what a dialogue ought to look like, which is why we shall tease it out first.

Bernasconi is careful to point out that, on the Gadamerian model, any two interlocutors are united by a number of factors, including a mutually shared subject matter and a common language.¹³ Whenever two people enter a dialogue, they are always already united by a common subject matter and thus, in a sense, move within a mutually shared backdrop, allowing them to enter the dialogue in the first place. It is this principal assumption underlying Gadamer’s thought that Bernasconi wants to call into question. He introduces the example of a person claiming: “You don’t know what I’m talking about”¹⁴, by which I take him to refer to a Lévinasian radical Other beyond understanding.¹⁵ Anticipating a response on behalf of Gadamer, Bernasconi writes:

Gadamer would still be committed to anticipating an agreement that is being refused. Furthermore, what would this agreement be about? To suppose that there is a position to be appropriated, or even a common theme or topic to be addressed, is to impose a hermeneutic model without listening to what is being said.¹⁶

Bernasconi is right to point to the fact that for Gadamer understanding is always possible. For, as we have shown before, dialogue can bridge the distance between the self and the Other once it is realised that both interlocutors share a common language and subject matter. When Bernasconi refers to Gadamer ‘anticipating an agreement’, we therefore cannot take him to refer to a psychological unity of minds. That is to say, a Gadamerian agreement between two interlocutors does not require the self to know what it feels like to experience the world in the way the Other does, sharing the same first-person experiences.¹⁷ Conversely, we can infer from this that Bernasconi’s claim ‘You don’t know what I’m talking about’ does not translate into the claim ‘You don’t know what I’m experiencing’. For, Bernasconi acknowledges that Gadamer moves away from Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics of transposing oneself into another’s mind towards a hermeneutics centring on a common subject matter.¹⁸ We can therefore conclude that the aforementioned anticipated agreement denotes the common subject matter that is

shared by both interlocutors, but more importantly, that thus unites both interlocutors. Recalling Gadamer's account of tradition, this is ensured so long as there is present a 'unity of the One and the Other', guaranteeing a familiarity and overlap between the two positions endorsed by the interlocutors.

With respect to Bernasconi's example and the very absence of such a common subject matter, the Gadamerian precondition of agreement prior to entering the dialogue seems not to be met. This becomes problematic insofar that Gadamer would nonetheless claim that understanding and thus a fusion of horizons is possible. Thereby, however, he would end up claiming to understand the Other better than herself and thus not engage with her claim of refusing the possibility of understanding. Such an attitude would amount to an act of self-relatedness, something Gadamer himself rejects. He warns: "A person who reflects himself out of the mutuality of such a relation changes this relationship and destroys its moral bond. A person who reflects himself out of a living relationship to tradition destroys the true meaning of this tradition in exactly the same way."¹⁹ Bernasconi thus appears to repeat a move we have already seen in the context of his critique of Gadamer's account of tradition against which we come to understand texts. For Gadamer to be consistent and appreciate the Other as a moral phenomenon, he would have to accept the impossibility of understanding.²⁰ Yet, the Gadamerian model of dialogue commits him to the position of an always-present common subject matter, which entails the possibility of understanding. Hence, we can infer that, for Bernasconi, Gadamer would fail to truly listen to the Other and instead reduce her to a projection of himself.

Against this, we encounter Bernasconi advancing a vision of dialogue in which the Other is beyond the reach of understanding. The radical Other confronts the interlocutor with her statement 'You don't know what I'm talking about', thus precluding the possibility of being understood. Instead, she constitutes a radical force that ruptures into the interlocutor's framework, leaving the interlocutor 'shattered' without any familiar terms of reference to make sense of her. As Bernasconi puts it: "Then the phrase says, 'You cannot be yourself and understand me.' It not only says 'this is you'; it also implies 'you ought to change' yet at the same time acknowledges that the change won't - in a sense can't - take place."²¹ Whilst the radical Other and her claim cannot be cognitively comprehended, it puts the interlocutor into question, calling her into responsibility to respond to its normative call in an ethical fashion, and yet, this call can never be truly understood. In other words, Bernasconi's Other thus questions the Gadamerian dialogue as such, including its violent force of subjugating the Other to something the self can understand whereby however its alterity becomes diminished. Recalling the two levels of the radical hermeneutic debate, we can conclude that, on the general normative level, the Other is conceptualised as a radical Other outside the self's framework and thus Gadamerian hermeneutics. On the other hand, this is why, on the particular interpretative level, Gadamer's theory of understanding via the fusion of horizons fails to appreciate the Other's ethical status. For Bernasconi, the Gadamerian Other is nothing but a projection of the self, an assimilation of the Other into terms the interlocutor is familiar with.

Gadamer's Genuine Dialogue

Drawing on Bernasconi's reading of Gadamer has allowed us to sketch a radical hermeneutic critique of Gadamer's theory of understanding via the fusion of horizons. On such a reading, Gadamer does not manage to reconcile the two commitments of appreciating the Other's Otherness whilst preserving the claim to understand the Other. The Other is reduced to nothing but a projection of the self, which again prevents an understanding of the

true Other. For Bernasconi, the Other resides outside the Gadamerian framework and conduct of dialogue. The radical hermeneutic critique therefore moves beyond the Gadamerian notion of dialogue by considering the possibility of non-understanding. In contrast to this radical hermeneutic critique, as it has been construed here by referring to Bernasconi's claims, there have been a number of attempts to defend Gadamer's project of reconciling the alterity of the Other and the claim to understand the Other by following the path of philosophical hermeneutics; amongst others to be found in the works of Lawrence Schmidt, Lorenzo Simpson or Monica Vilhauer.²² However, I shall focus on the most recent defence, advanced in direct response to Bernasconi's position, by Joseph Gruber in his article "Hermeneutic Availability and Respect for Alterity"²³, which I take representative of a pervasive tendency in the scholarship on Gadamer and his treatment of the Other.

Gruber responds to Bernasconi's criticisms by stressing the never-ending challenge of the Other, amounting to a constant dialogue between both parties, where the Other's alterity will never be fully appropriated but instead will always remain a challenge to one's own position. Drawing on the parallel between the Other and tradition, Gruber argues that "Gadamer's concept of the other can account for what Bernasconi demands of the other both in terms of her unending difference and constant and continual claim"²⁴. Whereas Bernasconi problematises Gadamer's account of tradition, Gruber locates resources in Gadamer's account thereof that open up the possibility of a dialogue appreciative of what he calls 'true alterity', denoting an Other that can be understood albeit never completely. He refers to the relation between an interpreter and a text and identifies two elements to this relation upon which to model his defence of Gadamer's treatment of the Other in dialogue. Firstly, as the text cannot speak itself, the interpreter must bring it alive and make it speak, which, however, secondly, is only possible against a mutually shared backdrop, allowing the interpreter to be affected by the text's alterity.²⁵ Whilst agreeing with Bernasconi on tradition's importance as key to understanding Gadamer's treatment of the Other and his model of dialogue more generally, we can infer that Gruber deviates from Bernasconi's negative characterisation of Gadamer's account of tradition. Bernasconi claims: "[The] hermeneutics of the text appeals to tradition to render understanding possible without resorting to the model of an alterity that has to be overcome."²⁶ In other words, it is tradition that allows bridging the historical distance between the text and the interpreter, whereby however the text's alterity is diminished. On Bernasconi's reading, distance has thus to be understood as something problematic in that it renders understanding impossible, which is why, Bernasconi follows, Gadamer introduces tradition and the notion of one historical horizon. Gruber takes issue with this reading by rightly reminding the reader of Gadamer's positive account of distance: "In fact, the important thing is to recognize temporal distance as a positive and productive condition enabling understanding."²⁷ This quote is revealing with respect to the importance of alterity for Gadamer's hermeneutic project of understanding the Other, forming the starting point and thus calling forth the need to bridge such distance in the first place. Furthermore, and more importantly, without the distance introduced by the Other's Otherness, a productive fusion of horizons could not take place, allowing both parties to question their own position. Gruber is thus right to conclude that "Gadamer's model of understanding entails a meeting of different perspectives, not the assimilation of one viewpoint into another"²⁸.

Following this reading, the alterity of the text is not something to be reduced to one's own projection, but rather to be brought alive so that it can challenge the interpreter's position, allowing her to advance further. To recall, Gadamer diverges from Schleiermacher's hermeneutics by rejecting a subjective interpretation of the text that focuses on the author's intentions. Instead, we can identify a shift in focus from the author's subjectivity to the subject

matter that provides a common orientation for the interpreter and the text, as both stand in relation to it. That is to say, Gadamer leaves behind a Cartesian subject-object distinction.²⁹ The text does not merely constitute a passive object to be understood by the interpreter as an active subject. Rather, the text and the interpreter enter a relationship, in which both are guided by the mutual orientation towards the subject matter. This suggests that the Gadamerian interpreter does not deliberately anticipate what the author would have wanted to say. Rather, she attempts in a Socratic manner to “[bring] out its [i.e. the text’s take on the subject matter] real strength”, aiming at a “logos, which is neither mine nor yours and hence so far transcends the interlocutors’ subjective opinions that even the person leading the conversation knows that he does not know”³⁰. The fact that Gadamer portrays hermeneutic understanding as a Socratic endeavor has crucial implications for the fusion of horizons. Being willing to strengthen the text’s point of view presupposes what I shall call two hermeneutic virtues³¹ on behalf of the Gadamerian interpreter for understanding and thus the fusion of horizons to take place.

For Gadamer, “knowledge of oneself can never be complete”³², which is why we need the Other to advance and challenge our own position. If the Other were to be completely assimilated, as Gruber points out, she could no longer constitute a challenge to the self.³³ We can construe such assimilation also as a state of absolute self-knowledge, insofar that there is no Other to challenge the self’s position any further. In light of this, we can infer that the fusion of horizons seems to be driven “by a Socratic acknowledge of one’s ignorance - ... of the finality of reason”³⁴. Key to the hermeneutic experience of the Other is thus the realisation of one’s own finitude. Hence, the first hermeneutic virtue needed on part of the Gadamerian interpreter is what we might call a form of epistemic humility, being aware of one’s own epistemic limits. As Gadamer puts it, “[the] experienced man knows that all foresight is limited and all plans uncertain” but also that she “acquires a new openness to new experiences”³⁵.

Underlying such openness we can identify what Gadamer calls a “good will to try to understand one another”³⁶, which, I want to suggest, constitutes the second hermeneutic virtue. The interpreter wants to understand the text and therefore strengthens the text’s point of view. We thus encounter the Gadamerian interpreter as someone who respects the Other’s alterity as something that is worth paying attention to, despite the risk of being challenged. She is “constantly recognizing *in advance* the possibility that [her] partner is right, even recognizing the possible superiority of [her] partner”³⁷. This anticipatory structure refers to what Gadamer calls ‘fore-conception of completeness’, i.e. the interpreter presupposing the text to form a coherent unity of meaning and to be true.³⁸ Only if the interpreter anticipates the completeness of the text, the text is given enough space to express itself, and can break the interpreter’s “I-centeredness by presenting [her] something to understand”³⁹. Hence, Schmidt concludes that without this anticipation the Gadamerian process of understanding could not take place, because the text could not possibly break into the interpreter’s position, resulting in a fusion of two unique horizons.⁴⁰

These two hermeneutic virtues help us make sense of Gadamer’s claim that Bernasconi himself cannot consistently endorse a notion of the Other as radical as being beyond dialogue and thus understanding. Gruber is right to point out that once we conceptualise the Other as radically other, we are left in a position where “nothing can be said about her, thereby saying everything about her and reducing her to that incommunicability”⁴¹. What this reveals, however, is that Bernasconi himself reduces the radical Other to a projection of one’s self, insofar that she is understood in advance from the self’s point of view as something unintelligible, whereby the self “reflects himself out of the mutuality of such a relation” and thus “changes this relationship and destroys its moral bond”⁴². What might initially appear to be a hermeneutically

virtuous attempt to appreciate the Other's alterity turns out to have reverse effects. Acknowledging one's own finitude and thus being aware of the impossibility of complete self-knowledge, the self assumes the Other's claim to be meaningful and true, approaching her with the anticipation of being challenged. Yet, in doing so, we take the radical Other by its word and end up pushing her even further aware. This also means that we adopt a stance close to that of absolute self-knowledge in that we assume the Other to be incapable of teaching us anything, irrespective of whether or not she refutes the possibility of being understood. We can therefore conclude that Bernasconi himself is left in a position in which he cannot possibly meet his own standards. He does not and cannot consistently manage to reconcile both of his commitments, namely to posit and defend a radical Other on the one hand, whilst simultaneously refuting the possibility of understanding such on the other hand. As soon as we encounter a radical Other, as construed by Bernasconi as residing outside dialogue, who claims to be beyond understanding, we cannot help it but reduce it to such so as to appreciate its claim. Yet, thereby we miss the opportunity both of seriously engaging with its alterity, and as a result, of potentially being challenged and changed ourselves.

Two Fusions of Horizons

We can therefore conclude that Gruber makes a convincing case as to why, on the general normative level, we should not conceptualise the Other as completely and radically Other, but instead as an Other that is other enough to call us into question whilst simultaneously being familiar enough so as to be recognised as an Other in the first place. However, it is not yet clear, I contend, as to whether or not Gruber has succeeded in what he sets out in his paper, namely to show that "Gadamer's concept of the other can account for what Bernasconi demands of the other both in terms of her unending difference and constant and continual claim"⁴³. Since the Other refers both to a text as well as to a person, we have to ask: Does a Gruberian reading, drawing on the two hermeneutic virtues, help to avoid the possible exhaustion of the Other in both cases, that of a dialogue with the Other as a text as well as with the Other as a person?

On the Gruberian reading, the answer must be in the affirmative insofar that we have shown that we will never be able to gain finite knowledge of ourselves, but instead are continuously open to the challenge of the Other, enabling an understanding albeit never of complete nature. Such an answer, it seems to me, therefore rests on the claim that we can treat the Other as a text and as a person exchangeably. Indeed, this is what Gruber, following Gadamer, seems to imply when explicating his approach towards defending Gadamer's treatment of the Other against Bernasconi's criticisms: "... the comparison between the tradition and the other that Gadamer presents in *Truth and Method* is taken seriously."⁴⁴

Gadamer acknowledges that a text cannot address us in the same ways a person does, which is why, as we have seen before, it is the interpreter's task to bring the text alive and make it speak to her, thus calling her into question. He writes:

Texts are 'enduringly fixed expressions of life' that are to be understood ... [by] the interpreter. Only through him are the written marks changed back into meaning. Nevertheless, in being changed back by understanding, the subject matter of which the text speaks itself finds expression. It is like a real conversation in that the common subject matter is what binds the two partners, the text and the interpreter, to each other. ... Thus it is perfectly legitimate to speak of a *hermeneutical conversation*.⁴⁵

We can take this quote as representative of Gadamer's overall ambiguous attitude towards the relation between conversing with a text and with another person, something already touched upon. Despite the differences, Gadamer considers both cases as a dialogical encounter between two partners giving rise to a fusion of horizons. What unites both is the mutual orientation towards the subject matter: "[The] chief thing that these apparently so different situations ... have in common is that both are concerned with a subject matter that is placed before them."⁴⁶ He goes as far as claiming that "[everything] we have said characterizing the situation of two people coming to an understanding in conversation has a genuine application to hermeneutics, which is concerned with *understanding texts*"⁴⁷. In light of Gadamer's own words, it thus appears reasonable for Gruber to treat the Other as a text and as a person exchangeably. In the remainder of this paper I want to propose, however, that such treatment is problematic insofar that it downplays the special status of the interlocutor and more generally a dialogue between two people.

As aforementioned, Gadamer himself acknowledges that texts differ from people as they are "enduringly fixed expressions of life"⁴⁸. That means a text is neither in the position to change its words nor to speak for itself. In contrast, what a person says constitutes the 'perpetually open expression of her life'. A living person is thus able to change and correct what she has said, i.e. she can respond to us independently of our speaking on her behalf. To clarify the implications of these two fundamentally different forms of life, we can draw on a phenomenological analysis of what it feels like to be in a dialogue with a text and with another person respectively.

In the essay "Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity", Gadamer criticises Husserl for artificially constructing intersubjectivity, "insisting that the Other can first be given only as a perceived thing, and not as living, as given 'in the flesh'"⁴⁹. For, "[in] the living relationship of life to life, the givenness of the senses of a perceived thing is a quite secondary construct."⁵⁰ This is why he calls the other person a moral phenomenon, as it is more than an object. A text however is object-like, thus given 'as a perceived thing' first and only secondarily it comes alive through the interpreter's reconstruction. In keeping with this, we can infer that the text fails to be a moral phenomenon, but instead is a somewhat artificially constructed Other calling us into question. We might therefore question the extent to which the Cartesian distinction between subject-object is overcome, if the initially perceived, 'passive' text has to be awakened by an 'active' interpreter. In contrast, in a face-to-face relationship, the Other makes us respond to her presence before we even perceive of her as a given thing. Prior to reflectively thinking about the Other's presence as something 'present-at-hand'⁵¹, such as in the case of a text, the Other confronts us. This form of acknowledgment can be juxtaposed with Lévinas's notion of the Other's face that "breaks with the world that can be common to us"⁵², which underlies Bernasconi's notion of his radical Other. Even if Gadamer draws on a far less radical understanding of the Other, he could still subscribe to Lévinas's claim that the Other's presence evokes a response in a unique manner, something the text cannot do. In fact, in a later work Gadamer writes that

[the] mere presence of the other before whom we stand helps us break up our own bias and narrowness, even *before* he opens his mouth to make a reply. That which becomes a dialogical experience for us here is not limited to the sphere of arguments and counter-arguments, the exchange and unification of which may be the end of meaning of every confrontation. Rather ... there is something else in

this experience, namely a potentiality for being other that lies *beyond* every coming to agreement about what is common.⁵³

The quote's first part clearly suggests a focus on the other person's embodied presence confronting and calling us into question, something unique to the dialogical experience with the Other as a person. The second part goes further in that the Other's Otherness will always remain, regardless of whether the fusion of horizons has led to an agreement about the common subject matter. The Otherness eludes complete appropriation, instead will continuously confront us, as the Other's embodied presence will remain. Hence, there is no ultimate ending in a dialogue between two people. Not only can we not tell in advance "what limits one will confront ... or what truth will be brought forth by the encounter with another"⁵⁴, but, more importantly, we can also not tell in advance if and how the other person is going to come back, presenting ever-new responses to everything said so far.

Given the constant challenge by the other person, the foreign will never become completely exhausted but instead always remains relative and thus moves alongside to what has been understood. In contrast, the text cannot possibly come back and challenge whether it has been understood correctly. "What is written as a whole ... [risks] misuse and misunderstanding because [it has] dispensed with the obvious corrections resident within *living* conversation."⁵⁵ Even if the Gadamerian interpreter virtuously reconstructs the text's question, the point still holds that the text cannot correct itself. Here, we can discern two different temporal dimensions underlying a dialogue with a text and between two living people respectively. Any understanding between two people never gives rise to "a constant and identifiable unity, rather it occurs in the *continuing* conversation"⁵⁶. In contrast, the act of reconstructing the text's voice amounts to a closure of meaning. It is certainly true that a text is more than a given object to be appropriated. Being only 'object-like', it is open to different meanings that result in the process of interpretation. Hence, any fusion of horizons with a text will never lead to a 'complete' understanding of the subject matter, but instead can be changed in subsequent conversations.

This partial and provisional, thus dynamic nature however is limited in three ways. Firstly, a text constitutes a unity of meaning by coming to an end, regardless of its word length, thus "[providing] the experience of reading with a relative closure not found in dialogue"⁵⁷. Secondly, it depends entirely on the interpreter whether the conversation will be continued, as implied before.⁵⁸ Finally, even if the reader willingly continues the conversation and reconstructs the text's question once again, the text can only show up in as many ways as the interpreter's horizon can accommodate for.⁵⁹ Although the text's reconstructed Otherness is supposed to confront the interpreter's horizon, it can only do so in a way that has been anticipated by the interpreter in the act of reconstruction. We can therefore infer that the reconstruction and relatedly, the recognition of the text's Otherness appears to be a form of self-relatedness, insofar as the text becomes the Other of the interpreter. This is not only in line with the first part of Bernasconi's critique, that of Gadamer's account of tradition against which we come to understand texts, but also in direct contradiction to the Gruberian conclusion. The problem thus seems to be that a dialogue with the Other as a text prioritises the interpreter's self-recognition in the text to the validity of the text's claims.⁶⁰

We can conclude that Gadamer is not justified, and thus neither Gruber, in neglecting what have turned out to be crucial differences between coming to an understanding with the Other as a text and as a person. Contrary to conversing with a text, a dialogue between two people is a continuous process in which the Other's Otherness will never be fully appropriated, but instead constitutes a remaining challenge to one's own claims regarding the subject matter.

A dialogue between two living people is subjected to a certain dynamic that is beyond one's conscious control, never leading to a closure.⁶¹ Once we realise this embodied, spontaneous nature of the Other as a person, however, Gadamer's claim that in a genuine dialogue the fusion of horizons is primarily concerned with the subject matter appears dubious.

According to Gadamer, "understanding means, primarily, to understand the content of what is said, and only secondarily to isolate and understand another's meaning as such."⁶² In this quote, we can identify two claims. The first claim states that in the process of understanding we shall primarily focus on the subject matter. Underlying this is a second claim that we can separate an understanding of the subject matter from understanding another's meaning, in our case that the subject matter can be distinguished from the other person. For, otherwise we would not be in the position to primarily focus on the subject matter in the process of coming to an understanding with another person. Despite this prime focus on the subject matter, however, Gadamer claims that understanding in a genuine dialogue means "being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were"⁶³. But how can he possibly talk about the transformative power of the fusion of horizons without conceding to a more intimate link between the subject matter and the other person in the process of understanding?

For Gadamer, one's horizon denotes "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point"⁶⁴. Being thus at least partially constitutive of one's identity, it provides a framework through which things appear with relative significance to us. Hence, it follows that the new, fused understanding of the subject matter alters the interlocutor's epistemic 'framework of significance'. This implies that the interlocutors must have somewhat identified with the subject matter. If their take on the subject matter were completely separated from their horizons, the fusion of horizons would not occur. As we have seen however, this is a logically impossible position to hold, as Gadamer acknowledges the transformative power of coming to an understanding with regards to one's identity. The fusion of horizons takes place with regards to the subject matter, which in turn alters one's horizon, thus transforms one's identity.

This line of argument can most forcefully be demonstrated, I suggest, when considering an 'unsuccessful' fusion of horizons. In line with our phenomenological analysis of entering a dialogue with another person, we can follow Ruchlak in analysing the everyday saying of 'You don't understand me' when there has been an 'unsuccessful' exchange between two people.⁶⁵ Consider a genuine dialogue where both people are open towards each Other's claims and yet, the fusion of horizons leads to disagreements regarding the subject matter. In such a situation it is often the case that we find ourselves telling the other person that 'You don't understand me', although she actually does not understand my claim with regards to the subject matter. In those cases where the subject matter really matters to us, a disagreement might even lead to a disturbed relationship between the interlocutors, which however only makes sense if there was an intimate link between the subject matter and each person in the first place. Here it might be countered that such a close link exists only in those conversations that address an issue of importance to the interlocutors. Yet, as Gadamer himself stresses, "[whoever] opens his mouth wants to be understood; otherwise, one would neither speak nor write"⁶⁶, and this seems to pertain, at least to some extent, to any conversation regardless of the importance of the subject matter. This insight, I want to suggest, has crucial implications for our discussion of Bernasconi's example of a radical Other. Recall his characterisation: "Then the phrase says, 'You cannot be yourself and understand me.' It not only says 'this is you'; it also implies 'you ought to change' yet at the same time acknowledges that the change won't - in a sense can't - take place."⁶⁷ Having established the close link between the subject matter and the person

articulating her stance on it, I argue, we can shift Bernasconi's focus of analysis from the impossibility of being understood to the Other's disbelief in the possibility of being understood, which entails both the hope and urge for the interlocutor to change. Rather than calling into question the Gadamerian dialogue as such, the challenge presented by Bernasconi's Other should be understood as the starting point and invitation for a never-ending dialogue in which understanding will never be complete, yet is constantly sought after in the hope of changing oneself whilst simultaneously being more appreciative of the Other's alterity.

Realising the special status of the interlocutor and more generally the dialogue between two people, we are now in the position to conclude by distinguishing between two different fusions of horizons. On the one hand, there is a fusion of horizons with the Other as a text, in which the text's Otherness becomes reduced to the projection of the interpreter's self. As we have shown, this is because the text cannot speak up for itself, but is subjected to the interpreter's fore-conceptions. On the other hand, there is a fusion of horizons with the Other as a person, where the person's Otherness is truly respected, giving rise to a continuous dialogue in which the Other's Otherness will never be fully appropriated. It is only the latter fusion that opens up the possibility of a dynamic, constant dialogue between the self and the Other that meets Bernasconi's demands "of the other both in terms of her unending difference and constant and continual claim"⁶⁸, as Gruber puts it. Hence, by drawing such a distinction, we are able to advance a defence of Gadamer's theory of understanding against the radical hermeneutic critique as articulated by Bernasconi's position. For, it is only the former fusion of horizons that reduces the Other to a projection of one's self. On the particular interpretative level then, Gadamer's theory of understanding via the fusion of horizon is able to appreciate the Other's alterity. Yet, my claim is thereby not that Bernasconi's reading of Gadamer and his treatment of the Other is completely wrong. Rather, I have attempted to urge for truly distinguishing the dialogue with the Other as a person from the dialogue with the Other as a text. It is in the absence of such a clear cut distinction that both a Gruberian reading, which appreciates the other person's ethical status, but also Bernasconi's reading, which illuminates the problematic and limited role of the text as the Other against Gadamer's account of tradition, are misinterpreted if not altogether dismissed. In other words, in order to develop a comprehensive defence of Gadamer and his treatment of the Other that allows him to reconcile both of his commitments, namely to appreciate the Other's Otherness whilst preserving the claim to understand the Other, we need to juxtapose both positions, that of Bernasconi and Gruber.

Conclusion

Our aim in this paper has been to defend Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics against what I call the radical hermeneutic critique, specifically the critique developed by Bernasconi, and thus show that Gadamer can successfully reconcile the Other's alterity and the claim to understanding the Other. Our claim has been that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics can accommodate an Other that is not assimilated but appreciated, on the condition that the unique status of a dialogue with the Other as a person is no longer neglected, as Gadamer does, but instead truly distinguished from a dialogue with the Other as a text. Recognising this special status of the interlocutor and more generally the dialogue between two people, we have been in the position to conclude that there are two fusions of horizons we need to distinguish. The first is with the Other as a text and fails to live up to the particular interpretative claim posed by the radical hermeneutic critique, regardless of the different conceptions of what the Other's Otherness means. The second however is with the Other as a person and opens up a space between familiarity and foreignness, in which the Other's Otherness will never be appropriated,

but instead constitutes a continuous challenge.

Endnotes

¹ This name is taken from John D. Caputo's book *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987) of the same title and employed as an umbrella term for all the Nietzschean-Derridean criticisms leveled at Gadamer's fusion of horizons; see e.g. Robert Bernasconi, "'You Don't Know What I'm Talking About': Alterity and the Hermeneutic Ideal," in *The Specter of Relativism. Truth, Dialogue, and Phronesis in Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. Lawrence K. Schmidt (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 178-194; Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*; and *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Knowing Who We Are* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000); Jacques Derrida, "Three Questions to Hans-Georg Gadamer," trans. Diane Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer, in *Dialogue & Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 52-57; Marina Vitkin, "The 'fusion of horizons' on knowledge and alterity," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 21 (1995): 57-76; or Bernhard Waldenfels, *Vielstimmigkeit der Rede. Studien zur Phänomenologie des Fremden*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1999).

² Bernasconi, "'You Don't Know What I'm Talking About,'" 178-194.

³ Henceforth, the notions 'alien', 'alterity', 'otherness' and 'foreignness' are used interchangeably.

⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Bd. 1: Hermeneutik I: Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* in *Gesammelte Werke*, 7th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 304. For translation, see *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 299. Henceforth referred to as *GW1* and *TM* respectively.

⁵ Bernasconi, "'You Don't Know What I'm Talking About,'" 185, italics mine.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁸ See *GW1*, 298; and *TM*, 396.

⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Bd. 2: Hermeneutik II: Wahrheit und Methode. Ergänzungen, Register* in *Gesammelte Werke*, 7th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 65. Henceforth referred to *GW2*. For translation, see "On the Circle of Understanding," in *Hermeneutics versus Science?: Three German Views*, trans. and ed. John M. Connolly and Thomas Kenter (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 70.

¹⁰ *GW1*: 364; *TM*: 352.

¹¹ Bernasconi, "'You Don't Know What I'm Talking About,'" 185.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 182-184.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁵ In a footnote, Bernasconi explicates that his critique is inspired by Lévinas. See *ibid.*, 263.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 192-193.

¹⁷ See Monica Vilhauer, *Gadamer's Ethics of Play: Hermeneutics and the Other* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 89.

¹⁸ Bernasconi, "'You Don't Know What I'm Talking About,'" 179-180.

¹⁹ *GW1*: 366; *TM*: 354.

²⁰ Bernasconi, “‘You Don’t Know What I’m Talking About,’” 193.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 192.

²² Lawrence K. Schmidt, “Respecting others: The hermeneutic virtue,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 33 (2000): 359-79. Lorenzo C. Simpson, *The Unfinished Project: Toward a Postmetaphysical Humanism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001). Vilhauer, *Gadamer’s Ethics of Play*.

²³ Joseph Gruber, “Hermeneutic Availability and Respect for Alterity,” *Philosophy Today* 58 (2014): 23-38.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁶ Bernasconi, “‘You Don’t Know What I’m Talking About,’” 183.

²⁷ *GW1*: 302; *TM*: 297. Gadamer adds in a footnote: “I have here softened the original text (‘it is only temporal distance that can solve ...’): it is distance, not only temporal distance, that makes the hermeneutic problem solvable. See also *GW*, II, 64.” (*GW1*: 304; *TM*: 298).

²⁸ Gruber, “Hermeneutic Availability and Respect for Alterity,” 30.

²⁹ For instance, see Philippe Eberhard, “The Mediality of the Dialogue,” in *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics and the Art of Conversation*, ed. Andrzej Wiercinski (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2011), 283-286.

³⁰ *GW1*: 373-374; *TM*: 361.

³¹ Gadamer himself introduces the term in the context of respecting the Other: “if we do not acquire *hermeneutic virtue* – that is, if we do not realize that it is essential to first of all understand the other person if we are ever to see whether in the end perhaps something like the solidarity of humanity as a whole may be possible...” (Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Von Wort zum Begriff: Die Aufgabe der Hermeneutik als Philosophie,” in *Gadamer Lesebuch*, ed. Jean Grondin (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 110. For translation, see *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, trans. and ed. Richard E. Palmer (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 34, italics mine. See also Schmidt, “Respecting others.”)

³² *GW1*: 307; *TM*: 301.

³³ Gruber, “Hermeneutic Availability and Respect for Alterity,” 32.

³⁴ Kristin Gjesdal, “Between Enlightenment and Romanticism: Some problems and challenges in Gadamer’s hermeneutics,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46 (2008): 300.

³⁵ *GW1*: 363; *TM*: 351.

³⁶ *GW2*: 343. For translation, see “Text and Interpretation,” trans. Dennis J. Schmidt and Richard E. Palmer, in *Dialogue & Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 33.

³⁷ *GW2*: 505. For translation, see *The Gadamer Reader*, 34, italics mine.

³⁸ *GW1*: 299; *TM*: 294.

³⁹ *GW2*: 9. For translation, see Schmidt, “Respecting others,” 359.

⁴⁰ Schmidt, “Respecting others,” 366.

⁴¹ Gruber, “Hermeneutic Availability and Respect for Others,” 34.

⁴² *GW1*: 366; *TM*: 354.

⁴³ Gruber, “Hermeneutic Availability and Respect for Alterity,” 29.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁵ *GW1*: 391; *TM*: 389.

⁴⁶ *GW1*: 384; *TM*: 370.

⁴⁷ *GW1*: 389; *TM*: 387.

⁴⁸ *GW1*: 391; *TM*: 389.

⁴⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Bd. 10: Hermeneutik im Rückblick*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, 7th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 95. Henceforth referred to as *GW10*. For translation, see “Subjectivity and intersubjectivity, subject and person,” trans. Peter Adamson and David Vessey, *Continental Philosophy Review* 33 (2000): 283.

⁵⁰ *GW10*: 95. For translation, see “Subjectivity and intersubjectivity,” 283.

⁵¹ See Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 19th ed. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006), 73-75. For translation, see *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 103-105.

⁵² Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 194.

⁵³ *GW2*: 335-336. For translation, see “Text and Interpretation,” 26, italics mine.

⁵⁴ Darren R. Walhof, “Friendship, Otherness, and Gadamer’s Politics of Solidarity,” *Political Theory* 34 (2006): 581.

⁵⁵ *GW2*: 344. For translation, see “Text and Interpretation,” 34, italics mine.

⁵⁶ *GW10*: 130. For translation, see “Respecting others,” 374.

⁵⁷ Steven G. Crowell, “Dialogue and Text: Re-marking the Difference,” in *The Interpretation of Dialogue*, ed. Tullio Maranhao (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 348.

⁵⁸ The text’s author might adjust and change the text, incorporating findings of the preceding conversation. However, this does not challenge our claim, since the text’s adjusted version would constitute a new unity itself.

⁵⁹ See *ibid.*, 347.

⁶⁰ See Gjesdal, “Between Enlightenment and Romanticism,” 303.

⁶¹ The continuous dynamic of a dialogue between two people could be further substantiated by drawing on Gadamer’s account of language as advanced in the third and final part of *Wahrheit und Methode*. For Gadamer, we will never be able to put everything into words: “[The] living virtuality of speech ... brings a totality of meaning into play, without being able to express it totally.” (*GW1*: 462; *TM*: 454). What has been said within language is never exhaustive but always points to what has been left unsaid and is thus yet to be said.

⁶² *GW1*: 299; *TM*: 294.

⁶³ *GW1*: 384; *TM* 371.

⁶⁴ *GW1*: 307; *TM*: 301.

⁶⁵ Nicole Ruchlak, *Das Gespräch mit dem Anderen. Perspektiven einer ehtischen Hermeneutik* (Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann GmbH, 2004), 107.

⁶⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Und dennoch: Macht des guten Willens,” in *Text und Interpretation*, ed. Philippe Forget (München: W. Fink Verlag, 1984), 61. For translation, see “Reply to Jacques Derrida,” trans. Diane Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer, in *Dialogue & Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 55.

⁶⁷ Bernasconi, “‘You Don’t Know What I’m Talking About,’” 192.

⁶⁸ Gruber, “Hermeneutic Availability and Respect for Alterity,” 29.

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