

DECONSTRUCTION AND/OR HERMENEUTICS: PLACING JACQUES DERRIDA
AND HANS-GEORG GADAMER IN NON-DIALOGUE

A Paper

Presented to

Dr. Marc Cortez

Western Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Course

THS 665HZ, Theology and Philosophy

By

Brian LePort

December 10, 2010

Introduction

In April of 1981 in Paris, France, Sorbonne professor Philippe Forget organized a meeting between Jacques Derrida and Hans-Georg Gadamer at the Goethe Institute. Michelfelder and Palmer describe it as being “an *Auseinandersetzung*: a confrontation of positions, out of which one could gain not only a greater understanding of each individual standpoint but also of the relationship between them.”¹ Unfortunately, most of those who have studied the aftermath of this meeting have doubted that any meaningful communication/relationship resulted. There was a presentation of formal papers, a round table discussion, questions from Derrida to Gadamer and a reply from Gadamer.² Since the event there have been papers and books published as commentary, yet it seems that there is a nagging pessimism regarding the results.

Why Write about Gadamer and Derrida?

Gadamer is widely considered to be one of the great philosophers of the twentieth century. Malpas states that, “Hans-Georg Gadamer is the decisive figure in the development of twentieth century hermeneutics”.³ As regards Gadamer's *magnum opus*, the popular *Truth and Method*, Weinsheimer and Marshall assert that it “is one of the two or three most important works of this century [twentieth] on the philosophy of human studies.”⁴

Similarly, Bradley states, “Derrida is now generally agreed—by both devotees and critics alike—to be one of the most influential philosophers of the later twentieth century.”⁵ Although Derrida himself would not accept the label “postmodern” this has not prevented others from using it in reference to him. Derrida is perceived to be a major catalyst of the “postmodern” impulse, therefore he has had an influence over many who have never even read a page of his work.

1 Diane Michelfelder and Richard Palmer, “Introduction” in Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer. *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*. (1989) Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. 2.

2 Ibid. 3.

3 Jeff Malpas, “Gadamer” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gadamer/> on 13 November 2010.

4 Hans-Georg Gadamer. *Truth and Method*. 2nd Revised Edition. (2006) Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (trans.). New York, NY: Continuum. xi.

5 Arthur Bradley. (2008) *Derrida's On Grammatology*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. 1.

That these two met face-to-face in an attempt to see where hermeneutics and “deconstruction” meet/collide/avoid is motivation enough to juxtapose them. Many say they were polar opposites. Benson writes, “According to the usual account, Gadamer is the conservative upholder of the traditional way of reading and Derrida the deconstructor of all that is sacred. If you're for Gadamer, you must be against Derrida— and vice-versa.”⁶ That these two are “rivals”, and that the meeting between them “failed” to produce satisfactory results, makes writing such a paper a bit of a paradox! If the actual meeting failed in what sense is it possible for this paper to succeed?

What will this paper include? The following: (1) Gadamer's specific hermeneutical project; (2) Derrida's theory of deconstruction as well as his particular vocabulary (so that the reader can better understand what makes his project unique); (3) an outline of their meeting; and finally, (4) an attempt to find relevance for the Christian philosopher and/or biblical interpreter.

What is the aim of this paper? (1) To survey the influence of Gadamer and Derrida on interpretation/communication; (2) asking if their paradigms are compatible, antithetical, or something else; (3) present useful aspects of either one or both of these philosophers that can be considered useful for the Christian philosopher and the biblical interpreter.

Defining and Redefining Hermeneutics

In order to understand Gadamer's hermeneutic we will ask how he defined “hermeneutics”. This will necessitate reading Gadamer's retelling of the evolution of the term. This (very) brief history will outline his history of the subject:

“The Art of Interpretation”

Hermeneutics is a branch of philosophy named after the mythological messenger of the gods, Hermes. Inwood says that this field became important after the Reformation,⁷ but we should add the influence of humanism with its desire to recapture the “classics” of civilization. Historically Christian

6 Bruce Ellis Benson. “Text Messages: Gadamer, Derrida, and How We Read”. *Christian Century*. 122 no 6 Mr 22 2005. 30-32

7 M.J. Inwood. “Hermeneutics” in Ted Honderich (ed). (2005) *The Oxford Guide to Philosophy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. 380.

interpreters spoke of four approaches to reading: (1) literal; (2) allegorical; (3) tropological; (4) anagogical.⁸ This became unsatisfactory after the era of Descartes, Kant, et al., which postulated that human knowledge was judged by the scientific method of epistemology. In order to truly “know” an object—like a text—the old way of approaching a text in search of multiple meanings was no longer legitimate. There has to be “a” meaning.

Schleiermacher's Grammatical-psychological Approach

Ad fontes! This is a cry shared by Christian Reformers and the cultural renaissance to go back to the original sources. This means going behind the traditions of western culture and the Roman Catholic church; going back past Latin translations of Hebrew and Greek texts; seeking the *sensus literalis* of each text. The *one* literal sense of the text.

Gadamer understands Schleiermacher's project to be an attempt to get beyond the “unity of the content of tradition” to “the unity of a procedure”.⁹ There is a “universal” procedure that if applied to the reading of *any text* would result in the *singular meaning* of that text. This would allow a reader to read free of dogma's prohibiting prejudices.

Understanding is to understand “each other” and it is a form of “agreement” in respect to “something”.¹⁰ The text first must be understood in its grammatical-linguistic format.¹¹ This will assist the reader in understanding the “exact words and their objective meaning”.¹² It will not all come at once but happens through the process of a hermeneutical circle where a text is understood first by understanding a part which informs the whole which informs the part¹³ creating a circle of understanding that will eventually result not merely in “less misunderstanding”.¹⁴

Where Schleiermacher erred, according to Gadamer, is when he began to include the

8 Ibid.

9 Gadamer (2004 ed). 179.

10 Ibid. 180.

11 Ibid. 181.

12 Ibid. 186.

13 Ibid. 189.

14 Ibid. 184.

psychology of the author.¹⁵ He began to see this circles of “whole-part-whole-part” as being able to also understand the internal motivations of the author. Gadamer did not debate the need to reconstruct the historical context in which the assertion of an author “could be true”. Rather, he disagreed with Schleiermacher that we could use a “grammatical-psychological” model.

Schleiermacher felt that “the inverse of an act of speech” would reconstruct the author's construction.¹⁶ He thought he could understand “the total context of a man's life”.¹⁷ He thought he could “understand a writer better than he [the writer] understood himself”.¹⁸ Gadamer could not affirm this attempt at a “universal” hermeneutic.

Dilthey's Extension

According to Gadamer, Wilhelm Dilthey, expanded Schleiermacher's project to include not only the relationship between author-text-reader, but “all human behavior”.¹⁹ For Dilthy history, sociology, and other areas of study could be understood objectively using a similar method. Gadamer approved of Dilthey's expansion of hermeneutics beyond reader-text relationship. He disapproved of Dilthey's Schleiermacher-esque confidence that we could reconstruct these things which are so distinct from us. He writes,

“Dilthey did not regard the fact that finite, historical man is tied to a particular time and place as any fundamental impairment of the possibility of knowledge in the human sciences. Historical consciousness was supposed to rise above its own relativity in a way that made objectivity in the human sciences possible.”²⁰

As concerns both Schleiermacher and Dilthey, as well as many others (Spinoza, Ranke, etc) who supported this ideal objectivity, what concerned Gadamer was the idea that the reader could stand outside the process as a scientific examiner of a text, society, or historical trajectory. For Gadamer there

15 Ibid. 186.

16 Ibid. 188.

17 Ibid. 189.

18 Ibid. 191.

19 Inwood. 380.

20 Ibid. 228.

is no removing one's finite self from this equation.

Heidegger's Hermeneutical 'Dasein'

According to Gadamer “understanding” for Martin Heidegger was not like Dilthey's “resigned ideal human experience”, or even Husserl's “methodological ideal of philosophy”, but rather *Dasein*: being-in-the-world.”²¹ Gadamer opposed the myth of objectivity. He was not supportive of interpretive “methods” that would somehow “universalize”. In Heidegger he found something that made “the problems of a hermeneutic of the human sciences look very different.”²² Gadamer followed Heidegger noting a sense of “belonging”.²³ The “interpreter's belonging to the object” prevents the interpreter from somehow (contrary to the “historical school”) standing outside of the traditional life of the text while objectively discovering some form of pure, undefiled by dogmatics, meaning.

Gadamer's Hermeneutics

This is by no means an exhaustive outline of Gadamer's influences but it does highlight the people and the vocabulary that shaped Gadamer's contribution. While Gadamer does not make a radical break of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and the rest of the western philosophical tradition, he does provide unique insights. At this juncture we will define some of Gadamer's key hermeneutical concepts before we move to Derrida:

Play

“Play is self-presentation.”²⁴ As part of the hermeneutical process, which Gadamer calls “play”, one never acts alone.²⁵ In fact, for play to begin, one must “project” one's understanding of a text upon the text itself (i.e. The reading process cannot even *begin* without the reader bringing some assumption to the text.). These understandings are called “prejudices” and prejudices are not always bad.²⁶

21 Ibid. 250.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid. 252.

24 Ibid. 108.

25 Ibid. 106. “...you cannot have a game by yourself.”

26 Ibid. 274.

If possible one will want to be aware of prejudices because “prejudices shape the individual”.²⁷

If prejudices submitted to a text are challenged then the reader ought to consider the nature of the prejudice. It may be that the prejudice is invalid. If a prejudice is not challenged this does not necessitate that the prejudice is valid, but rather than at this juncture there is no sufficient reason to discard the prejudice. If a prejudice is challenge this doesn't necessarily negate it either. It simply means that it should be reexamined.

Those who prefer the idea that a reader can reach an “objective” reading of a text worry when they hear this. For one, if meaning is found in “play” as Gadamer suggest (“meaning: is the interaction between the reader and the text, not something found “in” the text itself) then how does this prevent utter subjectivity. This misses the point Gadamer is trying to make. It cannot be utter subjectivity because each time play occurs the text and reader are both involved. It is never just the reader imposing (intentionally) upon the text, but contrary to those who want to speak of being “objective” neither is there a time when the text itself is the only one involved in meaning.

Performances

It could be the same “drama” or “musical work” that is shown in a theater on Broadway on November 11th at 7PM as one shown on November 12th at 7PM, but there is one important difference: these are two “performances”. This “difference” is real.²⁸ Every time the reader comes to the text the reader brings a new set of prejudices. Every time a new person approaches the text it is the same. Therefore, a text is never read the same way twice. Since a text is never read the same way twice it never has the same “meaning” twice. Each performance is a real opportunity for meaning to emerge.

Canon/Tradition

Authority is not “blind obedience”.²⁹ It “cannot actually be bestowed, but is earned”.³⁰ Gadamer attributed “authority” to the tradition/history/canon of a text. The tradition within which one reads a

27 Ibid. 278.

28 Ibid. 141.

29 Ibid. 280.

30 Ibid. 281.

text is an authority. A canon of interpretation is a guide to the historical life of a text and it is something that must be considered when interpreting various texts.

Gadamer differentiates tradition from “traditionalism”.³¹ Traditionalism says that once something is interpreted one way that this is *the* way it should be interpreted. Gadamer does not affirm this³², but that does not mean that he thinks each new reading should be done independent of consulting previous readings.

Wirkungsgeschichte

Gadamer reminds us, “Historical interest is directed not only toward the historical phenomenon and the traditionary work but also, secondarily, toward their effect in history. This is what is known as *wirkungsgeschichte* or the “principle of history of effect”. For example, when one studies the *Epistle to the Romans* written by the Apostle Paul to some of the first Christians in the city of Rome in the first century one must always be aware of *wirkungsgeschichte*: Augustine's reading against Pelagius; Luther against Erasmus or Eck; Calvin against Arminius. While we do not determine the text by *wirkungsgeschichte* we do acknowledge it has impacted us.

An Anti-Definition of Deconstruction

Many of Derrida's interpreters are as difficult to understand as he. For instance, Sarah Richmond provides a “definition of deconstruction” saying that Derrida tells us that, “deconstruction is neither an analytical nor a critical tool; neither a method, nor an operation, nor an act performed on a text by a subject; that it is, rather, a term that resists both definition and translation”.³³

Bradley expands the streams from which the river of Derrida is formed. He includes Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, Rousseau, de Saussure, and Levi-Strauss along with Heidegger.³⁴ This can be overwhelming. In order to understand Derrida one must understand a dozen or so philosophers with

31 Ibid. 282.

32 He was a good, German Lutheran after-all!

33 Sarah Richmond. “Deconstruction” in Ibid. 193.

34 Bradley. 2-3.

whom he was interacting. This is not possible here due to the size and emphasis of this paper,. Rather we will generalize the context within which Derrida worked and then we will provide a brief glossary of terms for understanding him.

Heidegger's 'Destruktion'

Heidegger's well-known idea of *destruaktion* was influential upon Derrida as concerns *deconstruction* and writing-under-eraser (see below). *Destruktion* occurs, for example, when writing about a concept like “God”. Heidegger did not like the metaphysical baggage associated with the word but he did not want to forsake it either. In order to maintain a form, while making a statement regarding the rejected metaphysics of the word, Heidegger would strike through the word: ~~God~~.

Structuralism and Post-Structuralism

Structuralism was the theory that “cultural forms, belief systems, and 'discourses' of every kind can best be understood by analogy with language, or with the properties manifest in language when treated from a strictly synchronic standpoint that seeks to analyze its immanent structures of sound and sense.”³⁵ Briggs and Meyer credit de Saussure with creating the “theoretical framework in linguistics”. According to Saussure when people share the same language we are able to “successfully decode what another person is saying to us” even if we do not know the rules we are using to do so. These rules are understood implicitly.³⁶ Language is something that naturally mirrors how a given culture functions. What goes from micro-structures eventually evolves into macro-structures as well.

Klages points out that this approach contrast the Romantic view of literature where the author was the originator and sovereign of a text. This is not so as structuralist understand things. According to structuralism, because an author is embedded in a given culture, “any piece of writing, or any signifying system, has no origin, and that authors merely inhabit pre-existing structures that enable

35 Christopher Norris. “Structuralism” in Honderich, 898.

36 Rachelle Briggs and Janelle Meyer. “Structuralism”. Accessed from <http://www.as.ua.edu/ant/cultures/cultures.php?culture=Structuralism> on 4 December 2010.

them to make any particular sentence (or story)".³⁷ For example, as some have said, *West Side Story* is essentially *Romeo and Juliet*. *West Side Story* may change things a bit but it is actually the same story structure underneath which is why it is so easy to understand.

Structuralism is defined by something known as binary patterns and hierarchies as well. A binary pattern may be one of the following: white/black; light/dark; good/evil; male/female; right/left. It is often the case that this is the pattern in which these things would be mentioned. Light is before dark and right is before left because inherent in a given structure of a given culture is the idea that light is better than dark and right is better than left. This is the hierarchy.

Post-structuralism is similar but it denounces the "naturalness" of the structure. So when the neutral third person pronoun is traditionally masculine ("let us say that when he writes he...") a post-structuralist will agree with a structuralist that this represents cultural norms yet reject that it says anything about the superiority of masculinity. "Whiteness" is seen as superior to "blackness" because "white" is clean and pure while "black" is dirty and defiled, but this is a human construct.

Derrida wanted to erase the line between the binary oppositions destroying (not reversing) the hierarchy. In his essay "The Restricted to General Economy" he emphasizes that a "master" cannot exist without a "slave" and that in some sense because a slave is no longer bound by the responsibility to maintain life like a "master" he is actually a "master" while the "master" becomes a "slave" to those things that maintain life!³⁸ In this sense he sits within the post-structuralist tradition since he sees these structures as culturally imposed. He goes even further though by showing that these binary oppositions are absurd because you would never understand master without slave, white without black, light without dark, etc.

Glossing Derrida

Derrida had a unique, morphing vocabulary that must be recognized if there is any hope of

37 Mary Klages. "Structuralism/Poststructuralism". Accessed from <http://www.colorado.edu/English/courses/ENGL2012Klages/1derrida.html> 3 December 2010.

38 Jacques Derrida. (1978 ed) *Writing and Difference*. (trans. Alan Bass) Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 254-256.

encapsulating his thought. We will provide a limited gloss here:

Arche-writing

Derrida calls arche-writing (or originary writing) “the complicity of origins”. As one will come to see he fights against the concept that speech is pure and writing is defiled. He does not allow for there to be a pure signifier of a signified in speech that is somehow perverted by writing as most philosophers have suggested. Derrida wants to show that communication has always been writing!

When we say “writing” we do not necessarily mean marks-and-dashes on an object like stone or paper. Rather, we mean there has always been a signifier that points back to a signified in an imperfect manner. James K.A. Smith understands this to be synonymous with “*différance*” (see below).³⁹

Deconstruction

Derrida presents deconstruction as “to not naturalize what isn't natural—to not assume what is conditioned by history, institutions, or society is natural”.⁴⁰ He says it “concerns first of all, systems”.⁴¹ He does not see it as a method imposed on the text from the outside, but rather something that occurs within a text all by itself. All texts have basic preconceptions that the reader often assumes while reading. When one allows deconstruction to “work” (or should we say notices as deconstruction works) one sees the absurdities of the text: the prejudices, the assumptions, the misguided and contradictory ideas in the text that the reader cannot ignore.

Smith defines deconstruction as “a deeply affirmative mode of critique attentive to the way in which texts, structures and institutions marginalize and exclude 'the other', with a view to reconstructing and reconstituting institutions and practices to be more just”.⁴² This is a positive understanding. It insinuates that deconstruction is not so much a “hermeneutic” as it is an attempt to

39 Smith. 43.

40 Jacques Derrida, “Derrida—defining deconstruction” [Video file]. Accessed from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgwOjjoYtco> on 27 November 2010.

41 Jacques Derrida, quoted in Smith. 10.

42 Smith. 12.

expose wrongful preconception buried within a given text that the writer and reader take for granted while furthering the oppressive and misguided assumptions embedded within the text.

A negative presentation of deconstruction can be heard in the words of Jack Reynolds who writes the following:

Deconstruction is parasitic in that rather than espousing yet another grand narrative, or theory about the nature of the world in which we partake, it restricts itself to distorting already existing narratives, and to revealing the dualistic hierarchies they conceal. While Derrida's claims to being someone who speaks solely in the margins of philosophy can be contested, it is important to take these claims into account.

Deconstruction is, somewhat infamously, the philosophy that says nothing.⁴³

As it relates to hermeneutics deconstruction is understood as being not something-in-itself but something-in-a-text that occurs within a text. It is not a method; it is a given. Deconstruction is what happens when we see the inherent contradictions in a text.

Différance

This is not an accidental misspelling of "difference".⁴⁴ For Derrida, *différance* is "an economic concept designating the production of differing/deferring". This neologism was created to prove a point. Since most philosophers had preference for the spoken over the written word Derrida created a word that cannot be differentiated audibly but can be via the written medium.⁴⁵ This showed the audible "writing" doesn't always supersede the marks-and-dashes of "written" "writing".⁴⁶

Bradley notes that it "brings together two different connotations of the French '*différer*': differing and deferring." He expands on this by noting that "it signifies the way in which the meaning of any sign is spread out across space in the sense that it necessarily refers to other elements that exists

43 Jack Reynolds, "Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)" in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Accessed from <http://www.iep.utm.edu/derrida/> on 27 November 2010.

44 Though my word-processor really struggled with allowing the spelling!

45 One cannot "hear" the difference between difference and différance, but one can "read" it!

46 Reynolds.

along side it in the system. Also, “it connotes the way in which the meaning of any sign is deferred or postponed in time in the sense that it always refers to elements that exist before or after it in the linguistic system.”⁴⁷ So if one were to write this word in a sentence it would have meaning determined by how it fits in the linguistic system. This is an attack on the misconception, according to Derrida, that words have a sort of metaphysical *signified* that they *signify*.

A word has no meaning without a system. Writing (audible or marks-and-dashes) is always that system. Through this concept Derrida shows that there is no “absolute presence” between a “signifier and a signified”.⁴⁸ Even when someone speaks we do not have the signified itself, only the signifier. Even psychoanalysis cannot recover what was intended in the mind of the speaker/author.⁴⁹ This being established Derrida can argue that speaking is essentially writing; writing is essentially text: both are merely signifiers.

Double-Reading

Many accuse Derrida of searching for “meaninglessness” in texts. This is not so. Derrida derived something known as “double-reading”. In this practice he does read with an eye to understand the text. We should not say that he seeks to understand the author, per se, since he does not see the author as governing language as much as being governed by language, but neither does he understand the text to be something that is completely reader-centric as he has been charged. Rather, he seeks to understand the text (Derrida was known to be a *very careful reader*) in order to then notice the act of deconstruction. In other words, one cannot see deconstruction take place if one does not believe that there is an attempted meaning in the text.

Logocentrism

This is the assumption that the *logos* (word, logic, reason, meaning) “privileges speech (*phone*)

47 Bradley. 146.

48 Jacques Derrida, “From *Of Grammatology*” in Peggy Kamuf (ed). (1991). *The Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 41.

49 Ibid.

over writing (*gramme*) as the means by which the presence of the *logos* is expressed.”⁵⁰ Derrida himself criticizes the idea that the “voice” which is “heard” represents some sort of “pure auto-affection that necessarily has the form of time and does not borrow from outside of itself, in the world or in 'reality', any accessory signifier”.⁵¹ In other words, Derrida did not see speech as being any more pure or unmediated than writing.

It is from this assumption that his famous phrase “there is nothing outside-text” emerges. Derrida does not think audio is any less in need of being “read” or “interpreted” than writing. In fact, even speech is “writing”.

Metaphysics of Presence

When one seeks to understand Derrida's concept of “presence” one must understand him to mean “what is most real, true or important is what is most present”. One analogy would be the consistent use in many languages of the third person masculine as the “standard”. Most languages will speak of a generic human as “he”. For Derrida this signifies that language has mistakenly fallen into the trap of believing there is a certain “ideal” that can be found in language. In the case, masculinity would be the ideal over against femininity.⁵²

Derrida will point out that this is absurd. There is no “masculinity” without “femininity”. There is no concept of “he” if not for the equal and opposite “she” (remember structuralism's claims). Therefore, masculine pronouns as the ideal pronoun signifies a mistaken concept of “presence”.

Another area of interest relates to the speaking/writing divide. It has commonly been understood that speaking is better because it has “presence” in contrast to “absence”. For Derrida even if a speaker is standing in front of someone there is both presence and absence. The presence of what the person says is meaningful only in light of the absence of what is said. “I love you” means many things to the hearer. “I” is not “we”. “Love” is not “like” but neither is it as defined as the hearer may

50 Bradley. 148.

51 Derrida, “From *On Grammatology*” in Kamuf. 36.

52 Bradley. 6.

want it to be (e.g. One could say “I love you” because another did something positive but the “love” means something more like “you really came through for me and I am very appreciative” rather than there being any romantic connotation.). “You” assumes singularity if one is present but it could be more than one if others are present since “you” can be both singular and plural in the English language. So “I love you” is not defined merely by what is actually being said but also what is not being said.

The Trace

Derrida writes,

If words and concepts receive meaning only in sequences and differences, one can justify one's language, and one's choice of terms, only within a topic [an orientation in space] and an historical strategy. The justification can therefore never be absolute or definitive. It corresponds to a condition of forces and translates an historical calculation., Thus, over and above those I have already defined, a certain number of givens belonging to the discourse of our time have progressively imposed this choice upon me. The word *trace* must of itself refer to a certain number of contemporary discourses the force of which I intend to take into account.”⁵³

What Derrida means by “trace” is simply that whatever words he has chosen to use are defined by the “trace” of the words before and after as well as the words not chosen. If one writes, “Lust is not a virtue, but a vice” none of these words have a metaphysical meaning in and of themselves. “Lust” is defined by the words coming after it. “Vice” is defined by the words coming before it. “Lust” is defined by not being “love”, “sensuality”, “hunger”, and a million other possibilities that could have stood where “lust” stands.

Writing Under Erasure

This is a practice that Derrida derived from Heidegger noted above. The “erasure” was “not, however, a 'merely negative symbol’”.⁵⁴ Rather, “Under its strokes the presence of a transcendental

⁵³ Derrida, “From *On Grammatology*” in Kamuf. . 41-42.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 40.

signified is effaced while still remaining legible”.⁵⁵

Heidegger did this in order to remove the accumulated meaning of a word like “being” in order to get back to an original, Greek meaning.⁵⁶ Derrida would take it further though. If he wrote “~~being~~” he would cross it out in order to use a metaphysical term such as this one and “mark his resistance to them at the same time”.⁵⁷ Derrida wanted the reader to know he was using the word but that he did not necessarily affirm the metaphysical “reality” “behind” the word.

The Non-Dialogues

Gadamer's Address: “Text and Interpretation”

When Gadamer and Derrida participated in the aforementioned meeting all these outlined ideologies were brought to the encounter. Gadamer was given the first opportunity to speak and he presented an essay titled “Text and Interpretation” on the opening night that we will summarize here:

(1) Gadamer explained that in German *Verstehen* meaning “understanding” also included “having an appreciation for something to “comprehend” it. Therefore, in order to understand, one does not “objectively” examine something from a detached state. One must be invested.⁵⁸

(2) He asserted that “linguisticity” is a play between two people but that “*individuum est ineffabile*”...you cannot penetrate the mind of the other individual. At this he juxtaposed his own starting point with Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and neo-Kantians, asserting Heidegger's *Dasein* is a better paradigm.⁵⁹

(3) He challenged Derrida's critique of Heidegger whom Derrida understood to have been bound to the idea that meaning is something “out there” (i.e. metaphysical). Derrida proposed that Nietzsche had been more successful than Heidegger at this task. Gadamer disagreed.⁶⁰

(4) At this juncture Gadamer launched into his own program. He stated that he “tried to

55 Ibid.

56 Bradley. 150.

57 Ibid.

58 Hans-Georg Gadamer. “Text and Interpretation” in Michfelder and Palmer. 21.

59 Ibid. 21-23

60 Ibid. 24-25.

conceive the original phenomenon of language in dialogue”.⁶¹ He writes:

“The dialogical character of language....leaves behind it any starting point in the subjectivity of the subject, and especially in the meaning-directed intentions of the speaker. What we find happening in speaking is not a mere rectification of intended meaning, but an endeavor that continually modifies itself, or better: a continually reoccurring temptation to engage oneself in something or to become involved with someone. But that means to expose oneself and to risk oneself.”⁶²

This is Gadamer's reoccurring “performance” presenting one's prejudices to the text.

(5) Gadamer proceeded from here with two questions: First, does communality mean anything? Second, is linguisticality a bridge or barrier to understanding?⁶³ He wanted to know in what sense do we share texts “in common” with each other.

(6) Gadamer spends the rest of the essay answering these questions using the concepts covered above. A reader enters into play with a text. Meaning is found in play. Play includes brining one's prejudices to the text humbly allowing the text to be engaged and to present itself in return challenging prejudices. Tradition and community are consulted . The reader must be a “listener” approaching the text in “good will” assuming some form of understanding is possible.

Derrida's Three Questions

To this long lecture Derrida's response the next day was three questions:

(1) When Gadamer says that we should have “good will” toward the text is this not like the “Kantian sense” of good will which “confers dignity”. If so, “What is the will if, as Kant says, nothing is absolutely good except the good will?”⁶⁴

(2) What do we do with this “good will” since it is apparent Gadamer wants “to integrate a psychoanalytic hermeneutics into a general hermeneutics?” Derrida understood Gadamer's

61 Ibid. 23.

62 Ibid. 26.

63 Ibid. 27.

64 Jacques Derrida. “Three Questions to Hans-Georg Gadamer” in Michelfelder and Palmer. 52-53.

hermeneutic, which included the “lived experience” as incorporating psychoanalytic hermeneutics.⁶⁵

(3) As regards the “underlying structure of good will” Derrida was skeptical of that one could know that they have been understood or that they have understood someone else perfectly. He wanted to know on what grounds was their continuity between the one who speaks and the one who understands.⁶⁶

Gadamer's Reply

Gadamer was baffled. The opening sentence of his response says, “Mr. Derrida's questions prove irrefutably that my remarks on text and interpretation, to the extent they had Derrida's well-known position in mind, did not accomplish their objective.”⁶⁷ He distanced himself from the Kantian concept, unsure of why Derrida appealed to Kant, and sided with Plato saying that by good will he meant one should seek to understand the other's view, to even strengthen their point, rather than to just prove they are right. In doing so understanding becomes closer to possible.⁶⁸ He reminded Derrida that this is an issue of wanting to be understood and that even Derrida himself wanted to be understood!⁶⁹

Gadamer didn't deny a rupture between signifier and signified. He didn't affirm that a psychological hermeneutic like Derrida implied. It seemed to Gadamer that Derrida was trying to prove the point that language and communication is never pure because there is no meaning “out-there” upon which two can agree. Gadamer understood this but he was unsure of where to go from there.⁷⁰

Derrida's Address: “Interpreting Signatures (Nietzsche/Heidegger): Two Questions”

The dialog becomes uncomfortable at this point because it simply was not a dialog. Derrida gave his presentation on Nietzsche and Heidegger as he understood them. While it may be relevant to Derrida's overall project it *never once addressed Gadamer*. Three years later Gadamer wrote an essay of Fred Dallmayr in which he attributed to misunderstanding to “the language barrier” and he was not

65 Ibid. 53.

66 Ibid. 53-54.

67 Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Reply to Jacques Derrida” in Michfeelder and Palmer. 55.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid. 56-57.

speaking of French and German, but rather of Derrida's self-contained linguistic world. Also, he felt that Derrida's use of “the artistry of Nietzsche's language” did not allow for common ground.⁷¹

Why a Non-Dialogue?

There have been many writers who have attempted to explain what went wrong between these two. Derrida himself admitted being “puzzled by his own response” attributing it to “ageless melancholy”.⁷² Let us present a hypothesis: Gadamer's hermeneutics and his lecture indicate that each understanding occurs in “play” which resumes each “performance”. This activity provides “meaning” between the two dialogue partners. If the one seeking to understand can present her prejudices openly there is a better chance that this humble approach will allow for any negative prejudices to be corrected to that greater understanding can ensue.

For Derrida “presence” was a great error of the western philosophical tradition. Yes, Gadamer was in the room but did this make it any easier for the two to “really” understand each other? If Derrida conceded that it did then his own deconstruction seemed at stake. Derrida did not like events such as “interviews”, for instance, because they faked “naturalness” that was mere production. It is likely that Derrida saw this meeting as staged and he did not want to allow onlookers to assume he supported something “unnatural” (a staged, face-to-face) as natural (two friends in discussion), so he played a game with everyone present causing intentional ruptures in communication. Did this vindicate Derrida if this was his motive? No, but it exposed something Derrida hated: the unnatural positioned as natural.

Summary and Conclusion

Can a Christian philosopher learn anything from Gadamer and/or Derrida? Yes. We suggest the following things can be learned from Gadamer:

(1) Reading is “play”. It is not an act of dissecting. A text is not like a dead frog in a lab that can be picked apart in order to understand the structure. Rather, it is a living organism that responds

⁷¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer. “Letter to Dallmayr” in Michelfelder and Palmer 93.

⁷² Smith. 100.

back and forth with a reader.

(2) We cannot be captivated by Schleiermacher's ideas of capturing a text. Language captures us; we do not capture language. Each “performance” is the opportunity to learn something “new” from the text.

(3) Reader-centrism is not the answer just as the historical-grammatical-psychological hermeneutic is not the answer. Reading is not methodology, per se. It is something that “happens” and the goal is to acknowledge prejudice, present prejudice, and ask if a text or an “other” is challenging our prejudice in such a way we should reconsider what we “know”. As regards the reading of Scripture this is a reminder Scripture speaks back to us and judges us; we do not dissect Scripture and judge it as a superior.

What can we learn from Derrida?

(1) We should never assume to be natural what is not natural. We should not assume that we understand a text in such a way that it merely supports our presuppositions and bias. We can learn from Derrida that sometimes the “other” has a voice as well and our texts, if they only contribute to the oppression of the “other”, are either flawed or misread.

(2) Words are defined by trace and therefore understanding is complex. If we read “God is love” this means more than just three words with metaphysical realities behind them. Our understanding of “God” determines “is” and “love” and so forth and so on. Also, what we do not understand to be true of God determines how we read this statement. Text always work in this context and we must see this and let it humble us as we again remember that we are not in control of language.

So yes, Derrida and Gadamer are different in many ways. Yes, hermeneutics approaches in support in humility, reliance on tradition, and belief in understanding. Yes, deconstruction comes with skepticism, it abhors tradition, and it believes we understand while exposing how the text always deconstructs itself. While these may be different it does not seem they are opposite. Maybe this is what Gadamer and Derrida would see if they could relive that meeting again today. Maybe both Gadamer's

hermeneutics and Derrida's deconstruction are major blows to a modernist epistemological approach to “the other” that Christians are better off without.

Sources

- Benson, Bruce Ellis. “Text Messages: Gadamer, Derrida, and How We Read”. *Christian Century*. 122 no 6 Mr 22 2005. 30-32
- Bradley, Arthur. (2008) *Derrida's On Grammatology*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Briggs, Rachelle and Janelle Meyer. “Structuralism”. Accessed from <http://www.as.ua.edu/ant/cultures/cultures.php?culture=Structuralism> on 4 December 2010.
- Derrida, Jacques. (1978 ed) *Writing and Difference*. (trans. Alan Bass) Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. 2nd Revised Edition. (2006) Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (trans.). New York, NY: Continuum.
- Honderich, Ted (ed). (2005) *The Oxford Guide to Philosophy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Kamuf, Peggy (ed.). (1991) *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Klages, Mary. “Structuralism/Poststructuralism”. Accessed from <http://www.colorado.edu/English/courses/ENGL2012Klages/1derrida.html> 3 December 2010.
- Malpas, Jeff. “Gadamer” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gadamer/> on 13 November 2010.
- Michelfelder, Diane P. and Richard E. Palmer. *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*. (1989) Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Reynolds, Jack. “Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)” in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Accessed from <http://www.iep.utm.edu/derrida/> on 27 November 2010.
- Smith, James K.A. (2005) *Jacques Derrida, Live Theory*. New York, NY: Continuum.