Heidegger and the hermeneutic turn

The closing decades of this century have been marked by a wide-ranging, multidisciplinary exploration of the theory of interpretation and its practical implications. To speak of a revolution in the history of thought is perhaps too grand, but certainly there has been a general movement that can be called the "hermeneutic turn." This turn has taken various forms, including poststructuralist cultural studies, deconstructive literary studies, interpretive anthropology and social science, and critical legal studies. Of course, the specific turns taken in each of these fields are reactions to older ways of practicing each discipline. But in each case the emphasis on interpretation is used as an antidote, usually to objectivistic conceptions of the discipline's methods. However, none of these particular turns would have been imaginable without a dramatic change earlier in this century, the change brought about in philosophy by Martin Heidegger in 1927 in *Being and Time*.

In 1927 Heidegger himself could not have foreseen the diverse effects of his theory on later thought, and in the final section of this essay I will describe his influence on the hermeneutic and deconstructive philosophies that emerged in the latter half of the century. But at the time Heidegger did see his account of understanding as a revolutionary break from the traditional philosophical emphasis on problems about knowledge and on the dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity. To explain this break I will begin by working through the details of Heidegger's account of understanding and interpretation in *Being and Time*, situating this material against the background of traditional hermeneutics as well as of Cartesian and Kantian philosophy.

**THE METAHERMENETIC TURN IN PHILOSOPHY'S SELF-CONCEPTION**

Hans-Georg Gadamer, who in *Truth and Method* (1960) was the first philosopher to develop Heidegger's account of interpretation into a general hermeneutics, defines hermeneutics as the philosophical enterprise for which the central question is, How is understanding possible? This formulation is a reasonably straightforward way to characterize the hermeneutic philosophy that Gadamer himself has contributed to twentieth-century thought. However, before Heidegger, or to anyone who has not read Heidegger, the question would be misleading, since hermeneutics might thereby seem to be merely one branch of philosophy, the one that analyzes the phenomenon of understanding in contrast to other human activities such as knowledge or language. Hermeneutic philosophers before Heidegger did think of understanding in this way, and they therefore distinguished disciplines that could acquire knowledge in an objective way, as in the natural sciences, from those that could not give lawlike explanations but instead offered interpretations, as in the humanities (or *Geisteswissenschaften*).

So classified, since the humanistic disciplines like history, law, literary and cultural studies (and perhaps philosophy itself) rarely or never give explanations emulating the causal laws of natural science, they seem to be poor cousins in the family of knowledge. One defense of these *Geisteswissenschaften* is to claim a separate status for them and to take them as examples of a distinct cognitive operation called understanding. This move, which ran through traditional hermeneutics from Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) to Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), has a weakness in that it seems to leave understanding as a derivative and deficient subspecies of knowledge.

A central part of Heidegger's legacy comes from his strikingly different conception of hermeneutics. Heidegger's analysis of Dasein as being-in-the-world changes our understanding of understanding from a derivative phenomenon to the central feature, the keystone, of human experience. As Gadamer remarks, "Heidegger's temporal analytics of Dasein has, I think, shown convincingly that un-
standing is not just one of the various possible behaviors of the subject but the mode of being of Dasein itself... and hence embraces the whole of its experience of the world." When understanding becomes the central phenomenon for philosophy, hermeneutics is no longer conceived of as simply one minor branch of philosophy. Instead, philosophy itself becomes hermeneutic. Or at least one can now speak of a distinctively hermeneutic approach to philosophy in contrast to the traditional approach running from Descartes through Kant to Husserl. This traditional approach conceived of the human being as a "subject," a knower disengaged from the world and from practical activity in the world.

Heidegger's hermeneutic turn is more radical than earlier philosophy, then, in that it avoids the traditional model of the subject as the knower standing over against what is to be known, the objective world. His hermeneutic turn shows both that the mentalistic vocabulary of the subject-object model is not the only possible starting point for philosophy and that this vocabulary is derivative from the more basic starting point where Dasein and world are coterminous in understanding. Heidegger conceives of Dasein and world as forming a circle, and he thus extends the traditional hermeneutic circle between a text and its reading down to the most primordial level of human existence. Traditionally the paradigm for the hermeneutic circle is the reading of a text, where the parts cannot be interpreted without an understanding of the whole, but the whole cannot be grasped without an understanding of the parts. As I shall explain, in Heidegger's deeper conception of what understanding is, he will have a different conception of interpretation, and a different account of how interpretation arises from understanding. What he means by understanding is not simply one form of cognition among others, but our most basic ability to live in and cope skillfully with our world. Of course, this ability must take into account that the ways in which features of the world show up are constantly changing, and this constant change requires us to form particular interpretations. As our projects and needs change, we will change our interpretations. For instance, sometimes we must interpret ourselves as students, sometimes as family members, sometimes as consumers, and perhaps sometimes as philosophers. Yet Heidegger suggests that all these interpretations presuppose a primary understanding of the world that runs through them. Our shift from one interpretation to another at the appropriate moment is a sign that we do understand the world. So a change in interpretation is not necessarily a sign of lack of understanding, since in these cases the change of interpretation shows that we can cope with the various demands the world places on us.

Heidegger begins his radicalization of the hermeneutic turn in Section 31 of Being and Time by distinguishing his conception of understanding from a different conception of how a philosopher might be interested in analyzing understanding: "Understanding" in the sense of one possible kind of cognizing among others (as distinguished, for instance, from 'explaining') must, like explaining, be interpreted as an existential derivative of that primary understanding which is one of the constituents of the Being of the 'there' in general" (BT 182). Traditional, pre-Heideggerian hermeneutics distinguished humanistic understanding and interpretation from the lawlike explanations of the natural sciences, and it thus put itself in a weak position when the metaquestion was raised, What is the status of the knowledge claimed by hermeneutic philosophy itself? Is hermeneutic philosophy itself the one right explanation, or is it only one possible interpretation? Obviously, hermeneutics is not itself giving causal explanations, so it appears to be at best only one possible interpretation, not the definitive explanation, of human inquiry and existence. Traditional hermeneutics, and Dilthey especially, was thus plagued by the threat of relativism, particularly by the relativism of its own philosophical status.

Now Heidegger too will want to say that Being and Time is an interpretation. But because he has a deeper conception of what understanding is, he will have a different conception of interpretation, and a different account of how interpretation arises from understanding. What he means by understanding is not simply one form of cognition among others, but our most basic ability to live in and cope skillfully with our world. Of course, this ability must take into account that the ways in which features of the world show up are constantly changing, and this constant change requires us to form particular interpretations. As our projects and needs change, we will change our interpretations. For instance, sometimes we must interpret ourselves as students, sometimes as family members, sometimes as consumers, and perhaps sometimes as philosophers. Yet Heidegger suggests that all these interpretations presuppose a primary understanding of the world that runs through them. Our shift from one interpretation to another at the appropriate moment is a sign that we do understand the world. So a change in interpretation is not necessarily a sign of lack of understanding, since in these cases the change of interpretation shows that we can cope with the various demands the world places on us.
case "i," includes the everyday phenomena of ordinary skills like hammering, typing, or driving. Interpretierung, translated as "Interpretation" with an upper case "I," includes thematized, discursive articulation and theorization. Interpretierung is itself said to be a derived form of Auslegung, but Heidegger obviously does not mean to denigrate Interpretierung since that is what Being and Time is. An Interpretierung is a reflective working through of phenomena, such as is done in philosophy and philology. So Heidegger claims the status of philosophical Interpretierung and not "knowledge" or "explanation" as a description for what he is doing.

Whereas the ordinary interpretations are more or less automatic, philosophical Interpretation of these ordinary interpretations is reflective in two senses. First, it is reflective in that it must explicitly articulate or thematize what goes on more immediately and less explicitly in everyday coping. Second, it is logically self-reflective in that it must itself be one possible manifestation among others of primary understanding; it will not be a representation of something that is of a different order from it, but it will be of the same kind as what it captures. Philosophical Interpretation can be "true to" the phenomenal activity of ordinary world interpretations because it is itself a form of the same phenomenon, although a more articulated or explicit form. So philosophical Interpretation is not simply arbitrary, and not threatened by the problem of relativism, because it is a case of the primary understanding that it is trying to capture. Philosophical Interpretation may be refined, or it may be supplanted by later redescriptions of what philosophy should be, but if it is agreed that there is a primary understanding of the world, then the philosophical articulation of that understanding will be binding to the degree that it is adequate to phenomenal manifestations of understanding, which include philosophy itself.

Is there any way to test Heidegger's philosophical Interpretation? Such an Interpretation will aim not merely to clarify ordinary usages of terms like "understanding," "explanation," and "knowledge," but will reinterpret or reorder them. This reordering is what goes on when Heidegger argues that something is derived from something else. If Heidegger can argue successfully that explanatory knowledge is a derived case of understanding, he will thus be in a stronger philosophical position than traditional hermeneutics, where understanding is simply an alternative mode of cognition. Heidegger's "derivations" are reminiscent of Kant's "transcendental deduction" in the Critique of Pure Reason, where Kant claims to demonstrate and justify our assumption that our experiences are not simply subjective but objective. Heidegger points to Section 31 as an attempt to go deeper than Kant did by explaining what Kant left unexplained (BT 184). One metaproblem with Kant's attempt to explain the possibility for our scientific knowledge of nature is the status of the synthetic a priori knowledge claimed by the Critique itself. That is, Kant is often accused of trying to give philosophical explanations of scientific explanation without reflecting sufficiently on whether the philosophical knowledge propounded in the first Critique had the same conditions as scientific knowledge.

Heidegger can avoid this problem by consistently claiming that Being and Time is an Interpretation. This Interpretation does not eliminate ratiocinative operations like explaining, deliberating, reflecting, and deciding, but situates them within a more general account of how they fit together in a primary understanding that also includes our everyday interactions in and with the world. Heidegger's account tells a story about how cognitive explanation always inheres in a context of intelligibility that is projected in understanding. Heidegger's account is thus properly construed not as a single, decisive transcendental argument, but as an Interpretation, that is, a reasonably complete and plausible reconstruction of the conditions that obtain if the things of the world make sense, and if beings like ourselves are also part of the world. Understanding is among these conditions and is the projection of an inclusive context or pattern of intelligibility as the background against which particular instances of sense making succeed.

In sum, contrary both to Kant and to traditional hermeneutics, Heidegger is trying to show us that we need not take "knowledge" as primary and see "understanding" and "interpretation" as derived, but that we can reverse this derivation. Even if the reversal is successful, however, a further problem arises if this result tells us simply that either direction of derivation is equally valid. The entire strategy of reordering or deriving would be undermined if that were the only conclusion, and relativism would again threaten. But Heidegger thinks that since traditional philosophy has come up against unsolvable antinomies and unbridgeable dichotomies, his reordering acquires greater plausibility to the degree that it avoids
such difficulties. Also, Heidegger can urge that by starting from the more primary phenomenon of understanding, he can make better sense than the tradition of how knowledge is really possible. Traditional philosophy from Descartes to Kant wanted to offer not only a definition of knowledge (for instance, as correct representation of the real world), but also an account of how the knower is connected to the known. Heidegger's strategy is different from the Cartesian strategy, which starts by assuming a basic ontological disconnection (e.g., between mental and physical substance) and then looks for instances of epistemological connection that cannot be doubted (e.g., the knowledge of the existence of a thinking subject). Heidegger's strategy is to see Dasein as already in the world, which suggests that what needs to be explained is not the connection, which is the basis, but the disconnection. Instances of disconnection happen obviously and frequently, as when humans make mistakes, not only cognitively but practically. The Cartesian strategy runs into difficulty when it fails to explain (e.g., to skeptics) connection. The Heideggerian strategy must show that it does not run into similar problems when it tries to explain how apparent disconnections could arise, as in the breakdown of a ready-to-hand tool and its transformation into a merely present-at-hand object or piece of junk. A crucial part of Heidegger's account of the connection of Dasein and world is the section on understanding as the projection of possibilities, and I will now focus on how the details of that section contribute to the hermeneutic turn.

Understanding, Projection, and Possibility

One question that arises if philosophy is itself a mode of interpretation is, How can one such Interpretation be said to be better than others? Is it “true”? Are there other such Interpretations that could be “true” in the same sense? To clarify these questions Heidegger distinguishes two senses of truth. One is the ordinary philosophical sense of truth, where an assertion uncovers or discovers some fact about the world. Heidegger usually describes truth in this sense as being about things that do not have the character of Dasein, using the term Entdecktheit (discoveredness). The contrasting term, “disclosedness” (Erschlossenheit), suggests that the total context is opened up through understanding. Understanding thus does not consist only of making assertions about the world, but also of grasping the entire mode of being-in-the-world. Understanding grasps the world as such, without which the discovery of particular features of the world would not be possible. However, understanding grasps not only the world, but also Dasein’s way of being in the world. So an understanding of the world is always also a self-understanding.

To speak of self-understanding can be misleading, however, if it suggests a Cartesian or Kantian ego, which stands at a remove from the objective world as if it occupied a different, subjective world. Heidegger says instead that disclosure involves both the world and Dasein at the same time. Dasein’s understanding of its world is thus not distinct from its understanding of itself, but is at the same time an interpretation of itself. This self-interpretation thus does not discover facts about the properties of a mental substance or a noumenal self, but discloses how Dasein has dealt with and is dealing with the question or “issue” of its own existence. A student of physics, for instance, is not simply learning some facts about the physical world, but is learning how to do physics. The student is thus becoming a physicist, at least to some degree. Being a student is generally best described neither as finding innate abilities in oneself nor as acquiring a mass of facts about the world. Instead, being a student on Heidegger’s account is learning how to go about in the world in a certain way, for instance, as a physicist or as a philosopher, where who one is and what one does are inseparable.

Understanding involves, therefore, more than the discovery of facts about particular features of the world. Understanding is more primordially the disclosure of what Heidegger calls possibilities. Heidegger suggests that the disclosure of possibilities could not be derived from the discovery of factual features. His philosophical Interpretation is trying to show that both discovery and disclosure are necessary to human activity. Focusing on the discovery of facts alone (e.g., as empiricist philosophers might) will obscure the dimension of disclosure. So Heidegger’s Interpretation shows that if the dimension of disclosure is recognized, then both discovery and disclosure can be accounted for, since disclosure makes the phenomenon of discovery intelligible. The isolated, atomistic discovery of one fact after another would not generate an understanding of a
world that was significant and intelligible, but only of a disconnected aggregate. An interpretation is precisely not a heap of facts but an account of how these facts are possible.

Possibility for Heidegger is not simply logical possibility, since understanding is of real relations and situations. Possibility also does not mean not-yet-actual, since Dasein is itself currently one possible way of existing and understanding. Dasein exists as "definite" or concrete possibilities (BT 183), which it does not choose arbitrarily. Dasein finds itself as already having these possibilities. We can begin to see what Heidegger means by returning to my example of what it is to be a student. Heidegger is not describing the process of explicitly planning to be, say, a physicist or a philosopher, and possibilities are not the abstract thoughts a student might have about what it would be like to be a physicist or a philosopher. Possibilities are recognized only in the concrete activity of doing physics or philosophy and are what limit the range of what it makes sense to do or try to do in those activities. What it is sensible to do in a particular situation is already laid out in advance in a genuine understanding of the concrete possibilities. Dasein may not be explicitly aware of those possibilities it has let go by, or even of the ones that currently characterize it. Dasein can also be mistaken about its possibilities, for instance, by trying to fix them so rigidly that it takes them as necessities instead of as possibilities, thereby misunderstanding itself and becoming disconnected from a more primary understanding of itself (BT 183).

Dasein's understanding of itself as possibility, and its "knowledge" of those possibilities of which it is capable, is thus a matter of degree. This "knowledge" is often more implicit "know-how" than explicit "knowing-that," and it is more a grasp of the worldly situation than a reflective turn inward. Insofar as Dasein finds itself already thrown into a situation that is not of its own making, it has "in every case already gone astray and failed to recognize itself" (BT 184). Dasein thus does not "know" itself from the start, but if it is to recover or "find itself," it must come to understand what it can do given its own possibilities in its particular worldly situation.

Understanding thus involves possibilities, and these are not simply subjective or inner phenomena, but are always tied to worldly situations. Heidegger wishes to distance himself from the traditional idea that these possibilities should be thought of as spontaneously free choices, and he rejects the "liberty of indifference" (BT 183). So he avoids making "choosing" the starting point for his analysis of primary understanding, and instead starts from what he calls "projecting." Projection involves an understanding of what matters, and there will always be two sides to what matters. First, there must be a context of significance, of meanings that are really possible in the "current world." Second, nothing could matter or make a difference unless it mattered or made a difference to beings who cared, so Heidegger suggests that Dasein's own being is also projected as that "for-the-sake-of-which" whatever matters or makes a difference.

Projection is not simply reasoning from a list of all the particular possible choices that one has, as well as the pros and cons for each choice, to some decision. Listing all the "facts" about oneself and one's situation would be an interminable process, and the idea of specifying all that could be known about anything may even be unintelligible. Furthermore, "facts" about humans are always already meaning-laden and interpretive. Heidegger thus draws a distinction between "factuality" and "facticity." Factuality has to do with nonhuman things, discrete facts about which could be entered in a list. Trying to draw up such a list for any particular instance of Dasein would always fall short of characterizing that Dasein, and thus Dasein itself always is something "more" than it is (factually). But a central aim of Heidegger's account of understanding is to show Dasein's inherence in the world, which is to say that Dasein is not some free-floating spirit that transcends its material situation. As a projection (Entwurf, from the German stem "to throw"), Dasein finds itself "thrown" into a world, and it finds itself as already projected or "thrown" into a situation with concrete possibilities. Possibilities that are concrete (or definite, bestimmte) differ from purely logical possibilities in that they come with concrete limitations. So Heidegger speaks of these limitations as Dasein's "facticity," in contradistinction to the other kind of fact that he calls "factuality."

Now exactly why something matters or makes a difference may be difficult to say or explain, either to oneself or to others. Hence, Heidegger wants to distance his concept of projective understanding not only from spontaneous choice, but also from deliberate decisions, conscious planning, or the weighing of alternatives. He denies that projection consists of making explicit plans or of grasping its possibilities "thematically" as explicit contents of the mind. Does
explicit planning or conscious weighing of alternatives and deciding never enter human action? In *Being and Nothingness* Jean-Paul Sartre takes the strong position that conscious reflection (or deliberation) has little to do with real choice, and that one is really just fooling oneself by such reflection to put off the inevitable need to act. As Sartre says, “a voluntary deliberation is always a deception,” one that really postpones a choice that has already been made, so conscious decision always comes too late, and “les jeux sont faits” (the dice are cast).¹

Heidegger need not make such a strong claim, precisely because he has a different interpretation of what understanding is. Understanding involves a holistic projection of a context in which particular possibilities first become intelligible. Much of what we understand thus remains largely inexplicit. However, it does not follow that when Heidegger says that understanding does not grasp its possibilities “thematically” that he must be denying that understanding is ever thematic in any way. Unlike Sartre, he need not assert that thematizing (deliberating and deciding) is only ever a way of postponing the need to take action and is thus inefficacious. The point is instead that more reflective operations such as explaining, deliberating, or deciding would ever be possible only by supervening on a larger background of features that could never be explicitly thematized, but that nevertheless were part of the understanding and thus of the concrete possibilities.

In contrast to Sartre’s claim that “les jeux sont faits” Heidegger’s argument is focused on a different claim, “Become what you are” (BT 186). This slogan has an ancient tradition, going back to the Greeks, but it also features famously in Nietzsche. The imperative that one should become who one is seems paradoxical, for one would seem able to become only what one was not (yet), and a being that already was what it was could not even try to become that way. Heidegger’s solution is to say that the paradox may indeed hold for beings that do not have the character of Dasein. But he asserts that not only can Dasein become what it is, it can also fail to become what it is. The facticity-factuality distinction thus clarifies how “Become what you are” expresses an imperative that is genuine. Dasein is not its factuality, so it is not what it is factually. However, because Dasein is understanding, and understanding involves projection into a concrete “current world,” Dasein is what it is factually.²

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But because the projection also involves concrete possibilities, Dasein can become what it is by becoming what it is already possible for it to be. There is a genuine alternative here, for Dasein can equally well fail to face these possibilities, and thus it can become disconnected from itself by failing to own up to all that it has been and can be.

INTERPRETATION

Becoming who we are requires interpretation for two reasons. First, we cannot become who we are unless we have an interpretation both of who we are and of how we can continue to be who we want to be. Second, what we are interpreting is already interpretive. How we get to be who we are is through interpretations, not only of ourselves but also of the possibilities inherent in the public world, which is already interpreted meaningfully for us. A question that has plagued hermeneutics, however, is, What makes some interpretations better than others? Are some interpretations true and others false?

Since interpretations involve possibilities and not simply facts, the true–false distinction may not be the most pertinent one to use when judging interpretations. If an interpretation of any sort can be said to be “true,” one must be using truth in a different sense from that in which a statement is said to be true. Interpretations typically contain or imply many statements, so in speaking of the truth of the set of statements, the sense of truth is extended. One might say that an interpretation is true only if all its assertions are true, but this reductive claim seems to misconstrue what is meant by calling an interpretation true. An interpretation may consist of more than simply those assertions that are uttered, since a good interpretation frees up the possibility of uttering many other significant assertions. There is also no reason to think that the set of possible assertions generated by an interpretation is closed. Furthermore, two interpretations could conflict with each other on some central claims while each one contained many other claims that either interpretation would grant to be true. In sum, interpretive understandings may be better judged by labels other than true or false, and Heidegger invokes such contrasting normative terms as authentic or inauthentic, genuine or not genuine, and transparent or opaque.⁴
Already this traditional philosophical obsession with the truth or falsity of interpretive claims may be on the wrong track in trying to understand Heidegger's account. In Section 32 of Being and Time Heidegger is not primarily concerned with explicit, deliberate Interpretation (Interpretierung) but with the phenomenon of Auslegung, that is, with interpretation of a practical sort that may not always involve articulated judgments or thematizing. Contrary to present tendencies to think of the reading of texts as the paradigm case of interpretation, Heidegger's paradigm cases are everyday activities like opening a door or hammering. Even Heidegger's philosophical Interpretation is an interpretation not of a text, but of Dasein. But these cases are analogues of texts insofar as Heidegger's point is that even the most obvious ordinary objects taken by themselves do not have their characteristics inscribed in them. Instead, the characteristics of the tools come into being in the concrete interpretation manifested in the activity of using them.

Contrary to an empiricist epistemology that presupposes that we first “perceive” objects with their particular properties and only secondarily apply or use them, Heidegger's suggestion is that this type of perception is not primary. Seeing is not simply perceiving the properties of external objects with the bodily eyes (BT 187). Instead of construing seeing as seeing that an object has such and such a property, Heidegger construes seeing as already interpreting something as something (e.g., seeing something as a hammer, as a door, or as a table). Another example of such “seeing-as” [not Heidegger's own] is found in the hermeneutic phenomenon of reading. When we read a text, we do not first perceive black marks on a white page and then construe their meaning. Instead, the meaning of the text, and indeed the text itself, comes to be only in the reading. Hence, for later hermeneutic theory the text and the reading form the paradigm case of the hermeneutic circle. While the early Heidegger does not emphasize textuality to the same degree, his account does underline the shift of philosophical attention from the epistemological model of perception to the hermeneutic model of reading.

Since reading involves grasping the meaning of the text, it is appropriate that Heidegger features the notion of meaning (Sinn) centrally. He does so in a way that will be congruent with this hermeneutic model and that will block some traditional problems that arise from construing meanings as private, internal, mental states. Meaning for Heidegger is not something that one imposes on an object, and it is neither a distinctive object of perception nor an intermediary between the subject and the object. Strictly speaking, says Heidegger, what is understood is not the meaning but the entity. There is thus a sense in which Heidegger eliminates the traditional philosophical notion of meaning from his vocabulary. He thinks that we grasp entities as entities in their webs of relations with other entities, not as aggregates of perceptual qualities. Thus, we do not first see some colors or hear some noises and only secondarily infer that we are seeing or hearing a motorcycle. Instead, we first encounter a motorcycle, and only secondarily (if at all) do we abstract its properties (perhaps to hear its “noise”).

“Meaning” for Heidegger thus involves the holistic way in which something can become intelligible as something in a web of relations (BT 193). Independent of the web of meanings, entities are not meaningful (in this special sense). Since this web of meaning requires Dasein, only Dasein can be said to be meaningful or meaningless, as Heidegger understands the notions. In other words, unless objects inhere in an interpretive context, they could not be understood. So they cannot be said to have meanings that are prior to and independent of their interpretive uses.

The context of meaningfulness is thus what makes it possible to interpret something as something. For the most part this context is not explicit, but makes up the background of understanding, or what Heidegger calls the “fore-structure” of understanding. For an explicit interpretation of something as something to occur (e.g., in picking up the hammer and hammering), there are three levels at which understanding must be running in the background. First, there must be a general grasp of the whole situation (e.g., of the workshop as a whole). Heidegger calls this the “fore-having” (Vorhaben), where, before making any particular object explicit, we have a background grasp of the totality of possible practices involved. But to have a grasp of the whole is not yet to make any particular feature explicit, so the second level required before anything can become explicit is “fore-sight” (Vorsicht), where we see in advance the appropriate way in which things can appear. But for something to become fully explicit in an act of interpretation there would have to be some particular concepts under which it would be appropriate even to begin interpreting it. So the third level required before an explicit interpretation can occur is the
interprets, and the levels of interpretation is not to deny but to affirm that asserting is itself an interpretive practice. He will have a separate argument in later sections that implicit levels of the fore-structure of the understanding would function independently of explicit interpretations. The fore-structure of understanding goes together with the as-structure of interpretation, and the levels of Vorhaben, Vorsicht, and Vorgriff are all in play at once in any given act of interpretation.

Furthermore, while Heidegger wants to show that interpretation takes place in areas of activity other than those where language is involved, he would not need to claim that understanding is more essentially prelinguistic than linguistic. While not all interpretation involves uttering sentences or making assertions, Heidegger's point is not to deny but to affirm that asserting is itself an interpretive practice. He will have a separate argument in later sections that although not all interpretation involves explicit linguistic thematization, the being who is Dasein and is able to interpret would also need to be a being who could thematize and assert. In this section, moreover, he does include textual interpretation as a case of interpretation. If he says that philological Interpretation is a derivative case, he is not making a derogatory claim about textual interpretation [BT 194]. On the contrary, he objects to the philosophical tendency to contrast the “textual” disciplines like historiography and literary studies with the natural sciences and to conclude that the former are “less rigorous” than the latter. While he recognizes that natural science is a “legitimate task” [BT 194], as we have seen, he thinks that science is a subspecies of understanding. So instead of thinking that science is a separate domain of knowledge, and then puzzling about whether history and literature should count as knowledge, Heidegger is giving an account of human understanding that will accommodate these different disciplines as subspecies. Hence, he does not see them either as unrelated enterprises or as a family in which the humanities are poor cousins of the natural sciences.

To make this case he need not privilege the textual disciplines over the sciences. So he does not invert the hierarchy and privilege historiography over mathematics. Mathematics is “narrower,” he says [BT 195], which is not to say that it is poorer, but simply that it has defined its limits in a different way than the humanities. Historiography on his model is not criticized because it is incapable of precise definitions and rigorous demonstrations. Instead, when properly practiced, it can highlight the possibilities, and not simply the factual consequences, of human action. Historiographic understanding is circular, but this circle is not the vicious one of an allegedly rigorous deduction that succeeded only in proving what it already presupposed. Instead, all understanding is circular, says Heidegger, in the sense that “any interpretation which is to contribute understanding must already have understood what is to be interpreted” [BT 194]. This “hermeneutic circle” thus characterizes all understanding, for there must already be a context of intelligibility for any discovery to be made, or for any conclusion to be proved.

This insistence on the circularity of understanding raises the problem of whether one is always trapped within one’s own assumptions, or whether there is some way to get out of the circle. The solution to this problem will depend on how “getting out” is construed. Heidegger, of course, believes that interpretations can make discoveries and that they can correct their own inadequacies. Heidegger grants that we do not simply prove things that we already know, or limit ourselves to “popular conceptions.” Genuine, primordial understanding will see that these popular conceptions or standard assumptions are hindrances to better ways of interpreting [BT 195]. However, Heidegger’s way of explaining how fanciful interpretations and popular conceptions are to be avoided may confuse some readers. He says that the task is to check our prior understanding of the subject matter against “the things themselves” [BT 195]. This phrase “the things themselves” might suggest that there is a domain outside the circle against which our beliefs can be tested. However, Heidegger’s main point is to undermine this strong philosophical assertion of a radically independent “outside.” His point is instead that beliefs can be checked only against other beliefs. Understanding
is holistic and includes a dense pattern of interlocking beliefs and skillful know-how, so the idea of “getting out” of it is not really intelligible. Heidegger thus insists that interpretation is never a “presuppositionless apprehending” of some given [BT 191].

Even if one is willing to abandon the idea of an independent given “outside” the circle of understanding, one still might object to the holism in the thesis that all understanding is interpretive. That is, one might think that understanding is prior to interpretation. This claim could mean that there is an understanding of something, and that this understanding then gets “interpreted,” for instance, by applying that understanding to a particular situation (as when a judge interprets a statute by applying it to a case not explicitly covered by the abstract legal language). Or the claim might be that when we really understand something we do not describe ourselves as interpreting it, since to say that we were interpreting would suggest that there were features that we had not yet grasped correctly or adequately. Either way expresses the feeling that there must be something “beneath” interpretation, such that interpretation is not a circle but an “arch” that remains firmly grounded in its object. Behind this insistence on the priority of understanding over interpretation would be an epistemological intuition, since the worry would be that understanding needs to be adequate to its object, which somehow anchors interpretation.  

Although many philosophers before Heidegger started from this epistemological worry, Heidegger’s own project is to show that this problem can only arise within the circle of understanding. To start from the problem is already to disconnect the interpretation and that which is being interpreted to such a degree that it becomes impossible to reconnect them. Heidegger’s insistence on the circle sees a particular misunderstanding arising only against a tacit background of shared understanding. While any interpretation may involve particular points of misunderstanding, it would be a mistake to infer that all readings are misreadings or that, as Jonathan Culler characterizes the literary theories of Paul de Man and Harold Bloom (but not Jacques Derrida), “understanding is a special case of misunderstanding.” Understanding must generally be a successful practice before particular aspects of the interpretive understanding could even emerge as mistakes or misunderstandings. Of course, in the process of interpretive understanding, the interpreter has the sense that there is something “out there” that is to be understood. Heidegger himself insists on this phenomenon and gives the following explanation of what is really happening: “If, when one is engaged in a particular concrete kind of interpretation, in the sense of exact textual interpretation, one likes to appeal to what ‘stands there,’ then one finds that what ‘stands there’ in the first instance is nothing other than the obvious (selbstverständliche), undiscovered assumption (Vormeinung) of the interpreter, which necessarily lies in every interpretive approach as that which has already been ‘taken for granted’ in interpretation as such, that is, as that which is pre-given through the fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception” [BT 192, translation modified]. So Heidegger does not deny that interpretations include some apparent givens, commitments, or purchase points. However, these points do not lie outside the circle of understanding, but are already at play within the circle as tacit aspects of our prior understanding of our world and ourselves. The world is itself in the circle, both in general as its horizon and also concretely as the commitments of any successful practice of understanding. Any particular assumption may become problematic, and therefore move from being tacitly taken for granted to being explicitly called into question. Then the assumption may show itself to be merely a popular misconception or a fanciful, superficial glossing over of difficulties. But any challenge to any particular assumption can be made only by appeal to other commitments that the interpretation is not willing to give up. So the challenge is from within the circle and is not to some independent given “outside” or “beneath” the circle.

If there is no outside to the circle, understanding should not itself be taken as a mental operation that is distinct from interpretation. Understanding is itself always realized in interpretation and is not a separate, prior operation that then gets reprocessed in a secondary operation of interpretation. Understanding functions concretely only as interpretation: “In interpretation, understanding does not become something different, but instead it becomes itself” [BT 188]. Interpretation is the concrete working through of the possibilities projected by the understanding. That is, the context of intelligibility that is tacitly understood provides the background against which specific interpretive actions make sense. The tacit background and the explicit interpretive action are integral functions of any instance of interpretive understanding.
AFTER HEIDEGGER

If the pieces of Heidegger's account of understanding and interpretation are now in place, some concluding reflections on the outcome of the hermeneutic turn later in the twentieth century are in order. Two thinkers in the second half of the twentieth century whose work would not have been possible without these sections of *Being and Time* are Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jacques Derrida. Yet the hermeneutic theory developed by Gadamer and the deconstructive movement fathered by Derrida take the Heideggerian account in different and apparently opposed directions. Gadamerian hermeneutics appear to deconstructionists to harbor the hidden assumption that the text has an internal unity of meaning, and that meaning is a single thing that interpretation must aim at reconstructing. The deconstructionists see this faith in the unity and the coherence of the text as a vestige of metaphysical faith, which they aim to deconstruct. In contrast to the hermeneutic move to recover and reconstruct the meaning of the text, deconstruction is the operation of questioning this faith in the meaning of the text by finding in the rhetoric and style of the language of the text moments where the assumption of the unity of meaning fails.

At least two problems, then, are raised by these two different ways of developing Heidegger's analysis of the circle of understanding. One problem is whether interpretation should be reconstructive or deconstructive in intent. The other is whether the interpretation's account of the meaning of the interpreted entails a metabelief that the interpretation is approximating the ideal of the one right interpretation. I will call the position that believes that this ideal is posited in all interpretation monism, and the denial of monism I will label pluralism.

The debate about deconstruction is too complex to be summarized here, and I will therefore limit myself to the issue of what follows directly from Sections 31 and 32 of *Being and Time* for this controversy. The issue has two sides, a methodological one and a political one. The methodological one turns on the question whether Heidegger's insistence on the circle of understanding does not simply imprison us in our own outlook, blocking us from recognizing the otherness or alterity of the text. The political issue arises from Heidegger's further insistence that the fore-structure of understanding forms our interpretations in advance. Thus, interpreters inherit from their tradition much of the background of their readings. From the deconstructive point of view the hermeneutic position that accepts Heidegger's analysis is too traditionalist and thus politically suspect because it seems unable to challenge the cultural and political status quo.

The countercharges against deconstruction are easy to imagine. Methodologically, deconstruction will appear to be fantasizing an escape from the circle of understanding by its dalliance with an impossible "outside" where meaning is undecidable and thus hopelessly multiple and fractured. Politically, its critique will seem pointless, since the fantasy of a complete break with tradition can lead nowhere. Deconstruction will seem to be neglecting Heidegger's insistence that we find ourselves already thrown into a social situation, which has specific concrete possibilities but also real limitations. Deconstruction's own faith that any construction can be deconstructed will lead to an undirected resistance that will be ineffective because of its inability to generate a positive construction of its own.

Unfortunately, these charges and countercharges may obscure the reach of Heidegger's original account of the hermeneutic circle. That account did not envision the specific controversy that I have sketched. Without minimizing this controversy, which is stimulating much current work in literary theory and social philosophy, I will outline some ways in which Heidegger's account can accommodate central features of both the reconstructive and the deconstructive enterprises.

Before this reconciliation can begin, however, the issue of monism versus pluralism must be clarified. Part of the deconstructive worry about the hermeneutic recovery of meaning may be caused by a suspicion that this recovery presupposes the monistic ideal of the one final, right interpretation. Much can be said for that ideal, yet in the exposition that I have given of Heidegger's account I have deliberately stressed the elements in it that I find pointing toward an antimonistic pluralism. Heidegger's account of "meaning" in his technical sense may seem monistic because it posits a whole, a totality of involvements, a single context in which interpretation may take place. My insistence on the holistic nature of meaning in this special sense suggests, however, that the context is always revisable, and that revision will come from within the context of
belief itself. This holism implies, therefore, that while the task of understanding strives to be coherent and unified, it must always recognize that there are elements in it that have not been worked through explicitly and that may be inconsistent with other central commitments. So the context can always turn out to include inadequate elements. The drive of understanding toward a single coherent position is thus compatible with its allowance for the inevitability of hidden error and bias, and the recognition that no interpretation is final.

Other aspects of Heidegger’s account that support the meta-position of pluralism include his revision of the ordinary conception of truth and his description of the fore-structure of projective understanding. While interpretations contain true statements, one cannot adjudicate between conflicting interpretations simply by counting the true statements that would be entailed by each one. Other criteria (such as richness, relevance to the present, genuineness, or authenticity) come into play, and these more normative considerations can lead us to prefer some interpretations to others. But the criteria are themselves interpretable and do not obviously support the monistic belief in a single exclusive interpretation. Furthermore, Heidegger’s account of understanding as projection suggests that explicit interpretations always arise from implicit needs. The appearance of a new interpretation is likely to generate new needs, and these will in turn stimulate further interpretation. That the circle of understanding is never closed need not raise the specter of epistemological relativism. The nihilistic conclusion that our present interpretations are mostly false does not follow from the pluralistic thought that they will be altered by future generations, for whom the context and the background conditions will have changed.

Heidegger himself may not have fully accepted this pluralistic conclusion about his own theory of Dasein in Being and Time. I noted Heidegger’s apparent desire to outdo Kant with Heidegger’s own suggestion that Section 31 rivals Kant’s transcendental deduction. But I also pointed out another reading of Heidegger’s enterprise, one that takes seriously his claim that the account of Dasein has the metastatus of an interpretation, in the sense of an Interpretierung. Taking seriously this metaposition of interpretive pluralism allows us to imagine ways in which Heidegger’s account of understanding could be expanded and modified. One way it can be modified is to take the hermeneutic turn more radically than Heidegger did in 1927, allowing language a more central role by modeling the account of understanding more explicitly on reading, as Gadamer did in 1960. Another way would be to recognize more explicitly and strategically how understanding can directly challenge meaning and how much more conscious the rhetorical play of language can become. The latter way was the achievement of Derrida and the deconstructive movement from the late sixties to the present.

If these modifications are granted, it must also be recognized that they are prefigured in Being and Time itself. Whatever Heidegger’s personal politics were, the text of Being and Time allows for the deconstructivist suspicion of simply recovering the tradition. Heidegger insists that the tradition may need to be criticized, and he reminds us that the “tradition” is not simply the “past.” The past is finished, and there would be no point in criticizing it since the criticism could have no effect on the past. What we (and poststructuralists like Derrida and Michel Foucault) may need to criticize is the present, or more specifically, the present’s interpretation of how it has come to be what it is, which is what “tradition” is. The criticism of the “traditional” in the present need not be presented as a complete break with tradition, but more reasonably as a break with a prevalent but mistaken understanding of the tradition’s possibilities. So an effective criticism will see places where the present has misconstrued the possibilities inherited from the tradition, and it will also draw our attention to concrete possibilities in the tradition that have currently been lost from sight.10

If political, social, and historical criticism is to be genuinely possible on the Heideggerian account, however, there must be some resolution of the methodological question that I raised about whether we are not always imprisoned in our own cognitive and normative standpoint. This problem seems to follow from Heidegger’s general claim that we can understand something only from within a context that we bring with us already. If the circle of understanding were static, this worry would be justified. But close attention to Heidegger’s text shows that he thinks of the circle as a dynamic process of making aspects of the implicit background explicit and then testing standard assumptions to see if they really hold up, given the rest of what we believe and do. Hence, he speaks of testing assumptions against the “things themselves” to make “the scientific theme secure” [BT 195].
Gadamer's own theory in *Truth and Method* (see pp. 254–71) is built around an explication of these sections of *Being and Time*. Gadamer replies to the charge that, on the hermeneutic account, understanding is always imprisoned in its own standpoint by pointing out that in interpreting a text our own preconceptions often do not work out. The text may give us a shock by showing us a side of the subject matter that we had not anticipated. So the circle of understanding is a dynamic one where preconceptions will either work out or fail. Heidegger himself had spoken of genuine understanding as that which gets beyond "fancies" and "popular conceptions," and these are precisely what come to nothing when the interpreter tries explicitly to work them out.

Gadamer thus insists that it is false to conclude that the hermeneutic circle cannot recognize the alterity of the text. I would add that deconstruction could indeed be a crucial moment in the circle of interpretation, for its techniques could be used to ensure that the alterity of the text was taken seriously enough. The circle of understanding should not be purely reconstructive, if by that is meant either that the interpreter reads only what is already familiar back into the text or that in the effort to find a unity of meaning the interpreter should overlook tensions and contradictions that are also at play. But the circle could also not be purely deconstructive, since there must first be an assumed meaning that is deconstructed, and the discovery of tension and contradiction is itself a projection of an understanding of what is really going on in the text.

Heidegger's model of projective understanding can therefore recognize both reconstruction and deconstruction as necessary moments of interpretation. How these are balanced in particular cases is itself a matter of judgment and may be part of what makes interpretations interestingly different. What makes some interpretations more interesting or insightful than others is a question that I suggested at the beginning of this essay and is an appropriate one with which to conclude. While the question is a large one, there is at least the outline of an answer in these sections of *Being and Time*. At least one central aspect of what makes an interpretation better will be whether it understands not only its object and subject matter, but also itself. Interpretations that are methodologically more self-aware are therefore better if they bring to light unnoticed features not only of the object of interpretation, but also of the conditions and procedures of interpretation. A good interpretation, on Heidegger's model, will show something about the possibilities of interpretation as such. An interpretation presupposes a self-understanding, and bringing crucial features of this implicit self-understanding to light will make the interpretation insightful (in Heidegger's special sense of sight, which is not simply the perception of present-at-hand objects, but the disclosure of the total background or context).

As I have suggested, however, self-understanding is not to be taken in the traditional sense in which it might suggest grasping some inner, private self. In German, "self-understanding" ([sichverstehen]) has to do with knowing one's way around. So for Heidegger, who construes Dasein as being-in-the-world, self-understanding thus has to do with knowing one's way around in the world or in some specific worldly subject matter. That Heidegger was himself interpreting Dasein and not simply a text does not signify a conflict with later hermeneutic theory. Instead, his *interpretierung* of Dasein brings out a double-sided possibility of interpretation. On the one side, genuine interpretation will reflect the being who is interpreting. So there must be some dimension of the interpreter's context that is itself brought into focus. On the other side, who this being is will itself depend on its interpretations of the world, including its beliefs and its activities. So on the Heideggerian account any good interpretation should disclose something about both Dasein and the world. Interpretation is, after all, the way that both meaningful human existence and a significant world become what they are.

**Notes**

2. Ibid.
5. Or at least, all understanding is interpretive in the sense of *auslegung*, not necessarily in the sense of *interpretierung*. Richard Shusterman raises the objection under discussion here in his article "Beneath Interpretation: Against Hermeneutic Holism," *Monist* 73, No. 2 [1990]: 181–204.

7 For the Heideggerian critique of epistemological foundationalism see Charles Guignon, Heidegger and the Problem of Knowledge (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1983), esp. pp. 150–82.


7 Death, time, history: Division II of Being and Time

This certainty, that “I myself am in that I will die,” is the basic certainty of Dasein itself. . . . The MORIBUNDUS first gives the SUM its sense. (HCT 316–17)

Only in dying can I to some extent say absolutely, “I am.” (HCT 318)

Modern philosophy turns away from things in the world and zeroes in on the human self that grasps them in thought and transforms them in action. The self becomes the repository of both their truth and their ultimate purposes. By the same token, the human self is given the status of the self-grounding ground of reality. In this new and exalted status, the self ceases to be viewed as part and parcel of some independent order of things. Beginning with Descartes’s cogito, the self withdraws from the world and falls back on its own experiences and thoughts. The subjectivity of the self supplies both the point of departure and the validating ground for various philosophical attempts at a reconstruction of our knowledge of the world.

One of Heidegger’s aims in Being and Time was to question and to overcome this subjectivist tradition of modern philosophy. I hope to show, however, that in Division II of Being and Time Heidegger reveals himself as an heir to that tradition and to its model of the human self.

The Human Self

In the very first section of Division II (BT 274–8) Heidegger makes two claims whose importance to the entire philosophical project he is pursuing in his opus magnum cannot be overestimated. In the first