Religion is quickly regaining a central role in public life, and as philosophers, especially as philosophers in the phenomenological tradition, we cannot deny it this prominence. Yet at the same time, we recognize the problems of religious fundamentalism and religiously motivated conflict. The convictions concerning ultimate reality held by particular religions, truths that transcend culture and determine the highest good seem to be incompatible with peaceful coexistence.

Given this cultural context, how can philosophical hermeneutics address the current need for intercultural and inter-religious understanding, a need that includes the full recognition of religion as essential part of our humanity? It is well known that this question occupied Gadamer during his final years. He suggested that the task of hermeneutic philosophy, indeed of humanity, is to clear the ground for a global dialogue on the issue of transcendence that fully integrates the great world religions. In this essay, I simply want to raise the question whether philosophical hermeneutics is up to this task. In order to do so, I will first establish the ethos of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutic philosophy, and then examine Emmanuel Levinas’s challenge to this ethos as a case study of the encounter between Gadamer’s hermeneutical idea of transcendence and a theologically inspired notion of transcendence.

The Ethics of Philosophical Hermeneutics

Does philosophical hermeneutics have an ethics? By “ethics,” I do not mean a detailed moral code but ethics in the Levinasian sense of acknowledging being-with and being-for-others as the starting point and limitation of human consciousness. More precisely, we could ask, how does the hermeneutic ethos, the spirit of hermeneutics and its habit of thinking, deal with the other? And how does it deal with the religious other?

As James Risser asserted in *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*, Gadamer’s hermeneutic philosophy is not accidentally but fundamentally shaped as a philosophy of address by the other: “Understanding comes not from the subject who thinks, but from the other that addresses me.” We know that two important influences that shaped Gadamer’s hermeneutic ethos are Hegel and Heidegger. It would be wrong, however, to reduce his position to either one of their respective philosophies. While Hegel taught him that encountering the other is quintessential to thought, Gadamer also recognizes the ultimately monological nature of Hegel’s dialectic.

Neither does Gadamer’s simply adopt Heideggerian ontology; rather he supplies its greatest lack: a personal, truly human relation. Gadamer makes clear that his entire work was an attempt to interpret the meaning of Heidegger’s thrownness as determination by the other lest we succumb to our finitude:

What I intended to show Heidegger already in Marburg, and developed further in the Lisbon lecture and other work, is that the actual meaning of our finitude or thrownness consists not only in the awareness that we are historically conditioned but in our awareness of being delimited by the other. . . . the only way not to succumb to our finitude is to open oneself up to the other, to listen to the Thou in front of us.

We find the same claim to have overcome Hegel’s and Heidegger’s reductive conceptions of otherness in Gadamer’s defense.
against Derrida's accusation that philosophical hermeneutics hankers after logocentric metaphysics of full presence. Gadamer is charged with defining understanding as familiarity and sameness, thus suppressing difference. Gadamer explains, however, that if deconstructionists paid more careful attention to his use of logos, they would find that Aristotle's idea of logos for the linguisticity of our being in the world and the nature of truth does not allow for any assimilative metaphysics whatsoever.

In drawing from and extending Aristotle's logos concept, Gadamer claims that reason as embedded in language itself allows the necessary reflective distance that prevents total integration of the other. The essence of language, in other words, is reason working in conversation. Hence the very logos which constitutes the transcendent universality of hermeneutics assures through its dialogical manifestation the particularity of each interpretation and therefore avoids inhuman totalities. Gadamer argues that “this constitutes a superior experience insofar as it surpasses [Heidegger's] Gemeinheit of Dasein and its fallenness in the world. There is no subjective consciousness, neither of the speaker nor of the interlocutor, which is able to comprehend that which emerges in a conversation.”

In defining the hermeneutic ethos, Gadamer finally concludes that a hermeneutic conception of truth is reflected not so much in the experience of the beautiful, i.e., not in aesthetics, as it is in the experience of the other in conversation. Gadamer returns again and again to the notion of logos as the very basis of human understanding and finds here hope for a global dialogue on issues central for our survival. In short, logos is the foundation of what we may call Gadamer’s post-metaphysicalhumanism: “To show in all circumstances the ability to enter into conversation, that is, to listen to the other, it seems to me, is the genuine elevation of human being to humanity.”

Gadamer’s reception of the Aristotelian logos enables him to posit a basic openness and translatability of languages and cultures one into another without negating their particularity. In our very historicalness (Geschichtlichkeit), our linguistic and cultural differences may be transcended (without negating them) toward a greater understanding of our humanity: “It is precisely through our finitude, the particularity of our existence, which is reflected in linguistic differences, that the infinite conversation which we are toward truth opens itself up to us.” The plurality of languages, Gadamer tells us, does not demonstrate a fragmented logos but points through the infinite openness of all languages to our common journey towards truth. Thus, in principle, global intercultural dialogue is always possible on the basis of a universal common logos. For Gadamer this ability to converse is indeed what defines our humanity.

Gadamer’s dialogical ethos gains its direction from his belief that the good manifests itself as logos in language. Within ontology, therefore, the ethical occurs precisely in the dialogical. Because of its dialogical nature, we cannot really understand or even ultimately determine the good through conceptual knowledge. Instead, the good manifests itself as wisdom, as the practical knowledge Gadamer finds in Aristotle’s idea of phronesis.

This wisdom, Gadamer tells us, is not simply the practical application of a communal ethos (if it were, Habermas’ initial worries concerning the vicious hermeneutical circle of tradition would be justified), but rather phronesis is “the mediation between Logos and Ethos,” between the universal or natural principle and the historically and culturally conditioned Ethos within which concrete ethical judgments have to be made. In other words, the Good can only be had in concrete, particular application (as wisdom).

Gadamer, however, is not satisfied with saying that reason operates in language and tradition as phronesis but also inquires toward what end it operates. While he talks about the exigency of universal reason behind our desire for understanding, Gadamer also offers us a goal of understanding as both the foundation and task for all of humanity.

Phronesis, the concrete situational application of our factic ethos, of our cultural-moral horizon, functions within a global sensus communis, a common humanity motivated by the threat of humanity’s self-destruction. Within this greater interpretive whole, encountering otherness draws us out of our own narrow, controllable horizon and broadens our self-understanding. By recognizing ourselves in the other, we become increasingly aware of
our interdependent participation in the whole.\textsuperscript{16} This is the task of humanity (Menschheitsaufgabe) which gives direction to the hermeneutical ethos, and Grondin is right to call it a humanism, a humanism whose faith in self-understanding and reason is carefully qualified but essentially unbroken.\textsuperscript{17}

To return to our initial question: does philosophical hermeneutics have an ethics? It does insofar as Gadamer advocates an ontology of being-toward, which goes beyond Heidegger’s Mitsein because it posits a genuinely relational context for understanding. In this context, the other becomes constitutive of my being. I am addressed no longer by Heidegger’s impersonal voice of Being, but the Good, or that which lends my existence purpose, now addresses me through the voice of the other in his or her concrete historicity as part of the human community in which we all participate in and whose common, if ultimately undefinable horizon is the logos. Gadamer understood clearly that this social ontology sets the ethos of philosophical hermeneutics apart from Heidegger’s philosophy. Gadamer believed that his hermeneutics was indeed more ethical than Heidegger’s Mitsein because his Miteinander more adequately recognizes the true sociality of understanding.\textsuperscript{18}

In short, the ethics of philosophical hermeneutics is best described as being-toward-the other, and this ethos forms the basis of what I have called Gadamer’s post-metaphysical humanism. For Gadamer this humanism was not a mere private, academic affair; rather the acquisition of self-knowledge through encountering the other in service of our common humanity is eminently political: to find the limits of our interpretations in the other and truly to risk our own worldview in conversation was seen by Gadamer as the very definition of politics if humanity as a global polis is to survive at all.\textsuperscript{19}

**“Religious” Transcendence in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics**

In his final years, Gadamer became increasingly convinced that hermeneutics had to incorporate religious transcendence if it was to succeed in preparing the ground for a global inter-cultural and inter-faith conversation. Gadamer bases the need for including religious transcendence not merely negatively on the demise of scientific objectivism as the measure of truth but positively on phenomenological analysis.

In his essay “Dancken und Gedenken,” an explicitly Augustinian exercise in phenomenology, Gadamer traces the divine or transcendent in human experience—in this case in the language of gratitude. Gadamer argues that thanking is always an excess, something irreducible to convention or nature; thanking is “always an experience of transcendence.”\textsuperscript{20}

And so his analysis of gratitude opens up onto something like religious transcendence. At this point the phenomenological description of thankfulness reveals to Gadamer the religious notion of the hidden God which now gains “universal significance.” Here the universal logos points to the absolute limit of human understanding, to a religious sense of transcendence.\textsuperscript{21} Gadamer believes that the task of humanity and indeed of philosophy is the pursuit of this universal transcendence. Only a common understanding of transcendence, as it emerges in conversation with the great world religions, can pull humanity back from the brink of self-destruction.\textsuperscript{22}

We have arrived at Gadamer’s idea of transcendence as a religiously experienced limit of human knowledge, his famous “Ignoramus.”\textsuperscript{23} This neo-Platonic concept of universal transcendence posits a transcendent beyond being (Jenseits) which by its very nature is undefinable.\textsuperscript{24} Ignoramus is the final stop of human finitude before the incomprehensible—the absolute limit of our knowledge. Here the problem of hermeneutic universality becomes the universality of the hidden God, the transcendent of not-knowing. This is not negative theology, but the end of all knowledge, the sheer absence of any content or particularity. Gadamer is not describing an abstract intellectual concept but an attempt to do justice to our human yearning for something greater. For, this religious sense (religiöses Gefühl) is humanity’s last hope to effect a global inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue. This is the last and greatest ethical task of humanity, which is inseparable from hermeneutics, from our efforts at self-understanding.\textsuperscript{25}

Thus Gadamer adds religious transcendence to the universality of the hermeneutic ethos described now as understanding’s irre-
ducibly linguistic nature,26 which is ethical because in its very historicity we encounter a universal transcendent that should bind us together. In this being-together-with as a being-toward-one-another, the highest principle of hermeneutics—to hold oneself open to conversation27—is grounded in something greater and possibly more positive than Gadamer’s earlier notion of solidarity based on the fear of humanity’s self destruction, though he still hopes that this fear will encourage us to seek out the universal transcendent.28

In seeking to dialogue with religion, the hermeneutic ethos of radical openness and Gadamer’s conception of universal transcendence show their greatest nobility and also their greatest limitations. I mean that Gadamer’s universal transcendence, ignoramus as the religious sense of our finitude, purchases its universal appeal of radical openness at the price of religious particularity.29 Gadamer fails to understand the intrinsic nature of religious faith, when he assumes that a neo-Platonic logos can provide common ground for all of humanity. What he fails to see is that, for most religions, particularity, i.e. doctrine, is not a convenient ornament to faith and practice, but that religion as practical, lived faith depends for its very life on doctrinally delineated ontological models that are in conflict with his own teaching of transcendence.

Gadamer believed that hermeneutic philosophy could clear the ground for a much needed inter-faith dialogue by offering a general, Neo-platonic notion of transcendence.30 Yet it is precisely this concept that is challenged by many religious notions of transcendence.31 One case in point is the Judeo-Christian religion. We will briefly turn to Emmanuel Levinas’s ethical philosophy to examine the challenge of religious transcendence for hermeneutics.

Levinas’s Ethical Transcendence

Levinas offers us a fundamentally different model of transcendence in two important aspects. The first difference is directional: Whereas Gadamer pursues a neo-Platonic conception of ascent by which the mind rises within its finitude toward the transcendent ceiling of understanding, Levinas proceeds on the Hebrew model of revelation in which the defining categories of our humanity and reason break into reality from beyond being.

The second difference between hermeneutic and religious transcendence is the idea of personal encounter. The Hebrew idea of revelation is tied to the notion of personal address with definite content. Since personal encounter cannot be relativized in the light of a greater impersonal transcendence, Levinas’s transcendence is more radically ethical than Gadamer’s. While both seek a social starting point for interpretation, Levinas’s “phenomenology of sociality,” argues not merely for a being-with or even being-toward, but defines ethics as being-for-the-other. Here otherness impresses on us the ethical injunction against usurping our neighbor’s being, of not in any way impeding the others’ flourishing in life. This transcendence of the other demands from us responsibility to the point of substitution. We are asked to be-for-the-other,32 to fear for his or her life, not because of any possible benefit but because this is the nature of true human being prior to all other reflection.33 Neither my survival nor that of an abstract humanity, but the concrete life of the person next to me constitutes transcendence.

While Levinas misunderstands central aspects of hermeneutics,34 his one true challenge is the nature of transcendence. In Gadamer, transcendence does come through the other but is still ultimately grounded in an indefinable something. In Levinas, by contrast, transcendence is the concrete human he or she all the way down, or rather all the way up, even up to the God who comes to mind.

For Gadamer meaning is the exigency of a universal rationality, a logos inherent in being in which we participate and because of which we want to understand things in a meaningful way. For Levinas, by contrast, meaning is primordially relational rather than cognitive. Meaning, he says, “begins in the spiritual, in the initial fact that man is concerned with the other man.” The ethical moment of personal, ethical transcendence is “the first notion of signifying, to which reason may be traced, and that cannot be reduced to anything else. It is phenomenologically irreducible: meaning means.”35 There is no greater impersonal logos behind the ethical encounter. If anything, in Levinas we find the ultimate other, God.
Levinas tells us that transcendence is itself an expression of God, the site of where the word 'God' becomes meaning, the place of “the first prayer, of the first liturgy.”

Seen through Levinasian eyes, Gadamer’s Greek ontology, for all its talk about the otherness, still resolves the personal ethical relation into an ultimate impersonal Logos as the ground of our understanding. To put the difference rather crudely: Gadamer looks beyond the other and behind religion and sees general transcendence. We respond to the other and the religious other, because of logos. For Levinas, there is nothing behind the other; the ethical encounter is what determines the nature of the logos and the nature of transcendence. Who not what. Not Miteinandersein, not even Zueinandersein, but Fürereinanderdasein, not interpretation but substitution for the other, not understanding but response to the other’s ineluctable call toward responsibility is the primordial determination of being.

**Conclusion**

Gadamer’s hope that philosophical hermeneutics can mediate in a global dialogue between different cultures and religions rests on a notion of universal transcendence that is essential to the soul of hermeneutics; yet this very concept of transcendence poses a serious barrier to hermeneutics’ ability to mediate between world religions. The same hermeneutic ethos which makes possible intercultural dialogue by affirming the essential translatability of languages and customs, the hermeneutic ethos whose logos carries phenomenology to the border lands of transcendence and the universality of the hidden God also demands rather dogmatically that God cannot show up in phenomenology. In essence, Gadamer asks a large percentage of humanity to forgo their positive religious identity, the very thing that defines their humanity, their particular beliefs for humanity’s sake. What happened to the hermeneutic ethos of learning from the other? Can hermeneutics deal with the insight that its own deepest assumptions are indeed a faith in Greek cosmology that filters its phenomenological findings just as much as Levinas’s Judaic roots?

When Gadamer asks religions to give up this revelatory model, to give up the idea of personal encounter that defines the Judeo-Christian religion, he is willing to sacrifice the very heart of this faith on the altar of understanding. And like the Judeo-Christian idea of transcendence, the universality of many religions is simply not separable from their particularity. If hermeneutics wants to foster world-religious dialogue, it cannot simply advance its own neo-Platonic faith in the ineffable reality of transcendence. This move may seem to possess the greater reverence toward the inexpressible mystery of the divine and a greater humility, but its own implicit arrogance lies in assuming an impersonal logos and the impossibility of the revelatory model of personal transcendence we find in Judaism, Christianity, and also in the Islamic religion.

So it may well be that, at least philosophically, the preparation for a religious conversation through philosophy has to begin with discussions on the nature of reason and phenomenology. Hermeneutics, to be true to itself, must recognize its own historically effected limitations and keep the logos open not only beyond a scientific model of truth but also beyond a Greek conception of reason as impersonal, ineffable transcendent.

**ENDNOTES**


2. According to Gadamer, in *Die Lektion des Jahrhunderts* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2002), the pressing philosophical task of philosophy is to prepare a dialogue between the world religions by discovering in each one a moment of “the great chain we call transcendence” (80). We need to notion of transcendence in order to come to our senses (um vernünftig zu werde) and Gadamer believes that “certainly we have to be clear that this is the task for philosophy today. I am also of the opinion that this is the preparation to a global conversation (eines Weltgesprächs), and we have to


6. Gadamer makes a similar remark on reason in his Selbstdarstellung: “The universality of the hermeneutical problem, which Schleiermacher already recognized, aims at the All of reason, that is, at all that for which we can seek to understand one another. . . . The possibility of understanding cannot every be denied among rational beings. Even the relativism which seems to lie in the multiplicity of human language, is not a barrier for reason, whose word is common to all, as Heraklitus already knew” (Wahrheit Und Methode: Ergänzungen und Register, 497).

7. “Früromantik, Hermeneutik, Dekonstrukтивismus” (1987), in GW 10:128. By using Aristotle’s practical philosophy, Gadamer could go beyond Heidegger: “And so it became possible for me to develop further the impulse I had received first from Kierkegaard and later from Heidegger also with the practical philosophy of Aristoteles and to define the essence of language as conversational. This insight constitutes insofar a superior experience over the one Heidegger developed in his analysis of Daseins that it surpasses his ‘Jemeinigkeit’ and its falleness to the world. [My concept] posits no subjective consciousness (neither of the speaker nor of the interlocutor) which can fully comprehend that which emerges during a conversation.”

8. “Ethos und Ethik,” in GW 3: 357: “But what I tried to develop as hermeneutic philosophy is foundation which is not based alone, nor even preferably, on the model of art. In Truth and Method the analysis of aesthetics has only an introductory function for me. As the structure of my book shows, everything ends in the basic character of linguisticality to be dialogical. It is the experience of the other which seems so fundamental to me and which has been so little surpassed by modern progress in Logic and semantic-linguistic analysis that this progress cannot put into question my basic position.”

9. “Nonetheless to become capable of dialogue, that is, to listen to the other, is in my opinion the actual elevation of man to humanity” (GW 2: 214).

10. “In that sense [of a wanting-to-say which opens onto the infinite possibilities of linguistic utterances] any language in which we live is infinite, and it is completely wrong to conclude that, just because we have different languages, we also have a cleft [zerklüftet] reason. The opposite is true. Just on this path of our finitude, the particularity of our being, which also manifests itself in these linguistic differences, does the infinite conversation which we are open onto truthd.” “Die Universalität des hermeneutischen Problems” (GW 2: 230).

11. “And so I brought dialectics and dialogue together. In this way dialectics is transformed from a sceptical-historicist worldview into the ethical dimensions of dialogue. That was the topic of the my habilitation: Platons dialektische Ethik” (Die Lektion Des Jahrhunderts, 30–31).


13. “All these concepts [virtues] are not just arbitrary ideals conditioned by convention, but despite all the variety of moral ideas in the most different times and peoples, in this sphere there is still something like the nature of the thing. This is not to say that the nature of the thing—e.g. the ideal of bravery—is a fixed standard that we could recognize and apply by ourselves. Rather, Aristotle affirms... that he too is always involved in a moral and political context and acquires his image of the thing from this standpoint. [The guiding principles] are valid only as schemata. . . . They are not norms to be found in the stars nor do they have an unchanging place in the natural moral universe, so that all that would be necessary would be to perceive them. Nor are they mere conventions, but really do correspond to the nature of the thing—except that the latter is always itself determined in each case by the use of the moral consciousness makes of them” (Truth and Method, 320).

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14. With Hegel, Gadamer posits what he calls “the exigence of reason, which presses us to keep on bringing about the unity of our knowledge.” The task of self understanding is ever before us. Under this umbrella all disciplines labor: the sciences, arts, and philosophy. Gadamer tends to think that reflection is properly the task of philosophy so that when we contemplate art, we need philosophy to make the step from admiration to appropriating it in self understanding. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 18.

15. *Truth and Method*, 320–24. See also Gadamer’s explanation in “Das ontologische Problem des Wertes”: “Ethics cannot be anything but the sheer self-enlightenment of the concretely determined Ethos. . . . *Arete* is the insight determining moral behaviour. Insight, however, is not a theoretical capacity of recognition, but insight springs itself from a ethical determination of being (*Seins-bestimmheit*). It is reasonableness (*Vernünftigkeit*) (*Phronesis*). It effects an original illumination of the respective situation which demands a decision” (GW 4:201).

16. In “Die Vielfalt Europas: Erbe und Zukunft,” in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Das Erbe Europas* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), Gadamer describes this as the task of the humanities because they stand closest to the life of cultures which demand not only knowledge but recognition (*Annerkennung*). Thus in their provenance lies the encounter with otherness, “the otherness, the recognition of ourselves, the encountering again of the other in language, art, religion, law, and history, which may lead us into true commonalities,” He concludes by extolling otherness as the ground of understanding and possibility of human survival: “But where learning to dominate something is not at stake, we will especially learn to experience the otherness of the other in his being other through our own prejudices. This is the ultimate and the noblest what we can achieve and strive for, to gain a share in the other, to participate in the other. And so it may not be too daring to draw the final political consequence of what we have said by saying that we might survive as humanity if we can succeed in learning that we cannot simply exercise our means of power and possible impact to their highest capacity, but we have to learn to arrest ourselves before the other as other, before nature as well as before other cultures and nations, so that we in this way experience otherness and others as the others of ourselves, to participate one in another” (33–34).

17. “[Humanism] is the acknowledgment that as finite beings we never cease to learn. And given that philosophical humanism is nothing but the modest openness to truths that can help us raise above our indigence, hermeneutics is a humanism.” Jean Grondin, *Sources of Hermeneutics* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1995), 123. Gadamer has presented his basic position on reason in an essay titled “Die Macht der Vernunft,” in *Lab der Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991) in which he already formulates his basic position that the Greeks gave us the notion of practical reason and with it the almost impossible task of humanity, “which is for man to direct his thought not toward his own advantage but to the common good” (54). In this essay he also already states that Aristotle’s reason is not restricted to practical application of principle: “Rather, reasonableness is a human comportment, something one keeps and keeps to in order to recreate always anew and preserve the human moral order one has established through common norms” (55). We also find in this essay the relativising power of reason over all dogmatic truth assertions: “Reason is engaged in a constant effort of understanding even about itself and its own conditions.” And so reason (*Vernunft*) objects to “any dogmatism, no matter where it comes from.” Here is the anticipation of ignoramus: “We cannot reach such a great mystery in following solely one path” (66–67).

18. “*Mitein* is a concession Heidegger had to make, but which he held without real conviction. Already back then, when he developed this concept, he wasn’t really talking about the other. . . . Care (*Sorge*) is always caring for one’s own existence, and *Mitein* is in actuality a very weak thinking about the other, it is more a letting-the-other-be than an actual being-turned-towards him.” Gadamer adds that Heidegger acknowledged this difference: “He acknowledged that I connected more with the thought about the other than he did with the idea of Mitseine. Being-with is a weakening, because the “with” leaves open whether the other is also a Dasein; this “also” functions, so to speak, as justification for his conscience” (*Die Lektion Des Jahrhunderts*, 27). Gadamer adds that Heidegger acknowledged this difference. “He acknowledged that I connected more with the thought about the other than he did with the idea of *Mitein*. Being-with is a weakening, because the ‘with’ leaves open whether the other is also a
Dasein; this ‘also’ functions, so to speak, as justification for his conscience” (ibid., 27).
19. “In the end, the humanity of our existence depends on our ability to perceive the limitations we have in our being toward the being of others (“Vom Lehrenden und Lernenden,” in Das Erbe Europas, 158).
21. “When I proceed from these considerations one step further, something announces itself on rational grounds, which is probably contained in all religious experiences. It is the doctrine of the hidden God that now gains universal significance. We have to see a task for humanity in this. The experience of the divine encounters us not only in certain churches, confessions, or traditions which raise a claim to orthodoxy, or in cultural circles, nor does it fulfill itself in a watered down world religion” (ibid., 212).
22. “We have to realize that our desire for transcendence, which our European thought contains, is secretly present everywhere, and we should organize this realization. . . . How could we do this? Well, we could do it, perhaps, if the four major world religions could agree on the recognition of transcendence as the great unknown, then they could likely prevent the destruction of the earth’s surface through gas or chemicals. There is only this solution left. There is not other” (Die Lektion des Jahrhunderts, 139).
23. For Gadamer transcendence is not belief in God but “something incomprehensible . . . that is all we can say today.” In this sense, Gadamer agrees with Jasper: “The ignoramus is the foundation of transcendence” (ibid., 85).
24. “We cannot hide, however, that we cannot simply recant from Neo-Platonism. For us, transcendence is a very good expression to say that we are not sure what the beyond looks like, or that it is such and such. None of us can say that we possess it. There simply a whole lot we cannot say, about the mystery of birth of life, and of death” (Lehrjahre, 81).
25. “This final ethical task cannot be separated from the task of questioning and understanding our own existence” (ibid., 153).
26. “And in this way we have to understand the claim to universality, attributed to the hermeneutic dimension. Understanding is tied to language.” This does not amount to linguistic and cultural relativism because the same logos underlies all languages. See “Die Universalität des hermeneutischen Problems,” in GW 2: 230. In the same essay Gadamer describes question and answer as the primordial hermeneutical phenomenon based on an already understandable, ordered world: “This is the primordial hermeneutic phenomenon, that there is no possible utterance which cannot be understood as an answer to a question, and that it can only be understood this way” (ibid., 226).
28. “If this fear so to speak, threatens everyone, then we may have some hope that humanity can agree in a reasonable manner on the notion of transcendence” (Lektion des Jahrhunderts, 152).
29. Michael King addresses this problem in his Fractured Dance (Telford: Pandora Press, 2001), when he observes that Gadamer’s position “leaves inadequate room for conversation partners who believe the essential integrity of their prejudice will be violated by any compromise which moderates their initial stance. They hold the stance precisely because it is the one “right” stance required to be true to their community and their understanding of its doctrines. How can they allow their stance to be enlarged?” (172–73). King suggests “The Gadamerian correction is this: perhaps genuine openness includes receptivity to the possibility that even closed positions can enlarge the prejudices of the ostensibly open minded” (173). And a little later he observes correctly: “But at a minimum it appears that particularly those who advocate openness from the outset bear the burden of remaining open even when it hurts” (174). King also reminds us that Gadamer believes in the assumption of completeness and therefore for Gadamer truth is “connected to what emerges as self-evident within the human community,” which may at least suggest a possible limit for the benefit of openness (176).
30. Instead of naming the will of God, which is what came out of the Tübingen school, Gadamer thinks: “Maybe one can say something better yet, helping a little with Neo-Platonism. . . . For us transcen-

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dence is a very good expression to say that it is not certain what exists in the beyond or that it is such and such” (Die Lektion Des Jahrhunderts, 81).

31. Gadamer believes that today’s metaphysical thinking can only begin with an adequate notion of transcendence from which follows philosophy’s mediating task for an interfaith dialogue: “that is the task for Philosophy today. I am of the opinion that this task is a preparation for a world dialogue, and we have to use this opportunity and develop this dialogue or we will perish” (ibid., 79). This global dialogue of the world religions depends on a general notion of transcendence: “Therefore is the first answer I have to give concerning the dialogical possibility of metaphysical discourse the dialogue between the different world religions which philosophy has to prepare by discovering in each religion a moment of the great chain we call transcendence” (ibid., 80).

32. Levinas elaborates this incarnate subjectivity as substitution most fully in chapter four of Other-wise than Being or Beyond Essence, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998). Levinas links the kenotic self, the subjectivity of “oneself-for-another,” with the idea of an incarnate subject. This incarnate subject needs to be fully physical and yet different from the merely biological or sociological. The self has to be incarnated as physical because “only a subject that eats can be for-the-other, or can signify. Signification, the-one-for-the-other, has meaning only among beings of flesh and blood” (74).


34. For example, Levinas’s rejection of horizon fusion as assimilation is unfounded as Gadamer has himself explained: “Derrida meanwhile has completely agreed with me, after I explained to him in Neaples that horizon talked about in the fusion of horizons, is nothing one can ever reach, not a metaphysical position one can occupy. Since then he is completely on my side. The horizon of interpretation changes constantly, just as our visual horizon changes with every step we take” (Die Lektion des Jahrhunderts, 67).

35. Levinas, Alterity and Transcendence, 173.


37. See here Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s astute analysis of Neo-Platonism and the citation of the senator Symachis to the Emperor Valentinian II’s defense of paganism in Neoplatonic terms akin to Varro’s philosophy, a citation which bears remarkable resemblance to Gadamer’s ignoramus: “It is the same thing that we all worship; we all think the same; we look up to the same stars; there is one sky above us, one world around us; what difference does it make with what kind of method the individual seeks truth? We cannot all follow the same path to reach so great a mystery,” Ratzinger comments: “We do not know truth as such; yet in a variety of images, we all express the same thing. So great a mystery as the Divinity cannot be fixed in one image which would exclude all others. . . . He is practicing the ethic of tolerance who recognizes in each one a little of the truth, who does not set his own above what is strange to him, and who peacefully takes his place in the multiform symphony of the eternally unattainable that hides itself in symbols, symbols that yet seem to be the only way we have to grasp in some sense the Divinity.” Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions (San Francisco Ignatius, 2004), 176.

38. When rejecting revelation, Gadamer usually refers to the medieval Thomistic philosophy, which resolves all tensions in the infinite mind of God. The Aristotelian notion that knowledge is only in enactment is ever the model according to which Gadamer rejects any notion that we can actually behold truth abstractly, that we can know the mind of God: “the model of practical philosophy has to replace this ‘Theoria’ whose ontological legitimation could be found only in an intellectus infinitus, of which our existential experience which is not supported by any notion of revelation, knows nothing” (“Selbstdarstellung Hans-Georg Gadamer,” GW2: 500). Gadamer had made the same point in his essay “The Nature of Things and the Language of Things,” in which he transposes correspondence from the mind of God into language. It remains a crucial observation that he can only do so with the help of an incarnational model of language as shown in part 3 of Truth and Method. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics, ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 75.

39. Ratzinger argues that this religion fits the current postmetaphysical climate all too well. While we are supposed to think that the distinction between a personal and impersonal God is merely “a penultimate distinction that does not affect essentials.” The rejection of any divinely revealed will, and
consequently of dogma, the eradication of an ethi-
cal, personal encounter comes with many prob-
lems. If I leave a personal God behind, then there
is no will, nor ultimate distinctions between good
and evil. Then both good and evil “one, just as
much as the other, is a mere surge of the waves of
being, and I am the subject to no standard… Yet if
God is a person, then the ultimate and very highest
being is also the most concrete—in that case, I am
standing under the eye of God, in the realm of his
will, of his love” (Ratzinger, Truth and Tolerance:
Christian Belief and World Religions, 103).

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