The Future of Hermeneutics

Edited by
Gert-Jan van der Heiden,
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and Theodore George

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Mohr Siebeck

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Contributions to the
International Hermeneutics Symposium

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Introduction

Towards a Living Hermeneutics

This volume gathers contributions to the *International Hermeneutics Symposium* 2023 and 2024, presented under the title *The Future of Hermeneutics*.[1] The *International Hermeneutics Symposium* has a long history, dating back to the late 1980s. It was originally set up by students of Hans-Georg Gadamer in Heidelberg to further philosophical hermeneutics in conversation with Gadamer. Among the people participating in the Heidelberg Symposium were renowned scholars such as Donatella di Cesare, Nicholas Davey, Günter Figal, Jean Grondin, James Risser, John Sallis, Dennis J. Schmidt, Lawrence Schmidt, and Ben Vedder.

After Gadamer's death in 2002, the meeting continued to be held at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, hosted initially by Günter Figal and later supported also by Bernhard Zimmermann. During this period, Figal founded the *International Yearbook for Hermeneutics / Internationales Jahrbuch für Hermeneutik* to disseminate contributions to the *International Hermeneutics Symposium*. He edited the Yearbook for twenty years, alongside Zimmermann from 2018 onwards. The description of this Yearbook still captures the sense and the stakes of the *International Hermeneutics Symposium*:

> This yearbook represents hermeneutics as one of the main trends in present-day philosophy with its counterparts in other sectors of the humanities. Hermeneutics sees itself as a successor to German idealism and to the philosophy which originated in Germany and Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries. In a broad sense, hermeneutics can be seen here as a counterbalance to analytical philosophy.
>
> The yearbook considers all approaches: Historically and systematically it is open to all fields of research which can be connected to the range of questions posed by hermeneutics, whether of a critical or an affirmative nature. Thus it does not only represent the research which refers to hermeneutical thinking in a narrow sense, for example the philosophies of Nietzsche, Dilthey or Heidegger. It places particular emphasis on the reference to antiquity as the origin of European philosophy.[2]

In 2022, Gert-Jan van der Heiden and Anna Novokhatko took over the role of editor of the *International Yearbook for Hermeneutics* and published volume 21 of the Yearbook on finiteness. This co-editorship was meant to continue and enhance

[1] We would like to thank the Radboud University, Nijmegen, for generously supporting the 2024 Symposium, both intellectually and financially, in cooperation with its Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies and its Center for Contemporary European Philosophy.

[2] See the website of Mohr-Siebeck: https://www.mohrsiebeck.com/en/monograph-series/international-yearbook-for-hermeneutics-iyh/.

the reciprocal influence of philosophy, literature, and literary criticism, extending an invitation to prospective participants who are interested in hermeneutics within the purview of both pure philosophy and its historical development in Ancient Greek thought and in contemporary literary studies.

Since then, additional changes have taken place in both institutional setting and publication format. The *International Hermeneutics Symposium* has found a new home at the Radboud University, Nijmegen, where it was organized in 2024 and 2025 and where it takes place also in 2026. The symposium is still dedicated to research in the spirit of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and to fostering intellectual bonds over shared philosophical concerns and intuitions. The contributions to the symposium will continue to be published, even though from this year onwards in a different, updated form, no longer as a Yearbook, but as a volume in a new series Mohr Siebeck initiated: *Post-Kantian European Philosophy*.

The challenges and concerns of hermeneutics have also changed over the years. Hermeneutics originally taught us how to approach texts, authors, and the act of reading itself. Yet today, when experience, existence, language, meaning, and interpretation are challenged by shifting cultural, technological, and ethical contexts, hermeneutics calls for renewal, while staying true to its original calling to be an open and receptive practice of understanding. By attending to the dialogical nature of texts, the fragility of truth, the material circumstances of nature and culture, and the responsibilities of interpretation, hermeneutics offers new perspectives for engaging with the world, aiming to preserve the bonds between word and world, between experience, interpretation, and life.

These material, institutional, personal and thematic changes inspired the topic of both the Symposium of 2024 and this volume: *The Future of Hermeneutics*. Under this heading, this volume aims to explore the philosophical-hermeneutic questions and concerns that move us today. From a hermeneutic point of view, the future cannot really be conceived of without being aware of where one comes from and how one's past offers the means to a future, the retrieval of the possibilities from past existence, as Heidegger has put it. The past may also confront us with particular obstructions or prejudices to move forward, but which we may nevertheless discover in conversation with those who help us to become aware and to clarify them. And yet, in an altogether different sense, the question of the future may impact how we perceive and understand the present and its profound transience.

In the spirit of the *International Hermeneutics Symposium*, the symposium of 2024 was opened with words from Gadamer. Remembering Günter Figal, who has passed away in 2024, and remembering John Sallis, who passed away in 2025, the essay *Vergänglichkeit* resonates with both the times, the losses felt and the quest and need for a future. In fact, while this essay does not address the question what the future holds in store for the field of hermeneutics, it does give us a clear indication of what the future is from a hermeneutic point of view, in which dimension of human existence it is grounded, hermeneutically and phenomenologically.

Gadamer opens his essay by pointing to a basic human experience:

It is part of the basic human experience to know about one's mortality and at the same time not to know when or how soon one will be called away. Knowing of death has accompanied humankind for thousands of years before any recorded tradition.[3]

Moreover, it is not only the transitoriness of their own existence that captivates humans; "experience teaches the fragility of all earthly things and the futility of all loft plans. But the whole of nature, like the human world, is threatened with destruction."[4]

Yet, humans relate to this sense of an ending of their own existence, their world and nature in a particular way. It is never without an openness to the future and to possibilities. This goes back to the specific combination of the human awareness of one's mortality without knowing one's hour of death of which already the Greeks know. Gadamer points out how especially the tragedy *Prometheus* (traditionally attributed to Aeschylus) emphasizes this when the tragic playwright portrays Prometheus as the one who took from humans the knowledge of hour of death. Doing so, he gave humans a future: "Thus, knowledge of death has become knowledge of a veiled future and, precisely because of this, an unlimited opening to possibilities. It is a gift of certainty about life and the future at the same time."[5]

It is especially in the arts that Gadamer senses a human response to this particular relation to the future:

> Like every creative person, today's artist is constantly touched by the transience of all things, and it is precisely from this that he gains new motivation to serve the enchantment of art. Between the transience of the world and the fulfilment of the moment, art promises us all that in the hesitant while there is something lasting.[6]

Art and philosophy give permanence to the transitory, give it a future. They do so because they sense a particular significance in the transitory and because of that they sense in it a claim to permanence. They respond to this claim by granting the transitory permanence in a different form, such as in the artwork or in writing. Humans are the ones who know of death, of their own and of all there is, but

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[3] "Es gehört zur Grunderfahrung des Menschen, daß er um seinen Tod weiß und zugleich nicht weiß, wann oder wie bald er abberufen wird. Wissen um den Tod hat die Menschheit schon Jahrtausendelang vor aller bezeugten Überlieferung begleitet." Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Vergänglichkeit," in *Ästhetik und Poetik II. Hermeneutik in Vollzug*, GW 9 (Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 171. All translations from this text are our own.

[4] "Die Hinfälligkeit alles Irdischen und die Vergeblichkeit aller hochfliegenden Pläne lehrt die Erfahrung. Aber die ganze Natur wie die Menschenwelt, beide sind von Zerstörung bedroht." Gadamer, "Vergänglichkeit," 177.

[5] "Damit ist das Wissen um den Tod zum Wissen einer verhüllten Zukunft geworden und eben damit zur unbegrenzten Öffnung für Mögliches. Es ist eine Gabe von Levensgewißheit und Zukunft zugleich." Gadamer, "Vergänglichkeit," 172.

[6] "Wie jeder Schaffende wird auch der Kunstschaffende von heute immer wieder von der Vergänglichkeit aller Dinge angerührt und gewinnt gerade daraus immer neuen Antrieb der Verzauberung durch die Kunst zu dienen. Zwischen der Vergänglichkeit der Welt und der Erfüllung des Augenblicks verspricht die Kunst uns allen, daß 'in der zögernden Weile einiges Haltbare sei.'" Gadamer, "Vergänglichkeit," 177.

in the particular form of this knowledge resides a resistance to death, a sense of future and possibility, which is actualized when humans create and give duration to what is of significance. This resistance to death by granting permanence to what is fleeting, one might argue, is nothing less than the testamentary or testimonial dimension of the arts and of human language in particular:

> Ultimately, the arcane power of language also bears witness to this enigmatic connection. For what is language other than the creation of memory and memorials as well as the bringing to mind and the making present of what is not?[7]

Along these lines of thought, Gadamer's *Vergänglichkeit* offers one response to the question of what the future is in a hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective. It is with this question that this volume engages but also with the possible venues open to the characteristic questions and themes in hermeneutics.

We would mention, too, that we believe these guiding concerns of the volume to receive poignant expression in the image incorporated into the beautiful design for the cover of this volume, Paul Klee's 1934 *One Who Understands* (*Einer, der versteht*).[8] In this, it is perhaps no coincidence that the simple points, lines, and shapes which Klee uses to depict the central figure of his composition ultimately refer us into a distance that as it were extends beyond the canvas of the present. It is perhaps likewise no surprise that Klee's composition is sometimes said to evoke a cracked pane of glass – what better emblem could there be of the fragility of art and philosophy, of all understanding, to hold open a throughline to the future.

Gadamer's sensitivity to the fragile openness of the future is also a reminder of the significance of the book series, *Post-Kantian European Philosophy*, in which *The Future of Hermeneutics* finds its home. Established by Mohr Siebeck in 2024, this series focuses on significant research on major philosophers and key themes that have shaped European philosophy since Kant. In this series, research in hermeneutics stands beside contributions to scholarship from across a broad range of figures, themes, and movements that comprise this venerable tradition. Of course, the future of this tradition, no matter how venerable, is nevertheless precarious – for Post-Kantian European Philosophy, too, the future remains behind a veil. It is thus a great fortune that Mohr Siebeck, a publisher renowned for the quality of the research it makes available to the scholarly world, has introduced a series in Post-Kantian European Philosophy. For, as we might put the point with Gadamer, this series may itself be understood as a response to the veiled future that promises to open onto the infinite possibilities of Post-Kantian European Philosophy. We are delighted that *The Future of Hermeneutics* contributes to this larger mission.

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[7] "Am Ende ist auch die geheimnisvolle Macht der Sprache ein Zeugnis für diesen rätselhaften Zusammenhang. Denn was ist die Sprache anderes als das Stiften von Gedächtnis und das Vorstellig- und Sichgegenwärtig-Machen von Nichtseiendem?" Gadamer, "Vergänglichkeit," 172.

[8] The source of the cover image is Paul Klee, *One Who Understands* (*Einer, der versteht*), Wikicommons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1934_Klee_Einer_der_versteht_anagoria.JPG#filelinks). Per Wikicommons, the image is in the public domain.

Overview of the Contributions

The contributions in this volume mirror the transformations outlined above and demonstrate a shared concern for the future of hermeneutics and the intrinsic sense of transience at the heart of a hermeneutic understanding of the future.

Dennis J. Schmidt reflects on the question of what it means to live responsibly as a philosopher in a time when truth, language, and ethical bonds appear under siege. Beginning from a personal sense of crisis about philosophy's role in a world of misinformation, violence, and fractured discourse, he considers historical precedents and responses. Through recollections of Gadamer's reflections on his life under National Socialism, Heidegger's engagement with Plato's allegory of the cave, Gadamer's postwar reflections on philosophy's tasks, and Plato's own account of the philosopher's reluctant return to the city, Schmidt's paper confronts the tension between public responsibility and private withdrawal. It asks whether philosophy today can still preserve truth and meaning, and what responsibility philosophers bear when language itself risks losing its force. The conclusion emphasizes philosophy's enduring task: to speak truth, however fragile, and to sustain dialogue with others as a form of resistance and renewal.

Tobias Keiling poses the question of whether the Anthropocene necessitates a rethinking of Gadamer's concept of historical consciousness and argues that it does not. According to Keiling, claims of transcending historical consciousness arise from the same drive for certainty that once underpinned the Enlightenment's aspiration to liberate thought entirely from prejudice and historical context – the very assumptions Gadamer's theory was meant to challenge. The opening section turns to Dipesh Chakrabarty's influential essay from 2009 "The Climate of History: Four Theses," highlighting the difficulties the Anthropocene introduces for our conception of history. While Keiling concurs with Chakrabarty's critique of nineteenth-century philosophies of history, he disputes Chakrabarty's belief that scenarios of human extinction can exert the transformative force he envisions. The second section extends the discussion to the writings of Jonathan Lear, Ted Toadvine, and Ben Ware, who consider extinction through the lenses of psychoanalysis and philosophies of temporality. The concluding section gestures toward an alternative approach that unites a practical concern with historical justice and a theoretical engagement with the phenomena of historicity.

Theodore George draws upon Gadamer's and Figal's perspectives on the hermeneutics of education. It is widely acknowledged among scholars that Gadamer's *Truth and Method* makes a novel contribution to considerations of formation, cultivation, or education (*Bildung*). In this, Gadamer defends the notion that attaining an educated state (*ein Gebildete*) does not primarily entail the acquisition of specialized knowledge or expertise. Instead, it is more fundamentally characterized as a process of becoming "undogmatic," a transformation that is facilitated by extensive interpretive experiences. These experiences serve to unveil the limitations inherent in our attempts to comprehend ourselves, others, and the

world around us. Nevertheless, Gadamer's delineation of the concept of an educated individual being "undogmatic" remains in a nascent stage of development. George puts forward the argument that Gadamer's conception of being undogmatic is complemented by Figal's recent work which suggests that the absence of dogma is indicative of a state of ambiguity.

Mirela Oliva reconstructs Figal's account of living beings as models for understanding what it means to be a thing and to exist. Her first section examines Figal's interpretation of Aristotle's view that living beings are substances in the fullest sense, emphasizing Figal's defense of their independence and endurance through the concept of originariness. The second section analyzes how living beings exemplify the dynamics of being, with particular attention to Figal's notions of form of life, structure of life, exteriority, and self-directed conduct.

Niall Keane examines Gadamer's reflections on the complex relationship between language, being, and understanding and explores the boundaries and potential of hermeneutics, with a particular emphasis on its limits and the limits of its own capacity. He analyses Gadamer's ontological turn and his notion of linguisticality as being central to human experience. Keane's article draws on the tension between the inner and outer world, the said and the unsaid, to posit that hermeneutic understanding is an infinite, future-oriented task shaped by indeterminacy and mortality. Gadamer's emphasis on recollection, dialogical responsibility, and the speculative nature of language reveals a commitment to the continual openness of interpretation in running up against the limits of the unsaid. The argument is posited that the unsaid functions as both a possibilising limit and a condition of meaning. This assertion serves to substantiate Gadamer's universalist claims while concurrently affirming the inexhaustibility and infinity of meaning.

Eddo Evink elucidates the metaphysical purport of Gadamer's hermeneutics and interprets it as a "metaphysics of play" or as a "metaphysics of the world as play." This includes a critique of Gadamer's emphasis on language and of a problematic ambiguity in his view on language. Moreover, Evink challenges this interpretation by confronting it with Nancy's critique of hermeneutics. The synthesis of these two aims is achieved through a reading of Heidegger in the conclusion, in which Nancy's perspective on sense is adopted within a hermeneutic metaphysics of the world as play.

Lucas Gronouwe examines the hermeneutic dimension of Bruno Latour's thought by tracing his engagement with hermeneutics from his early philosophical training in Dijon in the late 1960s and 1970s to his 2016 work. Gronouwe posits that Latour develops a theory of interpretation intended to overcome the entrenched modern divide between nature and culture. Instead of diverging from Gadamerian hermeneutics, Latour refines its context in material and ontological terms, thereby expanding its scope to encompass the more-than-human world.

Gaetano Chiurazzi proposes a rethinking of the concept of ontological difference, as well as of some fundamental notions of Heidegger's philosophy and of

philosophical hermeneutics more broadly (such as ἀλήθεια, event, and origin). These are approached through the lens of asymmetry. The concept of asymmetry was theorized following the identification of incommensurable magnitudes in antiquity and their ontological implications. These magnitudes constituted a surplus to the system of natural numbers, that is to say, the actual and as potential δύναμις. It is therefore the case that asymmetry should be interpreted as a condition (possibility) for the manifestation of something (actuality). This is based on the premise that events do not occur in a perfectly symmetrical world, and prompts a re-evaluation of ontology, which is no longer regarded as the science of that which is stable and invariant, governed by the principle of symmetry. Instead, it is now understood as a contemplation of the contingent and accidental dimensions of reality, wherein asymmetry becomes fundamental.

Gert-Jan van der Heiden examines how the famous paradigms of the judge and the historian for the task of interpretation, as elaborated by both Gadamer and Ricœur, allow us to rethink the hermeneutic role of witnessing. To this end, first the hermeneutic role of the witness in the legal paradigm is described and it is shown what its philosophical repercussions are, especially in conversation with Kant and Latour, and show what is lost in this paradigm. Second, it is shown how the notion of witnessing problematizes the opposition between objective fact and subjective interpretation. Third, it is shown, in conversation with Arendt, how the historian offers another paradigm for witnessing that does not suffer from the same drawbacks as the legal paradigm.

Adriani Milli Rodrigues explores the interpretive nature of testimony from an epistemological and hermeneutical standpoint, thus offering a framework for approaching the interpretive nature of testimony in dialogue with selected influential proposals in contemporary thought. The central argument of his study is that the examination of the nature of testimony, along with the discourse surrounding credulity and suspicion in the epistemology of testimony, and the recent phenomenological contribution of van der Heiden concerning the nature of testimony, serve to enhance a Ricœurian hermeneutics of testimony. Within this theoretical framework, according to Rodrigues, there is both a phenomenon that is inherently susceptible to interpretation and an entity that is inherently interpretive in nature.

Anna Novokhatko claims that through physical behavior, facial expressions, and action, theatre forged a reciprocal link between the visible world and the imagined, the material stage and the natural or fictional environment. Novokhatko is interested how Ancient Greek drama used embodied metaphors – drawn from gesture, labor, and sensory experience – to translate abstract domains such as politics, philosophy, and aesthetics into tangible forms on stage. Comedy, with its reliance on laughter as a universal acoustic and visual behavior, heightened this interplay by engaging audiences both cognitively and emotionally. Shared bodily imagery – kneading, tasting, weighing, cleansing – enabled spectators to grasp complex ideas through common experiences of strain, touch, and discom-

fort. In doing so, drama created empathetic bridges across cultural and personal boundaries, shaping how societies understood and adapted to the abstract through the visceral.

James Risser explores rhythm as a fundamental dimension of both life and art. Returning to the original Greek notion of ῥυθμός, understood not as mere flow but as form, the shaping and configuring of movement, he traces how rhythm operates across poetry, music, sculpture, painting, and embodied life. Engaging the reflections of Hölderlin, Benveniste, Heidegger, and Gadamer, Risser's study shows that rhythm is not an externally imposed order but an immanent articulation that joins movement and repose, sound and meaning, image and perception. Rhythm appears as an enacted form, always in the process of becoming, and thus provides a medium in which the sensible and the intelligible converge. As such, rhythm not only animates artistic creation but also grounds the very sensibility of understanding, binding us to the measure of life itself.

Finally, John Sallis's text, which was received after his demise, explores the phenomenon of conducting music. The medium of conducting serves as a conduit for the exploration of matters that are of significance to our interpretive experience of music. This encompasses the function of musical conducting as a unifying force, the distinct spatial dimension of musical experience, and the pervasive nature of silence in music. The author employs references to philosophers of art, as well as to seminal works and compositions by composers, to elucidate these themes.

"What to Do?"

Dennis J. Schmidt

Abstract: This essay reflects on the question of what it means to live responsibly as a philosopher in a time when truth, language, and ethical bonds appear under siege. Beginning from a personal sense of crisis about philosophy's role in a world of misinformation, violence, and fractured discourse, it considers historical precedents and responses. Through recollections of Gadamer's reflections on his life under National Socialism, Heidegger's engagement with Plato's allegory of the cave, Gadamer's postwar reflections on philosophy's tasks, and Plato's own account of the philosopher's reluctant return to the city, Schmidt's paper confronts the tension between public responsibility and private withdrawal. It asks whether philosophy today can still preserve truth and meaning, and what responsibility philosophers bear when language itself risks losing its force. The conclusion emphasizes philosophy's enduring task: to speak truth, however fragile, and to sustain dialogue with others as a form of resistance and renewal.

Keywords: the philosopher, hermeneutics, Gadamer, Heidegger, crisis

I need to begin by speaking quite personally. I confess that for a long time now I have faced a sort of existential crisis about what I am doing *as a philosopher*. In saying this, I hope it is clear that I am not referring to my life *as a philosophy professor* – that is a life of privilege and while it is very much a reason for this existential crisis (the academic world is clearly able to generate crises), it is not the deepest form of the crisis I want to discuss in order to frame the question and texts that I propose to take up in a moment. Rather, the crisis that leads me to ask the question can be explained by the erosion of a longstanding conviction that led me to believe that choosing a life devoted to philosophical discussions with others is a worthy and responsible choice. I have long believed that Sartre was right when he suggested that because philosophers do not contribute to sustaining the world when there is such shortage, we have an obligation to expose the circumstances in which we live and, if we are to be responsible, we need to give voice to the victims of those circumstances. In short, to think responsibly is to tell the truth – so far as it is possible – about the world and that this truth matters.

But it is this sense of the importance of telling the truth, of truth being something that *matters*, is what has come under assault and leads me to ask about what it means to be responsible *as a philosopher* today. Before I begin to address that question of the relation of a philosopher to her/his times, I need to make clear two assumptions that I will not defend, but that are decisive.

First, that being a philosopher is not defined by a profession, a set of texts, or any form of disciplinary knowledge. One is not a philosopher because one is authorized as such by any institution, but because of the way one thinks and asks about the world. Gadamer once said to me that "everyone is a philosopher, unfortunately most people are not very good at being one." Saying this means that philosophy – a life devoted to philosophical questions – is simply an *intensification of being human*. The exceptional philosophers are not defined by any special knowledge, but by something else, something that is profoundly human. Of course, this does not imply that philosophers are "better" human beings, only that we are human, all-to-human.

Second, that to live responsibly means to see with clarity the moment in which one lives and to engage with others in the effort to understand how one ought to respond to such a moment. The responsibility that matters, that one needs, is not a juridical responsibility that is really a matter of an accountability, of the logic of crime and punishment that is concerned with measuring the deeds that have been done. It is rather a matter of being able to respond to one's times. Responsibility is a question coming from the future and it is hard precisely because one is responsible before even knowing for what or for whom.[1]

So, my crisis in a nutshell: I wonder if it is possible to live responsibly as a philosopher in the world today, in this world of misinformation, of lies without shame, and of the quantum speed and flood of words through which we swipe daily and which have reduced conversation to the size of a tweet, and when it seems as if we have broken the bonds between language and the real, the bonds that hold people and things and us together. We have been asked to speak of the future of hermeneutics. I'm afraid to say that I believe that the future is already here and that I for one am not quite ready to respond to it *as a philosopher*.

Having confessed this, I need to tell a story that is about how someone I admired confronted a crisis that is frighteningly similar to the one that I find myself facing. It is a story about which I remain uncertain, but is one which sharpens the question I want to ask.

* * *

The first time I had an extended, direct, and quite honest conversation with Gadamer about the Nazi years was on a Saturday afternoon. I am no longer sure of the year, but believe it was 1981. I had translated the text of a talk Gadamer was to give. He had only learned that he was expected to provide a written English version of his talk in advance the day before and he was to leave on Sunday. He called and asked if I might be able to draft a translation – I happily agreed and stayed up Friday night and translated the text. The next morning we had breakfast and went through the translation. I believe that was the first time I had translated something

[1] See Robert Bernasconi, "Before Whom and for What," in *Difficulties of Ethical Life*, ed. S. Sullivan and D. Schmidt (Fordham University Press, 2008), 131–46.