

INTERVIEW

Dennis Schmidt and his conception of philosophical hermeneutics¹

Luiz Rohden², Dennis Schmidt³

Introduction

*An interview with one of the leading and best known
representatives of Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics*

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His work covers a range of areas and themes: Hermeneutics; Ethics; Ancient Philosophy; Post-Kantian Continental Philosophy (esp. Hegel, Schelling, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Derrida); Aesthetics; Literary Criticism; German Romanticism. Some of his recent books: *Idioms of Ethical Life* (2018, forthcoming); *Idiome der Wahrheit* (2014); *Between Word and Image* (2013); Foreword to and revised translation of Heidegger's *Being and Time* (2010); *Difficulties of Ethical Life* (2008, co-edited with Shannon Sullivan); *Lyrical and Ethical Subjects: Essays on the Periphery of the Word, Freedom, and History* (2005); *On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life* (2001); *Hermeneutische Wege: Hans-Georg Gadamer zum Hundertsten* (2000, co-edited with Günter Figal), "Series in Continental Philosophy" (over 164 titles).

After I finished my book *Filosofar com Gadamer e Platão: Hermenêutica filosófica a partir da Carta Sétima* (2018), under his supervision at Penn State, I decided to make this interview in order to address some themes in his work and his views on the state of philosophy today.

Luiz Rohden (LR): Dennis, I know that you have been deeply influenced by Gadamer's hermeneutics and that your relationship with Hans-Georg Gadamer was very important to you. Could you tell us about your relationship with Gadamer and could you speak as well about the sort of person Gadamer was?

Dennis Schmidt (DS): Before I turn to your questions, my friend, I want to thank you for your work and especially for this book. Our conversations during your time at Penn State University in 2015, during my visit to Unisinos in 2013, and over the years of our correspondence have been important to me. Your book on Gadamer and Plato, and your starting point with Plato's 7th Letter, is a project close to my own heart and one that has helped me immensely with my own work. I have long thought that Gadamer was a Greek at heart and your project has understood that. It is perhaps the best way to approach the problems of hermeneutics today and so I am grateful for your work.

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I am also very grateful for the questions that you have put to me. I have postponed replying for too long for the simple reason that your questions are challenges to me and press me to ask about some of my own deepest concerns. I do not believe I have answered your questions sufficiently, but that is simply because they go to the heart of my own concerns. I know though that our conversation and questions will continue for a long time to come. That is something I welcome.

Meeting Gadamer was one of the great turning points of my life.⁴ I first met him in 1975, when he came to Boston College to teach for a semester. He was 75 years old and I was a beginning graduate student in philosophy who did not know that Gadamer was a famous philosopher. Like many beginnings, my first encounters with Gadamer are now shrouded in a bit of a fog that has blended years, conversations, memory, and stories told, so it is a bit difficult to sort out the details of that first year of our relationship. As I recall, he taught two seminars that semester: one on Plato and the other on Hegel and Heidegger, and I was enrolled in both of his classes. I had excellent teachers in other classes and in my earlier studies, but Gadamer's classes were riveting and would define my own understanding of what teaching could be like at its best. His English was adequate, but his ability to communicate was remarkable – it was then that I learned that one could communicate and converse with someone even if one was not fluent in a language. Gadamer's limitations with English grammar and vocabulary were not insignificant, but he listened to his conversation partner and somehow was able to engage them more fully than most others, even native speakers. Already in this first year of our relationship, I came to think of Gadamer as "hermeneutic Mensch," as someone with a gift for engaging others and genuinely able to find a way to let language be a real bond with others. There was something like poetry in his way of confronting the limits of his fluency in English – he never let those limits inhibit his attempts to speak, rather he took them as challenges to find ever better ways of speaking.

I soon learned that Gadamer was indeed a celebrated philosopher and so the intimidation that a young doctoral student invariably feels before his or her professor was amplified by Gadamer's fame. I was always timid, afraid to speak to him, but he was quite the opposite: he was open-minded, curious, and completely unpretentious. Over time, my intimidation before Gadamer began to diminish, but my admiration for him only grew. I hung on his words in class and relished the opportunity to talk with him in private.

The same year we met the first translation of *Truth and Method* into English was published and this would become the occasion for me to come to have a number of private conversations with Gadamer. Since I read German, he asked me to discuss the English translation of his own book with him. He said that he was never really sure about many of the translations of key terms and that he was frequently puzzled by

how his English language readers understood him. Sensitive to the role of translation in understanding, Gadamer knew that he needed to "hear" himself in English. So, we would read passages of *Truth and Method* together. At times, I would correct his pronunciation so that he could speak about his own text clearly; at times, we would discuss the translation and how some of the words would be heard in English. We did this in his rooms at the "Robert's House," which was the Jesuit home where Gadamer would stay during his visits. Those conversations would be so basic, so profound that I do not know if I would be who I am today without them. We spoke of language, of understanding, of speech and accents, and of his aims in *Truth and Method*. He was always generous, always interested in my completely uninformed, if earnest, opinion, and always engaging. We had those discussions so that he could sharpen his English, but it is clear that for me they were the events of a lifetime.

Language was often at the center of our discussions even when I was a young student. I translated some texts for him and reviewing those translations was always an occasion for real conversations. We spoke German together, but would speak about words in Greek, German, English, Italian, and French – and it was always more than talk about words, but a way of talking about understanding and the world.

One other topic of discussion from those early days was Heidegger. He always spoke of Heidegger with great admiration. Just as I then and still now speak of Gadamer in glowing terms, so too did Gadamer speak of Heidegger with the eyes of the young student he was when he first met Heidegger. When he spoke of Heidegger, Gadamer always returned – at least at the start – to being a young student who was stunned by a great philosophical mind. I realized that this admiration was very likely a repetition of the admiration that Plato had for Socrates and that students have had for teachers for centuries. I knew early on that Heidegger was the great riddle of Gadamer's life, just as Gadamer would become the riddle of my own life.

That meeting in 1975 would be the beginning of one of the most important relationships in my life. It would take another lifetime to speak about that relationship, to speak about Gadamer, and to address just what it means to have another person as such a central riddle in one's own life. By the time of Gadamer's death in 2002, we would be good friends, almost like a father and son in many ways, and strangely his death has not really diminished his presence in my life. I suspect that I will need much longer to even begin to make sense of what he came to represent for me.

I can say this: that Gadamer was a person of great and good humor, generous to others, and a genuinely curious and open mind. He truly believed something that I have trouble accepting: that all people want to be reasonable and that everyone has something to teach me. In short, he was a Socratic

⁴ I discuss this meaning and its significance for me in a somewhat different way in my essay published on the occasion of Gadamer's 100th birthday, "Socrates mit Gehstock," in *Begegnungen mit Hans-Georg Gadamer* (2000, p. 137-146).

figure – and this was not at all a posture, but really his nature. He listened to first year students or his haircutter with the same openness and curiosity that he would bring to a conversation with world-class philosophers. He looked at paintings with sophistication, but with the eyes of one just ready to be open, and he loved to learn poems to recite. Two experiences that I had with Gadamer surrounding the events celebrating his 100th birthday are revealing. A photographer came to take pictures of him for a book that showcased ten 100-year-old people who continued to accomplish much. After the photographer left, Gadamer remarked that a book on one hundred year-olds would be much more interesting. The other experience was an interview on his birthday by an Italian television journalist who asked Gadamer the “secret to a long life”. His answer: “learn a poem by heart every day and never take an elevator” – stay alive in mind and body.

Gadamer’s wit and humor were very much at the core of his character – and they were invariably ways in which he taught as well. On one occasion Gadamer faced a rather obnoxious and long-winded question after a talk he had given; the questioner rather pompously concluded “surely Professor Gadamer, you must agree with me that it is far more difficult to understand Heraclitus than your next door neighbor”. Gadamer paused, removed his glasses, rubbed his face and said, “I guess that depends on who your next door neighbor is”. He kept conversations real and never abstract, and so one inevitably felt the weight and real stakes of philosophical discussions.

Gadamer was never comfortable in the role of a famous philosopher. He was humble – genuinely so – and enjoyed people. He also lost himself in books, especially the Greeks, and found a world of conversation there. Over the years, I developed my differences with him philosophically, sometimes politically too, but my admiration and even love for him only ever grew. He was not a perfect person, but he was genuine and honest and caring. He made the world a more interesting, decent, and even better place for me.

LR: How would you describe the state and situation of hermeneutics today?

DS: I worry about the present state of philosophy generally and am especially worried about the status of hermeneutic thought today. We live in an age of digital texts, of the speedy circulation of ideas, of responses that do not always seem to be very responsible replies to others. Universities are pressing younger colleagues to publish more and faster – this is not a novel problem, but it is accelerated by technology and the Internet – and the time one needs for reading and understanding always seems to be out of reach. The rapid turnover of ideas and arguments does not leave much time for reflection and careful criticism. To be sure, there is an availability of information and dissemination of texts that has opened up new worlds for thinking, but the speed that seems to accompany this expansion has blunted real discussion. Political discourse today is reduced to tweets and philosophizing is

carried on in blogs. Words flash across screens, but few seem to have time for reading.

I mention this because philosophy has always needed time and patience. It is built upon careful reflection upon what is said and about how words and arguments are to be understood. These conditions for philosophy are only minimal (and they are perhaps not even sufficient for philosophy), but they seem to be in jeopardy today. Speed and “the next thing” seem to define even academic life today, and if that is indeed the case, then some of the real conditions of philosophizing are in danger of being lost today in the noise of the present. I sometimes wonder if my view on this matter is simply the reflection of becoming stale in my own views and of simply resisting new possibilities. But I do believe it is important for us to raise questions today about the prospects of philosophy generally in our time. Philosophy has played an important role in the development of cultures and especially in forging critical perspectives that can open us to new possibilities. It has always been at the margins of a culture – even the setting of Plato’s dialogue the *Republic* at the city limits makes this clear – but today the risk is that philosophy will simply be absorbed into the empire of technology that will increasingly define the possibilities of any culture.

There is no tradition of philosophizing that is more dedicated to fostering and thinking the conditions of philosophy than hermeneutics. Hermeneutics has always been centered upon a concern for the conditions of understanding: of language, reading, translation, conversation, and of critique. Above all, hermeneutics is a matter of developing the capacity to listen. This seems more necessary than ever. Of course, hermeneutic theory is far more than this, but if nothing else this is something that we find in hermeneutic theory and its practices that is sorely needed in our time.

It is difficult to think of centers for research in hermeneutics. Universities in the European and Anglophone world tend to be too diverse to have a strong concentration in one field. This, I believe, is a good thing too since it has the effect of bringing different traditions and projects into conversation with one another. There are, however, extra-university groups and societies that have long helped maintain the hermeneutic tradition. Here one thinks of the “Hermeneutik Symposium” held annually at the University of Freiburg (it began with Gadamer at the University of Heidelberg), the Collegium Phaenomenologicum in Italy, SPEG and NASPH in the United States, and ASCP in Australia. Journals and book series too help to promote the best in this tradition. The hope, of course, is to be found in the next generation. This is something I learned from Gadamer and his very real interest in younger philosophers. He knew that the strength of a tradition is found in its future as much, if not more, than its past or present.

This future will be international and I know that in Brazil there is a great energy behind research and work in the hermeneutical tradition. There are traditions in Italy and France, as well as in North America and Britain that keep alive the

hermeneutic tradition that still has its roots in Germany. But as we move forward, I expect that there will be a more international cast to the way hermeneutic theory evolves. That is an exciting prospect as other languages and other histories come into the discussions we need to have.

LR: How do you understand the relation between what is called analytic philosophy and continental philosophy? How do you understand the emergence of this division in philosophy, its significance for philosophy in general, and how we are to work with it?

DS: I tend to be a bit dogmatic about the way we are to think about the various traditions of philosophy that define the present age. More precisely, it seems to me that the structure of the university, above all the disciplinary distinctions that articulate departments and lines of funding, teaching, and research have come to harden over time. There are a number of fields of research – and here I definitely would count philosophy as one – that have evolved a great deal over the years. Nonetheless, institutional structures hold different lines of research together as if they shared a genuinely common bond. To put the point rather bluntly: departments are defined by ideas and images of knowledge that no longer reflect the state of a field of research. This situation has bred academic fights and territorial disputes. In extreme cases, we can have the same philosophy department represented by a mathematical logician and a linguist, as well as a cultural critic and a literary theorist. Historians of philosophy are deemed not philosophers, analytic philosophers argue that the continental tradition is simply gibberish, and continental philosophers argue that analytic philosophers have lost sight of the real questions of philosophy. This plays out differently in different cultures and even in different universities. I have moved to four different universities and been closely affiliated with two others and have always been struck by the fact that the lines of division are never the same.

To be sure, it is difficult to talk to someone who is working out of different texts, different assumptions, and different histories than one's own. That is always the struggle behind every conversation. But, as we become increasingly specialized and live ever more in our own bubbles, this problem becomes more difficult. And sometimes the struggle to find common grounds for a conversation is not worth the effort. Sometimes we simply have different questions and problems that we need to address and it is only the fact of sharing a department that forces us to have such struggles and such fights. My own rather stubborn interpretation is that not everything that happens in a philosophy department really should be understood as part of the long tradition of philosophy that begins with Plato. I also would say that philosophy does not

have a unique hold on truth nor that owning a department is ultimately important.

As I understand it, one way of characterizing the difference that divides so much of philosophy today has more to do with the questions one asks rather than the approach one takes or the texts one takes up. In other words, one is not a continental philosopher because one reads texts from European authors, nor is one an analytic philosopher because one traces one's roots back to certain authors going back to Oxford or Cambridge. I would prefer to say that the difference has to do with how one conceives the measure of truth and how one understands the aim of philosophy. More precisely, I would understand continental philosophy as the tradition – largely traceable back to Kant's Third Critique and its reception by Hegel and Schelling – that recognizes that our relation to truth is not only a cognitive and conceptually defined relation. Kant argued that a feeling, the "feeling of life," opened up an experience that needed to be understood as *a priori* and yet did not submit itself to the rule of the concept. Such an experience was the foundation of judgment in the reflective sense and the summit of this form of judgment was to expose beauty as the symbol of moral life and the purposeless purposivity of nature itself.

This is not the place to trace Kant's arguments in any detail,⁵ but what can be said is that the *Critique of Judgment* opened a new possibility for philosophizing, namely, the possibility that truth is not only measured by conceptual reason and that an experience that resists such reason could nonetheless be *a priori*. The preeminent realm of this experience that requires a symbolic, rather than schematic, form is found in aesthetic experience. More precisely, it is found in the judgment of taste about beauty. This was a possibility that was excluded since Plato exiled the poets from the polis, and this exclusion had long defined the nature of philosophy itself,⁶ which is why Kant's *Critique of Judgment* marks such a radically new possibility in the history of philosophy. Kant demonstrated that truth could be found in the realm of the beautiful, lodged in a feeling that cannot be captured by the logic of the concept. Since the language of philosophy has long been understood to be defined by the logic and demands of conceptual reason, it is easy to see how Kant's analysis opens up the possibility of philosophizing in a different way than that defined by the history of metaphysics. This is the point in the history of philosophy where philosophy split into rather different traditions. Of course, the history of philosophy has always been a history of differences and contentiousness, but now the differences were fundamental since they concerned the horizons of truth and the reach of the *logos* itself.

The tradition that we now call continental philosophy is, in many ways, a misnomer since it is a tradition only con-

⁵ I have done this in a number of places, but most succinctly in *On Germans and Other Greeks* (Schmidt, 2001, p. 73-88) and *Lyrical and Ethical Subjects* (Schmidt, 2005, p. 7-19).

⁶ Let me say clearly that I do not believe that Plato held the view that such an exclusion made sense; however, the effective history of Platonism and the formation of a tradition of metaphysics clearly has formulated this view and been defined by it.

tingently defined by its relation to its geographical roots in Europe. It is rather better to define this tradition by its readiness to consider art, literature, and music to be legitimate fields of inquiry and not simply matters of “aesthetic theory.” Of course, there are points of common concern between the continental and analytic traditions, and those points can be productive moments for discussions. However, there are, at times, quite simply radically different concerns and questions that drive these traditions, and to force a dialogue when one is not needed has never seemed helpful to me.

LR: What role do you see for the approach of philosophical hermeneutics in largest context of philosophy today?

DS: It seems to me that the hermeneutic tradition, which is defined by its emphasis on listening and on dialogue, is especially important in the larger context of philosophy today. It is not dialogue for the sake of dialogue that hermeneutic theory promotes, but dialogue for the sake of understanding. Here a qualification is needed: understanding, which is the real goal of hermeneutic practices, is not the same as knowledge. This difference is not always easy to clarify, but it is all-important. Perhaps the two clearest presentations of this difference between understanding and knowing are found in Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (sections 31-33) and in Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* (section I on “The Meaning of the Humanistic Tradition for the Humanities”). What one finds in those texts is an argument that presents understanding as more fundamental than any cognition. This is significant because understanding is open to feeling, mood, and what Gadamer refers to as the elements of “Bildung.” This argument has a direct line to Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* and its validation of aesthetic experience and judgment.

What makes this especially important in the context of the present historical juncture in philosophy is that while philosophy has generally demonstrated a tendency to become specialized and to close itself off from the world in abstractions that speak only to other philosophers, the aim of a hermeneutic sensibility is to open the world to forms of experience that are not abstract, but rather lived experiences. This seems to me to be especially important in a time that has seen philosophy become increasingly academic and cut-off from the world, and that finds philosophers often unable even to understand one another. This effort to find ways of dialoguing with others and of recognizing that the foundations of truth might not only be defined by the orbit of philosophy’s own forms of thinking might, if we are lucky, keep philosophizing alive and vital in our world.

One caveat: when we who work out of the hermeneutic/continental tradition begin to close in upon ourselves and speak only to ourselves with our own special vocabulary, we become instances of one of the main problems with philosophizing today. To be sure, there will always be the need for new words, for specialized vocabularies, and for details that

require work and struggle to understand. My worry about the specialization driving philosophy is not a way of arguing that philosophy should be “easy” or readily comprehensible. Philosophy is a demanding work; it requires a rigor, patience, and attention that are quite extraordinary. At times, meeting these requirements requires in turn that one develop new ways of speaking about issues. However, when we lose our roots in real experience and in the concretion of ideas, we too become part of the problem with academic life today. Teaching is one way in which one is always required to remember to speak clearly and that is one reason why teaching is so important for philosophy today – it can help keep us honest about what we really understand. I should add that this is one reason I have long thought of teaching as a sort of model for hermeneutic practices.

LR: Could you speak about the general path of your work? In particular, could you speak to what you take to be the central and driving themes of your work as well as the direction you see it moving forward?

DS: It is strangely difficult to speak about one’s own work as a general project. One is always involved in some specific project – whether it be a course one is teaching, an article or talk one is preparing, or a book one is writing – and this project has a tendency to blot out a larger sense of one’s larger concerns. My most recent book concerns forms of truth⁷ and the last seminar I taught was on Hegel and Kant (on the topic of natural beauty). Recent articles have been about music, Paul Klee, gardens, imagination, and Heidegger’s political involvements. So, one finds oneself stretched over a number of themes and topics all at once. But it has become clear to me that the question of ethical life has dominated my concerns and guided most every question for the past two decades. I suspect that this question was already present in significant ways earlier, but it seems to be in the mid-1990s that my interest in searching for a new ethical sensibility began. During that time I found myself reading and writing more about Paul Celan and Friedrich Hölderlin, having to confront new questions about Heidegger’s involvement with the Nazis, and quite engaged with Kant’s Third Critique. Those were also the years in which my conversations with Gadamer would lead me back over and over to Aristotle and his way of thinking about *phronesis*. It was during these years that I turned my attention to Greek tragedy as a way of thinking ethical life.

Starting with *On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life*, I increasingly focused my work on thinking through the difficulties of ethical questioning. It had become clear to me that ethical questions began when there was ambiguity, irreconcilable conflict, and incommensurable yet equally reasonable demands. In short, ethics emerges as a question at the point that Greek tragedy had always taken as its core concern: a conflict or contradiction that was simply impossible to resolve. In the course of working on Greek trag-

⁷ *Idiome der Wahrheit* (Schmidt and Mirković, 2014).

edies a number of new themes came to occupy my attention: moral blindness, death and mourning, family and state, love and duty, as well as war and suffering. This was a pivotal moment for me and it belonged quite directly to an engagement with works of art as much as with philosophical texts.

This project opened me up to ways of speaking about ethical life that I had not considered before. In particular, I came to understand how much the questions of ethical life are wedded ineluctably to the riddle that I am for myself. There are philosophical precedents for this point, but I do not believe that these precedents have been pursued as actively as possible with respect to ethical concerns. Without engaging his treatment of this complex yet crucial notion, let me suggest that one place one can find such a precedent is Heidegger's analysis of death, anxiety, and being-toward-death in *Being and Time*. There one finds a philosophical analysis of this singularity of factual life that I now believe needs to be understood as ethically significant (but that Heidegger himself strips of all such significance). The best way to express this that I have found is to say that I am, one might say, an "idiom" – untranslatable, stubbornly wedded to being this singular being that I am. This life is mine to live and to answer for, and understanding myself to be mortal is at the heart of this self-understanding. It is not the "cogito sum" that exposes me to myself, but the "sum moribundus." In this inescapable mineness of existence I learn that this existence I mine to bear, it is my burden, and that I will have been responsible for it. This is the point at which we can speak of something like the birth of responsibility: nothing, no one, can lift the burden of being answerable to life from me. Kant makes a similar point when he speaks of the need to understand oneself as an end, as what should not be subordinated to anything else. What Kant reminds us (but Heidegger seems to forget) is that I also come to know myself as living in a *kingdom* of such ends; that is, I live among others who bear the same responsibility, the same weight of mineness as me: there is, in other words, a strange sort of solidarity to be found in my radical solitude. I bear the burden of existence, but never of the whole of existence. This is what it means to say that I must understand myself as living in a *moral universe*: I know myself to be ineluctably responsible, even if I also know myself as living in a world beyond my control and understanding. This, in part, is the point at which something like the discussion of ethical life can begin anew.

Since my book on tragedy this notion of the being of an idiom – more precisely, of being an idiom that is constitutively related to others and who is equally always in relation to an ideal – has become the central theme of my own work. My intention has not been to turn this notion of the idiom into a rigid concept, but to take this as a problem that will never fully be resolved and yet will serve as a starting point for reflection. Experiences that one thinks out of this sense of being an idiom are those that we undergo in our singularity – experiences such as suffering, pain, mourning, love – which are not merely singular but which open up upon shared senses of understanding, something akin to that which

Kant discussed as a matter of a "sensus communis." I have also increasingly found that art is able to present this life of the idiom, this singularity that resists conceptualization, much better than philosophical argument. This does not mean that I think it necessary to abandon philosophy or argument, or that I would myself move to the arts. Quite the contrary, the care and careful unfolding – the interpretive work – of philosophy is needed if these presentations are to be understood.

I need to make one final remark about my work and this deepening of a sense of the ethical import of philosophy. It is important to qualify what the word "ethics" can mean if this sense of ethical life as rooted in the being of the idiom is to be possible. Ethics is not to be understood as a set of rules or imperatives for action or decision. It is not to be understood as a theory that is applied to practices; indeed, it is not to be understood as operating at all according to any sort of distinction between theory and practice. Rather, ethics is a form of practice and self-understanding. It is the process of transforming oneself in order to live well and to be "better." I have frequently described ethical reflection by enlisting Plutarch's notion of "ethopoeisis." In the end, ethical life is an on-going work, the work of trying to live in the world. This, in some ways, is what is meant by Heraclitus' fragment 119 ἦθος ἀνθρώπων δαίμων and what Aristotle meant when he spoke of εὐδαιμονία. In the end, those comments on ethos drive quite directly to what I have struggled to bring into my own work.

LR: Could you comment on the argument that I have advanced in my book *Filosofar com Gadamer e Platão: Hermenêutica filosófica a partir da Carta Sétima* (2018), that we would do well to re-read Plato's work and that philosophical hermeneutics is an especially helpful way to approach this task? Do you see Plato, and specifically Plato's 7th Letter as significant for Gadamer and for understanding philosophical hermeneutics?

DS: I could not agree more with your thesis and with the approach you have taken to Gadamer and to hermeneutic theory in general. You are exactly right when taking Plato as a clue for understanding philosophical hermeneutics and I believe you are also right in finding Gadamer to be one of the most sensitive readers of Plato we have available to us. I frequently joked with Gadamer that he was not really a German, but that that he was an ancient Greek philosopher at heart. He always enjoyed those conversations and that line of joking with him – I think the enjoyment he found in this joke was that it was founded in a real truth: Gadamer approached philosophy in a way that resonated more with Plato than almost any other figure in philosophy's history. Even more than Heidegger, Plato is, to my mind, the best entrance into Gadamer's thought: even when Gadamer is not explicitly discussing Plato, the ideal of the Platonic text and the figure of Socrates never seems far from Gadamer's own concerns. That Gadamer was originally trained as a classicist should never be forgotten: ancient Greek texts belong to his own beginning

and never left for him. In the conversations we had Gadamer always insisted upon the legitimacy of the 7th Letter and upon its fundamental importance.

Your emphasis on Plato's 7th Letter is quite original and especially exciting since it poses some of the most interesting hermeneutical questions one can ask. Apart from its political significance, which is not to be underestimated, that letter leads one to ask about the relation of an author to a text, to the nature of a text, and the difference between written and spoken language. The form of the letter is also especially interesting for thinking about the idea of hermeneutics: a letter is addressed to another and, in this case, we only have one side of the exchange. In short, we are listening to a conversation without being able to hear it in its entirety. It is a form of philosophizing quite different from our habitual reliance upon the essay or book, much closer to but still not identical with the dialogue form that we find in Plato. And the 7th Letter is the letter that comes closest to thinking through these special hermeneutical problems.

But what I do know from what I can read, and what I know as well from the many conversations we have had over the years, is that your interpretation that begins by approaching hermeneutic theory through Plato's 7th Letter leads very much to the heart of the problems of hermeneutics. I have learned from you on this and can only say now that I look forward to the conversations we still have to come in the future.

LR: Are there any final thoughts or concerns you would like to mention about the situation of philosophy today and the task of thinking?

DS: I have already confessed to my worries about the present and future possibilities of philosophy in my answer to your second question. Those worries are real, but I confess that my hopes for the future of philosophy are still alive. I suspect that we are living in a revolutionary moment for philosophy: it is a time of crisis in which longstanding traditions are no longer tenable and forms of communication are changing the nature and content of thinking itself. So, I do worry about what we might find in the future. But then again there have always been difficult times for philosophy, many much more challenging than this time. So, one can hope.

But I must also say that the worries I have about the future are real and serious, and I do wonder how philosophy will be able to play some role in confronting the challenges of our time. We have problems to be addressed: climate change, authoritarian regimes, war, hunger, homelessness, and refugees who are being displaced by all of these forces. The question I ask is whether we who identify ourselves as philosophers will be able to help navigate these crises and to make our world a better place, and to secure a better future for our children.

This remains a challenge to which I cannot offer an answer other than to say remembering what is at stake in thinking about our world is at least a start to making things a bit better.

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