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A Hermeneutics of Practice:
Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Epistemology
of Participation

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Gadamer's "Philosophical Hermeneutics" leaves several unresolved questions inviting further development. (1) If scientific methodology is no longer the counter-balance to questions of procedure in the humanities, what can hermeneutics offer the sciences in grappling with the absence of certainty? (2) Why does Gadamer not develop the notion that understanding is a type of movement? What is understanding's seemingly perpetual disquiet? (3) Gadamer's case that understanding is an event is part of his rejection of the Kantian thesis that "knowing" is grounded in subjective consciousness. The question of how such events are generated is unresolved. Placing the event of understanding in a linguistic horizon establishes its ontological pre-requisite but offers no insight into the mechanisms that have to be in place to facilitate its emergence.

This paper will suggest that the notion of practice (itself a philosophical theme not extensively discussed in Gadamer) offers three possible answers to these questions. (1) Practice evolves notions of certitude other than those that are strictly epistemological. (2) Practice is often driven by a quest for completion (*Vollzug*) which proves instrumentally disruptive and a means to new insight. The drive for completion is a candidate for generating understanding's disquiet. (3) Practice facilitates not so much a fusion but a collision of horizons capable of generating unexpected transformations of understanding. All three answers suggest the development of philosophical hermeneutics into what will be termed a participatory hermeneutics.

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Aims

What is the future of hermeneutics? The aim of this paper is fourfold.

1. To use a discussion of the notion of practice to contribute to the current debate about the future of hermeneutics.
2. To present a discussion of practice as an element of a much larger project concerning recent philosophical challenges to both the methodological legitimacy of both hermeneutics and the cultural legitimacy of the humanities.
3. To confront those challenges in an attempt to restore faith in the cognitive content and cultural relevance of both hermeneutics and the humanities.
4. To offer a new hermeneutical approach to the understanding of the transformative effects of the practices that constitute these disciplines.

The unifying argument concerns the need for philosophical hermeneutics to embrace an episte-mology of participation to the end of re-building a notion of the hermeneutic subject in the context of a debate about the nature of practice loosely described here as those disciplines which depend primarily upon knowledge by acquaintance (savoir).

The Unresolved

One of the unresolved questions in philosophical hermeneutics concerns the cognitive role of the subject. Gadamer's hostility to the Kantian notion of subjectivity as the ground of knowing is well known. What is needed, however, is something that Gadamer's thought points to but does not fully articulate i.e., the notion of the subject as participant rather than adjudicator or judge.

Philosophical hermeneutics self-announces with a Kantian question: what are the pre-conditions of understanding? The answer is shaped ontologically and derives from Heidegger's conception of Being as eventual: the preconditions of understanding are ontological including tradition, language, and culturally received subject-matters (Sachen). This, however, is no answer: the epistemological question is displaced by an ontological assertion. The consequence is twofold. (1) Language becomes an all powerful super-subject (Koegler, 1996) and (2) the role of subjec-tivity in understanding denied (Kelly, 2004).[1] This creates an obvious difficulty. If language generates substantive undecideables (polyvalent meaning), how are the undecided possibilities decided and acted on? Are they self-selecting? Arguably, practice invokes a notion of participa-tory intervention.

Does talk of participatory intervention imply a return to a notion of autonomous subjectivity? Arguably, not. Talk of subjectivity traditionally implies a co-relative notion of objectivity. However, contemporary science is increasingly calling into question the notion of an independ-ent extra-mental reality. The notion of an "out-there" that is an objective co-relative to subjec-tivity is becoming unsustainable. What is emerging is a conception of actuality in which all

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[1] See Koegler (1996, p. 116)
  Kelly (2004, p. 103)
  Kelly (2004, p. 103)

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche; "The assumption of one single subject is perhaps unnecessary: perhaps it is just as

entities are to varying degrees creatures of possibility. We might intuit this "new" objectivity as the sum of interactions between living processes. The conceptual links between interaction, hermeneutics and a participatory hermeneutics call out for development. This is the basis for the argument that hermeneutics should develop a participatory epistemology.

From Subject to Participant

And so, with regard to resolving the unresolved within philosophical hermeneutics, the following is an outline of a participatory epistemology.

1. *The participant-subject is always 'positioned,'* always a part situated in a larger nexus or whole.
2. *The participant subject is an embodied subject*, not standing apart from the sum of relations that constitutes its environment but simultaneously acting on and being acted on by it.
3. *Such a subject is always located within a situation that is both historical and linguistic* and, in Gadamer's words, "to throw light on it (the situation) is a task that is never entirely completed" (1989, p. 269).
4. *To be is to do: participatory-subjects are in effect clusters of activities*, not beings that act but actions that have a being insofar as they are effective agencies: their essence is a consequential construct, an effect of and not a pre-requisite for action.
5. *Subject-participants are, to use Nietzsche's phrase, multiplicities that act as subjects but are not actual subjects*. They are processes of assemblage or com-posure that gather received events and possible courses of action into one constantly revising story, identity, or practice.[2]

The consequences of a "positioned" subject for hermeneutical thought are suggestive. They imply that:

1. *The experience of an embodied and hence situated subject is multi-registered*, and not to be reduced to any singular mode of interpretation. Though it may reflect a point of view, it cannot be reduced to a single perspective.
2. *The situation of a participant agency is not subject to final description*: If each and every cultural positioning is linguistic, its character can never be fully articulated. In language there is no final description of any position albeit that language will always seek the finality that is constantly inferred from it.[3]
3. Because embodied experience will also be an experience of the temporal, that *experience will also be perspectival* i.e. characteristic of a specific temporal, spatial and cultural location. A given perspective is rarely self-transparent though its characteristics are often clearer when discerned from another perspective. There is always more to a positional centre than a singu-

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[2] Friedrich Nietzsche; "The assumption of one single subject is perhaps unnecessary: perhaps it is just as permissible to assume a multiplicity of subjects whose interaction and struggle is the basis of our thought and our consciousness in general? … My hypothesis: The subject as multiplicity…The continual transitoriness and fleetingness of the subject". Nietzsche (1968, section 493).

[3] Gadamer contends in this context: "Hermeneutic philosophy, as I envision it, does not understand itself on an "absolute position but as a path of experiencing. Its modesty consists in the fact that there is no higher principle than this: "holding oneself open to the conversation" (Gadamer, 2007, p. 34).

lar perspective can imagine. That participatory epistemology should (indeed, ought to) be invoked in favour of inter-disciplinary research is no surprise.

4. *The situated subject is a dialogical, negotiable being.* The other can see things about my perspective I cannot see: I need the other to present me with perspectives enabling me to think differently about the possibilities within my own. Each (dialogical) position is unfinished and unfinishable, "constantly under pressure" to open itself to what is other than itself.[4]

5. *The situated-subject is grounded in what transcends it.* If a position's character and possibilities depend upon the nexus of historical, linguistic and cultural horizons it is placed within, each "position" is dependent the sum of inter-actions it is part of.

These five axioms of hermeneutical positioning have an interesting consequence: they suggest that reflection upon the nature of practice should be (or, stronger, is) the heart of a "philosophical" consideration of hermeneutics.

The reason to support the claim and thereby strengthen the link between participatory epistemology and hermeneutics is as follows.

1. Practices (in the various forms of understanding, interpretation, representation, creativity) presuppose positioning in the ontological sense outlined.

2. Positioning within culture and language implies part-icipation.

3. Participation is interactive: the part can change the character of the sum (whole): speaking matters because it changes matters.

4. Practices are, then, vehicles of transformation, forming and yet formed by their participants.

So, thinking through the relationship between participatory epistemology and hermeneutics opens three conceptual routes to articulating a hermeneutics of practice.

Towards a Hermeneutics of Practice

The three routes to the prioritisation of practice as a hermeneutical thematic entail:

1. *The replacement of the cognitive subject by participatory centres,* that is subjects ontologically formed in and through practice.

2. *Practice considered as formative of the narrative-self or hermeneutic identity* (Ricouer), it is a source of effective and confident inter-action with other such subjects.

3. *The collapse of the Geistes-Naturwissenschaft* distinction, a corollary of which is the replacement of epistemological certainty with practical confidence.

As these three routes conceptually entail each other, I shall deal with them collectively under the sub-themes of practice and its formative powers, uncertainty, and confidence.

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[4] See Williams (2014, p. 122)

Practice, Uncertainty, and Confidence

> "The most precious thing in life is its uncertainty"
> (Yoshida Kenko, *Essays in Idleness,* no. 7.)

Paradoxically, philosophical hermeneutics is built on an abandoned but still influential distinction between the certainties of science and the alleged uncertainties of the humanities. Wilhelm Dilthey is specifically criticized by Gadamer for looking to the sciences for the certainties that life cannot provide: "Dilthey's need for something firm is explicitly the (his) need for protection from the frightful realities of life. …He expects the uncertainty and unsureness of life to be overcome not so much by the stability that the experience of life provides as by science," (Gadamer, 1989, p. 239). The question becomes how to reconcile "uncertainty" about existence with "confidence in existence"? An answer to the question indicates how practice can be understood as formative, indeed, as initiating a form of *Bildung*.

Gadamer (1989) contends that "the certainties of science are different from the certainty acquired in life …" (p. 238) and, what's more, "the unsureness of life is to be overcome by the experience of life that the experience of life provides …" (p. 239). What are these non-epistemic certainties and how does life provide them? The key to this is the expedition of practice itself.

Gadamer invokes tradition as a non-epistemic source of certainty or, rather, confidence. "Tradition in the form of morals, religion and law, rests (in contrast to methodical doubt), on a knowledge that life has of itself" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 238). Uncertainty may be assuaged by initiation into the firmer structures of inherited thought though since when, it might be objected, is tradition a guarantor of stability? (Dilthey's loss of faith in theological tradition is a case in point). However, it is not the "values" transmitted by tradition that inspire confidence. Rather, it is the practices - the commitment to modes of doing - that nurtures it. This suggests that it is practice-acquired-confidence that displaces the (unrealisable) epistemic quest for certainty.[5] What is it that builds confidence in existence and displace the dissipating nihilism of hyperbolic doubt?

What can we trust to and be confident of? Gadamer answers, we can trust to language and tradition. The claim is an obvious re-working of Heidegger's notion of the existential condition of *Geworfenheit*: the finding of ourselves inexplicably cast into the contingencies of language and cultural tradition. However, "certainties" are not simply acquired by immersion in tradition and language alone. The certainties of life are *won*: they are achievements, not the certainties of knowing but those of doing, of participation, and of involvement. The certainties of life are those emergent certainties *won* through confident engagement with various practices. Practice forms the practitioner. Practice is formative.

Practices involve repetition, memory, adjustment, failure and success: upon these rhythms the confidence to perform is built. Participatory engagement with a range of practices enables the capacity and confidence to engage and develop. Tradition and cultural horizons are the preconditions of practice but they do not build the certainties Gadamer speaks of. It is the engage-

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[5] The word confidence is built around the word faith (*fide):* to confide is it to have faith in who one confides in.

ment with practice and the self-insight it affords that grounds the certainties and confidence of the practiced performer, whether artist, doctor or scientist. Certainty and confidence is won through participation and engagement and not through the classical routes of epistemological detachment. This suggests that it is through practices that the identity of the practitioner emerges.

If practices involve repetition, memory, adjustment, failure and success, a provisional narrative identity emerges. The individual centre (the situated subject) achieves a practical point of self-composure: the individual formation is a composition, an integration achieved in and through the skills of practice, a composition only arrived at indirectly. Such a composition is a narrative identity: a centre of possibilities which is always open. This establishes a conceptual link with the notion of a situated subject.

It is from within my practice that I have something to say, and can speak to that which allows me to speak. My narratively established identity offers direction and anticipation. Living narratives are by definition on-going, incomplete, temporal projects. They offer a unique point of orientation inflected by their past and their implicit future (how they might unravel in the both the positive and negative sense). The point is that it is the poise and assuredness of the accomplished practitioner that affords a relatively stable narrative identity. However, we are always vulnerable to what we have confidence in.

The Vulnerability of Practical Understanding

The poise and assuredness of the accomplished practitioner affords a degree of fulfilment. The confident practitioner is recognized as an effective member of a community of practitioners. Yet such fulfilment is always momentary, local, and can be undermined at any moment. Modes of narrative understanding, as well as analogical forms of reasoning and understanding, are particularly subject to internal deconstruction. The practical or narrative identity which participation in a practice affords is at the same time vulnerable to being deconstructed by the same horizons of meaning that enable its emergence in the first place. Being a "situated subject" is not only to be enabled but also to be threatened by the linguistic and historical worlds one is located in. Narrative identities are vulnerable to the infinite varieties of description (or counter-narratives) that being in a language world affords.

Narrative identities are "vulnerable" because they are connected with several horizons of anticipation and expectation. I might build a pattern of sense around certain linguistic meanings. The polyvalence of all meaning suggests that the same signs and symbols when placed in another pattern of sense can disrupt the pattern I have built. The practical identity that participation in linguistic horizons affords is at the same time vulnerable to the very horizons that enable it.

There is an inevitable dialecticity to our participating in a sum of inter-active relations: what they enable (the emergence of a position), they can equally disable (deconstruct): what language gives, language can take away. An account of this dynamic is missing from philosophical hermeneutics, a striking omission in need of address.

What Keeps Understanding Moving?

There is no account of this problem in Gadamer's hermeneutics and it is a question which must be confronted if we are to consider the question of understanding's transformational power. Having established that understanding, interpretation, and representation are practices, what makes such practices inherently unstable and vulnerable to change? Returning to the discussion of narratives, narratives involve expectations and projections. In a sense, all narratives confess their unrealised nature. Narratives are on-going stories: there is much within them that remains possible. Narratives house intuitions of (albeit unrealisable) completeness.

This exposes a formal tension in Gadamer's hermeneutics between epistemological completeness and aesthetic completeness (*Vollzug*). Formally, there is no end, no definitive, no final interpretation able to close a narrative. The reasons for this are clear: (1) the infinity of language horizons makes the task of interpretation endless, (2) the problem of incommensurablity (no interpretation can be fully adequate to its subject-matter) renders formal completion in interpretation impossible, and (3) the fact that participatory epistemology cannot transcend and fix the sum of world constituting relations means that other interpretations are always possible. Yet there is a distinction between seeking for the (final) meaning of something (epistemological closure) and seeking for something that can bring meaningful (aesthetic closure). The artwork offers an appropriate model.

Artworks have a "sense": no lines of meaning scatter within them. They are "closed circles of meaning, in which everything is fulfilled" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 101) so that "more becomes known than is already known" (1989, p. 102). What comes to completion (*Vollzug*) within an artwork is not the infinity of (indeterminate) meanings underwriting it. To the contrary, an artwork takes singular aspects from a subject-matter's infinite horizon of possibilities and weaves them into a "meaningful whole" enabling the recognition of something as something with "its chance and variable circumstances" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 102) removed. An artwork does not concretise all its possible determinations of meaning: a determinate set of possibilities is selected and rendered "whole." It becomes seen as "aesthetically complete" (1989, p. 102), that is, … seen as "something" as if for the first time. The *Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit* emerges, then, as an hermeneutic *a priori*, an analytic condition of any experience of coherence.

The anticipation of completeness is a consequence of interpretive engagement with the open-ended possibilities within a horizon. Translating them into intelligible sequential structures, establishes narrative forms where none were previously were perceived. The anticipation is, in effect, that intuitive sense for *where a work is going*. The quest for aesthetic completeness within a practice is a quest for what might give sense to the indeterminacies at play within that practice. It is, we argue, the quest for aesthetic completeness that drives understanding's disquiet. This gives an explanation of why aesthetic experience plays such a foundational role in philosophical hermeneutics.

Conclusion

I have argued that a future for philosophical hermeneutics lies in the direction of a hermeneutics of practice. Practices are, we contend, forms of "sense-making." They represent different ways

of organising the indeterminacies of human experience. As modes of "sense-making," they assume and pursue a completion (*Vollkommenheit*) of meaningfulness. This brings us to a seminal point: *it is not what a practice pursues that matters but that it pursues it.* To put the point another way, it is often the emergent insights that a practice generates by default rather than the ones it anticipates that prove transformative. The condition of this possibility is ontological rather than epistemological.

The situated practitioner or participatory subject is linguistically and culturally positioned. Such positioning is always shaped explicitly and implicitly by the cultural and historical horizons that define it: explicit in that the horizons set the initial orientation of the practitioner and implicit in that orientation is subject to being changed by the emergence of unrealised nuances of meaning from within those horizons. It is a mistake to think of such positioning in a singular way, as if being situated only involved a single linguistic or historical horizon. The situated practitioner is more a point of transection between a variety of horizons; personal, professional, linguistic, literary, national, social, and philosophical. Arguably, philosophical hermeneutics simplifies the number of horizons at play within understanding and as a consequence underestimates the transformative educational capacity of hermeneutical engagement. The situated nature of understanding means that it is always at a juncture of a variety of individual and cultural horizons. What enables transmission between different horizons concerns the formal operation of simile, metaphor, analogy, and the place holding function of concepts.

Because of the formal operations of language and thought, being situated as a participatory subject is always to be subject to having one's understanding challenged and transformed. Understanding is always at a juncture. Broader cultural meanings presently unknown to me can impact on those within my own narrative and issues of personal narrative can unexpectedly transform how a wider cultural concern is grasped. To be a participant, to be positioned, is to be simultaneously open to deconstruction or re-construction in one horizon precisely because of its linguistic and conceptual connectivity with others. The quest for *Vollzug* and *Vollkommenheit* is instrumental in occasioning such orientational shifts.

Gadamer rightly insists that hermeneutical understanding is not a matter of grasping facts or intentions but a question of acquiring a sense of where an argument is going, a sense of what a work or practice is aiming at even though such ambition may not have, as yet, been achieved. Having an anticipatory sense of where a project or a narrative might take us is key. In other words, although understanding may have a singular object (making sense of a particular text), understanding is never singular. We bring to any engagement a range of expectations and anticipations deriving from a variety of commitments. Bringing to completion what remains at play within a narrative is key for, as argued above, it is the pursuit rather than the pursued that is critical. It is what the pursuit of completeness in one horizon inadvertently puts into play in other associated horizons of meaning that matters. Because no horizon of meaning whether personal or historical can exhaust the possibilities for meaningfulness within it, the pursuit of completeness in one horizon may impact upon another, prompting unexpected and transformative patterns of sense to arise.

Each humanities discipline practises the impossible: the pursuit of an anticipated completeness (*Vollkommenheit*). And yet, it is only in the controlled pursuit of the impossible that the unex-

pectedly possible can arise. In the horizons of language where the as yet unsaid can be as eloquent as the spoken, "things are always waiting to happen" and those things can be "game-changers," serendipitously rather than methodologically arrived insights capable of transforming a framework of understanding. Hermeneutically constituted practices venture, then, controlled risk: the risk - the over-turning of established narrative identities; the gain - extending old identities in new ways or establishing new practices altogether. Considered ontologically, a hermeneutics of practice is the key to understanding the transformative capacities of the humanities.

We conclude that practices are forms of "sense-making." They situate a participatory subject in horizons of linguistic and historical possibility. Practices represent different ways of organizing the indeterminacies of human experience. As modes of "sense-making," practices assume and pursue a completion (*Vollkommenheit*) of meaningfulness. It is not what the practice pursues but that it pursues it that matters. The pursuit of interpretation's end - aesthetic completeness - is but a means to induce a key effect i.e., achieving that transformation of understanding which is, arguably, the primary end of hermeneutics and the humanities (increasing the range of existential possibilities). In Gadamerian terms, to play one must be in play for it is only by playing that one can put into play what is not yet in play. This is what a participatory hermeneutics demonstrates.

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Note

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