

## Assaying Vandavelde's Approach to Gadamer

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to look at four important aspects of Vandavelde's criticisms of Gadamer. First is his position on Gadamer's claim that his hermeneutics is a "philosophical hermeneutics" and not a methodology. Second is Vandavelde's view of interpretation as necessarily going back to the author's intention, and the status of the "mental state" of the author. Is it relevant to interpretation? Is it really accessible? Gadamer, because of his roots in Heidegger, offers a hermeneutics altogether free of intentionality. Third, while Vandavelde sees interpretation as an act of man, Gadamer sees understanding as an event that happens to the interpreter in which he or she participates. Finally, we shall consider the fundamentally different views of language in the two thinkers and the effect of this on their two views of interpretation. In this we find the basis for the many contrasts between the approaches of Vandavelde and Gadamer to interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Gadamer, Vandavelde, Author's intention, Understanding as an act or event, Language.

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1. I, in an article that published in the same journal (No. 205), have already brought to light Vandavelde's critical views in detail. Here, I turn to criticizing his criticism.

## Introduction

What are the critical views of critics of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics? How can philosophical hermeneutics bear up the charges and critiques of critics? These two questions need a familiarity with Gadamer's hermeneutics which is founded upon an adequate understanding of the key elements of his thought. Gadamer's *Truth and Method* is an extremely complicated work.

Understanding this magnum opus and its main message is somewhat difficult, nevertheless, discovering the main question which arises in the book itself and grasping its key elements is the best way to approach Gadamer's hermeneutic thought. The fundamental question for Gadamer is that "How is understanding possible, not only in the humanities but in the whole of man's experience of the world?" Recovering the validity of tradition in human understanding which itself is possible, according to him, by avoiding the all-encompassing emphasis on method is one of the Gadamer's crucial aim in his book.

Although Gadamer's own works are properly enough to present and develop his philosophical hermeneutics, nevertheless both clarifying and developing his hermeneutics are somehow related to his critics. Weinsheimer says: "*Truth and Method* have been disseminated not by Gadamer's disciples but by his critics."<sup>2</sup> From those loyal to the actual practices of regional hermeneutics, Gadamer's hermeneutics has met with criticism in the more than forty years since the original German publication of *Wahrheit und Methode* in 1960. Pol Vandavelde is a contemporary thinker who has recently criticized Gadamer's hermeneutics from the perspective of traditional hermeneutics. Vandavelde's critiques rely on linguistics, Husserlian phenomenological concepts, and the prevailing philosophy of language. The best way of examining the charges made against Gadamer's hermeneutics is trying to confront them by exploring his principles and explicating the meaning of his basic concepts. In my view, much of the conflict between critics of Gadamer, on the one hand, and Gadamer on the other lies in the contrasting definitions, scope, and function of hermeneutics. Here, I will show that Vandavelde's critiques shows that he has not adequate consideration to the foundations of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.

### 1. Ambiguity or Clarity

Vandavelde says that Gadamer's thoughts can be situated between two extremes: "Gadamer only works if the two poles between which he wants to drive a wedge indeed constitute a true dichotomy."<sup>3</sup> Gadamer, he says, only refuses this polarity and did not offer a justification for his views. The result of this position, as he puts it, is twofold: first, there is no "clear indication of where he stands and how far he wants

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2. Weinsheimer, 1988, xii.

3. Vandavelde, 2005, 60.

to go in one direction or the other."<sup>4</sup> Second, "his views ... leaves interpreters in the infelicitous position of either attacking Gadamer or choosing the apologetic approach."<sup>5</sup>

It seems to me that Vandavelde has not judged fairly here.

First, Gadamer, as he pointed out, clearly and without any ambiguity confesses that "Fundamentally ...I am describing what is the case. That it is as I describe it cannot, I think, be seriously questioned. ... I am trying... to envisage in a fundamentally universal way what always happens."<sup>6</sup> Again he says "the purpose of my investigation is . . . to discover what is common to all modes of understanding and to show that understanding is never a subjective relation to a given object but to the history of its effect".<sup>7</sup> Second, since Gadamer's purpose in *TM* "is not to offer a general theory of interpretation and a differential account of its methods,"<sup>8</sup> requesting rational reconstruction from him is a futile affair.

## 2. Intentionality or Non-Intentionality

One of the most important and challenging issues in hermeneutics is the author's intention in interpreting a text. Vandavelde wants to prove the necessity of the author's intention in the interpretation of a text, but on the other hand, he wishes to escape from the difficulties and the critiques that are directed against the intentionalism of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. Thus, he distinguishes two kinds of intention: the private psychological intention and the publicly available intention. Then he claims that what is necessary and inseparable from the text in the process of interpretation is the publicly available intention. If we ask from Vandavelde, what do you mean by the publicly available intention, he responds that it is nothing but what is written in the work itself. In other words, a work is nothing but "the manifestation of publicly available mental states."<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, if he means that a work or a text independently can be put at the core of interpretation, there will be no difference in this sense between his idea and Gadamer's position. But, this is not what Vandavelde has in his mind. It seems that his central concern, like Hirsch, is to combat the theory of "semantic autonomy"<sup>10</sup> in order to reinstate the author's intention as the principal interpretive criterion.

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4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Gadamer. 1990, 512.

7. Ibid.,xxx1.

8. Ibid.

9. Vandavelde, 2005, 42.

10. "Semantic autonomy," as Hirsch called it, is the idea that textual meaning is cut off from the life of its author, and has its own life independent of its author's mind. Hirsch criticizes

Therefore, the work's meaning, for Vandavelde, is the author's very intention that is manifested in the form of the text. He writes, "Sophocles meant what he wrote because he chose the articulation of his intentions. If we want to understand what he meant, there is no better candidate than what he wrote."<sup>11</sup> A paradoxical point here emerges. On the one hand, Vandavelde scrupulously argues that "the distinction between a private psychological moment and a public mental moment is crucial for interpretation theory"<sup>12</sup> and shows that what an interpreter is looking for in the act of interpretation is the public mental moment, but on the other hand, he reunites these separated parts (public mental moment matches the private psychological moment) through the implicit claims made by the author. As he writes, "the claim to intelligibility authors make gives interpreters assurance that what is written in the work, which is the manifestation of publicly available mental states, matches what the author intended, the private psychological state of the person before or during the writing process."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the question is why Vandavelde chooses this long, problematic, and finally useless approach in the first place. These three speculative levels of meaning, i.e. the author's intention, textual meaning, and representative content, are distinct but, in actuality, they are an interrelated set of elements that work together; and the interpreter who tries to arrive at the determinate and original meaning of a text grasps all three levels together.

Perhaps Vandavelde's description of the interrelation between the private psychological intention and the publicly available intention is notable and fascinating, but it is not clear enough if his account can resist or solve Gadamer's own critique against intentionalism's reconstruction. Gadamer believes that historicity and linguisticity together constitute the ultimate horizon of all human understanding, and he asserts, "Not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author."<sup>14</sup>

Taking into account the interrelatedness among these three levels of meaning and distinguishing between two kinds of author's intention, Vandavelde imagines that the problem of intentionalism and non-intentionalism is solved. However, one should note that not only is the problem not solved, but even we return to the starting point. If we ask, "What is the meaning of what Sophocles wrote?" perhaps Vandavelde will answer: "It is nothing but what he meant." But, if we ask again, "What did Sophocles mean?" his response would be: "What he wrote." It seems that this approach is a vicious circle that can neither bring about new knowledge nor help us to understand a determinate and original meaning. However, even if we had access to a determinate meaning of the text, it can be asked of Vandavelde: by which

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Heideggerian-Gadamerian hermeneutics, New Criticism and Structuralism since they defend this approach. See, Hirsch, E. D. *Validity in Interpretation*, pp. 1-5; *The Aims...*, p. 17.

11. Vandavelde, 2005, 42.

12. *Ibid.*, 40.

13. *Ibid.*, 42.

14. Gadamer, 1990, 296.

means can we be sure that what we understood as a determinate meaning of the text is the same as the intended meaning by its author? He may respond that by returning to the author's intention, but the author's intention, as he puts it, is itself identified by the textual meaning. In other words, to find the author's intention we need only find out the textual meaning. This seems fine, but what if we should then ask: how do we know that we have discovered the textual meaning? The response is that we will evaluate it through assaying the author's intention. But, now we are right back where we started, since the original problem is that we do not know what the author's intention is. What Hoy writes about Hirsch could also be used to speak of Vandavelde: "[He] clearly presupposes a theory of meaning that connects meaning with the will of a psychological agent. This position puts him at odds with currently important epistemological and literary-critical theories that challenge such a close connection between intention and meaning. Obviously, the concept of meaning itself needs careful analysis."<sup>15</sup> Hoy is right.

According to the arguments that Gadamer advanced against the intentionalists (based on his historicity and linguisticity of understanding), appealing to the author's intention to reach a determinate meaning not only "is a futile undertaking"<sup>16</sup> but also misses out what is the most important, "for understanding something written is not a reproduction of something that is past, but the sharing of a present meaning."<sup>17</sup>

Vandavelde, on the one hand, introduces a written work as "the manifestation of publicly available mental states," and writes that, "Authors, like interpreters, make claims, and their work is the articulation of these claims. Authors are certainly entitled... to comment on the true intent of their work."<sup>18</sup> But, on the other hand, he stupendously concludes that, "As a consequence, the historical writer does not have an authoritative status when it comes to the meaning of a work. And interpreters can sometimes understand better than writers themselves what they meant."<sup>19</sup> How can Vandavelde resolve these contradictory phrases?

First, if the text is the manifestation of the author's intention and "authors are certainly entitled... to comment on the true intent of their work,"<sup>20</sup> it seems that it is not possible to understand someone's intention better than himself.

Second, although it might be possible to understand a text "in a different way"<sup>21</sup> or perhaps (according to Vandavelde) in a way better than the writer, this, according to the interpretive bases of Vandavelde, will be a futile attempt. Because, regarding the

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15. Hoy, 1978, 19.

16. Gadamer, 1990, 167.

17. *Ibid.*, 354.

18. Vandavelde, 2005, 42.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. Gadamer, 1990, 266.

perspective of intentionalism, objectivity is arriving at nothing more nor less than the author's intended meaning. In fact, understanding a text in a different way or better than the writer is possible only when we accept the theory of "semantic autonomy" and allow for a text to have an independent personality apart from its author.

Third, referring to the possibility of losing the work's meaning, Vandavelde believes that, "Loss can happen, and does so rather often."<sup>22</sup> There is no doubt that the loss of meaning can happen with an interpreter, but how about the author himself? Is it possible for the author to lose his intended meaning? Since the work, as he says, is the manifestation of an author's intention, losing the intended meaning must not happen to the author, and even further, it is not possible that the given meaning can be understood by the interpreter better than its author. To clarify this argument, I make use of an example that he mentions in his work. Thomas Jefferson had brought into the Declaration of Independence the idea that, "All men are created equal."<sup>23</sup> Vandavelde says that as to the meaning of this sentence, "Even as a public moment, scholars do not agree."<sup>24</sup> The disagreement of interpreters on its meaning may have happened for different reasons. One can say; "... because he was a slave owner he could not really have meant all people or that he had conflicted feeling about slavery and could anticipate such a future time of equality for all people."<sup>25</sup>

The question here is that if this phrase is the manifestation of Jefferson's intent, who can suggest the intended meaning of the phrase better than Jefferson? Not only it is not possible for others to get Jefferson's intended meaning better than he himself, but for him to lose the intended meaning would be meaningless. However, if we put this phrase as a pivot of interpretation in itself, apart from its writer, the situation will be completely different: both of the different readings would be allowed and it might be possible to get to the meaning that is better than the author's. And also, loss can happen.

### **3. Hermeneutics as a Hermeneutic Theory or Hermeneutics as Hermeneutic Philosophy?**

There is the issue of whether interpretation is an act of the interpreter or an event of understanding. The fact that Gadamer considers interpretation as an event and not as an act is a central point of Vandavelde's critiques against Gadamer. By saying that, "Gadamer is the best example of a theoretician who takes interpretation exclusively as an event and declares the absurdity of a single right interpretation of a text," Vandavelde, as a matter of fact, wants to argue that not only Gadamer's hermeneutics has no practical applications, no objective consequences, but also he

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22. Vandavelde, 2005, 42.

23. Ibid., 62.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

does not make a framework by which the validity of an interpretation can be established.

In response to Vandevelde's critiques, it is helpful to pay close attention to the following notes to be found in Joel Weinsheimer's text entitled "What Is Philosophical about Philosophical Hermeneutics?"<sup>26</sup>

First, the impracticality of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics stems directly from the kind of hermeneutics it is. Second, this impracticality or inapplicability implies no indictment and it does not show that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is pointless and inconsequential but only that it is not a theory.<sup>27</sup> Third, and most importantly, Gadamer's position in this case is based on his view of language which is different from Vandevelde's position. That will be the last point we will discuss.

Although Vandevelde, quoting from Gadamer, often has acknowledged that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is not a theory, it seems to me nevertheless that he disregards the consequences of his acknowledgement. If we accept that the goal of Gadamer's investigation is not to offer a general theory of interpretation, we must deal neither with his philosophical hermeneutics as a theory nor with him as an interpretive theoretician. Regarding his expectations of a theory of interpretation, Vandevelde criticizes Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. He commits exactly the same fault that had been done before by his predecessors, i.e., Betti and Hirsch. Understanding the fact that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is not a theory is of such importance that Weinsheimer writes: "No single fact is more crucial than this to an understanding of *TM*, for to distinguish philosophy from theory is to open up the fundamental question of what makes philosophical hermeneutics specifically philosophical."<sup>28</sup> By theory we mean the hermeneutic theory as represented by Betti. This meaning of theory, according to Bleicher, "focuses on the problematic of a general theory of interpretation as the methodology for the human sciences."<sup>29</sup> According to this meaning, there is a close relation between theory and method. "Theory, thus defined, is the foundation of methodology; it is inherently practical insofar as it entails the construction of general principles whose very purpose is to govern interpretive practice."<sup>30</sup> On the contrary, Gadamer asserts that, "The purpose of my investigation is not to offer a general theory of interpretation and a differential account of its methods (which Emilio Betti had done so well) but to discover what is common to all modes of understanding."<sup>31</sup> Although Gadamer acknowledges that his aim is to reveal what is common to understanding, thus making a general account of

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26. Weinsheimer, 1991, 24- 41.

27. Ibid., 25.

28. Ibid.

29. Bleicher, 1980, 1.

30. Ibid., 26.

31. Gadamer, 1990, xxxi.

interpretation, this generality does not make it theoretical, because it lacks the other ingredient essential to theory: the attempt to establish regulative principles and thereby govern interpretation. He asserts that, "I did not wish to elaborate a system of rules to describe, let alone direct, the methodical procedure of the human sciences."<sup>32</sup> Gadamer definitely admits that no universal method governs interpretation; therefore he concludes that what is universal to understanding is not a method. One of the implications of this thesis is the fact that "if not all understanding is governed by method, then theoretical methodology does not exclusively determine which interpretations are true."<sup>33</sup> Regarding these considerations, it becomes clearer why Gadamer's hermeneutics lacks practical implications. It was neither inadvertent nor resulted from his ignorance, but "his thesis is indeed that understanding understanding does not depend on elaborating a principle of validity in interpretation, for interpretive practice does not ultimately consist in the application of principles based on interpretive theories. Gadamer's hermeneutics is philosophical in intent: not only does it have no practical applications but, further, any attempt to put it into practice constitutes a misinterpretation of it."<sup>34</sup>

In short, here, the essential conflict between Betti, Hirsch and Vandavelde, on the one side, and Gadamer, on the other, is the conflict between their definition of hermeneutics as a hermeneutic theory and Gadamer's definition of hermeneutics as hermeneutic philosophy. Hermeneutic theory as we have seen in Betti and Hirsch has practical applications. Interpreting, here, is something interpreters do, an act of *construere*, of construal or construction, which can be regulated and normative. Not only do theorists construct theories; their theories enable interpreters in turn to construct objective interpretations.<sup>35</sup> This whole process, in Gadamer's words, "is dominated by the idea of construction." As Gadamer writes, "Modern theory is a tool of construction by means of which we gather experiences in a unified way and make it possible to dominate them."<sup>36</sup>

In contrast, Gadamer asks a philosophical question. He "asks (to put it in Kantian terms): How is understanding possible?"<sup>37</sup> This question is directed toward what precedes the activity of regulated understanding and even the activity of unregulated understanding, for the philosophical question is: what precedes any act of understanding on our part and makes it possible? Precisely this, as Weinsheimer emphasizes, is the locus of hermeneutic philosophy.<sup>38</sup> Gadamer states, "My real

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32. Ibid., xxviii.

33. Weinsheimer, 1991, 27.

34. Ibid., 27-8.

35. Ibid., 30.

36. Gadamer, 1990, 454.

37. Ibid., xxx.

38. Weinsheimer, 1991, 32.



concern was and is philosophic: not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing."<sup>39</sup> Therefore, hermeneutic philosophy seems to have no practical applications, and thus it is not concerned with what interpreters do. It is an event that happens universally to interpreters, and one that we can do nothing about.

This takes us back to the basic aim of philosophical hermeneutics according to Gadamer. According to Gadamer, the reconstruction of the question that called the text into being, is not finding out the author's intention. What is speaking in the text is the subject-matter about which it was written, the question that called it into being and to which it is an answer. Here, referring to this point, Palmer has a valued notification.<sup>40</sup> Both the concept of temporal distance and the emphasis on meaning in historical understanding show that the task of hermeneutics, for Gadamer, is basically to understand the text, not the author. The subjectivity of neither the author nor the reader is the final reference, but rather the historical meaning itself for us in the present.<sup>41</sup> This historical meaning comes to understand not because a relation between persons is involved but because of the participation in the subject matter that the text communicates. As Palmer noted, "the ground of objectivity," according to Gadamer, "lies not in the subjectivity of a speaker but in the reality which comes to expression in and through language. It is in this objectivity that the hermeneutical experience must find its ground."<sup>42</sup> Therefore, Gadamer's main purpose is to show that an author has no authority concerning his meaning because of his occasional character. Indeed, as we have already noted, one of the most important tasks of Gadamer was challenging the subjectivism and the subject-object schema in his hermeneutics. Taking note of the key elements of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics—mainly, the fusion of horizons, the dialectic of questioning and answering, and the play—shows that it is neither the interpreter who by using his/her particular method imposes to his/her prior category on the text nor the subjectivity of the author engraved on his/her text which are essential to grasp the meaning of a text, but it is the text that seizes and overpowers the reader, and in being read transforms him. According to Gadamer, the "subject" of interpretation of the text is not the subjectivity of the one who interprets the text; it is the text itself.

Understanding, for Gadamer, is basically dialogical in character, i.e. it is coming to an agreement on a subject matter, thus a matter of participation. The concept of participation will be clearer in relation to the concept of "play." As the play or game has its own nature independent of the consciousness of those who play it, the text, too, has its own nature independent of the consciousness of the interpreter itself. When we watch a play or read a novel, we are not a mere spectators but we

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39. Gadamer, 1990, xxviii.

40. Palmer, 1969, 185.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*, 244.

participate in it, "watching something is a genuine mode of participation... being totally involved in and carried away by what one sees."<sup>43</sup> Appealing to the concept of play, Gadamer illustrates the inadequacy of the subject-object schema in interpreting a work. Gadamer tries to free interpretation from the subject-object dichotomies and from the tendency to take the reader's subjectivity as a starting point, and he tries to preserve the text in separation from the author's opinions and creative act. His approach, as Palmer noted, "is a more dialectical approach that tried to allow itself to be guided by the nature of what was being understood. Knowledge was not something that they acquired as a possession but something in which they participated, allowing themselves to be directed and even possessed by their knowledge."<sup>44</sup>

Therefore, according to Gadamer, neither author nor interpreter is in a privileged and absolute position concerning the meaning of a text, but the interpreter must be governed by the claim of the text, and simultaneously interpret it in the light of the present. The interpreter must not see himself as the master of the situation. Conversely, he is a participant; his participation is "not something active but something passive." The text brings a world to stand before the interpreter who, in confronting this world, finds his own horizon negated. The process of understanding a text is advancing into the subject itself through Socratic question and answer. In this dialogue, "to understand a text is not simply to bombard it with questions but to understand the question it puts to the reader. It is to understand the question behind the text, the question that called the text into being."<sup>45</sup>

#### 4. The Different Views of Language

Finally, a basic element of contrast is their philosophy of language. The most important difference between Gadamer and his critics is related to philosophy of language. Like Betti and Hirsch, Vandavelde also considers language as a medium or a sophisticated means both for the author to manifest his intention and for the interpreter to recover the author's intention. Language for Vandavelde, as we saw before, fulfils a complicated function of articulating an intentional state, providing such an intentional state with its public expression, and referring to an outside world. In other words, he believes that there is a direct link and an instrumental relationship between a set of intentional states and language. This is the point that is frequently emphasized in his work. As he writes, "since we are dealing with written documents or texts, language is the only means of communication involved."<sup>46</sup> Words as signs, according to Vandavelde, have a function of conveying the existing

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43. Gadamer, 1990, 124.

44. Ibid., 165.

45. Palmer, 1969, 250.

46. Vandavelde, 2005, 48.

meanings and intentional states. Accordingly, as the author uses common signs/words to convey his/her intentional states interpreters also by using the same signs/words can obtain the meaning of the text. This is because of the fact that "the terms used by a speaker have the same value for the other members of the linguistic community."<sup>47</sup> Then, it seems that for Vandavelde there is a "lexical pool" from which the author and interpreter choose appropriate semiotic vehicles. This will be highlighted when we pay attention to what he writes about the relation of language and reality. Although Vandavelde, based on Saussure's differentiation between *langue* (language as a system) and *parole* (language as speech), believes that language and reality are separated from each other, at the same time, "the interaction between words and things," he says, "is relevant."<sup>48</sup> Again, he writes, "the interaction between word and things is somehow captured by a language as a system that, because it is in part a reconstruction based on how speakers speak of the world, provides speakers with words already endowed with specific potential for being used."<sup>49</sup>

Reviewing Gadamer's linguistic thoughts shows that these are the essential differences between, on the one hand, Vandavelde (and Betti and Hirsch) and Gadamer on the other. Gadamer considers neither language as a means or tool nor words as signs; rather, in contrast, he believes (following Heidegger) in the ontological status of language and our participation in it. He sees word not as a sign but something like a copy or image.

Thinking, in Vandavelde's and his predecessors' theory of language, seems to be separate from words and uses words to point to things, but, for Gadamer, there is an original connection between speaking and thinking.

While Vandavelde, Betti, Hirsch and, of course, Saussure, believe in the separation of language and reality and *langue* and *parole* and then in the interaction between them, Gadamer maintains their unity. In closing, we find a statement in Weinsheimer that is very helpful:

Language is the appearance of being, its own image, its own self-reflection. In terms of interpretation, we can say that being that images itself interprets itself in language. Being that can be understood, interpretable being, is not "in itself" such that the interpretation (the verbal appearance of the understanding) is superadded. Being that can be understood appears, presents itself, performs itself, pictures itself, interprets itself in words: being that can be understood therefore is (inalienable from) language.<sup>50</sup>

For Gadamer, language and the text disclose a world. Word and world, according to Gadamer, are so bound together that he says, "not only is the world world only insofar as it comes into language, but language, too, has its real being only in the fact

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47. Ibid., 52.

48. Ibid., 50.

49. Ibid., 52.

50. Weinsheimer, 1991, 111.

that the world is presented in it.”<sup>51</sup> Gadamer says, “the langue/parole distinction falsifies what language is, for a word is a word uttered, a word in dialogue. Further, the langue/parole distinction posits a word in itself, just as the signifier/signified distinction posits a signified in itself.”<sup>52</sup>

Following Saussure, Vandavelde believes that “not only language as a system precedes me but also discourses, with their rules and stakes.”<sup>53</sup> In another place he continues, “language is directly linked to a set of intentional states, in the sense that it encompasses terms with how they are supposed to be used by real speakers in the real world.”<sup>54</sup> This is a formal description of language which means that language as a structure can be studied independent of its saying anything at all. But conversely, Gadamer’s description of language is somehow different. Language, according to Gadamer, is neither a substance nor a form but it is “a process.”<sup>55</sup> Saying language is a process involves: first, the historicity of language and understanding, as Gadamer puts it. He writes, “if we stick to what takes place in speech and, above all, in every dialogue with tradition carried on by the human sciences, we cannot fail to see that here concepts are constantly in the process of being formed.”<sup>56</sup> Second, although “understanding,” Gadamer says, “always includes an element of application and thus produces an ongoing process of concept formation,” this is not the same as what we have quoted from Vandavelde above. It is because of the fact that application, for Gadamer, is not a fixed and finished process, but rather, it is an ongoing process. New concepts are formed as words are applied to new circumstances in new times. Gadamer writes,

... the general concept meant by the word is enriched by any given perception of a thing, so that what emerges is a new, more specific word formation which does more justice to the particularity of that act of perception. However certainly speaking implies using pre-established words with general meanings, at the same time a constant process of concept formation is going on, by means of which the life of a language develops.<sup>57</sup>

### Final Point or Conclusion<sup>58</sup>

When we consider the points of contrast between Vandavelde’s stance and that of Gadamer that we have considered, we must confirm Gadamer’s argument in the

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51. Gadamer, 1990, 443.

52. *Ibid.*, 110.

53. Vandavelde, 2005, 54.

54. *Ibid.*, 52.

55. Gadamer, 1990, 434.

56. *Ibid.*, 403.

57. *Ibid.*, 429.

58. What you will see below under this title belongs to Prof. Richard Palmer. When I sent this paper to him for revision he sent me this paragraph as a suggestion or a possible final paragraph. So, here you can see his suggestion as he sent to me.

introduction to the 2nd edition (1965) contra Betti, that they are doing quite different things! Gadamer is doing the philosophy of understanding, while Vandavelde is confronting the task of interpretation as a methodology within the modern mindset. He laments that Gadamer is not helping him in his task. The reason for it is that they are doing quite different things, as we have shown, **and** they stand in two different historical horizons. Vandavelde stands in the horizon of modernity, scientism, and the quest for scientific validity since Descartes, with its definitions of language, human subject, object, and validity (and their methodological attainment), whereas Gadamer represents **a new way of thinking altogether**, a way of thinking that stands within a horizon stemming from Heideggerian philosophy. We have not had time to go into Gadamer's debt to Heidegger. Nevertheless, for Heidegger and Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (1960, trans. 1975, 2nd revised edition in English 1989), understanding—especially understanding a work of art—is a linguistic event of ontological disclosure [one understands in language and history] that occurs to a human being in his or her historical being-in-the-world, as Heidegger explains in his famous series of lectures in Frankfurt in 1935, “The Origin of the Work of Art” (first published in German in *Holzwege* [Klostermann, 1950, pp. 1-72], and available in English in Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, and this essay more completely in the 2nd revised and expanded edition, ed. David F. Krell, Harper Collins, 1977, 1993 [2nd ed.] and more complexly and comprehensively in the *Beiträge* [Klosterman, 1989]. the English translation is *Contributions to Philosophy from Enowning* [Indiana University Press, 1999, 369pp.]). This “new way of thinking” about texts and works of art experiences them in a new way, through a disclosive “objectivity” that reveals the object in the event of understanding. Understanding is not an act but an event which is a “fusion of [historical] horizons,” that takes place in language, it is not the act of an interpreter with a text. Language is not a tool of man (Vandavelde), but a medium in which the world is disclosed to humans in its truth. When we consider Vandavelde and Gadamer, we are dealing with a person who sees the world in an old, subjectivistic modern way, and a person who is thinking in a new way about language, truth, texts, works of art, and finally about understanding and interpretation. **The key to grasping their differences is that they are thinking in a quite new way about understanding and interpretation!**

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