

**“Being that can be understood is language”:
A Contemplation on the Implications of Gadamer’s Thesis Concerning
Language**

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ABSTRACT

Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his work *Truth and Method*, raises a controversial and thought-provoking argument regarding language and its relation to Being. He states that “*Being that can be understood is language.*” Despite his subsequent efforts in some works following *Truth and Method* to elucidate what he considers to be self-evident in the meaning of this expression, various interpreters have continued to derive various interpretations from it. Some have focused on its ontological dimension within Heideggerian context, while others have emphasized its epistemological aspect within the Kantian tradition. In this paper, we aim to clarify the meaning of the Gadamer’s expression and explore the grounds and reasons for the emergence of conflicting interpretations, while also referencing such interpretations and relying on a descriptive-analytical approach based on Gadamer’s relevant texts. Overall, it seems that the ambiguity in Gadamer’s position regarding language and its relation to being boils down to the fact that he seeks to reconcile Heidegger’s phenomenological perspective with his own philosophical hermeneutics. Thus, Gadamer sometimes emphasizes on the being itself and sometimes on our linguistic understanding of being.

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Introduction

As we are aware, one of the significant contributions of Gadamer to hermeneutics and the issue of understanding is his emphasis on its linguistic aspect. It is based on this linguistic aspect of the event of understanding that he underscores dialogue as the primary means to achieve mutual understanding, which is verbal in nature. Apart from language, nothing is articulated in understanding; for we are fundamentally confronted with the mediation of language with the world: "... the between-world of language has proven itself to be the true dimension which that which is given is given" (Gadamer, 1981/4, 167). Indeed, the fact that language mediates all our encounters with the world implicitly implies "the impossibility of going beyond the linguistic schema of the world." (Gadamer, 1981/4, 166). In other words, if for Heidegger, "Being" was the common ground upon which everything ultimately depended, for Gadamer, it is language that plays this fundamental role: "language, however, is like a field from which a variety of seeds can come forth." (Gadamer, 1979, 135)¹. Gadamer's perspective on the role of language in mediating comprehensive understanding of the world and phenomena, which is presented with various interpretations and emphases in his different works, has led to divergent interpretations. Each interpreter by emphasizes on a particular aspect of his claims, has leading to different conclusions.

In the third section (in the concluding subsection "The universal aspect of hermeneutics")² of *Truth and Method*, dedicated to the issue of language, Gadamer presents a provocative claim which, at first glance, is highly stimulating and provocative. Similar to Heidegger's famous statement on language, it has been quoted by Gadamer's interpreters here and there and to some extent, has been subjected to debate and various conflicting interpretations. Gadamer, by accepting the fundamental premise that language serves as a mediator through which "self" and the world encounter each other, articulates the famous statement: "*Being that can be understood is language.*"³ (Gadamer, 2004, 470). One interpreter considers its significance as "equivocal and ambiguous" statement and attributes the root of ambivalent interpretation to the brevity inherent in Gadamer's expression (Laurukhin, 2016, 48), while Grondin, as a prominent disciple and interpreter of Gadamer, regards the statement as a prominent exemplification of the "universality of language". In his opinion, Gadamer apparently equates the boundary of the world with the boundaries of language and perceives it in conflict with some of his views regarding the limitations of language and understanding, thus introducing a form of "turn" in Gadamer's position (Grondin, 1399, 127-9). Rorty, while noting that Gadamer's statement has become a sort of "slogan" for contemporary philosophers, believes that both the "linguistic turn" approach of analytical

¹ According to Hegelian expression of Gadamer, "... Only in a dialogue can a language arise and continue to develop - a language in which we, in a more and more estranged world, are at home" (Gadamer, 1977b, 195).

² The title of the section is as follow: The ontological shift of hermeneutics guided by language.

³ *Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache.*

philosophers and the “idealist” approach of continental philosophers regarding the nature of language are “encapsulated” therein (Rorty, 2004, 22-24).

Overall, in the interpretation of Gadamer’s aforementioned statement, some commentators emphasize its epistemological aspect, somewhat accentuating the Kantian heritage of Gadamer’s hermeneutics,¹ while others, by highlighting its ontological dimension, underscore Gadamer’s Heideggerian heritage of thought.² Finally, some consider both aspects simultaneously.³ In this paper, relying on Gadamer’s own expressions, we endeavor to arbitrate between these two positions and demonstrate whether juxtaposing Gadamer’s prominent views on language and understanding alongside his famous statement resolves the claimed ambiguity and whether, given the context of Gadamer’s expression and other components of his philosophical hermeneutics regarding language and understanding, there epistemological aspect concerning the relationship between language and the world is concentrated or the ontological aspect?

The Heideggerian traces in Gadamer’s perspective on language

Martin Heidegger, in addition to delineating the relationship between being and language in *Being and Time* (sections 34-35),⁴ in the *Letter on Humanism* explicitly defines the ontological status of language in relation to being in his famous expression: “Language is the house of being” (Heidegger, 2000, 83). We can discern traces of Gadamer’s indebtedness to Heidegger in his analysis of language and its relation to the world or what Gadamer terms as the “being-in-the-world” of our linguistic existence in the following phrases from *Truth and Method*:⁵

Not only is the world, world only insofar as it comes into language, but language, too, has its real being only in the fact that the world is presented in it. Thus, that language is originally human means at the same time that man’s being- in- the-world is primordially linguistic. We will have to investigate the relation between

¹ For example, within this group of interpreters, one can refer to Weinsheimer (2009) and Grondin (2020). Weinsheimer, in interpreting Gadamer’s statement, concludes that “the scope of hermeneutics’ understanding is identical to the scope of being.” (Weinsheimer, 2009, 36).

² Among these interpreters, one can mention the positions of Laurukhin (2016) and Reiser (2019). By emphasizing such phrases from Gadamer that what happens during conversation is more than just our action on “the matter at hand”; it is rather “the doing of the thing itself”, Figal attempts to highlight the ontological aspect of Gadamer’s attitude to language (Figal, 2002, 108-9). However, despite emphasizing the ontological aspect of Gadamer’s approach, he expresses Gadamer’s famous statement as follows (which its epistemological aspect is highlighted): “The being of the understanding just as much as the being of understanding which comes to word.” (Figal, 2002, 115).

³ From among these interpreters, one can refer to Figal (2002).

⁴ According to Gadamer’s interpretation, Heidegger considers language as an “existential” aspect of Dasein’s being in *Being and Time*; that is, “as a determining factor [*Bestimmung*] of a Dasein singled out by its understanding of Being.” (Gadamer, 1993, 136).

⁵ In the essay “On the Truth of the Word”, Gadamer using Heidegger’s terminology elucidates the relationship between language, being, and understanding ontologically: “... Man is not just himself at home in language, but rather ‘bein’ [*Sein*] is there in the language that we speak with each other.” (Gadamer, 1971, 136).

language and world in order to attain the horizon adequate to the fact that *hermeneutic experience is verbal in nature* (Gadamer, 2004, 440).

Certainly, Gadamer as Heidegger considers language not merely as a communicative “tool” nor even as one of the possessions of humans in the world that could easily be overlooked,¹ but rather intertwining it with understanding (the understanding of Being).² “Language is not just one of man’s possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that man has a *world* at all. The world as world exists for man as for no other creature that is in the world. But this world is verbal in nature.” (Gadamer, 2004, 440). The initial expressions echo a hermeneutical reinterpretation of Heideggerian ideas in *Being and Time* concerning the relationship between language, world, and Dasein. What distinguishes Gadamer’s work and marks his contribution to this discourse is encapsulated in the concluding statements of the above quotation. If the world or Being exists and if only Dasein has the world and just he can comprehend it, then world-having/ being-in-the-world and understanding it are “verbal in nature”. There is a hermeneutic circle between the world and language; both having language is contingent upon having the world and understanding the world in turn is “verbal in nature”. This epistemological dimension can also be traced to some extent in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*,³ since ultimately it is Dasein that has the world and comprehend it.⁴ In other words, if “Being should come to language” (Gadamer, 1969, 66), then Dasein takes on such a mission. However, the question arises whether if the world is “verbal in nature”, does this imply limitations on our understanding or limitations within the world itself? Is there any other possibility for the emergence and understanding of the world, and does its linguistic representation not confine it?

Throughout Gadamer’s works, one can discern expressions that explicitly or implicitly suggest a sense of “panlinguisticism,” indicating that he reduces everything, even being/ world, to language and linguistic understanding. This has provided a foundation for a sort of epistemological and relativistic interpretation. In the following, we will mention two instances in this regard to provide the necessary groundwork for a better understanding and analysis of Gadamer’s earlier mentioned expression.

On relation language and world, Gadamer in his essay “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem” writes: “Language is the fundamental mode of operation of our being-in-the-world and all-embracing form of the constitution of the world.” (Gadamer, 1966, 3). What is somewhat

¹ See: (Amini, 2023, 97-8).

² According to one of the commentators, “the language ontology” in Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics stands in opposition to an instrumental and nominalistic view of language that does not consider the meaning of words as the product of the “knowing subject’s” intention (Davey, 2006, 24).

³ Although Gadamer himself refers more to Humboldt, who views language as a “worldview”, than to Heidegger regarding language and its relation to the world (See: Gadamer, 2004, 440). Perhaps he wanted to simultaneously integrate the approaches of Heidegger and Humboldt.

⁴ According to Heidegger, the scope of Being and Time “It asks about Being itself in so far as Being enters in to the intelligibility of Dasein.” (Heidegger, 2001, 193).

provocative here is that Gadamer not only ties our being-in-the-world to the being of language but goes even further, considering the very “substitution” of the world dependent on it. This kind of emphasis on the universality of language is somewhat Kantian interpretation of Heidegger, while Heidegger himself emphasizes more on Being/world rather than language. Anyway, if we did not have Gadamer’s other statements in his other works, perhaps relying solely on this statement would lead to the misinterpretation that Gadamer seems to consider the being of the world contingent upon the being of language and, like Wittgenstein¹ initially, considers the boundaries of the world to overlap with the boundaries of language. However, by referring to similar statements and other explanations by Gadamer, avoiding such a conception is feasible. The following expressions are seemingly more exaggerated than Gadamer’s aforementioned statement, insofar as he considers language as “limitless medium” which “absolutely everything,” even tradition and culture, dependent on it:

The phenomenon of understanding, then, shows the universality of human linguisticity as a limitless medium that carries *everything* within it- not only the “culture” that has been handed down to us through language, but absolutely everything- because everything (in the world and out of it) is included in the realm of “understanding” and understandability in which we move (Gadamer, 1967, 25).

Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics revolves around language and understanding, as evident from the above expressions, indicating a kind of turn in relation to Heidegger’s approach. He emphasizes more on verbal understanding of Being rather than placing emphasis on Being itself. Although this understanding is still an understanding of Being, Gadamer is more concerned with the understanding itself and the linguistic occurrence of it, rather than Being itself as Heidegger would. Gadamer interprets Heidegger’s “the question of Being” project in favor of his own philosophical hermeneutics, to some extent aligning it with Kantian principles, albeit not fully embracing Kantian epistemological foundations. For example, Gadamer unsettles the Kantian distinction between “for us [phenomenon]” and “in itself [noumenon]”. Thus, the scope of hermeneutics is limited to the realm of human understanding and language, not beyond it. Whatever lies beyond linguistic understanding of humans is not pertinent to hermeneutical inquiry and its principles are generally indeterminate to the hermeneutician.

Therefore, Gadamer consciously dismisses the assumed boundary between the verbal thinkable and the non-verbal unthinkable. However, this expression does not contradict with Gadamer’s use of the term the “unvordenklich” (the unthinkable in its Schellingian sense) in some of his works

¹ “The world is *my* world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of language (of that language which I alone understand) mean the limits of *my* world” (Wittgenstein, 2001, 68). While Wittgenstein sees the mission of philosophy as a “battle” with language and the solidification of our consciousness through it, Gadamer completely disagrees with this perspective.

(Gadamer, 1955, 364). His conception of the “*unvordenklich*” has a verbal and immanent aspect, as we continually strive to approach its linguistic understanding and articulate it. Gadamer’s recourse to the concept of the “inner word” in the Christian tradition is an attempt to refer to this very the “unthinkable.” For example, in his essay “Hermeneutics and Ontological Difference”, where seems to still be under Heidegger’s influence and even employs Heideggerian terminology to articulate the problem further, in relation to the hermeneutical situation into which we are “thrown”, Gadamer brings forth something that is “unintelligible.” It is not that this thing is inherently unintelligible, but rather its unintelligibility is contingent upon our current capacities and abilities, as we do not have prior mastery over all “meaningfulness”. Thus, our task is to engage with it and comprehend it:

In this situation hermeneutics [as a hermeneutics of facticity] is focused on something that is *not understandable* [life]. Indeed, this is somehow always the case for hermeneutics. Challenged by something not understood or not understandable, hermeneutics is brought onto the path of questioning and is required to understand. In this process one never has some advance lordship over all meaningfulness. Instead, one is answering an always self-renewing challenge to take something not understood, something surprisingly other, strange, dark- and perhaps deep- that we need to understand (Gadamer, 1955, 363).

Thus, for Gadamer, there is no fundamental gap between “what it is” and “what is expressed,” where each belongs to separate realms that cannot be bridged, or where “the expressed word” is considered as a secondary compared with “what it is”. In Gadamer’s Heideggerian comment, “What something presents itself as belong to its own being.” (Gadamer, 2004, 470). As a result, the relationship between Being, understanding, and language in Gadamer’s hermeneutics is one of the significant and challenging topics that we will look at it more precisely in the subsequent sections.

Interpreters and somewhat conflicting interpretations

Jean Grondin dedicates the sixth chapter in his book (2020) to the interpretation and elucidation of Gadamer’s famous assertion. Grondin considers Gadamer’s central statement (1955), “We can never say what we want to say completely,” as indicative of an acknowledgment of the “boundaries of language,” in contrast to Gadamer’s famous assertion in *Truth and Method* (1960) that according to it “the realm of language is almost boundless.” (Grondin, 2020, 127). Grondin sees this veer as a type of “turn” in Gadamer’s position regarding language. He argues that Gadamer has moved from a position of acknowledging the boundlessness of language towards conceding the limitations of language boundaries. Despite the central concern in Gadamer’s hermeneutics about the distinction between the “inner word” and the “expressed word,” Grondin strangely overlooks this

distinction and instead focuses on the “turn” and change in Gadamer’s stance about the boundaries of language.

Another interpreter, while acknowledging the “ambiguity” inherent in Gadamer’s statement due to the “brevity” in it, sees his task to analyze ambiguity and critically reconsidering Grondin’s epistemological interpretation of it (Laurukhin, 2016, 48-9).¹ Rorty conversely sees important implicit implications in it. In his view, the “nominalism” of analytical philosophers as a reaction to the metaphysical tradition² “can best be summarized in this Gadamer’s doctrine that only language can understand.” (Rorty, 2004, 23).³ However, this interpretation of Gadamer’s position on language in the style of analytical philosophy is not entirely consistent with his overall “anti-nominalistic” stance. Although, it cannot be denied that Gadamer, like analytical philosophers and contrary to the metaphysical tradition, does not believe in “essences” in itself and does not have an essentialist view of language. However, the refusal of essences is not necessarily to accept the full position of nominalism. In addition, Gadamer’s approach to language cannot easily be labeled “idealist”; the majority of Gadamer’s effort, following Heidegger, is to avoid an idealistic and subjective interpretation of language and understanding. Gadamer’s criticism on Cassirer’s neo-Kantian approach to language as a “symbolic form” is evidence for this claim.⁴ Weinsheimer in opposition to such an interpretation believes that Gadamer’s intention is not an idealistic interpretation in the Kantian sense, which would attribute all being or phenomena to the mental capabilities of the subject. Hence, in Weinsheimer’s opinion, if Cassirer were to write the Gadamer’s phrase in his own language, its implication would be as follows: “Being is an expression of the constituted subject.” (Weinsheimer, 2009, 144).

Laurukhin identifies the three main component of the Gadamer’s statement: “Being, Understanding, and Language.” He considers conjunction and proximity of these elements as the source of ambiguity (Laurukhin, 2016, 49). Depending on which component we emphasize, our interpretation will vary. If we prioritize the notion of Being and read it through a Heideggerian lens, we arrive at the general proposition that “Being is Language” (Grondin, 2020, 129), because from Heidegger’s perspective, Dasein is the only linguistical being that questions Being, and Being is problematic for whom. It is on basis Heidegger claims that “Language is the house of Being”. According to Grondin, although this Heideggerian interpretation is not entirely alien to the spirit of Gadamer’s thought, but the formulation of *Truth and Method* places the emphasis “elsewhere”: “Being that *can be* understood is language. Therefore, not every ‘being’ is language, but rather that

¹ Instead, Wisenheimer argues that through a careful examination of what Gadamer means by the concept of language (Sprache), we can understand the significance of Gadamer’s famous statement without considering it as an “ambiguous slogan.” (Wisenheimer, 2009, 137). While Laurukhin considers Grondin’s interpretation to be “completely ambivalent,” much like Gadamer’s own expression (Laurukhin, 2016, 49).

² The claim that “all essences are nominal and all necessities *de dicto*.”

³ For the critique of Rorty’s pragmatist approach regarding Gadamer’s expression and its implications, refer to: (Brad, 2005).

⁴ For example, see: (Gadamer, 2004, 405; Gadamer, 1977a, 64; Gadamer, 1964, 30).

the being which can be understood." (Grondin, 2020, 129). It is disputable why Grondin explicitly states this and simultaneously accuses Gadamer of equating Being with language. Laurukhin, while criticizing Grondin's interpretation, believes that Grondin's exposition aims to de-Heideggerize Gadamer's understanding of language. In other words, he downplays Gadamer's ontological stance and highlights its epistemological and "philological" dimension. In Laurukhin's view, reducing Gadamer's stand to "Being is Language" is both a simplification of Gadamer's position and an attempt to "de-ontologicalize" his hermeneutics. Instead, he endeavors to highlight the "ontological structure of language" implicit in Gadamer's statement (Laurukhin, 2016, 49-55).

Grondin offers two possible interpretations of Gadamer's statement; in each one a different aspect of the sentence is emphasized. Indeed, contrary to Laurukhin's interpretation, Grondin's distinction between syntactic and philological for understanding the meaning and resolving its "ambiguity" is quite illuminating.¹ From this perspective, it can be said that Gadamer's statement is a "conjunctive" sentence, that is, a "determining/limiting" phrase rather than an "explanatory" one. The difference lies in the fact that in the former case, the second part of the sentence restricts the domain of the first part and makes it "conditional" (to understanding), while in the latter type, it explains the subject matter and, since it does not have a determining role, its omission does not affect the sentence structure. This does not hold true for the former case (Grondin, 2020, 130). So, his conclusion is that the Gadamer's statement does not mean Being is absolutely language, but rather only the Being that *can be* understood is language (i.e., it is of the determinative type of sentence), and as it turns out, this is simply a repetition of Gadamer's own words.

Accordingly, the context of the sentence specifies a limitation of Being to "the understood Being," and thus, Gadamer's intention is that "the understood Being necessarily possesses a linguistic property (while Being *not understood* is not language). In other words, we concern with the linguistic nature of our understanding." (Grondin, 2020, 130).² Based on this, Grondin does not consider Gadamer's statement as an "ontological" assertion regarding Being itself (by which the language is entirely the same as Being), but rather it has an epistemological aspect (that is, the verbal nature of Being is related to the structure of our understanding; our approach to Being and our understanding of it are necessarily linguistic).

Rorty also has such an understanding of the Gadamer's doctrine. In his view, this proposition is not a metaphysical discovery about the nature of Being in itself. Instead, it is a proposal regarding how to describe the process which we call "increasing our understanding." (Rorty, 2004, 24). By highlighting the affirmative and epistemological aspect of Gadamer's approach to language, Rorty

¹ Therefore, it can be said that the root of ambiguity somehow comes back to the way of reading Gadamer's sentence, which can be read in at least in two ways.

² Distinguishing between these two types of sentences, which convey different meanings, is illustrated based on the English language structure using two relative pronouns that specify restrictive or explanatory clauses:

- Defining Sentence: Being *that* can be understood is language.
- Explanatory Sentence: Being *which* can be understood is language.

sees therein the potential for deconstructing the entire metaphysical tradition (which it is essentialistic and ontological at the same time). As said by Rorty, this doctrine of Gadamer helps us to replace “metaphors of depth”, which are the result of metaphysical tradition about the objects, with “metaphors of breadth” (Rorty, 2004, 24).¹ In general, he regards Gadamer’s statement more as an anti-metaphysical and anti-ontological stance, while Laurukhin sees a Heideggerian ontological attitude in it. Besides, Grondin discerns it as a sort of epistemological-hermeneutical approach. In any case, if we take Grondin’s distinction as a basis, considering the context of the statement and Gadamer’s own explanations in his other works, we can align with Gadamer that here the issue has a determinative/ delimiting and epistemological/ hermeneutical dimension for Gadamer, and from this perspective, Laurukhin’s critique of Grondin’s interpretation is not very well-founded. However, Laurukhin argues that Gadamer not only claims epistemological precedence for language but also fundamentally claims “ontological precedence.” (Laurukhin, 2016, 54). However, the phrase of “ontological precedence” here is ambiguous, and it can be interpreted in two ways. First, if the meaning of this precedence is that language has an existence independent of us and it is beyond our experience; such an interpretation is incompatible with Gadamer’s hermeneutic view. Second, if the meaning of this precedence is that language is involved in every encounter and understanding, and it always determines our orientation beforehand, such an interpretation is entirely compatible with the foundations of Gadamerian hermeneutics. This is what we have read as epistemological and methodological precedence, and Grondin does not object to such precedence. But necessarily, this statement does not mean that Gadamer has completely turned away from Heideggerian views on language and returned to the epistemological and subjective foundations of modern philosophy.

Gadamer accepts that we (as subjects) are not always the ones speaking and control the process of speech “...but it is we who are spoken through.” (Davey, 2006, 24). Even where Gadamer, in the foreword to *Truth and Method*, formulates his problem around this question “how is understanding possible?” (Gadamer, 2004, xxvii), his inference of understanding is not necessarily Kantian, but rather understanding is for him “the mode of being of Dasein itself.” Therefore, he intentionally refrains from formulating the problem of understanding based on the subject/ object or phenomenon/ thing-in-itself dichotomy. What Gadamer emphasizes is the epistemological and cognitive precedence of “linguistic experience” and “human experience of the world” over whatever exists and is understood. As a result, this primacy is not logical and ontological, but rather returns to the structure of our understanding as an interpreter of the world; that is, language is

¹ Rorty’s notion of “metaphors of depth” in the metaphysical tradition refers to the idea that the deeper and more profound our understanding, it brings us closer to the true nature of a thing, while moving further away from its appearance. The term “metaphors of breadth,” on the other hand, signifies to get more descriptions and several interpretations from various perspectives of a thing and then synthesizing these interpretations to aid in our enhanced understanding of that thing.

superior to us rather than to the world itself as a whole. Gadamer himself explicitly raises this distinction:

Our verbal experience of the world is prior to everything that is recognized and addressed as existing. *That language and world are related in a fundamental way does not mean, then, that world becomes the object of language.* Rather, the object of knowledge and statements is always already enclosed within the world horizon of language. That human experience of the world is verbal does not imply that a world-in-itself is being objectified (Gadamer, 2004, 447).

As the text suggests, Gadamer intentionally removes any semblance of subjective significance from his seemingly Kantian project and even denies any existence of a world or thing-in-itself beyond the boundaries of language. In addition, the nature of language in Gadamer’s view aligns with the phenomenological approach of Heidegger, whose function is essentially the “disclosure of reality”; that is, language acts as a mediator that allows something to show itself and disclose itself. As notes one of interpreters, Gadamer’s intention is that language is not a “secondary” representation of reality, in such a way that first reality or things come to display and then in the second step we put them into words (Risser, 2019, 4). However, Gadamer sometimes speaks of the “primacy of language” in such a way that it seems that the ontological primacy is of concern in Heideggerian context. In conclusion of the essay “The Truth of the Work of Art,” which discusses the importance and primacy of language in the poetics works in Heideggerian context, this issue becomes more apparent. Gadamer considers the “primacy and superiority of language” not as a unique feature of poetic works, but as a characteristic of the thing-being of beings: “The work of language is the most primordial poetry of Being. The thinking that conceives all art as poetry and that discloses that the work of art is language is itself still on the way to language.” (Gadamer, 1960, 109).

Now we have discussed some interpretations offered by scholars regarding Gadamer’s famous doctrine, it is appropriate to elucidate Gadamer’s own explanations and interpretations in his works following *Truth and Method* to facilitate a better assessment.

The relationship between Being and language: What does Gadamer himself say?

As mentioned earlier, Gadamer raises this controversial statement in the third section of *Truth and Method*: “*Being that can be understood is language.*” Alongside some contradict interpretations about the meaning of this expression, it is better to clarify its significance with the help of Gadamer’s other statements, considering the context of the discussion and his philosophical hermeneutic foundations.

In an interview with Grondin towards the end of his life (1996), Gadamer explicitly articulates the significance of this statement, surprising Grondin with his response.¹ Grondin, while referring to the “misinterpretation” of Gadamer’s words, argues that “... but one gets the impression from *Truth and Method* that the universe of language is boundless.” (Gadamer, 1996, 417). Perhaps, in view of this boundlessness interpretation of language and the reduction of Being to it, Grondin concludes elsewhere that “the word is the truth of Being.” (Grondin, 2003, 145). It is strange here that Grondin does not pay attention to the following statements from *Truth and Method*, where Gadamer clearly takes the opposite position: “If we start from the fact that understanding is verbal, we are emphasizing, on the contrary, the finitude of the verbal event in which understanding is always in the process of being concretized.” (Gadamer, 2004, 471). Here, Gadamer explicitly states that the emphasis on the linguistic nature of understanding and the centrality of language in the hermeneutical practice are not aimed at proving the limitlessness of language and the reduction of the Being to it; rather, it is to demonstrate the boundaries of linguistic understanding.

Since Gadamer himself admits that what is discussed on language in the third section of *Truth and Method* “was only a sketch,” it seems that he himself was aware of this sketch and the “misinterpretations” resulting from it, especially in his famous statement about language. Therefore, in some of his works after *Truth and Method*, he eludes it and tries to shed some light on it; albeit without providing clear and explicit explanations, often relying on brief and general allusions. For example, in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer, a few lines after his controversial statement about language, attempts to complement it by saying “That which can be understood is language.” (Gadamer, 2004, 470). However, this statement does not resolve the previous ambiguity much (perhaps it even adds to it), except that instead of the concept of Being, he uses an indefinite pronoun. Several years after the publication of *Truth and Method*, in an essay titled “the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection” (1967), he ties the fundamental principle of hermeneutics to his famous proposition: “The principle of hermeneutics simply means that we should try to understand everything that can be understood. This is what I meant by the sentence: *Being that can be understood is language.*” (Gadamer, 1967, 31). In this context, Gadamer’s intention is not to equate the boundaries of language with the boundaries of Being and to say that language has no boundaries. Instead, he brings forth the possibility of understanding things, emphasizing our mission to comprehend them or to articulate them in language.

A decade later, in the essay “Text and Interpretation” (which is essentially a dialogue with Derrida), Gadamer elaborates slightly on the meaning of the aforementioned statement, albeit somewhat more elaborate, merging the boundaries of language and understanding rather than the boundaries of language and the world. Additionally, here he emphasizes more on the “limitation” aspect of language that takes the form of a “proposition,” highlighting a kind of precise demarcation

¹ Ofcourse, in the same interview Gadamer affirms that the third section of *Truth and Method*, which concerns language, was “only a sketch” (Gadamer, 1996, 413).

in his position regarding language compared to *Truth and Method*. It appears that he focuses more on the incompleteness of our understanding of language as a limitless capacity and emphasizes distinguishing it from a proposition or the expressed word:

My own efforts were therefore in every hermeneutical experience of meaning. When I wrote the sentence, 'Being that can be understood is language' what was implied by this was that what is can never be completely understood. This is implied insofar as everything that goes under the name of language always goes beyond whatever achieves the status of a proposition. That which is to be understood is that which comes into language, but of course it is always that which is taken as something true [*wahr-genommen*] (Gadamer, 1981/4, 162).

At this juncture, based on Gadamer's own statements, there doesn't seem to be an explicit acknowledgment of the limitlessness of language boundaries in relation to Being. Contrary to Grondin's claim, the text from *Truth and Method* does not lead to such an interpretation. However, the quoted text expresses a kind of complete incomprehensibility of the nature of language in works after *Truth and Method*. This issue can be discerned in Gadamer's differentiation between the inner word the expressed word, although this discussion is not within the scope of this paper.¹ Interestingly, even Gadamer himself questions thinkers (for example, Habermas) who misunderstand his notion of linguistic universality: "But is it not true that we can understand precisely *every* ideology as a form of false linguistic consciousness, ... ?" (Gadamer, 1967, 31). This implies that language itself serves as a mediator even for unfolding "false consciousness" or any ideological approach. Habermas views Gadamer's attention to language (as dialogue and connecting it to tradition), as a form of "legitimization" the existing status quo, while neglecting the critical and emancipator thought (Weinsheimer, 2010, 36-7). However, it's interesting to note that even Habermas eventually accepts Gadamer's conception of linguistic universality years later. The following phrases seem to have been written by Gadamer:

As historical and social beings we find ourselves always already in a linguistically structured lifeworld. In the form of communication through which we reach an understanding with one another about something in the world and about ourselves, we encounter a transcending power. Language is not a kind of private property. No one possesses exclusive rights over the common medium of the communicative practices we must intersubjectively share (Habermas, 2003, 10).

Now let's see what Gadamer "exactly" says in interview with Grondin about his provocative phrase. In response to Grondin's question about the exact meaning of the mentioned statement, Gadamer explicitly highlights both the ontological and epistemological dimensions of the phrase

¹ The author has discussed this distinction and its implications in detail in another forthcoming publication.

(perhaps such a statement has provoked the conflict interpretation of the interpreters). While pointing out that its significance is clear, he states: “Above all it means: being that can be experienced and understood, and it means that Being speaks. Only via language can being be understood” (Gadamer, 1996, 417). In these phrases, he aims to simultaneously uphold both the Heideggerian approach to language and his own hermeneutic approach to it. It is probably because of such instances that Laurukhin accuses Grondin for neglecting Gadamer’s ontological dimension and Grondin also, observes a “turn” in Gadamer’s position on language. Based on the aforementioned statements, it seems that Laurukhin is justified in emphasizing the ontological and Heideggerian aspects of Gadamer’s position. Gadamer initially places the emphasis on “Being” itself and attributes speech to Being: “It is Being that speaks.” He then refers to Heidegger’s famous phrase “Die Sprache Spricht/ Language Speaks”.¹

On the other hand, scholars like Grondin are justified in emphasizing the epistemological aspect of Gadamer’s statement, because in addition to mainly epistemological assertions in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer in latter quotation emphasizes that “*only* via language can being be understood”. Of course, considering our linguisticity, he states that it cannot be denied that there is “someone” who speaks, but he/ she is limited to the boundaries of language in any case. So, if both Laurukhin and Grondin are somehow correct in their interpretation of Gadamer’s position on language, then where is the problem? However, the issue with Grondin’s interpretation lies in concluding the “limitlessness” of language boundaries based on the context of Gadamer’s statements about language and understanding of being. He claims that Gadamer has entirely restricted being to our linguistic comprehension. Moreover, limitation of Laurukhin’s position lies in focusing solely on this Gadamer’s claim that “it is being that speaks”, in Heideggerian terms, meaning that language is the language of being. Laurukhin pays less attention to the fact that such expressions have largely become clichéd in Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics and play a lesser role. According to the general principles of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, our role as interpreters who understand being in a linguistic manner is mostly highlighted rather than being itself.

These challenges become obvious in the continued questions and answers between Grondin and Gadamer in the aforementioned dialog. The question arises: if there is “someone” who speaks and understands being and at the same time is limited to the boundaries of language, then what is the task of hermeneutics? Gadamer, referring to Heidegger’s particular interpretation of the concept of *aletheia* (truth), explains that “hermeneutics helps us to realize that there is always much that remains unsaid when one says something.” (Gadamer, 1996, 417). Little attention to what Gadamer says reveals that, unlike Habermas, he does not intend to suggest that everything expressed or communicated through language is necessarily “true”, that language reveals all aspects, visible and

¹ More precisely in another text, Gadamer writes: “As Heidegger says, language speaks *us*, insofar as we do not really preside over it and control it, although, of course, no one disputes the fact that it is we who speak it.” (Gadamer, 1968, 76).

hidden of being, or that being is exactly what language "represents" for us. From this perspective, Gadamer fully preserves Heidegger's phenomenological view. He explicitly puts an end to all misunderstandings in this regard when he responds directly to Grondin's interpretation:

No! no! I have never thought and never ever said that everything is language. Being that can be understood, insofar as it can be understood, is language. This contains a limitation. What cannot be understood can pose an endless task of at least finding a word that comes a little closer to the matter at issue [*die Sache*] (Gadamer, 1996, 417).

In this quotation, the phrase of "insofar as it can be understood" is indeed crucial.¹ It is evident that Gadamer does not confine the entirety of being to language; the disputed issue is not the scope of being but rather the scope of our linguistic understanding of being. A more explicit response than this is not found in Gadamer's texts. However, can one, like Grondin, argue for a sort of "turn" in Gadamer's position? According to Gadamer's texts, it is evidently not possible to discern a "turn" or a fundamental shift in position regarding this matter (though Gadamer emphasizes the epistemological aspect of his view on language). Anyway, the primacy of the "universal mystery of language ... to everything" (Gadamer, 2004, 370) is epistemological rather than ontological. Perhaps Grondin modifies his position in response to Gadamer's explicit answer, replacing "turn" with a "sort of relocation in emphasis". Indeed, Grondin rightly attributes this relocation in emphasis to Gadamer himself. So, when Gadamer states, "Being that can be understood is language," does he simply mean to say that "Being/ world" is identical to language, that is "The word is the truth of the being" (Grondin, 2003, 145), or does he intend to convey something else?

It seems that the ambiguity present in Gadamer's position and expression regarding language and its relation to being boils down to the fact that Gadamer seeks to reconcile Heidegger's phenomenological perspective with the fundamental principles of his own philosophical hermeneutics. Thus, he sometimes emphasizes on the being itself and sometimes on our linguistic understanding of being. While considering the foundational principles of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, its epistemological aspect takes precedence over its ontological dimension in his perspective on language and understanding. This is because his overarching project is based on the question, "How is understanding [which is verbal in nature] possible?" rather than on defining being as it is in itself.

Conclusion

In the third section of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer advances the notion that language is the only medium of our understanding of the world. The important of the linguistic aspect of understanding for Gadamer is such that he explicitly asserts in a controversial statement that "*Being that can be*

¹ As previously stated, Heidegger also, with the qualification "in so far as Being enters in to the intelligibility of Dasein" confines the understanding of being to the understanding of Dasein.

understood is language". Most interpreters consider Gadamer's assertion to be ambiguous and compendious, and various and conflicting interpretations, stem from this ambiguity and succinct. Gadamer's ambivalence lies in simultaneously emphasizing Heidegger's ontological approach to language and considering understanding of the world as "verbal in nature" from an epistemological perspective. Contrary to prevalent interpretations of Gadamer's famous phrase, what is central to him is not the distinction between being and language (the distinction between "what it is" and "what is expressed"), but rather the distinction within language itself, namely between the inner word and the expressed word. Therefore, interpretations that pronounce Gadamer's position as "limitlessness of linguistic boundaries," "nominalistic," or "idealistic" one, return the problem to the relationship between the word and the object, while the issue is about the linguistic capacity (as an infinite realm of linguistic possibilities that "can never be fully understood") and its objective or expressed manifestations. Undoubtedly, traces of Heidegger's views on language and its relation to being are traceable in Gadamer's thought; however, Gadamer endeavors to distance himself from Heidegger's perspectives by incorporating his own hermeneutic principles. Based on certain emphases and qualifications made by Gadamer himself in explaining the aforementioned phrase, it can be argued that he never intends to say that "being is the language," but rather, in his view, Being only "insofar as it can be understood," is language. That is to say, the emphasis is not merely on Being itself in general, but on a being that is understood and situated within the framework of our linguistic understanding. From this perspective, the epistemological interpretation in the majority of Gadamer's texts takes precedence over the ontological interpretation (in the sense that "our verbal experience of the world" takes precedence over us and not over Being itself). However, the presence of other implications in Gadamer's statements does not simply allow for such a unilateral conclusion; for instance, sometimes he expresses in a Heideggerian manner that "Being speaks." Consequently, different interpretations have their roots in Gadamer's own ambivalent positions.

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