

16. The Beginning of Understanding: Event, Place, Truth

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“Understanding begins ... when something addresses us” – Gadamer, *Truth and Method*¹

Hermeneutics, especially as articulated by Gadamer in *Truth and Method*, begins nowhere if not with the concrete experience of understanding – an experience that arises in the encounter with a work of art, in the reading of a text, in the conversation with another person, in the simple appearing of things as thus and so. For this reason, hermeneutics begins with an *event* – the same event that Heidegger also called the event of truth (*aletheia*) – although it is an event that cannot be separated from our *factual situatedness* in the world.² The event of understanding is thus no mere passive ‘happening’, but an active engagement, nor does it remain restricted to the subjective, but encompasses the world within which the subject, always standing in relation to others, is already embedded. Both Heidegger and Gadamer refer to this situatedness, which Heidegger thematizes early on in the idea of the ‘hermeneutical situation’, as the ‘Da’ of being, even though both also tended, at various times, to interpret this ‘Da’, this ‘here/there’, in terms that prioritise temporality.

While the focus on temporality is certainly important, and especially so given the way in which understanding has so often been separated from its essential historicity (a point that is particularly important in Gadamer), it should not be allowed to deflect attention from the *spatialised* and *located* character of hermeneutical situatedness.³ Understanding is always singular and concrete⁴ – it is

always a ‘taking place’ *in place* – and this has important consequences not only for the character of understanding as such, but also for the character of hermeneutical and philosophical engagement. Indeed, if a large part of what is distinctive about the hermeneutical approach is its attentiveness to the original situatedness of understanding, then this must itself be understood as an attentiveness to the essential “topos” of the hermeneutical event as such. In fact, in the work of both Gadamer and Heidegger, such an attentiveness to the “topographical” or “topological” (the latter term deriving from Heidegger himself) is clearly evident, even if it is not always made explicit nor directly taken up.⁵ In the pages that follow, I intend to explore the ‘place’ that is invoked here as a means, not only to understand the character of hermeneutic situatedness as it encompasses the temporal and the spatial, but also the way in which such situatedness underpins hermeneutical and philosophical *engagement* – an engagement without which philosophy cannot even begin – as well as implicating, in a crucial way, the concept of truth.⁶

The emphasis on the temporality of understanding as a matter of its *historically* conditioned character, and on such historicity as central to the very possibility of understanding, is one of the key insights of Gadamerian hermeneutics – an insight that extends back beyond Heidegger to Nietzsche, specifically to Nietzsche’s 1874 essay “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life”.⁷ In Gadamer’s work this emphasis on historicity is articulated in a number of ways, most notably through the idea of the indispensable role of *tradition* in understanding, itself connected with Gadamer’s rehabilitation of a positive notion of “prejudice” or “pre-judgment”, and in the notion of “historically-effected consciousness” (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*).⁸

Historicality itself, however, is not a purely temporal phenomenon. History, and so also 'tradition', works itself out in relation to particular communities, and so also to particular locales, sites, and geographies. Indeed, within twentieth-century historiography, the essential interconnectedness of the historical and the geographic is one of the themes that has determined the influential line of thinking that encompasses Vidal de la Blache, Lucien Febvre, and Henri Lefebvre, and out of which comes Pierre Nora's monumental *Realms of Memory*⁹ – a work that explores French history and culture through the sites and spaces (the *lieux de mémoire*) in which French national identity and collective memory are inevitably constituted. The spatialized character of the historical is also a theme that appears in Heidegger himself, and, as Stuart Elden argues, is further developed in the work of Michel Foucault.¹⁰ Indeed, an increasing focus on place and space as part of the essential frame within which social, political and historical formation occurs is a characteristic feature of much contemporary theorising, not only in geography and historiography, but in many other empirically oriented disciplines that concern themselves with the study of human behaviour and forms of life.

In Heidegger, the essential connection between the temporal-historical and what we might think of as the spatial-geographic is particularly evident in the essay that Gadamer acknowledges as foundational to the development of his own hermeneutical perspective,¹¹ 'The Origin of the Work of Art' from 1935-36.¹² The Heideggerian analysis of the event of understanding, or, to keep to the language of the essay, of the working of truth, is addressed specifically as it occurs in relation to the artwork. Heidegger is not concerned merely with any such work, however, but rather with the artwork that serves to 'found' a 'world',¹³ and so with the artwork in its historicality, not only in its historically determined character, but as itself opening up

the historical as it arises for a community and for a people – much of Heidegger’s discussion is focused on the Classical Greek temple as paradigmatic of such an artwork. Heidegger’s analysis recognises the historical specificity of the artwork (and so the need to understand its very working as an artwork only in relation to a particular historical-world¹⁴) is not separable from its character as set into a particular locale or ‘site’ (*Stätte*), and as standing there (*Da stehen*) in that site.¹⁵

It is thus that the artwork, in its concrete placedness – which involves *both* the temporal *and* the spatial¹⁶ – initiates what Heidegger refers to as the “struggle” or “strife” (*Kampf, polemos*) between world and earth. This strife is a differentiating between and opening up of world and of earth, in which world emerges as the open dimension of possibility, that which allows for the free play of appearance, while earth comes into view as that which closes off, and so determines, but also supports and grounds. The artwork works *as art* from out of its placedness in the midst of the world and above the earth. One might even argue that the historicity of the work, and even history itself, operates only in and through such placedness – history *becomes* history in the place that belongs to it and to which place it belongs also – although this placedness is itself a happening of place as such.

The central role of the work in the happening of truth – which appears in “The Origin of the Work of Art” in terms of the standing there of the work in the strife between world and earth – is a central theme in Gadamer’s own thinking, although Gadamer presents it in rather less dramatic terms than Heidegger’s 1935-36 essay, and in a way that does not prioritize the artwork in the same fashion. Understanding, for Gadamer, always takes place with respect to some thing or subject matter (*Sache*) that invariably retains its own authority.¹⁷ In its ‘conversational’ or ‘dialogic’ character, understanding has its origin in the space that is opened up between

interlocutors – in a space that is properly dialogic¹⁸ – as that space arises in and around the singular entity or event (text or image, performance or artefact, idea or thing) by which those interlocutors are brought together, and that sustains and structures the very possibility of engagement. Such an analysis can be seen as capturing the structure of the conversational and the dialogic, in its concrete form, but also of the broader movement of tradition itself (which might, with a nod to Oakshott and Rorty, be viewed as a certain sort of ongoing and developing “conversation”, although in a somewhat different sense¹⁹), as well as of the happening of history.

It might be argued, however, that the focus on historicity, as well as on the dialogic or conversational, and the way this inevitably calls upon notions of the spatial and the geographic, has to be distinguished from the idea of the temporal as such, and whatever might pertain essentially to it. The fact that historicity or conversationality might require modes of the spatial or the geographic need not imply the same about temporality. Moreover, temporality, it might be thought, is also more primordial within the structure of understanding than is the historical, or the spatial or the topographic, and not only distinct from them. Such a line of thinking could be seen to reflect the strong tendency within modern and contemporary philosophy to take temporality as central to the structure of subjectivity and the self, and especially to the structure of self-consciousness. In that case, the apparent role played by notions of space and place in the structure of understanding, while not irrelevant, perhaps ought to be seen as secondary to temporality.

The tendency to prioritize temporality that is at issue here is clearly evident in two very recent books. In David Hoy’s “critical history” of temporality, *The Time of Our Lives*, the problem of temporality or time-consciousness is presented as closely entangled with the problem of self-consciousness,²⁰ and in a way that, significantly

for what is at issue here, makes no mention of spatiality whatsoever – indeed, in spite of the care and insight that Hoy’s discussion exhibits in other respects, it is a discussion from which space and spatiality seem to be entirely absent. Similarly, Dan Zahavi’s otherwise excellent phenomenological investigation of the relation between self, subjectivity and consciousness, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, gives considerable attention to temporality and time-consciousness, but none at all to spatiality – even when embodiment emerges as an issue towards the end of Zahavi’s discussion, the spatial remains unaddressed.²¹

Although the tendency both to prioritise the temporal as central to any investigation of subjectivity and self-consciousness, and to treat the temporal in a way that often appears to separate it from the spatial, is commonplace in modern and contemporary philosophy – especially in the idealist and phenomenological traditions – the thinker who is most often assumed to exemplify the modern philosophical prioritization of temporality, namely, Immanuel Kant, actually insists on the co-relatedness of time with space. It is certainly true that Kant takes time to be the form with respect to which all representations are ordered, both the representations that are given as belonging to inner-consciousness alone (dreams, imaginings and so forth) as well as to consciousness of what is external (our perceptual acquaintance with worldly events and things). Yet Kant also stresses the character of time as itself representable only by means of what is spatial, and so by reference to the line or to the counting-off of discrete elements (whether on the fingers, an abacus, or whatever), and this is largely tied to his insistence on quantity as itself representable only in such a way: “The possibility of things as magnitudes... can also be exhibited only in outer intuition, and...by means of that alone can it subsequently also be applied to inner sense”.²²

The representability of time by means of what is spatial reflects, not so much a feature of quantity alone, however, as the character of representation as itself spatial in character – a point reflected in Derrida’s idea of *inscription* as that in which the possibility of language essentially resides (which is partly why he gives priority to writing over speech). Language can thus be viewed as itself dependent on spatialisation – an idea also expressed in the Saussurean notion of language as “a system of differences”. The latter is taken up by Derrida, in a way that combines spatialisation, in the form of *differing*, with a mode of temporalisation, in the form of *deferring*, so as to give rise to the idea of *différance*, as fundamental to any form of difference or deferral, and so to all forms of more particular spatio-temporal ordering, unification, or differentiation.²³

The idea that representation may be essentially dependent on the spatial, as well as on the temporal, gives a new sense to the Gadamerian conception of language as conversation – conversation provides a model of a particular form of spatialisation, and so also temporalisation, that works through the back-and-forth relatedness of conversational partners, each concretely situated in respect of one another, but therefore also apart from one another, that is a relating to, and so both a connecting and disconnecting with, some subject matter. Here is a model of language as fundamentally social, and therefore also public, as worked out dialogically between subjects, and so as occurring in and through particular *locations* and *encounters* (the *movement* of conversation is thus a movement within and between *places*), in a manner that combines Derrida with Gadamer, as well as with Davidson. Indeed, Davidson’s notorious assertion that “there is no such thing as a language”,²⁴ can be reformulated as the claim that there is no language outside of the conversational, and so no language that is not tied back to particular instances of situated engagement

between speakers (even if the engagement is sometimes one in which the other speaker is present only through the already given text).

Yet if the conversational model of language can be seen, in this way, to reflect the spatialized character of representation, then it is not only through the way in which conversation involves a certain play of difference and deferral (and equally, I would say, of sameness and advance), but also through the very distinction that is apparent in conversation between *what is spoken* and *what is spoken about*. Conversation, and language with it, depends essentially on this distinction (a distinction that takes on a particular form in relation to the concept of truth), since without it there can be no sense in which conversational partners can engage with one another in any meaningful way: the act of speaking is a relating of oneself to what is other than oneself – a relating to one's interlocutor that is accomplished through a relating to a subject matter that is accessible to both oneself and to one's interlocutor (hence the metaphor of 'triangulation' in Davidson's work,²⁵ and the model of dialogue or conversation in Gadamer's).

Representation, and so also communication and understanding, can thus be said always to call upon a form of *externalization*, which is also, of course, a *spatialization* (and this occurs together with the *internalization* that is also involved here). Such externalisation and spatialization is what makes for the public and social character of language; it is what enables language to be historical (in the sense both of being historically determined, and of operating across temporal distance); and it is also a necessary element in the meaningfulness of language, since meaning arises only through the relating of things that are otherwise distinct (through the relating of particular marks or inscriptions, for instance, to certain entities and events). It is the latter, in fact, that can be seen expressed in a particularly significant way in

Davidson's externalist conception not only of meaning, but also of mental content in general²⁶ – an externalism that does not concern merely our *knowledge* of content, but the very basis on which content is determined.²⁷

The role of spatialization in making possible representation and language, fundamental though it is to questions of understanding, is, however, only one instance of the way spatialization, in conjunction with temporalization, underpins the possibility of sameness and differentiation. The very formation of the self, so often treated as primarily temporal in character, is also tied to the spatial in a way that is no less primordial. That this is so should already be evident from the way in which, in Kant, time and space are mutually implicative of one another – while the appearing of things in space is also dependent on the ordering of representations in time, so too is the representation of things in time dependent on the representation of time by means of space. What is also evident in Kant is that the formation of what is “inner” occurs always in relation to what is “outer” (which is itself always more than anything merely temporal), and this is a central part of the argument Kant advances in the “Refutation of Idealism” in the *First Critique*.²⁸

The way spatiality is implicated here (and which is expressed at a number of points in Kant's thinking) can be seen most clearly when one considers what it might be that could mark off, not only the self, and so what is “inner”, from that which is “outer”, and so belongs properly to what is “objective,” but also what might differentiate the self from other selves, that is, what might make for the possibility of different instantiations of the “inner”. This cannot be possible by reference to temporality alone, since temporality is precisely the form of inner sense, but only by calling upon some notion of spatialization.²⁹ Indeed, one might argue that if the differentiation of the self from other selves, and so the very possibility of the sort of

differentiation between persons that is necessary for the inter-personal engagement that is at the heart of conversation, is dependent on the externalization that is realizable only within the frame of the spatial, then so too is the identity of the self also bound up with such spatialization – both identity and individuation are worked out spatially as well as temporally.

The essential role played by externalization and spatialization in the formation of the self, and that appears above in highly schematic terms, appears in a much more concrete and immediate fashion in the actual working-out of individual human lives. Such lives are typically constituted, not in terms merely of the temporal continuity of thought or memory (a continuity which is, after all, often interrupted), but through the way in which our “inner life” connects with the sense we have of our own bodies, our relations to other persons, and our involvement with the specific things, places and events within which we are inevitably involved – all of which presuppose a sense of spatial and not only temporal articulation. It is thus that the commonplace idea of the connection between a sense of self and a sense of place – which is perhaps so commonplace as to seem like a naïve assumption of everyday thinking – can be viewed as expressing a much deeper philosophical truth, namely, that the structure of human lives, including the most basic structures that underpin memory, thought and meaning, are essentially relational in character (we may also say that they are essentially “holistic”) in a way that encompasses both the internal and the external, the temporal and the spatial, the “subjective” and the “objective”.³⁰ It is thus, to take a common, and readily accessible example, that the simple act of removing someone from one place to another – as in cases, especially, of forced migration or displacement – can have frequently such disruptive psychological effects.³¹

The relationality that is at issue here is not merely a relationality that connects an already determinate self with that which lies outside of the self, but a relationality that obtains *within the structure of the self as such*. In Gadamer, the relational character of the self is evident in the self-referential character of understanding – all understanding implicates our own self-understanding, and so the process of coming to understand is also a process of self-modification and self-formation. The role of self-referentiality in the formation of the self does not appear within the context of Gadamerian hermeneutics alone, however, but is a recurrent feature in philosophical investigations of the nature of mind and meaning. It is an idea present in Kant, for instance, in the idea that consciousness implicates self-consciousness,³² in Heidegger, in the conception of Dasein as that being for whom its own being is an issue for it,³³ and, in Davidson, in the idea that the having of beliefs presupposes the having of the concept of belief.³⁴ It would be a mistake to suppose that the self-referentiality that is at issue (albeit in different forms) in Gadamer, in Kant, in Heidegger, or in Davidson, could be a purely *internalized* mode of relationality such as might be given in the form of a constant process of self-reflection or the ever-present capacity for such self-reflection (since some situations are such as to make explicit self-reflection an impossibility, the latter is quite obviously ruled out from the start). The self-referentiality that seems so essential to human being (and here I am treating the human as an *ontological* and not a *biological* category), and that is also, therefore, a feature of understanding, is already one that implicates a conception of the self, in its own relational structure, even in its own “interiority”, as articulated in and through the spatialized externality of the world.

While such a conclusion is readily apparent in Davidson, who adopts an explicitly externalist conception of self and mind, it is perhaps less so in Kant,

Heidegger, even, to some extent, in Gadamer. Part of the reason for this is that the tendency sometimes to character the self-referentiality at issue here in terms of a mode of self-affectedness that can easily be viewed as implying a purely “internalized” form of relation. This is especially so, it seems to me, in Heidegger’s own reading of Kant and it is directly tied to Heidegger’s prioritization of the temporal over the spatial in his early work – something Heidegger abandons in his thinking after the so-called *Kehre* (the *Ereignis* that determines Heidegger’s later thinking is *not*, it should be emphasised, the notion of a pure mode of temporality, but rather, as should be evident from Heidegger’s account of the *Ereignis* that is the happening of the work of art, essentially a temporalizing *and* spatializing – it is a *taking place, a happening, of place*³⁵). This is itself indicative of one of the problems with the widespread emphasis on temporality as primarily determinative of the self – or of understanding or experience – in that this almost inevitably tends, often in spite of intentions to the contrary, towards an “internalized” and abstract conception of the self. Such a tendency might be thought to accord with Kant’s own insistence that while inner sense is given in the form of time, it is only through space, and so through outer consciousness, that inner sense gains determination³⁶ – a claim that might itself be viewed as pointing in the direction of precisely the “externalist” conception of content-determination found in Davidson.

Rather than attempt to read the essential self-referentiality that is so essential to the formation of the self as implying some form of pure, internalized self-affectedness (which surely renders self-referentiality more rather than less obscure), it should instead be interpreted as having a structure that is parallel to the structure involved in the self-location and orientation, and as in fact dependent upon that structure. In finding oneself in a specific location, one grasps both the character of the

space as such, as well as one's own position in and orientation to that space – (this is a point Kant makes, in purely spatial terms, through directing attention to the way in which spatial locatedness is tied to the sense of spatiality one has in one's own body, which is itself articulated through one's spatial engagement³⁷). Similarly, one cannot orient oneself to a place beforehand – nothing compares, as the saying has it, with *being there* – and even equipping oneself with a map provides no capacity for orientation prior to one's concrete situation in the place itself, since every map is meaningless until the features it picks out are connected both to features of the presented environment and to one's own bodily positioning in that environment.³⁸

There is thus no sense of first beginning with oneself, and then moving out to determine where one is, rather one's sense of oneself is bound up directly with one's sense of orientation and location, and an analogous structure applies both in the case of simple self-location, and the more complex case involving self-identity and self-individuation. In being-located and being-oriented we have a model of the underlying structure that determines self-formation, but we also have a glimpse into the very structure within such self-formation occurs – the structure of the temporalizing-spatializing *topos* in which self, other and world come to appearance. The self is defined and determined, both in its own internality *and* its externality, in and through its situated and oriented activity in the world – activity that is both an affecting and a being-affected, and that involves both the self and what is not the self in a constant process of interaction – a process, we might even say, of dialogue or conversation.

The manner in which self-location and orientation occurs only in and through our being in the place in which we are located, and to which we are so oriented, is illustrative of the character, not only of spatial situatedness, but of any form of situatedness as such – including the situatedness of understanding as such. One

particularly notable consequence of this is that understanding can never be a matter simply of applying some prior set of principles to a situation; it is instead always a matter of understanding as it arises in and as a response to the situation itself. The point at issue is exactly parallel to that with respect to the use of maps that I referred to above: a map does not provide any prior orientation to a locale, becoming meaningful and useful only when it is interpreted in light of one's immediate and concrete embeddness in the locale in question – one cannot, as it were, simply “read” one's location from the map. Similarly one cannot generate understanding purely on the basis of a principle or principles that are prior to and independent of one's concrete hermeneutical situation.

The way in which understanding is tied to its situation is quite explicit in Davidson's rejection, to which I referred briefly above, of the idea of linguistic understanding as somehow based in the mastery and application of some priorly given and determinate set of shared linguistic *rules*, that is to say, in a “language” (or in a language as given under a certain conception). This is also a point that Gadamer emphasises in *Truth and Method*, although often the the explicit focus of his concern is not so much the way we might bring prior rules to the situation, as the tendency to treat the text to be understood as if it were itself given in some similarly prior fashion. Thus, in discussing the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* he writes that:

If we relate Aristotle's description of the ethical phenomenon... we find that his analysis in fact offers a kind of *model of the problems of hermeneutics*.

We too determined that application is neither a subsequent nor merely an occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but co-determines it as a whole from the beginning. Here too application did not consist in relating

some pre-given universal to the particular situation. The interpreter dealing with a traditional text tries to apply it to himself. But this does not mean that the text is first given for him as something universal, that he first understands it *per se*, and then afterward uses it for particular applications. Rather, the interpreter seeks no more than to understand this universal, the text – i.e., to understand what it says, what constitutes the text's meaning and significance. In order to understand that, he must not try to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to his situation if he wants to understand at all.³⁹

Understanding begins with our being already in a situation – a situation that cannot be construed as any form of pure self-affectedness or self-enclosure, but rather a situation in which we are inevitably taken outside of ourselves at the very same time as we are also brought back to ourselves (a dynamic movement that is evident in the simplest forms of self-location and spatial orientation). To be so situated, so placed, is dependent upon a certain prior understanding, a prior orientation, but it also calls upon us to articulate our understanding anew, and to orient and reorient ourselves. Such orientation is never accomplished simply through reference back to what we think we already know or understand, since what is called for is indeed an orientation to *this place*, and not to some other, an orientation that is also, one might say, already present in our very being there. Such orientation arises through our own *responsiveness* to the concrete place in which we find ourselves – a responsiveness to the demands of the place itself and of that which appears within that place.

The Gadamerian account of the hermeneutical situation as essentially given over to a mode of *praxis*, and so also to *phronesis*, implies that the usual

understanding of the relation between theory and practice is fundamentally mistaken. Theory must itself be grasped as a mode of practical engagement, while practical engagement is also theoretical in that it is only in practice that theory can arise. This must apply no less to the practice of philosophy than to any other activity. But in that case, the idea of there being such a thing as “pure” as opposed to “applied” philosophy must be fundamentally misleading. Indeed, it may even lead to problematic modes of philosophical thinking – thinking that construes itself in terms of philosophical theory and principle on the one hand and its various domains of application on the other. This is perhaps most problematic within contemporary ethics, in which the very idea of “applied ethics” is suggestive of a divorce of ethical theorizing from ethical practice – in which priorly articulated principles or ethical “theories”, often of a highly abstract nature, are employed to resolve “practical” ethical problems. Moreover, this is not only a problem affecting the “ethical” and its “application”. What is at issue here is our very conception of the relation between theory and practice, and the nature of each. Understanding the “placed” character of understanding is not a matter of giving priority to practice over theory, but of understanding the manner in which theoretical articulation, and even formalisation, occurs in and through the very situation in which we are called upon to theorize in the first place. To adapt a line from Heidegger,⁴⁰ it is not that mathematics is more removed from place than ethics (or historiography), but that the mode of its situated engagement is different.

The essentially placed character of hermeneutic situatedness implies, as we have already seen from the analysis above, a complex and ramified structure that cannot be construed in terms of temporal projection or self-affectedness alone. A key element in that structure is the relatedness of interiority and exteriority, and of self

and other, as that relatedness is worked out both temporally and spatially – something partially captured, in Gadamer, in terms of the character of understanding as always involving an interplay between the strange and the familiar⁴¹ (a contrast that can itself be construed in a fashion that calls immediately on more topological notions, for instance, of the foreign and the homely, the distant and the near), as well as in terms of the notion of “play” (*Spiel*) that is also invoked here.⁴² The structure of understanding, of hermeneutical situatedness, thus comprises *multiple* elements – elements that are distinct from one another even while they are also drawn together in the complex unity of place – a structure that might even be considered to mirror the structure of the “singular-plural” of which Jean-Luc Nancy speaks.⁴³ To be given over, as we always essentially are, to the hermeneutic situation, and so to be given over to understanding (so that we cannot draw back from the attempt to understand), is thus always to find ourselves standing in a relation to that which is outside of and other to us, and yet which, by virtue of its very relatedness, also calls unavoidably for a response from us.⁴⁴ It is thus as a direct consequence of the *placed* character of understanding – its beginning in place, and its character as a turning and returning to it – that understanding arises as always a matter of engagement and response, and that it is also determined as properly conversational and dialogic in character.

The conception of understanding that prioritises the temporal alone is inadequate to grasping the situated character of understanding. But more than this, it cannot engage with the character of understanding as, in Gadamerian terms, essentially conversational nor even as *practical*. Yet there is a further consideration to which we must attend: the character of the place to which the event of understanding belongs is also a place that is inextricably bound up with the notion of truth. Thus, in Heidegger’s account of the working of art, the happening of place in the work is also

a happening of truth, while Heidegger's own characterization of truth as *aletheia*, unconcealment (*Unverborgenheit*), and in terms of "lighting" or "clearing" (*Lichtung*), is indicative of truth as itself "topological" or "topographical".⁴⁵ Understood in the sense Heidegger employs it in essays like "The Origin of the Work of Art", truth names the original happening of world that first enables the *appearing* of things, on the basis of which assertion, and so the truth or falsity of assertion, is possible.⁴⁶ This happening of world involves truth in an essential way, since not only is it that on the basis of which specific truths emerge as truths, but that opening is also the opening up of a domain in which in which we essentially engaged, on which we have a claim and are ourselves claimed, and yet in which the determination of that claim is not up to us alone. In this sense, truth names the demand that is placed on us beyond our own interests, preferences, or opinions – the demand that comes from the reality of our inevitable and concrete placedness in a world, as ourselves, and among others.⁴⁷

Attending to truth means attending to the very character of hermeneutical situatedness in its plurality and its unity, its subjectivity and its objectivity, its ownness and its otherness. Understood as *unconcealment*, truth refers us, then, not to something transcendent of our singular placedness, but rather to the way in which only through such placedness, only through our concrete involvement, does meaning emerge at all. Understood as *correctness*, truth is always the truth of individual *sentences*, having significance only so long as those sentences remain meaningful, and in relation to those specific contexts, including the linguistic contexts, in which those sentences are meaningful.⁴⁸ There is no concept of truth that stands outside of the specific operations of language, disengaged from our concrete situatedness in the world. Moreover, there can be no situatedness, no engagement, without truth, while

the concern with truth is itself a marker of that engagement. The emergence of truth as itself a central element in the placedness of understanding, and as tied to it, is something echoed in pragmatist and anti-realist construals that would identify truth with pragmatic effectiveness or with epistemic “usefulness”. Yet the way in which truth is “practical” is not in the sense of being identical with the pragmatic or the useful, but rather through the way in which understanding (including our self-understanding) has its origins in our placed situatedness in the world, a situatedness in which we are taken up by the matter at issue, are held in its sway, and are also called to respond to it. The demand that is made by our placed situatedness, a demand that derives from our own finitude, is the same demand that is made by truth – it is a demand we can no more avoid than we can set ourselves apart from the place and places in which our lives are formed.

Hermeneutics has its beginning in the experience, not merely of understanding, but more specifically in the experience of the “placed” character of understanding – and so in understanding as temporal and spatial – and in the exploration of the nature and limits of that place. The character of understanding as event is inseparable from its taking-place in and through place, while the character of understanding as determined by its engaged situatedness is also tied to its essential determination in relation to truth (both as unconcealment and as correctness) as it emerges in its own placedness. The beginning of understanding, and not merely of hermeneutics, is to be found only in the place that appears here. Moreover, in beginning to understand that place, we begin to grasp the complex and interwoven character of the situatedness that is central to the hermeneutical – a situatedness that involves time and space, self and other, “practice” *and* “theory”. In doing so, we begin to understand the genuine character of our own place in the world, of our self-

formation in that place, and of the opening up of world in and through that place. Understanding is thus never a disengaged, disembodied, or displaced happening, but always an event that begins in and unfolds out of the place in which we find ourselves, a place in and from which we are ourselves addressed.

¹ *Truth and Method*, rev. trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 2nd rev. edn 1992), p.299.

² One might say, more generally, that the very notion of an event, certainly as used here, is not the notion of something purely temporal – a point to which I will return briefly below.

³ Much of the discussion that follows is given over to an elaboration and defence of this claim, as well as to an exploration of some of its implications, but there is an initial objection that may be raised here that should perhaps be dealt with right from the start. It may well be claimed that situatedness is self-evidently a function of the projection of possibility, that it is thus that the hermeneutical situation is essentially shaped and configured, and that the projection at issue here is fundamentally temporal. This is, more or less, the argument of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, and it is an argument frequently repeated or, more often than not, assumed. But this assumption of the primacy of temporality in situatedness is to overlook the complex character of projection itself which is both temporal and spatial (something suggested in both the English "project" and the German *Entwurf*), as well as the way in which the temporal and spatial projection and orientation are mutually determinative and implicative of one another. Situatedness is thus a function of *both* temporal *and* spatial orientation and

projection. This is something that the late Heidegger recognises, but the early Heidegger seems, to some extent, to overlook. For a detailed discussion of the prioritization of the temporal in Heidegger, especially *Being and Time*, see Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), chapt. 3.

- ⁴ Which is not to say that it cannot encompass the abstract or the formal, but that abstraction or formalisation, and the appearance of the abstract and the formal, is itself something that occurs within the singular happening of understanding.
- ⁵ See especially *Heidegger's Topology* in which the argument is made for Heidegger's thinking as a whole as essentially focussed on the idea of *topos*. The use of the term 'topology' here reflects Heidegger's own characterisation of his thinking as a "Topologie des Seyns" (see "Seminar in Le Thor 1969", *Four Seminars*, trans. Andrew Mitchell and François Raffoul (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp.41 & 47; Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* 15 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1986), pp. 335 & 344.
- ⁶ Significantly, the exploration of this place is an investigation of a structure that, even though occurring only in and through the specific factuality of individual places, can also be distinguished from such places – see *Place and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.172-174; see also Malpas, 'Comparing topographies: across paths/around place', *Philosophy and Geography* 4 (2001), pp.233-234.
- ⁷ "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" ("Von Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben"), trans. R.J. Hollingdale in *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge: New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp.57-124 – it is notable that, as Ingo Farin has pointed out to me, this essay already deploys the

notion of ‘horizon’ (a notion we normally associate originally with the phenomenological origins of Gadamer’s thinking) specifically in relation to historical understanding (see, for instance, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life”, p.63).

⁸ See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp.340-379.

⁹ *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, 3 vols, ed. Lawrence D Kritzman (Columbia University Press, New York, 1998); original French publication, Pierre Nora (ed.), *Lieux de Mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).

¹⁰ See Stuart Elden, *Mapping the Present: Heidegger, Foucault and the Project of a Spatial History* (London: Continuum, 2001).

¹¹ This is a point that Gadamer has repeatedly emphasised – see, for instance, in Lewis Edwin Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, Library of Living Philosophers (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1997), p.47: “My philosophical hermeneutics seeks precisely to adhere to the line of questioning of this essay *and the later Heidegger* and to make it accessible in a new way”.

¹² In Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.1-56; Heidegger, *Holzwege, Gesamtausgabe 5* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1977), pp.1-74. Note that in this essay Heidegger’s focus is specifically on the founding role of the work of art, but the basic structure is not one restricted to the artwork alone – the real focus is the founding of world in the concrete placedness of the work, whatever form that work might take..

¹³ Works that have a defining significance for a society or culture – see Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Art*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.6.

¹⁴ See ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, pp.20-22.

¹⁵ See my discussion of this in ‘Objectivity and Self-Disclosedness: The Phenomenological Working of Art’, in Joseph Parry (ed.), *Art as Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, forthcoming, 2010); see also my discussion in *Heidegger’s Topology*, pp.197-200.

¹⁶ Heidegger had already, by the mid-thirties, begun to talk of time and space together as *Zeitraum* (meaning “the inner unity of space and time”) – see Heidegger, *What is a Thing?*, trans. W. B. Barton Jr. and Vera Deutsch (South Bend, Indiana: Gateway, 1967), pp.16-17.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Gadamer’s comments on this issue in ‘Reflections on my Philosophical Journey’, in Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, pp.43-44; see also *Truth and Method*, pp.117-119, 268-269.

¹⁸ In another context we may say that it is “intersubjective”, but this is a term for which Gadamer seems to have had little liking, seeing it as merely a pluralisation of subjectivity rather than as directing attention to the dialogue that occurs between subjects (see, for instance, Gadamer, *Gadamer in Conversation*, ed. and trans. Richard E. Palmer, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001, p.59). Certainly, the use of the term “inter-subjective” – a term that figures prominently in Davidson – can be seen as obscuring the important distinction between the ‘second’ and the ‘third’ person and this may be an implicit part of what Gadamer has in mind here (the importance of this distinction is something to which Glenda Satne draws attention – see Satne, *Meaning and the Second Person. Towards an Account of the Normative Character of Linguistic Practices*, University of Buenos Aires, Unpublished PhD dissertation, 2009, and “Normatividad sin reglas” in G. Agüero, L. Urtubey, L. and D. Vera., eds., *Conceptos, creencias y racionalidad*,

Córdoba: Brujas, 2008, pp.429-435). The conclusion to be drawn may be that talk of the “intersubjective” needs to be explicit in its encompassing of a complex structure of relatedness between persons (although even where this distinction is not made explicit, the concept clearly has an important use that is present in Davidson and elsewhere – see my “Between Ourselves: Philosophical Conceptions of Intersubjectivity”, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 81, 2000, pp.587-592). One might argue that Gadamer’s own use of *Gespräch* is intended to emphasise the second-personal character of linguistic engagement, and that this is what also underpins his use of the notion of *dialogue* (as a face-to-face discourse between speakers), with the implication that the notion of *conversation* at issue here must be the notion of conversation as itself properly dialogic (which perhaps mitigates against the generalised use of conversation that is characteristic of, for instance, Rorty’s work as a way of understanding the more specific concept of Gadamerian *Gespräch*). For most of the discussion below, I will use “conversation” in a way that connects it to dialogue (in fact, the OED barely distinguishes between these terms, defining dialogue as “a conversation carried on between two or more persons”), and so to the second-personal, although there will be occasions when it also carries some sense of the third-personal also – as, for instance, in the idea of tradition as itself “conversational” (see the note immediately below).

¹⁹ The sense in which tradition constitutes a “conversation” has to be understood as distinct from the sense of “conversation” as that applies to the concrete dialogical engagement between speakers – the “conversation” of tradition operates, one might say, at a level that is more properly third-personal rather than second.

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- ²⁰ See David Hoy, *The Time of Our Lives: A Critical History of Temporality* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), pp.vii-viii – this volume is, in fact, presented as part of a two-volume examination of consciousness of which the second volume is projected to be on self-consciousness.
- ²¹ See Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press: 2005) – Chapter Three focuses on “The Structure of Time Consciousness”, while embodiment is dealt with in Chapter Six “Self and Other” as part of the discussion in Section II, “Embodied Subjectivity and Internal Otherness”.
- ²² *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B293, see also B154-155; on the “topographical” character of Kant’s thinking in general, see Jeff Malpas and Günter Zöller, “Reading Kant Topographically: From Critical Philosophy to Empirical Geography”, in Adrian W. Moore, Graham Bird and Roxana Baiasu (eds.), *Kantian Metaphysics Today: New Essays on Space and Time* (forthcoming, 2010).
- ²³ Derrida, of course, argues that *différance* is more basic even than Heidegger’s ontological difference, see Derrida, ‘Différance’, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp.22-27. If one takes the claim advanced here for the fundamental role of the spatial and the temporal in the possibility of differentiation as such, then one may be left puzzled as to how this might relate to a distinction such as the ontological difference – surely that distinction is not itself dependent on the spatial or the temporal. Yet the ontological difference is not a difference between entities – but a difference that emerges only in language, and so a difference that cannot appear other than

through the temporalizing-spatializing of speech and writing. This is an important point that is relevant, not only to how we might understand the idea of the ontological difference, but also to being able to understand the nature and possibility of conceptuality as such.

²⁴ See Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs”, in *Truth, Language and History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), p.107.

²⁵ See, for instance, “Three Varieties of Knowledge”, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), pp.205-220.

²⁶ See *ibid*; see also Malpas, *Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), chapter three (while the focus here is on holism rather than externalism as such, holism is construed in a way that externalism follows almost directly from it); also Malpas, “Locating Interpretation: The Topography of Understanding in Heidegger and Davidson” *Philosophical Topics* 27 (1999), pp.129-148. Davidson’s holistic externalism is not without its detractors – see, for instance, Ernest Lepore and Kirk Ludwig, *Donald Davidson: Meaning, Truth, Language, and Reality* (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 2005); see also Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore, *Holism: A Shopper’s Guide* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp.59-104.

²⁷ One of the greatest misunderstandings of Davidson’s position, and it is a misunderstanding shared by analytic and hermeneutic readers alike, is that his position is an *epistemological* one. Certainly Davidson does attend to epistemological considerations, but to suppose that his concern was only with the manner in which mind and meaning are known would threaten to turn his entire position into a form of verificationism. Mind and meaning are, according to Davidson, holistically and externalistically determined in their very nature, and

not merely in the manner in which they are known – see Malpas, *Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning*, pp. pp.53-56 & 107-108.

²⁸ See *Critique of Pure Reason*, B274-B279

²⁹ See my “The Constitution of the Mind: Kant and Davidson on the Unity of Consciousness”, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 7 (1999), pp.1-30.

³⁰ See *Place and Experience*, 157ff.

³¹ For more on the “externalist”, or better, “topographical”, conception of the self that is at issue here, see Malpas, *Place and Experience*, pp.1-18, 72-91 & 175-193.

³² See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B131: “The *I think* must be able to accompany all my representations”.

³³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p.32 [H12].

³⁴ See especially Davidson, “Thought and Talk”, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd edn. 2001), pp.155-170.

³⁵ See my discussion in *Heidegger’s Topology*, chapter 5, especially pp.214-215; see also Joseph P. Fell, *Heidegger and Sartre: An Essay on Being and Place* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p.204 & p.221 – Fell writes (p.204) that: “This primal ‘gathering principle’ or ‘event’ (*Ereignis*) is the original understanding of place, clearing, abode, home, whole, or totality, ‘worlded’ earth, ground – all of which mean fundamentally the same”. It is strange to find that the idea of the *Ereignis* is so frequently assumed, almost as a matter of course, to represent a continuation of the Heideggerian focus on the primacy of temporality that is apparently so central to *Being and Time*. If nothing else, this seems to represent a failure to recognise both the way in which the notion of originary

temporality in *Being and Time* is itself problematically related to the idea of temporality as such (see William D. Blattner, *Heidegger's Temporal Idealism*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1999, chapters 2, 3, and 4, and also chapter 5, pp.279-290), and the *topological* character of originary temporality as such.

³⁶ See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxl: “The empirical consciousness of my existence... is only determinable through a relation to something that, while being bound up with my existence, is outside me”; see also B276-7: “...outer experience is really immediate [and]...only by means of it is possible not, to be sure, the consciousness of our own existence, but its determination in time, i.e., inner experience”.

³⁷ The basic point at issue here is developed by Kant in a number of places – see, for instance, Kant, ‘Concerning the Ultimate Ground of the Differentiation of Directions in Space’ [1768], in *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770*, ed. David Walford, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant in Translation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.361-372.

³⁸ See Malpas, *Place and Experience*, pp.52-67; see also Malpas “Heidegger, Space, and World”, in Julian Kiverstein and Michael Wheeler (eds.), *Heidegger and Cognitive Science* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, forthcoming, 2010).

³⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.324.

⁴⁰ See *Being and Time*, H153.

⁴¹ See, for instance, *Truth and Method*, p.295: “Hermeneutic work is based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness”.

⁴² The way in which Gadamer uses the notion of “play” as the “clue to ontological explanation” also encompasses something of what is at issue in my own emphasis

in the discussion below on the “demanding” nature of the hermeneutical engagement in place – see *Truth and Method*, pp.101ff.

⁴³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular-Plural*, trans. Robert Richardson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

⁴⁴ Here, it seems to me, is where my own account comes into close proximity to that of Emmanuel Levinas account of the ethical as a face-to-face relation to the other whose otherness can never be effaced. The difference is that my account of the situation in which such face-to-face encounter is possible emphasises the placed character of that encounter, whereas for Levinas, to put the matter in summary terms, *place* gives way to the human *face* – see especially Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?”, *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996): pp.1-10.

⁴⁵ See *Heidegger’s Topology*, p.196.

⁴⁶ See *ibid*, pp.186-189.

⁴⁷ The idea that we might dispense with truth, that it might be a concept to which we can “bid farewell”, as Gianni Vattimo urges (*Farewell to Truth*, New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming, 2010), depends on failing to attend to the specificity of the way in which truth engages with attitude and action, with meaning and preference, with practices of understanding and explanation – in short, on neglecting the essential connection between truth and the nature of human being in the world. The centrality of truth in this respect is something that Davidson has set out in many of his essays (but see especially *Truth and Predication*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005), and for which I have also argued in a number of places (see, for instance, ‘Speaking the Truth’,

Economy and Society 25, 1996, pp.156-177; also ‘Lying, Deceit, and the Commitment to Truth: On Ethics in Contemporary Public Life’, *International Journal for Applied Philosophy*, 22, 2008, pp.1-12. It is the most important point of difference between Rorty and Davidson, and a point on which Rorty and I had a long-standing disagreement – see Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p.41-42 n.22.

⁴⁸ Thus Davidson can write that “Nothing in the world, no object or event, would be true or false if there were not thinking creatures,” Davidson, *Truth and Predication*, p. 7 – a claim that echoes Heidegger’s assertion that that “‘There is’ truth only in so far as Dasein is and so long as Dasein is”, *Being and Time*, p.269 [H226].