The Ground of Understanding

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In his contribution to Gadamer's volume in the Library of Living Philosophers, Donald Davidson makes an explicit attempt, taking Plato's Philebus as his focus, to connect his own thinking with that of Hans-Georg Gadamer in a way that, while it does not ignore possible points of difference, is also suggestive of important continuities in their approaches.[1] In the same volume David Hoy argues that 'the hermeneutic theory of interpretation can enter into a dialogue with the Davidsonian account' and attempts to 'draw on some of Davidson's arguments to defend Gadamer's hermeneutic theory against its critics.'[2] Elsewhere Simon Evnine has suggested that Davidson belongs more in the company of two of Gadamer's own philosophical heroes – Plato and Hegel – 'than in the company of the Vienna Circle and Quine, with their austere, anti-metaphysical scientism'[3] – while in my own work I have advanced a reading of Davidson that brings him into proximity, not only with Gadamer, but also with Gadamer's teacher, Martin Heidegger.[4]

Yet although there has been much within recent English-speaking philosophy that looks towards a rapprochement between the so-called 'analytic' tradition as represented in Davidson's work and the 'phenomenological-hermeneutic' tradition of which Gadamer was one of the leading figures, still there are reasons for hesitation in announcing such a rapprochement. From a European perspective, for instance, Davidson might be thought to be committed to a naturalism, an extensionalism, even perhaps, a scientism, quite antithetical to the more 'humanistic' style of philosophising to which Gadamer belongs. Indeed, Gadamer himself, for all that he seems to have felt some significant proximity between his own position and that of Davidson, nevertheless also voiced some uncertainty on the matter. In replying to the aforementioned essay by David Hoy, Gadamer writes that: "I have certain reservations concerning a further elaboration of the investigation of the relations between Davidson's efforts and my own," and he goes on, "The problem

lies … in the fact that it still sounds as if conversation, and the structure of conversation in all areas dealing with understanding, primarily only referred to the attainment of correct knowledge. But what is fundamentally at issue is not primarily science and epistemology but…the 'ontology' of life communicating itself through language. Even the model proposition that Davidson employs – 'snow is white' – seems strange to me from this viewpoint. Who uttered this, even if it is true? I am only interested in asking about the precondition of human communication: namely, that one really tries to understand what the other thinks about something."[5]

Gadamer's concerns here are reflected in some of Rüdiger Bubner's comments on the relation between Davidson's thought and that of Gadamer and Heidegger. Bubner argues that Davidson's approach stands within a largely pragmatist frame that, in contrast to the Heideggerian-Gadamerian approach, simply assumes the relation of language to the world, thereby cutting short any real concern with the ground of understanding, referring us instead to the simple fact of pragmatic success[6] – as Bubner reads Davidson, it seems there is no question of grounding understanding because the fact of understanding is already given.

The question raised by Bubner's and Gadamer's comments is significant inasmuch as it indicates that any attempt at an exploration of possible convergence between the work of thinkers such as Gadamer and Davidson, who come from otherwise divergent traditions, cannot be undertaken merely at the level of a comparison of particular ideas,[7] but must also address more basic issues concerning the very character of their respective approaches. What is raised here is thus not a matter of whether or not certain Gadamerian theses can be found to have analogues in Davidson, or vice versa, but, more pointedly, whether there is any sense in which these two thinkers might, in spite of their differences in background, be said to share a similar philosophical orientation or overall approach. The possibility of such shared orientation is what I intend to explore in the discussion that follows. Any investigation of this matter cannot, however, be pursued independently of the broader question as to the very nature of the inquiry into 'precondition' or 'ground' as it arises in the work of Heidegger and Gadamer and it is with that question that I will begin.

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It is notable, in fact, that Bubner's own discussion of Davidson is actually fairly peripheral to the essay in which it appears. The main focus of that essay is not the Davidsonian position, but rather certain basic differences, as Bubner sees it, in the way in which Heidegger and Gadamer each respond to the question concerning what Bubner terms 'the ground of understanding' or that appears in Gadamer as the 'precondition of communication'. It is Bubner's contention that Heidegger's treatment of Dasein as 'always already called understanding',[8] grounds understanding in the ontological structure of Dasein (in the 'Interpretation of Existence') in such a way that 'the question about the ground is made superfluous'[9] – as soon as Dasein is, so is understanding. Things are no better in this respect, according to Bubner, in relation to Heidegger's later thought, except that Being itself (understood in terms of Ereignis) now plays the role earlier given to Dasein. It is against this reading of Heidegger that Bubner argues for the distinctiveness of the Gadamerian approach to the problem of ground – an approach that Bubner presents as oriented towards the historical rather than the ontological. Yet in spite of the important differences that he argues are to be found between the Heideggerian and Gadamerian approaches, Bubner nevertheless presents both Heidegger and Gadamer as concerned with uncovering "the ground of understanding". However, since his concern is with the particular way in which the ground of understanding is articulated in Heidegger and Gadamer, rather than with the way in which any such grounding, or indeed the inquiry into ground, is itself structured, so he gives relatively little attention to the question of what might involved in the inquiry into ground that is at issue here.

Still, Bubner does provide some indication of his views on this matter, and at one point, in fact, he talks of 'making precise once again the question regarding the ground of understanding.'[10] With reference to the possibility of understanding as it arises in ordinary experience, Bubner comments that 'when we want to know why we possess this possibility, then we have to clarify the source of this universal

capability, which is bound to no region of objects or field of science. Philosophical hermeneutics stands or falls with this question'.[11] Elsewhere Bubner talks of 'naming' the ground of understanding, arguing that the ground is not 'our own nature' (the answer supposedly given by early Heidegger), not an 'anonymous life-process' (Dilthey), not 'a quasi-mythical Being' (later Heidegger), not an 'all-encompassing world spirit' (Hegel). Instead the ground is to be found in 'the history of effect' (Wirkungsgeschichte), which is to say, in history as it involves us in tradition, and this is the answer that Bubner finds in Gadamer.

In general, it seems that the inquiry into ground, as presented in Bubner, is a matter of identifying that larger frame or "horizon" within which the possibility of particular acts of understanding, and understanding as a whole, can be located and so given justification. One of the features of the Gadamerian position as expressed by Bubner, however, is that the frame or horizon at issue is not some single structure that stands behind understanding or in which understanding is simply instantiated, but is rather a matter of our being always already given over to history and to the historical as itself arising only through the dialogical process of understanding.[12] Thus Bubner writes of the Gadamerian position: 'If we must have recourse to history as the ground for the activity of understanding, we have recourse to something which we have always already implicated in our understanding. There is no independence of the ground irrespective of our effort of justification…the ground of understanding lies in history itself, but this ground is not to be sought independently of that which is grounded through it.' [13]

Described in this fashion, the relation between ground and what is grounded is not a relation between two independent elements or structures[14] – understanding is grounded in history, but history is itself worked out only in relation to understanding. Indeed, one might say that there is only the one structure here that is both the structure of understanding and the structure of the historical, and that is worked out in ongoing dialogue. Notwithstanding the contrast that Bubner draws between the Gadamerian and Heideggerian positions, the 'circularity' or reciprocity that is evident in the grounding of understanding as it appears in Gadamer also seems to have a correlate in Heidegger. As Bubner emphasises, understanding is

grounded in Dasein's mode of being, and yet Dasein's mode of being is itself worked out only in relation to Dasein's understanding – Dasein is 'in' the world (that is to say, Dasein 'exists') in and through Dasein's capacity to understand.[15]

The circularity or reciprocity that is evident here can be stated 'ontologically' – that is in terms of the reciprocal relation between the ground and what is to be grounded – as well as methodologically. Stated in methodological terms, such reciprocity or circularity amounts to the idea that the inquiry into ground must implicitly presuppose what it nevertheless aims to question. If understanding is grounded, as in Gadamer, by reference to history, and as history itself refers us back to the process of understanding, then so it would seem that exactly what is in question, namely the possibility of understanding, must already have been presupposed. Such circularity is explicitly acknowledged by Heidegger in his discussion of the nature of the question of being in the first few sections of Being and Time – there the inquiry into being is seen already to presuppose a prior grasp of what is to be inquired into.[16] Heidegger argues, however, that the circularity at issue here is not damaging to the inquiry being pursued – it is not, for instance, a version of the fallacy of petitio principii. He writes that 'It is quite impossible for there to be any "circular argument" in formulating the question about the meaning of Being for in answering this question, the issue is not one of grounding something by such a derivation; it is rather one of laying bare the grounds for it and exhibiting them.'[17]

Although the details are not spelled out, it seems that here Heidegger is really distinguishing between two ways of conceiving of the project of grounding. The first involves the grounding of one thing in another by means of some derivation or demonstration – one might take as a paradigm here the way in which a theorem is "grounded" through being derived from some set of axioms and rules of inference within a formal system. In such a case, the grounding relation can be construed as a matter of the formal relating of one thing to another – as theorem is related to axioms by means of rules of inference. The second does not involve a process of formal derivation of one thing from another – indeed it is not a process that could be properly formalised in terms of a sequence of logical inferences from the more to the less basic – but is instead a matter of grounding an entire 'region' by uncovering the

very structure of that region as such. Inasmuch as the project of Being and Time can be understood, in Bubner's terms, as a matter of establishing a certain ground of understanding, so it is not directed at the derivation of some instance of understanding from something more basic, but rather of 'laying out' and 'exhibiting' the structure of understanding in its entirety. Within the framework of Being and Time, that means exhibiting the structure of 'existence' – the structure of Dasein's being – as a whole.

Laying bare the structure of existence in this way involves exhibiting its underlying unity in a way that nevertheless maintains the multiplicity of elements that make it up. The being of Dasein must thus be exhibited in terms of a 'multiplicity of characteristics' that are constitutive of it and that are also, writes Heidegger, 'equiprimordial.'[18] Heidegger contrasts this approach with what he regards as a common tendency in ontology 'to derive everything and anything from some simple primal ground.'[19] The preservation of a multiplicity of elements – and so the insistence on a ground that is itself complex but unitary – is thus an essential feature of the grounding project as it appears in Heidegger. It is clearly also an important element in Gadamer. Indeed, the Gadamerian emphasis on dialogue, and on the immersion of understanding in history or tradition, along with the working out of history itself in relation to the play of understanding, is exemplary of the kind of structure that is at issue here. The ground of understanding is thus uncovered, not through the derivation of understanding from some more basic underlying structure or principle, but rather through exhibiting or 'laying out' the structure of understanding itself. Such a 'laying out' will often be a matter of exhibiting the broader horizon within which understanding is itself located – as in Gadamer, it will mean locating the understanding in relation to history and to tradition, or else, as in Heidegger, in relation to the structure of existence.

It should already be obvious that the way in which the inquiry into ground proceeds, and the reciprocity that evidently obtains between ground and what is grounded, mirrors the structure that hermeneutic theory has often taken to be characteristic of the movement of understanding as such and that it often refers to in terms of "hermeneutic circularity" or the "circle of understanding." Heidegger is

himself quite explicit in treating his own inquiry into the question of being as hermeneutic in character – "only as phenomenology," he says, "is ontology possible"[20] – while he also argues that the phenomenological method he deploys must itself be construed hermeneutically – "the meaning of phenomenological description as a method lies in interpretation."[21] The idea that the inquiry into the ground of understanding is itself an interpretative inquiry is one way of giving expression to the idea of such an inquiry as properly a "laying out" and exhibiting of reciprocal interconnections rather than a "derivation" or "demonstration". It also draws attention to the way in which the grounding of understanding is something that can be undertaken only by reference to the understanding – the uncovering of a ground for understanding is not to be achieved independently of the operation of the understanding and as such the inquiry into ground turns out to be self-referential in that it uncovers the ground of its own possibility.[22]

The hermeneutic dimension of the inquiry into ground, and the structure that it brings with it, can usefully be illustrated by reference to a more mundane example. When confronted with a text whose meaning we wish to uncover – say a dramatic or poetic work – understanding the meaning is not a matter merely of coming to understand what each word or sentence in the text means independently of the whole. Indeed, one may be able to read the whole of the text and yet still not understand anything of what the text 'means'. Here the understanding of each word or sentence is dependent is dependent on our understanding of the larger structure of which they are a part and within which they 'show up' in a particular way (of, course there is a sense in which for them to 'show up' as meaningful at all is already for them to be located within that larger whole which is the language). However, any such understanding of the text is not itself independent of the understanding of the component words and sentences. We might characterize this in terms of the familiar 'circularity' of understanding, but in fact it really amounts to the point that understanding in this case is something that must always be worked out by reference to the text itself.[23] Interpretation is thus a matter of achieving a certain sort of integration or unification (though a complex unification) of the elements of which the text is composed. The meaning of any particular element of the text, and so also

the meaningfulness of the text as a whole, is itself justified or 'grounded' by reference, not to anything independent of the text, but to the text itself and the integrity or unity that can be found within it.

The circularity or reciprocity that can be discerned in ordinary textual interpretation, as well as in the philosophical 'interpretations' undertaken by Heidegger and Gadamer, refers us to the character of interpretative inquiry – and also, in Heideggerian terms, of ontology or phenomenological description – as always a matter of exhibiting the interconnectedness of the elements that make up a certain region or domain (once one arrives at the appropriate level of description), rather than through their reduction or derivation, and which can only be carried out 'internally' to that region. Strictly speaking, this does not mean that the region in question is itself possessed of some 'circular' structure. Instead, any such circularity arises as a result of the fact that the only way the integrity or unity of some domain can be articulated is through a process that involves working through the elements of which that domain is composed, and such working through will indeed give an appearance of circularity. Thus the prior assumptions and expectations on the basis of which one's current interpretation is based are constantly tested out against the actual interpretative situation, and often revised in the light of that situation, as one seeks to arrive at an overall interpretation that optimizes the integrity or unity of the domain in question. Put in terms of the reading of a text, one is constantly involved in playing off one's overall understanding against one's understanding of particular parts and sections and vice versa – more generally, Thus in reading a text, one is constantly involved in playing off one's overall understanding against one's understanding of particular parts and sections and vice versa. Put in terms of the inquiry into ground, the establishing of such a ground is not a matter of relating that which is grounded to something that stands apart from it; instead it is a matter of providing an interpretation that will exhibit the integrity or unity of the domain or region in question, and that will thereby bring to light the conditions that make possible what stands within that region, while also exhibiting the region's own interconnected structure. This broadly 'interpretative' approach to the question of the ground is clearly tied, in the work of both Heidegger and Gadamer, to a

phenomenological-hermeneutic framework, but there is no reason to suppose that it has to be so tied. Indeed, just such an "interpretative" approach also seems to be evident in Davidson's work, albeit couched in the language of analytic epistemology and philosophy of language.

Davidson's early essays, in which the focus on the problem of developing a formal theory of truth – the famous 'Snow is white' being the archetypal example in this connection – was very much to the fore, may well give the impression of a narrowly technical concern with language in which issues of understanding and communication are subordinated, as in Quine, to questions of scientific epistemology, and in which any question concerning the ground of understanding or the preconditions of communication is completely removed from view. Yet one has only to read Davidson's work more broadly, especially his more recent writings over the last fifteen years or so,[24] to see how mistaken such an impression would be. The question as to how an interpreter can come to understand the words of another has long been a central concern in Davidson's work, but as his thinking on that question has developed, so too has the scope of the question become much broader and its real significance much more explicit: it is not just a matter of how one understands another, but of how one understands oneself as well as the world;[25] not just a matter of understanding the exemplary sentences of Tarski, but also the literary exuberance of Joyce;[26] not just a matter of understanding the character of interpretation given the fact of its pragmatic success, but of uncovering the conceptual linkages that make any such interpretation possible.

The idea of "radical interpretation" provides the original focus for much of Davidson's thinking about understanding. The situation of radical interpretation is one in which an interpreter is faced with a completely unknown language. How, in such a situation, can the interpreter come to understand the language in question? Davidson claims that it is possible only through the interpreter's ability to interact both with the speaker, and with the objects and events that make up the speaker's environment and with which the speaker also interacts. An interpreter can thus look to the objects and events in a speaker's environment – objects and events that are also part of the interpreter's surroundings – in order to identifying the attitudes and

interpreting the utterances of the speaker. Indeed, Davidson claims that the mutual interaction between interpreter and speaker in relation to a common set of objects and events is the indispensable foundation for all communication and linguistic understanding.

The importance for the possibility of understanding of a common set of objects and events with which both interpreter and speaker are causally and intentionally related was originally expressed by Davidson in terms of the centrality of the 'principle of charity.'[27] In his later work, however, Davidson drops talk of 'charity', along with reference to "radical interpretation", and instead emphasises the way in which understanding, communication and knowledge all depend on a tri-partite relationship between interpreter, speaker and world that can be expressed in a number of different ways: in terms of the way in which the interpreter is able to access the meanings and attitudes of another through their differing positions in relation to some common object; in terms of the interdependence between different forms of knowledge (knowledge of self, knowledge of others and knowledge of the world); in terms of the dialogical interplay between speaker and interpreter in the face of some common subject-matter. Davidson's approach has thus been essentially to provide an account of the possibility of understanding in a holistic structure that encompasses individual, society and environment. The delineation of the structure of understanding is a matter of articulating a set of complex and dynamic relationships – a matter of 'laying out' a structure that is already present in our actual interpretative-communicative practice. It seems to be a structure that is closely analogous to that which can also be found in Heidegger and Gadamer and that 'grounds' understanding through exhibiting its interconnected structure. Of course, Davidson's way of presenting this inquiry into ground is, as I noted above, rather different form the way in which it is presented in Heidegger or Gadamer. For the most part, Davidson's inquiries into 'the ground of understanding' take the form, neither of an 'ontology' nor a 'history'. Instead, the approach has been more oriented towards a form of conceptual analysis: exploring the preconditions necessary for interpretation and understanding through a careful mapping out of the linkages

between certain fundamental notions – notions such as meaning, belief, truth and knowledge.

Davidson is quite explicit about the non-reductive character of this style of analysis as well as its indispensibility. Thus he writes that:

> …however feeble or faulty our attempts to relate these various basic concepts to each other, these attempts fare better, and teach us more, than our efforts to produce correct and revealing definitions of basic concepts in terms of clearer or even more fundamental concepts…For the most part, the concepts philosophers single out for attention, like truth, knowledge, belief, action, cause, the good and the right, are the most elementary concepts we have, without which (I am inclined to say) we would have no concepts at all. Why then should we expect to be able to reduce these concepts definitionally to other concepts that are simpler, clearer, and more basic?[28]

Here Davidson is not only making a claim about philosophical method, but also about the character of the concepts themselves. In this respect his comments can be seen as mirroring Heidegger's insistence on ontological inquiry as a matter of the uncovering of an interconnected structure rather than of reducing it to something simpler that somehow lies 'behind' or 'beneath.'

Yet any similarity here may well be thought to arise merely from the employment of too general a level of analysis and that, in fact, the Davidsonian inquiry never moves beyond an inquiry into the immediate 'structural suppositions' (the phrase is Bubner's) of our everyday interpretative practice – a practice whose possibility is taken as already given rather than inquired into. As Bubner writes: "the relation of language to the world is assumed and reflexively thematized, and is not substantially grounded in sources other than the correct understanding of language …Davidson has integrated into his theory of interpretation the old argument of pragmatism that, on the whole our systems of orientation do their work, because an eccentric relationship to the world would constantly threaten our basic actions with failure.'[29] Just as Gadamer worries that Davidson's concerns remain epistemological, so, on this reading, Davidson may be seen merely as providing an account of the presuppositions that must be made in the practice of interpretation – as explicating how interpretation works – rather than providing any account of that on which the

possibility of understanding rests. As a consequence, neither 'human Dasein' nor 'a meaningful history' is seen as playing any grounding role in the Davidsonian account, since there is "no theoretical impetus" to uncover such a ground.[30]

It is certainly true that Davidson does not "name" the ground of understanding in the way that Bubner claims Heidegger and Gadamer do. Yet this does not mean either that the 'historical' or the 'existential-ontological' have no role to play in his account. The triangular structure that encompasses interpreter, speaker and thing, is a structure that already contains within it a historical dimension inasmuch as it gives expression to the idea that all understanding and interpretation takes place only within the realm of our ongoing socio-linguistic engagement with others[31] – an engagement that is always based in what has gone before. Moreover, the structure that Davidson describes here is not required only as a 'structural supposition' of interpretative practice or its explication. Rather, it is a necessary precondition for there to be anything to interpret or to communicate, for there to be a speaker capable of being interpreted or being understood, for there to be an interpreter to interpret or to understand. Indeed, although Davidson often makes use of the language of epistemology, his account ought to be viewed as properly ontological in much the same sense that the term is used by Heidegger and Gadamer. Thus, when Davidson argues that knowledge of self, of other and of world, form a 'tripod' in which 'if any leg were lost, no part would stand',[32] he is not making a claim merely about how it is we know anything, but rather about what it is for such knowledge to be.

Davidson undoubtedly gives a certain priority to our actual communicative-interpretative practice as the touchstone for the inquiry into the nature of understanding. Rather like Wittgenstein, Davidson views understanding, not as some occult 'inner' process, but rather as a matter of our ongoing capacity to 'get along' in the world – to 'get along' with the objects and events around us and to 'get along', both conversationally and behaviourally, with the other persons with whom we share the world. Yet to view understanding and communication in this way does not, by itself, imply a commitment to any significant form of "pragmatism". Instead it represents a commitment, first, to a particular view of what understanding and

communication should be seen to consist in – both involve capacities for ongoing activity – and, second, to a particular conception of the proper place from which any inquiry into the ground of understanding and communication must begin and back to which it must always be referred. In these respects, however, it may be better to view Davidson in terms that suggest less of a contrast and more a continuity with the Heideggerian and Gadamerian positions. Rather than as prioritizing the pragmatic, then, the Davidsonian approach can be viewed as giving recognition to what appears in Heidegger and Gadamer as the priority of 'the factical' – our being already given over to the world and our activity within it. In being already given over to interpretative-communicative activity – in being 'always already called understanding' – we are already given over to the interplay between what appears in Davidson as the triangular dynamic of self, other and world. And it is in just this interplay that the 'precondition of communication' or the 'ground of understanding' is to be found – in the working out of the unitary connections that bind together the various elements within the interpretative domain and that therefore give a certain dynamic unity to the triadic field that comprises interpreter, speaker and thing.

In Davidson's case, this emphasis on the interplay of elements as that in which understanding is properly grounded is also closely tied to a rejection of any approach that would treat understanding or interpretation as a matter of the mastery of a set of rules or conventions.[33] Significantly, it is in relation to just this matter of the role of rules or conventions that Davidson takes issue with Gadamer. In his paper in the Library of Living Philosophers volume, Davidson quotes a lengthy passage from Gadamer in which is included the comment that 'Every conversation presupposes a common language, or, it creates a common language.'[34] Davidson notes his agreement with Gadamer on almost all points, but then adds:

> Where I differ (and this may merely show I have not fully understood Gadamer) is that I would not say a conversation presupposes a common language, nor even that it requires one. Understanding, to my mind, is always a matter not only of interpretation but of translation, since we can never assume we mean the same thing by our words that our partners in discussion mean. What is created in dialogue is not a common language but understanding: each partner comes to understand the other.[35]

Elsewhere Davidson argues independently that while a shared language may well facilitate linguistic understanding, such sharing is not essential for understanding to be possible. Indeed, for the most part, communication and understanding proceed in spite of differences in linguistic practice and any agreement in such practice that is arrived at is always open to fluctuation.[36] Yet Davidson does allow that he may have misunderstood Gadamer on this point, and, indeed, it seems that Gadamer no less than Davidson is committed to a similarly dynamic conception of the interpretative-communication process. This should be obvious enough from Gadamer's own emphasis on the dialogic or 'conversational' character of understanding, but it is also evident in Gadamer's well-known rejection of method as adequate to guarantee truth. Neither for Gadamer nor for Davidson can understanding be reduced to a set of rules, conventions or principles.

It may be that, for Davidson, the basic concordance between his own and Gadamer's position on this point is obscured by Gadamer's particular emphasis on language as the medium in which understanding always takes place. As Gadamer writes in the essay 'What is Truth?': 'I believe that it is language that achieves a constant synthesis between the horizon of the past and the horizon of the present. We understand each other inasmuch as we speak with one another, inasmuch as we constantly talk past each other and in the end we are brought, nevertheless, through the use of words, before the things that are said with words.'[37] Yet of course, that it is indeed by means of language that understanding is made possible is something that Davidson himself would agree.[38] What he rejects is that it is possible only on the basis or through the establishing of a single language. It is, however, just such an idea that Davidson apparently takes as suggested by the passage he quotes from Gadamer. And while that passage can certainly be read in the way Davidson reads it, it seems that what is really at issue there is not to do with the need for a single, shared language prior to any interpretative encounter as the basis on which that encounter is possible, but rather with the role of language as that in which understanding is articulated and expressed . In this respect, the comment need not be taken to commit Gadamer to any strong claim concerning the necessity of a common language for the possibility of understanding. Indeed, as Gadamer

explicitly notes in lines that follow from the passage from 'What is Truth?' quoted above:

> It is the case that language has its own historicity. Everyone of us has his own language. Two people who share their lives with each other have their language. There is no problem at all of one language for all, rather there is only the miracle that although we all have a different language we can nevertheless understand beyond the limits of individuals, peoples, and times…What we grasp with great difficulty is that we cannot speak the truth without the commonality of a hard won agreement. But most astonishing about the essence of language and conversation is that I myself am not restricted by what I believe when I speak with others about something, that no one of us embraces the whole truth within his beliefs but that the whole truth can however, embrace us both in our individual beliefs. A hermeneutics that was adequate to our historical existence would take as its task the development of this meaningful relation between language and conversation that carries us away in its play.[39]

Understanding is possible, then, in spite of differences in language. And this is because understanding is based, not in the agreement that consists in a single shared way of speaking, but rather in our being already given over to the play of language and conversation.

Just as understanding cannot itself be reduced to a set of rules, conventions or methods, neither can understanding be grounded in any similar fashion. It cannot be reduced to something more basic than it nor derived from anything that stands apart from it. The project of grounding understanding is thus a matter of exhibiting the complex and dynamic structure that is understanding itself and in which all understanding, from the everyday to the existential, from the general to the particular, finds its ground. Of course, just how that structure is set out depends on the particular interpretative approach that is adopted, and clearly Heidegger, Gadamer and Davidson all offer different analyses of the dynamic structure that is at issue here. Inamsuch as Heidegger takes the structure of understanding to be given in the existential-ontological structure of Dasein, so it is through the interplay between the elements that are constitutive of Dasein's own being, particularly as worked out in relation to Care and temporality, that is the real ground for understanding; in Gadamer's hermeneutics, it is the interplay that is encompassed

by our relation to history and tradition; in Davidson, it is the interplay that arises through our linguistic engagement in relation to a common object or objects. Yet these differences should not be allowed to obscure the very similar grounding strategy that is evident in all three approaches.

As Bubner presents matters, however, the similarity at issue here does indeed seem to be obscured, in part, through Bubner's focus on the question as to exactly what it is that is taken to be the ground of understanding in each case – whether that be ontology, history, or, in Davidson's case, nothing at all. But this way of approaching matters is already problematic in that it takes as its focus, not the dynamic relation between elements, but rather the 'naming' of one such element as a ground – in so doing, it also tends towards the problematic assumpton that the ground of understanding must be seen as something that, at least notionally, stands apart from understanding.[40] Perhaps this is what underlies Buber's criticisim of the Davidsonian position as well as his claim that the Heideggerian approach renders the question about the ground of understanding 'superfluous.'[41] Strictly speaking, however, the ground of understanding is not Dasein, nor Spirit, not Life, nor even History. It is rather to be found in the complex structure that is the dialogical interplay between speakers, and between speakers and their world, that always takes place in relation to language and tradition, and yet is never held captive by them. It is something of this that is surely captured in the lines from Rilke that stand at the head of Gadamer's magnum opus:

> Catch only what you've thrown yourself, all is
> Mere skill and little gain;
> But when you're the catcher of a ball
> Thrown by an eternal partner
> With accurate and measured swing
> Towards you, to your centre, in an arch
> From the great bridgebuilding of God:
> Why catching then becomes a power –
> Not yours, a world's.[42]

[1] 'Gadamer and Plato's Philebus', in Lewis Edwin Hahn (ed.), The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Library of Living Philosophers XXIV (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), pp.421-32. The points of disagreement noted by Davidson do indeed seem to be, as Davidson admits is possible, more a product of misunderstanding than real difference.

[2] 'Post-Cartesian Interpretation: Hans-Georg Gadamer and Donald Davidson', in Hahn (ed.), The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, pp.110-128.

[3] Simon Evnine, Donald Davidson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p.154.

[4] See Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[5] Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Reply to Hoy', in Hahn (ed.), The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, pp.129-30.

[6] Rudiger Bubner, 'On the Ground of Understanding', in Brice Wachterhauser (ed.), Hermeneutics and Truth (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1994), p.81.

[7] Bubner himself refers to 'the convergence of hermeneutics with Davidson's semantics' noting that "It is astonishing that this essential relationship has received so little attention" ('On the Ground of Understanding', p.80).

[8] Ibid., p.76

[9] Ibid., p.78

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., p.78

[12] Ibid., pp.74ff.

[13] Ibid., pp.79-80

[14] Ibid., pp.79-80

[15] See Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), esp. H143ff.

[16] See Ibid., H7-8; see also H15-H153.

[17] Ibid., H7-8; see also H153.

[18] Ibid., H131.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., H35.

[21] Ibid, H37.

[22] Such self-referentiality is itself something to which Bubner himself draws attention in his well-known discussion of the structure of transcendental argument – Bubner claims that it is characteristic of such arguments and he illustrates the point with reference to Kant as well as to Quine, Strawson and Wittgenstein. See Bubner, 'Kant, Transcendental Arguments and the Problem of Deduction', Review of Metaphysics 28 (1975), pp.453-67.

[23] Even extra-textual considerations are only relevant inasmuch as they are brought to bear on the text and enable us to configure the text in a certain way. In this respect such considerations really do no more than provide clues as to how the text should be understood.

[24] It is notable that Davidson has written more in the period since the publication of the two Oxford volumes (Essays on Actions and Events, Clarendon Press, 1980 and Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, Clarendon Press, 1984), than in period preceding it and yet for many philosophers – no matter what their background – their only real acquaintance with Davidson's work will be with the essays in those two volumes. It is to be hoped that the republication of the more recent essays – collected together in three volumes scheduled to appear with Harvard University Press – will go a long way toward rectifying this situation.

[25] See especially 'Three Varieties of Knowledge', in A. Phillips Griffiths (ed.), A. J. Ayer: Memorial Essays (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp.153-66.

[26] See Davidson, 'James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty', in Midwest Studies in Philosophy XXXX

[27] See, for instance, 'Radical Interpretation' in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, pp.125-40.

[28] 'The Structure and Content of Truth', Journal of Philosophy 87 (1990), p.264.

[29] Bubner, 'On the Ground of Understanding', p.81.

[30] Ibid., p.82.

[31] Some might argue that the structure Davidson sets out here, a structure that seems to minimally involve only two persons is hardly sufficient to sustain any real sense of the social let alone of the

historical. However, it is quite clear that Davidson intends the structure to be a schematic one that captures something of the same structural relation that appears in Gadamer as dialogue or conversation and that might also be taken, minimally and schematically, to involve just two partners, but more properly will always be worked out in ongoing fashion within a linguistic, and hence necessarily also historical, dimension.

[32] 'Three Varieties of Knowledge', p.166

[33] On this point see: 'Communication and Convention', in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, pp265-80; 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', in Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson, edited by Ernest LePore (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp.433-46, and also 'The Social Aspect of Language', in The Philosophy of Michael Dummett, edited by B. McGuinness and G. Oliveri (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), pp.xx-xx

[34] Quoted in 'Gadamer and Plato's Philebus', p.431; the passage is from Gadamer, Truth and Method, p.341.

[35] Davidson, 'Gadamer and Plato's Philebus', p.431-2.

[36] See 'A Nice Derangment of Epitaphs'.

[37] Gadamer, 'What is Truth?', in Wachterhauser (ed.), Hermeneutics and Truth, pp.45.

[38] See, for instance, 'Thought and Talk', in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation and 'Seeing Through Language'.

[39] Ibid, pp.45-6. It is interesting to note that in a section of this passage that I have not quoted here, Gadamer emphasises that the things about which we speak are themselves only brough to appearance as common through our speaking about them. This may be thought to mark a different point of disagreement with Davidson, but it is only so if one neglects the way in which, in Davidson too, the common object stands at one apex of a traangle the base line of which – namely the engagement between speaker and interpreter – is itself constituted through linguistic interaction.

[40] In fact, if either "ontology" or "history" are to be taken as providing a ground for understanding, then it is because they themselves refer us to the interplay of elements that is properly at issue here.

[41] Ibid., p.78

[42] Truth and Method, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall. New York: Continuum, 2nd rev. edn., 1989, p.v.