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# DISPLACING HERMENEUTICS WITH THE HERMENEUTICAL?

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## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Given the extensive philosophical problems arrayed against it, should hermeneutics be abandoned as an epistemology of interpretation in favor of a reflective pedagogy of practical engagement? Is it not time that hermeneuticians renounce their obsession with legitimizing the “truth claims” of experience in favor of what we shall call “the hermeneutical,” that is, submitting to the (factual) truths of experience that engagement in practice exposes us to? Perhaps it is now appropriate to argue for what will seem a heresy amongst many philosophical hermeneuticians: the lesson of practical engagement is that the subjectivity of experience must be taken really seriously.

The following argument is written on the presupposition that the discipline of hermeneutics, traditionally understood as an epistemology of interpretation, is bound to fail. The nihilistic axiom that there is no truth but only interpretation means that there is no getting to the bottom of epistemological argument. The result is indecisiveness, uncertainty and negativity. No wonder that hermeneutics and the humanities appear to be in such a methodological crisis. However, if we both switch our framework of argument from the epistemological to the ontological and treat interpretation not as a subject’s interjection but as a mode of interactive

<sup>1</sup> I should like to thank the officers of the North American Society for Philosophical Hermeneutics for inviting me to present this paper at their 2018 Annual Conference.

participatory practice, understanding can be retrieved not as anything definitive but as something perfectible. Should philosophical hermeneutics continue to be treated as a deviant form of epistemology, then *Bildung* (the ability of individuals to build on and have confidence in their accumulated experience) is stifled by the indecisive. Epistemological nihilism corrodes belief in the worthwhileness of practice. Yet regard hermeneutic engagement as a participatory practice in a relational ontology, and the ‘hermeneutical’ becomes an ever fluid movement of insightful formation.

This paper proposes that (1) philosophical hermeneutics considered as a mode of epistemological theory should be abandoned in favor of promoting hermeneutics as a form of experiential participation. This explains my title. Hermeneutics considered as a warrantable theory of knowing must be displaced by an account of hermeneutics as participatory engagement for it is in the ‘eventual’ nature of practice that the ‘hermeneutical’ arises. (2) The processes of practical engagement will be presented as engendering the occasions in which the ‘hermeneutical’ (an experience of understanding’s movement) arises. (3) The arguments concerning practical engagement demand an ontological re-reading of subjectivity. No longer should the subject be treated as the epistemological anchor point of knowledge but rather as continuously a plurality of processes which “subjectivize” as one. (3) The formation of agency is key to my argument and explains why I oppose Gadamer’s claim that subjectivity is impotent. Subjectivity as a mode of the epistemological subject may be impotent but considered as the coordinating viewpoint or perspective of a plurality of interacting processes, it is far from impotent.

## **Hermeneutical De-fenestration: On Windows and Positions**

To initiate our argument, I borrow two terms from L. Kramer’s text *Music as Cultural Practice*, namely, ‘hermeneutic windows’ and ‘subject-positions.’<sup>2</sup> Let us first address the notion of a hermeneutic window. Hermeneutic windows frame an event, an occasion. They are an opening-out and on-to. They frame a view and render something visible. What makes a window ‘hermeneutical’ is the ability to disclose a site of breakdown, to reveal how a change of perspective can suddenly expose an object of interpretation as fraught with the tensions of unresolved problems. Hermeneutical windows open out on to a *Spannungsfeld* (Nietzsche). They threaten those that look through them with vertigo and, possibly, with conceptual defenestration. When texts, paintings or compositions challenge our habitual readings and responses, we become disorientated and lose the security of our initial expectancies. Kramer’s windows frame the space

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800-1900*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993.

of hermeneutical experience, opening spaces in my understanding between what I thought I had understood and what, I now realize, I plainly had not. Passing to Kramer's second term, the notion of a subject-position, he treats the act of interpretation as a sense-making process in which a hermeneutic subject or agency forms its perspective or viewpoint. Our argument is that subject-positions are not applied by knowing subjects to the objects of their interpretation (as if an epistemological schema antedated any engagement). To the contrary, a subject-position is (in Gadamerian terms) the effect and not the cause of an interpretive engagement. The subject-position is a consequence of engagement in participatory processes. The ontological consequences are discussed below.

Why am I drawn to my own adaptations of Kramer's two notions? The reasons are several. (1) Hermeneutical windows are subject-positions affording vistas and perspectives which are important not so much because of what they look out on to but because of what they reveal of the viewing position itself. It is not that a Cartesian subject is looking out onto a hermeneutical terrain but rather that the window itself frames or articulates the complexity, which is the viewer's mode of seeing, a mode of seeing which differentiates it from the perspectives of other interacting agencies. (2) Kramer's metaphors suggest that it is impossible to think of hermeneutic engagement or interaction *without* an appeal to a perspective-setting force or agency. This returns the notion of the subject and subjectivity to the center of hermeneutic debate. Both the Heideggerian and Gadamerian critiques of the subject and subjectivity are well known. However, the abandonment of epistemological approaches to interpretation in favor of an ontological model of hermeneutic interaction makes it necessary to re-think the subject and subjectivity. (3) *Without the notion of engaged subjectivities* (here I invoke Nietzsche's 'subject as a multiplicity'), *education understood as transformative practice makes no sense*. If education (whatever the discipline) is about anything at all, it is surely about the empowerment of a subject-position to engage with confidence in the social and cultural terrains it finds itself within. *Dialogue, participation and transformative practice whether in art, religion or medicine are inconceivable without subject-agencies or -positions. The notion of ex-change would be redundant*. Hermeneutical education is, arguably, about practical empowerment. This is a point worth stressing. As public education moves towards quantitative models of assessment (or normative modes of social compliance) the more it moves away from those formative individual practices of engagement and judgement which give such compelling force to Gadamer's notion of *Bildung*. In arguing this we are not advocating a reactionary return to bourgeois notions of the knowing subject as the ground of all discernment, judgement, and taste. Articulating inter-action not reaction is our concern. (4) *Bildung*, considered as an ontological process, promises a way of circumventing the negativity of post-structural and deconstructive critiques of the knowing subject, critiques which render any notion of hermeneutic transformation and education facile. However, if knowing is presented not as the activity of an isolated epistemological subject but as the effect of inter-acting subjectivities, a tractable notion of *Bildung*

as practical engagement and transformation can be formulated. This move is dependent upon recognizing the antecedence of the ‘hermeneutical.’ The formative narratives indicative of an unfolding *Bildung* are dependent upon the ontological priority of hermeneutical defenestration; that is, upon a subject-agency or subject-center undergoing the experience of its leading assumptions being challenged by exposure to altogether different and unexpected ways of thinking. This predicament we call ‘the hermeneutical.’ Our central proposal is that the primacy of hermeneutics as a philosophy of interpretation should be displaced by the “hermeneutical” considered as a consequence of ontological inter-action. If hermeneutical reflection is to be retrieved from the strictures of post-modern critique the proposal has some merit.

Access to our primary argument is anticipated by a remark Gadamer makes on a distinction of Julius Stenzel.

If emphasis has been -rightly- placed on the fact that meaning is related to the “I”, this means, as far as hermeneutical experience is concerned, that all meaning that is handed down to us finds its concretion in its relation to the “*understanding I*” and not in reconstructing the originally intending “I”.<sup>3</sup>

Stenzel’s differentiation suggests displacing the epistemological (intending) subject with the “understanding I.” The latter we shall articulate as a subject-agency both engaged by and in participatory processes of transaction. As we shall see to our advantage, there is a provocative connection between the “understanding I” and Heidegger’s notion of *Dasein*. However, let us further contextualize the lead argument.

## Subjectivity Dismissed

If we are defending the view that ‘hermeneutical’ engagement makes no sense without an appeal to engaged subjectivities, why does Gadamer adopt such a negative attitude towards “subjectivity”? He speaks specifically of “the impotence of subjective particularity”.<sup>4</sup> In such passages, Gadamer openly attacks the psychologistic and subjectivist supposition that meaning resides in what a subject ‘intends’ or in what volitional consciousness imposes on its world. He is clear that subjectivist accounts of meaning are *not* as they proclaim: spontaneous acts on the part of a knowing subject which bring *ex nihilo* meaning and color into a meaningless world. Such “subjects” are not the masters of the meanings they claim to command.

The anchor point of Gadamer’s critique of “romantic” accounts of meaning lies his reading of Hegel. “All self-knowledge arises from what is historically pre-given, what with Hegel we call

<sup>3</sup> Julius Stenzel, *Über Sinn, Bedeutung, Begriff, Definition*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1958.

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London, Sheed and Ward, 1989, p. 489.

substance because it underlies all subjective intentions and actions... What we need to discover in all that is subjective, is the substantiality that determines it.”<sup>5</sup> This gives a particular nuance to Gadamer’s phrase “subjective reflection.” The emphasis is not in fact on the act of a subject thinking but on what comes to be reflected in and through that thinking. According to this view, meaning resides in the substantive structures of tradition and language? that shape the subject’s outlook. Epistemological subjectivity is secondary, dependent upon the wider substantive structures that shape it. Gadamer describes “self-knowledge” accordingly as getting to know not one’s subjectivity *per se* but all that underlies it.<sup>6</sup>

## Subjectivity Reconsidered

In the preceding remarks Gadamer’s hostility to subjectivist accounts of meaning is clear. Yet, as other passages in *Truth and Method* make evident, subjective experience is also presented in way that is anything but impotent. Other passages present subjectivity as the site of an inner-historicity of experience. Gadamer’s account of Aeschylus’s *pathei mathos* (learning through suffering) implies the emergence of a subjectivity that becomes aware of itself in confrontation with its limitations, inadequacies and mistakes.<sup>7</sup> On this account ‘profound’ experience is far from inconsequential but involves the experience of one’s own finitude. Gadamer’s account of *pathei mathos* is a hermeneutical window. Such windows reveal ‘hermeneutical’ experience as a contested space where conflicting interpretations in which we are complicit collide. Plainly, such experience can only be undergone by an engaged and embodied subjectivity. On this stands one of philosophical hermeneutics’ key claims: subjective awareness only arises because of deep prior practical involvements (*Dasein*). Such reflective awareness is, indeed, a consequence, if not an expression, of its preceding practical embeddedness.

The conundrum is plain. On the one hand we have an argument that with regard to the question of meaning, Gadamer derides the impotency of subjectivity and yet, on the other, there is the appeal to intense subjectivization (the *pathei mathos* argument), an experience Gadamer takes so seriously as to liken it to religious experience.<sup>8</sup> Can these cross-currents of argument be reconciled? First, some initial qualifications. Gadamer is certainly right to insist that subjective consciousness can never be its own master. It is the product of an *epistémé* which marks and shapes its orientations. That substantiality can, of course, be analyzed, permitting a given subjectivity to become more hermeneutically aware of its nature. To a degree, Gadamer’s hermeneutics follows a “hermeneutics of suspicion” which for very different reasons also deconstructs the Cartesian

<sup>5</sup> *ibid* p. 302

<sup>6</sup> *ibid* p. 302.

<sup>7</sup> Hans-Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London, Sheed and Ward, 1989, p. 356.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p. 357.

epistemological ‘I’. The consequence of this is somewhat nihilistic. Theoretical analysis is, as Nietzsche appreciated, disempowering, interminable and alienating. It questions the veracity of a subject’s motives, it leads to endless and irresolvable analytic disputes which, in turn, have the effect of alienating subjective consciousness from its practical world. Such confusion has blatantly contributed to the current critical demise of both hermeneutics and the humanities. Indeed, the argument of this paper is a contribution towards freeing the hermeneutical from this demise.

## The Framing of Argument

Before we address the current confusions afflicting hermeneutics, let us step back momentarily from the main argument to consider its principal points so far. (1) We have established the juxtaposition between Gadamer’s critique of the impotence of subjective consciousness on the one hand and his crucial positioning of intense personal experience at the heart of hermeneutic engagement on the other. (2) The *pathei mathos* argument neatly maps on to Kramer’s distinction between hermeneutical windows framing colliding interpretations and his invocation of a struggle towards a sense-making ‘subject position.’ (3) Whereas Kramer and Gadamer strongly differentiate between the two elements of this distinction, I would argue that the two elements are mutually dependent. There can be no vision of endlessly competing interpretive stances other than in relation to the initial interests of distinct subject-positions. It is only because ‘I’ as a practitioner have strongly held views of a subject-matter that its dissolution into a myriad of competing perspectives can pain me. Practical engagement is already presupposed. This favors a stronger claim: what comes to frame in a consciousness of competing interpretations is not the site of an contested battlefield of opposing perspectives but a coming to consciousness of consciousness itself as such a contested site, a consciousness with different ‘voices’, inclinations and intuitions vying each with the other to work out a coherent “subject-position” This stronger claim establishes the grounds for two further ones.

(1) The interdependent elements of windows and subject-positions structure what can be described as the hermeneutic predicament itself. The hermeneutic predicament involves not just the assertion of our facticity but the experiencing of it. This can be characterized as the constant interplay between an environment of competing perspectives each of which has a bearing on a subject-agency and the way that agency has to establish its subject-position (perspective, voice or outlook).

(2) All practices embody in their being, hermeneutical predicaments. Practices embrace (to adapt MacIntyre’s phrase) ‘continuities of conflict’ over ends, purposes and subject-matters implying that a practitioner is constantly challenged by and reviews her ‘subject-position(s).’

These two claims underpin my principal argument that ‘the hermeneutical’ should displace hermeneutics as a theoretical edifice. Let us now elaborate the equation of practice with the

‘hermeneutical’. Heidegger’s notion of *Dasein* and his articulation of the nature of artwork offer useful guidance.

## Practice, *Dasein* and the Hermeneutical

Our being-in-the-world (*Dasein*) is always a being-situated in a historical, cultural world. This is another way of saying that *Dasein* is practical (i.e. we are defined, attuned and constrained by practices and implicitly know how to ‘get on’ with the tasks they impose). If *Dasein* is a practical space or a place-holder term for where the multiple processes which constitute our social and cultural being intersect, *Dasein* denotes a porous space in and thorough which different practices are interwoven. The processes of practice, the practitioner and the practiced-upon, co-inhere and are codependent. The space of practice is stressed in the engineering sense, a location which articulates an intensity of multiple languages, aspirations and modes of behavior. Practices involve liminal spaces which forever point beyond themselves to other articulations of their norms, rationales or conventions. In Kramer’s metaphor, practical spaces are windows which reveal multiple, shifting commitments and expectations. They bring our hermeneutical being into a conscious framework.

The movements of practical spaces have deep implications for how the practitioner understands herself as a practitioner. The co-inherence of practice and practitioner means that the practitioner’s notions of what it means to be a virtuous practitioner are live questions. The space of practice is always a space of questioning and of being-in-question. Changes in the surrounding social and economic circumstances of practice impact upon how a practitioner comes to understand herself as a practitioner. The space of practice is, then, always a space of questions and of being-in-question. In this context, Kramer’s second notion of finding a subject-position is crucial.

By subject-position, I mean a position of confident coherent action within constantly shifting ontological circumstances. When Gadamer speaks of the necessity of finding free spaces in higher education, the implication involves more than escaping bureaucratic restraints.<sup>9</sup> In any practice there is always an initial level of determination and subservience to its traditional norms and expectancies. The more practiced a practitioner, however, the more initiated she becomes in navigating the continuities of conflict that constitute her practice. Such conflicts, liminal spaces and incommensurabilities form the ‘free spaces’ (Gadamer) opened up (made possible) by a practice. These spaces open the ‘hermeneutical windows’ by means of which possibilities for

<sup>9</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History, Applied Hermeneutics*, ed. Misdled and Nicholson, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1992. p.59

intervening in a practice arise, interventions upon which the renewal and furtherance of that practice depend. Such interventions are ontologically crucial.

The ontological processes which form each practice are furthered by cycles of non-identical repetition which allow a practice to become, in Gadamer's phrase, cumulatively "more" by means of repetitions of the same but in endlessly different ways. The cumulative differences arising from such repetitions are crucial: they are onto-generative, giving to shape to emergent identities, continuities and narrative forms which chart the duration of a practical life. The process is one of *Bildung*, one of formation through practical engagement. In this context, *Bildung* does not concern the molding of an individual according to prevalent cultural norms but involves immersion in processes of continual transformation. It is a process in which individual (practitioner) and collective (traditions of practice) are mutually dependent and mutable. Kramer's hermeneutical windows do not look out on a fixed landscape. They are reflective spaces. They afford remembered passages of experience which taken collectively give rise to a sense of a journey unfolding. Each view is non-identical but collectively they come to form an emerging sense of the terrain from which a practice has emerged and towards which it is seemingly moving. What is essentially involved is an inter-relatedness of movement and the emergence of narrative structures it gives rise to. The aesthetic space - which for Heidegger is our experience of the artwork - discloses to the spectator the world he or she lives in. It reveals or, rather, it subjects the spectator to a way of seeing, making visible things that are hidden in the visual.

Movement between hermeneutical horizons implies instability: the place of hermeneutic practice is accordingly place of risk. As Iser has shown, the ontological location of a practitioner in a practical domain places them in a liminal space which puts the practitioner's "self-understanding" in question.<sup>10</sup> This suggests a clear interactive relation between the ontology of a practice - its contested nature - and the self-understanding of a practitioner which, because grounded in that practice, is equally riven and contested. Contemporary medical practice is cross-hatched by religious and political discourse focusing on the body and is, furthermore, subject to the continuous influence of Greek ethics and competing historical notions of health, healing and sickness. To practice as a present-day medic is to be continually "cross-pressured" (Taylor) by variant cultural processes.<sup>11</sup> It is also to be cross-pressured by many other contemporary political and economic demands.

Gadamer's linkage of understanding with its enabling linguistic and historical horizons of concern (subject-matters) is a decisive move in the overthrow of the remnants of Kant's subject-based epistemological heritage. Yet, if Gadamer's argument has a short-coming, it is that it

<sup>10</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Range of Interpretation*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000, p.145 -157.

<sup>11</sup> See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2007.

underestimates the complexity of horizons threaded through our existence (*Dasein*). Hermeneutical existence has a denser multi-dimensionality than Gadamer seemingly allows. We are perhaps misled by such singular generalizations as the *Sprachswelt*. Our horizons are multiple: existence as social beings is threaded through with numerous ‘practical’ concerns: our sense of being a member of a community, of being a father and of being a friend. The demands and responsibilities attached to such concerns are not necessarily consistent. Tensions exist both within and between their horizons. Nor do these practices exist in isolation. They are linked by a common grounding in the *Sprachswelt*, the ontological base of all practices. Practices are also all subject to the common and communizing stresses and strains of facticity. Crucially, these practices involve projections (in the Heideggerian sense of the term), each anticipating future and by no means consistent outcomes. Yet, clearly, different practical horizons both inform and inflect each other.

Being a ceramic artist raises the question of what it means to be a good potter. The practice projects a credible answer. Because of the inter-connectedness of our cultural environments, an exemplar of good ceramic practice (confidence with materials, resolute execution, attaining a clarity of form etc.) can open an insight into a musician’s concern with the nature good performance practice. As historical, social and linguistic creatures we are constantly cross-pressured by unresolved questions as to what is meaningful in practices, by questions of how the ‘virtues’ of good practice might resolve tensions and traumas across the complex range of our commitments.

Practice-discourses are frequently inter-linked by place-holder terms such that an answer to what constitutes a brave performance in music can have a bearing upon what is understood as courageous performance in poetry or novel writing. Answers to these questions often lie unresolved in memory but on occasion exposure to a courageous performance in music can bring to mind an answer to a forgotten question about what it means to face up to the demands of one’s materials as a painter. Consideration of these practical virtues also have a bearing upon what it means to be a brave, courageous, and open-minded person. There are no definitive answers to these questions. Shared placeholder terms allow questions and responses in one practice to inflect their counter-parts in another discourse. This returns us to the metaphor of Kramer’s windows.

The image of looking out on to a plethora of competing interpretations, some incommensurable, others inadequate or unresolved, reveals the alleged weakness in hermeneutics that deconstruction easily exposes. Nihilism is often presented as the inevitable result of an irresolvable ‘conflict of interpretations.’ However, epistemological inconclusiveness and undecidability do not constitute objections to the ‘hermeneutical’ but embody its presence. Such objections only apply *if* it is assumed that hermeneutics makes verifiable epistemological claims. The burden of our argument is, however, to the contrary: the ‘hermeneutical’ is not primarily a theory of knowing but concerns an ontological predicament epitomized in the tensions of practice. Apart from failing to realize that inconclusiveness and undecidability constitute the hermeneutic

predicament, the problem with deconstruction is that it approaches hermeneutical objects as epistemological objects whose ‘truth’ is to be verified by a knowing subject distanced from the objects that resist its immediate assimilative categories. There is a mistake in this thinking which Heideggerian philosophy should have resolved long ago: hermeneutics is neither theory, nor epistemology, but ontology. What is needed is an ontological account of hermeneutical experience, not an epistemological account. Let us go back to our earlier invocation *Dasein*.

*Dasein* is not an attribute of a subject’s existence, as if the two were separable. *Dasein* is a subject’s being - it is that living nexus of concerns and interests that configure the “subjectivity” (the practical orientation) of that being. Returning to Kramer’s window, we should no longer think of an epistemological subject looking out upon a plethora of competing perspectives but, rather, think of that constellation as the subject-configuration itself. The ever-shifting field of competing interpretations *is Dasein*, that is, is a subject-agency’s mode of being. Such a notion of the hermeneutic subject whose interaction and struggle is the basis of our thought in general is no stranger to Nietzsche.

The assumption of one single-subject is perhaps unnecessary; perhaps it is just as permissible to assume a multiplicity (the subject position is a multiplicity) whose interaction and struggle is the basis of our thought in general... My hypothesis: the subject as multiplicity: the continual transitoriness and fleetingness of the subject.<sup>12</sup>

This ontological conception of hermeneutical being or *Dasein* is pluralistic. We are in our engaged ‘doing’ in? the site of plural practices, historical, linguistic and cultural. What, however, does it mean to refer to such a plurality of practices as a site? This returns us to the notion of a subject-position. How does a multiplicity become “a subject” and how does it gain its cohesiveness and coherence? Gadamer has already offered an answer to this in his comment on Stenzel.

As far as ‘hermeneutical experience’ is concerned, Gadamer contends that the meaning of what is handed down to us finds its concretion in the ‘understanding I’ and not in reconstructing the originally ‘intending I’. The distinction is suggestive. We are not talking about an “I” (a subject) that has ‘understanding’ as one of its modes but, rather, of a mode of understanding (*Dasein*) that configures itself, has become effective as an “I” or subject-position as one of its modes. The processes of experience *subjectivize*, that is, practicing articulates the practitioner.

When an understanding makes itself manifest it is never, ontologically speaking, *ex nihilo* but always situated in an established play of horizons and concerns. Emergent understanding reconfigures what is already in play in a practice. To repeat, the “understanding I” is not an “I” that has the attribute of understanding. Rather, it is that mode of understanding (interaction) which as a multiplicity itself operationalizes the fiction of being an I. The ‘understanding I’ is an

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, London, 1968, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968, Sec. 490

operational concept (Eugen Fink) developed from within complex process of inter-related modes of understanding which allow it to think of and coordinate itself as “one”.<sup>13</sup> The defense of such a claim is transcendental: coordinated singularity can only be (formally) thought if an appeal to such a formal figure of reflection is made. Without the operational notion of an “understanding I” it becomes difficult if not impossible to think of how a multiplicity could coordinate itself as a singularity, establish a cohesive narrative and actively manage its collective interests. This, of course, only renders such a multiplicity *thinkable* as an effective singularity. It does not imply that it is ontologically singular in any essentialist sense of the term. What these various points suggest is that the sphere of understanding - the totality of interactions within a *Dasein* - is synonymous with the sphere of that subject’s (i.e. manifold’s) range of being.

However, this is emphatically not to say that the sphere of understanding is reducible to what is within a subject-manifold’s immediate grasp. Gadamer will insist on the axiom: *Bewusstsein* (consciousness) is always *more* Being than knowing. A subject-agency (*Dasein*) is defined by its concerns: it lives in a field of interests, it has worries, is made uneasy and feels both anxious and vulnerable. In this context, it is perfectly plausible to say that ‘my practice concerns itself with’ or ‘has the following concerns’. This is, in fact, another way of saying that a practice has its vulnerabilities and that its interests can be challenged. The being of a subject-agency is defined by its fluid condition of being forever cross-pressured by the flow and counter-flow of interrelating concerns and dependencies. The subject-position is thus always in question, for the being of understanding is always in unstable movement. In other words, the subject-position (the “understanding I”) maintains itself as a continuity of operation. This operation is the subject’s being, an endless wrestling of its manifold into a body of coherent interactions able to react to and respond to others that pressure and attack it as one.<sup>14</sup> Ontologically speaking, the forever contested site of understanding is, then, the locus of the subject-position. Gadamer’s aesthetics is helpful here. The artwork is not an independent essence or entity to which its historical effects are predicated, rather the artwork’s effectivity is its being. So it is also, we contend, with the subject-position.

Gadamer’s “understanding I” is not an “I” that understands but rather an understanding that has an effectivity as a subject-posture able to interact and engage with other such alignments. That understanding (my existence) does not exist apart from its effects: its being is the past and future history of those effects and the potentialities they hold. Many of them are unpredictable such that practical engagement can be described as a consequentialism of unintended effects. This underpins our argument that in higher education *negotiating the hermeneutical (the experience of*

<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to Prof. John Caputo for pointing out the link with Eugen Fink.

<sup>14</sup> See article the very useful article by Pietro Terzi, “The Relevance of Fink’s Notion of Operative Concepts for Derrida’s Deconstruction”, *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, Vol 50, 2019, Issue No. 1.

*one's understanding being decisively shifted) should be prioritized over the teaching of hermeneutics as a mode of philosophical theory.* Engagement in the hermeneutical is to be practically located, which is to say, situated, in the cross-pressuring demands of language, history and cultural orientation. The challenge for higher education is how to empower engagement in such existentially 'testing' situations. Here much depends upon on the connotations of the phrase 'testing situation' and whether it is read negatively or positively. This is not an either-or juxtaposition but more a question of dialectical entailment, of a positivity of thought being contained within a dominant negativity. Kramer's hermeneutical windows test a subject-position in that they indicate the shattering of cherished interpretational expectancies. Yet, this very challenge puts the subject-position to the test creatively. Established interpretations do not simply fail. They are displaced or set aside as outmoded because shifts in historical and cultural circumstances reveal *other* logical or practical alternatives. Extensions of hermeneutical understanding are dependent upon the *via negativa* of circumstantial challenge and critique. In Howard Caygill's phrase, practice is a device for provoking accidents, a trip or a trap (...) it negates what is already given..."<sup>15</sup> This emphasizes the ontological priority of practical engagement for it is in an through the hermeneutical movements of practice that the "understanding I" can 'become more'.

## **Reversing the Emphasis**

In arguing for the primacy of hermeneutical experience, we are not advocating a return to an anti-intellectualist position which would displace theory with practice. Far from it, our argument offers a careful moderation on Gadamer's notion of "philosophical hermeneutics," specifically its internal implications. The phrase does not imply that in being philosophical, hermeneutics is or should be considered a theory or a philosophy of interpretation. If it is treated as a philosophy or as a methodological means to determining the truth of a text, it will fail and collapse into nihilism. The finitude of understanding, the perspectival nature of cognition, and the generation of unclosable differential and liminal spaces by the application of interpretative method, all imply that hermeneutics will fail. Adequacy between hermeneutic object and hermeneutic method is impossible to achieve. However, nihilism is not the inevitable result of this seeming *impasse*. A switch to an ontological account of practice moves us away from thinking about hermeneutics as a theory of interpretation towards considering the 'hermeneutical' as the expression of a practical situation. This turn does not entail the negation of philosophical theory within hermeneutical practices. Two points support this. (1) Hermeneutical meaning is always embodied. Embodied

<sup>15</sup>Howard Caygill, *Kafka, In the Light of the Accident*, London, Bloomsbury, 2016. p. 192

meaning is marked by its temporal and spatial signature in historical culture. The anti-intellectualist claim that theory can be separated from practice is absurd. If all practices are culturally shaped, they cannot be separated from their ideational elements. (2) Gadamer makes it clear that the philosophical component of hermeneutical experience involves reflecting on what is at play *within* practice and hermeneutic experience. The phrase ‘philosophical hermeneutics’ certainly implies reflection on the formal conditions governing the possibilities of understanding, but it also entails a reflection on what is at play within hermeneutic experience such that philosophical hermeneutics entails a reflecting philosophically upon the conflicts and challenges within ‘hermeneutic’ experience. Gadamer always insists that gaining a reflective distance from the immediate claims of experience is not to prioritize the status of theory but to use theoretical reflection to navigate experience in a more insightful manner. Theory becomes a means to deeper involvement in practical engagement. There is a clear and substantial corollary to this.

If philosophical hermeneutics prioritizes not the teaching of hermeneutic theory *per se* but the advancement of hermeneutical reflection on the antecedent conflicts that inevitably emerge from within practical engagement, hermeneutical reflection is relevant to any practice where the meaning of its goals and aims are contested. Hermeneutic philosophy should no longer be cloistered within specialist philosophy programs. In itself, it is not, cannot be taught as, and is not defensible as pure theory. Gadamer in fact argues that “theoretical knowledge is originally not opposed to practical activity but its highest intensification and perfection.”<sup>16</sup> Hermeneutics is not metaphysics. To the contrary, hermeneutical reflection becomes more a means of acute listening to what is at play within a practice and to the murmurings of what as yet unrealized possibilities it might hold. Contested meanings, ends and goals are always historically located and therefore subject to many levels and types of interpretation. Of course, given the facticity of existence, no end-interpretation is attainable. Yet, by forcing the emergence of a subject-position, what such negativity renders attainable is a deeper, better engagement with and grasp of what it at play within contested practices. Hermeneutical reflection does not have theoretical knowledge as its aim but a greater clarity regarding the aims and likely consequences of one’s practical involvements. No practice is problem-free or can avoid controversy. Hermeneutical reflection is not a philosophical add-on to a practice but an essential element of its articulation. Like many of the religious doctrines it once served, hermeneutics has become fully secularized. In so doing, it has become relevant to how *any* form of practical engagement can reflect on the constant challenge of change and disruption. The educational relevance of hermeneutic reflection is perfectly clear. It is engagement in the challenges of practice that establish points of entry into the teaching of hermeneutic theory. Theory as such should not be taught as the basis of practical engagement but only as a way of

<sup>16</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History, Applied Hermeneutics*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1992, p. 19

elucidating what such engagement entails. Returning briefly to an insight of Heidegger is instructive.

By prioritizing ontological engagement (practice) over (theory), we, in effect, follow Heidegger's prior ordering of *Dasein* (practice) over interpretation (elucidatory attempts to draw out what is entailed in *Dasein*).<sup>17</sup> Heidegger specifically equates *Dasein* with the ontological priority of understanding (*Verstehen*) which Gadamer, in turn, supplants with his derivative notion of *Sprachlichkeit*. Interpretation for Heidegger is secondary: it that entails that reflective effort to draw out our grasp of a practice especially when in Wittgenstein's terms, we no longer "know how to go on." An analogy with Kramer's window is pertinent. What in the Heideggerian model stimulates 'interpretation' is a breakdown within understanding grasped as *Dasein*. This we have presented as a network set of practical orientations, a *Spannungswelt*, the movements of which both ground and express themselves in one's being-in-the-world, a process of being revealed in and through the movement of one's practices. We may also equate the facticity of existence with understanding: the facticity of one's being in continuous question about the direction and limits of one's practical being. Here we come to a major juncture in our argument, a poignant consequence of the philosophical figuring of interpretation as the elaboration of what is within understanding. Understanding in Heidegger's sense is synonymous with *Dasein* and *Dasein* concerns our involvement in a range of practices the movement of which constitutes our being-in-the world. This suggest that, in the first instance, the role of the hermeneutical pedagogy should lead the practitioner into deep immersion in the operational practices that constitute her being. Such immersion is dialectical. On the negative side, no interpretation of a practice will be final or exhaustive but, on the positive side, it enhances one's stock of possible reference points when it comes to achieving future new alignments of meaning. Here pedagogy should linger and dwell with those moments of hermeneutic opening when a practice starts to break down or when, to use John Millbank's phrase "the word becomes strange." [citation needed] Such moments of crisis and challenge are of supreme 'hermeneutic' value in that they begin to reveal what is operative beneath the assumptions and expectations of a practice. It is here that 'hermeneutic listening' is of paramount importance. The teacher should not lead the student into hermeneutic theory *per se*, as if moments of crisis were problems requiring conceptual solution. To the contrary, teacher and student should travel further into such moments of defenestration trying to sense where the broken shards of a practice intimate a pathway of thought which might lead beyond a given impasse. Of course, the rich endowment of hermeneutical philosophy can and should be used in evolving of such pathways but (and this is the key point), it is the demands of practice that call hermeneutical theory into play and not the reverse. This emphasizes Heidegger's claim that interpretation (the

<sup>17</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1962, p. 82ff.

utilization of theory) is only a means to draw out what is already actually or potentially at play within understanding (*Dasein*). This re-states and our primary argument.

‘Hermeneutic experience’ grasped as the breaking of projected expectancies and the challenges of facticity is necessarily and unavoidably indicative of our practical being. However, the disappearance of truth and skepticism with regard to meaningful existence are only negatives in an epistemological perspective. Within practice ontologically conceived, negativity conveys a positivity: the possibility of coming to think differently about a practice and its subject-matters. This is why the practice of learning to dwell within moments of hermeneutical crisis is important. The skill is ontogenetic: it gives rise to something beyond itself. In learning to respond to negative challenges, the practitioner develops a repertoire of responses which builds the narrative of both the practitioner and her practice. The growth of such responses builds practical confidence: we “learn how to go on” and to diminishes anxiety about the facticity of existence. Nothing could be more instructive in times of crisis. For the reflective practitioner, negativity invites enhanced involvement in their practice, an invitation to become more. This implies that ‘hermeneutical’ engagement (practical involvement) should gain precedence over, displace the priority of, but not negate hermeneutic theory. It is a question of emphasis and of proper ontological ordering.

## **Conclusion; Practice and Navigating the Negative**

If hermeneutics is treated as a body of philosophical theory which establishes models of how texts, art-works and historical artefacts are to be interpreted, it will fail. Considered as an epistemology of interpretation, hermeneutical theory dies by its own hand. The more interpretation pursues the “truth” of its object, the more it will fail. As Wolfgang Iser has so effectively shown, interpretation, rather than seizing its object convincingly, only succeeds in differing it, opening further liminal (but luminous) differential spaces.<sup>18</sup> However, this is a negative result only if we persist in treating hermeneutics as an epistemological procedure rather than as offering an ontological account of practice. Practice considered as ontological engagement does not entail closure but the opening of liminal spaces capable of extending options for the agency of a subject-position. This switch to an ontological account of interpretive practice moves us away from considering “hermeneutics” as a theory towards considering it as a way of reflecting on the entailments of participatory engagement in practice. In essence, the switch would entail displacing ‘hermeneutics’ with the “hermeneutical.’ By the ‘hermeneutical,’ we mean precisely those intense moments reflexive awareness whereby we are brought to see our practice and our role within it profoundly differently. Such experience is deeply affecting if not disorientating. And yet, these

<sup>18</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Range of Interpretation*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000, p.146-152

moments of negativity have dialectical twist to them: they always reveal other interpretive possibilities to how we now think of ourselves as competent agencies. This is why practice and its associated subjectivities are more fundamental to education than theory.

No practice whether literary or mathematical can ever be reduced to theory alone. It is therefore quite impossible to anticipate all the possibilities latent with a practice capable of extending our understanding of both it and the consequences of our involvement in it. Practice always involves a consequentialism of unintended effects. Only our involvement in a practice will draw out its unseen possibilities. As Caygill has suggested, practices are devices for creating revealing and insightful accidents. Such accidents may be indicative of moments of crisis, but they also mark the point where negativity and suffering become constructive. Each subject-position is a position un-resolved, always shifting and moving: the hermeneutic turmoil of a subject-position (practitioner) is its being. This establishes our principal point. Ontologically speaking, the ‘hermeneutical’ (practical engagement) has priority over hermeneutics (theory). The precondition of learning is hermeneutic defenestration and defenestration the condition of a new subject-position emerging. The formation of a new alignment of meaning is the achievement of a new subject-position. That achievement is made possible only by an ontically prior immersion in practice and, as such, is a new event in the *Sprachswelt* (i.e. the world of understanding in Heidegger’s sense). The emergence of a new-subject position marks both the occasion of an ‘understanding “I”’ achieving a further moderation of its being *and* an addition to the stock of meaning-alignments (other possible subject-positions) within the *Sprachswelt*. That addition enriches the hermeneutical-existential options for other subject-agencies and with that enrichment the being of the *Sprachswelt* (the totality of practices) is increased.