toward others are driven by the fear of relativism. In contrast, by insisting on the interpretive nature of all human knowledge without falling into relativism, hermeneutics encourages the interpretive humility essential to any dialogue. Acknowledging the profound mediation of even our deepest beliefs through history, tradition, and language should induce us to admit that we could be wrong and are thus open to correction. The awareness that our own interpretive framework can benefit from another's encourages conversation in order to learn. By contrast, the belief that truth is something self-evident only an obstinate fool would reject fosters a basic stance of confrontation. Insofar as hermeneutic philosophy encourages conversation among those of different faiths and cultures, hermeneutics will remain an essential part of our future.

Appendix

This *Very Short Introduction* was written to demonstrate the essentially interpretive nature of human knowledge. To achieve this end, the volume focuses on showing the practical workings of hermeneutics in the main disciplines of knowledge. This focus on the practical did not allow us to deal with philosophical criticisms of hermeneutics, or to mention important hermeneutic developments. For the reader interested in these more abstract aspects of hermeneutics, this appendix sketches some of the most important debates concerning hermeneutic philosophy.

Safeguarding objectivity (Emilio Betti versus Gadamer)

The eminent Italian legal theorist Emilio Betti (1890–1968) was one of the first major critics of philosophical hermeneutics. Betti feared that Heidegger's elimination of the traditional subject–object division for interpretation opened the door to subjectivism. For Betti, texts are accurate representations of the author's mind (*mens auctoris*), whose originally intended meaning the reader should reconstruct through the use of reliable interpretive methods. Betti warned that Heidegger and Gadamer undermined such objective communication with their existential definition of the hermeneutic circle. For traditional philology, the hermeneutic circle pertained only to the inner workings of the text as an object to be analysed by a dispassionate, analytical reader. Chapters 2 and 3 of this volume describe how Heidegger and Gadamer extended this traditional hermeneutic circle of part and whole to include the reader's own subjectivity and cultural beliefs.

Betti argued that making the reader's own historical situation essential to interpretation would open the door to interpretive relativism, threatening especially the normative authority of legal and theological texts.

Betti saw this loss of objective meaning most clearly in Gadamer's claim that interpretation and personal application are inseparable. Betti insisted on a two-step approach to interpretation. First, the interpreter had to do the objective historical work of determining precisely what an author had intended to say and to judge how successfully the author had expressed his intention in a text. In a second step, the interpreter then applied the recovered meaning to her own context. Betti charged Gadamer with collapsing this distinction between the original meaning of an author's text and the significance of this meaning for the interpreter's present context. Gadamer replied that human consciousness does not divide interpretive activity into two steps of reconstruction and interpretation. Rather, application is always intrinsic to the interpretive process because even the historian must read a text from within his own cultural horizon and interests. Betti's criticism provided the basic platform for E. D. Hirsch's similar objections to Gadamer, which is described in Chapter 4.

Ideology criticism (Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel versus Gadamer)

If we derive knowledge about ourselves and the world from our participation in our respective cultural traditions, what keeps us from merely repeating tradition uncritically? What mechanism allows us to achieve critical distance from these traditions and to detect ideological distortions of language and meaning? This was the question put to hermeneutics by the philosophers Jürgen Habermas (1929–) and Karl-Otto Apel (1922–). They agreed with Gadamer's critique of scientific objectivism, but they worried that he was too optimistic about tradition and the power of language to convey truthful insights about our human condition. After all, language and tradition can equally serve as instruments of manipulation and oppression. Thus Habermas and Apel contested the universal claim of hermeneutics that every aspect of knowledge is dependent on tradition. They argued that Gadamer emphasized too much the historical nature of human

consciousness and paid insufficient attention to the need for critical reflection whereby we evaluate tradition in order to emancipate ourselves from dehumanizing social practices. They suggested that hermeneutics, as a description of how understanding comes about through our being in the world (i.e. an ontological description of understanding), requires a complementary critical evaluative dimension. Habermas and Apel thought that the social sciences could offer such a critical dimension. They modelled this critical function on psychoanalysis. A psychoanalyst takes an observing stance during communication with her patient in order to detect destructive beliefs stemming from deeply repressed traumatic experiences in the patient's past. In the same way, the social sciences provide a 'depth hermeneutic' for filtering out ideologically distorted communications (such as propaganda) and destructive cultural attitudes contained in traditions.

Gadamer replied that his hermeneutic philosophy was concerned solely with describing what happens when we understand. He dealt with the conditions for understanding and not with their moral evaluation. He merely wanted to show that all understanding depends on tradition and acknowledged authorities. If his description is correct, then Apel and Habermas were wrong to suggest psychoanalysis as a guardian of truth that is exempt from interpretation. For according to Gadamer, *every* evaluating judgement depends itself on some tradition and authority. Even in the suggested psychoanalytic scenario, the patient submits to the expertise of his doctor. Yet Apel's and Habermas's concern is certainly legitimate. How can we prevent blindness and even enslavement to bad traditions? Gadamer responded that the hermeneutic process itself contains a critical element. In his description of the hermeneutic circle, he insisted on the reader's task of shaping understanding according to the subject-matter presented by the text and thus of abandoning incorrect (*unsachgemäße*) pre-judgments in the course of interpretation. Interpretation thus becomes a constant process of revision and replacement in the quest for an ever more adequate understanding of a text. Moreover, tradition constantly changes because the reader always has to appropriate the past creatively. For Gadamer, critical reflection was thus an intrinsic part of the mediation between past and present that characterizes our historical existence.

Critical hermeneutics (Paul Ricoeur)

Along with Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) was the most important hermeneutic philosopher of the 20th century. Ricoeur was already developing a hermeneutic view of knowledge in the contexts of Husserl's phenomenology, Heidegger's existential philosophy, Freudian psychology, and French language philosophy (called Structuralism) before he encountered Gadamer's book *Truth and Method*. Ricoeur's basic goal was to work out the proper relationship between the self and the objective semiotic structures (signs, symbols, texts) by which we communicate meaning and gain self-understanding. With Gadamer, Ricoeur upheld that all thought occurs in language, so that even our innermost reflections take place within linguistic structures we can analyse and interpret. Ricoeur thus mediated between Romantic and Structuralist views of interpretation. Against Romantic hermeneutics that advocated the reader's empathic identification with authorial consciousness, Ricoeur contended that the object of interpretation is not experience *as felt* by the author, but the *meaning* of such experiences as inscribed and traceable in linguistic and symbolic expressions. At the same time, he also rejected Structuralist theories that reduced the self to a passive channel of pre-existing language systems. For him, language does not speak—rather, people do. Similarly, Ricoeur wanted to combine critical views of language and the self as inherently unstable (advocated by the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' represented by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud), with a basic trust in the reliability of meaning and its communication as found in ancient interpretation, but also in Husserl and Gadamer. Ricoeur argued that the masters of suspicion help us destroy naïve conceptions of unmediated contact with reality, thus asserting the need for interpretation. Yet this necessary critical detour is not the final state of affairs—lest one remain mired in scepticism—but forms merely part of the greater effort to grasp meaning more profoundly within a 'second naïveté'.

Ricoeur's criticism of hermeneutic philosophy was that Heidegger and Gadamer circumvent the necessary explanatory moment demanded by the linguistic structures we inhabit. They stressed intuitive understanding of a text at the cost of a verifying explanation of how we obtained our reading. Ricoeur agreed with Habermas and Apel that in their eagerness to criticize scientific objectivism, Gadamer focused too much on a pre-scientific, intuitive understanding conveyed through

our immersion in tradition. This focus downplayed the important explanatory moment that allows us to validate our interpretations. Contrary to Apel and Habermas, however, Ricoeur did not advocate a regulatory science external to the hermeneutic process. Instead, he sought to combine understanding and explanation into one dialectical interpretive movement of *distanciation* and *engagement*. Distanciation requires linguistic analysis and a moment of critical reflection concerning the content of a text. In contrast to personal dialogue, the reader has to reconstruct an author's intended meaning using the linguistic-grammatical structures through which the author inscribed her views in a text that is no longer under authorial control. (Ricoeur calls this the text's 'semantic autonomy'.) This demonstrable process of explanation, however, is also one in which the reader *engages* the text's meaning based on his personal interest. What he engages, however, is not the consciousness of the author but the semantic world opened up by the text (see Chapter 4). In this way, argued Ricoeur, the appropriation of the text (what it means to me), occurs via analytical procedures that are neither mathematically certain nor relegate understanding to a merely arbitrary, subjective insight.

Hermeneutics, ethics, and deconstruction (Jacques Derrida)

Another major hermeneutic debate concerns the ethical dimension of interpretation. Most famously, the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), described the hermeneutic impulse to understand another as a form of violence that seeks to overcome the other's particularity and unique difference. During a famous meeting with Gadamer in Paris (1981), Derrida suggested that behind the hermeneutic will to understand another lies an old metaphysical will to power, the desire to master and control difference. Hermeneutics' quest for meaning is thus really a quest for domination. While both Gadamer and Derrida derived their philosophies from Heidegger, Derrida claimed to have overcome the latter's residual 'logocentric' (i.e. reason or meaning-centred) thought patterns. Derrida's deconstructionist philosophy followed Heidegger in carefully tracing the history of philosophical concepts to question settled meanings. Derrida claimed, however, that Heidegger was still seduced by the desire for meaning when he searched for the significance of the question of Being. Derrida renounced such desire. Instead, he

proclaimed himself a follower of the more radical hermeneutics of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), revelling in the play of endlessly deferred meaning. In ethical terms, borrowed from the French ethicist Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95), deconstruction is oriented toward radical hospitality that allows another to disrupt one's expectations and does not seek to interpret another's communication in order to assimilate his views to the framework of my own interpretive horizon.

Gadamer responded that his hermeneutic philosophy resisted the foreclosure of meaning just as much as Derrida's deconstruction, without, however, giving up the willingness to dialogue in an effort to understand one another. And, indeed, Gadamer's concept of interpretive horizon entails that one's own standpoint changes even as one understands another person or text more deeply. Certainly, the fusion of horizons that happens in understanding does integrate another's perspective into one's own, but not as a one-sided assimilation. When we understand another's viewpoint, even if we do not agree with it, our outlook has changed already. This essentially constantly progressing, open-ended hermeneutic process, however, requires ears open to another's voice. This willingness to listen, Gadamer countered, is necessary even for Derrida in everyday life, unless he wanted to live somewhere on an island in total isolation. But Gadamer did not just defend his hermeneutic, he also issued a challenge to Derrida. Gadamer turned the deconstructive tables by charging Derrida himself with crypto-Platonism: does not Derrida's own radical distrust of language and meaning evidence a hidden desire for an ethically pure state in which communication poses no risk? Is not his idea of irreducible otherness and difference beyond language and interpretation itself a Platonic desire for purity? In an interview towards the end of his life, Gadamer believed to have convinced Derrida that hermeneutic understanding is a transformative experience that does not assimilate another's meaning but allows for the constant revision of meaning. In 2003, Derrida himself, in a moving speech in Heidelberg, commemorating Gadamer's death, conceded that deconstruction as the disruption of sense and hermeneutics as the seeking of meaning are two equally needed sides in our human quest for truth. The Derrida–Gadamer debate has been continued into the 21st century by the Derrida acolyte John Caputo and the Ricoeur student Richard Kearney. While Caputo in his advocacy of 'radical hermeneutics' continued to defend unconditional hospitality and agnosticism about meaning, Kearney stood for 'critical hermeneutics'.

Kearney defended the need for hermeneutic discernment lest either guest or meaning to whom we open our door turn out to be monstrous and destructive.

Hermeneutics and pragmatism (Richard Rorty)

The American philosopher Richard Rorty (1931–2007) has been instrumental in making known Gadamer's philosophy in the English-speaking world. Gadamer's work helped Rorty sort out the problems he faced within his own tradition of analytic philosophy. Gadamer's emphasis on a historically shaped consciousness allowed Rorty to criticize the foundational belief in analytic philosophy that the human mind mirrors reality so that truth can be determined by rigorous linguistic analysis. In his seminal book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), Rorty thus interpreted Gadamer's axiom that 'being which can be understood is language', to mean that being is nothing but language. In the absence of any actual correspondence between thought and reality, truth for Rorty becomes simply what we interpret it to be. Formerly, philosophers thought of themselves as some kind of scientist whose concepts mirrored reality more or less adequately. Once we grasp, however, that our descriptions *construct* the meaning we give things, we realize that philosophers are not scientists but rhetoricians and poets who shape how we imagine life. Now, the tasks of philosophy and education are therefore no longer to come up with better descriptions of reality but rather to foster those interpretations of reality we deem the most edifying or useful for our society. As the Canadian hermeneutics scholar Jean Grondin pointed out, Rorty misappropriated hermeneutic philosophy for his own purposes. While it is true that Gadamer, following Heidegger, had opposed idealist notions of timeless innate ideas, Rorty's nihilistic inversion of this idealism is foreign to Gadamer's hermeneutics. For Gadamer, neither our language nor practice determines being. The whole point of his thinking is that being, an objective reality, discloses itself *through* language. Hermeneutics is thus closer to a critical realism than the kind of nominalist relativism Rorty advocated.

Hermeneutics and weak thought (Gianni Vattimo)

Another important hermeneutic development is the concept of 'weak thought' (*pensiero debole*) advanced by the Italian philosopher Gianni

Vattimo (1936–) in the early 1980s. Vattimo's view of hermeneutics is quite similar to that of Rorty, who, in fact, endorsed the term 'weak thought' in his own writings. 'Weak thought' denotes the claim that there are no 'strong' objective essential, timeless meanings. Hence interpretation does not represent pre-existent meaning but *generates* meaning. We don't discover the world through interpretation, but we create our world by describing and thus by interpreting it. For Vattimo, this interpretive quality of being is not relativism but our very chance at remaking our world in better ways. Weak thought thus becomes the very basis for human emancipation. For this reason, Vattimo also called weak thought 'good nihilism', because it breaks down or deconstructs the status quo. In his book, *After Christianity*, Vattimo linked his nihilistic hermeneutics to religion by explaining 'weak thought' in terms of God's self-emptying (*kenosis*) into history in the incarnation. On this view, secularization and the continual breaking down and weakening of supposedly timeless institutions such as religious or social hierarchies are all part of the incarnation's ongoing effect in history.

The influence of philosophical hermeneutics on theological interpretation

Theological debates about philosophical hermeneutics are essentially concerned with the mediation of divine revelation through human language and reason. Can human reason by itself obtain true knowledge of God and the most authentic life this God ordained for humanity? Judaism, Islam, and Christianity insist that finite human reason does indeed require divine revelation for understanding the purpose of life. Yet is revelation opposed to or compatible with reason? To what extent can reason, and that means philosophy, help interpret the divine message? In the 18th and 19th centuries, increasing confidence in reason apart from faith led to the gradual separation of theology and biblical exegesis. On the one hand, theology had become an intellectual exercise or the endless analysis of dogma, and theologians preached morality. Professional exegetes, on the other hand, were not guided by faith commitments but by a supposedly neutral, scientific method. They were essentially philologists and historicists, occupied with the historical and grammatical analysis of biblical texts in order to obtain the objective meaning of each textual unit. After two world wars, however, neither moral theology nor

mere objective historical analysis—which advanced its own ideologically motivated interpretations under the cloak of neutral objectivity—satisfied peoples' need for religious and moral guidance. The Theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) first gave voice to the need for God's revelation to speak once again in fresh ways on its own terms. Barth showed that the supposedly neutral historical-grammatical exegesis operated on an implicit rationalism that had created God in accordance with its own tame bourgeoisie vision of the Christian life. Barth's break with the theological moralism of cultural Protestantism required a renewed emphasis on revelation: God speaks to us through the Bible and the sermon in a way that shatters our comfortable cultural prejudices. Indeed, we need philosophy and critical tools for interpretation, but we cannot ever rely on them or allow them to limit how God may speak to us.

Barth thus emphasized *that* God speaks to the church but did not concern himself overmuch with *how* he does so. By contrast, the Protestant exegete, Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), who shared Barth's concern for divine revelation, focused on just this issue, and turned to philosophy for help. Bultmann drew heavily on Heidegger's work to analyse the existential conditions under which modern people could interpret and listen to God's revelation. Bultmann did not follow Heidegger's thinking uncritically, but he recognized in Heidegger's philosophy a call to authentic freedom that could connect modern readers with the gospel's invitation to authentic selfhood. Bultmann's whole programme of 'demythologization' was essentially an attempt to detect this biblical call to freedom in the mythical language of the New Testament.

Barth's and Bultmann's desire for a hermeneutics that allowed a modern person to listen anew to God's revelation in the Bible was continued in the next generation by the so-called 'New Hermeneutic' of Ernst Fuchs (1903–83) and Gerhard Ebeling (1912–2001). Bultmann had drawn on Heidegger's existential analysis of human life to depict theological hermeneutics as a quest for authentic existence in a modern world. Fuchs and Ebeling, by contrast, turned to the later Heidegger's focus on language as the most important medium for self-understanding. Heidegger had rejected analytic instrumental views of language for the view that language was the medium that disclosed our all important relation to Being and its call to us. This

reference to Being in Heidegger is quite enigmatic, but his basic point is simple enough: what gives objects and human relations meaning is something that is greater than their sum total. Authentic existence requires that we do not make up reality but that we participate in something greater. This something greater shines through in our use and analysis of language.

Fuchs transferred this view to theology: Jesus's language of love in the New Testament is the true language of authentic existence under God. Thus interpreting the Bible is learning the authentic language of faith by trying to speak this language in life itself. Gerhard Ebeling differed from Fuchs in combining Heidegger's foundational view of language more strongly with Reformation theology. He focused on God's creative word of revelation as a 'word event' that speaks throughout history by constantly renewing itself. Theology, for Ebeling, is fundamentally hermeneutical because the very purpose of theology is critically to engage the text and our own presuppositions in order to allow God to speak. Thus, the New Hermeneutic combines philosophical and theological hermeneutics but also remains quite firmly subservient to the traditional Reformation doctrine of the Word: hermeneutics remains essentially a function of theology. Today, the importance of philosophical hermeneutics for theology and biblical studies is increasingly recognized among theologians of all confessions. In recent years, a number of biblical scholars have drawn on philosophical hermeneutics to advocate the renewal of explicitly theological interpretation.

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