

“How to Speak With the Dead: Brandom and Gadamer on the Dialogical Relation Between Past and Present”

In Robert Brandom’s groundbreaking *Tales of the Mighty Dead*¹, he offers a series of “Gadamerian platitudes” or hermeneutical principles that must, he claims, direct any serious interpretive engagement with the philosophical tradition. Chief among these is the “dialogical relation” which must arise between interpreter and text: Brandom argues that the interpreter must engage the text as a *Thou*, and not as a mere *thing*. This means, at least in part, that text and interpreter must be mutual informants: the interpreter finds new contexts in which to apply the truths of the text, but also discovers the dogmatism of her own presuppositions, which are made explicit through the process of interacting dialectically with the text.

In this paper, I aim to show how his “three-phase” interpretive methodology fails to create a dialogical relation between the past of the text and the present of the interpreter. I also hope to show that Gadamer’s hermeneutics provides a much more viable alternative for construing the dialogical relation. I analyze both Brandom’s and Gadamer’s positions with respect to two shared premises: first, that the task of hermeneutics involves navigating a tension between the past of the text and the present of the interpreter; and second, that the dialogical relation is the proper means to negotiating this tension. I show that Brandom’s methodology both fails to accord the text the ontological status of a *Thou*, thereby precluding the possibility of a mutually recognitive relation between interpreter and text; and also fails to mimic the phenomenology of

dialogue, thereby precluding the possibility of a dialogical relation. I then show how Gadamer fares better on both counts.

I situate my argument in a contemporary ontological construal of mind and body. By endorsing *externalism* about content, one believes that the contents of one's propositional states depend on one's relation to the external environment. For instance, when I say, "I believe that my French press makes the best coffee" and my clone likewise says, "I believe that my French press makes the best coffee," the contents of our beliefs (my French press and my clone's French press) are different, even though my mind and my clone's mind are identical. Thus my clone and I, says the externalist, have different beliefs, since he would probably think that the coffee from my press was inferior.²

In this paper, I take up what is, in one sense, a rather uncontroversial stance: that the interpretation of texts is externalist. Indeed, it would be absurd to deny that the kind of text we read makes a difference for the kinds of interpretations we form about it. But I want to draw a further distinction between the *kinds* of externalism that may inform a hermeneutics that is rather more controversial. On the one hand, *passive* externalism holds that the real action of thought occurs within "the head" of the subject, or that the environment of the subject provides only the stuff of thought. So although differing environments compel my clone and I to form different beliefs about the best French press, the real "action" of the belief-formulation lies in our minds, and not in the world.

On the other hand, *active* externalism holds that the real action of thought *extends out to include* the environment of the subject.³ For the active externalist, thought occurs within *the exchange* between subject and environment, thereby "de-centering" the mind of the subject as the core of cognitive activity. Those who endorse active externalism

typically point to phenomena like long division or crossword puzzles, where removing the external component significantly affects cognitive competence.⁴

Here, I apply the distinction between passive and active externalism to the relation between interpreter and text as a means to analyzing the status of the text in Brandom's and Gadamer's hermeneutics. According to what I shall call "passive hermeneutic externalism" (PHE), the text plays a *passive* role in determining its interpretation: the text provides the raw data of interpretation, but the real "action" happens in the interpreter's "head," where her conceptual apparatus shapes the textual raw data. By contrast, what I call "active hermeneutic externalism" (AHE) allows the text an *active* role in determining its interpretation, such that the "cognitive system" *extends outward to include* the text: here, the "mind" is equal parts interpreter and text. I argue that the proper ontological grounding for a dialogical hermeneutics is *active* and not *passive* hermeneutic externalism, since choosing the latter will, as I show, preclude the dialogical relation between interpreter and text.

Brandom speaks of a tripartite practice according to which one could count as having reconstructed a metaphysics of intentionality according to a text. The first part of this practice is "selection," whereby the interpreter picks out a certain core set of claims on some aspect of intentionality or semantics to be found in the text. In the selection phase, no ascriptions of conceptual content are made; the only commitment one is prepared to undertake at this point is that the selected texts are where one would go to find this thinker's views on some particular sub-topic of intentionality or semantics. One just locates the "base camp," in Brandom's terms,⁵ such that we may trace back whatever

ascriptions we *do* eventually make to these textual data. At this point, one is literate in the narrowest sense: one is responsive to textual stimuli, in the sense of being able to locate certain key phrases or terms which indicate the presence of talk of intentionality or semantics.

Second, in *supplementation*, the interpreter works up these textual raw materials into *actual ascriptions* of the textual conceptual contents. Here, the point is to get clear on what these texts actually assert by “translating” them into a familiar idiom. This translation serves the purpose of making explicit claims that the idiosyncrasies of the thinkers’ writings might otherwise obscure, but also allows for *further* selection: grasping the selected texts allows for deeper insight into the text as a whole, and so allows the interpreter to seek out other relevant claims that might have previously escaped her notice. The interpreter may then also supplement and so translate them into the familiar idiom, perhaps even enriching it by compelling revisions on the earlier supplementations. The hope is that several iterations of this process of selection and supplementation will yield a thorough, if not exhaustive account of this thinker’s views on the topic in question. In Brandom’s terms, it will allow the interpreter to “use the selected and supplemented raw materials to define the concepts and derive, by multipremise inferences, the claims of the selected and supplemented target.”⁶

Finally, the process of “approximation” seeks to install the attributed claims within the context of the text as a whole to see how well it meshes with what the author claims generally. For instance, the account of weak individuation holism could hardly count as Hegelian if one could not incorporate it, say, into Hegel’s account of Absolute Knowledge in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Brandom's three-phase process of reconstruction therefore regards the text as a collection of stimuli to which one who is "literate" is reliably disposed to differentially respond.⁷ We can imagine, then, that the sedimentation of knowledge of texts operates similarly to the sedimentation of knowledge of *things*: texts provide the raw data of analysis, which yield non-inferential, interpretive claims about the text of the sort: "Hegel speaks of concepts in the penultimate paragraph of Consciousness." This is an indicator that whatever ascriptions we eventually make will find root in this passage, or that this passage will serve as the "regress stopper" for those ascriptions.⁸ But this "mere" literacy only serves to collect the data of the text; the real interpreting happens when the interpreter "sorts out" the data of the text and is capable of reporting on his findings. Thus, no real interpreting happens during the interpreter's engagement with the text, but only subsequently, or while reflecting upon the textual raw materials: the interpretation happens when the interpreter runs the "raw materials" of the text through the "conceptual machinery that grinds out the target textual concepts and claims."⁹

Two conclusions follow. First, Brandom is committed to PHE: since we are disposed to respond *differentially* to the textual data, the text clearly matters for the kind of ascriptions we make; but since the text merely elicits non-inferential claims that we must think through "in the head," so to speak, all of the interpretive action is *subsequent* to the interpreter's engagement with the text. Second, PHE fails to create the proper dialogical tension between interpreter and text. On the one hand, even by Brandom's own standards, it is hard to imagine how this might fit into his deontic scorekeeping model of discursive commitment: phenomenologically, that is, it is difficult to see how Brandom could want to incorporate something like a bare responsiveness to

conversational data into one's ascriptions of commitment to one's dialogue partner: in this case, I am always already engaged with her at a sapient, and not merely sentient, interpretive level: my interlocutor's speaking is sufficient, for the most part, for my interpretation and ascription of commitment to her. Indeed, we could not imagine that treating the other's speech acts as mere raw data for reflection would impart to the other the capacity to have *something to say*. For this would indicate that the real conversation happens, paradoxically, only *subsequently* and largely independently of the actual back-and-forth of self and other.

Moreover, a dialogical exchange between two mutually recognizing speakers requires that both participants are capable of communicating norms of interpretation, or of communicating to the interpreter how they would like to be interpreted: both parties must be able to speak "on their own terms." Any interpretive methodology threatening such communication threatens also a balance of power in the dialogical relation, whereby the words of the speaker are subject to distortion by the interpreter; this means that the speaker does not achieve the status of a Thou.¹⁰ Here, Brandom's tripartite methodology precludes just such an exchange, since he establishes the methodology *a priori* and *independently* from any engagement with the text. Therefore, the text has no say in how it is to be interpreted. Thus, Brandom's methodology fails to create the proper tension, leaning too heavily on the interpretive practices of the interpreter.¹¹

Accordingly, Brandom's reconstructive method models the interaction between interpreter and text after the interaction between scientist and object: Brandom seeks similarities between his methodology and the processes of "model completion in mathematics" and "the postulation of theoretical entities in empirical science."¹² Thus we

should expect that his method would endorse the sort of “experimental” elements we find: for instance, that the “raw materials” of the text require some kind of manipulation as a condition for the knowledge of them.¹³

Gadamer’s analysis, on the other hand, finds root in a conception of “hermeneutics [as] an art”,¹⁴ we can therefore gain insight into Gadamer’s view of the ontological status of text and interpreter by understanding his view of the ontological status of work of art and viewer. Particularly telling is the distinction he draws between his view and that of “aesthetic differentiation.” This term indicates the sort of disinterested distance between work of art and viewer that is characteristic, for instance, of Kantian aesthetics.¹⁵ Gadamer argues that such a distancing threatens to extricate the history and culture of the viewer, since the aim of creating this distance is to judge the work of art solely on aesthetic grounds. For the same reason, aesthetic differentiation also extricates the history and culture from the work of art itself, thus imparting to it “the character of simultaneity.”¹⁶ For Gadamer, the central problem is that the work of art, in its confrontation with aesthetic differentiation, becomes solely what aesthetic differentiation *thinks* it is; the work of art has only whatever meaning or significance the aesthetic consciousness *bestows* upon it.

Gadamer rejects this view, and aims to impart to the work of art a different ontological status, one that finds root in the phenomenological analysis of “play.” Since the analysis of aesthetic differentiation shows “that conceiving aesthetic consciousness as something that confronts an object does not do justice to the real situation,”¹⁷ Gadamer undertakes this analysis of play with an eye toward de-centering the aesthetic subject, or aims to extend aesthetic consciousness out to include the work of art within itself.

In line with his phenomenological heritage, Gadamer's way of de-centering the subject as the site of play lies in placing the site of play within the *work of art itself*. So his analysis of play is going to downplay the importance of the mental states of the viewer or artist, and emphasize the *lived experience* of the viewer in her *interaction* with the work of art. Thus:

“...the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it. The ‘subject’ of the experience of art, that which remains and endures, is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it but the work itself. This is the point at which the mode of being of play becomes significant. For play has its own essence, independent of the consciousness of those who play.”¹⁸

Gadamer's reference to the work of art as “subject” suggests a critique of the Kantian subjectivism he is out to reject in at least two different senses. First, the subjectivity of the work of art means that it has the capacity to conform the *viewer* to the rules of the work. In other words, it has the capacity to *change* the viewer, to alter the way she sees the world. Secondly, the subjectivity of the work of art implies that the *play* of the work of art, and not the mental state of the subject, is the proper site of analysis of the experience of play. And as Gadamer notes, the experience of play always requires some kind of submission. For Gadamer, “all play is a being played. The attraction of a game ... consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players.”¹⁹ Thus, for Gadamer, the work of art “masters” the viewer: in viewing the work of art, we submit ourselves to the work and allow ourselves to be “led along” by it.

But Gadamer's intention is not to establish the viewer as one who is *merely* led along by a work: this would rule out the possibility of the dialogical tension toward which this analysis aims.²⁰ Gadamer understands play fundamentally as “a to-and-fro-movement,” and so means that the meaning of the work of art is “bandied about” in a sort of volley between viewer and viewed. Gadamer means to indicate by the subjectivity of the work of art the *capacity* for the work of art to conform the viewer, and the *essentiality* of this capacity to the experience of the work of art.

So when Gadamer calls hermeneutics an art, he means that hermeneutics ought to ground itself in this phenomenological notion of play, as a to-and-fro movement between interpreter and text. Two points follow from this: first, the site of hermeneutics is the interaction between interpreter and text, not the cognitive processing of the text in the mind of the interpreter. This means that we should not consider the text to be something that one must conform to one's own mind as a condition for the possibility of its intelligibility. Though critical reflection on a text is certainly part of the to-and-fro movement of play, the interpretation of the text depends more primordially on the ability of the *text* to conform the *interpreter*, or for the interpreter to enter into the text, thereby closing the circuit that the production of the text opens.

Second, this means that the text communicates to the viewer how it would like to be interpreted. One does not, therefore, enter into the text with an *a priori* methodology that one only subsequently applies to the text. Rather, the grounds for interpretation – the rules of the game, so to speak – emerge as part of this interpretive to-and-fro.

Gadamer thus conceives of understanding a text as a *Sichverstehen*, or as “knowing one's way around” in it.²¹ His motivation is to shift the notion of understanding

from a cognitive process for comprehending scientific claims – as it is on the Brandomian view – to a quotidian view, wherein the understanding explains one’s way of being-in-the-world generally. Accordingly, Gadamer conceives understanding the text as analogous to the way one understands one’s way of coping with one’s environment: one situates oneself within the text, and knows it in so far as one is adept at applying the points it is trying to make or is skilled at drawing analogies between different sections or arguments. This requires the “extension” of the mind outward to include the text and is, we recall, the *core* of AHE: in the same way that *Dasein* is always already within the world, so is the interpreter engaged with the text always “within” the text, navigating her way around in it.

Gadamer’s AHE, therefore, offers a superior account to Brandom’s PHE in so far as it accords with the phenomenology of conversation. Rooted as it is in the phenomenology of play, for Gadamer the conversation is a to-and-fro movement between self and other wherein both submit to the “rules of the conversation,” much as in playing a game, all of the players submit themselves to the rules of the game. In textual interpretation, the interpreter submits to the text in at least two ways. First, the interpreter allows the text to communicate how it ought to be interpreted: the text communicates the *rules* of the game, or sets the interpretive methodology for the interpreter. Second, the interpreter submits its prejudices to the text, making them vulnerable to critique based on what the text might have to say. Similarly, the text also submits itself to the interpreter since what the text has to say will always be subject to the latter’s historically inflected prejudices.

¹ Hereafter *TMD*.

² Cf. the famous “Twin Earth” argument in Putnam (1975).

³ This distinction between active and passive externalism follows Clark and Chalmers, 1998.

⁴ See also Clark and Chalmers (1998), who use the famous example of Otto’s notebook; Clark (2006) uses Leonard, the main character of *Memento*, whose tattoos serve as a substitute for his amnesiac memory; Chemero and Silberstein (2008) use a more sophisticated example, citing research in the sub-field of “coordination dynamics.”

⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁷ This is in accordance with Brandom’s non-inferential account of perception as Reliable Differential Response Disposition (RDRD). Cf. Brandom (1994), 214 and ff.

⁸ According to Brandom’s account in *Making It Explicit*, perceptions provide what Brandom calls “entrance moves” to discursive practices of justification (“the game of giving and asking for reasons”) by allowing the sensible to figure as premises as non-inferential reports (by definition they can never serve as conclusions.) This feature of non-inferential reports, that they are premises only and never conclusions (“unjustified justifiers” in Brandom’s terms) allows them to serve as *grounds* of inferences (“regress stoppers”) in the game of giving and asking for reasons. Brandom (1994), 222.

⁹ Brandom (2002), 113.

¹⁰ This is, of course, a matter of no small controversy, and the possibility of mutual recognition was at the center of Gadamer’s exchange with Habermas. Two points of clarification: first, in the Gadamer/Habermas debate, the difference between the two highlighted the legitimacy of presupposition as a backdrop for mutually recognitive

discourse. The critique here, which echoes Lafont (2008) and the claims about “ecumenical historicism” (4), does not call in to question the legitimacy of the presuppositions of the interpreter, but rather the fixity or *closedness* of those presuppositions. I am arguing that, as long as the methodology of the interpreter remains fixed and beyond revision in the face of the interpreted, mutually recognitive dialogue between interpreter and interpreted remains impossible.

Second, my claim is not that mutual recognition requires the eradication of all misunderstanding. But I am saying that, whatever else mutual recognition involves, it ought to include an openness to revising hermeneutical norms that dominate the words of the interpreted, and thereby *preclude* genuine interpretation. Such is, I am arguing, the case with Brandom’s reconstructive methodology: the text, here, has no say in how it would like to be interpreted.

¹¹ Accordingly, we have the *methodological* basis for the idiosyncratic, “autobiographical” interpretations of the tradition that, as I said above, Nuzzo (2007) lacks.

¹² Brandom (2002), 114.

¹³ The classification of this methodology as “science” finds root in the Kantian conception of scientific practice in the Preface to the B edition of the first *Critique*, esp. B xii – B xiii: “Reason has insight only in to that which it produces after a plan of its own ... [and must constrain] nature to give answer to questions of Reason’s own determining.” Though I cannot fully defend the point here, I see Gadamer as appropriating Heidegger’s phenomenological critiques of scientific thinking, so conceived, for his own hermeneutical project. In the same way that Heidegger, in “The

Origin of the Work of Art,” argues that the *a priori* preconceptions of thingness in metaphysics do “violence” to the thing, so too does Gadamer argue that an *a priori* preconception of interpretive methodology does “violence” to the text.

¹⁴ Gadamer (2004), 190.

¹⁵ Kant (2000), 90/5:205 – 6.

¹⁶ Gadamer (2004), 74.

¹⁷ Ibid., 102.

¹⁸ Ibid., 103.

¹⁹ Gadamer (2004), 106.

²⁰ This is not to say, either, that something like the opposite kind of domination is possible: Gadamer does not, I think, wish to rule out something like Dionysian revelry.

²¹ Ibid., 356.