REASON IN HISTORY AND HISTORY IN REASON

I was told that the theme of this conference was the philosophy of history, and it was suggested that I might draw on my previous work on Hegel and Gadamer. The two parts of my paper immediately fell into place: Part One, Hegel on Reason in History, and Part Two, Gadamer on History in Reason. We move from history as the culmination of Reason's universal purpose, to reason as contaminated by history's particularities.[1] We move from a quasi-theological metaphysics of historical development to a phenomenological epistemology in the hermeneutical situation.

Before looking at anything specifically Hegelian, we might ask what it might mean to look for reason in history (human history itself, not the narratives created by historians) A suggestion immediately comes to mind. The search for reason in history is the search for meaning in history. As Karl Löwith puts it, "the term 'philosophy of history' is used to mean a systematic interpretation of universal history in accordance with a principle by which historical events and successions are unified and directed toward an ultimate

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[1] On the use of contamination as a way of describing the hermeneutical turn, see my "The Prereflective Cogito as Contaminated Opacity," The Southern Journal of Philosophy, Vol. XLV (2007) Supplement, 152-77.

meaning."[2] But what is the meaning of 'meaning' here?

One way to answer this question would be to say that the philosophy of history seeks to refute the theater of the absurd. The events that take place in Büchner's play, *Woyzeck*, in Berg's operatic version of the same story, *Wozzeck*, in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, In Ionesco's *Bald Soprano*, or in Genet's *The Balcony* have meaning in the sense that the characters care, in some sense, about what is going on in their lives. But is there any reason to care about that caring, or is better seen in the light of Macbeth's response to the news of his wife's death?

> She should have died hereafter . . .
> Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
> To the last syllable of recorded time;
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.[3]

Less literary, perhaps, but similar, are words spoken (in fiction) looking

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[2] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 1.

[3] *Macbeth*, V, 5, 17-28.

back on the Third Reich.

> I perceived how history was nothing more than an accident, a fluke, a matter of a few centimeters here or there, a head turned, a sudden gust of wind, a dirty gun barrel, a misfired cartridge, a breath held for a second too long or too little, an order misheard or misunderstood, an itchy trigger finger, a second's delay, an instant's hesitation. The idea that anything is ever meant to be seemed nonsensical.[4]

It may seem that overcoming the sense (and surely it is a sense before it is a claim)[5] that everything signifies nothing is a fairly low hurdle. There is a reason that I summarized the absurdist position as "everything signifies nothing" rather than "nothing means anything." Surely people's lives are meaningful to them when they can check off at least some of the following boxes:

G I am and have been relatively healthy.

G I have gotten a good education.

G I have experienced the joys and challenges of marriage and raising a family.

G My work has enabled me to contribute to supporting my family.

G My work has given me a sense of doing something worthwhile.

In such a case it would be foolish to say "nothing means anything." It

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[4] Philip Kerr, *Prussian Blue* (New York: P. T. Putnam, 2017), p. 522

[5] Sartre's *Nausea* would be a good example.

would be equally foolish to say "everything means nothing" if by everything we meant each part of my life (which is but part of the story of human life), taken separately. But if by everything we mean, not just the parts of my life or even its whole but the larger whole of which it is a part, we won't have overcome and refuted the claim that my middle-class contentment is, as Nietzsche might say, "wretched"[6] or as Hegel suggests, part of the ephemera that sit from time to time on the "slaughter-bench" of history.[7] He writes, "But even as we look upon history as an altar on which the happiness of nations, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals are slaughtered, our thoughts inevitably impel us to ask: to whom, or to what ultimate end have these monstrous sacrifices been made?"[8]

Of course, to ask this question is not to find an answer to it, much less a reassuring answer. No doubt this question in some form is the root of the theater of the absurd, which I take to be one version of the death of God philosophy, or, in one of its most familiar meanings, of existentialism.

1. Hegel on Reason in History: A Story of Consummation

Hegel's reference to an "ultimate end" reminds us of Löwith's definition of the philosophy of history in terms of "an ultimate meaning." This seems to imply not only that history is somehow a single, unified story but that it is somehow, for all of its absurdities and for all of its anguish, good. I always chuckle at the description of a narrative in a German TV guide magazine, *Die*

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[6] "Wretched contentment" is a recurring theme of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

[7] G. W. F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), p. 24.

[8] Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 69

Geschichte ist Happy geendet. This is why Löwith adds that taken in the sense of an "ultimate meaning," the philosophy of history is "entirely dependent on theology of history, in particular on the theological concept of history as a history of fulfilment and salvation" and as such is based on "revelation and faith."[9]

In any case it is surely true that Hegel's philosophy of history is self-consciously a theology of history. However, as we will see, while it is a story of "fulfillment and salvation" he only allows it to be based on revelation and faith insofar as these are *aufgehoben* by Reason, which is entitled to a thorough-going hegemony over both revelation (objectively speaking) and faith (subjectively speaking).This occurs in the context of three fundamental claims Hegel makes about anything deserving the name of philosophy.

First, as the highest form of Absolute Spirit, Philosophy is the highest mode of being, the distinctive mark of being human. Being is a hierarchy at the bottom of which is Nature. On this stage the dramas of Spirit take place in three modes" Subjective Spirit, Objective Spirit, and Absolute Spirit. Subjective Spirit (whose science is philosophical psychology) concerns the conscious, cognitive life of human individuals. Objective Spirit is the social and political dimension of human life, whose sciences include Hegel's various analyses of Spirit as *Sittlichkeit* (Ethical Life) and the *Philosophy of Right*.[10] It is the horizon within which Subjective Spirit occurs and by which the latter is

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[9] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. 1.

[10] This is the level at which history begins since, Nature and Subjective Spirit are structural without having, in themselves, the form of narrative. By virtue of its embeddedness in Objective and Absolute Spirit, Subjective Spirit participates in an historical life not of its own making.

conditioned. Absolute Spirit includes Art, Religion, and Philosophy. They are the horizon within which Objective Spirit (and *a fortiori* Subjective Spirit) occur and by which they are conditioned.

Art, Religion, and Philosophy are understood as the modes in which the human spirit comes to knowledge of itself and thereby fully becomes itself. Though they may appear to be forms of consciousness, they are more fundamentally forms of collective self-consciousness.[11] The human spirit is at once the subject and the object. If Art and Religion are analogs of Freudian projection, the human spirit portraying itself to itself as something other than itself, Philosophy is the analog of the psychoanalysis that uncovers their true self-reference.

Second, in this context comes the key claim that as the highest form of the human spirit, Philosophy alone deserves the name of Reason. There are lower forms of thought that approximate Reason, and religious thought in the form of theology is a prime example. But Hegel regularly distinguishes *Vernunft* from *Verstand, Begriff* from *Vorstellung*, and *Speculation* from *Reflection* in order to claim that it is Philosophy alone in which Reason in the proper sense is found.

Third, Truth in the highest sense is the truth of God and that, by virtue of the just mentioned superiority of its form, it is only in Philosophy that we find Truth in the fullest and proper sense. Religion and Philosophy have the same content, but Philosophy has that content in the only form fully adequate to it.[12] Children who are told not to suck on quarters because "there are tiny

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[11] This means that if in Religion and Philosophy the human spirit is aware of the divine, this is only possible because it is itself, in a sense needing clarification, divine.

[12] Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris

bugs on them that can make you sick," have the truth in the highest form available to them as children. But only the biologist who understands about viruses and bacteria has that truth in a form adequate to the reality (and, of course, truth has classically been defined in terms of adequation). Reader alert: we should not be fooled by the fact that Hegel regularly speaks of 'God', for 'God' may end up meaning something very different from what may at first suggest itself to the careless reader. Classical, personalist theism may be the analog of the child's bug theory of why not to suck on quarters. It is practically useful but theoretically deficient. It is "truth" only with a lower case t and in quotation marks.

This entails the hegemony of Philosophy over Theology. It gives to Philosophy, in the name of Reason, the right to reject outright some religious beliefs and, perhaps more important, to reinterpret the beliefs of theologians, preachers, and lay believers.[13] These reinterpretations render highly dubious the claim that Religion and Philosophy have the same content and differ only in form. The religious claim that God is a transcendent, personal Creator and Redeemer, "wholly other" than any human individual, society, or culture is not only different from but deeply incompatible with the claim that properly understood Religion is human self-consciousness rather than consciousness of an "object" different from the self. That is a view we might call historical, humanistic pantheism. That, as I understand him, is Hegel's view.

(Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1991), §§1-18. *Phenomenology of Spirit,* , trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 453-93. *Hegel's Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Peter Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), I, 380-425.

[13] For a somewhat detailed analysis of how this works out in practice, see Merold Westphal, *In Defense of Heteronomy: Leaving Room for Revelation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), ch. 7-9.

Moreover, there is a certain academic elitism here that Hegel makes explicit when he says, "Religion is for everyone. It is not philosophy, which is not for everyone." [14] The "believing soul," to use Ricoeur's phrase, believes that God is a trans-human agent and speaker, while the intellectually sophisticated understand that this is just a metaphor for something else, a figure that needs to be demythologized or deconstructed.

As an essentially "theological" theory of "ultimate meaning" in the form of "fulfillment and salvation" under the hegemony of Philosophy as the only thought that deserves the name of Reason, Hegel's philosophy of history is part of his philosophy of religion. Together, they belong to the Enlightenment project that Kant happily named "religion within the limits of reason alone."[15] It sought to make religion respectable to those whom Schleiermacher had called its "cultured despisers."[16] I take Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel to have given us the most powerful versions of this project from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, respectively.

This is not the "rational religion" of the deists, who asked how much religion could be constructed with the resources of reason alone apart from divine revelation. Our trio is far more frank about their dependence on the biblical sources and profess to be their proper, rational form. But, as already noted, in the name of Reason they reserve the right to reject some of this inheritance and to reinterpret radically other what is to be retained. This Reason will be autonomous, self-grounded. It presented as universal, free from

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[14] *Hegel's Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, I, 180.

[15] This is the title of his "fourth critique," published in 1793, also translated as *Religion within the Boundaries of mere Reason*.

[16] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, 1799.

perspectival particularity, unsituated historically, presuppositionless, neutral, objective, and so forth.[17]

[17] For two rather different arguments for the presuppositionless character of philosophy, see, "With What Must the Science Begin," *The Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: :Humanities Press, 1969), pp. 67-78 and "Introduction" to *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), especially pp. 52-57.

This purity from anything culturally particular or historically contingent was to bring two advantages. Practically speaking, it was to overcome the religious intolerance that had produced so much in the way of persecution and religious wars. This was especially important in the aftermath of the Reformation when the facade of a unified Christendom, that had to acknowledge only the otherness of the Jews and Turks, now had to deal with its own internal fratricides.[18] Theoretically speaking it was to be the fulfillment of the Platonic dream of freeing human thought from all those features of the cave that hide or darken the bright sun of Truth.

We might say that the religion-within-the-limits-of-reason-alone project deconstructed itself in its most impressive achievements. The religiously loaded philosophies of Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel presented themselves as the product of a universal, presuppositionless Reason. But each of the three, both in its foundations and in its application to religion, was mutually incompatible with each of the other two. Claiming to be Reason's overcoming of sectarian babel, they showed Reason itself to be sectarian. Just as there are trios of revealed religion such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, or Protestant, Catholic, Jew,[19] so there is the trio Spinoza, Kant, Hegel. In each case there are overlaps but also deep, and fundamental differences. Truth in advertising

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[18] Spinoza's family had experienced intolerance from Catholics in Portugal. They fled to the Netherlands, where he experienced intolerance from Jews and Calvinists. Though he published his *Tractatus-Politicus* in his lifetime, its authorship had to be carefully disguised, and he prudently allowed his *Ethics* to be published only posthumously.

[19] With apologies to Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

would require denominational sub-or-superscripts: reason^{S}, reason$_{K}$, and reason^{H}. N.B. reason is now spelled with a lower case r.

Hegel is a special case here. For Spinoza and Kant the universality and presuppositionless objectivity of Reason, the basis for its claim to hegemony over theology and thereby over the philosophy of history, is due to it's autonomy vis-à-vis anything historically particular and contingent. If for Plato the movement from the cave to the sunlight was the movement from the temporal to the eternal, for Spinoza and Kant it is the movement from the historical to the ahistorical.

By contrast, Hegel's philosophy is saturated in history. His political and social philosophy, along with his philosophies of art, religion, and philosophy are not only deeply informed with historical learning but essentially historical in their telling. As Nature, Being is not historical. Hegel is no Darwinian. But as Spirit, Being is historical (dare we say?) from start to finish.

This is true even of philosophy, as Hegel's extensive lectures on the history of philosophy show. Hegel even argues that classical, Aristotelian logic is out of date, and that our historical situation calls for a new logic (guess whose?). He bemoans the fact that "[t]he complete transformation which philosophical thought in Germany has undergone in the past twenty-five years and the higher standpoint reached by spirit in its awareness of itself, have had but little influence as yet on the structure of logic" and that "logic shows no traces so far of the new spirit which has arisen in the sciences no less than in the world of actuality." What is needed is "a total reconstruction; for spirit after its labours over two thousand years, must have attained a higher consciousness about its thinking and about its own pure, essential nature." He

presents his Logic as a work "belonging to the modern world."[20]

Hegel summarizes this historicism succinctly in a famous and familiar passage. "Whatever happens, every individual is a child of his time; so philosophy too is its own time apprehended in thoughts [*in Gedanken erfassed]*. It is just as absurd to fancy that a philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as it is to fancy that an individual can over leap his own age . . ."[21]

Hegel will describe "his own age", which is "the modern world", in basically two major theses, a freedom thesis and a reconciliation thesis. They are the work of Reason in History. At the level of Objective Spirit, it is the rise of the modern state, a constitutional monarchy in the context of a capitalist economy. Here history is the growth and triumph of freedom. At the level of Absolute Spirit, history is the emergence of reconciliation, based on Christianity as the "revealed" (*offenbare*, *Phenomenology) or* "consummate" (*vollendete, Philosophy of Religion*) religion. But while Hegel claims to be a Lutheran,[22] this is not a reconciliation between sinful human beings and a holy and righteous God; that religious way of speaking (*Vorstellungen)* is an inadequate way of pointing to the truth that only philosophy grasps adequately, the reconciliation between the Finite and the Infinite. N. B. Reason requires the reinterpretation of the personal as the impersonal and abstract

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[20] Hegel, *Science of Logic*, pp. 25-26, 51, 42..

[21] Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), p. 11 (Preface). For an extensive analysis of Hegel's historicism in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, see Michael N. Forster, *Hegel's Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[22] See "Hegel and the Reformation," in my *Hegel, Freedom, and Modernity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 149-63

metaphysical.

Given their political or religious commitments, some have found the development of these themes promising and fruitful, while others have found them dangerous or even dishonest. But that is not the debate into which I wish to enter at present. Before we look at the content of Hegel's account of Reason in History, we need to be clear about its status. I have suggested that, in spite of their claims to the contrary, for Spinoza and Kant what is appealed to as Reason is as sectarian and denominational as the religious traditions whose *Aufhebung* they purport to be. History has infected their Reason with all of its particularity and contingency.

By contrast, Hegel emphasizes the historical character of everything human, including both religion and philosophy. So how can he base his hegemony thesis on a universality thesis, claiming that philosophy is presuppositionless and free from the relativities of history in all of its particularity and contingency?[23] How can the ever penultimate generate Absolute Knowing as the ultimate form of Absolute Spirit?

I think it is helpful to see Hegel's claim that even the philosopher is a "child of his time" and that philosophy itself is "its own time apprehended in thoughts" as an anticipation of Marx's notion of ideology. By that he means not merely a comprehensive and complex theory of society, in which descriptive and normative elements intertwine, but a theory that is in fact a mirror of

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[23] On Hegel's discussion of contingency in his Logic, see George di Giovanni, "The Category of Contingency in the Hegelian Logic," and John Burbidge, "The Necessity of Contingency: An Analysis of Hegel's Chapter on 'Actuality' in the *Science of Logic*," in *Art and Logic in Hegel's Philosophy*, ed. Warren E. Steinkraus and Kenneth L. Schmitz (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980), pp. 179-200 and 201-17.

existing practices and in function a legitimation of them. Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan in response to a lawyer who "willing to justify himself" asked, "who is my neighbor?"[24] Social and political orders are also willing, indeed eager to justify themselves, and to that end they generate ideologies.

So (surprise!), for Hegel as for Marx, Reason is ideology, the self-legitimation project of some particular and contingent set of social practices and intellectual traditions. So how does he escape the relativism implicit in fact that "Reason" is the voice of a faction?[25] The story a particular and contingent set of practices, theoretical and practical, tells to justify itself, does not erase their particularity and contingency. In its linkage to those practices makes it itself particular and contingent.

Hegel's solution is quite simple. Thought is always relative to some world, some form or intersection of forms of society and culture (Objective and Absolute Spirit). It can transcend its relativity only by being the ideology of the absolute, that is, final form of Spirit, its highest fulfillment. That is the argument Hegel makes in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*[26] and continues to presuppose as he develops his System.

Here we get the infamous "end of history" thesis. It is not the claim that at some point in time historical events cease to occur. It is rather the claim that at some point history has reached its telos, its end first of all in the sense

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[24] Luke 10:29.

[25] See the warning against factions in politics in *The Federalist Papers*, ## 10 and 51, probably written by Madison.

[26] For an interpretation of the *Phenomenology* along these lines, see my *History and Truth in Hegel's Phenomenology,* 3rd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998).

of its goal and then, derivatively in the sense of embodying no essentially new development. The acorn becomes a sapling and eventually a full growth oak tree. That tree may experience picnics, many generations of squirrels, forest fires, and hurricanes. But it does not develop into anything other than a full growth oak tree.[27] Hegel has a philosophical version of what theologians call a "realized eschatology."

A good many scholars are embarrassed by Hegel's embrace of the modern world and the Science it makes possible as the Kingdom of God, and with good reason. But the solution is not to deny the textual support for this reading, and for two reasons. First, the idea of progress that was a hallmark of so much Enlightenment thinking had not yet suffered the devastating blows of twentieth century history with two world wars and the holocaust. Even in recent years the academic restatement of the Hegelian thesis[28] is mirrored in the popular sense that liberal democracy as embodied in the United States and the best of our friends is somehow already the achievement of liberty and justice for all and that patriotism consists in the uncritical sacralizing of who we already are. We are the telos of history, the Kingdom of God. Whenever the flag or the nation are treated as something sacred, this idolatry takes stronger hold.

Second, even where Hegel's text is not as explicit as it sometimes is, his argument always requires his realized eschatology. On his own account Reason is ideology, and Philosophy as Science or Absolute Knowing is possible only if it

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[27] For this imagery, see Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 7, where "Science [Philosophy in its fulfillment] is the crown of a world of Spirit," Cf. Pp. 3-4, 50-52.

[28] See Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History,"in *The National Interest* , No. 16 (Summer 1989), pp. 3-18 and *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

is the ideological reflex of the goal and consummation of history. Otherwise it is just the shared opinion of some nation, tribe, party, faction, or cult.

Hegel famously writes,

> But the only thought which philosophy brings with it is the simple idea of reason – the idea that reason governs the world, and that world history is therefore a rational process. From the point of view of history as such, this conviction and insight is a presupposition. Within philosophy itself, however, it is not a presupposition; for it is proved in philosophy by speculative cognition that reason – and we can adopt this expression for the moment without detailed discussion of its relationship to God – is substance and infinite power; it is itself the infinite material of all natural and spiritual life, and the infinite form which activates this material content.[29]

But what if that philosophy, even if we call it speculative cognition, is not some miraculous "view from nowhere" but, as Hegel himself tells us, merely "its own time apprehended in thoughts," and what if even Hegel himself is "a child of his time"? And, to get to the crucial point, what if that time is not the Kingdom of God but just the latest chapter in a story about the "slaughter bench" that is not obviously at its end in either sense of the word, cessation or fulfillment? Then the claim to universality, presuppositionlessness, objectivity, neutrality, and so forth will have deconstructed itself. Hegel will have become Gadamer.

2. Gadamer on History in Reason: A Story of Contamination

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[29] Hegel, *Philosophy of World History: Introduction* (Nisbet), p. 27. Cf. *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (Rauch), p. 12.

Q. What holds the earth up?

A. It sits on the back of a turtle.

Q. What holds the turtle up?

A. It's turtles all the way down

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is haunted by Hegel as much as by Heidegger. If from Heidegger he learns that thought is never presuppositionless but always an interpretation that presupposes assumptions always already at work, from Hegel he learns that we inherit those presuppositions, without which thought could not get started, through processes whose generic name is history, the history of society (Objective Spirit) and culture (Absolute Spirit) that Hegel combines in the concept of Ethical Life (*Sittlichkeit*).

A colleague of mine once gave a course wonderfully named "Hegel and the Aftermath." One can imaging any number of courses under that rubric. What they would have under the heading, 'Aftermath', is a series of thinkers who offer us a version of Hegel without closure, without the Absolute, without the Whole, without Consummation. Hegel famously says "The True is the whole."[30] Hegelians without the Whole are thinkers who take their historical situatedness as seriously as Hegel does, but either in some "secular" form do not think eschatologically at all or in some "religious" form affirm only an unrealized never to be realized eschaton. The present is haunted by fragmentary images of a New Jerusalem, but without any doctrine of progress toward it. One step forward, two steps backward.

They have in common taken the hermeneutical turn that I take to be the dividing line between the modern and the postmodern. Both recognize that thought is interpretation that rests on presuppositions that cannot themselves

[30] Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 11.

be "proven" either by reflecting ourselves out of history or by the absolutizing of the modern world. One is tempted to say that we are all Gadamerians in the sense that this hermeneutical turn is not limited to any philosophical tradition. It pervades much, if not all, of the analytic, continental, and American pragmatist traditions.

In Gadamer's version, "Reason" has been infected by history. The Enlightenment claim that even Hegel makes in his own ingenious way, that reason is free from perspectival finitude and thus universal, objective, and presuppositionless is itself a prejudice – a prejudgement that one takes for granted rather than proving it from some neutral perspective. Oh dear. Do you hear the irony in the phrase 'neutral perspective'? Gadamer writes, "And there is one prejudice of the Enlightenment that defines its essence: the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power."[31] This is why

> history does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live . . . *This is why the prejudices [vorurteile] of the individual, far more than his judgments [urteile], constitute the historical reality of his being.*[32]

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[31] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd. rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1991), P. 270. Cf. P. 276. A reissue by Continuum in 2004 unforgivably has slightly different pagination, in this case pp. 272-73 and 277. For an more sustained interpretation of Gadamer see my *Whose Community? Which Interpretation? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

[32] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 276-77 (278).

Not even the philosopher is exempt from this structure. Gadamer is telling us not how things should or should not be but how they inevitably are.

It is worth noticing in passing, that tradition is here the name for the historical processes through which we inherit our prejudices or presuppositions. For Foucault and MacIntyre it is the notion of practices, while for Wittgenstein it is the notion of language games as ways of life. Derrida's way of putting the point is to say that we always come on the scene too late. "Language has started without us, in us and before us."[33] That's not a bad definition of the priority of the a priori.

Some of these postmoderns, who have taken the hermeneutical turn, are quite willing to affirm the hegemony thesis without any universality thesis with which to support it. Philosophy, somehow, but we are not told how, retains it hegemony over Theology. Thus Heidegger, channeling Spinoza, Kant, or Hegel, repeatedly says that it is the task of phenomenology to "correct" theology.[34] More specifically, Derrida reinterprets 'god' as the name for the fact "that language has started without us," as the name for "the absolute singularity of the other," or "the name of the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior."[35] Old habits die hard.

Returning to Gadamer, we should note that he emphasizes the

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[33] Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 99.

[34] Martin Heidegger, "Phenomenology and Theology," in *Pathmarks*, ed. By William McNeill (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[35] Jacques Derrida, see note 33 and *The Gift of Death*, 2nd ed., trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 67 and 108.

etymological not the pejorative sense of 'prejudice' *Vorurrteile* are the judgments that come before, the a priori assumptions that govern what can, cannot, and will be said. He is quite explicit that there are "legitimate prejudices" and "enabling prejudices," and that we must distinguish "the true prejudices, by which we *understand*, from the *false ones,* by which we *misunderstand*."[36]

We might think of scientific instruments as presuppositions. If we are studying the stars, a telescope is a "true" prejudice that helps us to understand better, while a microscope is a "false" prejudice that makes understanding impossible. If we are studying cells, however, the opposite is true.

Similarly, to stick with natural science, fruitful research depends on coming up with good hypotheses that guide us to new insight. Hypotheses are anything but foundations; they are temporary and tentative points of departure that have not yet been validated. Good science is not only willing to have its hypotheses, the presuppositions of its experiments, refuted, but we can say that the experiments are better understood as attempts to falsify the hypotheses than the confirm them. And to make matters worse, the hypotheses or presuppositions we make in the areas most central to our humanity, do not have experimental testing available to them. I have in mind political and social theories, morality, religion, metaphysics and so forth.

Writers of crime fiction are often Gadamerians, and detective stories provide another everyday context for epistemological reflection in keeping with the hermeneutical turn. Thus a detective named Jesse

> had learned the hard way about the danger of falling in love with any single scenario before the evidence was in. Even then, he had seen

[36] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 277, 296, and 298-99 (278, 295, and 298).

> colleagues ignore the facts in favor of their predetermined scenarios. He'd done it himself, but experience had also aught him not to completely ignore his gut.[37]

The misdirection resulting from "predetermined scenarios" recalls Gadamer's notion of "false" presuppositions, while the reminder not to discount one's gut feelings maps (in this context, but not always) onto his notion of "true" prejudices. These hypotheses are used before they have compelling evidential support, and, of course, they do not come neatly labeled 'true' and 'false'. Evidence here, as in the case of natural science, is just what is not neatly available for our social/political, moral/religious, and metaphysical questions.

Another murder mystery reminds us that

> everyone on earth at a particular latitude sees the same stars in the sky. But no two cultures see the same constellations. {The detective] had seen evidence of the phenomenon again and again: The patterns we perceive are determined by the stories we want to believe.[38]

The reference to cultures reminds us of history's invasion of reason by means of traditions, practices, and language games as bearers of particular presuppositions, in this case stories. The reference to what we want to believe is a reminder that the process is not mechanical and blind. We are shaped in part by the desires that welcome some stories and shun others. Thus the talk about the struggle to control the narrative in political debates.

Moreover, the line between our desires and our emotions is neither clear

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[37] Reed Farrel Coleman, *Robert B. Parker's The Hangman's Sonnet* (New York: Putnam and Sons, 2017), pp.47-48.

[38] John Verdon, *Peter Pan Must Die* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2014), p. 144.

nor complete.

> In the real world, we must connect the few dots we have and guess as a pattern that makes workable sense . . . The danger arises not to much from the scarcity of dots as from the unconscious personal agenda that prioritizes certain dots over others, an agenda that *wants* the pattern to look a certain way. Our perceptions of events are warped more by the power of our emotions than by the weakness of our data.[39]

The a priori agenda that may or may not be helpful arises from our "wants" and from our "emotions".

Emotions can affect not only the what but also the how of our beliefs prior to evidence. So our detective thinks about "how emotion created its own logic, how anger was invariably the mother of certainty. It was surely one of the great ironies of human nature that when our passions most severely disorient us, we are most positive that we see things clearly."[40] In other words, "man is not primarily a rational species, and . . . all our so-called logic is never more than a bright facade for murkier motives."[41] That "never more than"may be a bit hyperbolic, but perhaps the following universal claim is not: Reason is never free from the danger of infection by "murkier motives".

Gadamer does not place much emphasis on these "murkier motives", on the role of desire and emotion in shaping our presuppositions. But paying attention to them has been called the hermeneutics of suspicion, and it is a natural outgrowth of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, though it precedes

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[39] Verdon, *Peter Pan Must Die*, p. 172.

[40] Verdon, John *Let the Devil Sleep* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012), p. 92. This is a good analysis of the fundamentalist mind set both in politics and in religion.

[41] Verdon, *Peter Pan Must Die*, p. 43.

him in thinkers like the apostle Paul, Augustine, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.[42]

It's hard to defend the claim to be presuppositionless when the universality claim deconstructs itself into the hermeneutical turn. Does that leave us with a relativism that undermines the concept of truth, precisely in those areas closest to the heart of our humanity? I have no easy answers to this question, but for your consideration I offer the following thoughts.

1. We are relative. Only God is absolute. Any attempt to make ourselves absolute, individually or collectively is idolatry.

2. When it comes to our knowledge, there is a twofold biblical ground for affirming and acknowledging our relativity. In terms of Creation, we are finite and our knowledge is partial. We are not in a position to see the whole picture. In terms of the Fall, we are sinful, and our desires and emotions are contaminated before they contaminate our presuppositions.

3. The gift of biblical revelation does not eliminate either our created finitude or our fallensinfulness.

4. The solution is not to revert to Enlightenment arrogance and its claim to see the Whole without partiality in either sense of the term, partial as incomplete or partial as biased, distorted by self-interested presuppositions.

5. Nor is the solution to give up on Truth and revert to a tribalism that seeks only to score points against those whose interpretations differ from ours.

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[42] For an interpretation of the significance of the latter trio for religious believers, see my *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998). Also "Taking St. Paul Seriously: Sin as an Epistemological Category," in *Christian Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Flint (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), pp. 200-226

6. We can adopt a posture of double humility, reminding ourselves of the effect of our finitude and fallenness on our beliefs. We can get good at the hermeneutics of finitude and the hermeneutics of suspicion by practicing them on our opponents, but if finding the truth is important to us than discrediting them, we will practice hermeneutical critique on ourselves.

7. Finally, we will adopt a kind of biblical pragmatism. We will ask whether our interpretations make us more just, more merciful, more compassionate, in short, more loving. As Augustine says, "So if it seems to you that you have understood the divine scriptures, or any part of them, in such a way that by this understanding you do not build up this twin love of God and neighbor, then you have not yet understood them."[43]

But of course there are conflicting interpretations of how justice is to be reconciled with mercy and compassion and what love requires. It seems we cannot escape the hermeneutical situation with its reliance of presuppositions not established in some neutral forum. It seems that whether we inhabit a religious or a secular worldview, we walk by faith and not by sight.

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[43] Augustine, *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrine Christiana*), trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), p. 124 (Bk. I, 36, 40).