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ISBN 0 315-56327-3

NOTES ON THE OBJECTIVITY OF MEANING

<> Gadamerian Observations <>

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Thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of the M.A. degree in philosophy

University of Ottawa <> 1989



Edward Tingley, Ottawa, Canada, 1989.



UNIVERSITÉ D'OTTAWA
UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

Dedicated on a sidewalk of the past -
unreachable but mine:
now on a sheet of paper -
flat, white, square - things change:

to you,
who join both

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PREFACE <>

This is a thesis in philosophy, and it is philosophical in a way that any prospective reader might be fairly forewarned of. I have tried seriously to answer the one question I have asked: why do (and whether we should) we think of meaning as a kind of objective thing? I have gone about this, however, at a level of abstraction that I now feel calls for a word of explanation.

It makes some difference well outside philosophy whether we think of the meaning of a thing as objective (in the sense that I examine); a decisive answer would be very important. I now doubt that a decisive answer can be given in anything like the language that follows - except, perhaps, to philosophers. But because a certain type of mind thinks things through at the level at which they are addressed here (talking about analyzed abstractions like 'determinacy' and 'identity') I still hold out the hope that a certain type of reader might find the question answered, possibly even decisively. However, this could have no effect whatever on the deep cultural problem that I have tried to address. So I now think of what follows as notes on an issue that might in some other and better form be put to some real use.

A point about the construction of the thesis might clarify something that might otherwise remain puzzling. The subtitle says, rather strangely (because I couldn't think of a better way to put it), 'Gadamerian Observations'. What are Gadamerian observations and why does the name of Hans-Georg Gadamer appear nowhere in the main body of the text?

The problem that motivated this study is a very general and very important one: the problem of what is and what is not to be considered a legitimate interpretation of a thing (of a text, a work of art, an action, an era of your own life, ...). It is because this problem is very commonly settled in a

very general way, by appeal to the idea of 'objective meaning', that I made the objectivity of meaning the topic of a separate study, this thesis: I asked, why do we think of meaning as, in a certain familiar sense, objective? I didn't want to lose sight of this topic.

What I have to say about it, however, has been formed pretty much by reading the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, who I think offers almost everything one could want by which to address it. Because of this I have been able to make hermeneutics my sole positive source (hence the bibliography: though the issue is objectivity, it is comprised almost totally of works by and on Gadamer). What follows, therefore, is in a way a kind of exchange between Gadamer's hermeneutics, as I have understood it, and a prevalent and influential set of views (drawn from many of his critics) on the subject of the objectivity of meaning.

So I was interested in an issue, not a philosopher or even a contemporary debate, and I have altogether avoided discussing hermeneutics in the text just so as to keep this issue always in sight. The source of most of my thoughts has therefore been kept in the background - a feat I have accomplished by literally splitting the text: though much of what is said is due to him, Gadamer appears only below the footnote line. The notes carry on a kind of running commentary at a somewhat different level from the main text, because in the notes I wanted to do three things: make clear my debt, amplify my own discussion by drawing upon Gadamer, and clarify points in Gadamer's work that sometimes appear to be too obscurely understood. On this last issue a further word: in my opinion, attempts to make Gadamer accessible to English readers have too often left many of his central notions (the fusion of horizons, contemporaneity, occasionality, ...) too much in isolation from any issue but 'hermeneutics', where for analytic minds they have a very abstract air, and sometimes they have been simply misunderstood (his discussion of tradition). I have tried now and again to show just how simple and precise these notions are by situating them in my own discussion, which I have tried to carry on in a language wholly familiar to analytical thinking.

But this is not an exposition of Gadamer's hermeneutics. Since hermeneutics is not the issue, I have not restricted myself to what Gadamer has said (which of course is easy to get to know); here and there are thoughts and elaborations of my own that you may find nowhere in Gadamer.

'Gadamerian' means simply 'learned from': relying upon, on the whole faithful to, and carrying on from.

I find this thesis difficult to read, partly because of the genre, but partly because of the kind of effort put into it. Therefore I would like to record, for the benefit of conscience and memory, that, a thesis being what it is, it is often better to get on with things. I have put this in as good a form as it needs.

<> <>

Citations have been worked like this: references given with no author's name, in the following form - 1965 TM, 150 - are works by Gadamer and are listed in the first part of the bibliography; references as follows - Ricoeur 1973, 75 - are works (principally on Gadamer) noted in the second part. Any reference not in these forms refers to a source given in full in an earlier note. Internal cross-references are made as follows: 3.9 is chapter 3 section 9.

<> I <> UNDERSTANDING AND OBJECTIVITY

I Theory of Objectivity

I. The problem: objective understanding

The point of this thesis is to answer a question, a question that arises from thinking about the notion of objective understanding. It is my suggestion that a certain familiar conception of objective understanding, which we extend and apply to all sorts of situations, makes sense only on the basis of a particular philosophical theory, which I will call the 'theory of objectivity.' It is only on the premise of this highly philosophical conception of objectivity that objective understanding, as we often commonly approach it, makes any sense. We are not aware, however, that this isn't the only way that we think about 'objectivity'; you could say that this thesis is an attempt to distinguish two basic attitudes toward the concept of 'objectivity', so as to make possible a choice between them.

The 'theory of objectivity' that is the basis of one sense is so simple a piece of thought that to call it a 'philosophical' theory may seem almost an exaggeration - but it is not, since its substance came from Kant. The theory is the sum of three basic observations. First, that there are objects, autonomous things with natures of their own; knowing them means knowing something of this autonomous nature. Second is a corollary, that what belongs to this autonomous nature is not something produced by the subject - that is, the particular subject, that aspect of subjectivity that (unlike Kant's transcendental subject) is not universal but limited by human individuality: 'bad' subjectivity, as Paul Ricoeur called it, is individual subjectivity.¹ And

¹ Ricoeur's phrase comes from a discussion of historiography: "We expect the historian to have a certain quality of subjectivity, not just any subjectivity but one which is precisely suited to the objectivity proper to

third, it is a condition of knowledge that all those judgements that express the object will "agree among themselves" to achieve "universal validity."

This rudimentary critical distinction between two attitudes - objective and subjective - which took hold only after Kant, immediately provided the core of a theory of understanding that has since come to play a role in our approach to life. An objective attitude has become a necessary condition of any interpretation directed toward real understanding: to understand means directing oneself toward the condition of the object and suppressing one's own subjectivity (one's own categories, one's own preoccupations); anything else is projection, distortion. In the theory of the human sciences, for instance, this principle has been explicitly articulated ever since the nineteenth century; by now it conditions even our most basic conception of the understanding encounter between self and Other: subjectivity alienates you from the Other. To take an 'objective approach' has become a categorical principle of understanding in general.

2. Critical objectivity

Objectivity, like subjectivity, means more than one thing. The original distinction of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' had only a philosophical importance and a philosophical application, distinguishing mind and world. Originally, objectivity was simply a condition: the condition of objects, of things outside my knowing them. Objectivity marks a kind of ontological distinction between being in a mind and out: there is my awareness, the consciousness of a subject, and what lies apart from it, what is there to be aware of - the object itself. Though it didn't always carry a name, this distinction goes back a long way, as long as our recognition that the world and the world imagined are not the same. In this initial sense, what is 'subjective' can only belong to a mind, what is 'objective' can only be outside a mind. And only philosophers need to worry about what is where. It is a

history. It is a question, therefore, of an implied subjectivity, one that is implied by the expected objectivity. Thus we have a feeling that there is a good and bad subjectivity and we expect the very exercise of the historian's craft to decide between them" (Ricoeur 1952, 22, 25).

benign descriptive distinction, and a rather abstruse one, and it is not the sense we know best.

The other sense, which I am interested in, is already faintly implicit here. In just what way is it that the world and the world imagined are not the same? There is not only a difference between a mental world and a real world, sometimes there is also a discrepancy. There is sometimes a certain falsification or elaboration, a misrepresentation: something is attributed to the object that does not belong to it. Then subjectivity becomes a positive fictionalization of reality. Though he did not use the words, subjectivity and objectivity, divided by illusion, were made distinct by Galileo at the origins of modern science:

Many sensations which are deemed to be qualities residing in external objects have no real existence except in ourselves, and outside of us are nothing but names. ... Hence I think that those tastes, odours, colours, etc. on the side of the object in which they seem to exist, are nothing else but mere names, but hold their residence solely in the sensitive body.²

Heat and colour, for instance (except understood as inner phenomena) went onto a list of projections: "nothing but names." This is still really philosophy - for what other purpose would we need to remind ourselves that the 'real' world has no colour? - but we are making the transition to a sense of the distinction that is not just philosophy, and affects the world we really live in. For instance,

The study of art ... must be intolerant of subjectivity, it must aim at objective results.³

² From Galileo's Assayer; W.C. Dampier, History of Science, 4th ed. (Cambridge 1961), 134. On the origins of the distinction: "The distinction of our sensations from properties residing in external objects later became prominent in philosophy with John Locke's discussion of 'primary' and 'secondary' qualities. Galileo is often credited with its introduction. ... In fact the idea is much older, and Lucretius is probably the main source of its revival in the seventeenth century" (Stillman Drake, Galileo at Work: His Scientific Biography (Chicago 1978), 285).

³ E.H. Gombrich, "Reason and Feeling in the Study of Art," Ideals and Idols (Oxford 1979), 205.

Here objectivity is not the condition of things outside mind, but a way of seeing that a mind should manage; it is a matter of right representation. Objectivity is the condition of a perception or a judgement that represents the thing just the way that it is. What is objective is also true. In this sense a subjective remark, by contrast, misses things as they are: it represents not how something is but how it is not, and because of how it is seen - a judgement caught up in some limitation of the maker's way of looking at things.

'Subjectivity,' as it is called, clouds the eyes; we want to know how far our own individual deficiencies, and sins, and impulses, colour our vision. (1871)⁴

This is the sense of these terms that we know best, and for the reason that it keeps us, according to our efforts, in the world. It is a critical sense, whereas the original sense had no critical edge at all. So critical objectivity discriminates between a true reflection of things and an illusion laid before us by ourselves. A sense of objectivity is our only alternative to solipsism, to life in a fictive world; the world has its own colours.

Just for the importance it has come to have, this critical conception of objectivity - in the one term I include its antithesis, since there is no 'objectivity' without a sense of 'subjectivity' - is worth attention.⁵

3. The theory of critical objectivity

The history of the transition from the ontological sense of objectivity to the epistemological or critical sense is interesting and should clarify the distinction a little further. It might be imagined that a distinction as important as this would be very old, but it appears that we did without it

⁴ R.H. Hutton, Essays, Theological and Literary, I, 248; cited under "Subjectivity" (2), OED.

⁵ A more detailed account of the difference between these senses of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity', with a more concise presentation of the critical sense, is offered in the Appendix.

(as a distinction general and available enough to make a difference to the world) for a very long time. It was only when it appeared in the language of 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity,' in a work of philosophy that broke the bounds it set for itself, that the distinction took hold in human culture. And then it rooted very deeply. This happened with Kant. The story, I think, is roughly this.⁶ The transition from the original differentiation of mind and world, through a growing preoccupation with the gaps between them, to the presentation of subjectivity and objectivity as critical antitheses - opposed forces in understanding - is a steady development of the original observation, but it is a transition not without twists. 'Subjective' and 'objective' apparently came into use in the middle ages, when they distinguished things in consciousness from things in themselves. They did this for at least seven centuries, and, by an odd quirk, both words took their turn with both meanings.⁷ 'Subject' is from the Latin subjectum, a literal translation of the Greek word for essence, so 'subjective' originally meant as things are 'essentially,' in themselves. Things as they appear to us, as presented to us, were 'objective,' from obicere, meaning to set before.

Objective ... is used in the schools in speaking of a thing which exists no otherwise than as an object known. (1727-41)⁸

The switch in meaning followed the demise of scholastic philosophy, when the word 'subject' was available for other uses, and it was picked up for a notion central to modern philosophy, "the perceiving or thinking consciousness,"

⁶ I have pieced it together from the sources noted in this section.

⁷ The distinction was made, for instance, by Duns Scotus in the thirteenth century. Bernard Wuellner, A Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy, 2d ed. (Milwaukee 1966); Raymond Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (London 1983), 309.

⁸ Chambers's Cyclopedia of English Literature.

which was merely the contrary of its former sense.⁹ So 'subjective' now meant as received by the subject, and 'objective,' its antithesis, came to be its previous opposite: having to do with objects, things apart from us.

The idea may be considered in regard of its Objective Reality, or as it represents some outward object. (1662)¹⁰

In the pitiless examination of consciousness wrought by Cartesian philosophy, the disjunction between subject and object came to stand out rather more sharply than earlier, when some sort of harmony was easily presupposed. And if you pause here to consider the original distinction, the simple difference or distance between subject confronting object:

S > O

- wondering what it can tell us about our epistemological position in the world, and given a heightened awareness of the vulnerability of mind to deception - the critical sense of objectivity is already on the way. Seeing the world means transferring the world's objectivity to subjectivity: there is a kind of objectivity that the subject itself must manage. This was already plain to Cartesians and anti-Cartesians alike. For example Pierre Gassendi, in his objections to Descartes:

I am not bothered by what you call 'objective reality.' It is commonly said that external things exist 'subjectively' or 'formally' in themselves, but exist 'objectively' or 'ideally' in the intellect; and it is enough that you appear to follow this usage and mean simply that an idea must conform to the thing of which it is an idea. Thus an idea contains representatively nothing which is not in fact in the thing itself

As Descartes had put it in his definitions:

⁹ Descartes and all philosophy thereafter took subjectum for mind or ego. "Subject" (9), Oxford English Dictionary.

¹⁰ Edward Stillingfleet, Origines Sacrae, III, i, sec. 3. "Objective," OED; "Objectif, subjectif," Dictionnaire des sciences philosophiques, ed. M.A. Franck (Paris 1875).

Objective reality of an idea. By this I mean the being of the thing which is represented by an idea, in so far as this exists in the idea. ... For whatever we perceive as being in the objects of our ideas exists objectively in the things themselves.¹¹

The new sense comes out of the old one, reconsidered in relation to the problem of how we can truly know. But objectivity is already something more than the ontological condition of things themselves.

This increasingly remarked discrepancy between subject and object was still a fairly recondite matter. It was certainly of relevance to epistemological reflection, and it was a distinction worth making for the sake of science (or philosophical reflection on science), but it was of value for little else. The distinction and also its remoteness appear in Newton's Opticks of 1704:

If at any time I speak of light and rays as coloured or endued with Colours, I would be understood to speak not philosophically and properly, but grossly, and according to such conceptions as vulgar People in seeing all these Experiments would be apt to frame. For the rays to speak properly are not coloured. In them there is nothing else than a certain power and disposition to stir up a sensation of this or that Colour. ... Colours in the Object are nothing but a disposition to reflect this or that sort of rays more copiously than the rest; in the rays they are nothing but their dispositions to propagate this or that Motion into the Sensorium, and in the Sensorium they are sensations of those motions under the forms of Colours.¹²

In the philosophy of Kant, however, the distinction was placed right at the centre, in the language we are now familiar with; and what Kant made of it gave it genuine purchase on human life.

¹¹ Gassendi in the fifth set of objections, Descartes in his second replies, both in The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (Cambridge 1984), 74, - 199.

¹² Opticks: or, a Treatise of the Reflexions, Refractions, Inflexions, and Colours of Light (London 1714), 90-91.

Judgements are either merely subjective, when representations are referred to a consciousness in one subject only and united in it, or objective, when they are united in consciousness in general.¹³

Kant asked about knowledge and the relation of the mind and the external world. The whole argument of the Critique of Pure Reason, published in 1781, hinged upon a detailed explanation of the relationship between subject and object, clarifying the epistemological role of subjectivity in its relation to objectivity. And it was the tremendous influence of the Critique on nineteenth-century thought, far beyond philosophy, that gave these terms to society at large.¹⁴ It is only with Kant that the critical dichotomy of subjectivity and objectivity was finally and clearly delivered.

Kant's interest, however, was not the articulation of any theory of objectivity by which to guide an understanding of the world; it was metaphysics and the conditions of knowledge in general. But in the course of his analysis something was made clear about 'subjective' and 'objective' that gave these concepts a methodological importance which took them further than epistemological theory. Their critical value soon became clear.

Kant's issue in the first critique was whether metaphysics is a science, in the then traditional sense of an inquiry that affords knowledge. In dealing with the problem of metaphysics, Kant made subjectivity the basis of objectivity - which required that he explain their compatibility. This was possible through a discrimination within subjectivity, between a universal subjectivity that synthesizes intuitions into 'objectivity', and a particular and variable subjectivity that remains in opposition to 'objectivity' (a particular

¹³ Kant, Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics Which Will Be Able to Come Forth as Science <1783>, (Indianapolis 1950), 52.

¹⁴ On the origin of the English word 'objective' (as "external to the mind"): "This sense is occasional in writers of the later 17th and early 18th c. ...; but its current use appears to be derived from Kant, and to appear in English subsequently to 1790, and chiefly after 1817" ("Objective," OED).

subjectivity that was given most importance in the critique of judgement).¹⁵ In clarifying the dichotomy between objectivity and limited subjectivity, Kant laid out the material for what became a critical theory of objectivity, a theory affirming three important theses.

In Kant's solution there was more than a mere critical distinction; there was an implicit critical theory of objectivity. Implicit in the relation of the object to be known and the subject whose perception varies, which Kant had clearly articulated, is a set of conditions of objective representation.

... when a judgment agrees with an object, all judgments concerning the same object must likewise agree among themselves, and thus the objective validity of the judgment of experience signifies nothing else than its necessary universal validity. And conversely when we have ground for considering a judgment as necessarily having universal validity ..., we must consider that it is objective also - that is, that it expresses not merely a reference of our perception to a subject, but a characteristic of the object. For there would be no reason for the judgements of other men necessarily agreeing with mine if it were not the unity of the object to which they all refer and with which they accord.¹⁶

The three theses of the theory are all suggested in this passage. First, knowledge of an object concerns what belongs to the object. We try to apprehend an object with a nature of its own; when we succeed, our "judgment" or grasp of it expresses "a characteristic of the object." And in actual experience, this is a characteristic that belongs entirely to the object. It may be a deep level of mind that configures it that way, but it is an independent thing that is delivered to consciousness. Things 'as they are' is what transcendental subjectivity produces.¹⁷

¹⁵ That Kant did not pay enough attention to the epistemological position of this particular subjectivity was Dilthey's criticism: "No real blood flows in the veins of the knowing subject that Locke, Hume, and Kant constructed" (1965 TM, 217). It was Kant, however, who brought this aspect into prominence.

¹⁶ Kant, Prolegomena, sec. 17 (emphasis added).

¹⁷ "Only through the representation is it possible to know anything as an object" (Critique of Pure Reason, 78). In the world in which we live (no transcendental realm), objects are autonomous. And knowledge can "agree"

The second point is the corollary, concerning the other term, the subject. Knowledge does not express "merely a reference of our perception," revealing how we alone see (here it is individual subjectivity under discussion). What we know does not present something as it is just for individuals, it renders something as it is, according to its own nature (the subjective basis of objectivity is not individual subjectivity).

And last, it is a condition of knowledge that all those judgements that express the object will "agree among themselves," will achieve "universal validity." Their content is universally shared because it presents the object as it is, for standing behind all individual judgements is "the unity of the object." As Kant says, these conditions imply one another: the empirical givenness of the object implies the universality of knowledge, and vice versa.

Object: subject: universality. These are the three theses of a theory - a theory on a modest scale but one of radical importance, and that had never been made clear. There is more here than a distinction. The inherent relation of the subject, who was a limited subject, and the object brings with it a set of linked observations that clarify the conditions of knowing. This was very fundamental. The points, put again more simply, are these:

- (i) There is an autonomous object, and when we have knowledge of it, we know something that belongs to the nature of this object itself
- (ii) What belongs to an autonomous object is not something produced by an individual subject: the subject knows an object only when it does not contribute what belongs to itself; it must receive the object, as it is
- (iii) Knowledge is universal: when we receive what is objectively there, what belongs to the object, we will agree in our knowledge.

This is objectivity as we still understand it. It is worth recalling that in present usage the word 'objectivity' can mean either the first or the last of these theses - the condition of objects or the universality of knowledge.¹⁸ It

only with something that has qualities of its own.

¹⁸ Both theses are commonly articulated in current philosophical accounts of the meaning of 'objectivity', as is evident in the definitions cited on the last page of the Appendix. Another illustration can be found in

is this critical sense with which we are most familiar, and the familiarity-one might say the obviousness - of the notions that belong to it is only an indication of how much a part of our world it has become.

4. The theory and understanding

What does objectivity, in this critical sense, matter to us? It is the basic condition of knowing the world. Everything apart from us presents itself as an objectivity, not least of all other human beings: "objectivity is a being-in-itself and represents an 'other'."¹⁹ What the theory lays out are the basic conditions in which it is possible to know the world, given the finally recognized fact of an inherent subjectivity that influences our picture of the world. To know the world is the accomplishment of objectivity.

Objectivity is also an attitude - it is the very form of genuine experience, and not merely a standard for assessing the legitimacy of already made judgements about things. It lays out the approach to understanding the world as it is: to direct oneself toward the condition of the object, and to take distance from one's subjectivity. A positive principle, which directs one toward the conditions of things themselves, simply as they are,²⁰

and a negative principle, which directs one away from entrapment within the particularity of the subject. The theory made clear the sense of this primary disposition.

On the face of it, this may seem rather vague counsel, but it is not as empty as it sounds. What does it mean, 'to move toward things as they are'?

Mandelbaum 1977, 146-50.

¹⁹ Bleicher 1980, 30. The treatment of subjectivity and objectivity through the development of Idealist philosophy in the nineteenth century finished by stressing the notion of "objectivity," "the alien" that opposes the subject. Social reality, the realm of meaning, was understood as such an object. (1962 PFT, 115)

²⁰ "The demand that thought immerse itself completely in the objective content of the thing and leave its own fancies behind" (1962 PFT).

The positive principle simply argues respect for what is Other - to recognize the 'objectivity' of the other is not an attitude of exploitation;²¹ in fact, in the origin of the theory, it was quite the opposite:

The meaning of this antithesis of thing and person is found originally in the clear priority of the person over the thing. The person appears as something to be respected in its own being. The thing, on the other hand, is something to be used, something that stands entirely at our disposal. Now when we encounter the expression 'the nature of things,' the point is clearly that what is available for our use ... has in reality a being of its own, which allows it to resist our efforts in unsuitable ways. Or, to put it positively: it prescribes a specific comportment that is appropriate to it. But with this statement the priority of the person over the thing is inverted. In contrast to the capacity persons have to adapt to each other as they please, the 'nature of things' is the unalterable givenness to which we have to accommodate ourselves. Thus the concept of the thing can maintain its own emphasis by demanding that we abandon all thought of ourselves, thereby even compelling us to suspend any consideration of persons. ... This is where the exhortation to objectivity ... originates.²²

Respect for what the other presents and the subordination of the self. The entire theory, simple as it is, and including its methodological side, can be condensed to a virtual symbol:

$$s < k-O$$

The subject, diminished before the object, receives the knowledge that it delivers, and what it receives is an understanding of the object's autonomous nature, which remains the same understanding no matter who stands in the position of subject.

Though it had hardly been Kant's interest to lay out steps to knowledge, a critical theory of objectivity with basic methodological implications was implicit in his analysis of the concepts of subject and object. The Idealism spurred on by his transcendental subjectivity did not survive, and Kantian

²¹ To treat the alter as an alter and to treat her as a 'thing' are two distinct senses of object.

²² 1960 NL, 70.

philosophy has remained philosophy, where it has kept to itself. But the theory of objectivity that Kant's readers uncovered in his works was of immediate extension to the world - especially to the understanding of the human world. The importance of the theory of objectivity is its methodological significance for the process of understanding. It suggests how the world can be understood. It directs us to turn toward the condition of the object - the other, the thing that we want to understand - and, in order to make this possible, to suppress one's own subjectivity.²³ Here the guidance of critical objectivity has had some effect, and still serves us.

²³ The modern conception of understanding: "dividing the hermeneutic problem in terms of the subjectivity of the interpreter and the objectivity of the meaning to be understood." (1965 TM, 277)

2 Objectivity and Meaning

1. Objective understanding and objective meaning

The idea of objective understanding is meant to discriminate; under the guidance of the theory 'subjective' approaches ought to be systematically eliminated, and by now an objective attitude is almost a condition of true experience. What I would like to ask is, what really is this categorical discrimination based upon? Given how it is applied, perhaps this might be a good thing to be sure of. If understanding was placed in the hands of a philosophical theory of objectivity, it may be important to appreciate exactly why.

Of course the answer is that the theory applies to understanding. But why does it apply? For the reason that the meaning of things - the meaning of things like gestures, actions, linguistic expressions, and works of art - is taken to be a form of objectivity that fits the theory of objectivity. Meaning is a sort of cognitive object: a thing possesses a meaning; its meaning is there in it like a determinate object. The reason that we can talk about objective interpretation is that meaning is objective. This alone makes it possible to bring to bear a theory of objectivity in order to understand. It is not only things that have objectivity.

For instance, there is "objectivity as the otherness of the meaning to be arrived at."¹ And things have meaning; the meaning of a thing belongs to it. The meaning in a thing is there as a part of its identity. "If history

¹ Betti 1962, 57.

does not objectify itself in some sense, perhaps in loci of autonomous textual meaning, then how can we know anything of the past?"² To understand a word, an historical document, an action, is to uncover this meaning already there: "historical interpretation ... is concerned with the investigation of the finalized meaning of a segment of the past."³ It is just this condition of self-subsistence that is articulated in the first thesis of objectivity: there is an autonomous object, with a nature of its own. And it is the fact that this condition applies also to cases of meaning that the theory of objectivity applies. Meaning belongs to a meaningful thing as a part of its autonomous nature, and the theory makes clear what, as a result, our relation to it must be:

s <m-O

The subject receives the meaning that is there, and it is the same meaning no matter who understands it: "one and the same sense for all men in all eyes."⁴ Understanding is the recognition of an autonomous thing.

It is this fact of the objectivity of meaning that makes the idea of objective understanding sensible. And it was the recognition of this fact that made the interrelations spelled out by Kant - the set of observations that makes up what I have called the theory of objectivity - applicable in the human sciences, in the case of understanding and interpretation. It is because meaning is recognized as something that fulfils the conditions of objectivity (as something to which the first thesis of the theory applied) that objectivity became a matter of relevance to the human world.

² Wachterhauser 1981, 117.

³ Betti 1962, 83.

⁴ Kistler 1972, 196.

So objectivity guides understanding and interpretation because the meaning of things is thought to have a kind of objectivity. This philosophical premise stands behind the very notion of objective understanding. Only given this can a theory of objectivity have anything to say about understanding. Granting the objectivity of meaning, then, is the initial step to the notion of objective understanding, and what I would like to ask is, on what basis do we make it? What is the reason for this crucial belief, without which the theory of objectivity does not apply to understanding, does not govern it, does not marginalize subjective approaches to interpretation? Why simply do we think the meaning of a thing is a kind of object to be grasped by a passive subject?

This is the question that the following study attempts to answer. I intend in all of what follows to concentrate upon the ground for this one extension of the theory of objectivity, whereby meaning too is counted an object. It is an attempt to understand the notion of objective understanding with a care proportionate to its role in marking out our proper relation to the world.

This won't be to ignore the other theses of the theory, since the three parts are bound up together in a way, I think, that is very reliant upon the first. That subjectivity is to be suspended is implied by the fact of objectivity; but it may also be the case that neither comes before the other, that they are joined (it was the discrepancy between thought and world that brought the theory into existence - which means the recognition of both at once). But if they come together, they also go together. Without the object thesis there is no thesis of limited subjectivity - limited with regard to what? The last thesis concerns the universality of meaning, and Kant explicitly noted the link between this and the autonomy of the object: if it were not that an object stood before all of us just as it is, "there would be no reason for the judgements of other men necessarily agreeing with mine."⁵ The relation is different than with subjectivity: here objectivity is plainly prior, since not even universal agreement makes

⁵ Prolegomena, sec. 17.

something so. If these are the links, the thesis of objectivity is the key thing to examine; the other points won't stand without it.

2. . A distinction: thing and meaning

A certain distinction will be useful in dealing with the problem. According to the notion of objective understanding, the object at which we direct our understanding is a meaning. But meaning also belongs to things- meaning is always the meaning 'of' something, interpretation, the interpretation 'of' something. In fact this link with a thing is crucial to the idea of the objectivity of meaning: objective meaning is not just a meaning there, as if meaning were a kind of free-floating entity, it is the meaning that something possesses; it is the meaning a thing truly has, the meaning of the thing itself.⁶ In what follows I will call what has a meaning, just for simplicity, a 'thing' - and perhaps this will seem less crude if you remember the phrase 'the meaning of the thing,' which makes the point by itself. A 'thing' considered together with its meaning is a 'meaningful thing'; but that manifest part that has a meaning, considered alone, I will call a 'thing.'

With one qualification, this will not seem too simple. A 'thing,' in this technical sense, needn't be what we would normally call a 'thing' - a material object, something that fires the senses. Of course it can be: it can be a sound or something heard (a spoken word, a piece of music), a visible sign or something seen (a written word, a motion of hands), something felt (a bump on the shin in the dark). But it can just as well be something as already understood. An already interpreted thing may have to

⁶ "We must, in general, carefully keep ourselves from confusing, on the one hand, the support of perceptible material instrument, which- however evanescent or lasting it may be - belongs to the dimension of the physical world, which serves more or less as a vehicle, with, on the other hand, the mental endowment entrusted to it; an endowment, with symbolic force, which is, so to speak, held fast, incorporated, and fixed in this material support; an endowment whose content of mind and thought belongs to a dimension radically different from that of the physical world" (Betti 1955 EL, 30).

be further interpreted. The thing half of one meaningful thing might itself be the meaningful thing of some prior thing, if that is not too confusing. An example should make this clear. The pressing of hands means a handshake of farewell; but this already meaningful thing that is the handshake (a gesture invested with 'farewell') can mean something further: a reconciliation, an astonishing triumph over pride.⁷

(meaningful thing)	
(thing)	(meaning)
touch of hands	farewell
farewell	reconciliation

The point of making the distinction is that talking about meanings alone would not make it easy to discuss objectivity, since a meaning has objectivity only by virtue of belonging to some concrete thing: it is a meaning the thing 'possesses,' a part of the thing's own nature.

3. Facts of objectivity

The principal question to be asked is this: what are the reasons that lead us to recognize the objectivity of meaning? The approach I will take to answering this is to run through systematically all the arguments that I have come across in support of this view. I have drawn these arguments from what is effectively a current debate over the issue of the objectivity of meaning: they have been made in opposition to a sustained

⁷ As with the handshake at the end of Chekhov's story "The Duel" - the unforeseen farewell of one man who had hated another. "Silently he shook Layevsky's and his wife's hands and went away feeling heavy at heart.

"What people!" the deacon whispered as he followed the others. "Heavens, what people!" Solemnly he continued, "Von Koren, you should know that today you overcame man's most powerful enemy - pride!"

critique of the objectivity of meaning in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer.⁸ Despite his critique of the theory, Gadamer has not altogether undermined confidence in it, and what is continually brought out against his claims are the facts behind the thesis, the reasons why meaning has objectivity. It is these that I would like to examine.

The part that follows considers the most direct argument, which is that there are three simple and undeniable facts about sure cases of meaning that simply demonstrate the objective nature of meaning. What makes it evident that meaning has its own objectivity is the way it possesses features of true objects. Consider the following.

An 'object' is a fully determinate state of affairs whose being and intelligibility exist prior to the investigation and which may be discovered and described as it is in itself. The rational defensibility of any discipline has seemed to many to rest on the assumption that there is some intelligible 'fact of the matter' to be discovered and which, moreover, can be described in terms which in no way alter or contribute to what is there prior to the discovery. The object is simply there, waiting to be uncovered in terms completely adequate to the things themselves.

When we ask whether textual interpretation necessarily presupposes such 'objects' we are asking whether the meaning of a text is a fully determinate state of affairs simply awaiting discovery and description in terms which in no way constitute or alter what is there.⁹

An object is something that has a nature of its own; it has its own "terms." When we know something about things, we know about this nature. From this, three particular features of objectivity naturally follow.

An object is something determinate. Its nature is not something un-

⁸ Principally in Gadamer's main work of 1960, Truth and Method: Fundamentals of a Philosophical Hermeneutics (1965 TM), not altogether reliably translated in 1975 (the subtitle of the original was somehow omitted in the translation).

⁹ Wachterhauser 1986, 440.

defined or incomplete but settled; it is a "finalized meaning,"¹⁰ "a fully determinate state of affairs." It could hardly have a nature of its own if this were a blank that waited to be filled in. It possesses its own nature no matter where: "one and the same sense for all men in all eyes."¹¹ Interpretations that vary according to circumstance, saying different things to different interpreters, are not 'the meaning of the thing' but something else.¹²

Since this meaning is its own, the object is autonomous in its meaning: finite texts are "loci of autonomous textual meaning."¹³ The meaning of a thing that has meaning depends upon nothing outside it; nothing 'contributes' to or 'constitutes' it. If the nature of an object were to be filled in only according to the setting it is in, or by its various perceivers, its nature would not be its own; the object would lose the autonomy of its own character.

Also, an object that is an object has identity. So long as it persists, it persists the same. If its character were to change, it would cease to be the thing that it is. "A determinate entity is what it is and not another thing."¹⁴ It is because these three features have all been located in the condition of meaning that a meaning is recognized as an

¹⁰ Betti 1962, 83.

¹¹ Kisiel 1972, 196.

¹² This is the long-standing distinction made in traditional hermeneutics between meaning and significance. "The fundamental distinction overlooked by Gadamer is that between the meaning of a text and the significance of that meaning to a present situation" (Hirsch 1967; 255).

¹³ Wachterhauser 1981, 117.

¹⁴ Hirsch 1967, 249.

objective entity. What is delivered in genuine understanding is a true object, a thing with a settled nature of its own, autonomous of our individual subjectivity; meaning is such an object. But we can look at these arguments one by one.



<> II <> THE OBJECTIVITY OF MEANING

3 Determinacy

1. The fact of determinacy

The idea is to run through all the reasons why we consider the meaning of a thing to be an objective thing. Foremost among these for philosophers are some very basic facts about the condition of meaning in meaningful things: certain basic facts surely tell us that meaning is objective. The first of these facts let's call the fact of determinacy, which is the simple fact that if a thing is to mean something, it must mean something in particular - its meaning must be determinate as long as it means anything.

Why is this self-evident, why do we say this?

2. 'Things possess something'

First, determinacy is surely implicit in the very condition of a meaningful thing, that a thing has a meaning - how else can we think of the meaning of a thing but as a quality that it possesses? The meaning that it possesses is surely something determinate. Could a thing possess or communicate a meaning that had no definition?¹ The meaning that is the meaning of something belongs to it, and to belong to it it must already have a shape. Which makes it, however complex its conditions, a form of objectivity: a thing has a meaning that has a shape of its own; there is a meaning there

¹ "Determinacy is a necessary attribute of any shareable meaning, since an indeterminacy cannot be shared" (Hirsch 1967, 44).

to be "discovered and described as it is in itself." There can hardly be any other way to understand the idea 'the meaning of a thing.'

3. 'You understand something'

Here is a second reason: knowing means knowing something; knowing the meaning of something means knowing something that is there to be known. If meaning were not already determined, what would we try to understand? What of an indeterminate state exists to be understood?² It makes no sense to talk of any 'genuine understanding' of something not already there to be understood.³ The language we use to talk about understanding - to 'understand what was said,' to 'see what is meant,' to 'convey the meaning of the passage' - all presents the same image: an individual consciousness inclining toward a meaning (a kind of object) that is there to be known. An object is a condition of the possibility of anything called understanding: understanding requires something concretely there to be grasped.⁴

4. 'If meaning is not already there, interpretation is just invention'

Another point, this time negative. If meaning is not determinate, interpretation is a kind of invention - that is the only alternative. Interpretation either renders a meaning (there to be rendered) or it invents

² "Determinacy ... is a quality of meaning required in order that there be something <for the interpreter> to reproduce" (Hirsch 1967, 44). Also Carr 1979, 141.

³ "It is of decisive importance for our critical considerations to state that it is the determinacy of its content that lifts the object of our value judgement out of the sphere of mere 'empathy' and on to that of knowledge" (Betti 1962, 67).

⁴ Carr 1979, 145.

this meaning. The content of interpretation is either already determined or it is invented. But interpretation, we can be sure, is not invention.⁵ If it were, we would manage it quite differently. Interpreting would be as free as creation. The simple grammar of the word is against this: 'interpretation' is not like 'making' but like 'finding.' You 'interpret' what already exists. Why would we pretend that things have meaning, if all we really did was invent 'their' meanings? What is the sense of 'careful' or 'respectful' interpretation, and how could a creation be false, the way we know interpretations can be?⁶ And we also say, when we have understood something important - have not only understood the meaning but are compelled to agree with this thought that we had never formed for ourselves - we say that we accept it, that we agree with it. And being in agreement means that there is something there with which to agree.⁷ So interpretation is not creation; it renders. It attends to something we want to understand; it follows something, it does not flare out on its own. Because interpretation uncovers a meaning, a meaning must have a form to be uncovered. So the very sense of 'interpretation' implies an object.

5. But determinacy where?

The very condition of understanding requires an object, a determinate object whose nature is already settled - "a fully determinate state

⁵ Interpretation is not a "variety of changing experiences whose object is each time filled subjectively with meaning like an empty mould" (1965 TM, 104).

⁶ Wachterhauser 1981, 117.

⁷ Larmore 1986, 162.

of affairs whose being and intelligibility exist prior to the investigation and which may be discovered and described as it is in itself."⁸

The object, of course, that is meant to play this role is the meaning of the thing. All of these arguments are arguments for the objectivity of meaning. But maybe we ought to raise a question about this. If some sort of object is implied, is it really meaning? After all, we have had to start out by making it plain that meaning is only half of the meaningful thing. When we say just that 'things mean something' we are talking about two dimensions, things and their meanings. They are distinct aspects - the gesture and its meaning: sometimes we see no meaning at all; we can only give back the motion, which is everything that we have seen.

So it ought to be asked, which of these two is the object that interpretation requires? Is it conceivable after all that the definition interpretation requires is not in the 'meaning', but in the 'thing' that means? After all, the interpreted thing very commonly has objectivity - it is just its sort of empirical givenness that the notion of objectivity came from. The one clear objectivity is the thing. Things have a precise and definite form: the unexpected but palpable embrace, the words that were spoken, the semiquavers in the score, the painted hands with the branch of olive, The determinacy of meanings, on the other hand, is a lot less easy to see.

Is the determinate object implicit in interpretation according to all the above remarks the 'thing' that is interpreted or the 'meaning' of the thing? In other words, are all these undeniable facts evidence, really, for the objectivity of meaning?

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6. 'Determinacy extends to meaning'

The starting point of interpretation is plainly the determinate thing; it is the thing that interpretation sets out to interpret. Understanding you

⁸ Wachterhauser 1986, 440.

can imagine as a kind of seamless transition from the determinacy of the thing you start with (the embrace) to meaning (farewell, reconciliation). Understanding is tracing a single continuity from the dimension of the determinate thing into the dimension of determinate meaning.

So, there are these two further facts to consider: the initial determinacy of the thing, and that in interpretation, between this determinacy and the end point of meaning, nothing happens to suggest that at some moment we have left the realm of objectivity. There is no limit sign ('you are now leaving Objectivity') that tells you that meaning is beyond objectivity, is anywhere you want to go. In the transition from thing to meaning, no sign tells us that the meaning we end with does not belong to the objectivity we began with, the simple 'thing.' There is just the immediate seamless understanding, the objective fact of the embrace, the meaning of forgiveness. If we begin with a determinate thing, and if in the transition from the thing to its meaning there is no moment that advertises that we are leaving anything behind, then it is only natural to suppose that the meaning we must end with will be as determinate as its substrate. If meaning is an extension of an objective thing, it shares its determinacy.

So the continuity of meaning with a determinate thing is good reason to say that the determinate object interpretation implies is more than just the thing: it is an entire determined nature that extends from the dimension of things right into the dimension of meaning.

7.2 'Objective things determine objective meanings'

We seem to have good reason to argue that, even if they are distinct aspects, the thing that is an object and the meaning it possesses do not belong to separate realms - one objective, one not. What we are interested in is the thing in its meaning, the whole meaningful thing, and nothing suggests that this thing has only some partial objectivity.

Meaning is not something separate and additional, variable where the thing is fixed: it is not like the colours that one determinate chair can be painted and repainted. What is merely added is freely added, and we know that interpretation is not like this. Interpretation follows the contours of a

determinate thing (reading the text, looking at the picture), and it is this set thing that determines the meaning.

The part of a meaningful thing that is meaning is just an extension of the objectivity of the mere thing. It is an extension of the determinacy of the thing in the same way as the colour of a thing is an extension of its determinacy - it is like the green of the emerald, determined by structure of the stone.⁹ So interpretation is like light, and meaning like colour, possessing the objectivity of colour.

If prior to interpretation there is no meaning evident in the thing itself, this is not because an objective meaning is not there, and has to be constituted by interpretation, but because we are not looking so as to see it. There is no colour in the dark, because no colour is visible without light; only when you shine light on the thing can you see the colour that it has. Interpretation is merely a condition of seeing a meaning already there. The predeterminate meaning of a thing is just revealed by the light of interpretation; meaning is a facet of determined nature that the act of interpretation merely makes visible.

8. 'The determinacy of meaning is revealed by the fact of misinterpretation'

It might appear, to argue against the objective view, that the prevalence of subjective interpretations is a decisive indication that there is no objectivity of meaning, but the easy reply is that this is merely the typical confusion of practice and principle. The argument goes like this. The

⁹ The subjectivity of colour noted by Galileo and Newton is, after all, a subjective experience determined by the objective structure of the thing: "Why do so many things 'have' a particular colour?" - which is to say, a determinate colour? Because of the nature of the 'thing': the electron clouds of its material can absorb some of the photons of ordinary light, and shift into an alternative structure; but only a certain shift is possible, "a given material can absorb photons only of particular energies" - which means that it subtracts only certain colours of light from the spectrum. ("So the characteristic colour of an object, in daylight, depends on the wavelength needed to produce a readjustment of electrons, because it is these energies which determine the composition of that remaining mixture of light which enters our eye and causes the sensation of colour" - Hazel Rossotti, Colour (Harmondsworth 1983), 39-42.)

determinacy of things is obvious, bound up with their givenness for all alike: everyone describes the gesture the same way, sees the letters that are there, reads the same words, points out the same figures and strokes of paint. There is determinate fixity.¹⁰ But meaning is exactly the trouble area in the realm of objectivity. Where interpretation is an issue we don't find those conditions of agreement that distinguish objectivity; we agree about things, but about their meanings we more often differ. In the transition from the determinacy that is known to all to the meaning of the thing, we lose unanimity - which seems to suggest that at the meaning end of the continuum there is no determinacy at all.

That is the look of it, but the absence of universality can certainly be explained in another way. Do we lose unanimity in interpretation because there is no determinate meaning to be found, or just because we have lost our way in the transition from the thing? All that the disagreement tells us is that the objectivity of meaning is not in plain sight. And it is easy to explain why: the hermeneutic instrument is not perfected. Misinterpretations only give the illusion that there is no determinacy of meaning.

The fact that light contributes to colour, and interpretation contributes to meaning, doesn't show that there is no objectivity. This fact - that interpretation may bring something with it - is just the problem to which objectivity is the antithesis; the fact of subjective interpretation hardly weighs against it. The colour analogy just needs to be properly managed: there are false meanings, just as there are false colours. It is right to call coloured light biased. There is objective interpretation, like the pure untinted light that shows the true colour of the stone, the dress, the face, to reveal what meaning a thing possesses. And if interpretation is an element or a condition of the manifestation of meaning, it should bring only what can find this meaning. That anything can pass as interpretation has nothing to tell us about the objectivity of meaning. The determinacy of meaning can't lie open

¹⁰ This is the link that Kant observed between determinacy and universality. But what is the relation here? Kant appears to have said that we know a thing is there as an object because we all see it in the same way: is universality perhaps a condition of objectivity?

like the determinacy of things simply because interpretation is a more tenuous process, easily in error.

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9. Colour and meaning

These three further observations¹¹ are reasons not to think that the objectivity implied by interpretation belongs to the thing alone, but is shared also by meaning. But then they are not really 'observations', decisive obvious facts, because we can explain things also quite differently.

It is quite true, the colour analogy needs to be properly managed, and it is easy to be loose with it - for instance, to be simplistic about the conditions that 'truly' determine a colour. It is all straightforward to imagine meaning fixed by the determinacy of the thing, like colour by the structure of the stone, and merely exposed by the light of interpretation. Colour is not produced by a substrate alone, but in a condition of light. But what truly determines it in the condition of light? Of course, we imagine, just the structure of the thing. Genuine interpretation is just seeing the meaning that is determined by the structure of the thing; it is there like the colour of a stone in unbiassed light. But even the colour of a stone before it enters the light is not altogether there. 'Light makes colour visible, but also makes colour colour (what is colour without light?). In what sense can you really say that colour "pre-exists" light? And why is it necessary to attribute all the power of determinacy to the objective structure? Why should the light (or the interpreter's share) play no role in determining what meaning is really there? For meaning to be meaning it has to be known, and only being known gives a meaning whatever determinacy it can be said to have. Meaning is

¹¹ In 3.6-8.

really a dimension of things that can be manifest only in awareness, colour only in light.¹²

You might want to say (pushed by what commitment?) that interpretation is a condition only of the knowing of a meaning, not of its being, since meaning is there already in potentiality in the thing (things and their colour-potential). But then we are no longer talking about the 'fact' at issue, which is determinate meaning: the determinate colours that mere 'colour-potential' can produce is effectively dependent upon light, and this is just the point that objective determinacy is supposed to counter. Interpretation is a necessary condition of the being (and not just the manifestation) of a determinate meaning.¹³ Meaning beyond a mere inchoate potential, meaning with any definition at all, comes only in awareness and simply cannot pre-exist it. To have the character that makes it a meaning it has to be known.¹⁴ Meaning cannot pre-exist awareness with any determinacy; a concretely determined meaning can only be the outcome of the material to be received and its reception by an interpreting mind. Light makes colour colour more than it makes it visible.

So, to be fixed a priori by the nature of a thing is not the only way in which a meaning can truly belong to a thing. Just to gain the determination of meaning that it requires, a thing has to be interpreted. And this is not a

¹² This is partly what is stressed in Gadamer's discussion of the play aspect of art: art includes as part of itself the involvement of the spectators; "artistic presentation, by its nature, exists for someone"; this is the "transformation into structure" whereby a mere text becomes "a work" (1965 TM, 98-99). "The idea of a work-in-itself, divorced from its constantly renewed reality of being experienced, always has something abstract about it" (1965 TM, xix) - that is, it has the same peculiarity as the idea of the inherent colours of things, exclusive of light.

¹³ The work needs the temporal occasion of its presentation in order to be; this is what Gadamer means by occasionality, which is a lack of absolute autonomy (1965 TM, 130).

¹⁴ Bernstein 1982, 89; Bleicher 1980, 30.

matter of invention or completion or constitution - all of which imply that what is there is somehow supplemented¹⁵ - but of epiphany: in and with the light that shines on it, the thing shows, in a way produces, its own colour. In the light of a particular interpretation, the thing reveals and in a way creates its meaning.¹⁶

10. Objective colour.

So if colour is not produced by a substrate alone, nor by conditions of light alone, but by a substrate in a condition of light (by an objective thing in a subjective act of interpretation), how given this mutuality do we figure out what is the 'true' determinant? Because, as we know, there are also false colours. If we can distinguish false colours we can locate what makes them false, and find the determinant of objective colour. What produces the objective colour that the thing possesses?

The answer to this seems pretty clear. There is only one structure, but many kinds of light to go with it. The two randomly taken together deliver many colours, but we don't want to say that a thing has many colours (what colour is an emerald but green?). The problem is therefore the light that is needed. We don't want to say that colour is determined mutually by light and structure because that would mean ascribing to things too many colours. And since we can't pretend that colour is determined by structure alone, we want to say there is a certain kind of light that reveals the colour that is inherently determined by the structure of the thing. The question then is, what is the right light, the one that shows the true colour of the thing?

¹⁵ 1965 TM, 511 n. 26.

¹⁶ This production and bringing into being through interpretation is what Gadamer means by the ontological aspect of understanding, understanding as an "ontological event" (1965 TM, 419). To me there doesn't seem anything abstract or tenuously metaphysical about this sort of claim when it is understood this way (versus a criticism made by Nordenstam, who disputes also that the being of a work of art is not separable from its interpretation - Nordenstam 1984, 26).

Now it has just been made clear that there is no 'inherent colour,' colour prior to light, so there is no colour for any particular light to 'bring out'. But do we really want to say that a thing has its own colour in one light alone, or only in a certain narrow range of light? That would seem a rather arbitrary solution. Which light reveals true colour, and why that one?

The problem is that once colour ceases to be the exclusive possession of a thing that has colour, it appears all of a sudden as if the thing could have no determinate colour at all, and would change from light to light - that a thing could have any colour, or no 'real' colour of its own. And since this does not seem to describe the experience we have of things, we are pushed to reject the conclusions just reached. But something has gone wrong in this response. The trouble is that we are pursuing the struggle of one determinant against the other; either we push to this conclusion (giving all determinacy to light) or we fight against it (giving it all back to the thing). This is a mistake; it ignores something that happens to be vital to the fact that emeralds are green, period.

The colour that an emerald has, itself, irrespective of any false reflection, projection, and so on, is an issue only in a certain situation, and that situation within which it is an issue has its own solution. Most things 'have' their own colour in daylight, because that is the kind of light that we are used to, and that for most of our purposes is adequate. Beyond this - maybe for jewellers - there are perhaps other tests of the 'true' colour of the stone. There is more to the issue of 'true' colour than mere structure and light.

Analyzing the determination of colour (meaning) into a mutual interaction of structure and light (thing and interpreter) seems to contradict the fact of 'true' colour (true meaning). But all that has happened is that we are forgetting the further and peculiar conditions in which the problem of 'truth' arises, and we are overlooking the further considerations that in those situations single out one kind of light (one kind of interpretation) as true. Does a thing have its own colour in one light alone? The colour a thing 'has' and the light that is 'true' depends upon more than just what determines what.

So meaning has the objectivity of colour. Only 'objective' colour is not something one-sidedly determined by structure, nor two-sidedly determined by structure and a certain light that co-operatively 'reveals' the colour that the

structure inherently possesses (which is still perfectly one-sided - they 'co-operate' in the one submitting to the other). Objective colour is any interaction of structure and light that satisfies certain interests we have in the colour of things. The condition of colour is certainly limited by the inherent fixity of the structure, which alone cannot render only a single colour - cannot render any colour at all: colour is determined in accord with what light reaches this structure: and if whatever results from their meeting is to be called 'objective colour', then there is bound to be some special set of human concerns, projects, considerations that will decide the issue, and narrow 'true' colour to colour in a certain light. There is no sense whatever to the idea of 'inherent objectivity', either in colour or in meaning. 'Objectivity' itself (as in the objectivity of colour) cannot be understood according to the theory; the subjective situation of interpretation contributes something even to objectivity.

11. Disparaging the interpreter

The objectivistic explanation offered for the fact of the diversity of interpretations was that we have trouble interpreting. This is a fair suggestion, but it ought at least to be noted that in an objective framework a lot more is being said than that we have trouble. If there is really a determinate meaning, most interpretations in the variety that there may be will be simply wrong. Objectivism has a very negative edge, and it cuts further than we think. Determinacy means not only the mutual exclusion of interpretations that are in logical opposition (the meaning of suffering: God or no God), but even the elimination of difference. The meaning of 'the determinate event itself' cannot be endless, and the whole tendency of objectivity is towards narrowness. (It does not mean the elimination of all difference of interpretation; perhaps there could be a determinate range of meaning - though it is not really clear how, if it is simply the thing alone that is to determine its meaning.) Determinacy implies a limit of meaning, not

an open extension.¹⁷ How much this limit excludes is not clear in general; but it has to exclude a great deal just to preserve the very idea of determinacy: to be determinate is to be distinctly this and not that.

Determinacy undoubtedly excludes much in the range of meaning found in things through the passage of history, among the many who interpret it at any time, and even by oneself in the course of one life. This means pretty much that most interpretation is in a state of error. This is a hard fact about objectivity that shouldn't be overlooked. An alternative view less pejorative about our capacities might be more comfortable, but that is not how facts work. That objectivity is harsh is certainly no argument against it.

But there may be a mistake in extending to meaning itself determinate conditions of objectivity that are appropriate only in some situations of interpretation. When is it an issue to be decisive about what colour, say, an emerald is or is not? Or what colour her eyes are? (How many colours of eye are there? Brown, blue, and green - that's all. But this is mistaken: not three, period, but three 'for ID purposes.')

And is it ever an issue to know the true colour of some things? It might be a very bad thing to associate determinate exclusion with meaning in itself - with all situations of interpretation - if the idea of determinacy were an element of only some particular conditions.

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12. Mutual determinacy

The analogy of colour makes it clearer how meaning is not determinate without the involvement of the interpreter. There is no colour without light, and there is only colour according to the light. Except there is also only colour according to the structure of the thing. So that meaning,

¹⁷ "To say that verbal meaning is determinate is not to exclude complexities of meaning but only to insist that a text's meaning is what it is and not a hundred other things" (Hirsch 1967, 230).

like colour, is the result of a kind of mutual determinacy: it is the effect of the light on the thing, and the effect of the thing in the light. There is no reason to favour one side or the other.

Meaning can only take a concrete shape, become more than a mere potential, with the involvement of an interpreter.¹⁸ And interpretation is not simply passive; the interpreter is not a mere rendering device, so that one could say that nothing is brought to the thing. In attending to the thing, the interpreter brings out this identity through his own understanding.¹⁹ But nothing is added to it; in what is brought it is the thing that reveals itself. The interpreter does not supply a content that is somehow lacking. If the thing were truly incomplete, it could be filled in in any way at all - like a sketch that can be finished this way or that, and so made into something it originally was not. This is no analogy of interpretation, because in interpretation what is given and what is brought to it are of different orders. What is given is left untouched, unaltered; nothing is added to it; the interpreter never lets go of the nature of the thing as he encounters it.²⁰ Of course there is a condition here for the manifestation of true meaning, and that is that the structure of the thing be truly part of this mutual interaction.

18 This, I believe, is what Gadamer means by the "transformation into structure" that takes place in the encounter with a work of art: in its dependence upon interpretation, the thing manifests the meaning aspect of its nature, realizes itself as a meaning and achieves a level of its own being. "It is the complementary nature of the two sides ... that we seek to underline" (1965 TM, 99-100, 105).

19 "Contemporaneity <a legitimate seeing from one's own point of view> is not a mode of givenness in consciousness, but a task for consciousness and an achievement that is required of it. It consists in holding onto the object in such a way that it becomes contemporaneous" (1965 TM, 112-13).

20 The validity of an interpretation is limited by (Gadamer sometimes says is ensured by, but he should make clear that this is a necessary rather than a sufficient condition) the condition "that it contains a relation to structure itself <the thing quality of the work> and submits itself to the criterion of its correctness" (1965 TM, 85, 109).

This marks a difference between the cases of meaning and colour: the structure of a stone is a passive participant in the process of being illuminated, whereas the structure of a poem has to be sought by the interpreter and found. So it is a condition of the true revelation of meaning that the interpreter 'see' the thing that is to be interpreted. But if he does, surely a genuine meaning is revealed in whatever light he brings.

The concrete determinacy of the meaning can only be the outcome of a relation between the material there to be received and an interpreter who truly receives it, but in any way that he truly receives it. This is not any relation, since to be the interpretation 'of the thing' the interpreter has to give it attention and see it. But when this happens it is the meaning of that thing that interpretation unfolds. It is the meaning of the thing itself that the determinate thing realizes through the interpreter. The light that understanding requires is not the single fixed light that shows up always a single colour - a predetermined object of meaning inside the thing - but any light that can illuminate what is simply there. Meaning is the result of a mutual dependency: the interpretation that needs the determinate thing, and the thing that needs the interpreter. Like colour, the union of light and form.

The interpretation that renders the meaning of the thing is what fits itself most perfectly against all the determinacy that is evident. Every interpretation that does this is a realization of the meaning of the thing itself. It only has to be remembered that the idea of the 'meaning of the thing itself' has sometimes a very limited purpose. There are also situations where for some particular purpose not just any form of interpretation is going to reach a certain kind of meaning sought, in just the way that in some situations not just any light will serve the purpose of 'showing the colour' of the thing. But the 'meaning itself' is exclusive only for this particular purpose, not absolutely. It is often forgotten that the 'genuine meaning' in this case is determined also relative to a certain aim, so that it isn't at all necessary to establish this meaning as exclusively pre-determined by the nature of the thing; there is no need to objectify it in this way.

13. What the fact of determinacy is, and isn't

It makes sense to call meaning a "fully determinate state of affairs whose being and intelligibility exist prior to the investigation." This is a way of saying that the thing possesses a potential for a determinate meaning of its own that cannot be freely projected onto it by circumstantial kinds of interpretation. A meaning 'pre-exists', however, not as determinate, but as a potential for determinacy that requires the contribution of the interpreter. There is no other sort of predetermined meaning that can be inferred from the determinacy of phenomena. The meaning that the thing has the potential to determine in the light of a particular interpretation is surely a meaning that it can be said to possess - even to possess already (and why not already?). But alone it possesses nothing more than the potential of a precise and determined meaning.

It makes sense to say that the meaning of a thing "may be discovered and described as it is in itself." This is to say that it is a potential 'brought out' in interpretation, and not something that is projected. It is produced by the interpreter, but in the sense of being drawn out, not in the sense of being fabricated.

Meaning has a determinacy corresponding to the determinacy of the thing: determinacy is the limited potentiality of meanings that can be revealed by this thing. The idea of determinacy is important both because it acknowledges the primacy of the thing to be understood, which is what guides the transition to meaning, and because it recognizes the real and actual constraint that the thing to be understood can have on the range of possible understanding. But for all that, it is determinacy only in the light of interpretation. Determinacy 'of meaning' is only the determinacy of actual interpretations, what the definite nature of the thing realizes through the interpreter. It is plain that this is not the determinacy of an 'object.' For meaning to be determined, interpretation is necessary; and because it is concretely determined in a process of interpretation that depends upon subjectivity, it is not an object. The determinacy of a meaning is not the determinacy of an object, because in the relation of true interpretation the meaning of a single thing can change and vary. The determinacy that accords with the theory of objectivity is fixed, but there is no simple fact about the meaning of a thing that requires it to be eternally one.

What are the appropriate conclusions? The 'fact of determinacy' is not, in the end, a basic fact about meaning that demonstrates the objectivity of meaning. It is really an exaggeration of certain aspects of the situation of interpretation into false generalities. The confusion can be cleared up if one is a little more cautious about the general conclusions one is willing to draw and if one pays closer attention to what we mean by some of the things we do say about interpretation and meaning.

Of course it is true that things have meaning, and 'things possess something,' and it is true that when you understand 'you understand something'- but the something meaningful things possess and that interpretation understands is not a meaning predetermined without any reference to the interpreter, as a purely objective content.

And it is not true that 'if a determinate/meaning is not already there, interpretation is just invention.' Interpretation is bound by the objectivity that there is - the determinate form of the thing to be interpreted - and in doing so realizes in its own terms the meaning already held by the thing in potential.

And why do we want to say that 'this determinacy of the thing extends to meaning,' and that 'objective things determine objective meanings'? This is just a typically philosophical confusion of the plausible and the sensible with the obvious and the real.

And while the fact of conflicting interpretations can easily be taken to show that the objectivity of meaning is hard to see, it can also suggest, especially if the objectivity of meaning is a weakening conclusion, that things naturally manifest their own meanings, in the varying approaches of different interpreters, in different ways.²¹ The determinacy recognized by the theory has its place, but has been misunderstood, and correcting the misunderstanding

21 "Gadamer never decides to definitively develop his hermeneutics in the direction of either objectivism or relativism <the relativism that is implicit in allowing interpretation to realize meaning>. The ambiguities of his position lead me to believe that an attempt to read him as a rapprochement between these positions will not succeed" (Wachterhauser 1981, 126-27). But a rapprochement between objectivism and relativism is precisely what happens when one takes care to understand in what way there is objectivity, in what way relativity.

does not leave behind an 'objective meaning,' at least according to the theory of objectivity. There is a determinate thing, which is of special importance, and there is a limit of meaning in accordance with the determinacy of this thing - but there is not a predetermined meaning. Meaning cannot be predetermined where an interpreter is required to co-determine it; the actual limitation of meaning comes about within this relationship, not prior to it. The determinacy that is reason to recognize the objectivity of meaning is really only possible given the participation of subjectivity.

Adherence to the thing is a realization of its meaning. When an interpretation follows the nature of the thing in order to understand it, it is its meaning that we uncover, even though this meaning depends upon what we bring to understanding - not forgetting as well those qualifications by which some forms of understanding will be inappropriate to certain ends of interpretation. Objective meaning is the meaning that is revealed when the thing is truly recognized - and, for narrower purposes, when it is recognized in the light of the appropriate approach of interpretation. There can be a multiplicity of genuine meaning without any damage to the important sense of 'objectivity'.

When the determinacy that belongs to interpretation is properly understood, there is no fixity of meaning to make an object of, and the entire relation upon which a theory of objective meaning is based is missing: an object of meaning in opposition to subject. Meaning is not an object; it is the product of a special relation between subject and object.²²

²² What has been called "the essential tension in Gadamer's work"- whether a text is autonomous or exists only in an interpretation (Wachterhauser 1981, 114) - does not seem to involve tension at all.

4 Identity

1. The fact of identity

There is a second fact about the condition of meaning that philosophers insist shows the obvious objectivity of meaning. We can call it the fact of identity. If a thing truly possesses a meaning, this meaning has to endure as a single self-same meaning from one interpretation to another, and unless it does, we make nonsense of the fact that we are always interpreting the same work.

The idea of the single meaningful thing implies a sameness of meaning. A single meaningful thing cannot have the variety of meaning that follows from the mutual determination of meaning (according to the last chapter) and still remain the same meaningful thing.

The arguments go like this.

2. 'One thing, one meaning'

It is a question of the relation between the thing and its meaning. As we fully recognize, the determinate thing has identity: it endures as itself, a self-same thing, a phenomenon with a lasting sameness.¹ But then the thing is not the whole that we are interested in; we are interested in a thing and its meaning. If the thing alone had identity, what relation could it have to 'its' meaning? If the meaning of a thing were not simply a part of a single

¹ In 3.5.

identity, we wouldn't say the thing had a meaning to be uncovered. Meaning would not belong to it, but be a separate entity unto itself. And if that were so, interpretation could no longer be the understanding of a thing's meaning; interpretation could ignore the thing. But this is plainly not how interpretation works.

The one identity must enfold the meaning too: it is the identity of the 'meaningful thing'² that is at issue. If the thing has a meaning that truly belongs to it, the thing and its meaning are united in a single identity. The nature of interpretation implies an identity of meaning and thing.

But identity precludes the possibility of variety. Identity is singleness: determinate singleness is part of the concept. The idea of the thing - the one work, the single meaningful action - implies a meaning that belongs to this unity without variety.³

3. 'Enduring thing, enduring meaning'

To make a further point, identity precludes the possibility of variety. Identity is not only singleness but self-sameness, enduring singleness. The singleness of the thing - the one work, the single meaningful action - implies a meaning that belongs to this unity and endures without variety. The very fact of communication implies it.

If verbal meaning is to be shareable it must be 'determinate'; that is, it must be self-identical and unchanging.⁴

² As explained in 2.2.

³ If the interpreter has any role in the determination of meaning, "then this raises questions concerning in what sense if any we can speak of the same text, the same 'universal thing'" (Bernstein 1982, 109). Identity has also been called the problem of "repetition": "how one and the same message is always understood differently" (Kisiel 1972, 200).

⁴ "If a meaning were indeterminate, it would have no boundaries, no self-identity, and therefore would have no identity with a meaning entertained by someone else." (Hirsch 1967, 230, 44)

When interpreters address the single phenomenon but deliver different meanings, can this variety really represent the meaning of a single thing? Can an identity vary in this way? It can't: one meaningful thing and many different determinations of its meaning is a virtual self-contradiction.⁵ If there is a self-same thing, from one interpreter to another, there is also a self-same meaning, from one interpretation to another; variation within an identical meaningful thing is inconceivable.⁶ So for a poem to exist as itself, it must exist in time and for all persons, and to exist this way it must remain the same poem, and because a poem is inherently meaningful, it must always carry the same meaning or cease to be itself, cease to be a meaningful poem - cease, in short, to be. In other words, identity is a conceptually necessary fact about being: it requires determinacy intersubjectively and through time - in fact it is really a further argument for determinacy.

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4. But what sense of 'identity'?

The idea of identity in these facts has actually been rather

⁵ It is considered a "fatal contradiction" of hermeneutics to insist upon the identity of the work while identifying the meaning of a text with interpretations that can vary. To allow this array of meaning is to abandon the idea of the identical work - it is to suggest that every interpretation produces a new work (Wachterhauser 1981, 101-03, 111). It is not possible that "a written text has a self-identical and repeatable meaning and ... the meaning of a text changes." "Such a conception really denies the self-identity of verbal meaning by suggesting that the meaning of the text can be one thing, and also another different thing, and also another; and this conception ... is simply a denial that the text means anything in particular" (Hirsch 1967, 45, 251-52, 255).

⁶ "Gadamer ultimately fails to present us with a convincing account of a text's identity which somehow underlies all its many varied historically influenced interpretations" (Wachterhauser 1986, 440, 455).

confused. It is true that a self-same thing is implicit in the idea of interpretation, but what does this really tell us?

The original thing offers an unchanging identity: there is one text behind each interpretation of that text. This is a condition very important to interpretation, and it is taken to have a decisive significance for the nature of meaning.⁷ But what does this really imply about meaning? Though it may be the same physical painting or a finite witnessed event that we each interpret, the original thing is only part of what matters. The mere thing on its own is nothing: the material is not the work of art, nor the acts the historical event. What matters is the 'meaningful thing': the thing in its meaning. Both together, not even the meaning alone: the thing is not simply discarded at the point of meaning. In the plainest case,⁸ it makes no sense at all to divide the painting as a meaningful work of art from the painting that is an arrangement of pigments. The meaningful thing comprises both: the paint belongs to the painting, the actions done to the event.

So it first seems to be clear that the identity that interpretation implies is the identity of the whole: to interpret a thing one has to arrive at the meaning that belongs to (is part of, linked to, one with) that thing. As was noted above in articulating the very issue of identity,⁹ in interpretation what is important is to ensure the unity of the meaningful thing - that thing and meaning are aspects of the same whole. And this so far indicates the singleness of a whole, not a singleness of meaning.

⁷ For instance Wachterhauser (1981, 100). "We need some notion of a text's identity which makes the claim that different interpretations of a text refer to the same text intelligible. Gadamer, unfortunately, has not done this"; it is "a key problem" of his hermeneutics" (Wachterhauser 1986, 454).

⁸ Perhaps it isn't always both that matters.

⁹ In 4.2.

5. Unity and singleness

But does the fact of unity imply singleness of meaning? The question is, can meaning vary within this single whole? Can varied meanings belong to the same work? The idea of one work of art seems already to imply one material thing (one configuration of paint) plus one interpretation (one equally set and limited range of meaning).¹⁰ If the one meaningful thing is both the thing and its meaning, perhaps it is natural to suppose a balance between them: one identical thing in two realms (the realms of thing and meaning) but simple at each pole - like a post driven into the ground, two simple single extremities. So, one thing, one meaning.

But is this really obvious; is it self-evident or is it a presumptuous simplicity? The sense of identity that matters is the unity of the whole, and there are other figures of unity spanning two dimensions (the one parsnip root buried in the ground: the many many stems of parsley above: but a single plant). Why should simplicity at the phenomenal pole be found also at the meaningful pole? What matters to 'identity' is that the two ends are joined.

The problem is this. The implicit identity of the whole implies the singleness of the meaningful thing - we have to talk about 'the same work.' But then to talk about the condition of meaning we break the meaningful thing into thing and meaning - and imagine that we have to find the same singleness in each part, or the unity of the thing disintegrates. This is the kind of confusion to which abstract thinking is prone. The self-sameness of a work has to do with a single whole, not simple parts.

6. Identity in difference: festivals

The confusion is only hidden more deeply when the issue is treated as a manifestation of a deep philosophical problem, the problem of identity in difference, a problematic paradox. But in precisely this area, the area of

¹⁰ Wachterhauser argued that unless the interpretation is the same, it is not the same law (a single meaningful thing) that is applied from case to case (Wachterhauser 1981, 88). It is the identity of the whole, the law, that matters: the mere text, the thing, cannot even be applied; loose readings, on the contrary, have no authority.

things and their meanings, we already know that it is not a real paradox. We already have plentiful experience of single things with manifold meaning, difference within a single identity.

We can see there is no problem here because we already recognize the compatibility of difference and identity, and we know this by the example of festivals. Each Christmas or Easter, it is always the same festival that is celebrated though the celebration must always be different.¹¹ How is this so?

We imagine that for it to be Christmas, there must be some fixed aspect, some invariable set of necessary or sufficient features that make it so - the basic ceremonies of the festival. It is some set of features that makes it the same - perhaps any from a large assortment (the time of year, many possible rituals, and so on; and it is only their general aspect that matters - you don't need to put up the same tree each year). So the fact of difference in time - the fact that the celebration is never really repeated, that the rituals vary and are experienced quite differently - does no harm to the identity of the occasion because of this core that is always present. This is the fixed nature that makes each Christmas Christmas. This everpresent core is necessary to identity, since any celebration realized differently on each occasion could be "the same in name only."¹² Well, this is how we think it must be. But what about the real case? Perhaps there is often such a core, and in those cases it may be just this continuity that secures identity, but there is often no common thing present in every celebration. For instance Christmas. No selection from some basic rituals are part of every celebration of Christmas (not even the date is a necessary condition). And if it isn't this that accounts for identity, perhaps it isn't some other thing either: perhaps there is no one

¹¹ "The festival exists by being always something different" (1965 TM, 511 n. 31). It is Gadamer who has brought this case to light; in my opinion his discussion of the festival is meant precisely to eliminate the problem of identity that is an ostensible argument for the objectivity of meaning.

¹² Wachterhauser 1981, 120.

way to account for the identity of a festival.¹³ There are other things that can sustain identity outside an unchanging core, and one of these other things is what makes the paradox of identity in difference soluble.

Sometimes what makes a festival the same festival is some original thing that in each celebration is 'observed' by those who celebrate it, and observed in many different ways: Christmas as the festival of the birth of Christ. This is not an unchanging constant that is a manifest part of the ritual, since this original thing is not even really there - a festival arises to 'commemorate' it precisely because it is not. This aspect of commemoration (which, it should be noted, is a kind of relation to what is observed) may be a constant of the ritual, but it is not for that matter the missing condition of identity. Why? The relation of observance is not what makes each Christmas Christmas, but just what makes each Christmas a festival. It is just criterial of a certain kind of festival, in general. What makes Christmas a holiday (of a sort) is a certain relation to an original event, and what makes it Christmas is the particular event it observes.

So what does it take to make this holiday always the same holiday?: a particular relation to the unchanging thing that the holiday observes. All that it takes to be the same is the relation to the original - the relation of observance - but observance is a general relation that can be effected in many different ways.

In fact, the case of the festival is not an analogy of interpretation, it is a real example of interpretation. Without speaking loosely at all, one can say there is a 'text' for a festival, an 'object' of the celebration: the birth of Christ, the death of Christ, the record of the Gospels. This is no less true of many very ordinary festivals: the celebration of a birthday, whose modest

¹³ This is a nuance not made by Gadamer, whose way of countering is often to talk about the essence of phenomena like the festival or play. For this "ontological" approach Gadamer has been sensibly criticized (Nordenstam 1984, 24, 26); it might be preferable to talk only of alternate cases. But the force of the criticism is often misunderstood: the critique of essentialistic oversimplification does not affect the argument; what Gadamer needs to show is not that is the essence of the festival to vary, but just that the identity of a festival is sometimes secured despite real difference. That alone shows that determinacy is not a condition of identity.

'text' is a single important fact - 'she was born.' It isn't as if this original thing is the real holiday, every commemoration being a kind of false copy. We call each Christmas Christmas, not the echo of some real Christmas.

It is the relation to this text that secures the identity of each instance of the festival: when the celebration respects its text (and in a way that is not predetermined by a fixed set of rituals) we know it is genuinely itself-Christmas, or Easter. Not everyone's Easter is the absolution of human imperfection - perhaps, rather, the suffering of a mortal Christ, the promise of resurrection, or just hope. But at the centre of every Easter is the 'observance' of the same event: the crucifixion. The relation to this centre makes everyone's manifestation of Easter the same festival, the same festival as always. The manifestations differ, but that each is focused on the original event - the 'object' - ensures that it is an instance of the identical festival. And what is there about these repetitions that we would want to call "the same in name only"? The phrase attaches to festivals where there is no common observance: the Easter of the death of Christ and the Easter of chocolate eggs.

So in these cases there is a condition that effects identity: a relation to the object. It is the actual observance of this central event that makes each occasion a repetition of the same festival. Identity is secured not by identity or sameness in the celebration - the repetition of a fixed ceremony - but by the existence of a relation to an unchanging object, by the fact that each celebration addresses itself to what it has always celebrated.

So - and this is the simple point of this discussion - we are already familiar with identity in difference: a single entity formed of an aspect that is strictly given (the focus of the festival) and an aspect that is varied, because it demands the particular and present observance of this aspect (the particular celebration of the holiday). The holiday is an identity formed of both, the actual observance of the thing as determined by the participant.¹⁴

¹⁴ "A festival exists only in being celebrated," which is to say it is something not predetermined like an object. "An entity that exists only by always being something different is temporal in a ... radical sense"; this, Gadamer claims, is the condition of everything that is to be understood (1965 TM, 109-10, 511-12 n. 31). It might just be added that it is not only time that alters: at one time, even in one place, there are many celebrations of Easter that are each a celebration of Easter.

The unchanging observed event is the object interpreted; the manifest celebration is an interpretation of the meaning of the original event (for instance, the interpretations of Easter mentioned above), and it varies according to the beliefs of the celebrants. So there is nothing contradictory, especially in cases of meaning, about the idea of identity in difference: one festival that is the relation between a unified thing (the object of the festival) and a varied meaning (the actual celebration).

Possibly, this is characteristic precisely of 'meaningful things'; that is, this relation to the object is a characteristic condition of interpretation. 'Observance' is a basic fact of the situation of all real interpretation - addressing oneself to the thing to be observed (painting, poem, piece of music), giving it one's fullest attention.¹⁵ To interpret is to accommodate the nature of what one observes; and if one has addressed what is there, the meaning that one finds - even if, in the particular light of one's way of seeing, it is different from the sense of others - this meaning is genuinely the meaning of the thing. And all these varied interpretations are bound together as meanings of a single thing, faces of one meaningful identity. Identity is secured in the satisfaction of this relation alone.

So identity and difference are not always in conflict. Here is difference that does not contradict identity. It is no figure of speech that we call different celebrations 'the same' festival. The conditions of identity are different here than elsewhere - how wearing the 'same' clothes as yesterday means no change - and since there is more to the world than things maybe this should be no real surprise.

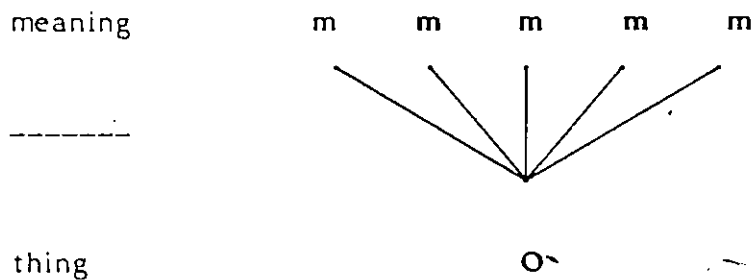
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¹⁵ This is a feature of interpretation that is crucial to the argument of 'autonomy' discussed in chapter 5.

7. Meaning and relation: perspective

A meaningful thing - a thing and the meaning that belongs to it - has a relative aspect, because it requires a relation with an interpreter to be realized as a meaningful thing. A meaningful thing is a thing interpreted - something looked at from the realm of human understanding, which is to say in the terms of an individual understanding. And an individual understanding is a particular way of seeing, an individual point of view that delivers a meaning according to that point of view. What this means is that it can be seen differently. A meaningful thing is in part inherently varied; it remains one thing with an aspect that varies.

You can think of this as the colour of a thing in a certain light, or you can think of the analogy of perspective. Interpretation is seeing a thing as it appears from a point of view: the difference of the point of view producing a difference of meaning, the existence of many points of view producing an array of meaning.¹⁶



¹⁶ Gadamer's notion of horizon is explained by this analogy of perspective: "We define the concept of 'situation' by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision.... The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (1965 TM, 269). "We accept the fact that the subject presents itself historically under different aspects at different times or from a different standpoint. We accept that these aspects do not simply cancel one another out as research proceeds, but are like mutually exclusive conditions that exist each by themselves and combine only in us" (1965 TM, 252).

But the whole schema is one identity, the phenomenon and its meaning.¹⁷ That each variously interpreted meaning belongs to the thing - is a facet of the thing rather than being detached from it, foisted upon it, a meaning not its own - depends upon the nature of the relation between them.¹⁸ That the array of meaning belongs to the one thing inheres in the relation, not in the identity of all interpretations with each other, in some core of meaning they all share, or in their correspondence with a hidden meaning somewhere 'there' in determinate potential (which is actually a contradiction) within the thing, waiting to be realized as a meaning. No definite meaning needs to be found and delineated so as to make all interpretations interpretations of the same thing.¹⁹

17 The interpretation cannot be separated from "the work itself"; in varying interpretations the identity of the work remains (1965 TM, 107). "We ask what this identity is that presents itself so differently in the changing course of ages and circumstances. It does not disintegrate into the changing aspects of itself so that it would lose all identity, but it is there in them all" (1965 TM, 108, 359). "The fact of the matter is ... that the experience of art possesses various different degrees of explicitness and awareness; and this in such a way that it is the work of art itself which displays itself as one and the same in and through all these forms of experience < - approaches or methods work like perspectives >. The contribution of technical scholarly methods may be grasped adequately as only bringing specific perspectives to bear on the work of art, for example, by locating it within its more general context of social history, or explaining its linguistic usage in the light of a universal history of language, or casting light on its artistic form in terms of art history or, e.g., the aesthetic theory of genre" (1981 CT, 328). The perspective taken upon the thing seen is always a perspective on that thing, and this legitimacy of perspective is what is involved in Gadamer's notion of contemporaneity.

18 It should be obvious that 'the meaning' of the work is not the entire "never-exhausted array," which would make every single interpretation not the meaning at all - as understood by Hirsch (1967, 249). All that is at issue is just what meaning truly belongs to the identity of the thing. Only if you still wanted the limit of the meaning would you have to include everything.

19 Is it really contradictory to allow, as Gadamer does, that true interpretations of the same thing can lack a common meaning (as claimed by Hirsch 1967, 251-52)? That Gadamer offers no way of identifying the identity, the commonality, shared by all true interpretations (Wachterhauser 1986, 452)

8. What the fact of identity is, and isn't

A notion of 'identity' is implicit in the fact that we interpret always the same work, the same meaningful thing. But the condition of identity interpretation implies is, very simply, that meaning must belong to its object; it must be properly part of the meaningful thing. A meaning belongs to the thing if there is a sound relation between them, if the interpreter sees the thing that he is given.

Identity is also the link between a determinate thing and its meaning, and this is certainly a fact that the nature of interpretation presses us to note. But this gives us nothing that implies how many meanings the thing might have. (To make a chain, the links have to be joined: but how many rings must there be in each link?)²⁰ The 'meaning' of the thing itself can vary between interpretations, because the condition of meaning requires what the subject brings.²¹

What is at last clear is that the appropriate sense of identity makes no requirement at all of a determinate 'self-same' identity of meaning - a fixed meaning that mirrors the fixed nature of the object. That only an already finite meaning can truly belong to a finite thing is an entirely different condition of identity that the identity interpretation compels us to recognize

is not at all surprising when the identity relevant to interpretation is properly understood.

²⁰ In other words, this isn't something to be worked out by thought.

²¹ This is the sense of Gadamer's often misunderstood remark, "We understand in a different way if we understand at all" (1965 TM, 264). The meaningful thing "determines itself anew from occasion to occasion"; "it is its own original essence always to be something different"; "the identity and continuity of the work" are left open (1965 TM, 107, 110, 130-31, 511 n. 27). This difference within identity is an important feature of what Gadamer intends by the contemporaneity of all meaningful things: the work of art that "says something to each person as if it were said especially to him, as something present and contemporaneous"; the work of art "holds its word in readiness for every future" (1976 AH, 100, 104). "The discovery of the true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished" (1965 TM, 265).

does not imply at all. There is no logic whatever to the extension of one sense to the other; this exaggeration into singleness is not even required for the identity of things. (What colour are her eyes? Blue - like ice, like the sky, like slate, like lapis? Or are they grey, or even green? Of course they are none and all.)

Under the spell of more simple things we want to split these deceptive 'identities', into the thing and what is not the thing: the true colour and the relection of the sky; the festival itself and its mere celebrations; the true 'meaning' of the thing and its 'significance' to interpreters.²² Is there more than a mere echo of the problem of essence and accident here? The line that is found between the two is not just there, but has to be laid down. The true colour of eyes? We learn the 'essence of things' where only one face counts, and where only one face counts life has, and maybe for good reason, narrowed itself ('control' in science). But that this seems to teach us what identity is is only the spell of the normal.

A self-same identity of meaning is not a necessary aspect of identity, and maybe for good reason. If there were an already determined meaning to be reached, what would this do to the identity of the whole? Then there would be two objects each determined in its own way: a thing and its meaning. Of course there is in some sense a real difference between thing and meaning; but from this it doesn't follow that each is a kind of separately fixed entity, each determinate in its own realm. And if there were two set faces, one of then is expendable to interpretation: the thing becomes only a kind of container for another determinate object. Interpretation pushes past the husk of the determinate thing to find it. This no longer sounds like a condition of identity at all; the whole figure is no longer what matters.²³

²² Because Gadamer does not, it is commonly said that his 'analogies' of identity fail (festival, or musical theme and variations) (Wachterhauser 1986, 453-55).

²³ In music, for example, 'content' "is contained, not as a necklace in a box ... but as an electric current in a wire: if we touch the wire we shall get a shock, but there is no way whatsoever of making contact with the current without making contact with the wire" (Deryck Cooke, The Language of Music <Oxford 1959>, 199). And once you have let go, it is no longer

It is because only the thing is determinate that the identity of the whole is preserved.¹ Meaning follows from the determinacy of the thing in the transition that constitutes interpretation. Knowing the condition of meaning means seeing what the thing will determine, not positing a second object: it has what meaning it makes. And why should a single determinate thing not produce an array of meaning?

Once again, what are the conclusions to be drawn? No contradiction at all is forced by the notion of identity that belongs to interpretation. The trouble is a certain slippage in what we mean by identity; precisely how identity is relevant to understanding is too often confused. It is the stability of the unified thing to be interpreted, its self-same endurance, through one interpretation to another, which makes all a thing's meanings its own. And it is the binding of interpretation to this thing that realizes the meaningful thing that is the one piece of writing, the one meaningful event, the one work of art. It is the nature of this relation that makes this identity real, one thing formed of the unity of a given thing and its meanings.²⁴

Nothing in the idea of identity necessitates that meaning must share the simplicity of things.²⁵ "A determinate entity is what it is and not another

there.

²⁴ "It is part of the historical finiteness of our being that we are aware that after us others will understand in a different way. And yet it is a fact equally well established that it remains the same work, the fullness of whose meaning is proved in the changing process of understanding" (1965 TM, 336). "It is the same work that remains and perdures in its varying interpretations through changes of time and circumstances" (Kisiel 1972, 200).

²⁵ The worry that if the text were not fixed in meaning we could not all understand the same text (Wachterhauser 1981, 119) follows only from pressing upon meaning the conditions of identity of empirically experienced objects.

thing."²⁶ This is true of objects, but the identity of the whole, if interpretation accommodates the thing, sustains difference without becoming something else. One work of art, one historical event, one human being, and all the ways in which they are truly understood (the "thousand facets of the Torah," in the ancient exegetical proverb). A single meaning can belong to a single thing without having to be its only possession. There is really nothing inconceivable about a single identity that includes a thing and a varied meaning, and this identity does not require an inert inner meaning that sits there like an object. A single thing in the realm of meaning can be, not simply appear, manifold.²⁷

²⁶ Hirsch 1967, 249.

²⁷ There is finally no contradiction in claiming that "a written text has a self-identical and repeatable meaning and ... the meaning of a text changes" (according to Hirsch 1967, 255). What changes is the sense of the thing; what does not is its identity with the thing - this sense always belongs to it.

5 Autonomy

1. The fact of autonomy

Interpretation requires an autonomous object, an object that exists independent of the interpreter, something that has a nature independent of subjects who interpret it: this is simply "the true binding nature of the work," "the compelling quality of the work," which everyone who has thought about interpretation acknowledges.¹ Meaning itself has autonomy. The work that binds us in interpreting has autonomy, and because meaning is a part of this autonomous thing, it shares in this autonomy.

We know that meaning has autonomy in an even more direct way: meaning is 'there,' it is 'meaning in itself' that guides interpretation. It is what is referred to by the simple expression 'the meaning of the thing itself,' which is a fundamental and inescapable regulative ideal of all interpretation.² Unless meaning were autonomous, interpretation would be pure invention. And this is why it is important to insist upon the "semantic autonomy" of all things

¹ Among them Gadamer (1965 TM, 106-07), as has seemed contradictory to some (Wachterhauser 1981, 121, 125-26). It is this autonomy that Gadamer refers to in claiming that a work seems to interpret itself: "in the representation the unity and identity of a structure emerge. To be dependent on self-representation is part of its nature" (1965 TM, 109).

² Carr 1979, 145.

with genuine meanings.³ Autonomy is an aspect of the idea of an object that must therefore be shared by meaning.

2. 'Interpretation finds meaning'

It appears even as if the process of interpretation itself demonstrates the autonomy of meaning. Interpretation is a cognitive process that deals in meaning: if it is not to invent, it must search out the meaning still hidden in the thing, take it in, and deliver it finally to consciousness. Interpretation is the transmission of an autonomous meaning to consciousness.⁴

But this, one might say, is really more theory than observation. In what is truly obvious of the process, all we are aware of is that we attend perceptively and thoughtfully to the thing to be interpreted, and that at some moment meaning is given: we understand. In revealing this meaning, what does interpretation actually do? However much we may be looking for meaning, what is involved in interpreting gives us no sense of searching for something - we are interested (perhaps for very definite reasons and very different ends), we look at the thing or we go over the facts, and we think about what we see - but we are not really searching for something. We examine the body looking for the symptoms, not the disease. We look at the gesture, more carefully at the expression of the face - what does he mean? We recall exactly what happened. But before already understanding, we have no contact with any self-subsisting meaning. The 'experience' of 'taking a meaning in' is only a logical interpolation between understanding and an autonomous meaning that has already been presumed.

It may be, nevertheless, that meaning is present unknown to us until the moment when interpretation is complete: interpretation is a process that picks

³ Wachterhauser 1981, 96.

⁴ Human creations "are all objectifications of mind, which, since they were at their origin imprinted or molded by a mind, thus depend on the collaboration of another mind, which in the present may find, know, and awaken these forms" (Betti 1955, 35).

out of what we see the meaning that is there, possessed by the thing, but that, without interpretation, is not conscious to us. It might be pictured something like this (awareness is the bold type):

object ▫ subject

O/m > (perception) > O(m) > (interpretation) > m

The meaning is there, already finitely, contained in the object that we see; perception by the subject grasps the object, then interpretation grasps the meaning; and in this way we become aware of meaning, know it, and understand.

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3. The meaning of things

If there is autonomy, is it really an autonomous meaning that constrains and guides and prevents interpretation from being mere invention or projection? This process account is still only a hypothetical way of explaining interpretation; rather than uncover pre-existent meaning, it simply accommodates it. It takes the autonomy of meaning that is implied by the idea of interpretation (the thing itself that guides interpretation) and rather loosely concludes that since interpretation produces meaning, it must be meaning that directs it. This is at least plausible; why not assign meaning the autonomy of phenomena, and think of them as present until delivered to consciousness by the senses?

But perhaps autonomous presence is not the nature of all things. After all, meaning has one very considerable difference from things: it is always the meaning of things. Meaning rides in on something, whereas phenomena ride in on nothing we know of. This is precisely why we say 'the meaning of the thing' (the meaning of the gesture, of the poem, of the sign); it is obvious in all our talk about interpretation ('what does it mean?' we ask). In this

meaning is quite unlike things - is a thing a thing of anything, the way meaning is the meaning of a thing? It is the thing that has autonomy, and it is this autonomy that is meant by the "binding nature of the work."

What is most obviously binding is the thing interpreted; it is the thing given that constrains (the lines of the text or the facts of what was done). What we interpret, in the sense of 'process', is not meaning but the thing that has meaning. We take in the thing to be interpreted; we are aware of it, and our awareness of it, in the dimension of human thought that is interpretation, sees it as meaningful.

object $\square$ subject

O > (perception) > O > (interpretation) > m

As has already been mentioned,⁵ the meaning of a thing is the thing seen in the dimension of meaning. Interpretation is not so much a kind of mental operation as a level of awareness; it is seeing something as meaningful. The clouds call forth the storm; they themselves are the first trace of the storm. The symptoms suggest the disease; they are the disease - we are already sick. The embrace itself is the greeting. Which means, there is a way of explaining the bound nature of interpretation that makes more obvious sense of the further fact that a meaning is a meaning of a thing.

4. Autonomy over the interpreter

There is the temptation to return, now, and say that the priority of the thing actually explains the autonomy of meaning: meaning is implicitly present, in a determinate way, in this autonomous substance of the thing. Meaning has autonomy even in the autonomy of the thing: it may be

5 In 3.9.

dependent on the thing, but it is autonomous of everything outside this thing. This makes the first diagramme⁶ still perfectly correct. The interpreter is needed only to place the meaning that is there, held in potential by the structure of the fixed thing, concretely into consciousness. The interpreter is required only as good (passive and empty) subjectivity, since meaning can be known only to a mind. Even if, as was noted in the discussion of determinacy,⁷ meaning is only potential in the autonomous substance of the thing, and needs a mind to give it the flesh and blood that makes it a known meaning, it is nonetheless implicit already in a definite way. If meaning can exist only in the consciousness of an interpreter, then only its manifestation is dependent on the mind. The meaning that appears is determined by the nature of the thing, and is autonomous of the mind of the individual interpreter.

5. Autonomy through the interpreter

But this is only the argument of determinacy all over again, and it has already been pretty much settled.⁸ Meaning is not only inconceivable without a relation to the interpreter; it is empty and indeterminate without what the interpreter delivers to the process of interpretation. It was said already that meaning is not autonomous, but relational, a product of the action of one thing on another. Perhaps this claim should be made stronger here.

It is fine to say that meaning is the meaning already fixed in potential, and is determined in a mind by the nature of the thing (as in the diagramme in 5.2). But this is not to say that the potential fixes the meaning on its own, autonomously (as in that diagramme). A meaning in potential is still empty (colour without light is not colour). It needs not only a mind but the particular content of a mind in order for this potential to become a

⁶ In 5.2 above.

⁷ In 3.9.

⁸ In 3.12.

determinate meaning.⁹ Mind varies, and within it the fixed structure of the thing determines its meaning in different ways. A meaning is determined only in accordance with the content that a mind brings. For there to be colour, you need light; light does not chase the shadow off a colour that is already there, it is the medium in which colour exists, in which the thing has and produces its own colour. Particular mind is the medium of meaning. Because meaning cannot pre-exist such a mind, it doesn't.

But it could still be said that if a concrete mind is required, it is not just any individual mind but the particular mental content that can make evident what the potential already contains. Except, as we have already seen,¹⁰ there is no particular meaning that can already lie in the thing as potential. What the thing contains is only a meaning-making capacity. This is what Newton said about coloured objects, that all they have is a 'colour-making' capacity. There is no colour at all without light, and what colour appears depends upon the kind of light there is. But this dependence hardly delivers all determining power to light.

Which means that meaning has autonomy over the interpreter, without independence of the interpreter: autonomy but not utter autonomy. The thing has its own capacity to mean, but the meaning it actually determines is formed in the material of the subject. Meaning is co-determined by the object and the subject.

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⁹ "The meaning of what we seek to understand is not self-contained, it does not exist an sich. The meaning of a text or of tradition is only realized through the happening ... of understanding" (Bernstein 1982, 91). The occasionality of meaning is a "continued determination of ... significance" that lacks absolute autonomy: the work of art, for instance, relies upon the situation in which it appears just in order to have a "definite meaning" (1965 TM, 100, 130).

¹⁰ In 3.9-10.

6. Misunderstanding

But surely autonomy is implied by misunderstanding. What can it mean, to misunderstand, unless to fail to grasp a meaning that is already there, that already belongs to the thing in a definite way? Some interpretations are simply wrong. What can this mean except an autonomous meaning, a meaning already in some way constituted and determinate. The fact of failed interpretations itself indicates that meaning has autonomy.

But as was made clear above,¹¹ it is the thing that is interpreted, not its meaning; perhaps then it is the thing also that is misinterpreted.¹² What leads us to call something a misinterpretation? Typically it is not the 'discovery' of any pre-existent meaning. We don't find that some interpretations cannot accommodate a pre-existent determinacy of meaning that has suddenly come to light. We discover misunderstanding without any trace of autonomous meanings. What reveals a misunderstanding is the discovery that an interpretation is inadequate to the phenomenon of the thing. For example, the misinterpretation of a painting:

Much of the symbolism of the allegories is brought into the open in this analysis of the subject-matter, but with two notable exceptions - the near-empty wine beaker beside the bed in the so-called Epiphany of Venus, and the letter passed by the goddess of Supreme Delight to the man on her left. Neither of these rather humdrum objects appears to accord well with the interpretations outlined In the first place they take account only to varying degrees ... of the visual evidence of the paintings.¹³

¹¹ In 5.3.

¹² It is sometimes supposed that in his criticism of the idea of objectivity Gadamer denies this object - without which, it is quite true, he must give up his talk of the finitude or inadequacy of interpretations (Carr 1979, 138-39, 140-42, 145). But he does not; the only object that is really unwanted is a meaning-object.

¹³ Allan Braham, "Veronese's Allegories of Love," Burlington Magazine CXII (April 1970), 205-06.

Interpretations are false, above all, because they do not actually interpret the thing they are supposed to be interpretations of.¹⁴ They are false following the recognition of some aspect of the thing that was overlooked; it is the uncovering not of a hidden meaning, but of some neglected aspect of the thing all the time open to recognition, yet till then not recognized (a missed event, a pattern unnoticed, an earlier remark now forgotten).¹⁵

We misinterpret: we see a meaning, but then see that it is not the meaning. To discover a false interpretation is to allow the thing to determine its meaning within us by receiving it; when the interpreter receives a thing, its meaning is manifest. Interpretation does not unbury a pre-determined meaning that is somehow hidden, it allows the meaning of the thing to form in the understanding of the interpreter, which is its only realm. To misinterpret is to fail to grasp the meaning of the thing, but because the thing itself has not been seen. To misinterpret is to prevent the thing from determining its own meaning for the interpreter.

'Incorrect interpretation' also implies only a relational autonomy: autonomy over the interpreter, but through the interpreter, in the interpreter's own particularity.¹⁶ 'Incorrect interpretation' implies only a deficiency in the relation between subject and object: the object is still not seen, there is a failure on the side of the subject, and the condition of understanding is still not attained. Incorrect interpretation implies a thing with a nature to be

¹⁴ Of course there might be other reasons why interpretations are false (see, for instance, 5.7), some of which might conceivably support the objectivity of meaning. The point here is only to show that misinterpretation itself is not an argument for the objectivity of meaning.

¹⁵ Error in interpretation is indicated - at least very commonly - by one's interpretations not being borne out by the things, by being "pulled up short by the text" (1965 TM, 236-37).

¹⁶ Even in the relation to the author or to the interpreter, the work has "an absolute autonomy" of meaning: that is, it "acquires its definite meaning" in the way it unavoidably appears to them; this is its "transformation into structure" (1965 TM, 99-100).

recognized and that is inadequately seen, not a determinate objectivity of meaning.

7. 'This means that'

Perhaps not all forms of meaning are objective; perhaps there is meaning that does not have autonomy, but is whatever the thing itself determines in the variable material of the interpreter, so that the meaning of things changes according to interpreters. But that some things mean something is the truth. "It is going to rain": it will rain - dark clouds mean rain.

Misunderstanding is not only overlooking something in the thing; not every response even to the thing determines its meaning. What, for instance, is failing to understand altogether? Think of an impenetrable script (a word in Arabic), a strange object in the hand of a painted figure, or a set of formless historical facts that do not relate. Here no meaning is reached at all - but here, surely, the thing is totally in the open. The thing does not 'interpret itself.' Seeing every last curve of the script does not explain what it means, so the autonomy of the mere thing is not enough. Even if the autonomy of the mere thing over the interpreter determines a real meaning, it can't always be accepted that this free understanding delivers the meaning. The mere autonomy of the thing cannot exclude a meaning that the thing definitely does not possess, nor can it produce in every case a meaning that it always has.

What this appears to show is that meaning does not depend simply upon what is determined within what the interpreter brings, but belongs to the world, and has an autonomous content that cannot change according to interpretation. Meaning belongs to things themselves, apart from us, determinately and unchangingly.

This is a conclusion that cannot be avoided by altering the meaning of truth. Whatever else truth can be, it must remain also something enduring, something unaltered by what you or I believe. Signs of her presence mean she was here: the meaning and the truth of those signs are bound up together; they can be contradicted by no one. Surely this indicates an absolute

autonomy of meaning, beyond a limited autonomy that determines itself through and in accordance with subjects?¹⁷

If we are to face that this means that, as a truth that cannot be contradicted, then meaning must be objectively determinate. If meaning is as relative as interpretation and the thought through which it appears, how could interpretation have its truth? And if it is ever truth, how can it not remain what it is, regardless of who confronts it.¹⁸

8. Subjectivity and conditions of meaning

The step from the undeniable meaning of a thing to the absolute autonomy of meaning is not as sure as it seems. Is it first of all true that if meaning were even partially dependent upon interpretation, truths would not endure? Even though the truth of things is autonomous - and why should it not be? - to be a truth that is known, which is to say to become a meaning of things, someone is needed to know it. But nothing about the nature of the subject suggests that all subjective conditions are in constant flux.

The conditions that humanity brings to the understanding of the world, by which truth is grasped, are not a chaotic kaléidoscope. Is it really inconceivable that a fact of the world requires something of us in order to be known as this enduring truth; is it inconceivable that the world draws upon the particularity of understanding to be recognized as this one truth? The entering of the world into individual minds does not mean that it always discovers difference, and that what it determines there is always something new.

The idea of the inherently inconstant and variable subject - bad subjectivity - is in fact a piece of the theory that follows from a rather dramatic contrast with the enduring object. But the two are not opposed in

¹⁷ A genuinely autonomous meaning is considered to be implicit in Gadamer's remark that not all of "the facts of our situation" are "appropriate" to the interpretation of the work of art (Warnke 1987, 69).

¹⁸ Warnke 1987, 62-63.

principle at all. The durability of the meaning of the object can be dealt with as surely through the nature of the subject as through a nature of its own. (This is just Kant's lesson).¹⁹ The theory of objectivity suffers from the very casual identification of bad subjectivity with particular subjectivity. The subjectivity built out of situatedness is not on that account individual, variable,

The subject receives the truth, but not without grasping it in interpretation, not without configuring it in accordance with how it sees the world - and this condition is not necessarily an unreliable sea of change. I call the ground solid, and perhaps because it is a place where I walk. I don't make it this way that I experience it, but that it comes to me as solid depends upon what I am compelled to notice. Has there ever been a human being who did not need to move about? Conditions of subjectivity are not for that matter necessarily limiting.

Still, if the variation within subjectivity is exaggerated, it is not invented. Bad subjectivity means something. It is easy to see that what is brought by the understanding of the subject to the pure thing is very often inadequate for the thing alone to determine what it truly means. The Arabic word keeps silent, but that does not make it meaningless. It has meaning, beyond what the subject is capable of seeing.

But it is not at all straightforward that even this fact implies an utterly autonomous pre-determined meaning. What does an Arabic word mean? The thing itself - the very curves of the script - tell me that the pragmatism of writing has not always conquered the beauty of the mark. - Is this a misinterpretation? A failure to understand? It is just a meaning. The fact that I still cannot read it indicates an insufficiency in the autonomy of the object to determine all the meaning that it has, as well as an insufficiency in the subject to allow every facet of meaning to be realized through me just as I am (limited interpretations).

¹⁹ It may be the case that for Gadamer truth is in some way contingent (Warnke 1987, 66). - But the 'contingency' of truth upon what is universal to subjectivity is, as Kant made known, no terror.

It shows that for at least some meaning - in some situations? for some purposes? - something more is required, not that the meaning still unknown is autonomous. It might be, in fact, that there is more to meaning than the mere recognition of autonomies. The Arabic word means, and as a matter of 'objective' fact, the name, for instance, of a poet, because of a whole situation that I am compelled to accept. I do well to accept it - and this is an important point. A situation makes a demand upon me; but this demand exerts its claim on me in the terms of my own world. The words mean the name of this poet on account of a complex situation of authority, trust, purpose (and so on) that is part of my own relation to things; it is all of this that drives me to accept the 'objective' meaning. There is a requirement of the subject not to diminish his subjectivity but to extend it - for reasons other than the pure autonomy of meanings.²⁰

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9. What the fact of autonomy is, and isn't

The autonomy that belongs to the work, the text, the historical event, that is implicit in the "binding nature of the work" that defines the regulative ideal of all interpretation, has been misunderstood. There is autonomy, in that for every subject the meaning of a thing is autonomous. The fact of autonomy is meant to stress that what is meant is not in any way a matter of freedom. Meaning appears, but in and through subjectivity.

²⁰ There has been a lot of trouble on this point: it is the subject's own recognition of things, made from within his own world, that drives him to extend himself and alter his own beliefs. There is no contradiction at all in affirming that a truth is judged relative to a situation and yet might have a universal claim (Wachterhauser 1981, 28; Mohanty 1984, 118), that a situated interpretation might also be timeless (Apel 1980, 250): what is universally true is also true relative to interpreters. It is even a part of our individual situatedness in a social world that we cannot insist upon "truth for us from our own point of view" (which is not what Gadamer is affirming, contra Warnke 1987, 74). This is the relevance of a valuable sense of Bildung: the expansion of the subject, the extension of its limits (1965 TM, 13-15).

Participation is a matter of will only to the extent that you realize it - you really bother to look at the thing and give it the capacity to affect you. If you are attentive, meaning appears to be in the hands of the object. The autonomy of the work or any meaningful thing is first the autonomy of the object that is there, a determinacy that compels. It is also the meaning that this determinacy compels. But it cannot compel no one and nothing; it uses us.

This involvement of subjectivity, however, does not make meaning an act of subjectivity: if things are received, meaning cannot be thrown over them or pressed on them. (Try to see hatred in the handshake or love in a rebuff; make Kant mean what Mozart means; make the symptoms mean nothing. Choose what you like.) The material resists. In a right relation to the thing, meaning can neither be invented nor projected onto the thing. 'Projection' is not the right word for the participation of the subject: light doesn't carry the colour it renders on things.²¹ Meaning is not a matter of will, a subjective act.²²

The idea of autonomy, of 'the meaning of the thing itself,' 'the binding nature of the work,' expresses a real truth - that the relation of meaning and thing is not arbitrary. The thing has its own power to mean.²³ Autonomy of meaning is the thing's irresistible effect on our understanding; it is a meaning that is the sway of the thing, that belongs to the thing, and cannot be freely pushed upon it. But the meaning that this implies is not something already

²¹ As Newton explained, it is really a figure of speech to say that pure white light 'contains all colours': "in the rays they <colours> are nothing but their dispositions to propagate this or that Motion into the Sensorium." And if we attribute colour to the world, as life compels us to do, the spectrum of the prism is as much the contents of light spilled onto the wall as the colours of the wall under a fan of separated wavelengths.

²² The true sense of autonomous meaning: a work is "a closed circle of meaning that resists, of itself, all penetration and influence"; the interpreter cannot alter or direct the meaning that is there (1965 TM, 115).

²³ Works of art: "they themselves lay claim to their place" (1965 TM, 138).

determined without reference to interpretation. Meaning has autonomy in the relation of a thing to a subject. There is no 'autonomy of meaning' of any absolute sort, a meaning that stands outside this relation, and that does not rely upon the content of subjectivity.

But this is not to say that subjectivity itself may not be compelled to change by the thing, or by an external situation in which the thing appears. The change required is not, however, the abandonment of particular subjectivity (the achievement of objectivity) but a new particular content. Bad particular subjectivity is required for the 'objective' meaning to appear; it is not something that the individual must suspend.

In short, there is neither any experience of pure autonomy nor any logical requirement for it. It is only a kind of thing-prejudice that assimilates meaning to the condition of objects, treating it as a kind of hidden thing there to be dug up like a round red potato - red and round already in the ground. The thing analogy, the object analogy, is a way of characterizing a situation in which, for various reasons, the subject must alter in order to find a meaning that has some social currency (what I have to learn to read Arabic). But the analogy goes no farther than this, and in its philosophical setting-transferred into a theory of objectivity - it becomes quite false. Meaning is not something indifferent of subjectivity, free of it, autonomous, 'objective'. Its very objectivity involves subjectivity.

Interpretation is only figuratively a process of detection and transmission; it would be more exact to call objective interpretation a co-operative determination. Interpretation is necessarily a relation in which the subject offers its own particularity and the object its own form. When this genuinely takes place, the object is known in its meaning, though not always its full meaning. Meaning is the result of a relation involving both: the meaning of the object wrought in the subject. The autonomy that interpretation implies is not an objectivity of meaning, but the autonomous thing that has meaning by virtue of interpretation, and that in interpretation can determine its own meaning through us.

6 The Meaning of Objectivity

1. The 'facts' of objectivity

The very condition of things having meaning and of the interpretation of these things does imply autonomy and determinacy and a consistent identity, but only misunderstanding these conditions suggests that meaning must be considered a kind of object, as something possessed in a wholly determinate way, unchangingly, by the thing that it belongs to. If these 'facts' of interpretation are not the only bases for the philosophical objectivity of meaning, they are among the most commonly asserted, and it is by now doubtful, I think, that these are facts with anything to say about objectivity as theory understands it. There has been too little care in discriminating just what we are actually noticing when we acknowledge the 'objectivity' of interpretation. And perhaps it is not surprising to find that in the typical cases that have been discussed they refer to the most obvious objectivity present in the circumstance of interpretation - the thing interpreted - and not a discrete object-meaning that it in some way possesses.

2. Determinacy

What is the fact of determinacy? The fact that things must have a concrete meaning if they are to have any meaning at all ('things possess something'); the fact that when you understand 'you understand something,' something precise; the fact that 'if meaning is not already there, interpretation is just invention' - these are not, any of them, incompatible with the fact that for this precise meaning to arise the individual subject must contribute to the

realization of meaning, and is involved in such a way that determinate meaning does not inhere in the object without reference to this subject and what he or she can bring to understanding. The example of the condition of colour makes this relation of mutual determination more than merely plausible; it is a fact, and it fully accommodates the observation that things have limited and precise colours (meanings) without this being an objective condition inherent in a thing with no contribution of subjectivity.

The fixed determinacy supposedly found for meaning belongs rather to the thing. The thing possesses a determinacy that functions in precisely the way that interpretation requires: by offering something to be interpreted and by constraining the ways in which interpretation can be carried out. The thing can determine meaning and by its own constraint secure an interpretation. There is no reason to claim that what results in this way, with the variable participation of subjectivity, is not the meaning of the thing, even if for some particular purposes what some particular subjectivity (not particular subjectivity in itself) happens to produce may be inadequate. If we permit ourselves to accept that what the thing determines is its own genuine meaning, it has also to be said that the thing alone is incapable of determining all its meaning. For some meaning, something more is required. But this is no indication of a predetermined meaning.

The fixed determinacy of the thing is extended to meaning for some rather poorly considered reasons. To argue that 'the determinacy of things extends to meaning,' that 'objective things determine objective meanings,' and that 'the determinacy of meaning is indicated by misinterpretations' is just to presume objectivity. Determinacy is not by any means an argument of conceptual necessity, and there is nothing in the most recognizable facts about interpretation that makes this extension necessary.

3. Identity

What is the fact of identity? The simplistic assertions 'one thing, one meaning' and 'enduring thing, enduring meaning' not only do not address what is really relevant about identity in the matter of interpretation, they are little more than superficial plausibilities that turn out to be nonsense. The logic they seem to lay claim to does not support them, since unity and

singleness are not at all the same. The sense of 'identity' that matters to interpretation is that the meaning of a thing truly belong to the thing (and, to hark back to an earlier discussion,¹ in the relevant sense of 'belong'). And this kind of identity is entirely possible if one thing does not have one meaning, if indeed the meaning of a thing is implicitly always open, so that it can always be different. There is nothing perplexing, as the fact of festivals and the analogy of perspective both demonstrate, in the notion of identity in difference.

In the thing that is interpreted there is a self-same identity. We can allow without any philosophical pain that what a thing determines in a subject through the force of its own nature is its own meaning, and this secures the only identity that interpretation requires, the unity of the whole; it satisfies the condition that the meaning be the meaning of the thing. For this a self-same meaning is not only unnecessary but more than is wanted.

4. Autonomy

What is the fact of autonomy? The apparent fact that 'interpretation finds rather than invents meaning' seems to suggest that meaning endures with some kind of absolute independence from interpreters. But what kind of conclusion is this? It doesn't rest on logic, since it is perfectly evident how a thing could have a meaning of its own for interpretation to find - that is, a certain autonomy over the interpreter - without subsisting in pure autonomy. The fact of autonomy that we recognize in interpretation is a limited autonomy - how in what each subject brings to interpretation the thing determines a meaning of its own - which offers no support to the absolute autonomy that is part of the philosophical conception of objectivity.

There are further observations to consider, about decisive misunderstanding and about the factuality of meaning (that in some instances 'this means that' in the most absolute way). But it can easily be pointed out

¹ In 3.10.

how these facts too are compatible with the participation of individual subjectivity in the determination of meaning.

The thing has autonomy, and through its proper influence upon interpretation it is the thing that possesses the "binding nature of the work." As a result, the meaning it determines in an interpretation that receives it has a perfectly autonomous nature in the relevant sense, without exaggerating this into absolute autonomy: meaning cannot be freely determined by the interpreter. Pure autonomy, meaning determined with no reference to the interpreter, is not necessary; in fact it is hard to conceive how in the case of meaning any such requirement could be fulfilled.

This power over an interpreter is enough to produce a meaning that cannot be resisted, and in every case it is right to say that this is the meaning of the thing. But this is not to say that it is the entire meaning of the thing, or that it is the precise meaning of the thing that is relevant to some particular purpose. Philosophy takes the search for 'the meaning of the thing' from our struggles to understand, leaves behind the situation, the preoccupations, the interests according to which this question of the legitimacy and the limits of meaning derives its sense, and takes it as a kind of ontological clue about the nature of meaning. And so the philosophical sense of 'objectivity'.

The meaning of a thing may be unchanging, but not even this is a sign of a genuine autonomy of meaning, a meaning essentially determined without subjectivity. It is the indication of an insufficiency in the object to determine all the meaning that it has, and of an insufficiency in the subject to allow every facet of meaning to be realized through it within the subject's present limits.

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5. Meaning without the theory of objectivity

What sort of argument is offered here against the philosophical conception of the objectivity of meaning? Objectivity in its philosophical sense (absolute determinacy and autonomy) is commonly argued on the basis of

certain 'basic facts' about meaning and interpretation. But these facts, when they are looked at, turn out to work in two ways that don't support the theory. They are either false facts or misunderstood facts, and neither supports the theory of objectivity.

Sometimes they are supposedly self-evident presumptions - logical necessities to which there turn out to be quite comprehensible alternatives. At other times, they are exaggerations or distortions of features that have a more limited, more circumstantial application to interpretation - facts that are falsified when they are taken as evidence about meaning in itself. There is a way of explaining undeniable features of interpretation that makes an objectivity of meaning seem uncalled for in some respects and distinctly inapt in others. The suggestion that there is no alternative is certainly false.

With only what has been seen this far, one might suggest the following corrections to a conception of interpretation now dominated by the notion of the objectivity of meaning. Here are seven theses about meaning and interpretation.

1. There is no determinate meaning inherently fixed in a thing.
2. There is, however, a determinate thing, which is what our interpretations have to be guided by.²
3. In a genuine experience of this thing, the meaning of the thing is determined.
4. It is determined, however, in the world of an interpreting subject: the interpreter follows the thing, but offers his or her own concrete understanding, and it is within these terms that the thing determines its meaning. The actual limitation of meaning comes about here, as the limit of this relationship, and not prior to it.³

² "The experience of limitation, pressure and resistance ... the solid walls of actuality" (1965 TM, 200).

³ "We can, then, bring out as what is truly common to all forms of hermeneutics the fact that the sense to be understood finds its concrete and perfect form only in interpretation, ...

5. But it is only in a special relationship between subject and object that a meaning truly possessed by the thing is realized. It is a condition of knowing the meaning of something that we have a 'genuine experience' of that thing: that we see it, adhere to it as it is truly given to us.⁴
6. When this occurs, whatever meaning is revealed is a true meaning of the thing, a legitimate, a 'valid' meaning, even if this one encounter cannot reveal every aspect of meaning that the thing has. A meaning that the thing possesses - this is half of what 'objective meaning' really means.
7. This means that a thing can have more than one genuine meaning, according to what is brought to it. But there is no objective meaning part of the thing in a way that makes all such 'subjective' interpretations false. Only the limited interests of particular kinds of interpretation can fault subjectivity, and what is faulted then is not the presence of subjectivity in interpretation but the insufficiency of the particular subjectivity that is present. The demand upon subjectivity made by the search for a particular sort of meaning is the other half of what is meant by the 'objectivity of meaning,' and this sense gives nothing to the theory of objectivity.

⁴ ... <continuing note 3> but that this interpretative work is wholly committed to the meaning of the text" (1965 TM, 297).

<> III <> THE OBJECTIVE CONTEXT OF MEANING

7 Context

1. A philosophical weakness

It is possible, however, to support the objectivity of meaning on an entirely different basis, on a basis, perhaps, that avoids what might be regarded a certain weakness in the conclusions I have reached so far.

Rejecting the objectivity of meaning has involved a certain deference to the objectivity of things, even if this amounts only to a rather simple-kind of givenness. I have credited phenomena with an objectivity that I think has been misattributed to meaning. This might be regarded a rather serious weakness, since 'givenness' is commonly considered a rather naive supposition. Do even phenomena stand the same for every interpreter? It might appear that the objectivity given to the thing produces an objectivity very like the primitive Lockean schema of knowledge. It is an exemplary sort of 'objectivism': the object simply appears.

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Of course this would mean that the critique of objectivism falls into objectivism.¹ Objects don't simply appear as themselves.² To fall into a

¹ Gadamer has been criticized for giving the object too much autonomy, in a way that makes meaning "independent of consciousness," strangely extra-human (Hirsch 1967, 247-48).

primitive objectivism would be an especially unfortunate way to clarify 'objectivity,' since it would mean overlooking the very origins of the concept: the recognition that there are ways of seeing.

The naïveté of givenness is that it ignores the conditions of knowing things, brought to light by the Kantian philosophy that we began with. There is objectivity in givenness, as Kant made clear, only where what is given is given by a universally regular way of seeing. But laid over this are other levels of subjectivity with varied ways of seeing - givenness according to habits of perception and what we already believe. It is precisely the influence of a subjectivity that distorts that the idea of critical objectivity recognizes. Simple 'givenness' is no criterion of a genuine objectivity, and the true evidence of objectivity cannot be found in something as indiscriminate as this. What has been said about objectivity so far appears to be not merely a sort of objectivism, but a forgetful one.

The approach to objectivity developed thus far has drawn out tensions that exist within the traditional conception of objectivity - between determinacy and variety, between identity and difference, and between autonomy and dependence - that result in part from the necessary role of a variable subjectivity in the understanding of meaning. It appears that these tensions

2 It is just this conception that Gadamer criticizes in the attitude of aesthetic consciousness, to which hermeneutics is greatly opposed: the view that a work of art, "the aesthetic object in its own right," is what it simply presents to us excluding any other consideration. "It is not the case ... that the work exists an sich and only the effect varies." The aesthetic consciousness is a species of objectivism. It "abstracts from all the conditions of a work's accessibility" and distinguishes "the work proper" from all "extra-aesthetic elements, such as purpose, function, the meaning of its content." Its objectivism lies in an exaggerated sense of autonomy, by which the picture hanging on a gallery wall in isolation from any context of world becomes the paradigm case of art. This breaks "any connection with everything that could determine its meaning." Indeed, according to the aesthetic consciousness the relation art to the circumstance of its occasion is "something forced on it by its interpreter"; it is not part of the work itself. The aesthetic differentiation that strips away all that does not belong to this mere thing, the "object of aesthetic consciousness" isolated from its "context of life," cuts away layers of the work itself, which finally has "merely a shadowy reality and lives a distorted life only in the degenerate form of an object of interest to tourists <a visible thing, merely to be photographed> The 'work of art in itself' proves to be a pure abstraction" (1965 TM, 76-77, 80-81; 104, 119, 127-28, 130, 139, 453).

have been resolved simply by dividing the meaningful thing into two poles and crediting determinacy, identity, and autonomy to a fixed objectivity at one of them.

This would mark a weakness in the understanding of objectivity not only in the eyes of those who support the theory, but also for their traditional opponents. For a philosophy of objectivity - a philosophy of a realist strain - what objectivity there is (a more sophisticated sort of thing than Lockean givenness) is left far too indistinct from subjective distortions. The tensions inherent in objectivity in fact follow only from an inadequate conception of what objectivity is. The traditional opposition to realist philosophy - which can be called idealist - stresses the subjective component of the given, and doubts that objects of any sort can properly be distinguished. The hope to resolve the tensions inherent in the idea of objectivity with an object discovered in the mere thing is hopeful naiveté. Objectivity itself is a problematic notion.

It is the first view, involving the theory itself, that is most central here, but the second can hardly be ignored, since it lays added pressure upon what has so far been argued. And in fact it is the same observation that is worked by both: the claim that there is a thing that delivers itself. For one side, this leaves genuine objectivity inadequately protected; for the other it presupposes what cannot exist.

2. Objectivity and 'givenness'

But if it is the thing that is to bear the weight of 'objectivity,' it will have to be clear what kind of thing and what kind of objectivity this is understood to be. It was stated at the very start³ that a 'thing', in the sense in which I have been using it, is not necessarily an object, since it is very often the case that what has to be understood is something as already interpreted, that is itself the result of an interpretation: for instance, the meaning of a farewell. It is not always an object that simply imprints itself as it is upon a passive subject. As a matter of fact, it is not an objectivity

³ In 2.2.

according to the theory at all. The real conclusion to be drawn is the 'objectivity' means something other than what the theory explains.

The most naive view of objectivity understands the givenness, the autonomy, of the thing, in a mistaken way, as a condition that has its determinacy without reference to anything - things, and the blank slate of the mind. The inadequacy of this view is disputed by no one; there are few 'things' without some kind of mental preparation that allows what is 'given' to stand out.⁴

But the critique of objectivity is precisely this. Nothing ought to be sought as a pure autonomy, but should be received as it is given to the recipient. One has to work with this givenness. What directs interpretation is just the thing as it is received. It does not have absolute autonomy, but it does have autonomy over the will of the individual.⁵ This is the only givenness that matters, and it is not one that either draws upon or plays into the theory of objectivity. It is just this that has to be understood about the concept of objectivity.⁶ It is simple givenness that matters. This is the starting point for all reality. If the clarification of objectivity involves a thing that is not an 'object,' neither of the typical criticisms - that the 'thing' is insufficiently objective (left too open to subjectivity), or it is too objective (naive objectivism) - is actually fitting. The problem is that both critiques, realist and idealist, accept the dichotomy of the theory; it is only

⁴ "The great historical realities of society and state always have a predeterminant influence on any 'experience'" (1965 TM, 245). "In truth there is nothing that is simply 'there.' Everything that is said and is there in the text stands under anticipations. ... Only what stands under anticipations can be understood at all" (1962 PFT, 121).

⁵ As noted in 5.5.

⁶ "The real problematic dimension" of the question, for example, of the meaning of art lies in the tension between the fact of a work's autonomy and its reliance upon a condition of reception (1964 AH, 96-97).

likely that an understanding of 'objectivity' that contradicts the theory would seem weak to either.

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3. The notion of context

However, it is not yet settled that this is all there is to objectivity. In fact the clarification just now made - that the thing is not a pure object, but has its nature against a background - makes room for a more sophisticated defence of the true objectivity of meaning.

It has been made plain that the givenness of things is not all that interpretations are based on: even what is merely seen is not just there for interpretation, but there only as it is seen, in so far as the interpreter can acknowledge and recognize it. Perhaps we all see things like a wave of a hand, but most things to be interpreted are not so obvious. For example, the formal qualities of a painting or a poem. These are not recognizable to any innate natural subjectivity, and unless it is acquired and these qualities are recognized, the thing to be interpreted is hardly there at all.

And even where the thing can be seen for what it is - a farewell - this might very well guide and limit one's interpretation without making the meaning clear at all (it is only when one knows those men were once mortal enemies that we could understand that what we are witnessing is a reconciliation). More than the mere thing is virtually always necessary. Standing dumb in front of a picture, shuffling attentively but thoughtlessly through historical notes, is not how we interpret. Without a certain developed awareness, a certain knowledge of things, we won't make much of it at all. Not only the simple identity of a thing but also its meaning depends upon something more than what is merely given.

This is to suggest that the nature of objectivity - the objectivity of both things and their meanings - is a more complex condition than has so far been made out. Objectivity is not a Lockean influx, nor a state of self-subsistence. It might be said that, after Kant, objects cannot easily be reduced to pure autonomies; but neither, in response to this fact, can they be debased into the

contingently given. What is given is given against a ground; a true object appears against a proper ground.

This introduces the notion of context, applicable above all to meaning. There is objective meaning because of a context that properly belongs to a thing. Not any context determines objective meaning. Only in a setting of its own does a thing have its own identity; torn out of that setting, it is no longer seen as it is. So objective meaning is a fact; it is the meaning that is determined by a context that belongs to a thing.

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The context of a thing is part of it; it is a constellation of elements that implicitly surrounds it and determines its meaning in the way proper to it. Set inside the context, the thing has its own objective meaning. A context of this sort is something objective. It is bound to the thing as a part of its identity, effectively part of the thing. It is a determinate constellation, with its elements already defined by various things. Since its link with the thing is made prior to interpretation, it has autonomy over interpretation. So it is the objectivity of a context that makes the meaning of a thing an objective entity. Meaning is objective: it is the determinate meaning that is delivered by a thing set within its own objective context.⁷

This is a more sophisticated notion of objectivity than one that stresses the complete autonomy of meaning; it accommodates not only the autonomy stressed by realists but the dependency stressed by idealists, which it can argue is not a dependency upon subjectivity, but upon an external objective condition within which the thing needs to be set. The objectivity of meaning

⁷ "Every speech and every written work can equally be regarded as a link in a chain which can only be fully understood by reference to its place within a larger meaning-context" (Betti 1962, 60, '69).

becomes far more plausible than before, when the potential possession of meaning by the thing seemed a little bit occult:

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Meaning does not just 'cling' to things; it is the product of the interaction of a thing and its own semantic context brought together by a mind. Through a context, it is rather more easy to see how meaning subsists (in the potentiality of the relation between object and context) without actually existing, and how it is concretized only by an interpreter who brings together the whole configuration.

The contextuality of meaning is not limited to only the more complex examples, and this clarifies the qualification made above concerning the nature of 'things'. A handshake means a farewell only against the background of a custom. The crossing of a boundary means treason only given the recognition of a law. Context is the key to meaning in the most obvious case of meaning, the meaning of language. What makes it plain that 'case' in the last sentence is no 'container for things' is the sentence the word is in.⁸ That the word is in that sentence - that it possesses its own context - is a simple fact. A context is an objective condition.

4. Objective and subjective contexts

The idea of context also clarifies why there is subjective interpretation. The way in which the given is given is the way in which it appears in a context of understanding. If it is a meaning that is given, whether it is subjective or objective depends upon the relation of the thing and the context it is seen within. A thing that is seen from within a context constituted of what are merely my own beliefs is not even there to be seen.

⁸ The idea of context is an aspect of the traditional conception of the hermeneutic circle: that the part, which is the work, is understood in relation to the whole, which is its context (1965 TM, 167).

It is seeing a thing in a context other than its own that allows things to shift their meaning from one interpreter to another, which has obscured the fact of the objectivity of meaning.⁹ We do not understand by naively attending with whatever we are already given; meaning is not whatever we are able to see in a thing by reading it within our own limited range of knowledge and according to our own beliefs, with our own "cultural and historical limitations." This amounts to misunderstanding.¹⁰ A thing's own meaning is revealed by its own context. We understand by discovering what context a thing itself possesses and making this the framework of our own interpretation, reading the thing within it.¹¹

5. The objectivity of contexts

The objective meaning of a thing is what is determined by seeing the thing within the context that belongs to it, is implicitly part of it;

⁹ Larmore 1986, 162.

¹⁰ Habermas 1980, 137, 182-83, 188.

¹¹ This requirement is stressed, against Gadamer, by Betti (Palmer 1969, 57). See also Habermas 1984, 131; Ricoeur 1952, 28-29.

objective meaning is a product of the interaction of two aspects of the same objective entity, the thing and its context. But what marks the objective context that a thing truly possesses?

The objectivity of a context is naturally very different from the givenness of a thing. If it is a cognitive thing, it is also unlike a Kantian category, which is given and unavoidable and part of all objectivities. Contexts are not unavoidable; they have to be properly associated with the thing they belong to. A context is something that must be purposefully linked by the mind; a context must be 'attached to' the thing through knowledge - this is the sense of saying that it belongs to the thing 'implicitly'. For instance, the context within which a set of angles means an equilateral triangle: the stipulated axioms of geometry. The context within which a gesture means a farewell or an action means betrayal: the rules and customs of a culture. The semantic context that a thing possesses, within which its own objective meaning is made evident, is a set of relevant elements that are clearly marked by the nature of the thing. As the nature of a thing varies, so does the context that reveals its meaning. An action: the intentions and purposes of the agent. A gesture, a statement: rules of a 'language.' The context of a meaning is marked by the nature of the thing; the context has an objective link with the thing.

To make the objectivity of meaning clear, all that needs to be done is to produce examples of these objective contexts - the purpose of the following chapters.

8 Communication

1. The condition of communication

The first context of meaning objective enough to demonstrate the objectivity of meaning is the context of intentional communication. Among all possible meanings there is a distinction to be drawn between meaning that we see in things and meaning that is made. Objective meaning is something made. It is made within a condition of communicative action; it is the product of a limited and determinate act of meaning.¹ Certainly most of all those things taken to be meaningful are human creations, and of those most are devised precisely to communicate.² Meaningful things are expressions - that is,

¹ "It is ... important that we insist that an interpretation is possible only in view of meaning-full forms. 'Form' is here to be understood in a wide sense as an homogeneous structure in which a number of perceptible elements are related to one another and which is suitable for preserving the character of the mind that created it or that is embodied in it" (Betti 1962, 54). That meaningful expressions were to be understood precisely as human acts was a new stress marked in the theory of interpretation only at the opening of the nineteenth century, by Schleiermacher; after Schleiermacher, language understood as expression has become the paradigm of meaning for modern hermeneutics (1965 TM, 164, 172).

² Larmore 1986, 160-63.

objectifications of a determinate meaning already humanly known.³ And recognizing them as expressions situates them in an objective context. Recognizing communications as communications immediately sets them in a context of intentional action that, filled in according to the case, will determine an objective meaning. Only a determinate meaning, narrow and fixed enough to be known and passed on, could be communicated. So the fact of the objectivity of meaning arises in another way, from considering the conditions of the paradigm situation of interpretation: the understanding of communications.

Meaning is objectively determinate because of the nature of communicative action. In communicating you begin with a determinate meaning, precise enough to be transmitted; the thing then encapsulates this meaning on the basis of conventions of expression. Of course you don't communicate a meaning by 'putting' it into a box and delivering it; you never really get your hands on it. But for anything to be received as a meaning, it must appear in the mind of the recipient, and it is important that there be a precise meaning for subjectivity to realize.⁴ So even if the transmission of meaning requires a very special kind of delivery, it is a determinate thing that is transmitted. Communicative practice not only clarifies the determinacy of meaning but also marks its limits. It is the fact that created things are vehicles of human communication that endows them with sense and solicits understanding. From where else could meaning come? Meaning belongs to

³ "To understand is to understand an expression" - Wilhelm Dilthey (1965 TM, 164-65, 198). "The works of art and of poetry which the human mind has conceived and shaped, the extremely varied forms which the genius and the hand of man have fashioned and modeled, the remnants and surviving rudiments of the past of humanity, are all objectifications of mind, ..." (Betti 1955, 35).

⁴ (That is, good subjectivity, a subjectivity that receives objectivity, not bad subjectivity, a subjectivity that distorts and projects upon what is there.)

communicative actions above all; the fact of context, it can even be said, shows that what is not a human expression has no meaning to be understood.⁵

2. Meaning as a determinate act.

In gestures and ordinary speech communicative function is everything. Here it is clear that there is an objective context - an established communicative practice - that determines a meaning. I raise my hand knowing that this is what means a greeting: it is what transmits this meaning according to a convention of encoding. It is because there is a culturally established correspondence between meaning and sign, and then sign and meaning, that a meaning is determinate for every communicative expression. In gestures and ordinary speech, the objective context within which a meaning is determined as an object is impossible to mistake. Determinacy of meaning belongs to a thing in a semantic context. When the thing is set within the context of the concrete communicative practice to which it belongs, meaning is an objectivity. So determinacy of meaning belongs to a thing in a semantic context; the thing without the conventions according to which meaning is a part of it is a powerless empty mark.

But in what does the objectivity of a communicative practice lie? How does communication really work? If meaning is made in an act of meaning, it is determined by who makes it.⁶ How does this happen? Communication is a

⁵ Betti 1955, 53.

⁶ This is a basic tenet of traditional hermeneutics: "Since meaning-full forms, as the object of interpretation, are essentially objectivations of mind and, in particular, manifestations of some thought-content, it is clear that they have to be understood with reference to that other mind that has been objectivated in them, and not in relation to any meaning the form itself may acquire if abstracted from the representational function it had for that mind or thought. ... The meaning to be determined may not be inferred into meaning-full forms in an arbitrary manner; rather it ought to be derived from it. May I suggest that we call this first canon the canon of the hermeneutical autonomy of the object, By this we mean the meaning-full forms have to be regarded as autonomous ...; they should be judged in relation to the standards immanent in the original intention: the intention, that is, which the created forms should correspond to from the point of view of the author and

deliberate process, and its point of departure is something concrete that someone wishes to convey. Something is already fixed in my mind that I want known. So I can use the sign that delivers it - which is to say I rely on a sign that carries this sense inside the communicative practice of a concrete language. If I intend to greet someone and understand the grammar of a gesture - know the gesture, know what it conveys, know the circumstances in which it does convey it - I can raise my hand with the expectation that it will mean what I mean by it: a greeting. It will mean what I intend, and it is my intention that determined it. The meaning the sign has is delimited by my wish. Meaning has just the determinacy of a desire or a thought.

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3. Further conditions of meaning

But this is not an accurate picture of what happens. Communication in fact becomes peculiarly distorted when it is understood as merely an act: will alone does not really determine meaning in communication. If meaning could be determined just by will, there would be no need for language at all.⁷ Communication occurs only when the original meaning is determined for another person, who is not a dull terminus ("indeed the doors of the mind can be opened only from the inside").⁸ Which means it is not something simply

his formative impulse in the course of the creative process; it follows that they must not be judged in terms of their suitability for any other external purpose that may seem relevant to the interpreter" (Betti 1962, 58).

⁷ "If by 'will' one means properly a pure internal psychological entity, it leads one to think that the interpretation may do without a representational form, which is absurd" (Betti 1955, 35).

⁸ A nice metaphor from Betti.

done, but something that takes place between two people. What links them, and parallels interpretation with intention, is a structured language.

Language does not do what we ask it to but what it will, operating by its own grammar; it serves intention and communicates only when we serve it, when the sign chosen has the sense of the original intention, by its own laws. And communication occurs only when this sense is also received. For the hearer, the meaning of the sign is determined above all by the language it belongs to. Intention fixes what meaning we wish to communicate, but the meaning that is conveyed is determined by the system of language,⁹ and there is communication only if the words are well chosen. In fact, that intention does not determine meaning is plain enough from the case of failed communication. Even if will has fixed a meaning in mind, we can still fail to express it: we use a term that we have misunderstood, or use it too far from a proper application.

Whether there is communication or not, it is language that speaks. Intention has to entrust delivery to a language with an its own capacity to determine meaning. The meaning of what I say belongs to a language that I do not define and over which I do not preside. Intention has no power to hem the functioning of language to serve our wishes.¹⁰ Intention has no more power over meaning than it does over life. What I am is in the hands of my acts; even if my wishes are kindly in accord, it is only what I do that makes

⁹ "Interpretation is probably, in a certain sense, re-creation, but this re-creation does not follow the process of the creative act, but the lines of the created work" (1965 TM, 107).

¹⁰ "What the expression expresses is not merely what is supposed to be expressed in it - what is meant by it <in the sense of intention> - but primarily what is also expressed by the words without its being intended, i.e., what the expression, as it were, 'betrays'" (1965 TM, 300).

me.¹¹ One intends and dreams - but acts, and throws the sense of one's actions open to a world that itself holds the key of meaning.

So the condition that determines the meaning of a communicative action - a statement, a deed, a work of art in so far as it does communicate - is not the intention of its agent. Only something broader and external - a language - provides the objective context in which a meaning can be communicated, that is, actually determined for a recipient.

4. Intention as a limit of meaning

It might be worth reconsidering what the semantic act is in the creation of a meaningful thing: it is not always an 'act of communication.' It seems, after all, that even in the case of failed communication we can recognize an act of meaning.¹² Sometimes intention is more important than what the language actually communicates: for instance the purpose of a remark, or of a misfired action, or in a failed but unusual work of art? Failures are so much a part of life that meaning must be to some extent determined by pure intention as well. So intention marks a kind of ontological determinacy that remains even where it is rightly overshadowed by the pragmatic determinacy of a real action.

But this is only a particular situation in which intention has a special importance. Here, simply, we want to know meaning qua intention. This is the only kind of meaning that is relevant to the interest according to which,

¹¹ "In response to a misunderstanding rather widespread among jurists, one can never insist enough on the concept that, in practical behaviors, no less than in statements, the object of interpretation is not the 'will' as such, but always only the form, in which the will is carried out and realized: that which has been said or that which has been done." The will "is not the object of interpretation, but rather one of its results, that is to say, one of the goals of hermeneutic determination" (Betti 1955, 34).

¹² "A symbol evokes ... the term that it is actually used and destined to recall: certainly not that term that it ought to serve to recall when used more correctly, or that different term that is by chance understood by the interpreter or by someone who adopts it" (Betti 1955, 50).

in this case, the question of meaning arises. The thing to be understood about this case is its limitedness. It is a precise interest that decides what counts as meaning here. Meaning according to a limited interest cannot be universalized as a demonstration of the objective nature of meaning: meaning qua intention is not meaning qua meaning, which is what the disputes about objectivity are about. Even in the kind of situation where intention is decisive, there are other interests in meaning that are equally legitimate, and that can give rise to further meanings. The background of intentions is not the limit of meaning of a thing humanly endowed with meaning.

For instance, there are meanings in what we say and do that we do not intend but that we definitely put there. Whether we call these unconscious intentions, all that matters is that what determines and clarifies this meaning is not the background of what I understand my intentions to be.¹³ The meaning in what I actually say is determined here simply by what I feel and believe, whether I am aware of it or not. Finite and conscious thought is not the context within which a semantic act is wholly defined.¹⁴ The one purpose to which a meaningful action is directed cannot wholly determine the meaning of that expression; the semantic finitude of an intention does not simply pass over into the words of the text. The limits of a conscious act are not the

¹³ "Meaning can be experienced even where it is not actually intended" (1967 HR, 30).

¹⁴ The importance of this in traditional hermeneutic theory: even "a behavior not in itself directed toward making a thought recognizable to others may be the object of interpretation,...." What matters is "the drawing forth from this behavior, seen as a sign or index, of ... an orientation, which is revealed there, that is to say, the manner of conceiving ... with which it shows itself objectively to be imbued." It is a meaning that is "implicit, or perhaps symptomatic." This is of crucial importance in the legal and historical interpretation of events. "Practical attitudes, by the very absence of a conscious representational finality, are the most genuine and sincere indices or symptoms which reveal the mentality of the authors" (Betti 1955 EU, 33, 34).

limits of even the meaning that is humanly made; and the limits of unconscious intention are invisible.¹⁵

The meaning of an 'expression' is supposed to be determined by the finite intentions and the precise purposes and beliefs of an agent. But there are cases where we accept that the 'actor' behind the semantic act has grown beyond the conscious individual, even if there is only something metaphorical about this talk. What defines the unconscious person are the beliefs, resentments, ideals, ... that must lie behind this way of living and acting-things that one can fill in by the implication of a person's behaviour. This is just how we unravel our own selves and understand who we are. An inferred nature defines the inner person, and against our picture of this inner person the meaning of external actions is understood. But there is no obvious limit to this kind of meaning, because there is no obvious limit to the kind of agent that we can reasonably piece together in this way. In just the way that we can construct an unconscious self (from beliefs implicit in a pattern of actions), we construct a type, a group, a culture, and so on, each of which constitutes a new context in which to interpret the meaning of human actions. In every case, the meaning of an act is what is fixed by the co-ordinates of a configuration of beliefs and desires that we piece together. The conscious individual is only one set of beliefs and values; the unconscious is only another; and there are further level. This is what explains why what no individual ever put into actions and creations, consciously or unconsciously, is nevertheless truly 'expressed' in them: the Romantic outlook, the bourgeois

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¹⁵ Intentional meaning is relevant to some kinds of text and some interests (1962 PFT, 122); but it is not only the artist who speaks in the work; meaning cannot be limited to this alone (1964 AH, 102). "The work is the expression of a truth <i.e., of a meaning that has truth> that cannot be reduced to what its creator actually thought in it." Either because of "unconscious creation" or "the conceptual inexhaustibility of every artistic expression from the point of view of the beholder, ... the work of art communicates itself" (1976 AH, 95-96).

ethos, the aesthetic temperament, the medieval mind, The meaning of actions is not limited absolutely by the determinacy of intention.¹⁶

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5. What communication implies

Communicative actions do not have absolute determinacy. Their objective limits are secondary to a restricted interest (communication qua intention), which means that the example of communication cannot be taken to offer any support to the claim that meaning is an objective entity. Some kinds of meaning, in some situations, have an object-like limitedness, but this is no argument for the 'objectivity of meaning' according to the theory.

Meaningful things made to have meaning have no inherent limit of meaning. The limits of the 'act of communication' or the 'act of meaning' are not drawn merely by finite intentions. Even the limited meaning of a limited act of meaning depends upon further determinates, and this opens up many possibilities of meaning. Even a strictly limited communication - a wave of the hand - is determined by more than intention, for in this case what fixes the meaning and effects communication is a language.¹⁷ The context within which a sign expresses an intended meaning always includes more than intention alone. And what goes to configure an individual who means something and not something else does not stop there. There is no inherent

¹⁶ Interpretation was always too narrowly conceived as "the explication of the author's true meaning"; meaning goes beyond intention (1962 PFT, 117, 122).

¹⁷ The inherent possibilities of interpreting semantic acts: "the signified of a symbol may be equated with that term to which the one who is using the symbol refers or ought to refer (according to an objective criterion), with that term to which he himself (subjectively) believes he is referring, with that term to which the one who is called upon to interpret the symbol must refer, that is, to which he refers or, for his own part, believes he refers, or yet again, believes that the one who uses it refers" (Betti 1955, 46).

limit, even given by the fact of a limited semantic act, to what constitutes an entity with the power to 'mean'.¹⁸ The context that illuminates the meaning of a statement, an action, a work of art is not just the context of the intention of its agent.

So communication is not the finite event it is taken to be. The meaning made in the act of meaning is the product of a rather open-ended process, and this is the reason why a work has over its author "an absolute autonomy" of meaning.¹⁹ However limited and objective the author's intention might be and given the fluidity of even the idea of author and agent that I have suggested, even this level of meaning will be hard to narrow down for the purposes of fixing - it cannot lay claim to the role of 'the meaning of the work,' and posit itself as the obvious demonstration of the inherent objectivity of meaning. Communication and intention cannot alone furnish the whole context within which the meaning of a created thing is determined. Because they are incomplete contexts, they are not the objective situation that determines meaning. Something more is required before we have an objective context that substantiates the theory.

18 "Just this expansion of the hermeneutical perspective to include the language of art makes it obvious how little the subjectivity of the act of meaning suffices to denote the object of understanding" (1976 AH, 102-03).

19 1965 TM, 99-100. "Understanding can also go beyond the author's subjective act of meaning, and perhaps even necessarily and always goes beyond it" (1962 PFT, 122).

9 Language

1. The condition of language

There is a second context of meaning that is conceivably objective enough to demonstrate the objectivity of meaning: the context of a determinate language. Meaningful creations are creations in a language. It was just made clear that it takes a language to determine meaning in a communication; the meaning of expressions is determined by the objective set of conventions of the language within which it was fashioned. It is language as a system by which a sign is to be read that gives expressions their meaning. Language is the condition of meaning altogether.¹ A language is more than the system of speech or writing. Even human actions belong to a language: the social 'conventions' by which we act in order to be understood.² A language is the fundamental context to which meaningful

¹ A dictum of Schleiermacher read, "Language is the only presupposition in hermeneutics, and everything to be found ... must be discovered in language" ("Aphorisms," sec. 55; cited in Margolis 1987, 363).

² "The representational or semantic function in social life is entrusted above all to language, whether this language consists of words, that is, of discourse, or of other signs and expressive means: formulae, images, figures, and sounds" (Betti 1955, 32). That social and historical events are to be understood like languages is a discovery of nineteenth-century hermeneutics (1965 TM, 187). "It was Schleiermacher's distinction to treat the whole of human life - written utterance, oral exchange, practical behavior, social acts - as hermeneutically freighted texts ... insofar as they manifest themselves in languages" (Margolis 1987, 362-63).

things truly belong and within which their meaning is determined. The thing without the conventions by which meaning is attached to it is just an opaque sign.

So it is language that makes the objectivity of meaning clear: meaning is the objective result of setting an objective sign in its own objective schema. The objectivity of meaning is uncovered by placing the symbol back into the semantic context within which it was formed. As part of a language, the sign itself includes the semantic context from which it arose in a culturally situated act of communication. The language that is this context is an objective reality.³ It is a context constituted by nothing having to do with the interpreter's subjectivity; it is an historically determined condition. Meaning is determined by the objective context of a language.

2. The determinate code

How is it that a language objectively determines the meaning that a particular sign has, so that the meaning of a given expression is an objective matter? To speak simply, a determinate language is an established code of correspondence between meaning and sign. As has already been noted, the person who wishes to communicate a meaning does not institute a language; in order to be understood, he needs a language that already exists.⁴ A determinate language: the communication of his intended meaning is made possible by invoking the sign that carries of itself this meaning for whomever he

³ Language "is an objective system of lexical elements built out of an inventory of phonemes and syntactical and semantical rules. Such a system may be perceived diachronically or synchronically. At any given time, we are presented with a logical system with an ideal being of its own; at the same time, it is undeniable that the system had a genesis, a course of development, a history" (Mohanty 1984, 119).

⁴ "The meaning of a text is that which the author meant by his use of particular linguistic symbols. Being linguistic, this meaning is communal, that is, self-identical and reproducible in more than one consciousness" (Hirsch 1967, 255).

speaks to. This gesture in this cultural language of gesture means a greeting; the meaning is conveyed by reading the gesture within this code.⁵

But to talk simply of a 'code' may give too simple an impression. It leads to thinking of the context of a definite language as a kind of rule book. But a language is more than mere rules of correspondence - for this sign that meaning - and this is evident even from the way we understand a simple familiar gesture: we need to know not only the correspondence between sign and meaning, but the circumstance within which this correspondence can properly be made (is a wave of the hand a greeting or a farewell; and made from the stage, or by a complete stranger, is it to be understood as either?). Something needs to be added to refine this picture: rules of context that clarify in what circumstance a sign means one thing, in what another, and in what again nothing at all; the rules of grammar, by which the simple lexical correspondences can be articulated into complex expressions; the pragmatic aspect of language, which makes clear how signs are tied not only to meanings but to functions. But none of these adjustments may appear to alter the important fact: that language, complex as it is, has a rigid structure. It is the rigidity of this structure that makes it work, so that a string of words in a language can mean something and not just anything.⁶ All of this forms the semantic context against which the meaning of the thing is objectively determined. What is meant by a 'code' - we could just as easily call it the structure or the total grammar of the language - is everything necessary to

⁵ "A single linguistic sign can represent an identical meaning for two persons because its possible meanings have been limited by convention. By the same token, the larger linguistic configurations which an interpreter confronts also have this conventional and normative character. ... The author's meaning has a shape and scope that is governed by conventions which the interpreter can share as soon as he is familiar with those conventions (Hirsch 1967, 262-63). This has also been presented as a clarification of Gadamer's hermeneutics: poetry, for example, is "a language-game, defined by the implicit rules of its participants: the writers, readers, publishers, and critics of poetry"; what an element means "is set down by implicit agreement within the speech-community of poets and their various audiences" (Connolly 1986, 273-74).

⁶ Hirsch 1967, 44-45.

the right reading of the thing. One thing means another given all the facts the language it belongs to make relevant. Without the fixity of this code - the speaker tying signs to an intended meaning, the hearer linking that meaning to these signs - communication could not take place.

Language can be a determinate code even if we are unable to lay out this code. It is a fact that, in learning, a language is not a structure that is taught. We know the meaning of a gesture not because we have been shown the correspondence (this means that); we have learned waving ourselves. In belonging to a culture we learn how to employ language. It might be said that if the learning of a language does not teach us about its structure, it teaches its structure implicitly: the practices we mimic and take up are a rule-governed system. The linkages of the structure have been tacitly understood, and they are preserved even within the simple practices that effectively determine meaning. Even though we cannot lay open the code, it must be there: what would a world be like in which the meaning of words were not set?

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3. Code and sense

But with what kind of determinacy does a determinate convention exist? If we do not learn language by learning sets of rules, the correspondences between signs and meanings, how do we learn it? Sense is a criterion of the formation of a rule. We learn a language by interpreting it, acting on our interpretations, and then reinterpreting or not. We learn how to speak by hearing language and by responding according to the notion we have formed of its meaning, by re-employing it according to this understanding - and being forced, perhaps, to change our conception.⁷ We understand a word in a way

⁷ "No one fixes the meaning of a word, nor does the ability to speak merely mean learning the fixed meanings of words and using them correctly. Rather, the life of language consists in the constant playing further of the game that we began when we first learned to speak" (1962 SU, 56).

that gives sense to a phrase; we use it this way and are understood - or we find by the confusion that results that we have misunderstood. But we find the right way to understand it not by uncovering the objective correspondence, but by being thrown back upon another notion of what is meant, this time, if we are luckier, one that works as we expect it to.

The same process is true of other types of language. An artist learns a way of expressing a meaning: for example, a way to give dynamism to a form. What is learned is not a code, a rule ('to convey dynamism, draw the figure like this'). Instead, the artist uses the form that he has already understood to be dynamic, a form that already has for him this meaning, which is the meaning that he himself has come to see in it just by looking at it with his own eyes.⁸

What constitutes a code is not ultimately a fixed correspondence, however complex its structure, or an implicit structure; code rests upon the continuous efficacy of interpretations, the sense that interpreting sheds on what has to be understood. If there is a structure, it depends upon interpretation rather than guides it. What perpetuates it is not the endurance of objective links, but the persistence of the combined acts of interpretation and application.

So the meaning that a thing possesses is not found by reading within an objective code. In fact a code is something posterior to an act of interpretation that is not objectively determined at all, because it relies upon a 'sense' grounded only by the acceptance of the subject.

4. Sense bends rules

The subordination of the 'objective' code to the subjectivity of sense is evident also in the flexibility of rules of language. There is more openness in the 'structure' of a language than is typically supposed. In a

⁸ The meaning of a work of art is not 'instituted' as is the meaning of signs and symbols, where the "functional significance" is "agreed by convention," on the basis of an established "relationship between the sign and what is signified"; instead pictures acquire meaning "from their own content" (1965 TM, 137).

single determinate language there is more than one way to read signs; ambiguity is an aspect of all natural languages that is not easily excluded.⁹ Ambiguity belongs even to languages that seem on the face of them to be literal codes.¹⁰

What are the objective aspects of a language that resolve ambiguity? There are no 'rules of context' to which we can have recourse. If there is any uncertainty about which sense is the sense meant, what linguistic rule of context resolves it? The only rule is to choose what makes things clearest, which is nothing but an invitation to rely upon our own conceptions of good sense. Are these conceptions of sense objectively determined? The ambiguity of a language is settled by notions of sense that are immediate and subjective.

The openness of signs is shown also by the very fact of the historicity of languages. If the meaning of languages were the limited correspondence of a precise sign already in the repertory of the time, language could grow only by accretion, gradually building up (in the manner of a sunken ship); but in fact the old parts of the language are also transformed, in themselves. And this does not happen through a repeated redefinition of the code. It follows from the fact that the structure of a language has an inherent play. The signs as they have already come to be established at a given time permit extended uses. They can be taken outside the contexts in which the objective structure of language supposedly fixes them.

⁹ On the lack of fixed correlations in language: "But words, in cases where they cannot join up directly with and be supported by gestures, constitute rather imperfect, deficient, and unreliable means of communication." Because symbols are not wholly reliable, "they require a method of verification that diminishes the risk of discrepancy, guaranteeing the correctness, the uniformity and the stability of the allusion within the sphere of a social group. It is, however, naive to depend on definitions or on the use of dictionaries," or to reduce language to "a 'system of symbols founded on fixed and unalterable definitions'" (Betti 1955, 46, 49, 50).

¹⁰ Like the language of iconographic symbols: "presiding over the humans is a figure which seems to be the most difficult to interpret in the series She is naked and has as attributes a sphere, a cornucopia, a girdle, a crown of leaves and a veil - and the possible readings of these various attributes is almost limitless." Braham (see note 13 p. 61), 209.

Innovation is not a mere detail of the nature of language. And this fact of innovation is in great tension with the idea of determinate structure according to which communication through language is supposed to work.¹¹ Extended usage is the result of extended readings: it is also because in interpretation a new sense is seen in the sign, a sense not theretofore attached to the sign by the code, that a new use results: it happens that in accordance with this reading the sign can be applied differently but with as much effect as before. If language were to function by virtue of an established correspondence, these innovative extensions could never be understood. The history of language, and of art, literature, music, custom, would be impossible. So the structure of a language itself is inherently open, and what fills the gaps is not an objective condition. It is more a subjective one: it is the sense that is settled upon by the interpreter.

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5. Historically determinate codes

This conclusion might be opposed, and ought to be looked at in more detail. Perhaps the openness of a language that is evident throughout its history is closed when one looks at a situated use of language. Communication through a language can only work if those one addresses know the code that is used. This is guaranteed by the fact that in a distinct time and place a definite language must exist. If there is nothing that answers to the 'rules of English,' there are nevertheless rules of a certain genre of North American English at the present time. One can argue that communication is premised on the existence of a code by which to communicate to one's contemporaries - or at least a certain set of readers among them; there is after all a distinct

¹¹ It is a problematic tension, and resolving it is the solution to "the puzzles of all the human sciences," which rest finally on three facts about language: that there are structures of language that allow correct interpretation, that there is room also for innovation, and that the innovations that extend "received usage" are immediately clear (Margolis 87, 364).

language that they are versed in by belonging to their place. To know the meaning of an expression means recovering this convention, which is a fact of history. Perhaps it could be said, then, that the code of language is open, but a situated historical code is determinate.

The best place to see this might be the case of an archaic language. An opaque text from the past is opaque because the exact phase of language that is the context of its meaning has been left behind by the subsequent transformations of the language. Meanings fall away from their signs because the language moves on; we lose the language of the past and confront human creations not with their grammar but with our own, so that they remain opaque to us. Consider a case in the interpretation of pictorial language. How does one understand the meaning of a walled city suspended in space above the heads of several figures standing firmly on the ground in a tenth-century Ottonian miniature; or a naked infant floating in the sky in a fifteenth-century Flemish altarpiece.¹² By our own ways of reading - reading according to current pictorial conventions - we have only ambiguity: are these supposed to be apparitions, or miraculous levitations, or exactly what? The mere contemplation of the thing does not answer this. The meaning of these images is delivered, rather, by reading these things "according to the manner" in which particular meanings were expressed by forms at distinct historical times. To understand means recovering a lost historical code.¹³ When we have recovered it, we know that pictorial space in tenth-century Germany can be merely schematic, so that a 'hovering town' is only a bit of information indicating like a caption the locus of the narrative, while pictorial space in

¹² I borrow these examples from the art historian Erwin Panofsky, who uses them to illustrate the historicity of pictorial languages.

¹³ We cannot understand a work of art "without having divined, as it were, its historical 'locus.' While we believe that we are identifying the motifs on the basis of our practical experience pure and simple, we really are reading 'what we see' according to the manner in which objects and events are expressed by forms under varying historical conditions" ("Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art," Meaning in the Visual Arts (New York 1955), 34-35).

fifteenth-century Flanders is to be read as real, so that a floating child can only be understood as truly floating, as a supernatural apparition. The spatial conventions of the two times differed. The same visual form - a suspended object - had different meanings at different times, but one meaning in either.

6. Historical codes and sense

But does this really demonstrate the historical determinacy of the code, proving the objectivity of the context of language? How do we really discover conventions like these? And they do have to be discovered, since they are never spelled out for us in simple lexicons: there is no rule book in which to look up the sign 'object suspended in space' (the difficulty even of verbalizing this sign makes it obvious how impossible such a project would be). In art, rule books for the encoding of meaning exist in only the most minimal way, and to the extent that they do they explain precious little of what has to be interpreted (the iconographies that give no more than the identities of figures). The nearest one comes to an explicitation of a convention - of how signs are to be read - are interpretations with some sort of historical pedigree (they rarely come straight from the time and place of the work itself), or the enunciation (perhaps by contemporary artists) of various odd principles of expression that held sway in the time at issue. As was already observed, this is in the nature of languages: languages are not learned through codes, through rational system, but through use. There are no records to find; codes could only be implicitly 'absorbed.' So what we are looking for in recovering an historical code is not the objective system itself - something displaying the correspondence between sign and meaning - but rather evidence of the code.

It should not be surprising, then, that we rediscover the archaic pictorial language in the same way as we learn our own present verbal language - not by uncovering a code, but by interpreting. The evidence is the meaning of the work. How is it possible for us to know that in tenth-century Germany pictorial space means schematic space? We discover it by looking at and by simply interpreting Ottonian pictures (as indeed the German apprentice once did). From one picture to the next, we can see that this is the right way to read them, and we can see this just because it makes sense of what goes on in their space. We discover an historical regularity - but our evidence is just

other pictures like this one.¹⁴ Our way of reconstructing the implicit conventions of other times requires that we go ahead and interpret them without conventions - which is to say, with our own. We find within our own ambiguous ways of reading one way that makes sense.

Even historically fixed codes are secondary to sense. A limited convention is only a methodological construct built subsequent to coherent interpretations. We think of communication as the appeal to a convention within which a sign has a definite meaning. We think of right interpretation as, at least in part, the matching of a sign against the meaning that corresponds to it in a table of encoding implicit in the historical situation of a language. And this is plainly what we do. But it is not all we do, and to insist on it is to leave out something crucial. Every convention that we are able to reconstruct is built out of interpretations made on no foundation of a code. The recovery of the rule that Ottonian artists use space non-naturalistically depends upon the sense that we make of Ottonian art by interpreting space non-naturalistically - which is to say, in a way that is fully within the range of our own ways of reading. To interpret it otherwise would produce contradictions and puzzles in the meaning of these pictures. Whatever convention we judge implicit in a work is a convention we infer on the basis of an already valid, already viable interpretation. A rule of the code can only be found inside an interpretation that makes sense of what is simply there to be interpreted.

Even when an explicit code is discovered, and makes clear the 'real meaning' of the thing, what is 'discovered' is not an objective link that binds thing and meaning, but a meaning that is accepted because it makes sense of more than before. When we can actually apply such a convention as a tool of interpretation, we accept that it holds and know that the rule can be applied in the case at hand only when it makes sense of what we are presented. This is a form of legitimation that cannot be built out of historical facts. In fact even undoubted historical currency cannot legitimate the use of a rule: any

¹⁴ "Understanding the meaning of the work makes it possible also for the historian to experience something of the original situation into which the work speaks" (1965 TM, 453) - it is as much this as the reverse.

case that an established rule, no matter what its pedigree, makes nonsense of is for that reason alone an exception to the rule.¹⁵ In other words, there is a criterion even for the application of an historically fixed rule, and it is the criterion of sense.¹⁶

Here too, what is recovered as the fixed objective code by which an objective meaning is determined follows from interpretation without objective bounds, according to rather subjective criteria of sense. It is the sense that we make of the picture that tells us that by our own methods we have understood it. What this really means is that we understand without a code—or rather, we understand by applying any code and accepting what delivers the deepest, most complete sense.

In order to form conclusions about "the manner in which objects and events are expressed by forms under varying historical conditions" we have to interpret these works; they are our only substantial evidence for the convention that it seems we need in order to understand them, and we interpret pictures through a competence we already possess. It is only on the basis of the sense that we can make in this way that we reconstruct past languages and formulate a 'convention.'¹⁷ It is not on the basis of past languages that

¹⁵ On Veronese's Industria, an allegory painted for the Doge of Venice and based upon an established emblem meaning 'industry': "Veronese retained the sewing basket, but because ants would not have been visible in a ceiling painting he replaced them with a spider making a web, an equally self-evident symbol of industriousness, but one that contradicted the interpretation of the spider's web given in the most authoritative contemporary source, Valeriano's Hieroglyphica, where it is said to signify 'useless labour,' a reading that can hardly have been meant in the context of the Doge's Palace" (Charles Hope, "'Poesie' and Painted Allegories" in The Genius of Venice, 1500-1600 [London 1983], 37).

¹⁶ For example, the legitimate application of "rules of ... textual criticism" is only determined by the intelligibility they produce: "their proper application cannot be detached from the understanding of the textual content" (1965 TM, 261).

¹⁷ Even where the historical consciousness supposes it approaches the work directly on its own terms, it relies in some fundamental way, at some crucial stage in this process, upon its own form of understanding (1965 TM,

we decide coherence. How can we determine that a non-naturalistic use of space is historically appropriate to Ottonian art other than by the ease with which this allows us to read Ottonian art? There is nothing specifically historical about this way of reading; what makes it seem 'historically fitting' is simply how well it works with what we see in Ottonian pictures.

The interpretations by which we reconstruct a code are always grounded by 'sense' - the rightness, the fit, the coherence of the interpretation. This is a necessary feature of all interpretation. And these are our own standards of sense: sense is always what makes sense to us. The inherent determinacy of a language is the determinacy of its sense, and this is not an objectively fixed condition.



7. What language implies

The objectivity that is evident in the condition of language - the aspect of fixed convention or code - is not objectivity according to the theory. It is not an autonomous determinacy but rather a regularity of sense. The closedness in the idea of a code expresses a common fact about language: that there are certain fixed practices, certain regular ways in which to read signs that illuminate things. The same ways over and over again give sense to things. In the culture that we live in, it never makes anything clearer to think of a certain gesture as other than a greeting; this, then, is always its meaning. But this fact, the simple regularity of an interpretation or a meaning, is not the discovery of the inherent determinacy of a language. That some piece of language in some situation has a limited meaning does not indicate the determinacy of language in itself. This is a disclosure neither of the semantic determinacy of language on the whole nor of this particular piece of language. What so far as we know has one sense, by our interpretation, for our purposes, is no indication of inherent determinacy.

The code aspect of a language is misunderstood. It is only a part of what makes language function, and it is not a fixed structure of correspondence but more like a set of directions for interpretation. Directions are not orders; they can be disregarded when a sense can be made that goes beyond them. In fact, a code is limited only by the limit of the sense of interpretations. The limit of the meaning of a sign is as rigid as the limit of its meaningfulness.

So a language is not in essence an objectivity, within which the meaning of a sign is determined. 'Language itself' contains no inherent limit that can be relied upon to show the limited meaning of its signs. An expression does not have a context that is inherently fixed by the nature of a language; it is fixed only by language in a situation, involving experiences and interests according to which sense can be found. Which gives to the structure of a language the following form:

thing	meaning, ...
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What the ellipsis means is 'and whatever else could in the situation make a better sense.' An objective code cannot fill this in. The set of meanings that a sign possesses within a language is the set of workable interpretations, which no one is ever really in a position to limit. The determinacy of a language is the determinacy of its sense: the limit of this sense is the limit of those interpretations that actually realize it: and what this limit is always remains to be seen.

Language has autonomy (to return to an earlier notion that a less abstract idea of objectivity ought to preserve); it is not freely interpretable. But it has this autonomy only through the sense that it bears upon the interpreter, outside the operation of any objective correspondence. To call this condition of meaning subjective is to say that the sense that is found cannot be isolated in a structure of language that stands perfectly outside subjectivity. It does not have the objectivity claimed by the theory. But the sense that arises cannot be explained either as objectivity or as subjectivity: it exists only where it is accepted by the interpreter, because it is found precisely where for the interpreter everything is clarified; still it is not the interpreter that leads the way. Language determines the mind of the inter-

preter with the mind of the interpreter... It does not have the objectivity that the theory requires.

One cannot, then, appeal to 'the code' of a language (current in the time and place of the creation of a thing) as a way to show the determinacy of its meaning. Even that a thing belongs to a language within which it must be understood does not mean it is fixed in its meaning. What determines in a language is not principally a fixed correspondence but an adequate meaning within the frame of one's own understanding. The context of a language includes the judgement of the interpreter. A part of the supposedly objective linguistic context is the subject - not as the passive mind within which language itself determines the meaning of its signs, but as a participant with the code whose movement within it, and sometimes beyond it, delivers the sign of its meaning. Because this is part of the functioning of all actual language (as opposed to the sub-languages of artificially fixed sign systems), language does not offer an objective context, and is not, therefore, the objectivity within which meaning is made an object.

10 Culture

1. The condition of culture

It may be the case that languages are not determinate systems of rules, complete contexts within which semantic entities have determinate meanings. The determining context is left incomplete by a language taken on its own. But languages are historical phenomena and human constructs themselves, which is to say they are only part of a larger situation that must itself complete the determining context. They themselves belong to a context. Very possibly the context left open by language is closed not by subjectivity but by culture, the common form of life to which the language belongs as a creation itself. There is an objective historical or cultural background to a language and an expression in a language that must be recovered if the thing is to be properly understood. Culture, therefore, completes the partial circle drawn but still left open by intention and language: This finally closed circle is the objective context that is fully capable of determining meaning without the contribution of subjectivity.

If language itself has an openness, the culturally situated use of language does not. The encoding of a meaning within an historically established communicative practice involves more than tabular rules of a language. What makes the loose code precise is a common form of life; what closes the open context of a grammar is the context of a time. The objectivity of language is not therefore fixed within the language itself, as in a set of historically finite rules; it is fixed by the determinate historical conditions beyond language and within which language operates. So there is a background even to language that must be recovered if any linguistic entity, any human action or creation,

is to be understood as itself. A humanly created thing is made in a cultural context within which alone it has its own complete content.¹

This awareness of meaning as a human product wholly configured by the conditions of its creation is in fact the basic conception of the modern historical consciousness.² The real determining effect of the historical/cultural context is clear from the fact that we lose it, and with it lose the meaning of things: outside their context, human creations are often just mute signs. Outside their world they are opaque to us, and inside their world they come to life, recovering a sense they once clearly had. So the objectivity of meaning is fixed by the co-ordinates of an objective cultural context, a whole historical world.

2. Culture and understanding

On this view, what it is that the individual contributes to the understanding of a piece of language is not therefore subjective; insofar as he

¹ For the historian or critic, understanding is "a matter of placing a given text within the context of the history of language, literary form, style, etc., and thus ultimately within the totality of the living context of history" (1965 TM, 302).

² Gadamer's critique of objectivism is as cautious about the historical consciousness as about the aesthetic consciousness that it is meant to correct (discussed in note 2 p. 76): one view fights the other with too narrow a conception of cultural creations. Whereas the aesthetic consciousness thinks of objective meaning as autonomous, the historical consciousness considers it contextual; each view considers it has an exclusive understanding of meaning. According to the historical consciousness, a cultural creation does not stand on its own with its own meaning, it "belongs to a world that endorses it with its significance." "All the data of history" are "manifestations of the life from which they stem"; "the permanent significance of something can ... be known objectively only when it belongs within a self-contained context." Understanding therefore proceeds according to the theory of objectivity: "we must set ourselves within the spirit of the age, and think with its ideas and its thoughts, not our own, and thus advance toward historical objectivity"; it is "the claim of historical consciousness to see the past in terms of its own being, not in terms of our contemporary criteria and prejudices but within its own historical horizon" (1965 TM, 148, 202, 264-65, 269).

understands, he is the instrument of his culture. He has already absorbed, growing up inside the culture to which this language belongs, what must surround the language to make it functional. We understand immediately not because we know the rules of an independently determined code, but because we share the context in which the language works. Language is completed through the community of its speakers, who tacitly share the context of an historical/cultural form of life. We understand because we live within the context in which these communications are made: we know their grammar and we share the way of life that this presupposes.

When on the other hand we do not understand, it may be that something of this cultural context is missing for us. So understanding a language, and understanding what has become distant, means possessing or recovering these conditions. The distance is not always historical. Distance is cultural: it is the gap between ways of life. It is this that explains both the foreignness of the past and within what we very loosely call a single culture. (How many cultures co-exist at this moment in one small North-American city?)³ The strange messages of our own time and place require more than knowing the language, but also the world against which this language has meaning.

Only what still exists within our world is there to be acquired. How do we acquire a context not naturally ours? What is foreign in our own place and time has its practitioners, and we usually understand it by asking them to explain. This is just what we do in asking questions, which are ways of getting others to situate themselves against the semantic pillars of our own view of things. We don't acquire their context and then interpret so much as have them translate themselves to fit our own. Which means this is not the way in which anything past can be understood (in the case of historical creations there are no longer authors who can be cajoled into recasting

³ Temporal distance as essentially cultural: "To say that men of different eras cannot understand each other is really to say that men who exist in significantly different situations and have different perspectives on life cannot understand each other"; "the concept of a homogeneous present culture is empirically false and cannot suffice to bridge the gap between persons of the same period. That is the real ontological gap - the one that subsists between persons, not the one that subsists between cultural eras" (Hirsch 1967, 256-58).

themselves). The alternative way to understand - perhaps the true way - is to enter the world to which a thing belongs and to acquire mentally the semantic context that determines the thing's meaning.⁴

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3. Alien contexts, familiar contexts

But we should look carefully at how this entering and acquisition of another context takes place, to see just how much it actually tells us about the objective condition of meaning. Take the case of understanding the past, where this is what we must do. With past creations, the context that determines meaning is conspicuous simply by its absence. It must be recovered and set up around the thing in order to make the thing reveal its meaning.⁵ The question is, where do we go looking for the historical world that holds the meaning of these things?

⁴ "Hence all the various means of historical reconstruction, the re-establishment of the 'world' to which <the work> belongs, the re-establishment of the original situation about which the creative artist was writing, performance in the original style, and so on, can claim to reveal the true meaning of a work of art and guard against misunderstanding and false reproduction" (1965 TM, 148).

⁵ An example of the revelatory power of the cultural-historical context: "each of the chapters <in this book> interprets a painting or group of paintings within the several determining contexts of conventions and institutions - artistic, social, historical - of Renaissance Venice, especially as these are manifest in the patterns of patronage that occasioned the pictures and in the specific locations for which they were intended. Created in and for Venice, these paintings can be best understood by being viewed in situ Such contextualism necessarily reinforces our awareness of the position of these images in history, of the distance separating us from the moments and circumstances of their creation. Part of our task in attempting to understand them involves historical reconstruction, a reimagining of those dimensions of experience that surrounded a picture and that both constituted and resonated its fullest significance" (David Rosand, Painting in Cinquecento Venice <New Haven 1982>, xv).

Here we encounter a peculiar difficulty: to recover the conditions that reveal an historical text we face what is only a world of historical texts: the past remains only through its traces, which are creations precisely like the thing to be understood. Whatever is left that might disclose the revealing context is locked up itself in that context. To show that the historical context necessary to reveal meaning is actually accessible, we have to face our distance not merely from the meaning of a dark symbol, not merely from the cultural context that would clarify it, but from the meaning of everything that could still disclose that past reality. If the historical consciousness is correct, if an independently or purely cultural context is a necessary condition for understanding any past or foreign thing, then we are faced with an utterly unbridgeable gulf.⁶

Just to make an historical context accessible, we are driven to presuppose that the discontinuity between cultures cannot be total. Unless there were some continuity, it is truly hard to see how we could have access to what we are supposed to understand in order to reconstruct the context. Which means, quite simply, that understanding within a purely historical context is not the condition of grasping historically distant meaning. Our historical sensitivities make it appear worse than naive to presume we have an already given bridge to the past, but has our supposed sophistication anything to do with a real appreciation of how historical understanding is possible? When our actual situation is faced, we can either accept the existence of the link or deny that we have ever broken into history at all.⁷

⁶ For the historical view, "the true significance of the work of art can be understood only in terms of its origin and genesis within that world" from which it came (1965 TM, 148). But it is a part of this conception that we look back at that world in an historically conditioned way; by virtue of this historical relativity the historical consciousness makes itself virtually impossible (1965 TM, 206-07).

⁷ The historical consciousness "presumes, of course, that one is able to overcome the fact that the historical observer is tied to time and place" (1965 TM, 204).

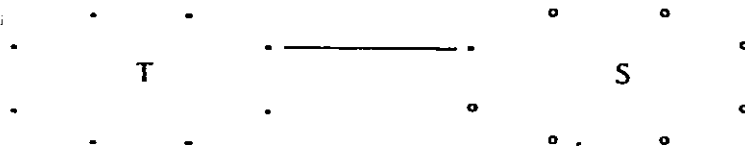
If it were truly the case that the conventions of our own culture belonged only to our culture, we would be imprisoned in the cultures into which we were born. If contexts were discontinuous, and if the objectivity of meaning were finally determined by an autonomous cultural context, the recovery of this context would not be the issue it is, because there would be no bridge from the known to the alien.

There must then be some continuity between the contexts of past and present, so that working from some piece of meaning that is immediately clear, beyond question, we can gradually reassemble the whole alien context. Some continuity with a context is a condition of recovering it. This means that we are still able to understand things according to our own context; our own context cannot be suspended or excluded.⁸ It is a simple condition of the recovery of, say, a past language that our culture has some continuity with its, that to some extent we are still versed in conditions of meaning that have extended themselves from the past - that we are versed in them, that is, just by belonging to our own time. (In the same way, the anthropologist learning the entirely unknown language of an utterly foreign culture - a situation that on the face of it seems hopeless - presumes already to share an understanding of the basic human situations, the foundation on which his translation is raised.) We must live with some continuity or commonality with the past (think, for instance, of the degree to which we can understand without guidance centuries-old English); if we can understand the past at all, we must already share just enough continuity that we can just enter it (freely and subjectively), and can work bit by bit from this immediate clarity to a grasp of an ever broader world, until a past creation that we did not originally and immediately understand presents itself to us in its meaning. Perhaps we share very little,⁹ but however little, if it is to hold the capacity to unfold an

⁸ Continuity is not a mere "assumption" (as claimed by Wachterhauser 1986, 449); it is a necessity recognized in a true apprehension of our position with regard to the past.

⁹ The point is not to diminish the real gaps - "every encounter with tradition ... involves the experience of the tension between the text and the present. The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation but consciously bringing it out"; "the alienation

entire context of meaning that illuminates something hitherto impenetrable, it must be a powerful link.¹⁰ Some corner of our own cultural context we must already share with the context of what we want to understand. Our context, the context of the subject, and the context of the thing must be in some degree the same.



of meaning" the text undergoes as a result of distance in time is not to be overlooked (1965 TM, 273, 278). It is merely to recognize that subjectivity holds an inviolable link.

¹⁰ This continuity is what Gadamer discusses as tradition - which is a perfectly appropriate name for it: "understanding is not so much a method by means of which the enquiring mind approaches some selected object and turns it into objective knowledge, as something of which a prior condition is its being situated within a process of tradition" (1965 TM, 276). Its importance is clear; it is the overlooked fact that is opposed to the philosophical exaggeration of alienness, without which understanding is not merely difficult but impossible. That we share some commonality of life is the basis for the understanding of any human difference. For instance, the understanding of "what we call 'classical' does not first require the overcoming of historical distance, for in its own constant communication it does overcome it." The understanding of all human phenomena relies upon this commonality, this "contemporaneity," which is what Gadamer's notion of tradition really means (1965 TM, 251-52, 257). Contemporaneity is that necessary extent to which temporally distant cultures are not distant. It is an unavoidable presumption of all interaction between present and past. Hence it is hard to see how it can be regarded as "naive" (Wachterhauser 1981, 117), just as it is easy to see how far this is from the presumption of a single and enduring intact canonic tradition - a "universal system already (in some sense) in place throughout man's history" - for which it has been rather grossly mistaken (Margolis 1985, 201-02; Margolis 1987, 365-67). Habermas has made much the same error (see Ricoeur 1973, 86-87). There have been other unfortunate misinterpretations: tradition is important to Gadamer "because it points to a principle for resolving disagreements between contemporary readers. The reader who follows the path of tradition is right, and the reader who leaves this path is wrong" (Hirsch 1967, 250; a similar misreading was made by Hinman 1980, 532-33).

This continuity is the bridge by which we can reach the rest of the cultural context in which the meaning of the thing is revealed.¹¹

Temporal distance is really cultural distance, and the continuity that must be present to bridge temporal distance must exist wherever cultural distance can be overcome. Distance does not utterly separate. If understanding is possible, contexts - the distinct contexts of subject and object - must overlap. What indicates where this overlap occurs? Only an immediate understanding of something that belongs to a foreign world. It is an immediate experience of sense - that is, it is something that cannot be legitimated by anything historical, because it is the historical that one first enters with this step.¹² How many steps into the past can one freely take, relying upon the present, upon one's own context? There is no a priori indication of how much these two contexts overlap, are the same. But as it was the experience of incomprehension that implied the separateness of an historical context, perhaps it is only the experience of comprehension that betrays their unity. The foundation of all historical understanding - of the understanding that

11 The "understanding of the past ... undoubtedly requires an historical horizon. But it is not the case that we acquire this horizon by placing ourselves within an historical situation. Rather, we must already have a horizon in order to be able to place ourselves within a situation. For what do we mean by 'placing ourselves' in a situation? Certainly not just disregarding ourselves. This is necessary, of course, in that we must imagine the other situation. But into this other situation we must also bring ourselves. Only this fulfils the meaning of 'placing ourselves'." "Are there, then, two different horizons here, the horizon in which the person seeking to understand lives, and the particular historical horizon within which he places himself? Is it a correct description of the art of historical understanding to say that we are learning to place ourselves within alien horizons? Are there such things as closed horizons, in this sense? ... Is the horizon of one's own present time ever closed in this way, and can a historical situation be imagined that has this kind of closed horizon.... The closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction" - that is, a philosophical fiction. (1965 TM, 270-71) The historical consciousness only alienates us from "our true historical being" - our connectedness with the past (1985 OPH, 178).

12 "The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the communality that binds us to the tradition" - from the link with the past that understanding presumes upon in principle (1965 TM, 261).

painstakingly reassembles the historical context that makes the mute creation speak - is at its very ground an immediate sense that is not built out of historical facts. It is not an objective historical currency that delivers the historical context, but the sense of the subject's own present.

4. The cultural legitimation of meaning

But is this sufficient reason to say that an objective historical context does not exist? Surely it is the case that any sense that is accepted of the past must be historically legitimated. Only a sense that could have been recognized in the past can be taken as historical by me. Historically possible meaning is a limit condition of the reconfiguration of the context. It is a fact, after all, that a past thing meant something in the past. Any 'reconfigured' context according to which it does not have this meaning is built not upon continuity, but upon an experience of subjective 'sense' that is merely mistaken for continuity.¹³

This sounds quite intelligent, but can one really apply an historical standard to the experience of meaning, to the meaning one begins with in reconstructing an historical world? The 'historical' legitimation of an interpretation is just that one's understanding bears out through all that one goes on to uncover of the past. On the other hand perhaps it does not: it is resisted, something contradicts it or shows it to be false. But then the only thing that shows our reading to be mistaken is some form of nonsense, nonsense by our own standard. There is nothing especially historical about this. What is 'historically' or 'culturally inadmissible' is never anything but what is singled out as incompatible by our own current judgement about what

¹³ "The difficulty involved in such an inversion rests in the ... transposition into another subjectivity that differs from the original one" (Betti 1962, 57). "The historical consciousness has the task of understanding all the witnesses of a past time out of the spirit of that time, of extricating them from the preoccupations of our own present life, and of knowing, without moral smugness, the past as a human phenomenon" (1966 U, 5).

is historically possible.¹⁴ All that makes an interpretation 'historically fitting' is how well it fits with everything that we accept we ought to know about the case at hand.

It is also true that the reconstruction of 'the original historical context,' in any real breadth, will probably let in enough to determine the meaning of a thing several times over, in various and even contradictory ways. Even where one has found that narrow context into which, for example, an artist delivered his work, within it one can usually find more than one frame of reference. What is the semantic context of a fifteenth-century Crucifixion painted as an altarpiece for a specific Flemish church? The meanings that were attached to this single symbol in the one historical place would have varied through all the levels of theological sophistication that the one congregation afforded - including, one might well imagine, various heretical readings. Perhaps, then, the superficially factual 'historical context' turns out to be something open-ended; here again the idea of the self-sufficient objectivity of the cultural context breaks down.

Perhaps the historical context that makes a meaning objective is not just any historically viable context (which still delivers too many meanings for objectivity) but more precisely 'the context of the thing itself,' a single context that 'belongs' to the creation (if the thing is orthodox Christian art, therefore, heresy is not a possible context). But this again means that it is not simply historical aptness that legitimates the true context, even if historicity is a necessary condition.¹⁵

¹⁴ "In this scheme, history is also limited in its objectivity in that it may only detect anomalies between its version of the world and the world itself on the basis of identifying faults from within its own system of description" (Paul Smith, "Pictures and History: One Man's Truth," Oxford Art Journal X:2 <1987>, 99). - Since this is all that ever happens, the question is what relevance the notion of objectivity is still to have.

¹⁵ Sometimes this difficulty is recognized: "What a word means is determined by the ... regular manner in which members of the relevant speech-community use that word. The 'rules of use' ... are their rules" (Connolly 1986, 273). But what it is that singles out 'the relevant' audience among writer, commissioner, reader, critic, and so on is rarely hinted at - and it is not at all easy to make clear.

One never goes looking for the one context that 'belongs' to a created thing - in fact it is impossible to conceive how one could identify such a context, prior to interpreting (so as to eliminate the possibility of subjective interpretation). A context doesn't just 'cling' to a thing any more than does a meaning. There is a tendency to slip back to the idea of communication: the artist, the purpose, and the 'act of meaning,' as if in some way these things too could be filled in without interpreting. But it is a poor recourse also because it is naive to exclude the artist's audience.¹⁶ But casting about in this way is arbitrary; it is an approach that we have already had to abandon just because we are not in a position to delimit abstractly the context of communication. Meaning arises in interpretation. And the thing itself, after all, is not just a creation by someone or for someone, but something offered to the world.¹⁷

The cultural and historical situation of any created thing holds more than one set of determinants. The context 'of the act itself' is not something that is autonomously defined and that we discover as a fact (it is not found somehow attached to the thing). Defining it is not a matter of discerning a distinct set of objective links, but narrowing one's focus, choosing to regard the thing 'as' something - the intentional action of an individual, the



¹⁶ All these notions of 'real' context tend to take on the interpreter's own preoccupations. In Schleiermacher's day, for example, "every thought construct" was to be understood against "the total context of a man's life" (1965 TM, 167) - a typical example of Romantic 'individualism' in the era of the genius. The present trend is in the opposite direction: the context of a work is a society, a class or a community. What a poem means is not given by the poet's intention, but "because of the special way it and other such texts are read, discussed, criticized, etc. within the literary community" (Connolly 1986, 274). These 'contexts' are simply de facto preoccupations; it is senseless to talk about their being the 'right' restrictions' for each time.

¹⁷ "The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and whom he originally wrote for. It certainly is not identical with them <limited to them>, for it is always partly determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history" (1965 TM, 263).

expression of class or a religious group, the representative of a style or a fashion, the expression of a merely human truth. A context must be there to choose. The various constellations of context that can be marked out in the cloud of reality that surrounds a created thing in the world to which it belongs necessitates a choice. And this choice means that context is not an objectivity that limits the meaning of a thing. Meaning cannot be objective in the sense of being narrowly or even finitely determined, a priori. The condition of limit that is inherent to the notion of the objectivity of meaning does not follow from the nature of context. The limit of a thing's meaning we could only declare a posteriori - and this would mean after setting it seriatim within every legitimate context. But the number and nature of every legitimate context can never at any time be finally known. Context does not present a limit of meaning.

5. Human but alien?

It is suggested here that the reconstruction of the objective cultural context within which an expression has meaning is not itself an objective matter, so that this context cannot be regarded an objective condition. But there is a further way in which individual subjectivity must enter into the recovery of the supposedly objective context. It is also the case that the past was human. If the reconstructed world of the past is to be accurate, it has to be understood as something human, a theatre for what we know as life; it cannot be made into a theatre of cut-outs, of beings who act out historically accurate pantomimes free of all anachronism that remain foreign.¹⁸ Any

¹⁸ There are two approaches to the understanding of past life: one of these is "reconstruction," which is wholly concerned with the original purpose, "the context of their original world," from which an artefact is "wrenched." But the past, like life, cannot be revived; it can be recovered (following the subject thesis of the theory of objectivity) only in "an estranged state"; "reconstructed" relics are thereby given "only a secondary, cultural, existence"; "a hermeneutics that regarded understanding as the reconstruction of the original would be no more than the recovery of a dead meaning." The alternative approach is "integration" - integration with life as we know it, which is life in the present. The objective 'contextualization' of the past does not produce "a living relationship," but rather the irony of all purely historical understanding: that texts are looked at "in a way that they themselves did not intend to be looked at" (1965 TM, 147-50, 301).

understanding in the terms of a specifically 'historical' sense that does not give human history or human culture this human sense, to us, in our terms, lacks human reality.¹⁹ The meaning of the time has to be understood as a 'contemporaneous' not a distanced meaning. Nothing definitively rules out an interpretation with contemporaneity but a positive contradiction; it would not only be wrong but positively frustrating to prohibit subjectivity. If the human past is to be understood as human, it has to be understood in terms fully compatible with the human world of the interpreter.

Anachronism turns out to be a difficult concept to manage. There is a certain inherent openness in what is truly historical, against which anachronism and other such limitations appear dogmatic limits. Perhaps it will seem dogmatic to reply that the past was always as rich a place as the present, but surely this is a precondition of any genuine feeling for history: even if there are conceptions of 'humanity' that have historical limits, there is a sense of human being - what it means to live, to feel, to fear, to want, ... - that no amount of historical cleverness could relativize.

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6. What culture implies

The cultural context within which meaning is determined as the product of a semantic act is narrowed by an interpretation that makes sense - that is, by a search for sense that one cannot utterly strip of subjective features, as has been brought out in earlier chapters. The very ground of an

¹⁹ "The implicit prerequisite of the historical method, then, is that the permanent significance of something can first be known objectively only when it belongs within a self-contained context. In other words, when it is dead enough to have only historical interest. Only then does it seem possible to exclude the subjective involvement of the observer" (1965 TM, 265). But a genuine "historical consciousness has the task ... of knowing ... the past as a human phenomenon" (1966 U, 5).

interpretation involves criteria of meaning that cannot be freed of what, by the theory, could only be called subjectivity.

The cultural or historical context is not another objective world, but must include our own world. Because continuity between contexts is a condition of entering other contexts, because the sense of an 'historically legitimate' interpretation is only a sense that we can recognize, and because the context one attempts to recover must be known as a human context-human, that is, for the interpreter - there can be no categorical line drawn between the subjective and the objective.

It remains true that our own de facto context may be insufficient to deliver any sense at all. But this does not demonstrate the theory of objectivity, which argues the inapplicability of subjectivity in principle; it points to limitations of subjectivity in practice. It does not show that subjectivity itself should be left behind - abandoned for a foreign context to which we can cross by a narrow footbridge, the last thread of continuity; it shows where individual subjectivity is limited in its individual content, where it needs to be supplemented with something. Something more has to be learned.²⁰ The process of extending subjectivity might be pictured by the footbridge diagramme (in 10.3), where subjectivity is effectively left behind. It could be seen that way, but at the cost of ignoring the rôle of subjectivity in the sense-finding that takes place both in locating the bridge and in making sense of things once the bridge is crossed, and at the cost of deepening a sense of categorical alienation that is already suspect. It would be so much more sensible to say that here subjectivity recovers a context by extending its

²⁰ As Gadamer fully recognizes. The understanding of art and history is not a 'natural' capacity; it involves acquiring an "aesthetic or historical consciousness" (free, however, of philosophical distortions), it requires 'Bildung' (1965 TM, 17). Historical knowledge is necessary: Gadamer is himself against the dissolution of the connection of the work with its world; this is one of his criticisms of the aesthetic consciousness: one cannot "abstract from life-references in order to grasp the work itself. Rather it exists within them"; "it is right, in principle, to exclude the prejudices of a pure experiential aesthetic and to place the play of art within its historical and political context" (1965 TM, 76, 108, 453). Understanding the conditions in which a work "fulfilled its original purpose is undoubtedly an important aid to its understanding"; the point is that this kind of understanding cannot involve the suspension of present sense (1965 TM, 148-49).

own awareness, by recognizing things that it was unaware of in a world it shares with the object. When enough is recollected, and when it is the right recollection, the meaning of the thing in question speaks out to the interpreter, and speaks in a world shared, surrounding subject and object alike. In the extension of his own world, the subject discovers the object.²¹

The idea of a cultural context merely recognizes what in practice a subject does not know, without which meaning remains hidden. It is the independence of these illuminating facts that gives context its degree of autonomy - there are facts that one must know and that do not depend upon us - but this is not an otherness opposed to the subject. The function of a culturally determined semantic context necessarily involves a concrete subjectivity. It is therefore only as limited in its capacity to reveal meaning as is concrete subjectivity in its capacity to grow.²²

21 "Revealing what is unfamiliar does not mean merely reconstructing historically the 'world' in which the work had its original meaning and function," suspending the horizon of the interpreter; "there is no more an isolated horizon of the present than there are historical horizons.... Understanding, rather, is always a fusion of these horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves." (1964 AH, 100; 1965 TM, 273) There is a shared world in which the interpreter's own viewpoint has a legitimate place: "The way in which the interpreter belongs to his text is like the way in which the vanishing point belongs to the perspective of a picture. It is not a matter of looking for this vanishing point and adopting it as one's standpoint. The interpreter similarly finds his point of view already given, and does not choose it arbitrarily" (1965 TM, 293-94). Understanding is "a matter of placing a given text within the context of the history of language, literary form, style, etc., and thus ultimately within the totality of the living context of history" (1965 TM, 302) - but this living context is precisely a totality that cannot be fragmented into hermetic spheres of meaning.

22 "No one will deny that there are scholarly methods of interpretation and criticism taught and learned and applied to works of art, whether they be historical, philological, sociological, and psychological methods; but no one in his right senses would want to claim that only the scholar understands art or himself in the light of arts. ... To be sure there are quite diverse things and many different hermeneutical levels in terms of which the experience of art may be enacted. But it would be absurd to restrict the adequate comprehension of the work of art to a putatively highest level supposedly established by scholarship." (1965 TM, 328) When the restraint is lifted by recognizing the commensurability of the individual, interpretation is a path whose limit cannot be seen.

11 The Objectivity of Context

1. The condition of context

The second approach to affirming the objectivity of meaning involved demonstrating the objectivity of a context: a meaningful thing that belongs to a context which has an objectivity of its own is fully determined by that context - it is determined, that is, solely by objective factors, so that it possesses an entirely objective meaning. But the attempt to find objectivity this way has not been very successful. The general problem with this approach is that these 'objective contexts', when you look carefully at how they work, do not function like objective mechanisms. They are not purely external conditions that, free of subjectivity, simply constellate meaning.

2. Communication

The basic context of a meaningful thing has been taken to be the context of human communication: meaning is a human product, and the meaning of a thing is the meaning that was 'put into it.' It is the finitude of the act behind a created thing that situates it, and it is situated in the context of its production. There is objective determinacy in the very condition of communication.

Of course it is a fact of the context of communication that a determinate meaning is conveyed - there is a discrete original meaning that a sign is meant to deliver. However, it happens that these predetermined units of communicated meaning are only a part of what is proper to communication and the context of communication.

Moreover, what is involved in determining even this limited meaning is not objective enough to support the theory that it is invoked to support. Further conditions of meaning are required for the 'act of meaning' to determine anything. Whatever the role of intention, it is language that appears to do the effective work of determining the meaning of expressions for interpreters; in fact it is precisely because intention can determine nothing that an objective system of language is necessary. The intentional background of communication does not itself clarify meaning at all.

Intention, therefore, is neither a sufficient context of meaning nor a necessary one: a determinate act of communication is not the context of all communicated meaning, and when it is a context, it is inadequate to determine the meaning that is involved. It can hardly be taken to demonstrate the objective determinacy of meaningful creations.

3. Language

What is the implication of the condition of language, which is possibly a more powerful determinant? The language within which a semantic creation is produced is thought to be a code that makes the determination of meaning an utterly objective matter. This has even been considered the essential function of a language: an objective code is required just for communication to be possible.

But this picture of language is oversimplified. The code of a language is not strict; it is open enough to allow various possibilities of meaning, and does not simply deliver a meaning that is objectively definitive. The interpreter of language is commonly left with the task of settling upon one among several determinations, and what directs the choice is what sense the interpreter finds. What the context of a language 'determines' has to be further narrowed by the sense of a reading.

In fact, in every case the subject has the role of accepting or not what the simple operation of the code delivers: no matter how objective the translation, only what makes sense to the interpreter can be a meaning. The legitimacy of objective connections is dependent upon their sense.

The mechanism uncovered in the examination of codes is not principally an objectively fixed correspondence, but rather sense within the terms of one's

own understanding. Rather than an objective system of correspondence, it is this - not at all the objectivity demanded by the theory - that finally determines. (It is because a greeting made by an utter stranger makes no sense to us that it is not counted a greeting; this has ultimately nothing to do with rules.) Sense is more primary than rules. In fact what implicit rules of language there are can only be learned within this process, and sense even bends rules. This is true both for language in principle and the finite language of an historical moment. It is empty to stress the 'objective autonomy' of system built upon the 'subjective' resolution of meaning. A meaning that is determined only subject to its sense is no objectivity at all.

A linguistic code is neither an objective limit upon meaning nor a fundamental determinant. The meaning of any piece of language is determined by sense as much as system, which means that the context of a language understood as an objectively functioning system is also inadequate to the determination of meaning. The determinacy of a language is the determinacy of the sense that can be recognized in it, and the sense that can be recognized depends upon the limits of interpreters. What limit this is can be settled only by time, so no determinate limit of meaning is uncovered through the case of language. Language is not the 'objective context' that determines objective meaning and demonstrates the objectivity of meaning.

4. Culture

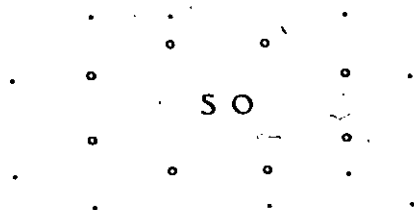
It was suggested, however, that if an objective language is not enough of a context to determine the meaning of expressions, that is because too little is taken into account in understanding how language functions. As a human creation itself, language functions in a context too. There is an ultimate context within which a language itself has a determinate function, so that it can operate as a communicative system. What completes the context of a code is not so much subjective sense, but the cultural situation within which the language was used. That this is an objective context is made clear by the fact that an expression is made at a time and place - that is, in a situation when a background to the language is already given. This is what one must bring to the correct reading of an encoded expression, what supported it in the life of its setting.

This is very sensible, but when you consider how a cultural context is uncovered and how it is applied in an instance of interpretation, it does not have the objectivity that is claimed for it, and for which it is cited in defence of objective meaning. But if it takes an historical context by which to complete a language and deliver a sense, is this another objective world, a world that takes the place of sense-finding subjectivity? Whatever one must reconstitute of a past context to stand in the place of the anachronistic context of subjectivity, so as to recover the meaning of some historical thing, requires recovery itself, and recovery from the position of the present. The fact of continuity between present and past, the necessity of working one's way from the context that is one's own, means that this constellation cannot be built only of pieces of the past. It is the same conclusion: concrete subjectivity cannot be excluded from the determination of meaning, and plays some role in the interpreter's articulation of an 'objective' context.

It is a condition of the recovery of even an historical context that the historian's own context be continuous with it: bad subjectivity must share the same world. The tradition that intervenes and separates the historian from the meaning of the thing is therefore also what links him to it. It is only from the standpoint of the present that one reconfigures the past and gives it the coherence it requires in order to form a context - something vital enough to elicit from a language a genuinely human sense. And a context rich enough to do this can be formed only by a subject who is humanly engaged with the remnants that he addresses in recovering a lost world.

It is in the nature of this relation that there is no simple crossing from the context of the subject into the context of the object (the historical footbridge constructed by the theory of objectivity). The historical context that is finally made capable of determining the meaning of the thing is indivisible from the 'illegitimate' context of subjectivity. In fact, the context in which a language is supplemented cannot be an alternate world that the subject must find a way to, taking nothing with him from his own. It can only be a part of his own world that he has not yet recognized, and that because it is a part of his world is accessible to him through if not solely by his own understanding. The context within which an historical sense is delivered must therefore be a constellation that is found within the world that implicitly surrounds both subject and object, and, encompassing both, is neither

purely objective nor perfectly subjective.¹ So the bridge diagramme² presents a false picture of alienation, and could be more accurately redrawn in the following funny-looking way.



The context that withholds and then reveals the meaning of a thing (here in dark type) is a part also of the subject's world, though for a time it may be hidden from the subject by the narrowness of his present capacities; it takes the subject's own self-extension to bring it into relief, to make it part of his world, but it gains this relief also from the point of view of his own world. The subject has to broaden his world - broaden the world compatible with his own subjectivity - before he can find and link together the entire context within which the meaning of this or that thing will speak to him.

The context that supplements a language is not an objectivity opposed to subjectivity; it must include our own context of thought and concern. The determination of meaning by even an historical context still relies upon a coherence that cannot be effectively torn away from subjectivity. So the objective context that is to reveal the objectivity of meaning is still missing.

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1 "When our historical consciousness places itself within historical horizons, this does not entail passing into alien worlds unconnected in any way with our own, but together they constitute the one great horizon that moves from within and, beyond the frontiers of the present, embraces the historical depths of our self-consciousness. It is, in fact, a single horizon that embraces everything contained in historical consciousness" (1965 TM, 271).

2 In 10.3.

5. 'Objective context' and the theory

There are contexts, but they offer nothing of any use to the theory of objectivity. The idea of context clarifies that there are cognitive conditions within which meaning arises. But no form of context is a pure enough objectivity to be counted as something that determines the meaning of a thing without involving the content of subjectivity. A context can be discovered; it can also, certainly, be an historical context - a collection of bits of information that we can find only in the past, and without which the thing will never be anything but mute.³ But it is not found simply 'tied' to the thing by a thread of objectivity, and if it is found, it is not wholly outside the world one belongs to. The idea that the object 'possesses' its context simply as an aspect of its own nature is a pure metaphysical presumption.

In any semantic context that truly reveals a meaning a role is played by what, according to the theory, could only be relegated to subjectivity: questions that in being answered constellate a context, standards of sense that recover the historical by no historical standard, conditions of the acceptance of meaning that cannot be externalized into an objective system, an engagement with the thing that is rooted in and draws upon the interpreter's own world.⁴

The role of subjectivity in the articulation of a true semantic context contradicts only the theory of objectivity, nothing of what objectivity actually means and ought merely to mean. The meaning of a thing is still nothing

³ "The art of interpretation or hermeneutics ... makes use of the most diverse methods, but it is not itself a method. Still less is the theory of this art, philosophical hermeneutics, a method. Whatever might be intended by the expression 'the hermeneutical method,' I do not know. All methods of interpretation belong to hermeneutics and either play a role or can be brought into play when it comes to interpreting works such as poems. The task of philosophical hermeneutics is to clarify how this can occur" (1981 CT, 328)- and to show how method incorporates the suspension of subjectivity at the cost of its own purpose.

⁴ If there is some meaning that is accessible only through a pre-determined context, there is other meaning - "the preferred objects of hermeneutics" (theology, law, art, ...) - that speaks to any context (1972 SH, 90).

arbitrary; it is no product of the interpreter's freedom or will. It is delivered neither by subject nor object, but in the relation between them. The context has autonomy; not just anything brought to bear on a thing makes sense of it, and sometimes what makes sense of it is not what is brought to it but what it requires of us. This is what the claim of the 'objectivity' of the context actually notices, though it is misunderstood and distorted by the dichotomy of the theory. The theory misunderstands it because a context has its power only in relation to the interpreter. The context that determines the meaning of the thing beyond the will of the interpreter does so with the interpreter's own understanding. The interpreter constitutes the context from his own point of view; the unfolding context influences the understanding of the interpreter in its own way. Understanding occurs in a circular relation between subjectivity and objectivity.⁵ The context has a sense of objectivity, but it is not what can be understood according to the prevailing theory.

The objectivity of the context is made clear by whatever accommodates the objectivity of the thing. Because no case of any genuine context is critically free of what is called 'subjectivity,' the original suggestion that a thing has its own meaning in an interpretation that accommodates it loses its naiveté: the inevitable condition of so simple an interpretation - the pre-informed eye of the interpreter - cannot be simply discredited as prejudice. It is the attack upon 'innocence' that now seems naive: subjectivity is no presumption of innocence; it is simple necessity.

5 "Fundamentally, understanding is always a movement in this kind of circle, which is why the repeated return from the whole <the context> to the parts <the thing to be understood>, and vice versa, is essential." "The anticipation of meaning in which the whole is envisaged becomes explicit understanding in that the parts, which are determined by the whole, themselves also determine this whole"; "the movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole. Our task is to extend in concentric circles the unity of the understood meaning. The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding. The failure to achieve this harmony means that understanding has failed." (1965 TM, 167, 259) This circle, however, is neither subjective nor objective; it is "the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter" (1965 TM, 261). Against the exclusive critical dichotomy of subjectivity and objectivity Gadamer affirms the "fundamental significance of the circular structure" (1965 TM, 235).

Contexts are just cognitive conditions within which a meaning is recognized; they are not objectivities exclusively attached to meaningful things and that turn out meaning like independent mechanisms. But it is the objectivity of the context that is supposed to reveal the objectivity of meaning. The context of the thing itself, an objective appendage of the thing, was believed to provide the limiting condition of legitimate interpretation, within which the limit of a thing's meaning was to be clear. It would have offered the precise terms within which an interpretation had to be conducted, at least if it was to show any concern for the meaning of the thing 'in itself.'

However, the ultimate non-objectivity of the context demonstrates that meaning is only as fixed as the sense that can be borne upon us. The openness of the context permits no decisive limitation. The context that illuminates the thing itself is only as closed as what truly makes sense of it, for all interpreters, now and in the future. Any context, any subjective world, is legitimate in principle - and in practice ...? Limits in mere practice - limits contingent upon interests and purposes - are not the limits that the theory wants to defend. The theory is about Meaning and the inherent limit of Meaning, a determinate content that stands outside of all conditions of subjectivity. But there now appears to be no absolute distance between a subject and an object. And it is in this non-existent gap that the theory of objectivity is built, in the very meaning of its terms.

<> IV <> MEANING AND UNDERSTANDING

12 Understanding and Objectivity

1. Meaning and subjectivity

The interpretations that we accept as 'objective' are necessarily infiltrated with what by the theory of objectivity could only be subjectivity, which is to say bad subjectivity, a condition supposedly antithetical to the recognition of objectivity. But only within the framework of this subjectivity - a limited subjectivity with its own particular, situated content - can an object have any determinate meaning at all. The meaning that, according to the theory, belongs to the object itself is inseparable from a cognitive context that is the province of subjectivity. This is not any merely practical limitation: this role of the subject is a condition of the manifestation of meaning. The inalienable context of the interpreter belongs to some extent also to the object. Neither subject nor object enter the world of the other; both share the same world.¹

Ultimately, the foundation of every legitimate interpretation is a manifest encounter with meaning. The meaning of a thing is the subjective 'sense' that is borne upon judgement in the subject's encounter with the object, and is not overturned by everything that the subject ought to notice. It cannot be freed from subjectivity. It cannot be determined by conditions of the object alone,

¹ "The interpreter seeks no more than to understand this universal thing, the text.... In order to understand that, he must not seek to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation, if he wants to understand at all" (1965 TM, 289). "What is said" always transcends "what is expressed"; "what is said" is said to someone, and is not a mere meaning but a determination of the recipient (1976 AH, 101).

by purely objective criteria. The reason why it has been impossible to convey what distinguishes a legitimate interpretation, one that uncovers the true meaning of a thing, is by now clear: 'accommodation' of the thing² is not too loose a criterion; it is no criterion at all. That the interpretation must fit the thing is certainly a necessary condition: no interpretation of a thing can be contradicted by it.³ But the sufficient standard of adequacy is a 'sense' that cannot be articulated without reference to the orientation, interests, point of view of an interpreter. It cannot be treated as objective, in the exclusive way the theory understands objectivity. The criterion is not something to be isolated, known, and employed to legitimate and illegitimate interpretations. It belongs to the event itself, which means there is no true criterion of right interpretation at all.⁴

If no form of true understanding can avoid so-called 'subjective' elements, subjectivity cannot be made into a negative antithesis of objectivity. One comes to see the artificiality of a dichotomy whose antitheses, where they are thought to be crucial, cannot be kept apart. The object thesis of the critical theory of objectivity is the autonomy of the object. But the meaning we call 'objective' appears to have no such autonomy. The thesis of the objectivity of meaning is a mistaken extension of the nature of the thing.⁵

² See 4.6.

³ "The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding. The failure to achieve this harmony means that understanding has failed." But that the lines of the work have been followed is shown by their accord "with the meaning the interpreter finds in it" (1965 TM, 107, 259).

⁴ "The only criterion of interpretation is the significance of <the> creation, what it 'means'" (1965 TM, 170).

⁵ "The ontological premises of the concept of subjectivity": "substance-ontology, which sees being in terms of what is present and actual" (1965 TM, 239).

If the 'subjective' context into which the object speaks is not therefore a liability (to be eliminated as a medium of distortion) but a condition of the manifestation of what sense of 'objectivity' we recognize, then 'the given' - that is, what is given in this subjective context - becomes again a rather important conception, though it will never recover its permanently lost 'innocence.' What is known is knowable from this framework or not at all. One's own categories are ways of understanding or there are no ways. The historian's isolation in an anachronistic world-view is as strong an example of a foreign context as one might find, but as has been made clear, this cannot be made foreign at all, though it might very well be incomplete. The continuity that the historian not merely 'presupposes' but necessarily draws upon, to the extent that he knows history at all, means that even in the present world the past is objectively given. The past is contemporaneous in principle.⁶

An individual subjectivity may be narrow - undoubtedly all subjectivity is narrow - but the misunderstanding that results from a restricted vision cannot be turned against subjectivity itself, turned thereby against one's own capacity to see. 'Bad' subjectivity is a limitation of understanding that, for more than a century, epistemological theory has consistently misunderstood.⁷

It is not the subjectivity of false interpretations that makes them false. Revealing the way that false interpretations rely upon subjective conditions

⁶ The "fusion of the past with the present" (1965 TM, 258).

⁷ "The fact that erroneous interpretations also arise from anticipations and, therefore, that the prejudices which make understanding possible also entail possibilities of misunderstanding" is no justification of the theory - the dogmatic exclusion of subjectivity. It is just "one of the ways in which the finitude of human nature operates." (1962 PFT, 121; 1967 HR, 28) The subjective person merely overvalues what is nearest; one must "look beyond" the "close at hand - not in order to look away from it, but to see it better within a larger whole and in truer proportion." "The important thing is to beware of one's own bias"; but this does not involve "'neutrality' in the matter of the object" or "the extinction of one's self"; it happens by being open to the text "so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth" against inattentive interpretations that merely repeat what we already know. (1965 TM, 238, 269, 272)

doesn't in any way indicate that subjectivity is the problem, or that there are properly objective conditions. And since there are no conditions of understanding that exclude it (which can be seen when they are closely enough examined), the dichotomy is not a critical distinction but a false schism. If the conditions of subject and object are not exclusive of each other, the conclusion to be drawn is not, as is so often now heard, that there can be 'no objective point of view,' that there are no conditions of understanding that can 'avoid' subjectivity. The terms should lose their sense altogether. There is just no fundamental opposition here. There are no foreign or illegitimate contexts by virtue of their subjectivity.

2. Meaning and objectivity

Meaning is not an object, something fixed and pre-determined, already there to be uncovered. It is borne of a mutual relationship. It is determined not by one side of the relationship - subject or object - but through the union of both. There is no trace of an utterly autonomous meaning that can exist independent of the involvement - even the contribution - of the concrete subjectivity brought to the object.

There is, however, an object that is interpreted, and the autonomy that this object possesses is what gives substance to the true sense, the valuable sense, of the 'objectivity of meaning.' It is the object encountered as it is that directs interpretation. To say 'encountered as it is' does not presume a Lockean naiveté; 'as it is' means just as it is seen, allowing for the fact that there are ways of seeing that may be too restricted to understand enough.⁸ But without a way of seeing nothing is seen at all. A way of seeing in itself cannot be treated as a distortion. How subjectivity renders the object cannot be made a distortion to be overcome by suspending subjectivity and achieving objectivity. Aspects of subjectivity provide the very condition of any possible 'objectivity.' So the givenness of an object according to the subject is not a

⁸ There is projection; there is "misunderstanding suggested to us by distance in time, change in linguistic usages, or in the meanings of words or modes of thinking"; these must be excluded (1966 U, 7). But this is not inherent to the involvement of subjectivity itself.

naive starting point. It is the task of the subject to be sure that what is there is seen, but this is not a matter of alienating his own terms of understanding. There is a way that the object as it is itself can be seen, as he also can see it. Seeing just what is there with his particular eyes may in this or that case not be enough, but it is genuine objectivity.⁹

The objectivity of the object means that things have autonomy of meaning. This is not a pure autonomy but a determination of the thing within the subject. It is the thing itself that appears; the object lays claim to its own meaning. The thing always retains its identity, which remains untouched through all the variation that the condition of meaning permits and makes necessary.

The disintegration of the fundamental premise in the extension of the theory of objectivity to meaning - that meaning is not an object, a nature that endures in the thing as a determinate content - does not diminish the sense that the idea of the autonomy of meaning originally possessed, and which the theory of meaning has exaggerated into an absolute quality. Very simply, no subject has the power to make something mean what he would.¹⁰ Meaning arises, it is not made. The thing can speak into any context. Only it will not speak every sense into every context. The disintegration of the object thesis removes, in fact, a barrier to the recognition of the thing: the

⁹ "Precisely through our finitude, the particularity of our being" we know truth (1966 U, 16).

¹⁰ Art "does not permit just any forms of comprehension" (1965 TM, 96). "It seems to me that ... an appeal to the nature of things <by those countering subjectivism> finds its limitation in a common assumption that remains unquestioned and dominates all these attempts at the restoration of the autonomy of things. It is the assumption that human subjectivity is will, an assumption that retains its unquestioned validity even where we posit being in itself as a limit to the determination of things by man's will. In the nature of the case, this means that these critics of modern subjectivism are not really free at all from what they criticize" (1960 NL, 74). An 'expression' expresses itself; it is not a mere vehicle of meaning: "it is the right word, and not the subjectivity of the act of meaning, that expresses its meaning" (1960 NL, 80-81).

delusion that a thing can only have a limited and self-same meaning, an error that only binds things to the image we already have made of them.

There is 'objective meaning,' but it is not what the theory of objectivity makes of it. If according to our own categories the thing is fully and utterly received as it presents itself, received so as to reveal a meaning, it is a face of the object that we encounter.¹¹ This is the nature of objectivity. That it is a serious and not a diminished kind of objectivity is shown by its power to enter and change subjectivity, and to direct the way in which we see it.¹² An interpreting mind is required to supply the conditions within which the thing to be interpreted determines itself.¹³ This is the autonomy characteristic of a true objectivity. Meaning is determined in the acceptance of this autonomy, as it presents itself. The objectivity of meaning is the meaning of the thing itself, and this is whatever is truly received in any context. In the right relation of subject and object, the meaning revealed is the 'objective' meaning of the thing. In the end, the condition of genuine meaning cannot be put any more stringently than this: the meaning of the thing is what is truly received in any context.¹⁴

¹¹ Works of art, "they themselves lay claim to their place" (1965 TM, 138).

¹² A correct interpretation must "do justice to the true binding nature of the work, which imposes itself on every interpreter in a special and immediate way" (1965 TM, 107).

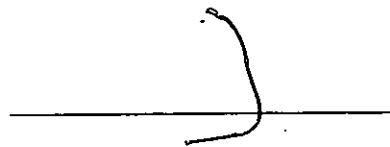
¹³ There is an object to be grasped passively, something to be "totally involved in and carried away by"; being present to this object means self-forgetfulness: "being outside oneself is the positive possibility of being wholly with something else"; but the idea of passivity is misleading: "contemporaneity is not a mode of givenness in consciousness, but a task for consciousness and an achievement that is required of it. It consists in holding onto the object in such a way that it becomes contemporaneous" (1965 TM, 111-13).

¹⁴ "This metaphor of participation cannot, it seems to me, be stressed enough as the key to understanding Gadamer's position. Unfortunately, however, Gadamer says very little about it" (Wachterhauser 1986, 444) - but not, it seems, too little.

3. Subjectivity and objectivity

The condition of meaning is neither subjectivity nor utter objectivity, according to the theory. Meaning is borne of a relationship of mutuality; it is determined neither by the one half nor the other - by subject or by object - but by the reliance of each upon the other. Meaning comes from a reciprocal relation, in which each element determines the other: a subject with a way of seeing presents the conditions according to which the object is recognized and to which a meaning can be given; an object presents itself to the subject as something with its own qualities, and touches within subjectivity its own responses, so as even to direct the way it is seen. The definition of meaning comes about within this circular, mutual relationship between the subject and the object.¹⁵

Meaning cannot be prior to this. It is something shared between subject and object. In the relationship that produces meaning, subject and object have come to share a world. In the relationship that sustains it, meaning is a kind of manifest creation: it is something made by this relationship, but because it is in the nature of a relationship that no one is in control, it is not made at



¹⁵ "A necessarily circular motion is involved in the fact that we read or understand what is there, but nonetheless see what is there with our own eyes (and our own thoughts)" (1962 PFT, 121). "It is also necessary for this expected meaning <according to the way we read> to be adjusted if the text calls for it; then the expectation changes to another expected meaning" "Thus the movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole." The hermeneutic circle is "the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter." This is a basic condition of understanding, not a technique: "the circle of understanding is not a 'methodological' circle, but describes an ontological structural element in understanding" (1965 TM, 259, 261).

all, but something that simply arises.¹⁶ It is produced, discovered, and delivered in and by the relationship itself.¹⁷

Because the meaning of a thing is determined only in a relationship, according to what is joined in that relation, it cannot be something static. This does not mean merely that the thing may have meaning differently 'according to' different interpreters, but that its own meaning is not eternally fixed.¹⁸ In the realm of meaning, there is no object of the sort that belongs to the theory of objectivity. The meaning of the thing itself exists only through the experience of the thing, and in this way an aspect of the being of

16 "The relation between the understanding and what is understood has a priority over its <separate> relational terms." "Understanding involves a moment of 'loss of self'" that ... should be investigated in terms of the structure of the game": the player "conforms to the game or subjects himself to it, that is, he relinquishes the autonomy of his own will. For example, two men who use a saw together allow the free play of the saw to take place, it would seem, by reciprocally adjusting to each other so that one man's impulse to movement takes effect just when that of the other man ends. It appears, therefore, that the primary factor is a kind of agreement between the two, a deliberate attitude of the one as well as the other. But this attitude is still not the game. The game is not so much the subjective attitude of the two men confronting each other as it is the formation of the movement as such, which, as in an unconscious teleology, subordinates the attitudes of the individuals to itself" (1962 SU 50-54). - (A photograph of Gadamer and Heidegger sawing appears in Gadamer's Philosophical Apprenticeships <Cambridge, Mass., 1985>.)

17 Meaning is created anew in interpretation: "What we mean by representation <interpretation> is ... a universal ontological structural element of the aesthetic, an ontological event and not an experiential event which occurs at the moment of artistic creation and is only repeated each time in the mind of the viewer" (1965 TM, 141).

18 "A text can begin to speak. ... When it does begin to speak, however, it does not simply speak its word, always the same, in lifeless rigidity, but gives ever new answers to the person who questions it and poses ever new questions to him who answers it" (1962 SU, 57).

the object itself relies upon the interpreter.¹⁹ A meaningful thing is not a thing that has its being wholly autonomously, and to which the mind must conform if it is to be known at all.²⁰ Understanding is not a kind of representation, according to which interpretation uncovers a present but hidden object, the meaning of the thing.

$S \leftarrow m \rightarrow O$

The condition of meaning is more interesting - even the figure is more elegant:



Meaning is neither objective nor subjective; it can be isolated with neither the subject nor the object and belongs to their mutual relation.²¹

¹⁹ "Understanding must be conceived as part of the coming into being of meaning, in which the significance of all statements - those of art and those of everything else that has been transmitted - is formed and made complete." "Understanding is never subjective behaviour toward a given 'object,' ... understanding belongs to the being of that which is understood." (1965 TM, xix, 146) This is why for Gadamer interpretation is an ontological event.

²⁰ The erroneous view: "The demand for objectivity: the interpreter's reconstruction of the meaning contained in meaning-full forms has to correspond to their meaning content as closely as possible; for this reason, the requirement mentioned is one of honest subordination" (Betti 1962, 57). It would be mistaken to carry on "dividing the hermeneutic problem in terms of the subjectivity of the interpreter and the objectivity of the meaning to be understood. This would be to start from a false antithesis that cannot be done away with even by recognizing the dialectic of subjective and objective. To distinguish between a normative function <the "truth claim" on the interpreter, the way the interpreter is reached by the work> and a cognitive one is to separate what clearly belong together." (1965 TM, 277)

²¹ This is "the inner relation between subjectivity and objectivity." "Understanding ... is always the fusion of these horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves." This fusion of horizons - how the subjective context fuses with the objective context - is "the central problem of hermeneutics. It

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4. Theory and understanding

Critical objectivity is meant to direct understanding; it is a critical theory. Its principles, its particular form of attention, its restrictions and its limits: all of these are intended to narrow our approach to things (by eliminating our subjective distortions). But an objectivity that is not in antithesis to subjectivity could not serve as a very reliable guide.

When the conditions of objectivity are looked at carefully, some of its antithesis is found there - which means that there is something wrong with the way the dichotomy has been drawn. There would be a consequence of systematically excluding a 'subjectivity' that was not only no distortion, but a very condition of understanding. Theory cannot solve the problems of interpretation. Philosophy has tried, in its own utopian fashion, to overcome the limitations of human finitude - the narrowness endemic to every perspective and all human life - by a leap of theory, and has in doing so both misunderstood and narrowed our situation. The true problem of interpretation - how to understand, how not to be blind to what one is given - cannot be solved by a single sweep of intellect. That is, it cannot be solved; it must be dealt with again and again in each situation.²²

Precisely because meaning is relational, the idea of the limit is inapplicable. The genuineness of any single interpretation is not the limit of every

is the problem of application that exists in all understanding." (1965 TM, 220, 273, 274)

²² "What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from all the countless ones which it is the undeniable task of the critical reason to overcome?" This is "the really critical question of hermeneutics, ... distinguishing the true prejudices by which we understand from the false ones by which we misunderstand." (1965 TM, 246, 266) "How can a text be protected from misunderstanding from the start?" "That the prejudices that determine what I think are due to my own narrowness of vision is a judgement that is made from the standpoint of their dissolution and illumination and holds only of unjustified prejudices." (1965 TM, 238, 247, 266)

possible relation between subject and object. Possibly a single context - for instance, certain (subjectively mediated and grounded) historical knowledge - will be the only one that renders sense at all, but it is important to see that this is a limitation in practice alone: one has always still to see what sense can be made; no manifest sense ever marks a limit of meaning. A new context may arise.²³ The historical consciousness justifies the importance it has been given only through its actual particular clarifications, not through an historical method exclusive of subjectivity.²⁴ The historical consciousness is secondary to understanding: it is only when one cannot already see sufficient meaning in the thing that one has recourse to it.²⁵

In the same way, the aesthetic consciousness can claim its own practical legitimacy, once rid of the delusion of its ontologically based supremacy. The aesthetic consciousness makes the pretense of doing without context, but it is plain that its exclusion of 'everything but the given' is an illusion: its own sense of aesthetic meaning is a very substantial (and very historical) context,

23 1965 TM, 265.

24 The notion of method polemically stressed in the title of Truth and Method is, as has too rarely been understood, only the conception based upon the flawed theory of objectivity. "The scientific notion of modern science consists precisely in the fact that it makes tradition objective and methodically eliminates any influence of the interpreter on understanding.... According to this view, science claims to remain independent of all subjective applications by virtue of its method" (1965 TM, 297-98).

25 Instead of forcing our own way of using language, "we regard our task as rather that of deriving our understanding of the text from the linguistic usage of the time of the author" - but we do this only because otherwise the text does not render any sense to us at all. It is for this reason that "the hermeneutically trained mind will also include historical consciousness." "Adducing those ideas that are necessary for the perfect understanding of a passage" (Chladenius, 1742) is, as was recognized before the nineteenth century, a heuristic contingency, not a condition of all historical understanding: it is what was then understood by the idea of 'interpretation,' as a sometimes necessary preliminary to 'understanding.' The two were conflated by Schleiermacher (1965 TM, 161-62, 237, 262, 265-66, 524 n. 195).

and has no more claim to pre-eminence than any other sort of consideration. Its legitimacy belongs not to metaphysics, but to the individual encounter.

If the objectivity of a meaning depends upon the sense of its reception, only a lack of sense - not subjectively tainted interpretation - makes an interpretation illegitimate. If listening is listening to what is given, and not rewriting through inattention a different and probably poorer piece of work; if understanding comes from a context of concerns that are drawn out of the interpreter by the encounter itself - then the meaning rendered is the meaning of the thing. It is objective in the most vital sense of objectivity: what reaches us from the outside "over and above our wanting and doing."²⁶

5. Consequences of theory

In the foregoing chapters, I have tried to examine the reasons for which the theory of the object is extended into the realm of meaning, and what has been discovered about these reasons given them no support. We ought finally to draw the conclusions that should be drawn from the fact that the crucial notion of the objectivity of meaning appears to rest upon a whole collection of confusions and oversimplifications. Several crucial observations about meaning and the situation of interpretation - autonomy, determinacy, and identity, above all, and the basic conditions of contextuality - have been rather too loosely understood. But they have been pressed into service, all the same, to form a fundamental philosophical antithesis that cuts through all human experience in the most decisive way. Critical subjectivity is used to discount, to illegitimate, what is legitimate meaning.

What should this tell us? If meaning is not an objectivity, the theory of objectivity loses its hold on the process of interpretation. Under the guidance of theory, understanding is only distorted by categorically binding it to conditions of objectivity. If there is a problem of 'subjectivity' - and of course there is - it is not categorical falsification consequent upon any influence of the particular and the personal. Ordinary things (like works of art or experiences) might once again be permitted to 'have' kinds of meaning

²⁶ 1965 TM, xv.

that are not the result of objective (which is to say, anti-subjective) interpretations (for instance, ethical, religious, or life meanings), and without this in any way being maligned as a mere projection. I wonder if this wouldn't change more than just a few things.²⁷

Against this it is worth taking note of the fact that the theory of objectivity is only a philosophical mistake. Because something might be lost through it, it seems of real importance to give attention to this error, and to start disassembling the intellectual blockage. Perhaps this would be the first stage of the 'emancipation of things.'²⁸ A more cautious philosophy, which pays attention to what actually goes on in interpretation,²⁹ affords the possibility.

²⁷ This I think is Gadamer's most central point and the main object of his work, and it is only rarely noted. Culture is important for what it teaches about life, for its "truth," but we must be open to this truth "by avoiding commitments to apparently rigorous methodological standards" (Misgeld 1979, 228). There is truth on the one side - the meaning of cultural experience - and method on the other - the alienation from culture and the illegitimation of meaning brought about by the theory of objectivity.

²⁸ Hermeneutics must renew its respect for what is studied in the human sciences (1966 UHP, 4).

²⁹ This description is the object of Gadamer's "philosophical hermeneutics," whose purpose is "not to offer a general theory of interpretation ... but to discover what is common to all modes of understanding and to show that understanding is never subjective behaviour toward a given 'object.'" It is not a demand on hermeneutic practice, but "a description of the way in which interpretation through understanding is achieved"; it is "not to develop a procedure of understanding, but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place. But these conditions are not of the nature of a 'procedure' or a method, which the interpreter must of himself bring to bear on the text, but rather they must be given." (1965 TM, xix, 236, 263) This is "the philosophic reflection that attends to hermeneutics as the actually practised art of interpretation and so can be called 'philosophical hermeneutics'" (1981 CT, 327).

Appendix <> SENSES OF 'OBJECTIVITY' AND 'SUBJECTIVITY'

1. The ontological sense:

Objectivity. The condition of things; what lies apart from awareness, what is there to enter consciousness, what is real:

That is or belongs to what is presented to consciousness, as opposed to the consciousness itself; that is the object of perception or thought, as distinct from the perceiving or thinking subject; hence, that is, or has the character of being, a 'thing' external to the mind; real.¹

The state of a thing in its own reality, independent of the mind or will of a subject.²

Subjectivity. My awareness of what is real, the consciousness of a subject:

Relating to the thinking subject, proceeding from or taking place within the subject; having its source in the mind; (in the widest sense) belonging to the conscious life. (Correlative to 'Objective' A 2 b)³

1 'Objective' (sense A 2 b), OED.

2 "Objectivity" in Bernard Wuellner, A Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy, 2d ed. (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1966).

3 'Subjective' (sense 3 a), OED.

2. The epistemological sense:

There are two epistemological senses of both objectivity and subjectivity: (i) descriptive and (ii) critical.

Objectivity. Representing the objective condition of things, in the previous sense. Objectivity is in this sense a quality of a representation (of a description, a statement, a picture), not a condition of things themselves. It is also an attitude or a disposition belonging to a subject disposed to see or represent things objectively or as they are. It is an epistemological rather than an ontological condition:

Of a person, a writing, a work of art, etc.: Dealing with or laying stress upon, that which is external to the mind; treating of outward things or events, rather than inward thoughts or feelings; regarding or representing things from an objective standpoint. (Occasionally, after modern German objektiv: treating a subject so as to exhibit the actual facts, not coloured by the feelings or opinions of the writer.)⁴

Having or keeping an objective attitude to reality, events, claims, etc.; as the objectivity of an impartial judge or of a trained scientist⁵.

(i) The merely descriptive sense of this definition of 'objectivity,' as applied to representations and attitudes, does not carry any marked critical weight. The distinction has been roughly called "nonpsychological" versus "psychological." Here there is no clear implication regarding veridicality: the terms distinguish two ways of seeing that are not explicitly opposed in relation to truth (for instance, with or without involvement):

"I can wait in the street - this place disgusts me, honestly."

"Now, now, Gregory! If it's disgusting you can observe it. Just observe it - see?"

⁴ 'Objective' (sense 3), OED.

⁵ Wuellner.

"One must take the objective view," said the medical student sententially.⁶

Subjectivity. (ii) The critical distinction, however, involves an inherently critical sense of subjectivity. Not representing a subjective condition, in the previous sense, but giving a misrepresentation of the objective condition as a result of a subjective distortion, distortion resulting from the nature of subjectivity itself. Critical subjectivity is a condition that is not merely internal but deceiving because in-turned; subjectivity represents only how something appears to an individual, in opposition to how it is in reality:

Pertaining or peculiar to an individual subject or his mental operations; depending upon one's individuality or idiosyncrasy; personal, individual.

Existing in the mind only, without anything real to correspond to it; illusory, fanciful.⁷

Subjective responses hide the real nature of what is perceived:

"Yes, my life is abnormal, corrupt and useless, and what prevents me from starting anew is cowardice, there you are quite right. But your taking it so much to heart, and getting so excited and frantic about it ... now, that isn't rational, there you are quite wrong."

"A live man can't help being excited and frantic when he sees himself and other people near him heading for disaster."

"No one disputes that. I am not in the least preaching callousness, all I'm asking for is an objective attitude. The more objective one is the least risk of error. One must look at the roots, one must seek the cause of every phenomenon."⁸

⁶ Chekhov, "A Nervous Breakdown," The Oxford Chekhov, IV, 167. A more complicated example, but again with no critical suggestion - here both dispositions are expressed in a characterization of post-Impressionist painting: "... to objectify the subjective (the exteriorization of the Idea) rather than to subjectify the objective (nature seen through a temperament)." Gustave Kahn, "Réponse des symbolistes," L'Événement (28 Sept. 1886).

⁷ 'Subjective' (senses 4 a and d), OED.

⁸ Chekhov, "An Anonymous Story," in The Oxford Chekhov, VI, 250.

Hence the critical sense of the epistemological definition makes it a veridical distinction: accurate versus distorted, "error-free" versus "error-laden," factual versus biased. These two distinct epistemological dichotomies have been discussed as follows:

A pivotal source of the confusion that has attended uses of the term 'objectivity' stems from a remarkable ambiguity which 'objective' and its polar-opposite, 'subjective,' have had inflicted on them (in part by a traditional metaphysical view, the apparent popularity and vitality of which is out of all proportion to the number of times it seems to have been discredited in the history of philosophy). The ambiguity involved stems from being unclear about those uses of 'subjective' and 'objective' that mean something very much like 'psychological' and 'nonpsychological' respectively, and those uses of 'subjective' and 'objective' that mean something like 'biased' (or 'error laden') and 'unbiased' (or 'error-free') respectively.⁹

In the following two extracts I have marked the two aspects of the critical sense that are central to the theory of objectivity:

Already in our everyday language, objectivity is most frequently meant to express <ii> some 'independence of the subject' (in such a sense, e.g., we qualify as 'objective' especially judgements, appreciations, records of facts, expertises, etc.). <This> happens so frequently and so naturally that we may not pay any attention to something which should deserve at least some reflection: viz. that in so doing we are not keeping faith with what the linguistic root of the term 'objective' ought to imply. In fact this root would lead us to define some property, some feature, as objective when it is thought to be <i> 'pertinent to the object' and hence to qualify as objective also statements that describe such a state of affairs. On the contrary, no reference to that object is made in <ii> the most common acceptance of objectivity, but rather an indirect reference to the subject' (in the sense of an 'independence of' it).

There is no novelty proper in what we have just pointed out and one could recall here that the common sense of the use of the notion of objectivity is reminiscent of an epistemological distinction that can be traced between <i> a 'strong' objectivity (which means inference to the object') and <ii> a 'weak' one (which means independence of the sub-

⁹ Richard S. Rudner, "On the Objectivity of Social Science" in Values, Objectivity, and the Social Sciences, ed. G. Riley (Reading, Mass., 1974), 39/40.

ject'). Strong objectivity seems to imply weak objectivity as its logical consequence¹⁰

<i> Conformity of mental representation to the object known; knowledge measured by the object, ... <ii> exclusion, as far as possible, of personal and artificial interferences with nature and history in gathering and interpreting data; <i> exact regard for the integrity of the objects and facts.¹¹

¹⁰ Evandro Agazzi, "Subjectivity, Objectivity, and Ontological Commitment in the Empirical Sciences" in Historical and Philosophical Dimensions of Logic, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science, ed. R.E. Butts and J. Hintikka (Dordrecht 1975), 160.

¹¹ Wuellner.

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