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

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

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

dialogue, thereby precluding the possibility of a dialogical relation. I then show how

Gadamer fares better on both counts.

I situate my argument in a contemporary ontological construal of mind and body.

By endorsing *externalism* about content, one believes that the contents of one's

propositional states depend on one's relation to the external environment. For instance,

when I say, "I believe that my F 50 ench0 0.2400000soaTo

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brandom's three-phase process of reconstruction therefore regards the text as a

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

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

Gadamer's analysis, on the other hand, finds root in a conception of "hermeneutics [as] an art";[14] we can therefore gain insight into Gadamer's view of the ontological status of text and interpreter by understanding his view of the ontological status of work of art and viewer. Particularly telling is the distinction he draws between his view and that of "aesthetic differentiation." This term indicates the sort of disinterested distance between work of art and viewer that is characteristic, for instance, of Kantian aesthetics.[15] Gadamer argues that such a distancing threatens to extricate the history and culture of the viewer, since the aim of creating this distance is to judge the

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

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

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

[2] Cf. the famous "Twin Earth" argument in Putnam (1975).

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

[4] See also Clark and Chalmers

discourse. The critique here, which echoes Lafont (2008) and the claims about

"ecume

Origin of the Work of Art," argues that the *a priori* preconceptions of thingness in

metaphysics do "violence" to the thing, so too does Gadamer argue that an *a priori*