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Gadamer and Nāgārjuna in Play: Providing a New Anti-Objectivist Foundation for
Gadamer's Interpretive Pluralism with Nāgārjuna's Help

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Dedication

For Natalie

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If my conclusion is correct and we are the relations we have, then I can only be better for the relations listed above, and I can only hope that the benefit was somewhat reciprocal.

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ABSTRACT

Hans-Georg Gadamer rejects objectivism, the position that an interpreter may come to a single correct truth concerning any particular object, in favor of interpretive pluralism. What is not clear is how Gadamer grounds this position. This ambiguity leaves Gadamer open to multiple objectivist counters, ones which he would not wish to allow. The following argument, using a comparative and analytic approach, takes two concepts, *pratītyasamutpāda* (interdependence) and *śūnyatā* (emptiness), as they are deployed by Nāgārjuna to provide Gadamer with this much needed anti-objectivist foundation. Specifically, the new foundation is anti-realist in which interpreters and objects of interpretation are metaphysically empty, or devoid of independent existence, and are ultimately dependent on their “position” in a cultural and historical horizon. If there is no metaphysical object apart from the interpreter's engagement with it, then there is no stable phenomenon to which objectivists may appeal.

Introduction

This paper utilizes arguments presented by Nāgārjuna against *svabhāva* using *śūnyatā* and *pratītyasamutpāda*, to elucidate and support Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, specifically his theory of interpretive pluralism, the view, simply put, that in contrast to a single true interpretation there are multiple legitimate interpretations of an object or phenomena.¹ While reading Gadamer's general theory of philosophical hermeneutics it is clear that he rejects objectivism, the view that for any object of interpretation there is a single correct understanding that one can come to know regardless of the interpreter's cultural and historical situatedness.² Though his primary aim may not be the refutation of objectivism, the argument he offers in *Truth and Method* is meant as an exclusionary alternative to objectivism. What is not clear is whether or not he does in fact ultimately exclude objectivism, and on what grounds he believes he has done so. Is it simply that we cannot get beyond our cultural situatedness and its requisite prejudices (*Vorurteile*)?³ Is it that this situatedness is necessary for any understanding at

¹ The phrase "interpretive pluralism" is borrowed from David Weberman, "A New Defense of Gadamer's Hermeneutics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Review* 60, no. 1 (January 2000): 45. However, variations on this phrase are fairly common in the secondary literature on Gadamer.

² See for example, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 2005), 236, 285, 297, 309, and 342.

³ As will become clear in Chapter 1, "prejudice" carries a negative connotation that Gadamer wishes to "rehabilitate." Some have suggested that Gadamer could have been more prudent in his choice of term, or that it should be translated as precommitment. I maintain the traditional translation of "prejudice" with the explicit acknowledgment that it is meant to have both positive and negative connotations. For critiques of Gadamer's choice of "prejudice" see James J. Dicenso, *Hermeneutics and the Disclosure of Truth: A Study in the Work of Heidegger Gadamer and Ricoeur* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1990),

all? These two common options, which are not mutually exclusive, are not enough to ground Gadamer's interpretative pluralism. In fact, as Chapter One will demonstrate, Gadamer's metaphysical stance and foundation for his epistemology is ambiguous.⁴ By turning to the concepts of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) and *pratītyasamutpāda* (interdependence)⁵ it is possible to give Gadamer's epistemological position of interpretive pluralism a firm anti-objectivist metaphysical foundation by moving beyond the subject/object dichotomy, which would then not only maintain but strengthen his overall argument.

Questioning Gadamer and his argument's exact stance toward objectivism is in fact not new. For example, Jens Kerstcher says in his essay "Gadamer's Ontology of Language Reconsidered," "The aim of this essay is to outline the extent to which Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutical ontology of language can indeed be interpreted as exemplifying an anti-objectivistic conception of language and understanding."⁶ Kerstcher concludes that Gadamer does not deliver on his anti-objectivist motives. Similarly, David Weberman questions whether Gadamer's alternative to objectivism is as

97-102; Weberman, "A New Defense of Gadamer's Hermeneutics," 47; E.D. Hirsch Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 258-64.

⁴ Dividing epistemology from metaphysics or ontology in Gadamer's (and Heidegger's) work is admittedly artificial. How we are as historical beings is intimately connected with how we understand for Gadamer. But these two terms and fields are being distinguished for heuristic purposes of clarity. For one discussion of the relation between epistemology and ontology in Gadamer see Dicenso, 81-2.

⁵ When translated, *pratītyasamutpāda* will be rendered as interdependence. The more traditional translations, such as dependent co-arising, do not as obviously convey the term's connotations being stressed in the present argument. Dependent co-arising has the feel of origination while interdependence focuses on the necessarily dynamic and contextual constitution of "things." For other instances of *pratītyasamutpāda* being translated as interdependence see Peter D. Hershock, *Buddhism in the Public Sphere: Reorienting Global Interdependence*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009); Joanna R. Macy, *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory: The Dharma of Natural System* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991).

⁶ Jens Kerstcher, "'We Understand Differently, If We Understand at All'; Gadamer's Ontology of Language Reconsidered," in *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnsward, and Kerstcher (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 136.

objectivist-proof as Gadamer would believe. As he states, “Intriguing as this view is, what exactly are Gadamer’s grounds for denying the existence of a uniquely correct interpretation of a text, object, or event? And how can pluralism escape relativism? Because I believe that Gadamer's writings are ambiguous on both questions, I begin by looking at the rationale underlying Gadamer's anti-objectivism.”⁷ While this secondary literature raises the question and points to such difficulties, they too do not make the specific point that the problem lies in how Gadamer connects his metaphysics and his epistemology.

As stated above, the following paper attempts to quell such debates by resolving this ambiguity with the aid of two Buddhist concepts, *śūnyatā* and *pratītyasamutpāda*, which will be further explicated in Chapter Two. First, *śūnyatā* represents a larger argument against *svabhāva*, which, though some disambiguation of its various connotations will be provided in Chapter Two, may be translated as “essence.” As with its Western counterpart, for something to have an essence or *svabhāva* it must exist independently of all other objects and any knowing subject. Epistemologically, this would mean that there is an objective truth about that object. If an argument against such an object, as existing inherently and independently, is successful, then, presumably, there is ultimately no ground of appeal for objectivism. Given that Nāgārjuna equates *śūnyatā* and *pratītyasamutpāda* (MMK 24:18) his arguments supporting *śūnyatā* are largely based on how *pratītyasamutpāda* functions in the particular phenomena under investigation. Though this is given much greater attention in Chapter 2, *pratītyasamutpāda* generally asserts that nothing exists independently, whether it be causally, mereologically, or

⁷ Weberman, 46.

cognitively. Of the three, cognitive dependence is the most vital; for even some “thing” that is mereologically or causally dependent on something else requires a cognitive distinction that makes subjects and objects co-dependent. This, then, makes understanding or knowledge equally dependent on the subject as it does on the object, again making objectivism (and even subjectivism) untenable.

Though, strictly speaking, the following argument is not entirely comparative, it does presuppose some general parallels that allow Gadamer and Nāgārjuna to be brought into useful dialogue. As such there are some general critiques of such approaches that must be dealt with. After all is not the distance between Gadamer’s and Nāgārjuna’s horizons vast? And can these two concepts be extracted from the overall Madhyamaka system without carrying the entire system with them? And are there not explicit remarks made by Gadamer himself against comparative approaches and the results they tend to produce? This last question must be dealt with first, as it is the most threatening.

Gadamer does have a few general critiques of comparative approaches.

Comparison essentially presupposes that the knowing subjectivity has the freedom to have both members of the comparison at its disposal. It openly makes both things contemporary...Is it not the case that this procedure—adopted in some areas of the natural sciences and very successful in many fields of the human sciences, e.g., linguistics, law, aesthetics—is being promoted from a subordinate tool to central importance for defining historical knowledge, and that it often gives false legitimacy to superficial and arbitrary reflection?⁸

These are admittedly damning critiques of possible assumptions underlying and outcomes of comparative approaches. But must one agree with Gadamer? Are the characteristics he ascribes to such approaches necessarily essential to them? First, the argument to follow does not (pre)suppose either a universal historically transcendent consciousness or

⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 227. It should be noted that although Gadamer appears to mean by such critiques all comparative approaches, Dilthey’s use and justification of comparative approaches are the specific target of Gadamer’s general remarks.

object linking Gadamer and Nāgārjuna. Also, the following argument does not naively presuppose equal access to Nāgārjuna, Gadamer, and their respective horizons. Given my own and presumably most of my readers historical and cultural horizons, the Gadamerian system is horizontally nearer, thereby making it more accessible. Again, however, this does not mean that Nāgārjuna's horizon is so distant as to be completely inaccessible to understanding. This points to a more general problem with Gadamer's critique. How near must a horizon be for it to be accessible *enough*? As an American my horizon is necessarily further from Gadamer's when compared to a German scholar. This surely cannot mean, however, that I or any other non-German scholar cannot interpret and attempt to understand Gadamer's work. Similarly, the distance between an American scholar and Nāgārjuna is even vaster; yet again there must still be some legitimacy in such studies. Are not all such endeavors at least attempts at Gadamer's fusion of horizons?⁹ And are not such endeavors attempts to make the text speak here and now, to make it *contemporary*, to make the alien belong?¹⁰

This then points to another secondary benefit of bringing these two systems into dialogue. Though the primary aim is to use Nāgārjuna to benefit Gadamer, Nāgārjuna and the general Buddhist framework also benefit from the exchange. They are brought into a contemporary philosophical dialogue justifying the relevance of their voice in such matters. There is a tendency, as Jay Garfield points out, to simply label these systems as

⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305.

¹⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 295, 325; Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, trans. John Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 60-1.

religious with the undertone that they do not have genuine philosophical import.¹¹

Hopefully what follows will at least shake this illegitimate prejudice, as Gadamer would or should want.

Of course one may counter this by saying that Gadamer's intent concerned temporal distance, that the present horizon has a past, part of which is composed of the traditional material to be interpreted and fused, and that Nāgārjuna and Buddhist philosophy generally do not belong to the Western philosophical tradition.¹² However, distance need not be simply temporal or traditional. Though Gadamer's emphasis is on temporal distance he notes that it is not exclusive.¹³ This becomes more poignant when coupled with Gadamer's assertion that there is really only one horizon. As he states there are no isolated horizons. Rather these are merely convenient and analytically necessary divisions of a single horizon. If distance is not merely temporal but cultural, it may then be argued that the Madhyamaka system composes a portion of this single horizon. If this is so, then there should also be some "fundamentally enabling prejudices" that grant us some kind of access to it.¹⁴

In fact, Gadamer's appraisal is not definitive; support for comparative approaches exists in both his predecessors and successors. The most notable of his predecessors,

¹¹ Jay Garfield, "Philosophy, Religion, and the Hermeneutic Imperative," in *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnsward, and Jens Kertscher (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 97-110, esp. 99.

¹² This, in fact, is not true. There are many instances in the history of Western philosophy where "Eastern" approaches have been influential. Leibniz and Schopenhauer are notable examples.

¹³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 298 and 376n.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 280 and 295.

Martin Heidegger, had similar reservations concerning cross-cultural understanding.¹⁵ However, through the course of an extended dialogue with a Japanese philosopher, Tezuka, Heidegger and his interlocutor were able to come to a more or less mutual understanding concerning their understanding of the being of language.¹⁶ Using this dialogue as an impetus Wei Zhang continues, in *Heidegger, Rorty, and the Eastern Thinkers*, with a comparison similar to the one proposed here; though her focus concerned Heidegger and the Buddhist framework more generally.

Finally, though less optimistically, it is possible to conclude with Donald Davidson that though there is no basis from which to conclude that all cultural and linguistic frameworks share a conceptual scheme, there is equally no basis for the conclusion that there exists conceptual schemes that are incommensurable.¹⁷ We can only be charitable while attempting to overcome linguistic, conceptual, and horizontal differences generally, a sentiment shared by Zhang with the added emphasis of overcoming debilitating dichotomies such as East and West (or, one may add, Analytic and Continental in the horizon of “Western” philosophy).¹⁸

This all speaks to the positive possibility of bringing Gadamer and Nāgārjuna (or anyone for that matter) into dialogue. But what are the specific reasons for this pairing?

¹⁵See Wei Zhang, *Heidegger, Rorty, and the Eastern Thinkers: A Hermeneutics of Cross-Cultural Understanding* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 50-1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁷ Donald Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47, no. 1973-1974: 20.

¹⁸ Zhang, 105. Also see Jeff Malpas' justification for his comparison of Gadamer and Donald Davidson “Gadamer, Davidson and the Ground of Understanding,” in *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnsward, and Jens Kertscher (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 195-6.

Though some of the rationale will be covered again at the beginning of Chapter 2, it would be beneficial to specifically state some here. First, Gadamer is an inheritor of a philosophical tradition with some general and rather difficult goals, one of which is overcoming the subject/object dichotomy. With Kant there was a relegation of the object as a matter of metaphysical discussion in favor of the universal subjective conditions of knowledge.¹⁹ However, the object is not completely diffused; as evident from his distinction between the noumenon and phenomenon, and his thing-in-itself.

Epistemologically, this means that knowledge and understanding must adequate themselves to the object: “Truth and error, therefore, and consequently also illusion as leading to error, are only to be found in the judgment, i.e. only in the relation of the object to our understanding. In any knowledge which completely accords with the laws of understanding there is no error.”²⁰ Skipping ahead, Martin Heidegger, who to a great extent Gadamer is a continuation of, makes further progress in dissolving this dichotomy. Heidegger, for example, advances a theory of truth as events of disclosure of the Being of beings that are governed by historically and culturally determined relational matrices. As such, only within these particular modes of disclosure is truth as adequation or correspondence possible. However, there is a tension in Heidegger’s work between this approach and a tendency to hypostasize the Being of beings outside of history, culture

¹⁹ I would like to thank Michael DeJonge for reminding me of these points and providing general clarification. For one interpretation of how Nāgārjuna would respond to Kant see Hsueh-Li Cheng, “Nāgārjuna, Kant and Wittgenstein: The San-Lun Mādhyamika Exposition of Emptiness,” *Religious Studies* 17, no. 1 (March 1981): 77-8.

²⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, 0th ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 384.

and language.²¹ This then opens the possibility of using Heidegger to advance metaphysical realism and some correspondence theory of truth where the criteria of legitimate interpretation and understanding lie in the objects or beings themselves, i.e. objectivism. For reasons that will become clear in Chapter One such position are untenable for Gadamer's interpretive pluralism insofar as it leaves him open to objectivist critiques. As such, a way must be found to ultimately move Gadamer's system beyond the subject/object divide and metaphysical realism. Again, the following argument accomplishes this through arguments presented by Nāgārjuna.

But why use Nāgārjuna specifically to help accomplish these goals? First, there is a matter of efficiency; Nāgārjuna and his commentators were kind enough to do much of the heavy lifting. They form a tradition that has dealt with the very issues that arise in the following arguments. Second, the fact that they do come from a different tradition means that they do not have the same prejudices. Forcing ourselves and Gadamer (the more familiar) to dialogue with the less familiar forces the inherited prejudices to come to light, affording the opportunity to confront, and if necessary, alter them. Gadamer and Nāgārjuna have a profitable balance of identity and difference. Their presuppositions are similar enough to bring them into comprehensible dialogue. Yet their difference is enough to help dis-close (or re-open) the ontological presuppositions underlying Gadamer's work, and question them.

To accomplish the central aim of solidly founding Gadamer's interpretive pluralism the paper will have the following structure. First, an elucidation of the general problem is necessary. As such Chapter One begins with an account of the impetus

²¹ Dicenso, 76-8.

behind Gadamer's anti-objectivist alternative and the most explicit foundations for his interpretive pluralism. This will then allow for a critical assessment of the effectiveness of such grounding, particularly as it relates to prejudices, which will be accompanied by a brief account of secondary and critical scholarship that, whether consciously or not, is founded on the ambiguous foundations of Gadamer's interpretive pluralism. With this Chapter Two presents Nāgārjuna's arguments against *svabhāva* using *śūnyatā* and *pratītyasamutpāda*. Specifically, Nāgārjuna's argument against the *svabhāva* of causality is used as a sample of his metaphysics. Following this is an account of the epistemological consequences of such a position. In total, this provides the tools to firmly ground Gadamer's interpretive pluralism. Chapter Three begins the process of clarifying Gadamer's language and founding his overall system using these Buddhist concepts. As such, Gadamer's analysis of play comes closest to the Madhyamaka account of the interdependence and emptiness of the subject and object, consequently overcoming the division between the two and objectivism's claim to any rebuttal. This fuller explication of play then allows for the reintroduction of Gadamer's prejudices and the reappraisal of the more central relationship between the interpreter and the traditional text.

Chapter One

The Problem: Gadamer's Anti-Objectivism

As stated in the Introduction, before moving on to effectively grounding Gadamer's interpretive pluralism it is crucial to understand the overall goals of his *Truth and Method* (though the theme is common in much of the rest of his work).²² Only then is it possible to understand his critiques of objectivism and how he believes the system he develops in *Truth and Method* offers the more suitable alternative of interpretive pluralism.

Saving the Human Sciences (*Geisteswissenschaft*)

Though in its broadest conception Gadamer's work questions the ultimate or ontological ground of human understanding generally, much of this, he believes, has already been addressed by Heidegger. As such, Gadamer's aim is more focused. His question undoubtedly concerns the human sciences, their role, their form of truth and their means at arriving at such truth.²³ "Our question, by contrast [to Heidegger's broader questions], is how hermeneutics, once freed from the ontological obstructions of the scientific

²² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 363.

²³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxv-xxvi, 3; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. David Linge, trans. David Linge, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 18; Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 106; Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 59-60; Charles Guignon, "Truth in Interpretation: A Hermeneutics Approach," in *Is There a Single Right Interpretation?*, ed. Michael Krausz (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 274.

concept of objectivity, can do justice to the historicity of understanding.”²⁴ Though Gadamer’s primary concern may not be the critique of objectivism, as he believes Heidegger accomplished much of this initial task,²⁵ his system does presuppose its untenability, and whether it is critique of Kant’s aesthetic consciousness or historicism, Gadamer is obliged to continually point out the negative role of objectivism in the human sciences and theories of understanding generally.²⁶

According to Gadamer, whether in the form of psychologism, as exemplified in Schleiermacher’s hermeneutic theory,²⁷ or the historicism of Dilthey,²⁸ the problem is essentially the same. Both presuppose a single truth concerning an object, such as a text. Concerning texts, psychologism places the true meaning of the text in the psychology or intentionality of the author. Historicism takes a slightly different route. While the singular subjectivity of the author was the locus of the true meaning of the text for psychologism, historicism asserts that the meaning of a text was determined by the historical and cultural contexts in which it was created. A step closer to Gadamer’s position, but this approach still clung to the ideals of natural scientific methodology. As Gadamer points out:

The implicit presupposition of historical method, then, is that the permanent significance of something can first be known objectively only when it belongs to a closed context—in

²⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 268.

²⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 245-254, esp. 254; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, ed. Richard Palmer (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 57.

²⁶ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 61, 80.

²⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 191. Also see, Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 67-73.

²⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 214. See also, Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 84-92.

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.²⁹

So it is clear that Gadamer's critiques are aimed at the multifarious forms of objectivity that believe that there is a single truth about an object of interpretation that may be grasped once the cultural, historical and subjective contingencies of the interpreter are overcome. Hence his concomitant critique of methodologies used for the purposes of expiating such contingencies.³⁰ Such methodologies, he states, are based on a form of alienation (*Verfremdung*), one which falsely presupposes the separation of the subject from experience. This is detrimental to the overall tasks of interpretation and understanding in so far as it may leave presuppositions unchecked and negate the being and purpose of experience.³¹

Historically Effected Consciousness

So that is how Gadamer understands objectivism, as the attempt and the presupposition that it is possible for the interpreter or knower to remove personal and subjective contingencies in order to come to a single true understanding or knowledge of the phenomena in question. How, then, does he counter it and propose his own alternative? His alternative to objectivism culminates with what he terms "historically effected consciousness" (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*).³² As Jean Grondin points out,

²⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 297. Cf. *Ibid.*, 239, 240-1, and 293; and Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 35, 80, and 114-5.

³⁰ For example see Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 291.

³¹ For example see, *Ibid.*, 310 and 341-355, esp. 342. See also, Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 60-1.

³² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 301.

this term is slightly ambiguous.³³ First, it may simply mean that consciousness is constituted by history or histories of effects. For example, he states, “In relying on its critical method, historical objectivism conceals the fact that historical consciousness is itself situated in the web of historical effects.”³⁴ But this term may also be prescriptive; that becoming aware of this fact, that we are historically constituted, is a hermeneutic task of its own, and one which is never complete: “Consciousness of being affected by history (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*) is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical *situation*.”³⁵ While the latter meaning may be more concerned with the “method” of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, the former is more related to its “truth,” and is therefore more relevant for current purposes.

For Gadamer, the fact that we are so affected, to the point of being constituted, by history, forms the most damaging counter to objectivism. As the above quotation states, being affected by history means we stand in a particular situation, which is composed of the very things we seek to interpret and understand. Coming to know that situation and the cultural and historical elements that compose it is further complicated by the fact that we are always already in it: “The very idea of a situation means that we are not standing outside it and hence are unable to have any objective knowledge of it.”³⁶

³³ Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 114. See also Gadamer's own appraisal, Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxx.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 300. Though Gadamer does not make this connection as explicitly as he should, how he understands *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein* becomes clearer when seen through his understanding of *Bildung*; see *Ibid.*, 8-17, esp. 13.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 301.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

This, however, speaks more to the interpreter's situation or horizon generally. An objectivist may grant this general difficulty without hesitation (though most likely not the *a priori* impossibility of overcoming it). But what of individual objects of interpretation within this situation? The real potency of his argument, and its major thrust, would then appear to be the prejudices (*Vorurteile*) created by and, as an aggregate, composing historically effected consciousness. It is clear that by prejudice Gadamer does not intend its usual meaning; that is, a belief that is necessarily erroneous by virtue of the fact that it is methodologically or rationally unfounded.³⁷ Rather prejudices are born from the fact that we are always already in a situation, and that, when we encounter an object of interpretation, it is always an encounter *with us in that situation*. For example, Gadamer states,

Obviously the value and importance of research cannot be measured by a criterion based in the subject matter [i.e. a prejudiceless objectivity]. Rather, the subject matter appears truly significant only when it is properly portrayed for us. Thus we are certainly interested in the subject matter, but it acquires its life only from the light in which it is presented to us.³⁸

Prejudices are this light. They are then limiting predispositions that allow the interpreter to understand an object of interpretation from a set range of perspectives.³⁹ The question then becomes how do prejudices present a necessary alternative to objectivism, such that objectivism becomes untenable? If Gadamer's analysis of prejudices is correct, then there should be no room for objectivism or objectivist rejoinders. To follow are two possible interpretations of how prejudices make objectivism untenable; though it should

³⁷ For example see, Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 273; Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 9.

³⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 285.

³⁹ For an example of Gadamer's connecting of limitation, culture and play see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, trans. Nicholas Walker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 124.

be noted that these two possibilities are really two sides of the same “prejudice” coin. They are only distinguished according to whether one begins with a positive or negative assessment of the role of prejudices in understanding; Gadamer appears to argue that prejudices simultaneously function positively and negatively for understanding.⁴⁰

Prejudices as Insurmountable Obstacles

The first option is that prejudices are insurmountable obstacles. There is some textual support for this reading. For example,

In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.*⁴¹

That is, as constituted by *Bildung* (culture or enculturation) we always already find ourselves inescapably, at least for the most part, in a pre-given situation that carries with it precommitments on how we do or possibly could interpret and understand the world and the elements within it. If this is so, then it is impossible to always and completely foreground such precommitments in order to arrive at an understanding of an object of interpretation strictly governed by that object apart from subjective proclivities.

Though, as previously stated, Gadamer’s primary aim may not be to deliver a decisive blow to objectivism, his overall system does exclude it as a viable position; however, the “prejudices as insurmountable” option does not adequately do so. First, there is a possible objectivist response. Even the most extreme proponents of objectivism

⁴⁰ These two options are in large part borrowed from Weberman’s account; in the end, however, his grounding of Gadamer’s interpretive pluralism is just as vulnerable to objectivist critiques; Weberman, 46-51. For his proposed solution, see, *Ibid.*, 54-7.

⁴¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 278.

will generally agree that there are some obstacles created by the interpreter's subjectivity. Even if they allow for the impossibility of overcoming them, objectivists may still argue that there is an ideal objective truth about the object towards which the interpreter may strive.⁴² Here the ideal of objectivity and the objective truth of the object become the basis for criteria of validity and truth. Such criteria would move dangerously close to an objective methodology, closer than Gadamer would want to allow.

Second, taken by itself "prejudices as insurmountable" is a superficial reading of what Gadamer finds to be the most crucial characteristic of prejudices. It is difficult to believe that anyone could give such a reading of Gadamer given the dual nature of prejudices. In fact, E.D. Hirsch Jr. comes close to such a reading:

It will be my purpose in this final section to turn my critique of Gadamer's book to good account by showing how the concept of *Vorurteil* has a significance far more positive than that given it in *Wahrheit und Methode*. I shall suggest...the methodological importance of the doctrine for conducting all forms of textual interpretation.⁴³

As the explanation of option 2 to follow will demonstrate, Gadamer's appraisal of prejudices is also and primarily quite positive. The fact that Hirsch's reading does have some textual support is only the first sign of the ambiguity surrounding Gadamer's support for interpretive pluralism and his critiques of objectivism.

Prejudices as Necessary Preconditions

The second option offers a stronger exclusionary alternative to objectivism, though still inadequate, and appears to be the primary emphasis of Gadamer's account of prejudices. Here prejudices are not simply insurmountable obstacles but necessary for any understanding at all. Some of the above quotations have already hinted at this reading.

⁴² Weberman, 48.

⁴³ Hirsch, 258.

For sure, the first option does have some merit. Gadamer does not believe all prejudices are good or legitimate, and he does deal with how illegitimate prejudices are foregrounded and tested.⁴⁴ But prejudices generally, according to Gadamer, are necessary for any access to or understanding of an object of interpretation:

Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us.⁴⁵

Here prejudices are not strictly undesirable though inevitable hindrances to understanding. As essential to our always already being situated in a historical and cultural horizon, prejudices form the positive possibilities of accessing any object as an object of understanding and interpretation. This is so insofar as prejudices are determined by the tradition from which they come and in which the interpreter exists. As elements of the same tradition, objects of interpretation are formed by, inform, and share in these same prejudices, thus allowing the interpreter access to the object.⁴⁶ So, not only is it impossible to rid oneself of prejudices generally, it is undesirable to do so.

If this is true, this obviously represents a stronger critique of objectivism than the previous option. However, as Weberman points out, even this has a possible objectivist

⁴⁴ Most of Gadamer's accounts of foregrounding deal with confrontations with the text and the primarily, though not exclusively, negative nature of experience; see for example, Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 270 and 348-55.

⁴⁵ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 82. See also, Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 278, 280; Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 9.

⁴⁶ This, perhaps, deals only with prejudices as they relate to temporal (or historical) distance and its positive possibilities. It does not address how what may be generally termed cultural distance may provide the possibility of understanding objects that do not belong to an historical tradition. For a sign that Gadamer acknowledges distances other than temporal see, Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 376 note 44. For one possible argument for why Gadamer must acknowledge different distances see, Weberman, 54-7.

loop hole.⁴⁷ It is quite possible that an objectivist will concede that at first there must be a common background that would allow for an initial, meaningful engagement with the object. However, she could continue by arguing that this is only a useful first step. Once complete, even this cultural or historical commonality must be tested and critiqued according to an objective methodology.

Again, Hirsch's reading is a convenient example of option 2 gone wrong. Perhaps in response to just this possibility, he distinguishes between meaning and significance. Significance is the relevance a text or object has for the interpreter and her current cultural milieu. Meaning is the objective truth, equivalent to the author's original intent, of the object apart from such subjective contingencies. "*Meaning* is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence...*Significance*, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person...Failure to consider this simple and essential distinction has been the source of enormous confusion in hermeneutic theory."⁴⁸ While significance may be the impetus, or even the positive possibility, of research or interpretation, it is ultimately surmountable if one wishes to come to the true meaning of the object. Again, it is obvious from Gadamer's work that he does not want to leave such room for objectivists and their critiques. To continue with Hirsch's terminology, Gadamer would, at the very least, argue for a more codependent relation between meaning and significance. But what position he takes on this continuum, the extremes of which are the two being nearly independent to being coextensive, is unclear.

⁴⁷ Weberman, 50.

⁴⁸ Hirsch, 8.

Manifestations of the Ambiguity

As shown above, Gadamer believes that his alternative, namely interpretive pluralism, has left no ground for objectivism; however, objectivist rejoinders are legitimate. So the ambiguity in fact lies between Gadamer's conviction and whether he actually delivered on that conviction. This is particularly evident in the secondary literature. Though there are many areas of secondary literature where this ambiguity manifests, it is perhaps most visible in the debates concerning Gadamer's stance on realism, particularly as it relates to his philosophy of language. Therefore, a sample of this debate should be adequate to disclose the significance and byproducts of this ambiguity.⁴⁹

First, then, is Brice Wachterhauser's account of Gadamer's "perspectival realism."⁵⁰ Wachterhauser notes the pluralism in Gadamer's understanding of interpretation, and the inability of overcoming linguistic mediation and historical situatedness to come to a single understanding of an object. However, according to Wachterhauser this does not negate the existence of this object apart from the various perspectives it may be viewed from.

⁴⁹ As a note, the following argument will use the term "anti-realism." Though it will be argued that this is a position that Gadamer should hold and one that Nāgārjuna does hold, it should be understood negatively rather than positively. Essentially, it is just the rejection of realism, a metaphysical position often underlying epistemological objectivism. In fact, just as Nāgārjuna rejects the realist/anti-realist dichotomy (in the positive sense), so too should Gadamer. It should also be noted that this view is by no means universally attributed to Nāgārjuna. For arguments presenting Nāgārjuna as an anti-realist see Jay Garfield's commentary in Nāgārjuna, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, trans. Jay Garfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 103-23; and Jan Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2009), 207-8. For arguments asserting Nāgārjuna's attempt to transcend this dichotomy see Douglas Berger, "Acquiring Emptiness: Interpreting Nāgārjuna's MMK 24:18," *Philosophy East and West* 60, no. 1 (January 2010): 40-64; and Ewing Chinn, "Nāgārjuna's Fundamental Doctrine of Prañītyasamutpāda," *Philosophy East and West* 51, no. 1 (January 2001): 54-72.

⁵⁰ Wachterhauser, *Hermeneutics and Truth*, ed. Brice Wachterhauser, 1st ed. (Northwestern University Press, 1994), 154.

But although Gadamer says that we always understand the world in a language that is our own, it's important to emphasize that what we understand is not simply our own world, but *the* world, the one world we all have in common. Gadamer is an uncompromising realist...It's only within this realist framework that we can begin to understand Gadamer's much misunderstood remark that "being that can be understood is language."⁵¹

From this and other such statements, it is clear that Wachterhauser is advancing the position that Gadamer asserts the existence of a one and true reality composed of objects independent of our individual or human apprehension of it. The relation between the interpreter and the object of interpretation is then one in which the interpreter can never hope to gain full access to the object itself. Wachterhauser acknowledges that "history and language are the two conditions of knowledge that Gadamer thinks make our knowing 'finite.'"⁵² Essentially, this is the same interpretation found in option 1 given above, prejudices as insurmountable. In addition, in his unique way and dealing specifically with language, Wachterhauser also acknowledges option 2, prejudices as the positive condition for any understanding at all. On his reading, for Gadamer, language "enhances' or 'increases' the intelligibility of reality."⁵³ If Wachterhauser is correct, then Gadamer is vulnerable to just the type of objectivist critiques given above. Again, even a congenial objectivist may reply that while our situatedness may make an ideal objective understanding impossible, it is possible to move closer to it. If each perspective has a portion of the whole truth about an object, then quantity may in fact mean quality. Though there may be an infinite, or nearly so, number of partially true perspectives, the more one gains the more truth one has and the nearer one is to the objectivist ideal.

⁵¹ Brice Wachterhauser, "Getting it Right: Relativism, Realism and Truth," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert Dostal (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 66.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 57.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 67.

Perhaps Gadamer did in fact hold this position. The point is that according to his overall system it is not always clear that he does nor, more importantly, whether he in fact should.

Gianni Vattimo, however, offers a starkly contrasting interpretation of Gadamer's "being that can be understood is language."

As far as *Warheit und Methode* is concerned, the good, correct, appropriate interpretation is never so in virtue of its correspondence to a previously set truth...On the contrary, one should rather say that things are what they truly are, only within the realms of interpretation and language. In other words, a consistent formulation of hermeneutics requires a profound ontological revolution, because ontology must bid farewell to the idea of an objectified, external Being to which thought should strive to adequate itself.⁵⁴

And addressing general interpretations similar to Wachterhauser's, Vattimo warns that if such a reading were true then, "Gadamer would be limiting his doctrine to the domain of the human sciences, and he would imply a sort of objectivism and metaphysical realism."⁵⁵ While it is not clear whether or not Gadamer does endorse metaphysical realism, it should go without question that he abjures objectivism. If objectivism and metaphysical realism are as closely linked as Vattimo asserts, one may question whether Gadamer should or even could endorse the latter.⁵⁶

At this point a short digression into Gadamer's relation to metaphysics is in order. Defining metaphysics is obviously not simple. Classic or "old" metaphysics generally

⁵⁴ Gianni Vattimo, "Gadamer and the Problem of Ontology," in *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnsward, and Jens Kertscher (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 301.

⁵⁵ Ibid. "Metaphysical realism" is simply the view that objects exist and exist with certain properties independent of "anyone's beliefs, linguistic practices, conceptual schemes and so on." Alexander Miller, "Realism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/realism/>; Drew Khlentzos, "Semantic Challenges to Realism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/realism-sem-challenge/>.

⁵⁶ Vattimo appears to give Gadamer the benefit of the doubt believing that Gadamer could not have endorsed metaphysical realism because of this close connection to objectivism. Vattimo, 302.

deals with questions of being, first causes, and immutable things, as well as positions that answer these questions negatively.⁵⁷ Adding to the confusion post-Medieval or “new” metaphysics includes questions of modality, space, time, mereology, free will and so forth.⁵⁸ For the purposes of this argument, metaphysics is vaguely defined as questions and assertions concerning being(s) and ultimate existents.

How Gadamer understands metaphysics is as difficult to discern as the word itself, and is in large part the subject of the following argument. Being a more or less “good” student of Heidegger, Gadamer’s metaphysical concerns in general deal with questions of being and time. However, Gadamer is not an obsequious follower of Heidegger. Gadamer does agree that being and understanding as events are constituted by time, thereby rejecting substance ontology.⁵⁹ However, he was not as critical of metaphysics and its Western history as Heidegger.⁶⁰ For Gadamer, metaphysics, particularly its Platonic forms, still has something to contribute, and that some form of metaphysics always underlies language.⁶¹ Obviously, this does not satisfactorily answer what Gadamer’s metaphysics is, but this is what is at issue. If this were not a point of

⁵⁷ Peter van Inwagen, “Metaphysics,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/metaphysics/#ProMetNewMet>.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* As van Inwagen notes such issues were not overlooked by ancient and medieval philosophers, they were simply categorized differently.

⁵⁹ For example see, Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 245-54, esp. 246, 248. Also see David E. Linge, “Dilthey and Gadamer: Two Theories of Historical Understanding,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41, no. 4 (December 1973): 549 and 551; Joel Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 256.

⁶⁰ For example see Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Krell (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), 115-138, esp. 137-8.; Brice Wachterhauser, *Beyond Being: Gadamer's Post-Platonic Hermeneutic Ontology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 36-7; Robert Dostal, “Gadamer: The Man and His Work,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert Dostal (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 30.

⁶¹ Wachterhauser, *Beyond Being*, 11, 13, and 36-7; Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, 249-50.

contention then the answer that the following argument is intended to be would have no question, and the secondary scholarship would not be as divided.

With this, Gadamer's ambiguity, between his epistemology and metaphysics, once more becomes apparent. Again, he unambiguously critiques objectivism's assertion that it is possible to come to a single true understanding of an object of interpretation. And in its strongest and clearest terms this seems to be due to the necessity of prejudices for there to be any encounter at all between the interpreter and the object. But it has been shown how objectivists may circumvent this option. While something like perspectival (or multiplist) realism allows for pluralism (and attempts to overcome relativism or interpretive nihilism), it does not allow for the strong critiques Gadamer makes of objectivism. So the question again is, is there a foundation that will both guard against objectivist rejoinders and cohere with Gadamer's overall system? The answer is yes and is the subject of the next chapter. Ultimately, the goal is to provide a new firm anti-objectivist metaphysics for Gadamer's interpretive pluralism, which is the subject of Chapter Three. Before doing so, however, the coming chapter gives a comparatively brief summation of Nāgārjuna and his metaphysical argument against *svabhāva*, along with its epistemological consequences. This provides the material for the new foundation.

Chapter Two

Nāgārjuna: Emptiness and Interdependence

As the last chapter demonstrated, the fact that Gadamer rejects objectivist epistemology while offering interpretive pluralism as an exclusionary alternative is clear. The ultimate metaphysical ground of these assertions, however, is not. The specific source of this ambiguity, as the above section on the secondary literature shows, is ultimately Gadamer's metaphysics and its relation to his epistemology. It is the goal of this chapter to set the foundation for correcting this problem. As one might expect from the Introduction Nāgārjuna and his arguments against *svabhāva* supply the means to this goal. As such, Nāgārjuna's arguments concerning the metaphysics of causality will be used as a sample case for how *śūnyatā*, *pratītyasamutpāda*, and *svabhāva* function. Although Nāgārjuna provides an abundance of arguments from which to choose, this particular argument is, arguably, the strongest and has the broadest application. Following this will be the epistemological arguments and consequences entailed by such a view.

Before continuing to Nāgārjuna's specific arguments a few general notes are necessary. First, aside from the general positive possibilities for bringing Gadamer and Nāgārjuna into dialogue, there is a more specific similarity that makes this endeavor possible. As stated in the Introduction, both operate in systems, or at least attempt to do so, that aim to overcome the subject/object divide. Though quotes and citations given

above from Gadamer should be sufficient to demonstrate at least his attempt to do so, for the sake of reinforcement one more may be added: “Our line of thought prevents us from dividing the hermeneutic problem in terms of the subjectivity of the interpreter and the objectivity of the meaning to be understood. This would be starting from a false antithesis that cannot be resolved even by recognizing the dialectic of subjective and objective.”⁶² Gadamer’s point is stronger than it may at first appear. Overcoming the division between the subjective and the objective must move beyond a dialectic where the two exist independently yet influence one another, a point Nāgārjuna would agree with. As for Nāgārjuna, the following verse should also be sufficient for introductory purposes.

Someone is disclosed by something.
Something is disclosed by someone.
How could there be someone without something,
And something without someone? (MMK 9:5)⁶³

In fact, Nāgārjuna’s success with arguments against this dichotomy is what makes him of particular use in disambiguating, if not Gadamer’s actual position then at least the one he should have chosen given his general aims.

Second, one must note the argumentative consequence of asserting universal emptiness. There, in fact, is no master or meta argument for *sūnyatā* in Nāgārjuna’s work. With the fall of objective existence comes the fall of general methodology. Rather individual arguments must be found and applied according to the particular phenomena

⁶² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 309.

⁶³ For similar assertions concerning the interpretation of this verse and Nāgārjuna’s general attempts to overcome the subject/object dichotomy see Nāgārjuna, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, 184; Tsong Khapa, *Ocean of Reasoning: A Great Commentary on Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, trans. Jay Garfield and Geshe Ngawang Samten (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 26 and 239; Alfonso Verdu, *The Philosophy of Buddhism: A "Totalistic" Synthesis*, 1st ed. (Hague: Martinus Nihoff Publishers, 1981), 104-5.

under investigation.⁶⁴ With this in mind the first argument for *śūnyatā* to follow should be taken as a case example of how *śūnyatā* and *pratītyasamutpāda* entail a lack of *svabhāva*; the minutia of the argument and some of its larger structural elements may only applicable to this particular class of phenomena.

Third and finally, a brief word on *svabhāva* and what it means to have it. Literally, it may be rendered “own-being,” “self-existence,” “self-nature,” and so forth. The primary requirement to have *svabhāva* is independence, specifically being causally, mereologically, and conceptually independent.⁶⁵ There is some difficulty in finding an exact match in Western philosophy. For example, haecceity or quiddity would not always be equivalent. Take the classic Buddhist example of fire and heat. Heat is the *svabhāva* of fire. This may be shared by all instances of fire, and may even be shared by such antitheses as water. The difference here is that fire has heat necessarily, while water obtains it through depends on sources of heat. Yet, in discussions of identity and difference *svabhāva* does appear to carry the above connotations.⁶⁶ Yet there is also a history, to which Nāgārjuna replies that strongly suggest that *svabhāva* should be understood as substance. Take, for example, the Abhidharmic attempt to circumvent substantialism using property-particulars.⁶⁷ Though both “substance” and “essence” have their merits as translations, neither completely fills the position. For no other reason than

⁶⁴ Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka*, 16-17, and 92; Nāgārjuna, *The Dispeller of Disputes: Nagarjuna's Vigrahavyavartani*, trans. Jan Westerhoff (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 94.

⁶⁵For example, see MMK 15:1-8; Jan Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 27, 32-41; Khapa, 317-22.

⁶⁶ Khapa, 119; Verdu, 109.

⁶⁷ Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2007), 113-19; Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka*, 32-6; Verdu, 94-7.

what seems to be convention, when *svabhāva* is translated, it will be translated as essence. The important point is that to have *svabhāva* is to have some quality or nature that may not be altered without the object becoming something else. As such, despite interrelation or change the *svabhāva* remains the same.

The ultimate goal of such arguments is to demonstrate not that nothing exists, but that what does exist is interdependent, particularly on the human subject. This has the consequence of not only dispelling notions of a metaphysically objective reality to which human understanding must comport, but also of dispelling the counter-notion that what is taken as “real” or “true” is simply subjective and relative. For Gadamer, the former will mean that there is no object apart from the subject to which truth must correspond. It will not simply be, as with Kant, that reason cannot get to this object as it is apart from the subject, for there is no “in-itself,” but rather the object does not exist without the subject. The latter, i.e. the overcoming of subjectivism, is dealt with briefly in the Conclusion, and is what demonstrates how Gadamer is able to reject objectivism while not falling into an “anything goes” approach.

The Emptiness of Causality

Despite the above disclaimer stating that the following argument concerning causation should not be taken as a universal argument for *śūnyatā*, it is nevertheless a central and, for present purposes, appropriate example. Causality is one of the fundamental human categories for the interpretation of phenomena and reality. As such, demonstrating the *śūnyatā* of causality has general metaphysical ramifications, even if not all of the details of the argument are universally applicable. Further and as alluded to above, it will have more specific consequences for epistemology.

I will begin, then, with Nāgārjuna’s argument specifically dealing with agent and action in Chapter VIII of the MMK.

This existent agent
Does not perform an existent action.
Nor does some nonexistent agent
Perform some nonexistent action (MMK 8:1).

Here Nāgārjuna presents the conclusion of the argument to follow. Madhyamaka, as the middle path, attempts to navigate between the extremes of substantialism, represented by the first two lines, and nihilism corresponding to the second two lines. The reader may recall that Gadamer, following Heidegger, rejects substance ontology and the corresponding belief that the object presents itself in a self-evident way to the subject in favor of the assertion that it is only within pre-given interpretive frameworks (modes of being or tradition) that the object is allowed to disclose itself. Nāgārjuna will agree; however, as the argument continues Nāgārjuna will go further to say that there is “nothing” outside of these interpretive frameworks and that those frameworks that suppose otherwise fall into an inevitable contradiction.

An existent entity has no activity.
There would also be action without an agent.
An existent entity has no activity.
There would also be agent without action (MMK 8:2).

As is usually the case with Nāgārjuna’s efficient use of language, the above verse assumes some background knowledge on the part of the reader. This verse represents a reply to an assumed opposition. Here, the opponent’s assertion is that the agent has *svabhāva*. Again, having *svabhāva* entails a lack of change or alteration of the phenomena’s essential nature. This also entails that there cannot be alternation or change in *svabhāva*; if this were so, then that particular phenomena would cease to be that phenomena. This is the point of “An existent entity has no activity.” Activity necessary

for action on the part of the agent necessarily entails change, more specifically change that is dependent on action.⁶⁸ Therefore, to maintain the essence of the agent, that essence must be independent of the action. This would make it possible for there to be an action without an agent.

Of course, the assertion that activity entails change on the part of the agent's essence may seem odd. Could there not be independent existent things and change? Take a simplified version of atomic theory for example. According to this theory physical reality is composed of unchanging substances, and what change is perceived is the rearrangement of these basic physical constituents.⁶⁹ So, a bicycle as an aggregate of atoms may not have independent existence, but the individual atoms composing the bicycle do. Why would *svabhāva* be ultimately incompatible with this view? The answer is a familiar problem in the philosophy of science and epistemology. The curious consequence of such aggregationist explanations is that they become further and further removed from the empirical realm, and become ever more theoretical to the point where contemporary physics is even unable to empirically test such explanations. Remember that one requirement for objectivism and independent existence is independence from a cognizing subject. As explanations come to this hyper-theoretical point, they become ever more, even completely, reliant on cognizing subjects.

This on its own may still be unconvincing particularly for those that hold a substance/property ontology. Here change would be change in the properties that adhere to a substance rather than in the substance itself. Though Nāgārjuna has a novel reply to

⁶⁸ For another account of Nāgārjuna's refutation of *svabhāva* using change see MMK 13.

⁶⁹ This is, in fact, the Nyāya response; see Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy*, 109-110.

this position, particularly in his analysis of motion (MMK 2), it is not of current relevance, particularly since Gadamer has already rejected this position.

Nāgārjuna's agent/action argument then continues:

If a nonexistent agent
Were to perform a nonexistent action,
Then the action would be without a cause
And the agent would be without a cause (MMK 8:3).

The first consequence of this verse is obvious and, ostensibly, uncontroversial; with neither an agent nor an action there is no cause for the action. It also serves as a warning against the nihilistic interpretation of emptiness, a consequence that will become more important when the general metaphysical consequences of *śūnyatā* are delineated later and when such consequences are applied to Gadamer's interpretive pluralism.

The next consequence of the verse is more controversial and requires a more robust defense. Without an action there is no agent. The first connotation of this statement is fairly uncontroversial. If there is nothing that is labeled as "action," then there is nothing deserving the label "agent." So, a carpenter may be labeled as agent of the action "building a table." If there is no building of the table, then the carpenter could not be the agent of that action. However, this does not mean that the carpenter is essentially altered by this. This would be fairly unimpressive if this were all that Nāgārjuna meant.

The stronger interpretation is that the carpenter is essentially different depending on whether or not the building of the table occurs. Here dependence is existential. Jan Westerhoff defines existential dependence as such: "[an] object x is essentially F, and if it also depends notionally on some y being G, then x will also depend existentially on y's being G, since x has to have F to exist at all (this is just what F being an essential

property of x means.”⁷⁰ For example, take a seed to be x and a tree to be y. Here the tree (y) has the essential property (G) of being caused by the seed (x). This seems fairly uncontroversial, but this still leaves the controversial assertion that the seed (x) has the essential property (F) of having caused, or having the power to cause, the tree. If this were not the case, then the necessity of causality itself would be undermined. One would then not be able to reliably predict the effect given the presence of its cause. The usual reply would be that causality itself accounts for such inefficacy. Improper watering, soil conditions, and so forth may all account for the inability of the seed to cause the tree.

Unfortunately for the hypothetical opponent this only weakens the argument. Nāgārjuna has already anticipated this argument, in fact presupposes it, in MMK 1:1-14. Conditions such as water, lighting, soil, the seed and so forth constitute the conditions of the causal field, all of which are necessary for the production of the tree. But what allows one to attribute causal efficacy to these conditions for the creation of a tree? Put differently, by what fact are these conditions, and not others, grouped together, and yet not all of the time? Causal efficacy cannot simply be attributed to the seed, water and so forth individually; nor is it enough that they all exist. The tree is this factor; without the tree there would be no reason to group together these conditions and label them as “cause.” This will become particularly important when reanalyzing Gadamer’s “play” and its metaphysical consequences. For Nāgārjuna *pratītyasamutpāda* is the process by which all phenomena arise. In Gadamer’s analysis of art and aesthetics, play is the process by which the work of art arises. The problem, however, which is given greater attention in Chapter Three, is whether or not the elements in play have objective

⁷⁰ Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka*, 28.

existence. Nāgārjuna's obvious answer is no, and is what will aid Gadamer's position against objectivism.

So, from the above arguments it is obvious that effect is dependent on the cause, and, contrary to convention, the cause or causal conditions are dependent on the effect. This interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*) entails their lack of *svabhāva*. A word of caution is needed, however. Despite what may be the reader's "instinctual" reaction when seeing the words "empty" or "emptiness," it does not entail non-existence. It should be obvious to anyone with the slightest exposure to Nāgārjuna's work that this is not his intended conclusion. One need only look to the opening verse of the MMK and keep in mind the literal meaning of "Madhyamaka," the Middle Way, to realize this. Nāgārjuna's intention is to navigate between eternalism/reification and nihilism. "Things" do exist, from the tree to its leaves and roots. Though under analysis these things breakdown into dependence relations. For instance, the tree depends mereologically on its leaves, branches and roots; it depends causally on the seed, water, sun and soil; and as will become vital shortly, it depends cognitively on the subject. It is the subject that distinguishes between the seed and the tree and unifies the leaves, branches and roots into the tree.

Nāgārjuna's Epistemology

The conclusion of the last section requires some elucidation, particularly given its vital role in correcting Gadamer. As one may expect, Nāgārjuna's metaphysics has its epistemological counterpart. As such, the following argument concerns the relation between the knower, the means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*), and the objects of knowledge (*prameya*). As one may expect, the general conclusion of the argument will be that all

three are mutually interdependent and may be characterized only in relation to the others. As such, they are empty, though again not in the sense of ineffectiveness or non-existence. Ultimately, it should become apparent that Gadamer and Nāgārjuna's epistemology share much in common. If this is correct, then it should be appropriate to adapt Nāgārjuna's metaphysics to Gadamer.

The first argument, then, concerns the dependent relation between the knower and the means to knowledge, specifically sight, though the argument is intended to be exhaustively applicable to all means of knowledge.⁷¹ As before, Nāgārjuna is replying to an opponent advocating for *svabhāva*.

That very seeing does not see
Itself at all.
How can something that cannot see itself
See another? (MMK 3:2)

Though somewhat obscure, this verse is meant as an initial and quick refutation of sight having *svabhāva*. The opponent assumes that sight, or any other means to knowledge, has an independent existence. This would require it to have an essence or nature, which being the faculty of sight would be seeing. However, if it had independent existence it would not require either a subject (seer) or an object (seen). But what then would this floating seeing see? It is only left with itself, meaning that there could be visual apperception, which is not possible. So, seeing cannot be the essence of sight.

Most, including Gadamer, would not argue with faculties or means of knowledge being dependent on something; this something generally being the subject. However,

⁷¹ According to traditional Buddhist epistemology, particularly Nyāya, there are four, perception, inference, testimony, and likeness; see Nāgārjuna, *The Dispeller of Disputes*, 67.

Nāgārjuna is quick to point out that the subject *qua* seer also does not exist independently.

Without detachment from vision there is no seer.
Nor is there a seer detached from it.
If there is no seer
How can there be seeing or the seen? (MMK 3:6)

Here, the first line asserts that seer and seeing cannot be identical; this follows from the previous argument. Nor are the seer and seeing essentially different; though this follows from the above argument for the interdependence of agent and action, it also follows from the immediately preceding verses. To say that seer and seeing are essentially different allows for the action of seeing to take place without a subject or agent of seeing. Nāgārjuna points out the obvious consequences; if there is no seer there could be no seeing or seen.

Again, the interdependence of seer and seeing may not be controversial; what is not as conventionally obvious is the interdependence of seeing and seen. With this the question concerns how the means of knowledge and the objects of knowledge are established. Here “establish” may simply mean to discover and determine the properties of something. So as an analogy, if one wishes to establish the dimensions of a box, one may simply use a ruler or measuring tape.⁷² More fundamentally, to establish means to justify; so the question, “How does one justify the reliability of the means to knowledge,” is implied in the following argument.⁷³ The conventional understanding would be that the means of knowledge establish, as in obtain information about, the objects of knowledge, and that the means are then in turn somehow justified in their ability and

⁷² Nāgārjuna, *The Dispeller of Disputes*, 30.

⁷³ See for example, *Ibid.*, 31.

reliability to do so. But, as one may guess, Nāgārjuna's argument will demonstrate that the means and objects of knowledge are mutually established, interdependent, and, therefore, empty.

If one affirms that means of knowledge establish objects of knowledge, one also has to account for how the means are established; how does one know the properties of the means that allow for such information and how are they justified? There are two premises that must be kept in mind: (1) "means of knowledge" is meant as an encompassing term for all the ways we have access to the world and (2) these means also exist in the world; that is, they may also become objects of knowledge.⁷⁴

One possible response is that any specific means of knowledge is established by one or more other means of knowledge. So perception may be established by inference and testimony. Though Nāgārjuna does not explicitly deal with this option one may infer a possible response. I hear a loud noise and judge that it is a thunder clap. What justifies my auditory perception in supposing this rather than a car backfire, hallucination, or what have you? First, I may have the testimony of the weatherperson telling me that thunder storms would be coming through my area. I also receive other perceptual cues, such as rain, dark clouds, and so forth. Through memory I know that when these perceptual cues occur together there is often thunder. Altogether these may be used to justify my perception of thunder. In turn, this may also justify my other means; I have evidence to support the weatherperson's testimony and my visual perception. This does in fact seem to be our usual engagement with the world, but are any of these means thereby established? Here, one may argue that the means are established by mutual

⁷⁴ Nāgārjuna, *The Dispeller of Disputes*, 69-70.

coherence, what may be a more polite term for circularity.⁷⁵ Remember, however, that according to a substantialist or objectivist view, the means of knowledge are meant to establish independently existing things (things with *svabhāva*). Coherentism cannot give us an account of how this occurs or whether it in fact does occur.⁷⁶ Though in the first few steps of justification and establishment perception is justified by other means to knowledge, ultimately those means become dependent on perception for their establishment. The objects themselves never enter in, and therefore how or whether the means establish the objects is not given. So, the means as established by other means is not a viable option.

The second possible response is a variation on the first. Rather than the means to knowledge being established by the other recognized means to knowledge, there is an additional means to knowledge with the property of being able to reliably represent the world.⁷⁷ But how is this means established and justified? It would seem to require another means, leading to an infinite regress. In general, such regresses should be avoided; here specifically one never gets the grounding that the means are supposed to supply.

The next option is that the means of knowledge do not require establishment or are inherently established. Remember, however, that according to the objectivist position the means to knowledge are our access to the world and exist in the world. So, if the

⁷⁵ For an account of how coherentism may not necessarily lead to circularity see, Laurence Bonjour, “The Structure of Empirical Knowledge,” in *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 390-2. However, the present argument does not turn on whether or not coherentism is circular.

⁷⁶ For another account of the failings of this type of epistemology see William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 73.

⁷⁷ Nāgārjuna, *The Dispeller of Disputes*, 30.

means to knowledge do not require establishment, then there is something in the world that does not require establishment.⁷⁸ If the means exist in the world and yet do not require establishment, then conceivably there are other objects in the world that do not require establishment. If one holds this position, one cannot simply presuppose that objects of knowledge require establishment. One would then need to justify why objects of knowledge require establishment. Of course, one may reply that in establishing the objects, the means simultaneously establish themselves. Aside from other various retorts, this returns the objectivist to the above problem of “sight seeing itself.”⁷⁹ There is also the problem that if the means were self-established, then they would be independent of the objects of knowledge, returning to the above problem of the independent nature of cause and effect. However, means to knowledge are means to knowledge of something. For example, visual perception corresponds to certain qualia such as color.⁸⁰ If the means to knowledge were truly independent, then it would be difficult to justify what they are means to knowledge of, if anything.

This then exhausts the ways in which the means may be established by other means or by themselves. Means as somehow established by their objects then seems to be the only option left. Though Nāgārjuna will also reject this option, one must remember that his rejection is contingent on the opponent’s assertion that though the objects may establish the means both still exist with *svabhāva*.

⁷⁸ Nāgārjuna, *The Dispeller of Disputes*, 31.

⁷⁹ For other responses Nāgārjuna gives see Nāgārjuna, *The Dispeller of Disputes*, 31-2; Nāgārjuna, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, 28-30.

⁸⁰ For a contemporary Western account of the relation between "inputs" and means to knowledge or "doxastic practices" see Alston, 153-5.

The objectivist may grant that the means are established by their objects. Behind this, again, is the assumption that such objects exist with *svabhāva*; so they are in some sense prior to the means of knowledge. Unfortunately, to arrive at this one must first use knowledge of the objects obtained through the means of knowledge in order to establish what counts as a particular means of knowledge. To do this would require the means of knowledge and their previous establishment, making their establishment through their objects unnecessary.⁸¹ Of course, one could give the absurd reply that the objects of knowledge are somehow established without the benefit of any means of knowledge. From this it would seem then that one has direct access to the objects of knowledge, thereby making the means themselves unnecessary.⁸²

Nāgārjuna moves the argument closer to his conclusion when he points out that if the means of knowledge are established by their objects the relation is then reversed.⁸³ If the point of means to knowledge is to do the establishing and the objects of knowledge function to establish the means, then the objects in fact become the means of knowledge and the means of knowledge become the objects. The objectivist may, in fact, have no problem with this. The point, however, is that this is another instance of circularity with no grounding and therefore no means to get to the *svabhāva* of either the means or their objects.⁸⁴ It is not that Nāgārjuna finds circularity in general untenable, in fact, it fits well with his assertions of emptiness and interdependence; his point, rather, is that his

⁸¹ Nāgārjuna, *The Dispeller of Disputes*, 33.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 33-4.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

opponents would find circularity untenable and that circularity and *svabhāva* cannot co-exist.

The point of all these objections to the various options is to demonstrate that an object is not an object of knowledge intrinsically (through *svabhāva*) nor are means means to knowledge intrinsically. Visual perception is only a means to knowledge in virtue of having something to see; reciprocally an object is only an object of knowledge according to the ways in which it interacts with various means of knowledge. Further, the object as we understand it, is composed of the artificial cognitive assemblage of information gained through the various means of knowledge. So, objects as objects and means as means are determined by the context in which the investigation occurs.

One may also take this argument beyond the mutual dependence relation between the means of knowledge and the objects of knowledge. As the above arguments have shown, there is also a mutual dependence between the knower and the means to knowledge. So, if x is dependent on y and y is dependent on z, then x must also be dependent on z. There is then a reciprocal dependence between the knower and the objects of knowledge.

There are then roughly two general consequences to this epistemology. First, the existence of objects of knowledge allows one to divide methods or sources of knowledge and label them as means to knowledge. If some method did not provide access to objects of knowledge they would not be justifiably considered means of knowledge; in fact, they most likely would not be recognized at all.⁸⁵ Second, at the same time and as already

⁸⁵ One example of this would be Alston's attempt to establish a "new" means to knowledge or doxastic practice, Christian mystical perception, based on its correspondence with, and ability to grant access to an aspect of reality, God, not generally covered by other means; Alston, *Perceiving God*.

stated, the means of knowledge create the objects of knowledge by aggregating the various forms of information. For example, what one understands as a particular chair is a confluence of color, shape, spatio-temporal location, texture, and so forth gathered and combined through perception. This would be a more conventional account, but one could include other means as well. If one doubts whether something were a chair, then the testimony of a carpenter may clear up the matter. Or through socialization, another form of testimony, one comes to know the general “family traits” of a chair. This then allows one to store in memory examples of chairs with which to judge future cases of possible chairs.

An immediate point of comparison and similarity between Gadamer and Nāgārjuna may be made here. Gadamer argues for the dependence of the object of interpretation on the particular mode of investigation. He states, for example, “The theme and object of research are actually constituted by the motivation of the inquiry. Hence historical research is carried along by the historical movement of life itself and cannot be understood teleologically in terms of the object into which it is inquiring. Such an ‘object in itself’ clearly does not exist at all.”⁸⁶ For Gadamer, then, the prejudices of an interpreter as a historian, exegete, sociologist and so forth in part construct the object of interpretation. Nāgārjuna is arguing essentially for the same thing, though he in fact begins with perhaps the most taken-for-granted relation between subject and object, perception. Once perception, as our most basic engagement with the world, is shown to be based on interdependence of the perceiver, perception and the perceived, then the

⁸⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 285.

contextual dependency of the object of interpretation on the mode of investigation because an easy and perhaps inevitable step.

General Consequences

According to Nāgārjuna's metaphysics everything is interdependent; what some "thing" *is* is dependent on the relations it has. As such there is no immutable substance underlying phenomena. Obviously this is in direct opposition to objectivism; if there is no stable substance, essence, or nature to an object, then there is no stable truth of that object. The scope of this position will become more apparent in the next chapter when it is used to correct and rebuild Gadamer's system. Also, as detailed above this position has a concomitant effect in epistemology. Part of the context of relations an object has, particularly as an object of knowledge, is its relationship with the knower, which also happens to be determined by contextual relations of which the objects is apart. One's knowledge, or understanding, of an object would then be equally unstable. In matters of interpretation and understanding this, as will be the topic of the coming chapter, gives a firm grounding to Gadamer's interpretive pluralism.

Chapter Three

The New Foundation for Gadamer's Interpretive Pluralism

As Chapter One demonstrated Gadamer's system requires a rejection of objectivism, but the exact grounds for and strength of that rejection in favor of interpretive pluralism is ambiguous. The most likely and apparent candidates for Gadamer's rejection of objectivism, historically effected consciousness and prejudices, whether as positive possibilities for or the limit of understanding, are not enough, at least unless they are coupled with an objectivist-proof metaphysics. Otherwise this would leave open the possibility for objectivist rejoinders. Chapter Two presented metaphysical and epistemological arguments advanced by Nāgārjuna that would make such rejoinders impossible. Metaphysically there are no independent objects with an essence or underlying substance to stabilize truth and meaning of those objects. Rather objects as objects and subjects as subjects are determined or arise according to their relative positions in a network of relations. Epistemologically, then, objects of understanding or knowledge do not have an independent existence (*svabhāva*), but are rather constituted or determined by the context in which they occur, the most important relation in this context being the relation between knower and known or interpreter and interpreted. The goal of the present chapter is then to synthesize these two systems in such a way as to leave Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, particularly its epistemology, largely intact while giving it the firm anti-objectivist base provided by Nāgārjuna. In fact, the clearest point

of connection between these two systems occurs with Gadamer's analysis of play. It is here that Gadamer comes closest to a Madhyamaka metaphysics as presented in Chapter Two. With some slight amending and elucidation it should then be possible to give Gadamer a firmly anti-objectivist metaphysics based on play.

The Metaphysics of Play

Gadamer first introduces play as a means to analyze aesthetics and art, though its significance is much broader as will be seen shortly.⁸⁷ Play, according to Gadamer, is the mode of being of art: "When we speak of play in reference to the experience of art, this means neither the orientation nor even the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, nor the freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play, but the mode of being of the work of art itself."⁸⁸

Gadamer intends play to explain what occurs between the spectator, which may include the museum patron, the audience of a drama, the artist herself, and so forth, and the art "object." The point here is to overcome previous aesthetic theories, such as Kant's, that presuppose that the nature of art exists either in the object or in the subjectivity of the spectator.⁸⁹ For example, "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."⁹⁰ Here, subjectivity is removed, but one may point to the conclusion of the quotation, "the work itself," and argue that Gadamer is placing art in the object,

⁸⁷ See Gadamer's own later appraisal, Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 115.

⁸⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 102.

⁸⁹ See for example Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 77-87; Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 18-21.

⁹⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 103.

whether it is the sculpture, the painting, or what have you. Here the truth of the art would lie in the object itself, i.e. objectivism. For reasons provided in Chapter One, this position is untenable given Gadamer's larger goals.⁹¹ With this there would be one truth, rather than a plurality of truths, concerning the work of art. This position also misunderstands what "the work itself" is for Gadamer.⁹² Since the being of the work itself is play, play must be further elucidated in order to clarify what the "work of art" is for Gadamer.

First, play is a process.⁹³ More importantly it is a to and fro medial process that takes place in-between.⁹⁴ From this medial nature of play Gadamer argues for the irrelevance of the subjectivities of the individual players to play itself. "For play has its essence independent of the consciousness of those who play."⁹⁵ As a supporting example he notes that there can be a play of colors, which does not mean that it is one color versus another but that play in this instance is a processual changing of colors.⁹⁶ The art object,

⁹¹ In an effort to help avoid confusion on the part of the reader, the terms "object" and "work" are given fairly specific meanings in the following analysis. "Object," in phrases such as "art object" or "object of art," refers to the thing that is commonly attributed as art, such as the sculpture, painting or poem themselves; where as "work" refers to the phenomena of art itself. The purpose of much of the analysis to follow is to disambiguate the two, demonstrate that for Gadamer there is a difference, and elucidate the significance of this difference.

⁹² Gadamer later implicitly acknowledges the ambiguity of this phrase when he advances *Gebilde*, creation or construction, as a preferable alternative, Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 126.

⁹³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 104, 107, and 109.

⁹⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 104 and 109.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 103. Though this will be taken up later, this does not mean that players generally are irrelevant to play. For Gadamer, there is a difference between the players and the subjectivities of the players. Endorsing the latter would move Gadamer too close to previous aesthetic theories that advocate that art is located within the spectator.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

in distinction to the work itself, such as the painting or sculpture, then becomes another player in the play of art.⁹⁷

One clue to this fact is Gadamer's insistence that presentation is essential to the work of art, for it "only manifests and displays itself when it is constituted in the viewer."⁹⁸ The script of the drama, the score of the music, or the paint of the painting do not become works of art unless their modes of presentation are fulfilled. The work must be seen, heard, and so forth.

The work of art cannot simply be isolated from the "contingency" of the chance conditions in which it appears, and where this kind of isolation occurs, the result is an abstraction that reduces the actual being of the work. It itself belongs to the world to which it represents itself. A drama really exists only when it is played, and ultimately music must resound.⁹⁹

Gadamer's analysis of drama is a useful example here. Where does the art or play of drama lie? It cannot simply lie in the single subject, nor can it lie in any intersubjective agreement between the subjectivities of the spectators, i.e. the audience.¹⁰⁰ It would be more common to place it in the actions occurring on stage, but this too misses the point. Aside from the obvious interdependence of the stage action on the script, stage, individual actors and so forth, the drama is only drama if it is presented to an audience. So with the use of play as the essence or being of art, Gadamer argues that art exists neither in the subject (spectator, artist, and so forth) nor in the object(s). Rather the work of art exists in the dependent relation between the two; the drama arises at the confluence

⁹⁷ For a similar assertion see Gerald Bruns, "The Hermeneutical Anarchist: Phronesis, Rhetoric and the Experience of Art," in *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnschwald, and Jens Kertscher (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 61.

⁹⁸ Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 126. Also see Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 115.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

of all these elements. There is then no self-existent independent essence of drama to which one could point.

Returning to Nāgārjuna's examination of causality and the example of the tree one sees the point. As an analogy, the tree is the drama that arises at the intersection of dependence relations. Just as the tree depends mereologically on the leaves, branches and roots, which are also not mereologically basic; so too does the drama depend on the actors, stage and so forth. The tree causally depends on the seed, water and so forth; while the drama depends on the writer, director and so forth. Finally, as the tree is cognitively united and divide in order to be identified as the tree, so too is the drama; the perceiver of the tree is the audience of the drama. The perceiver and the audience would be equally incorrect to suppose their own independence from the phenomena they are observing. The tree and the drama only arise in relation to them. At this point something else particularly interesting occurs; the divisions between causal, mereological and cognitive dependence begin to breakdown. Remaining with the audience, it is not simply cognitively necessary; the audience is a (mereological) part of the drama and composes part of the causal field giving rise to it.

Elucidating Gadamer's "transformation into structure" helps to clarify these points. "Only through this change [the transformation into structure] does play achieve ideality, so that it can be intended and understood as play. Only now does it emerge as detached from the representing of players and consist in the pure appearance (*Erscheinung*) of what they are playing."¹⁰¹ In the process of play occurring between the players something new arises, such as the above drama. Gerald Bruns presents another

¹⁰¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 110.

helpful example.¹⁰² He uses Duchamp and his ready-made art as an extreme case where the answer to what this transformation is becomes most obvious. Duchamp presents a snow shovel or urinal as his latest work of art and it in fact does become art. Ostensibly, however, there is no objective difference between the snow shovel (the object) and Duchamp's art (the work). How then does the shovel become art? First, there is Gadamer's transformation into structure. "[W]hat existed previously [such as the snow shovel or urinal] exists no longer,"¹⁰³ and something new arises. This transformation occurs because the object is transplanted into a world of play constituted by relations that create something anew in the mediated presentation between the object and the spectator. The snow shovel or urinal is placed in the world, or game, of art in which there are participants or players, among which is the shovel itself. Arising between the shovel and the other participants is that particular work of art.

One may ask a similar question of chess, which does not as conveniently fit the subject/object distinction.¹⁰⁴ In keeping with Gadamer's linguistic analysis,¹⁰⁵ what does it mean to call something a game of chess? The game is not on the chess board; this would artificially cut off the players and violate the medial nature of play. Nor is the game strictly speaking in the players or in a relation between their subjectivities or experiences.¹⁰⁶ Rather the chess game "comes to life," comes to presentation, as

¹⁰² Bruns, 62.

¹⁰³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 111.

¹⁰⁴ For art one may theoretically isolate the piece of art as object and the spectator as subject, where as in a game of chess or tennis this is not as easily done.

¹⁰⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 104.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

Gadamer prefers, or unfolds in the world that is created by all three “objects.”¹⁰⁷ There is, then, now only one “object” the game (or work) of chess itself.

One may see that there are already some parallels between Nāgārjuna’s arguments for *śūnyatā* using interdependence and Gadamer’s analysis of play. In a sense, and in this particular area at least, the two just work in opposite directions. Nāgārjuna generally begins with a phenomena that seemingly has inherent existence, such as a tree, and through *reductio* demonstrates that this phenomena in fact does not have inherent existence. In contrast, Gadamer begins with multiple seemingly independent phenomena such as the audience, the actors, the stage, the script and so forth, and demonstrates how such phenomena combine in such a way to give rise to a new dependent phenomenon, the drama. In both cases the phenomenon under investigation is dependent on the context in which it occurs. Though the shovel, as a work of art, is dependent on the shovel as object, the work of art is equally dependent on the world in which it exists, and the subjects that inhabit that world. So as the world and subjects change so too does the shovel as a work of art. However, it is this divergence in the direction of Gadamer’s and Nāgārjuna’s analyses that makes the difference, particularly when dealing with how there may be multiple true interpretations rather than a single objective truth.

The problem becomes most apparent when one asks the following question: Do the actors in the drama, its script, the shovel as object, the chessboard and its players, and so forth have essential existence independent of the play in which they engage? This is the crucial question for both providing a firm foundation for Gadamer’s interpretive

¹⁰⁷ Put in such terms, one may see the parallels with Ricoeur’s understanding of the “world that unfolds in front of the text.” Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1995), 41-3.

pluralism and its expansion into his overall system. The ability to do so ultimately comes from adopting Nāgārjuna's metaphysically anti-realist and epistemologically anti-objectivist position. His response should be obvious; they, as in any seemingly objectively existing elements involved in play, too are empty based on their being necessarily interdependent relations. Gadamer's response, in contrast, is not so clear.

Suppose that according to Gadamer the shovel, the script and so forth do have an objective independent existence apart from any particular instance of play; where would that leave his overall system? As Chapter One demonstrated, that would leave him open to objectivist critique. The objectivist could then say that the one true understanding or knowledge of any thing lies in the thing itself. The truth of the shovel as art would lie in the shovel as object. Of course, the easiest pro-Gadamerian response would be that the truth of the shovel as art does not simply lie in the shovel as object but in the shovel as it occurs in the world of art. This would diffuse the truth into that world making it impossible to point to one single "location" where the truth lies. The problem here is similar to the problem encountered when the objectivist granted the initial positive contribution of prejudices to understanding; the objectivist could argue, admitting the difficulty of the endeavor, that one need only step outside that world to see how the truth of the shovel as art arises within it, thereby allowing a comprehensive and unitary understanding of the truth of the shovel as art. The countermove would then be to argue that there is nothing outside the game being played. "But," says the objectivist, "if the shovel itself can exist outside any particular instance of play, then so too may the knower or interpreter. In fact, the objective natures of each element in play could be investigated apart from that instance of play. Even if there are too many elements in play to allow for

an exhaustive investigation, the more one does the closer one gets to that one objective truth of the matter.”

From this arises the crucial question of how expansive the phenomenon of play is for Gadamer. In fact, it appears that for Gadamer play is universal, or nearly so. “The first thing we must make clear to ourselves is that play is so elementary a function of human life that culture is quite inconceivable without this element.”¹⁰⁸ Or, more emphatically:

The fact that the mode of being of play is so close to the mobile form of nature permits us to draw an important methodological conclusion. It is obviously not correct to say that animals *too* play, nor is it correct to say that, metaphorically speaking, water and light play *as well*. Rather, on the contrary, we can say that *man* too plays. His playing too is a natural process. The meaning of his play too, precisely because—and insofar as—he is part of nature, is a pure self-presentation. Thus in this sphere it becomes finally meaningless to distinguish between literal and metaphorical usage.¹⁰⁹

So play appears to be ubiquitous. This alone, however, does not answer the question of how Gadamer does or should respond to the question of the objective existence of phenomena such as the shovel, the text, and so forth apart from play or any particular instance of it.

Moving closer to the answer requires moving from the universalism of play to the particularity of games.

Games differ from one another in their spirit. The reason for this is that the to-and-fro movement that constitutes the game is patterned in various ways. The particular nature of a game lies in the rules and regulations that prescribe the way the field of the game is filled. This is true universally, whenever there is a game.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 22; see also 124-5.

¹⁰⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 105.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

The point for now is that though play may be universal it is manifested in various distinct ways in games that are self-governing and relatively closed worlds.¹¹¹ For example, there are the games of chess, art (or specific genres of art), and language(s). Each of these would then have their own rules determining the nature of players and elements within those games. It is also important to note that such defining rules may have little to do with appearance, material constitution, and so forth, but are more often concerned with functional relations that a particular element has with other elements in the world of the game. A pawn in a game of chess may be a metal bolt, a knight-like figurine, an actual human, or a classically designed plastic piece. This is less important than the functional and relational properties given to the piece such as only being able to attack one space diagonally forward or being worth less than a knight.

Now, with Nāgārjuna's help, it is possible to move backwards from Gadamer's transformation into structure through play to a broader rejection of objective existence apart from play. The shovel as work only exists as such in the game of art; move the shovel back to the shed and it again becomes merely a shovel. Though even here, as Nāgārjuna would point out, the shovel does not have inherent self-existence (*svabhāva*), but rather exists in a net of interdependent relations, particularly as it relates to human subjects. It exists in the game of agriculture or human culture generally. It arises as a shovel between the human subject, the soil, her available intentions to dig, and so forth. "Certainly," an objectivist may grant, "the notion or label 'shovel' may be relationally dependent; a plastic cup may be used as a shovel, and therefore be labeled as a shovel. But there are still objective facts about the shovel. It has a definitive length, with an iron

¹¹¹ Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 124.

blade of certain dimensions, and a handle constructed from a specific type of wood.” But if one keeps in mind the arguments presented in Chapter Two these features, too, belong to a cognitive game. “Wood,” length and so forth only interdependently arise between the knower and the shovel; they are therefore as equally dependent on the perceivers and the world in which they relate, as they are on the shovel as object.

What is the general consequence then of carrying Gadamer’s play to this Madhyamaka extreme? First, there is no time or place in which an object is not found in some game; this is equally true of human subjects. What is then taken by the objectivist to be an object with a definitive essence and properties that exist apart from the knowing subject does not in fact exist; rather what is taken as such an object only arises as a result of the interdependent relations occurring in the game. If the game is changed so too is the “object.” With this the object, and the subject for that matter, are removed. There is nothing left for an objectivist to appeal to. The reason the objectivist believes that there is an independent object to point to is that both exist in a world or game with particular rules that allow both to arise and interact. Once this world and its rules are reified to the point of being taken for granted subjects, objects, and their modes of relation gain the veneer of factuality and objectivity. Only then does the object seem to exist independently and only then is it possible to adequate certain beliefs and propositions to the object.

The Epistemology of Interpretive Pluralism

As hoped for, this new metaphysical foundation requires little change in Gadamer’s overall system. This is particularly true for the epistemological components of

historically effected consciousness and prejudices.¹¹² First, remember that for Gadamer, historically effected consciousness means that consciousness is “situated in the web of historical effects.”¹¹³ More than just being situated, however, consciousness is constituted by its placement in such a web. The same is true of the object itself. One particularly gets this impression just prior to Gadamer’s analysis of *Wirkungsgeschichte*: “The true historical object is not an object at all, but the unity of the one and the other, a relationship that constitutes both the reality of history and the reality of historical understanding.”¹¹⁴ This has the further consequence of placing the “subject” and the “object” of understanding on equal ground. Since the historical school it has been recognized that objects in history are the products of their historical and cultural relations. What Gadamer adds is that consciousness as understanding is equally and essentially “a historically effected event.”¹¹⁵ Consciousness and its objects are then both players in the game of understanding. The truth of the text, historical event, or piece of art then arises between them as the true work of understanding that is equally dependent on the “subject” as it is on the “object” in the relation. What then makes it impossible for the objectivist to counter is the fact that both poles of that relation are equally dependent on other historical and cultural relations. There is no “thing” to which the objectivist may point and say “Here is where the truth lies; your understanding must conform to this.” As

¹¹² Again, dividing epistemology and ontology in Gadamer’s work is slightly artificial, particularly in discussions of historically effected consciousness and prejudice since our mode of being is determined by them. What is being isolated as epistemological here is the way in which they determine how and what we may come to know or understand.

¹¹³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 299.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Gadamer states, “[I]t is clearly an incorrect description of this understanding to speak of an object existing in itself and of the subject’s approach to it. The truth is that historical understanding always implies that the tradition reaching us speaks into the present and must be understood in this mediation—indeed, *as* this mediation.”¹¹⁶

This then continues to the individual prejudices composing historically effected consciousness. Here some slight amending may be necessary. As Chapter One showed prejudices are simultaneously the limit and the positive possibility of any understanding at all. As limits, and in keeping with Gadamer’s analysis of play, they are like the rules of a game. They constrain the number of possible moves. But this limiting is actually concomitant with the positive possibility they give to any understanding at all. Here prejudices may be seen as the epistemological counterpart to the metaphysical interdependence of historical and cultural phenomena.¹¹⁷ We are able to engage an object of understanding because that object has some relation with us. We are a product of them as much as they are a product of us. This provides the legitimacy of Gadamer’s statement that we belong to history more than history belonging to us.¹¹⁸ One of the tasks Gadamer gives to hermeneutics takes this even a step further: “The interpreter’s belonging to his object...now acquires a concretely demonstrable significance, and it is the task of hermeneutics to demonstrate it.”¹¹⁹ With this it is perhaps better not to think

¹¹⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 325.

¹¹⁷ See, for example, *Ibid.*, 278.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 254.

of prejudices as latently carried around by the subject but as only arising in the encounter with the object of understanding.

The Text

How does this all then affect one of Gadamer's main aims and the most notable use of hermeneutics, the interpretation of traditional material? First, there is no text in the way an objectivist or realist may think. Given all the arguments presented until now, this may still be difficult for some to accept. There are, after all, letters and words on a page. But hermeneutics is not actually interested in words or sentences on a page. Elucidating the following passage may help clarify this point:

Every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text belongs to the whole tradition whose content interests the age and in which it seeks to understand itself. The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original audience. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always *co-determined* also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history (emphasis added).¹²⁰

First, hermeneutics is interested in meaning.¹²¹ Meaning, however, only arises, according to Gadamer's use of the hermeneutic circle, in the interrelation between the parts and the whole.¹²² Even a single letter or word only has meaning in a certain context, and this context is not limited to the bounded text. It was created in a cultural and historical horizon to carry meaning. This may lead some, such as E.D. Hirsch Jr., to regard the author's intention or the text's reception by its original or intended audience to be the arbiters of the true meaning of the text.¹²³ But the text arises in front of the author just as

¹²⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 296.

¹²¹ For example see *Ibid.*, 365.

¹²² See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 291 and 293; Jean Grondin, "Gadamer's Basic Understanding of Understanding," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert Dostal (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 46-50.

¹²³ Hirsch, 1-23, esp. 10-14.

the painting arises in front of the artist, or the drama in front of the audience and actors. Though humans composed and bound the book, there is no one thing to point to and say “There’s the meaning!” Jean Grondin makes the point succinctly when he states, “To understand, in Gadamer’s sense, is to articulate (a meaning, a thing, an event) into words, words that are always mine, but at the same time those of what I strive to understand.”¹²⁴ The true text arises between the interpreter and the text. As both the interpreter and the text are historical and cultural events with prejudices arising between them, then the true text is always different. This is why Gadamer may say that “understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well.”¹²⁵ Or when he states “that neither the knower nor the known is ‘present-at-hand’ in an ‘ontic’ way.”¹²⁶ If there is no real text that exists independent of context, to which the interpreter belongs, then there is no single location for a one true meaning of the text leaving epistemological objectivism no metaphysically self-existent “object” to appeal to. There then can be only multiple true interpretations of the text, or Gadamer’s interpretive pluralism.

¹²⁴ Grondin, “Gadamer's Basic Understanding of Understanding,” 41.

¹²⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 296, 308.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 252.

Conclusion

It is now apparent how Gadamer may completely avoid objectivism. If objects of interpretation only arise in relation to the object and its interpreter, and they in turn are ultimately determined by other relations, then there is no metaphysical anchor for an objectivist epistemology. But what of the other horn of the dilemma, relativism or interpretive nihilism? Without careful management the rejection of objectivism may lead to relativism or interpretive nihilism, and, in fact, this is a common critique of Gadamer. Often the attempt to avoid relativism leads to positions, such as Wachterhauser's and Hirsch's, that move Gadamer and hermeneutics more generally back to a more objectivist position. As such, for the above argument to be effective, some account of how relativism or interpretive nihilism may be avoided based on this new foundation must be given.

Gadamer does explicitly reject interpretive nihilism just as he rejects the ossifying tendency of objectivism: "One way of understanding a work, then, is no less legitimate than another. There is no criterion of appropriate reaction. Not only does the artist himself possess none—the aesthetics of genius would agree here; every encounter with the work has the rank and rights of a new production. This seems to me an untenable hermeneutic nihilism."¹²⁷ One may recall that this path is also rejected by Nāgārjuna.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 82.

Though this topic is too intricate to allow more than broad strokes at this time, both Nāgārjuna and Gadamer may again mutually benefit one another.

First, Nāgārjuna makes a distinction between ultimate and conventional truth, the latter being akin to Gadamer's understanding of tradition (MMK 24:8). Here for Nāgārjuna, ultimate truth is simply the interdependence, and therefore emptiness, of everything (MMK 24:18).¹²⁹ Despite what one may initially think, Nāgārjuna does not disparage conventional truth in favor of ultimate truth. Both are in fact truths and they too are co-dependent. As he states, "Without a foundation in the conventional truth/The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught" (MMK 24:10a-b). First, to relegate conventional truth would imply that there is a reality, and a truth about it, apart from our engagement with it. It should by now be obvious that Nāgārjuna could not support such a position. In fact, our cultural and linguistic practices are integral in creating the world and its objects. This follows from the above accounts of cognitive dependence and the integral role of the "subject." Subsequently, it is that culturally and linguistically created world that must be investigated to find interdependence and emptiness. If the world is created by virtue of our linguistic and cultural practices, then there is no other way to investigate ultimate truth than by those means. So, for example, there is such a thing as a tree. This again speaks to the fact that emptiness does not mean non-existence. It then is

¹²⁸ See the Dedicatory Verse of the MMK and MMK 24. See also Khapa, 24 and 324-6; Nāgārjuna, *The Dispeller of Disputes*, 46-8.

¹²⁹ Also see Khapa, 495-6.

justifiable to talk about the tree existing. But once investigated properly the tree is shown not to have independent existence. This does not mean that the tree does not exist.¹³⁰

This, however, is obviously metaphysical, and what is currently at issue is how Gadamer and Nāgārjuna would deal with epistemological nihilism or relativism. As a reminder, just as Nāgārjuna's arguing for emptiness does not entail non-existence, so too does the fact that he argues for the interdependence of objects of knowledge, means of knowledge, and subjects does not mean that there is no knowledge to be had. In its simplest terms, for Nāgārjuna, the possible range of knowledge or understanding of something will be inhibited by the relations that compose that thing, by the relations that compose the subject, and perhaps most importantly the relation between the thing and the subject. Though, as with Gadamer's prejudices, this also provides the positive possibility for engagement with the object. There should be some additional obvious similarities between Gadamer's understanding of the composition of traditionary material and the interpreter. Remember, for example, that as humans we are constituted by our placement within "the web of historical effects" constituting our world.¹³¹ Similarly, the traditionary material has its placement in a web-constructed world. But these two worlds are not completely alien to one another; for "our understanding will always retain the consciousness that we too belong to that world, and correlatively, that the work too belongs to our world."¹³²

This begins to address why, for Nāgārjuna and Gadamer, there are justifiable similarities and differences between interpretations. For example, the relations that

¹³⁰ For example see Khapa's elucidation of nihilism *Ibid.*, 23.

¹³¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 290.

compose trees will be largely alike. Similarly, the means to knowledge that compose human perception are for the most part the same. So when two individuals see the same tree, their perception of it will be largely similar. What creates the greatest variations are the historical and cultural relations composing the subject. Take, for example, the difference between the “common sense” perception and the natural scientific perception of a hippopotamus. Given its appearance and location common perception may come to the conclusion that they are related to elephants, rhinoceroses, or pigs. (The fact that one may even wonder what and how animals are related is a new cultural phenomenon.) In fact, according to the game of natural science they are most closely related to whales and porpoises. Or, even in the world of “common sense” there may be divergence. While both the common zoo-goer and the African native may have no knowledge of evolutionary biology’s taxonomy, and therefore must depend on more direct perception, nevertheless they may have comparatively different perceptions of a hippopotamus. For one it may be a large lethargic animal with little real significance other than as a part of weekend entertainment; for the other it may in fact be a real threat to life and livelihood. It seems doubtful that Nāgārjuna would find either more true than the other. How a hippopotamus is conceived is legitimate in each of these cases. The difference between the two is simply the rules that create and restrain the possible modes of interpretation and understanding. But the rules of knowledge are not simply based on cultural and historical whim; rather they are also based on the hippopotamus and its relations. This is how there can be both legitimate similarities and difference concerning interpretation and understanding.

Gadamer's methodologically-open accounts of how legitimate and illegitimate interpretations may be discriminated can clarify some of these points. Specifically dealing with how fore-meanings may be challenged, he states, "I think we must say that generally we do so [question the appropriateness of fore-meanings] in the experience of being pulled up short by the text."¹³³ More specifically, relatively speaking, the interpreter is "pulled up short" when the expected meaning of the whole is not coherent with the continually emerging parts. "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."¹³⁴ So interpretations of trees, hippos, texts and so forth are limited in their range of possible legitimate interpretations by the relations that compose the thing being interpreted. But the range of legitimate interpretations is also open in the sense that the object of interpretation is partially determined by its relation to the interpreter and the relations composing the interpreter. As he states, "[T]his openness always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meaning or ourselves in relation to it."¹³⁵

Clarifying what "event" and "mediation" mean for Gadamer and Nāgārjuna may help to demonstrate why truths are necessarily multiple and yet not relative in the strong sense of the word. First, "event" obviously privileges time and change over space and

¹³³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 270.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 291. With this, if one were to argue for Gadamer fitting into some established epistemological category, coherentism would be a viable candidate. In fact, Wachterhauser argues as much in Brice Wachterhauser, "Gadamer's Realism: The 'Belongingness' of Word and Reality," in *Hermeneutics and Truth*, ed. Wachterhauser (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 154. Unfortunately, he also connects this to a type of correspondence theory of truth that would leave Gadamer vulnerable to objectivist attacks.

¹³⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 271.

stability. For heuristic purposes time may then be divided synchronically and diachronically.¹³⁶ Continuing with Gadamer's example of drama let B stand for a particular drama, such as *Hamlet*. As Gadamer states, "the work of art cannot simply be isolated from the 'contingency' of chance conditions in which it appears," and the work of art is necessarily tied to its presentation.¹³⁷ So with each performance of *Hamlet* it will be different. Let B, then, be the first or "original" performance of *Hamlet* and B' be some later performance. A and C are then synchronic phenomena contemporary to B that in part determine B. It should be noted that A and C stand for things both external, such as general cultural trends, and internal, such as particular actors or audiences, to B. Just as B changes to B', so too do A and C change to A' and C'. This necessarily makes B' different from B. But B' could not legitimately be anything, for it is in part determined by a succession of previous Bs. Also since A and C in part determined B, and A and C give rise to A' and C', then the possibilities of B' are also indirectly constrained by the original horizon in which B occurred.

This also points to the topic, inherited from Heidegger, of disclosure. *Hamlet* or the hippopotamus only arise as objects of interpretation within a pre-given interpretive framework. They become objects of investigation and interpretation within this framework. As such this pre-given framework has already determined the nature of the phenomena and the rules of engagement. The range of possible legitimate ways of understanding them have then already been set by the framework in which they arise.

¹³⁶ Much of what follows is derived from Mark C. Taylor, "Toward an Ontology of Relativism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46, no. 1 (March 1978): 41-61.

¹³⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 115.

So, in fact, just as prejudices are simultaneously the limits and positive possibility of understanding at all, so too are the interpreter's and the object's general positions in their webs of relations. Since there is no independent inherent essence to either and since they are co-determinative, any shift in the position of one creates a correlative shift in the position of the other. The truth of both then moves as well. But such moves cannot be arbitrary. Though one may interpret a dolphin out of a tree or *Mary Poppins* out of *Crime and Punishment*, such interpretations would not be judged legitimate. They have broken the rules of tradition, and the rules of the world that have already given rise to the phenomena.

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