

## The Medieval Roots of Gadamer's Claim for Hermeneutic Universality

### Abstract:

In a series of recent articles Jean Grondin has sought to shed light on the of what Hans-Georg Gadamer means by hermeneutic universality by focusing on his discussions of Augustine, specifically Augustine's analogy between the God as Verbum, as Word incarnate, and spoken language as thought incarnate. Against this reading, I think Gadamer's reliance on Augustine is overstated. I will argue that it is Aquinas' account of the inner word, the *verbum mentis*, that helps us to see what Gadamer means by the universality of hermeneutics, not Augustine's discussion of the *interius Verbum*.

NOTE: A revised version of this has recently been published in *Philosophy Today*)

Gadamer's claim that hermeneutics is universal is both widely controversial and rarely understood. At the very least it is the claim that the relevance of hermeneutics goes beyond the traditional questions of interpreting authoritative texts, especially religious texts or legal texts. More likely, Gadamer means something along the lines that hermeneutics asks the most fundamental philosophical questions, or that hermeneutic insights are central to any philosophical undertaking. Gadamer himself hasn't been particularly clear on what he means by hermeneutics' universality; sometimes he speaks a universal problem, at other times a universal process, at other times a universal experience. But what is clear is that the claim of hermeneutic universality is related to Gadamer's theory of language—the claim first arises in the final section of *Truth and Method*, “Language as the Horizon of Hermeneutic Ontology.” In a series of recent articles<sup>1</sup> Jean Grondin has sought to shed light on hermeneutic universality by focusing on

---

<sup>1</sup> “Gadamer and Augustine: On the Origin of the Hermeneutical Claim to Universality” in *Hermeneutics and Truth* (edited by Brice Wachterhauser [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994]); “Gadamer and Augustine” in *Sources of Hermeneutics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995); Chapter 6, “Augustine: The Universality of the Inner Logos” of *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); and even his biography of Gadamer, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). Each of these have corresponding German and French versions. More recently on the same theme he's published “L'universalité de l'herméneutique et de la rhétorique: Ses sources dans le passage de Platon à Augustin dans Vérité et méthode” in *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 54/213 (2000) and “Unterwegs zur Rhetorik. Gadamers Schritt

Gadamer's discussions of Augustine, specifically Augustine's analogy between God as *Verbum*, as Word incarnate, and speech as thought incarnate. It is Grondin's view that "Hermeneutics' claim to universality can only be adequately understood via Augustine," and this view has become standard fare among Gadamer interpreters. Against this reading, I think Gadamer's reliance on Augustine is overstated. Augustine's theory of the *Verbum* violates central features of philosophical hermeneutics, so either Grondin—and perhaps Gadamer too—is misreading Augustine, or Grondin is misreading Gadamer's use of Augustine. Commentators, including Grondin himself, have noted that in what is supposed to be a discussion of Augustine, Gadamer spends quite a bit more time discussing Thomas Aquinas. I will argue that is rightly so; it is Aquinas' account of the inner word, the *verbum mentis*, that helps us to see what Gadamer means by the universality of hermeneutics, not Augustine's discussion of the *interius verbum*. In fact ten pages of the crucial chapter simply contain an unacknowledged paraphrase of two treatises (we now know perhaps spuriously) ascribed to Aquinas: *De natura verbi intellectus* and *De differentia verbi divini et humani*.<sup>2</sup>

Such a criticism of Grondin's influential reading is not just a quibble about Gadamer scholarship. The issue of universality is important for three reasons: it is the linchpin of the debates between Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas in the late 60s;<sup>3</sup> it is one of the ways Gadamer

---

von Platon zu Augustin in Wahrheit und Methode" in *Hermeneutische Wege* (edited by G. Figal, J. Grondin, D. Schmidt, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> The one person who has carefully looked at Gadamer's discussion of Aquinas is John Arthos in his "The Word is not Reflective': Mind and World in Gadamer and Aquinas" (*American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 78/4 [2004], 581-608), though not as a criticism of Grondin's Augustinian interpretation. See also his forthcoming book, *The Inner Word in Gadamer's Hermeneutics* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> A quick glance at the titles of the main essays will reveal this: Gadamer's "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem" "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutic Reflection" and Habermas' "The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality." In one talk Gadamer says, "The universality of the hermeneutic problem seems to me to be the real key problem for hermeneutics. If the *hermeneutical problem* is indeed a universal concerning all of mankind, then *hermeneutics*, as the discipline dealing with this problem, would embody a universal approach to reality and experience" ("The Universality of the Hermeneutic Problem" in *Lectures on Philosophical Hermeneutics* [Neuwe Reeks: Universiteit van Pretoria, 1982], 2).

locates himself in the history of hermeneutics; and it is meant to legitimate questions of interpretation as central, if not the fundamental, philosophical questions. But as important as the claim to universality is, Grondin's misreading of Gadamer means that he misses the real insights contained in Gadamer's discussion of the *Verbum*. So to understand why Grondin is mistaken is at the same time to better understand core claims of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.

### **Grondin's Interpretation**

Grondin focuses on Gadamer's reference to Augustine in his account of the history of the forgetfulness of language. The forgetfulness of language was the event of turning language into a mere medium of the expression of ideas, rather than seeing language as having "a being of its own."<sup>4</sup> Gadamer traces the origin of this event all the way back to Plato's negligence of the "intimate connection between words and things."<sup>5</sup> In Plato's *Cratylus* Socrates weighs two competing accounts of language, one where language is made of purely conventional signs used to refer to things, the other where words are by their nature connected to the things they signify. Neither is wholly satisfactory—if language were pure convention we could not use words wrongly; if words were naturally connected to things we could not explain linguistic differences—but both take for granted that however words work, they work as signs of reality, and have a different kind of existence from what are truly real, the forms. Gadamer considers the instrumentalization of language in Socrates' two choices as masking the true character of language.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroads, 1991), 418.

<sup>5</sup> *Truth and Method*, 405.

<sup>6</sup> In *Truth and Method* Gadamer writes, "It can be stated as a fundamental principle that whenever words assume a mere sign function, the original connection between speaking and thinking, with which we are concerned, has been changed into an instrumental relationship" (433).

Fortunately, Gadamer tells us, in the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, “there is an idea that is not Greek which does more justice to the being of language, and so prevented the forgetfulness of language in Western thought from being complete.”<sup>7</sup> It's surprising to think that the mystery of the Trinity might provide us with clarity into the nature of language, so I will not hesitate to point out that it is not the theological idea that Gadamer is referring to, but the analogy to language that follows from St. Jerome's translation of *Logos* as *Verbum*, as Word, in John I:1. “*In principio erat Verbum et Verbum erat apud Deum et Deus erat Verbum.*” “In the beginning was the Word, and the word was God, and the Word was with God.”<sup>8</sup> The Word with God becomes the incarnate Word, without taking away from the being of its source. This is the leitmotif that motivates Grondin’s focus on Gadamer’s reading of Augustine.

To help illuminate Gadamer’s interpretation of Augustine’s account of the *Verbum*, Grondin turns to the use the young Heidegger made of “Augustine’s distinction between the *actus signatus* and the *actus exercitus*.”<sup>9</sup> Here are Gadamer’s own reflections from his classes with Heidegger.

I can remember what enormous significance it had for my generation when Heidegger acquainted us for the first time with a scholastic distinction that pointed in the same direction, namely, the distinction between the *actus signatus* and the *actus exercitus*. There is a difference between saying ‘I see something’ and ‘I am saying that I see something.’ But the signification ‘I am saying that ...’ is not the first awareness of the act. The act originally taking place is already such an act, which is to say it is already something in which my own operation is

---

<sup>7</sup> *Truth and Method*, 418.

<sup>8</sup> After *Truth and Method* Gadamer wrote that “It was not understood that when I make use of Augustine’s Trinitarian speculations, (the theme of the ‘verbum’), I am not defending Christian claims, but identifying their categorical significance” (*Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry and History: Applied Hermeneutics* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992], 67). One would expect Gadamer to be more sympathetic to Erasmus’s controversial translation of *Logos* as *sermo* than Jerome’s choice, *verbum*, since words only are meaningful, for Gadamer, in the context of conversation. *Oratio* might have even fit better for Gadamer’s interests, but since it is feminine it is not likely to be given as a translation of a person of the Trinity.

<sup>9</sup> Grondin, *Sources of Hermeneutics*, 101. I’ve adopted the convention of referring to the pre-*Being and Time* writings as belonging to the young-Heidegger, the *Being and Time* writings as the early-Heidegger, and the post-turn Heidegger, effectively post-1936 Heidegger, as the late-Heidegger.

vitally present to me. The transformation into a ‘signification’ founds a new intentional object.<sup>10</sup>

Grondin first connects the distinction between the *actus signatus* and the *actus exercitus* to Heidegger’s distinction between a “formal indication,” which initiates our attention towards inquiry, and the fulfillment of that inquiry in theoretical understanding; from there he moves to a central theme of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, that things can be disclosed to us hermeneutically or apophantically. Our hermeneutical awareness of something as something precedes and motivates our propositional awareness of something. Grondin writes about Heidegger,

The statement is always something secondary, namely the propositional fallout of an existential relationship to the world. ... Before the apophantic ‘as’ stands the more content laden hermeneutical ‘as.’ This hermeneutical as can only be won in a completion, i.e., by dealing with the motivation and context of interpretation. This is good Augustinianism.<sup>11</sup>

If the *interius verbum* is the analogue of the *actus exercitus*, which is Heidegger’s concept of the formal indication, which in turn is present in *Being and Time* as the hermeneutical-as, then we can understand Gadamer’s emphasis on the *interius verbum* by considering Gadamer’s emphasis on the hermeneutical-as. So goes Grondin’s thinking. The universality of hermeneutics, then, lies in the unbridgeable gap between the hermeneutic-as and the apophantic-as

---

<sup>10</sup> *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 123. He also wrote, “Later, in Marburg, ... Heidegger was concerned with a scholastic contradiction and spoke of the distinction between *actus signatus* [as act that has been explicitly designated as spontaneously executed] and *actus exercitus* [a spontaneously executed act]. These scholastic concepts correspond roughly to the concepts *reflective* and *directe* and refer, for example, to the distinction between the act of questioning itself and the possibility of concentrating on a question as a question. The transition from one to the other can be easily made. One can designate the question as a question and, thus, not only question but also point out that one is questioning and that such and such is questionable. This ability to reverse the transition from that which is immediate and direct into a reflexive intention seemed to us then to be a way to freedom. This promised to liberate thinking from the inescapable circle of reflection; it also pledged a way to regain both the evocative power of conceptual thinking and a philosophical language that had the ability to secure for thinking a position next to poetic language” (*Heidegger's Ways* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994], 34).

<sup>11</sup> Grondin, 140. Completion, *Vollzugsinn*, is Grondin’s German translation of *actus signatus*.

## Augustine and the Inner Word

Gadamer emphasizes Augustine's analogy that thought and language are intimately connected just as God, as the first person, and the Verbum, as the second person of the Trinity, are intimately connected.<sup>12</sup> Gadamer writes that

here the human analog—the mental word, the *verbum intellectus*—is helpful. This is more than a mere metaphor, for the human relationship between thought and speech corresponds, despite its imperfections, to the divine relationship of the trinity. The inner mental word is just as consubstantial with thought as is God the Son with God the Father.<sup>13</sup>

The distinction in Augustine is between inner and outer word—between the “true” *Verbum* that is the meaning, and the particular word that tokens it in a particular language.<sup>14</sup> The distinction harks back to the Stoic distinction between *the logos endiathetos* and the *logos prophorikos*—between inner language and expressed language. Humans are distinct from animals for having mental language, as even animals communicate with one another through vocal expressions.

Augustine's theological concern lies in showing the pre-incarnate existence of Christ, and then in drawing an analogy to the meaning of a word prior to its incarnation in sound. This has the intuitive appeal that we know what we say before we say it out loud, that we can speak inwardly even without speaking outwardly, but not vice versa, and also that internal expression is a legitimate expression, so we are guilty of sinning in our hearts, even if we don't sin through our voice. But, importantly, the inner word is not in any actual language, it is simply grasping a meaning with our heart, which later could be externalized in a language. To use a recent and

---

<sup>12</sup> Gadamer informs us of his two main sources of his view on the *verbum*, The “Verbe” entry of the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* (vol. 15/2, Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1950, 2639–2671) and Jules Lebreton's *Histoire du dogme de la Trinité des origines au concile de Nicée* (Paris: G. Beauchesne, 1927-1928), though, as is evident from the title, the latter work does not include a discussion of Augustine.

<sup>13</sup> *Truth and Method*, 421.

<sup>14</sup> On this see Tarmo Toom's, “The Potential Of A Condemned Analogy: Augustine on *Logos Endiathetos* and *Logos Prophorikos*” in *The Heythrop Journal* 48/2 (2007), 205–213.

anachronistic term, the inner word for Augustine is in a language of thought. That is what makes it universal for Augustine—all humans, by divine inspiration, share the same mentalesse: the Word of God.<sup>15</sup> We need to find words in natural languages in order to communicate our inner words with others.<sup>16</sup>

One thing Augustine emphasizes is that the word expressed in a natural language can never adequately capture the meaning of the word in the language of thought—“we are unable to give perfect expression to a reality of this kind and consequently the speaker’s mind cannot be fully disclosed.”<sup>17</sup> Grondin too wants to emphasize this point when discusses hermeneutic universality; he quotes Gadamer: “the supreme principle of philosophical hermeneutics such as I think of it (which is why it is a hermeneutic philosophy) is that we can never fully say what we want to say.”<sup>18</sup> Grondin takes the inability to say all we have in mind as the fundamental fact of hermeneutic universality, and as referring to the distinction between our propositional, linguistic apophantic understanding—the *actus signatus*--and our non-propositional, non-linguistic hermeneutic understanding—the *actus exercitus*. Such is his conclusion that Augustine’s views on the *Verbum* lead us to understand Gadamer’s claim that hermeneutics is universal.

---

<sup>15</sup> Of course for Augustine the view that Christ is the Word, and the Word is in us, provides the metaphysical foundation for his view that we never acquire knowledge except for through divine illumination—Christ, the *Verbum*, is *de Magistro*. Augustine’s view was not new. Origin, while favoring the idea that *Logos* should be understood as reason, not speech, paraphrased his opponents view: “Now it is possible that the son may also be the *Logos* because he reveals the secrets of his father, who is intellect in a fashion analogous to the Son called speech. For just as in us speech is the messenger of the intentions of the intellect, in like manner the speech of God, because he knows the Father whom no creature can approach without a guide, reveals him whom he knows, the Father” (quoted in Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle’s *Erasmus on Language and Method in Theology* [Toronto: University of Toronto, 1978], 25).

<sup>16</sup> Since Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical investigations* Augustine’s most well known discussion of language is found in the second book of *The Confessions*, but his views are also found in *De Magistro* and *De Doctrina Christiana*.

<sup>17</sup> “De fide et symbolo” 3.3 (quoted in Toom 235).

<sup>18</sup> Gadamer, *GW10*, 274, quoted in Grondin, *Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, 130.

However, we know from the start this can't be right. We know Augustine's view is not Gadamer's simply from fact that Gadamer takes the hermeneutic-as as being just as linguistic as the apophantic-as—all engagement with the world, propositional or otherwise, is in some sense linguistic for Gadamer. Gadamer's point is not about the limitations of words to capture our thoughts, the failure of the outer word tokened in a natural language to capture the universal inner *verbum*, as if our thoughts were fully formed and then could only be communicated in an imperfect language. Gadamer is focused on the limitations of words and thoughts to fully capture the objects of our thoughts and expressions. Here is how Gadamer puts it in his essay “Classical and Philosophical Hermeneutics”:

language is not just a ‘fact’, it is a ‘principle’. On it rests the universality of the hermeneutical dimension. One encounters such universality already in the doctrine of meaning put forward by St. Augustine and St. Thomas when they saw that the meaning of signs (of words) is surpassed by the meaning of the matter being discussed.<sup>19</sup>

The universal hermeneutic principle at work here is the view that about every subject matter there is always something more to be said. The gap is not between the external word and the inner word, but between the word and the *Sache*, the subject matter. In fact, Grondin's interpretation of Gadamer is mistaken at every step. Augustine is not the central character Grondin makes him out to be in Gadamer's discussion of the *interius Verbum* and the doctrine of the *interius Verbum* should not be equated with the idea of the *actus exercitus*, which means we should not look to Gadamer's connections to Heidegger to understand hermeneutics' universality.

As initial evidence for the implausibility of Grondin's reading let me simply point out that although Grondin calls on Heidegger's discussion of “Augustine's distinction between *actus*

---

<sup>19</sup> In *The Gadamer Reader* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 47.



*signatus* and the *actus exercitus*”<sup>20</sup> to help clarify Gadamer’s views, this distinction isn’t found in Augustine. The distinction doesn’t appear before the 12th century.<sup>21</sup> Grondin learned of Heidegger’s use of the terms from Gadamer’s recollections of hearing Heidegger’s lectures, but Gadamer is careful not to ascribe the distinction to Augustine. Instead he says it is a *scholastic* distinction. Furthermore, the distinction was not between propositional and non-propositional awareness; it is an ontological distinction between something taking place and something thought about or spoken of—something exercised versus something signified. A person walking would be *actus exercitus*, thinking of or speaking of someone walking would be *actus signatus*.

### **Gadamer, Aquinas’ *Verbum Mentis*, and the Hermeneutic Universality**

I’ve already mentioned that Gadamer’s discussion of the universality of hermeneutics occurs in the third part of *Truth and Method*, the part devoted to “The Ontological Shift in Hermeneutics Guided by Language.” It is in the second section, “The Development of the Concept of Language in the History of Western Thought” that Gadamer presents Augustine as a counterexample to the trend toward the “forgetfulness of language.” Gadamer takes the reduction of words to signs to be mistaken in that it treats language “as an instrument of subjectivity,” as a tool used to communicate concepts and ideas. Instead, “[a] word is not a sign that one selects, nor is it a sign that one makes or gives to another; it is not an existent thing that one picks up and gives an ideality of meaning in order to make another being visible through it.”<sup>22</sup> By rejecting a word’s merely secondary status Gadamer is alluding to his view that words serve a disclosive rather than referential function—words disclose objects directly to the mind. We don’t bring

---

<sup>20</sup> Grondin, *Sources of Hermeneutics*, 101.

<sup>21</sup> See Gabriel Nuchelmans’ “The Distinction ‘Actus Exercitus/Actus Significatus’ in Medieval Semantics” in Norman Kretzmann, ed., *Meaning and Inference in Medieval Philosophy: Studies in Memory of Jan Pinborg* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988).

<sup>22</sup> *Truth and Method*, 417.

words to wordless experience. Instead, “experience of itself seeks and finds words that express it. We seek the right word—i.e., the word that really belongs to the thing—so that in it the thing comes into language.”<sup>23</sup> The world becomes intelligibly disclosed to us through words. The intelligibility is always partial and incomplete, but it is a form of intelligibility nonetheless.

Gadamer’s discussion of Augustine lasts a brief three pages; from there he turns to scholastic discussions of *Verbum*. The bulk of his discussion is on Aquinas, and it is right that this is the case given Gadamer’s concern about the forgetfulness of language. The important point is that when we think in words we are not seeking to make clear something inner—some concept or idea—but an object. The words chosen are chosen because they reveal the thing to consciousness, not because they capture an idea we have in mind that we seek to communicate to others. As is common in the world-disclosing tradition of language, communication for Gadamer operates not by conveying ideas from one person to another, but by effecting the disclosure of objects in a particular way for another person. Consider this quotation from the end of Gadamer’s discussion of the *Verbum*.

Summing up what we have learned for the theology of the *Verbum*, first let us make a point that...is of particular importance for the hermeneutical phenomenon. The inner unity of thinking and speaking to oneself, which corresponds to the Trinitarian mystery of the incarnation, implies that the mental word *is not formed by a reflective act*. A person who thinks something—i.e., says it to himself—means by it the thing that he thinks. His mind is not directed back towards his own thinking when he forms the word... [T]he word is not expressing the mind but the thing intended. The starting point for the formation of the word is the substantive content (the species) that fills the mind. The thought seeking expression refers not to the mind but to the thing. Thus the word is not the expression of the mind but is concerned with the *similitudo rei*. The subject matter that is thought (the species) and the word belong as closely together as possible. Their unity is so close that the word does not occupy a second place in the mind beside the *species*; rather the word is that in which knowledge is consummated—

---

<sup>23</sup> *Truth and Method*, 417. Compare this with what Martin Heidegger says in *On the Way to Language* (New York: Harper Collins, 1971): “About the ‘word’ we also said that it not only stands in a relation to the thing, but that the word is what first brings that given thing, as the being that is, into this ‘is’; that the word is what holds the thing there and relates it and so to speak provides its maintenance with which to be a thing” (82).

i.e., that in which the species is fully thought. Thomas points out that in the respect the word resembles light, which is what makes color visible.<sup>24</sup>

This is not Augustine's view, but Aquinas' view. It is Aquinas, according to Gadamer, who properly recognizes the essential connection "between *forma* and *verbum*."<sup>25</sup>

In the Thomistic tradition, the *verbum mentis* is not that which is known, or that which is in the mind and expressed differently in different languages, but that by which an object is known.<sup>26</sup> It shares this with the intelligible species—Aquinas early on suggested the *verbum mentis* simply was the intelligible species—, but where the intelligible species initiates conceptualization, the *verbum mentis* completes the conceptualization. Just as Gadamer emphasizes in response to "the forgetfulness of language" that we grasp not the word, but the subject matter through the word, Aquinas holds that we grasp the species of the object of through the *verbum mentis*. The *verbum mentis*, for Aquinas, is just the theological characterization of the act of conceptualization. Concepts, for Aquinas, are not mental objects, third things, between us and external things. Rather they are the way that things are conceived; more exactly, "a concept is an informed activity of the intellect as it grasps *res extra animam*."<sup>27</sup> Gadamer will say much the same thing: "The inner word...is the subject matter thought through to the end. ... The word is not formed only after the act of knowledge has been completed—in Scholastic terms, after the intellect has been informed by the species; it is the act of knowledge itself."<sup>28</sup> The *verbum* is the

---

<sup>24</sup> *Truth and Method*, 426.

<sup>25</sup> *Truth and Method*, 422.

<sup>26</sup> I follow John O'Callaghan in reading Aquinas as a direct realist. See his *Thomistic Realism and the Linguistic Turn* (Notre Dame, Ind: Notre Dame Press, 2003). O'Callaghan's reading is unusual as many interpreters expect that Aquinas's Aristotelianism would commit him to interpreting the opening sentence of Aristotle's *Peri Hermeneias*—"those which are articulated in sound are signs of those passions which are in the soul"—as implying that words refer to things indirectly via concepts in the mind. In fact, Aquinas's commentary on the *Peri Hermeneias* never mentions the *verbum mentis*; signification for Aquinas is mediated by concepts, but direct nonetheless.

<sup>27</sup> O'Callaghan, 168.

<sup>28</sup> *Truth and Method*, 422; 424.

intellect in act, which is to say that the word is directly connected to the species of the object.

Word and thing are no longer ontologically separated as they were in the forgetfulness of language. Again, notice that Gadamer uses that exact Thomistic terminology: “the subject matter that is thought (the species) and the word belong as closely together as possible...the word is that in which knowledge is consummated—i.e., that in which the species is fully thought.”<sup>29</sup> The species thought is the species in the subject matter, not in the intellect; words connect first and foremost to things, not first and foremost to ideas and from there to things. Words disclose things to our intellect because of the species of the thing is present in the word—analogously, as we have seen, to how God is present in the Word.

For Gadamer the issue of the *verbum* is not a matter of the propositional versus non-propositional expression, it is a matter of focusing on what the person seeks to disclose through his or her words. And this means not grasping the person’s intentions, or the idea in the language of thought, but turning our attention to the subject matter of the expression and to understand how the *Sache* is disclosed through the expression. Here is Gadamer’s parallel: in the theological case, just as the incarnate word does not take anything away from the divine word, the limited understanding that comes through the *verbum* is not any less about the object for its limits. In more familiar hermeneutic terms: just as our understanding is shaped by our prejudgments and our language, this does not make it any less accurate of an understanding. Hermeneutic universality comes from the view that because understanding is always disclosed through language, additional understandings are always available. There is always more to learn about a subject matter, and we never grasp all that is the case about the object (which is not to say we don’t grasp the object). In the context of discussing Aquinas Gadamer writes, “The word of

---

<sup>29</sup> *Truth and Method*, 426.

human thought is directed toward the thing, but it cannot contain it as a whole within itself. Thus though constantly proceeds to new conceptions.... This incapacity for completeness has a positive side: it reveals the true infinity of the mind which constantly surpasses itself.”<sup>30</sup> The universality of hermeneutics stems from the ontological connection between words and things and from the awareness that there can be multiple, divergent, yet accurate understanding of things, not from the modified Heideggerian distinction between a proposition and its non-propositional context of intelligibility.<sup>31</sup>

### Coda

Given the arguments I’ve made one might wonder how Grondin came up with the interpretation he did—emphasizing the brief passages from *Truth and Method* on Augustine, and connecting them through Heidegger to a seemingly unrelated distinction. Indeed Grondin himself acknowledges that his interpretation of Gadamer’s reliance on Augustine is “nowhere emphasized in *Truth and Method*, let alone the secondary literature” and “seems to run contrary to the basic tendency of Gadamer’s philosophy.”<sup>32</sup> It turns out Grondin tells us what motivated his unconventional interpretation of Gadamer’s claim to hermeneutic universality—Gadamer told him that’s his view. In the “Preface” to his *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* Grondin tells about a confusing and astonishing (in his words) exchange with Gadamer. In 1988

---

<sup>30</sup> *Truth and Method*, 426.

<sup>31</sup> If what I’ve argued already isn’t enough to convince that Grondin is mistaken in his reading of Gadamer, consider the fact that the legacy of the account of the *inner verbum* in medieval thought was the idea of there being a *propositionally* structured mental language such that, for example for Ockham, an analysis of the logic of terms and propositions is at the same time an analysis of the logic of thought. Rather than standing opposed to the propositional awareness, the theory of the *verbum* makes it a central feature of all thought. For this account see Claude Panaccio’s “From Mental Word to Mental Language” (in *Philosophical Topics*, 20/2 [1992]) and his *Le discours interior: De Platon á Guillaume d’Occam* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, xiv.

in a Heidelberg pub he asked Gadamer to explain what he meant by the universality of hermeneutics. Gadamer replied,

‘[it]s in the *verbum interius*.’ ... ‘This universality,’ he continued, ‘consists in inner speech, in that one cannot say everything. One cannot express everything one has in mind, the *logos endaihetos*. That is something I learned from Augustine’s *De Trinitate*. This experience is universal; the *actus signatus* is never completely covered by the *actus exercitus*.’<sup>33</sup>

Grondin expressed his bafflement at these claims and then went to work deciphering their meaning. Within a few years Grondin concluded that

the universal can indeed be derived only from the doctrine of the *verbum interius*—that is, from the insight (stemming from Augustine read through Heidegger) that spoken discourse always lags behind what one wants or has to say ... [and that] this insight *alone* is capable of undermining the metaphysical and logical priority assigned to propositions.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, Grondin reflected for a time on Gadamer’s comment and developed the theory to make sense of it, the theory we have seen in all its parts—the emphasis on Augustine’s account on the inner word, the connection to Heidegger and the *actus exercitus*, and the attack on propositions.

---

<sup>33</sup> *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, xiii–xiv. Along these lines, in a late interview, Gadamer connects his reading of Augustine with his claims about non-propositional understanding. When responding to a question about Derrida’s claims about logocentrism, Gadamer says, “apparently Derrida has in mind the narrow view of ‘logos’ that he found in Husserl. However, this ancient concept was again put into a new light by Christianity as cited in the beginning of the Gospel According to St. John: ‘In the beginning was the Word...’. Thus if we focus only on sentential propositions and those sciences founded on such ‘true’ propositions, we will indeed arrive at a very one-sided rendering of the meaning of ‘logos.’ This is an artificial restriction.” (“Text Matters: Interview with H. G. Gadamer” (in *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995]), p. 273).

<sup>34</sup> *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, xv. Grondin also says on page 123, “In the inner word, in the drive to understand and language that constitutes the universe of our finitude, is rooted the universality of hermeneutic philosophy.” Confusions are multiplied here; not only is the inner word not a drive, nor is the universality rooted in a drive as if belonging to a theory of human nature, but the sentence does not even scan (leaving aside what “the universe of our finitude” might mean).

With this twist in mind—knowing that Gadamer himself presented the view to Grondin, and, I should add, that Gadamer endorsed Grondin’s interpretation,<sup>35</sup> how does this change my conclusion? First, it is not simply Grondin who lumps together the *interius verbum* and the *actus exercitus*, Gadamer makes the same mistake. That should cast doubt on Gadamer’s own interpretation of Augustine. Second, Gadamer’s claim that the universality of hermeneutics lies in the fact one cannot say everything one has in mind is closer to my reading of Gadamer’s claim to universality than it is Grondin’s. Instead of presenting thought as having content which cannot be captured propositionally, Gadamer’s idea is that we can only in limited ways disclose things through language, yet language is all we have. Both Grondin and I read the universality of hermeneutics as expressing hermeneutics fundamentality and inexhaustibility. For Grondin this is the fundamental gap between the apophantic-as and the hermeneutic-as which can never be fully closed through further propositions; for me hermeneutic universality expresses the fundamental fact that words successfully disclose their subject matter but always only incompletely, and new expressions are always required. Grondin takes Augustine to be the main influence here; I take Aquinas to be the main influence and I have tried to show how Augustine’s view of language simply does not fit Gadamer’s theory of language. Gadamer writes that “in order to think seriously about language, I believe we must ask if in the end language does not have to be called the ‘language of things’—the language of things in which the primordial correspondence between soul and being is so exhibited that finite consciousness too can know it.”<sup>36</sup> This strikes me as exactly right. The forgetfulness of language that is corrected through the

---

<sup>35</sup> “It is Grondin’s special merit to have worked out this ‘inner’ conversation as the real foundation of hermeneutics, which ... plays an important role in Augustine” (Gadamer, Forward to *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, xi).

<sup>36</sup> “The Language of Things and the Nature of Things” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 75-76. He continues, “In the end, the true being of things becomes accessible precisely in their linguistic appearance—in the ideality of what is intended that is concealed in such a fashion that its being intended (the linguistic character of the manifestation of

medieval account of the *Verbum*, is a forgetfulness of language's intimate connection to things. Grondin mentions that before his conversation in a pub, he thought Gadamer's account of hermeneutic universality had to do with the universal linguisticity of experience. He was right; he just didn't see the connection between this view and the Thomistic understanding of the *Verbum*. Gadamer himself may have led Grondin astray by directing him away from his discussion of Aquinas to his brief comments on Augustine.

---

things) is not experienced as such Since metaphysics understand the true being of things as essences that are directly accessible to the 'mind', the linguistic character of the experience of being is concealed. So too, medieval scholasticism, as the Christian heir of Greek metaphysics, conceived the word wholly in terms of the species, as its perfection, without grasping the enigma of its incarnation. The linguistic character of the experience of the world, to which metaphysical thinking had originally oriented itself, became in the last analysis something secondary and contingent that schematizes the thinking gaze at things through linguistic conventions and closes it off from the primordial experience of being. In truth, however the illusion that things precede their manifestation in language conceals the fundamentally linguistic character of our experience of the world" (77).