

## Davidson, Gadamer, Incommensurability, and the Third Dogma of Empiricism

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Both Hans-Georg Gadamer and Donald Davidson deny the existence of some commonly claimed forms of incommensurability. In his 1972 APA presidential address Davidson issued a sweeping criticism of even the “very idea” of incommensurable conceptual schemes.<sup>1</sup> One part of his argument was that if one held that there are diverse conceptual schemes one could not make sense of the idea that these schemes were incommensurable. Another part of his argument was against the idea that perception operates on a two-stage model where we take in raw data about the world through our senses, and then organize that data according to our concepts. If one adopts this two-stage account, then people will perceive the world differently in accordance with the various concepts they get from their particular backgrounds, cultures or languages. Incommensurability would arise when there is no way for a person to escape his or her schematizing concepts—his or her perspective on the world—in order to perceive the world from another perspective using another’s concepts. Davidson calls this scheme/content theory of perception “the third dogma of empiricism.”

In this talk I am going to consider the case of incommensurability arising in conjunction with the third dogma of empiricism. After spelling out some of Davidson’s arguments I will turn to Gadamer who, although denying incommensurability, seems to be committed to such a scheme/content theory of perception and thus would not be entitled to his denial of incommensurability. I will argue that he, in fact, does not have a scheme/content account of perception and the mistake arises if we fail to interpret “horizon” and “world” as technical terms

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<sup>1</sup> “On the Very Idea of A Conceptual Scheme,” in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 183–198.

with their roots in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Max Scheler respectively. After outlining Gadamer's account of the role of language in perception, drawing the important differences between his view and Davidson's, I will introduce two new arguments Gadamer can make against incommensurability.<sup>2</sup>

### **Davidson, Incommensurability, and the Third Dogma**

Throughout his writings Davidson makes a number of arguments that jointly attack the third dogma of empiricism and the incommensurability that follows from it—I will briefly point to five. The first and perhaps most intuitive argument targets the possibility of completely incommensurable conceptual schemes—conceptual schemes that never line up, that disagree everywhere. Davidson makes the point that in order for two schemes to disagree there must be something that they disagree about; otherwise it would not count as a disagreement. There must be something common with respect to which the differences could count as differences. There is a general insight here that should be obvious: disagreement only occurs on the back of much wider agreement. Gadamer says much the same thing, “a prior agreement in understanding is presupposed wherever disturbances in this agreement arise.”<sup>3</sup> So, if one holds there are multiple conceptual schemes that disagree about how to conceptualize the world, their disagreements

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<sup>2</sup> In this respect I am in full sympathy with Bjørn Ramberg when he warns against hasty assimilations of Gadamer's and Davidson's views. Even when they are saying the same thing, there are deep differences behind how they arrived at that conclusion. Ramberg writes that, “the commensuration of different philosophical positions is achieved, if at all, only slowly, by virtue of sensitive work carried out where resistance is greatest” (“Illuminating Language,” in Carlos Prado (ed.), *A House Divided: Comparing Analytic and Continental Philosophers* [Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2003], 214). I hope here to merely clear away a common misunderstanding of Gadamer, in the process highlighting one of Gadamer's and Davidson's key differences, to allow a comparison to fruitfully go forward.

<sup>3</sup> “Language and Understanding,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23/1 (2006), 15.

cannot run across the board. Their incommensurability must be local, not global.<sup>4</sup>

A second argument against global incommensurability is similarly straightforward. If our understanding of the world were wholly mediated by our conceptual scheme, and there were massive, comprehensive differences across conceptual schemes, we would never be in a position to recognize these differences. For to see the differences at the level of conceptual scheme would require a perspective on them independent from our own conceptual scheme—it would require us to “take up a stance outside our own ways of thought.” It is one thing to recognize a difference of opinion, it is quite another to recognize a difference of scheme. Either we are trapped or we are not: if we are trapped we have no evidence of other conceptual schemes globally incommensurable with ours, if we are not trapped our scheme is not globally incommensurable with other schemes.

Davidson make a brief argument, the third of five, that I think should be read in the context of the first two. He claims that recognizing behavior as linguistic is enough to know that there could be no systematic disagreement, so even if aliens were to land and try to speak to us in their language, that would be enough to know that complete disagreement could not be the case.

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<sup>4</sup> Davidson provides this helpful explanation: “Each of us has his own position in the world, and hence his own perspective on it. It is easy to slide from this truism to some confused notion of conceptual relativism. The former, harmless, relativism is just the familiar relativism of position in space and time. Because each of us preempts a volume of space-time, two of us cannot be in exactly the same place at the same time. The relations among our positions are intelligible because we can locate each person in a single, common world, and a shared time frame.

Conceptual relativism may seem similar, but the analogy is hard to carry out. For what is the common reference point, or system of coordinates, to which each scheme is relative? Without a good answer to this question, the claim that each of us in some sense inhabits his own world loses its intelligibility.

For this reason and others, I have long held that there are limits to how much individual or social systems of thought can differ. If by conceptual relativism we mean the idea that conceptual schemes and moral systems, or the languages associated with them, can differ massively—to the extent of being mutually unintelligible or incommensurable, or forever beyond rational resolve—then I reject conceptual relativism.

Of course there are contrasts from epoch to epoch, from culture to culture, and person to person, of kinds we all recognize and struggle with; but these are contrasts which, with sympathy and effort, we can explain and understand. Trouble comes when we try to embrace the idea that there might be more comprehensive differences, for this seems (absurdly) to ask us to take up a stance outside our own ways of thought. (“Myth of the Subjective,” in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* [Oxford: Oxford University Press], 39-40.)

The best way to understand this surprising claim is to realize that the very recognition of language use presumes a number of things. For example, it presumes the others think you exist, that they think you think they exist, that they believe you can perceive them, that there are beliefs or desires that can be communicated, that both parties can distinguish truth from falsity and understanding from misunderstanding, and so on. These commonalities suffice for showing that even the most minimal recognition—the recognition that someone is using language—presents enough of a shared basis to rule out radical conceptual differences across the different languages.<sup>5</sup> There might be local, or partial incommensurability, but not comprehensive, global incommensurability.

A fourth argument is against such cases of partial incommensurability across conceptual schemes, cases where there is enough in common to recognize disagreement. In these cases Davidson asks what could function as a criterion for determining whether a disagreement is simply a matter of different beliefs or a matter of different conceptual schemes. All we are faced with in these situations is someone who says something different from us about something. Either they are using the words like we do and have concepts like we do and simply disagree with us, or they are using words differently and are operating with a different scheme from us. But the only evidence we have for their having a different scheme from us is our disagreement, which leaves us no criterion by which we could decide whether the disagreement occurs at the

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<sup>5</sup> Davidson has an additional argument that only shows up in “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme.” There he considers two metaphors meant to show how a scheme relates to the unschematized content: one might say different schemes organize what’s given in different ways, or one might say different schemes fit what’s given in different ways. In the first case, the given must have parts to organize, and these parts would be consistent across the schemes. But that means there can’t be systematic disagreement across the schemes to be organized differently. This argument is along the lines of the first two I’ve presented. In the second case, where both schemes fit the given, both schemes are true, but for Davidson being true suffices for being translatable, so in this case too the differences can not be complete. This argument relies completely on Davidson’s Tarskian account of truth and that is not a likely place where Gadamer and Davidson can be brought into dialogue.

level of what we believe about the world or at the level of the different ways of speaking about the world.<sup>6</sup> That is, the only evidence that a different scheme is in play is that the other person has different beliefs than us, but having different beliefs is insufficient for concluding there is a different conceptual scheme in play. We are never justified in concluding partial incommensurability over simply partial disagreement.

All the arguments so far line up against the possible existence of partially or completely incommensurable conceptual schemes, once you accept the existence of conceptual schemes. His real target though is conceptual schemes as such. For the third dogma to fall he needs additional arguments; as he says, “[e]ven those thinkers who are certain there is only one conceptual scheme are in the sway of the scheme concept.”<sup>7</sup> His final argument strikes at the heart of how the third dogma functions within empiricism, that is, within the idea that our perceptual encounters with the world provide independent and essential information for justifying perceptual beliefs. Accompanying conceptual schemes, for an empiricist, is “the idea that there is an element in experience which serves as a basis and justification of empirical knowledge, an element which is private and subjective in the sense that it owes nothing to what is outside the mind.” Such epistemic intermediaries “are given in experience” and “provide the ultimate reasons for our take on the environment.”<sup>8</sup> Empiricism requires that our experiences play an essential role as a tribunal for justifying our beliefs, which means that experiences must both be independent of our beliefs and given with the certainty required for providing justification.

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<sup>6</sup> Such a criterion would allow for parsing analytic from synthetic knowledge, something that Davidson takes Quine to have rejected in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism.”

<sup>7</sup> “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” 183.

<sup>8</sup> “Comments on the Karlovy Vary Papers” *Interpreting Davidson*, Peter Kotacko, et. al. (eds.), (Palo Alto, Calif.: Center for Language Studies Press, 2001), 285.

The way I've set up the question should give you a sense of how the argument will go. For the sensory givens to be able to justify perceptual beliefs they need to have some conceptual content. They need to show to us that something is the case. But it is at the heart of the scheme-content picture that the content is brute, unschematized, and, Kant might say, "blind." Davidson is convinced such brute content cannot play that role. His mantra is: only beliefs can justify beliefs<sup>9</sup>—only something with propositional structure like a belief can stand in a justificatory relationship to something else with propositional structure, typically another belief. It is in this respect that Davidson calls himself a coherentist.

But he is also an externalist. Davidson holds that, in virtue of our senses, the world directly causes us to have beliefs. So to see a podium is to be caused to have a perceptual belief that here is a podium. The relationship between the perceiver and the world is causal, not conceptual—causal in the manner of producing beliefs about that world.<sup>10</sup> It is in this sense that we should understand Davidson's closing sentence from "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme": "In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false."<sup>11</sup> Since there is no conceptual content, only causation, in our interaction with the world the interaction itself can't play a role in justifying beliefs, yet this is what the empiricist seeks by making our beliefs answerable to the world. Davidson's argument here against the third dogma of empiricism, the scheme/content theory of perceptual belief, is a

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<sup>9</sup> More exactly, "nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief" ("A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" [in *Subjective, Objective, Intersubjective*], 141).

<sup>10</sup> As he says in the Appendix to *Truth, Language, and History*, "The interface between our bodies and the world is causal and nothing more" (321).

<sup>11</sup> "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," 198.

version of the arguments against the Myth of the Given.<sup>12</sup> Once the third dogma falls, so does the idea that there could be incommensurable conceptual schemes, or conceptual schemes at all as long as these are understood as schematizing raw sensory data. Davidson critiques the third dogma both from the side of the scheme and from the side of the content; criticisms from the side of the scheme are most useful for showing the impossibility of incommensurable schemes, but it is Davidson's externalism, his view that our perceptual relation to the world is causal not conceptual, that does the brunt of the work in his argument against the third dogma itself.

### **Gadamer's Apparent Third Dogmatism**

My assignment was to talk on Davidson and Gadamer on incommensurability. The topic makes sense; after all, starting from quite different philosophical backgrounds they both reject incommensurability.<sup>13</sup> They share quite a few views in common, Gadamer and Davidson—they both agree that language is social, that language is required for thought, that an awareness of other minds rises along with the use of language and with the ability to think, and that were there no humans there would be no truth. Above all both agree that questions about the nature of interpretation are at the heart of questions about meaning. It is not surprising there are over a

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<sup>12</sup> Bjørn Ramberg gets this right when he says “The real point of ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’ is simply that if we are extensionalists about meaning, we cannot imagine what it is for a language to have an ‘inside,’ one that remains inaccessible to us even if we have somehow managed to map the ‘outside’ of the language by the pairing off of extensions of sentences in radical interpretation. And this means that we cannot make sense of the idea of intranslatable languages” (*Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language* [New York; Blackwell, 1989]), 120.

<sup>13</sup> In his essay “Semantics and Hermeneutics” (in *Philosophical Hermeneutics* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976], 82–94) Gadamer appears to give two examples of incommensurability. He first discusses the way “force” has become a technical term in science, so much so that it moved away from the everyday sense of the word and “was individualized to the point of becoming untranslatable” (86). On the next page he mentions a lyric poem that “is untranslatable to the point that it can no longer be rendered in another language at all without losing its poetic expressiveness” (87). However neither are cases of untranslatability proper. One is simply the idea that there is no way to translate the technical term using the everyday meaning of the term, not that translation is impossible. The second is that any translation loses the poetic force, not the meaning, of the lyric poem, and that shouldn't surprise us. We don't expect the power of a work of art to be maintained across translations.

dozen articles comparing the two philosophers.<sup>14</sup> Even Davidson after reading large parts of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* said, "I definitely admire his work and I see quite evident resemblances."<sup>15</sup> But these resemblances mask significant differences about the nature of language, first-person authority, the nature of conversation, and, perhaps most deeply, the place of the history of philosophy for contemporary philosophizing. What I'm most concerned about and what I will be focusing on from now on is the possibility that beneath their shared rejection

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<sup>14</sup> Here is a certainly incomplete list.

Alcoff, Linda Martin, "Gadamer's Feminist Epistemology," in Lorriane Code (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (University Park, Penn: Penn State Press, 2003), 231–258.

Braver, Lee, *A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

Braver, Lee, "Davidson's Reading of Gadamer: Triangulation, Conversation, and the Analytic-Continental Divide" forthcoming in Jeff Malpas (ed.) *Davidson's Hermeneutics*.

Bubner, Rudiger, "On the Ground of Understanding," in Brice Wachterhauser (ed.) *Hermeneutics and Truth* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 68–82.

Dreyfus, Herbert, "Holism and Hermeneutics," *Review of Metaphysics* 34:1 (Sept., 1980), 3-23.

Höslé, Vittorio, "Truth and Understanding: Analytical Philosophy (Donald Davidson), Phenomenology (Hans-Georg Gadamer), and the Desideratum of an Objective Idealist Hermeneutics," in Andre Wiercinski, (ed.), *Between Description And Interpretation: The Hermeneutic Turn In Phenomenology* (Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press, 2005), 376–394.

Hoy, David, "Post-Cartesian Interpretation: Hans-Georg Gadamer and Donald Davidson," in Lewis Hahn (ed.), *Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 111–128.

Malpas, Jeff. "Gadamer, Davidson and the Ground of Understanding," in Jeff Malpas et. al. (eds.), *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 195–216.

McDowell, John, "Gadamer and Davidson on Understanding and Relativism," in *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, 173–194.

Ramberg, Bjørn, Chapters 9 & 10 of *Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language* (New York; Blackwell, 1989), 114-141.

Ramberg, Bjørn, "Illuminating Language: Interpretation and Understanding in Gadamer and Davidson," in Carlos Prado (ed.), *A House Divided: Comparing Analytic and Continental Philosophers* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2003), 213–234.

Ramberg, Bjørn, "The Source of the Subjective" in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, 459–471.

Taylor, Charles, "Gadamer on the Human Sciences," in Robert Dostal (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 52–78.

Taylor, Charles, "Understanding the Other: A Gadamerian View on Conceptual Schemes," in *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, 270–297.

Stueber, Karsten, "Understanding Truth and Objectivity: A Dialogue between Donald Davidson and Hans-Georg Gadamer," in *Hermeneutics and Truth*, 172–189.

Wachterhauser, Brice, "Getting it Right: Relativism, Realism, and Truth," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, 126–142.

Weisheimer, Joel. "Charity Militant: Gadamer, Davidson, and Post-critical Hermeneutics," in Donald Marshall (ed.), *The Force of Tradition* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 39–54.

<sup>15</sup> Katherin Glüer, *Donald Davidson zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 1993), 158.

of incommensurability Gadamer has, in fact, just the kind of scheme/content theory of perception Davidson rejects in his arguments against the third dogma of empiricism.

First, Gadamer belongs to the phenomenological tradition. Although phenomenology should not be considered empiricist, it does hold, like empiricism, that the careful attention to experience provides the main source of justification or rejection for empirical beliefs.<sup>16</sup> Such a view runs up against Davidson's claim that experience is causal, not conceptual, and as I pointed out it is Davidson's externalism that does the work against the third dogma.<sup>17</sup> Second, Gadamer has a theory that what we can understand alone is limited by our historical and cultural horizons; in dialogue with others (or with texts) with their own horizons we "fuse horizons" when we come to a new understanding that sheds light on the limitations of our previous understanding. Gadamer speaks of such changes as gestalt switches, which suggests a kind of incommensurability persists between horizons. Finally, Gadamer claims "language has a tendency towards schematization. As a language is learned, it creates a view of the world which conforms to the character of the speech conventions that have been established in the language."<sup>18</sup> Here language is set up as the medium by which the world is made intelligible. Presumably different languages, with different conventions and different words, would create potentially incommensurable worldviews.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Gadamer makes this claim in many places; perhaps his most explicit comes near the end of *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1991): "[T]he general concept meant by a word is enriched by any given perception of a thing, so that what emerges is a new, more specific word formation which does more justice to the particularity of the act of perception. However certainly speaking implies using pre-established words with general meanings, at the same time, a constant process of concept formation is going on, by means of which the life of a language develops" (429).

<sup>17</sup> Davidson makes it clear in "the Myth of Subjective" that his rejection of the relativism associated with conceptual schemes requires above all the rejection of "an element in the mind untouched by conceptual interpretation" (40).

<sup>18</sup> "Notes on Planning for the Future," in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 177.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Friedman seems to have such a take on Gadamer in his essay "Exorcising the Philosophical Tradition: Comments on John McDowell's *Mind and World*" (*Philosophical Review*, 105 [1996], 427–467). There Friedman

Frankly, the most straightforward way of reading Gadamer is that he has a scheme/content theory of perception. Different languages amount to different worldviews, and even within a language there are multiple traditions. Traditions shape our pre-judgments, which in turn, set the horizons, the limits on what we experience and believe at a particular time. Through dialogue with others, we can become critically reflective of our pre-judgments, and, in turn, our traditions, and we “fuse” horizons when we acquire a broader understanding, one inaccessible simply from the original point of view. Since we need the encounter with others to show us the limitations of our points of view, the limitations themselves must not be seen solely from within the point of view. But that means the new point of view acquired through the fusion of horizons amounts to a new way of seeing both what we saw before and the limitations of what we saw before. Yet, if this were his position, his view that there cannot possibly be incommensurable schemes would then simply be a kind of optimism that translation and understanding are always possible and he would have no resources for resisting relativism. The charge, by the way, that Gadamer’s view is actually relativist and the only thing keeping him from seeing that is a naïve faith in the power of dialogue, is one of the most common criticisms leveled against Gadamer.<sup>20</sup>

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claims that McDowell’s Gadamerian appeals to language and tradition open him up to the charge of relativism, presumably because Gadamer is open to this charge. McDowell’s replies in “Gadamer and Davidson on Understanding and Relativism.”

<sup>20</sup> In *The Power of Dialogue: Critical Hermeneutics After Gadamer and Foucault* (Boston: MIT Press, 1996) Hans Kögler argues that Gadamer’s theory of dialogue falters precisely on cases on incommensurability. His argument rests on the mistake view that, for Gadamer, a dialogue must end in agreement for it to be successful, yet this is not Gadamer’s considered view. His view is that dialogue needs to end in a shared understanding, which is different from an agreement. Kögler focuses on incommensurability in the sense of untranslatability and in the sense of lacking independent measures for adjudicating norms, but even if two terms are untranslatable or two values impossible to rank according to an independent third norm, they are understandable. That is part of the reason why I am focusing on incommensurability claims where the claim is about the impossibility of understanding another’s view; Gadamer himself talks about the impossibility of translating a poem while preserving the poem’s poetic force.

But despite how it looks Gadamer does not have a scheme/content account of perceptual belief. He is right to reject incommensurability and yet he does this while still holding a place for experience to justify or falsify beliefs. I want to show how he makes this work. In addition, we get two new non-Davidsonian arguments against incommensurability. To tell this story properly means looking carefully at the two claims—that “a language-view is a worldview”<sup>21</sup> and that every point of view is limited by a horizon—and recognizing that both “world” and “horizon” are technical terms in Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, terms with phenomenological roots. But in the end what must be made clear is the role language plays in experience. We need to understand what Gadamer means by his claims that all experience has a “linguistic character”<sup>22</sup> and that “language is the medium through which consciousness is connected with beings.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Horizon as a Technical Term in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics**

Let’s start with Gadamer’s claim that

Every finite present has its limitations. We define the concept of “situation” by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence essential to the concept of a situation is the concept of a “*horizon*.” The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular standpoint.<sup>24</sup>

Different people, texts, cultures, and times have different horizons, and all understanding, according to Gadamer, occurs as a fusion of horizons. Rightly some philosophers object that if a horizon is a limit on what can be seen from a vantage point, then the claim that horizons fuse makes little sense. Anything that is to transform our horizon must already belong to our

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<sup>21</sup> *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 442. Hereafter *TM*.

<sup>22</sup> “The Nature of Language and the Nature of Things,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 77.

<sup>23</sup> “The Nature of Language and the Nature of Things,” 76.

<sup>24</sup> *TM*, 302

horizon—to the extent it is outside our horizon it would be outside our limits of comprehension. The objection is similar to the one raised by Davidson that were everything mediated by a conceptual scheme, we could never escape our conceptual scheme to understand how other schemes might differ. Gadamer replies by claiming that horizons are “open” and constantly changing—if we riff on the metaphor some we can see how that might be. After all, it’s quite easy to see beyond our present horizon. Simply walking a short distance, or going to the top floor of a building changes the horizon. Moreover most of us know quite well what lies beyond the horizon from past experience. Again, following the metaphor, horizons might function as a limit at a particular time, but they are also gateways to something accessible and they move as we move.

Still, rather than trying to clarify Gadamer’s position by simply stressing different features of the metaphor of a horizon, we should seek an explication of exactly how a horizon functions in perceptual awareness, and how the openness and variability of horizons follows. For that we need to understand the term horizon as a technical term; fortunately it has been a technical term ever since Husserl introduced it into his phenomenology in 1913.<sup>25</sup>

Husserl was concerned with a common phenomenon—we experience more than is given to our senses. Husserl pointed out that although our senses only give us incomplete information about an object, we perceive the object as a whole. Even though when looking at a chair we are only presented with one side of the chair, we perceive a chair, not a chair-side. We are not surprised when we move to see the chair has other sides to it, that it's three dimensional and so on. In fact we would be quite shocked to find out what we thought was a chair was only a chair-façade. Likewise when perceiving a person we can often tell who a person is based on very little sensory information. We can recognize someone from the back of their head; were he or she to

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<sup>25</sup> See especially sections 27 and 44 of Husserl’s *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1983).

turn around to reveal that we were mistaken, this itself is a sign that our perception of the back of the head included more than simply the back of a head. Were it otherwise we wouldn't have been surprised to find he or she was someone we didn't expect.<sup>26</sup> So perception always goes beyond what is physically presented to the senses.

The horizon, according to Husserl's technical terminology includes all those aspects of an object that are not directly accessible to our senses, but make it possible to see an object as something.<sup>27</sup> It's what is "co-given" in the perception of the object, which in turn guide our expectations of future experiences of the object. When we walk around a house we are not surprised to see it has sides, that it has a back, that it doesn't elevate off the ground, that leaves don't knock it over when they brush against it, that when we look away and look back it remains the same, and that it didn't just spring into existence immediately before we saw it. Being three-dimensional, persisting through time, withstanding the impact of a leaf—all these things belong

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<sup>26</sup> In "Rational Animals" (*Subjective, Objective, Intersubjective*, 95–106) Davidson also makes use of the example of surprise, but he only discusses it at the level of belief. Or, rather, he calls the expectation, even if we were unaware of it, a belief. "My claim is rather this: in order to have any propositional attitude at all, it is necessary to have the concept of a belief, to have a belief about some belief. But what is required in order to have the concept of a belief? Here I turn for help to the phenomenon of surprise, since I think that surprise requires the concept of a belief. Suppose I believe there is a coin in my pocket. I empty my pocket and find no coin. I am surprised. Clearly enough I could not be surprised (though I could be startled) if I did not have beliefs in the first place. And perhaps it is equally clear that having a belief, at least one of the sort I have taken for my example, entails the possibility of surprise. If I believe I have a coin in my pocket, something might happen that would change my mind. But surprise involves a further step. It is not enough that I first believe there is a coin in my pocket, and after emptying my pocket I no longer have this belief. Surprise requires that I be aware of a contrast between what I did believe and what I come to believe. Such awareness, however, is a belief about a belief: if I am surprised, then among other things I come to believe that my original belief was false. I do not need to insist that every case of surprise involves a belief that a prior belief was false (though I am inclined to think so). What I do want to claim is that one cannot have a general stock of beliefs of the sort necessary for having any beliefs at all without being subject to surprises that involve beliefs about the correctness of one's own beliefs. Surprise about some things is a necessary and sufficient condition of thought in general" (104).

<sup>27</sup> Husserl writes, "What is now perceived, and what is more or less clearly co-present and determinate (or at least somewhat determinate), are penetrated and surrounded by an obscurely intended horizon of indeterminate actuality. ... [An] empty mist of dim indeterminacy is populated with intuited possibilities or likelihoods, and only the "form" of the world, precisely as "the world" is predelineated. Moreover my indeterminate surroundings are infinite, the misty and never fully determinable is necessarily there. ... This horizon, however, is the correlate of the components of undeterminateness essentially attached to experiences of physical things themselves; and those components— again, essentially— leave open possibilities of fulfillment, which are by no means completely undetermined, but are, on the contrary, motivated possibilities *predelineated with respect to their essential type*" (*Ideas I*, §27, §44, Italics his).

to the perception of a house; they are all horizontal elements of the perception.<sup>28</sup> So obviously our perceptual horizons change, both as our perceptions change and as we acquire new perceptual expectations given our changing understanding of an object. On the one hand it makes sense to call horizons limits, since they present the range of possible ways in which the object can be present, but they are also clearly constantly changing. In dialogue with others we encounter horizons that make something present in a different way than we are used to. Horizons fuse when these perceptual possibilities become part of our perceptual repertoire and we come to understand the contingent features of our previous horizons.<sup>29</sup>

It belongs to the phenomenology of perception that we are not drawing inferences from the perceptual information we receive such that, for example, we first see a field of color and our then our mind organizes the color and infers it is some object or person. We directly perceive some thing. Husserl, like all phenomenologists, is a kind of direct realist about perception. Typically having something disclosed to our consciousness as something generates the accompanying beliefs, but that is not automatically the case. Both Heidegger and Gadamer are careful to distinguish the non-propositional yet conceptual awareness of something as something, what they call the hermeneutical as-structure of perception, from the propositional expression of

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<sup>28</sup> Gadamer expands Husserl's account of horizons to include understanding a proposition: "every proposition has its horizon of meaning in that it originates in a question situation" ("What is Truth?" in *Hermeneutics and Truth*, 42. This work from 1957 contains his first published use of the phrase the fusion of horizons.) Where Husserl spoke of horizons as making meaningful our perception of objects, Gadamer speaks of horizons as making propositions meaningful. In the case of sentences, the horizon will be the set of beliefs that make it possible to understand the sentence. With this addition we can make sense of two of Gadamer's more surprising claims, that we may lack the horizon necessary to understand a text and that there is really only one horizon. It also fits Heidegger's use of horizon in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1982) not as a limit on intelligibility, but as the condition for intelligibility.

<sup>29</sup> John McDowell connects Davidson and Gadamer on these points. He writes, "Do I think a fusion of horizons is always possible? Yes; one way of putting the point of Davidson's 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,' which I think is right in spirit in not in every detail, is to say that if it is correct to think in terms of another horizon at all, it must be possible for it to be fused with ours. This is a possibility in principle" (*Reason and Nature* [Münster: LIT Verlag, 2000], 106). Part of my point here is to show that Davidson's insights still apply once we free the concept of horizon from its metaphorical connection with the scheme/content theory of perceptual awareness.

that awareness in language, what they refer to as the apophantic-as structure of assertion. The propositional content of the belief piggybacks on the conceptual content of the disclosure, but the empirical belief is separate from the empirical disclosure of the object as something or other.

With a better understanding of how Gadamer is using horizon in Husserl's technical sense we can get a clearer picture of his account of perception and how he avoids the paradoxes that come with seeing horizons as limits. Nonetheless, someone might object that even in the account of horizontal intentionality there still remains the distinction between that which is present to our senses and that which is added by our minds to the sensation. Certainly for Husserl there was a kind of "absolute presence" discoverable within perception that was indubitable and that, with the proper technique, could be isolated and used to descriptively capture the essential features of the object. All this sounds like a version of the third dogma of empiricism. If Gadamer is going to reject the scheme/content distinction and still allow that our experience of the world is thoroughly informed by our concepts and habits, he is going to have to deny there is such a given core to experience. He does just that. Here is a telling quotation:

Max Scheler, in his very living contacts with psychologists and physiologists of this epoch as with American pragmatism, and [Martin] Heidegger demonstrated with vigor that sense perception is never given. It is rather an aspect of the pragmatic approach to the world. We are always hearing, listening *to* something and extracting *from* other things. We are *interpreting* in seeing hearing, receiving. ... So it is obvious that there is a real primacy of interpretation. Husserl refused to accept this analysis... and held that all interpretation is a secondary act.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> "Hermeneutics of Suspicion," (*Man and World*, 17:3/4 [1984]), 316–19. Consider also this quotation from "Philosophy and Literature" (*Man and World*, 18:2 [1985]): "For Husserl, perceiving- or judging- something as something, with regard to meaning or value, was a higher form of mental activity which based itself on the fundamental stratum of the phenomena of sense perception. Insofar as this is the case, the hermeneutical dimension for Husserl comes only later. For him, the concrete presence of objects of perception in 'pure' perception was first. ... Yet he did not reflect on the extent to which the very concept of the 'phenomenon itself' is interwoven with the issue of 'interpretation.' ... A 'pure' perception, i.e., one fully adequate to the sense-stimulus, is an abstraction. That we know since Heidegger. He showed us Husserl's phenomenological principle contained a hidden dogmatic prejudice. Already Scheler, whose vivacious mind has used the insights of both of American pragmatism and of Nietzsche as well as the results of modern research of sense perception, showed that there is no pure perception" (241–2).

Gadamer explicitly criticizes Husserl for holding that at its core perception is non-conceptual and therefore, for Gadamer, non-interpretive. Like Davidson, Gadamer rejects the Myth of the Given. Unlike Davidson his rejection is on phenomenological grounds and Gadamer holds that perception is interpretive, and therefore conceptual, all the way down.

Gadamer goes beyond saying perception is conceptual; according to him it is also linguistic. The same criticism he levels against Husserl he also brings to bear against Scholastic nominalists (who, it should be added, are the forerunners of modern empiricists).

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.<sup>31</sup>

For Gadamer, language shapes perception all the way down; it does not play a secondary role in a two-step process. Of course all this doesn't help him escape relativism, nor the conclusion that there may be many incommensurable worldviews corresponding to different languages.

Furthermore, since for Gadamer experience is fundamentally linguistic, it's difficult to see how experience can function any longer in the legitimation of beliefs, much less as an arbiter across worldviews. If something is going to provide a criterion for our use of words it itself shouldn't be shaped by our use of words. Gadamer doesn't generate confidence when he says the following:

It is true that those who are brought up in a particular linguistic and cultural tradition see the world in a different way from those who belong to other traditions. It is true that the historical "worlds" that succeed one another in the course of history are different from one another and from the world of today.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> "The Nature of Language and the Nature of Things," 77-78.

<sup>32</sup> *TM*, 447.

We need to turn our attention to Gadamer's claim that language generates worldviews; in the process we will come to understanding of how Gadamer can say that (1) experience is fundamentally linguistic, yet still be a phenomenologist and (2) take seriously the idea that our experiences can serve as a tribunal for our judgments.

First, however, someone might be tempted to reply that there is an obvious biological fact here that Gadamer misses—we take in information through our senses and our brain makes sense of that information. Language is in our brain, not our eyes, and our brain needs information from our senses to interpret—light stimulates our retinas and our brain interprets these stimuli in meaningful ways; why would one object to that description?—there are clearly two stages here and any story of perception must fit this obvious biological fact. The reply is to focus our biological descriptions not on the level of sensory stimulus and brain response, but on the organism as a whole perceptively engaged in its environment. Visual information does not occur by happenstance. We have biological and social habits which shape how we are perceptually responsive to the world—we should keep in mind that sensation is not simply an accumulation of sense data, but a response to an environment based on past habits, ingrained as a result of biological and conceptual goals. According to Gadamer all seeing is already “perceiving-something-as-something”;<sup>33</sup> by this he means that by the time we are aware of something we have an already established perceptual and conceptual relationship to the object. Considering the biological process of perception at this level of an organism in ongoing interaction with its environment shifts us away from the picture of conceptless, retinal data organized by our brains. It helps us to see how sensory input is already conceptualized in virtue of the way our bodies reflectively and unreflectively oriented themselves in their environment and in virtue of our

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<sup>33</sup> “Philosophy and Literature,” p. 242.

habits of perceptual expectations. Another way to put the point is that the brain's conceptual organizing activities occur not just at the level of perceptual information, but primarily and more fundamentally at the level of the organism.<sup>34</sup> Yet here we are only talking about organisms with conceptual capacities and, for both Gadamer and Davidson, that means organisms with language.

### **World as a Technical Term in Gadamer's Hermeneutics**

Even if there is nothing uninterpreted, no pure given shaped by concepts, we can still inquire into the possibility that incommensurable languages might lead to incommensurable ways of interpreting the world. Gadamer suggests as much when at a key point in *Truth and Method* he sides with Wilhelm von Humboldt's claim that different languages generate different worldviews.<sup>35</sup> What then is Gadamer's view? Language certainly functions in acquiring and shaping concepts, which in turn shape the horizonal character of perception, but Gadamer refers to something quite different when he talks about the linguisticity of experience and the way language opens up a world for us. Just as we had to treat "horizon" as a technical term that retains its meaning found in the phenomenological tradition, likewise, we need to treat "world" as a technical term rooted in the phenomenological tradition.

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<sup>34</sup> Gadamer describes this interaction as a kind of *Spiel*, game or play. Part of his point in using that term is that in play we cannot definitively distinguish the stimulus from the response.

<sup>35</sup> Aligning himself with von Humboldt is not a good sign, not only because Humboldt argued that the differently structured languages allowed some cultures to be more intellectually developed than others, but also because it was Humboldt who influenced Benjamin Whorf, who offered a classic statement of a scheme content theory of perceptual belief. "[L]anguage produces an organization of experience. We are inclined to think of language simply as a technique of expression, and not to realize that language first of all is a classification and arrangement of the stream of sensory experience which results in a certain world-order. ... We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated" (quoted in Donald Davidson's "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," 189).

In *Truth and Method* Gadamer says he has inherited from Scheler a distinction between inhabiting a world and inhabiting an environment (or a habitat).<sup>36</sup> Beings incapable of language lack a world; what they have is an environment of stimuli to which they respond to in impressively complex ways according to their various, sometimes conflicting biological imperatives. They are “embedded in their environment.”<sup>37</sup> Humans, since they are able to reason about their course of action can conceptualize their situation and establish an orientation towards it that is not limited by the pressures of their immediate biological imperatives. “For man rising above the environment means rising to a world... This does not mean he leaves his habitat, but that he has another posture toward it—a free, distanced orientation—that is always realized in language.”<sup>38</sup> The ability to reflect, derived from the ability to use language, establishes a world in which they live, in explicit contrast to the environment in which non-human animals live.<sup>39</sup>

Now although there would seem to be overlap between a non-linguistic animal’s perception of its environment and a human being’s perception of its world, in fact Gadamer holds that the nature of perception is fundamentally different in these cases. Language transforms perception all the way down. Take as an example, my cat. Even though the same objects might pass through my and my cat’s fields of vision—such as the empty cat food bowl—I see the object as belonging to a world with an orientation according to which I can discriminate features

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<sup>36</sup> By the time of *Truth and Method* this distinction had become commonplace. It can be found, for example, in Paul Tillich’s 1951 *Systematic Theology*. The most in depth discussion of the distinction occurs in Part Two of Heidegger’s *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).

<sup>37</sup> *TM*, 444.

<sup>38</sup> *TM*, 445.

<sup>39</sup> Here is Scheler’s description of the difference. “The spiritual [human] being, then, is no longer subject to its drives and environment. Instead it is ‘free from its environment’ or, as we shall say, ‘open to the world.’ Such a being has a ‘world.’ ... [T]he essential characteristic of the spiritual being, regardless of its psychological makeup, is its existential liberation from the organic world—its freedom and detachability from the bondage and pressure of life, from its dependence upon all that belongs to life, including its own drive-motivated intelligence” (*Man’s Place in Nature* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1961], 37).

and recognize new possibilities. I can see the situation as reflecting reasons; the cat simply responds to seeing the object in its environment according to its place in its biological imperatives. A human being with full subjectivity experiences the world as available to reasoned reflection, as available to articulation in language, and therefore as suitable as evidence for empirical beliefs.<sup>40</sup>

Here is a sketch of how it works. When we acquire a language we acquire the ability to articulate our experiences in words. This ability shapes the horizon of every experience to include the possibility of expressing what we perceive in words. So to return to the earlier example, we not only see a house as having three sides, as persisting in time, and so on, we see it as something that can be expressed in words, at least in principle. Of course at any given time we may not be articulate enough nor have the words at hand in order to put what we experience into words, but the communicability of experience in language now belongs to the experience itself. This opens up a kind of freedom to step back from the immediacy of the experience and generate a reflective, articulate response—something non-linguistic animals lack. It would never occur to a non-linguistic animal to try to communicate its experiences in words, as the objects aren't disclosed to them as things about which to speak. They are disclosed as things to eat, to run from, to jump on, to hide under, and so on. In this respect animals are embedded in an environment rather than being agents in a world.

Importantly the addition of language doesn't just supplement the non-conceptual elements with conceptual elements, it introduces a whole new way of responding to experience, of taking up experience propositionally, in short, of making our experiences intelligible to us and

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<sup>40</sup> In "Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language" (*Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, edited by Lawrence Schmidt [Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2000], 19-50) Gadamer extends his distinction between an environment and a world to matters of intersubjectivity: animals are related to others as *Mitsamt*; humans are related to each other as *Miteinander*.

others through language.<sup>41</sup> Because we have opposable thumbs we directly experience objects as things to pick up; similarly because we have language we directly experience objects as things to express in words. This is what it means to say language shapes our perceptions all the way down, and this is what Gadamer means when he says that language “mediates” our relation to the world and that “our verbal experience of the world is prior to everything that is recognized and addressed as existing.”<sup>42</sup>

Unlike the view of some critical interpreters of Gadamer, he is not embracing a form of linguistic idealism. We do not experience the world with subtitles; we regularly experience things for which we have no words.<sup>43</sup> But Gadamer acknowledges that

[t]he fundamental linguisticity of understanding cannot mean that all experiencing of the world can only take place as and in language, ... who would deny that there are real factors conditioning human life, such as hunger, love

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<sup>41</sup> Scheler, again, writes, “It would also be a mistake to think that the new element that gives man his unique characteristic is nothing but a new essential form being added to the previous stages of psychic life.... The new principle transcends what we call life in its most general sense. It is not a stage of life, especially not a stage of the particular mode of life called psyche, but a principle opposed to life as such, even to life in man.” *Man’s Place in Nature*, 37. Scheler argued that we are aware of the thingliness of things through their resistance to our actions; Gadamer accepts Heidegger’s rejection of that view in section 42 of *Being and Time* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

<sup>42</sup> *TM* 450. Language mediates like our eyes mediate—we can’t see without them and the wavelengths of light we can see is limited by them, but we still see things with them, not images of or representations of things. Because we can see we experience the world with all our senses in a fundamentally different way from sightless creatures. That the world, for Gadamer, is perceptually mediated through concepts does not mean that the world is created by concepts any more than the fact the world is perceptually mediated through our having opposable thumbs, thus as containing things to pick up, means the world is created by our prehensibility. Gadamer may be an idealist of some stripe, but it is not entailed by anything I have said here.

<sup>43</sup> Christina Lafont seems to have made this mistake. She reads Gadamer as saying that language *determines* what is disclosed to us in experience. She then argues, appropriately for the topic at hand, that Gadamer is committed to there being incommensurable language-schemes and the consequent relativism. “If the ‘constitution of meaning’ inherent in language does have the constitutive character of a world-disclosure that determines everything appearing in the world, the possibility of ‘intra-worldly learning’ can only be understood as derived from that prior world-disclosure (and hence limited by it)” (*The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy* [Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1999], 222). There seems to be other problems with her interpretation of Gadamer. For example, it appears she takes the claim that language is world-disclosing to mean that *only* language contributes to the disclosure of objects, though of course our senses and our bodily engagement in the world contribute as well. She also seems to think that language cannot shape experience and experience still be directly referential. But to say that language affects how an object is disclosed to perception is not to deny that the object itself is disclosed to perception—perception can be conceptual and immediate. One limitation of Lafont’s interpretation of hermeneutics’ emphasis on world-disclosure is she imports Fregean terminology of sense and reference; if one sought usefully clarifying terminology from other philosophical traditions, the Scholastic notion of *significatio*—which means to bring before the mind—would be more appropriate.

labor, and domination, which are not themselves language or speaking, but which for their part furnish the space within which our speaking to each other and listening to each other can take place. This fact cannot be disputed.<sup>44</sup>

His view then is that a number of elements, including biological needs, social customs, individual habits, and previous understandings all shape the way the world appears to us. It also always appears to us as intelligibly expressible in language. Since our experiences are not determined by language, but simply call for articulation in language, perception is both conceptual all the way down and yet provides the friction with the world needed to confirm, revise, or reject our beliefs. The claim that a language creates a worldview seemed to suggest a potbelly incommensurable diversity of worldviews, but the important part of Gadamer's claim is that language transforms an *environment* into a potentially intelligible *world*. Unless we understand "world" as a technical term we miss this point.

### **Conclusion: Returning to the Topic of Incommensurability**

So now we have a rough picture of how Gadamer understands perceptual belief acquisition. As a conceptually informed purposeful organism we live in a world where all objects are experienced as something or other. The horizons of the object are the ways the object is made present to us in perception above and beyond the direct sensory presence of the object. In addition to the role played by language in shaping the concepts that guide the as-structure of the perception, we always perceive objects as potentially intelligible in language. It is the object's disclosure through language and as potentially expressible in language that leads Gadamer to say that language mediates our relation to the world, even though we are directly aware of the world.<sup>45</sup> It

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<sup>44</sup> "Reflections on my Philosophical Journey," in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, 28.

<sup>45</sup> Here Gadamer's view parallels Davidson's rejection of epistemic intermediaries, "items that are given in experience and that provide the ultimate reasons for our take on the environment" ("Comments on the Karlovy Vary

also links thinking with choosing the right word. It is not that we have a belief that something is the case and then we look for words that will best communicate that belief to others (this is analogous to the students who claim to know what they want to say in a paper, they just haven't found the right words yet); instead, thinking about a subject and finding the right words to articulate a subject are one and the same process. Bringing it into language, for Gadamer, really is the only way to make something intelligible.<sup>46</sup>

There are two more pieces to add to complete Gadamer's picture. First, language is public, never of our own making. As such we are never in a position of being sure that we are using language to properly articulate the matter at hand; we are never in a position to be sure we have properly made the object intelligible. Dialogue is the way we work with others to come to a shared understanding of a matter at hand, "Language is only fully what it can be when it takes place in dialogue."<sup>47</sup> Second, we have no special faculty for making our own thoughts intelligible to ourselves; all anyone has for making anything intelligible, including their own thoughts, is language. But that means too we need to give up a kind of first-person authority about our own beliefs. We know whereof we think only to the extent we can articulate our beliefs, and of course often others are better at articulating these things than we are.

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Papers" Gadamer's discussion in *Truth and Method* of the immediate link between the word and the world occurs during his reflection on medieval interpretations of the *Verbum* as the incarnate, second person of God. Gadamer's view lines up with Aquinas's and I've found Aquinas's argument that our experience of the world is directly of things, yet mediated through concepts, helpful for getting clear about Gadamer's position. For a discussion of Gadamer and Aquinas see John Arthos's "The Word is not Reflexive": Mind and World in Aquinas and Gadamer" (*American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 78:4 [2004], 587-608); for a discussion of Aquinas's theory of perception in conversation with contemporary analytic theories see John O'Callaghan's *Thomist Realism and the Linguistic Turn* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

<sup>46</sup> My reading of Gadamer view of the role of language in perception is in some ways very close to Brice Wachterhauser's reading of Gadamer. But while Wachterhauser thinks Gadamer has to reject Davidson's claim that only beliefs can justify beliefs, I think Gadamer should maintain a version of that claim and instead reject Davidson's view that perception is causal not conceptual. See Wachterhauser's "Getting it Right: Reason, Relativism, and Truth."

<sup>47</sup> "Treatment and Dialogue" in *The Enigma of Health* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 127-128. Variations on this phrase can be found throughout Gadamer's writings.

Finally, to bring us to the theme of the session, Gadamer's view has two consequences for the topic of incommensurability. First, recall Davidson's argument against partial incommensurability. There is no criterion by which we can tell when we come across a disagreement in conversation whether the disagreement simply a difference in belief or a difference in conceptual scheme. This becomes even more complicated on Gadamer's view. Perhaps because of his focus on radical interpretation, Davidson always thinks of communication as a transfer of information; according to him, to engage in conversation is to try to find the best words to communicate our beliefs to another person. The shared common language is the most useful tool, but it is not a necessary one.<sup>48</sup> For Gadamer conversation is more complicated. Since we also come to understand our own beliefs better in conversation, and since whenever we enter into dialogue it is with the knowledge that our interlocutor may know what we are talking about better than we do, conversations can't be reduced to exchanges of information between fully self-aware interlocutors. Rather it is an irreducibly social action of trying to come to an articulate understanding of a topic.<sup>49</sup> We have seen how this connects to his theory about the linguisticity

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<sup>48</sup> One key difference between the two is that language, according to Gadamer, is not a tool—or at least it is not primarily and fundamentally a tool. Its usefulness for communication is derivative of its role in disclosure. For this reason comparisons between Gadamer and Davidson on triangulation are not all that helpful; also Davidson relies on his account of triangulation to solve a problem about determining the meaning of a perception that doesn't arise for Gadamer's contentful account of perception.

<sup>49</sup> Gadamer writes "To speak with one another is not primarily arguing things out with each other. It seems to me characteristic of the tensions within modernity that it loves this turn of phrase. To speak with another person is also not speaking past him or her. Rather, in speaking with another person one builds up an aspect held in common, the thing that is being talked about. The true reality of human communication is such that a conversation does not simply carry one person's opinion through against another's, or even simply add one opinion to another. Conversation transforms the viewpoint of both. A conversation that is truly successful is such that one cannot fall back into the dissent that touched it off. Commonality between the partners is so very strong that it is no longer the point that I think this and you think that, but rather it takes in the shared interpretation of the world that makes moral and social solidarity possible" ("Language and Understanding," 17). Ramberg captures this difference between them when he comments that, "in Davidson's account, the radical interpreter fuses no horizons, suffers no experience, and attains no transforming insights" ("Illuminating Language," 231). Linda Martín Alcoff praises Gadamer and criticizes Davidson on this same point ("Gadamer's Feminist Epistemology," 238). Note also that the one claim of Gadamer's that Davidson criticizes—that dialogue requires a common language—follows from what Gadamer thinks is going on in dialogue, and not all communication is dialogue. For Davidson's criticisms see pages 274–75 of "Gadamer and Plato's *Philebus*" (in *Truth, Language and History* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005]).

of experience and his views about the publicity of language. Yet a condition for engaging in dialogue is the rejection of incommensurability. We cannot at the same time embrace the possibility of incommensurability and hold that our conversation partner can find the words to help us make our own beliefs more intelligible to ourselves. We are never in a position to conclude a disagreement in dialogue is evidence of incommensurability. Second, and more significantly, it belongs to Gadamer theory of perceptual knowledge that we experience the world as always potentially intelligible through language. There is nothing, according to Gadamer, that we experience that transcends the limits of language. But of course we often hear other people talking, we often encounter writings from other cultures, and these too we must experience as potentially intelligible. Davidson claimed that to encounter something as a language is sufficient for knowing that it is translatable; Gadamer will similarly say that to encounter something linguistic is to encounter something potentially intelligible. I quoted him saying “It is true that those who are brought up in a particular linguistic and cultural tradition see the world in a different way from those who belong to other traditions.” The quotation continues,

In whatever tradition we consider it, it is always a human—i.e., verbally constituted—world that presents itself to us. As verbally constituted, every such world is of itself always open to every possible insight and hence every expansion of its own world picture, and is accordingly available to others.<sup>50</sup>

The bottom line for Gadamer is that any thing intelligible to any one is potentially intelligible to everyone. So if it's the case that different languages lead to different ways of conceptualizing experience, we only need to learn those languages to discover those conceptualizations. No way of making the world intelligible is ever precluded. In an interview with a Hungarian student he states it as clearly as one might hope. The student asks, “Are we prisoners of our mother tongue? The American anthropologist Hall maintains that everything human is firmly bound in our

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<sup>50</sup> *TM*, 447.

cultural dimension. How stiff is, however, our cultural dimension? Can we escape this?"

Gadamer replied, "Yes, through learning a foreign language."<sup>51</sup> All there is to add is that no language is unlearnable.

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<sup>51</sup> <http://www.gkpn.de/gadamer.htm>