

Gadamer, *Lebensphilosophie*, and Bringing a Text to Life

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Abstract:

Hans-Georg Gadamer credits Martin Heidegger for showing him how to interpret a text such that the text is brought to life. I consider the meaning of “life” in this expression and trace the roots to the tradition of *Lebensphilosophie* that was culturally dominant during Gadamer’s youth. I argue that the greatest legacy of the Philosophers of Life—such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Georg Simmel—is that Gadamer considers the reanimation of a text as a criterion for a successful interpretation. For Gadamer, hermeneutics is in the service of life.

Keywords: Gadamer, Hermeneutics, *Lebensphilosophie*, Life, Romanticism

“I envied him, his capacity to affirm life” (Derrida 2016, xvii) –Derrida on Gadamer

In his “Autobiographical Reflections” Hans-Georg Gadamer asked, “What was it that so attracted me and others to Heidegger? At the time, of course, I could not tell you. Today I would put it as follows. In Heidegger the development of thought in the philosophical tradition came to life” (Gadamer 2007, 11). By interpreting texts “as answers to real questions” Martin Heidegger brought them “to life,” a process Gadamer contrasts with historicist relativism on the one side and trans-historical philosophical problems on the other. He calls the reanimation of a text “the fundamental experience [*Erfahrung*] of hermeneutics” and says it makes “the old questions of the tradition understandable and so alive that they became our own questions” (Gadamer 2007, 11). Almost everything about these positions has been mapped out—the focus on *Erfahrung* over *Erlebnis* as the proper way to characterize hermeneutic experience, avoiding the Scylla and Charybdis of historical relativism and trans-historical philosophical problems, the logic of question and answer as the basic structure of successful interpretations, and the importance of Heidegger’s influence on Gadamer’s views. What still remains to be asked is why Gadamer says the tradition “came to life” and is made “so alive.” His use of the concept of ‘life’ is the unexplored legacy of the tradition of *Lebensphilosophie* in his work.

The quote above is one of many places Gadamer speaks of interpreting texts as bringing them to life. It’s a common way of speaking and the temptation is to pass it by as a simple metaphor. One might say that a text comes to life when an interpretation reveals the unique intelligence of the author in the views and arguments. We might think, “Aha! Yes, that’s what she is saying. I see it now. That makes sense.” The feeling of life would be sensing the

distinctive vital presence, the lively mind, of the author.<sup>1</sup> Or one might point to the way we refer to Constitutions as “living documents,” by which we mean that their interpretation continues to develop and change in response to changing circumstances. Neither of these capture what Gadamer has in mind. By saying that the *texts* are being brought to life, rather than the author or the author’s intelligence, Gadamer is stressing that an interpretation’s success does not depend on capturing the intentions of the author. By saying that they are *brought* to life Gadamer is saying more than texts are open to interpretation; he is stressing that texts can be dead, that it is up to us to reanimate them, and that we may fail to do so. When talking about poetic truth he writes, “it is not the dead letter of the writing but the resurrected word (spoken or read) that can be assigned to the being of the work of art in poetry” (Gadamer 2007, 143). When discussing the history of hermeneutics he points out that “the living explication of literature and particularly of the holy scriptures represented important applications of Schleiermacher’s universal hermeneutics” (Gadamer, 2006, 50). Distinguishing the established meaning of terms from their meaning in use he writes,

Language may be codified and be more or less fixed in dictionaries, grammars, and literature—yet its unique vitality, its obsolescence and self-renewal, its coarsening, and its refinement into the high genre of literary art, all this lives only through the living exchange of people talking with one another. (Gadamer 2006, 351-52)

And in an interview at age 96, he asks, “What is Hermeneutics? I would say it is to bring back to life the power of language that is hidden in concepts” (Gadamer 1996a, 106). Notice there are a variety of things that are brought to life: traditions, words, concepts, language, and explications. It’s safe to say those who have read much of Gadamer’s writings will recognize the phrase, though no one has asked what specifically he means by bringing a text to life and wherein lies the roots of that idea. I will argue here that the roots lie in the intellectual and popular cultural

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Christopher Shields for articulating the experience in this way.

context of the *Lebensphilosophie* movement in Germany in the first third of the Twentieth Century.

Gadamer has written about the influence of the Philosophers of Life on his early thinking. “It seemed to me that the post-Kantian Academic philosophy of my youth had already been undermined through the philosophy of life. Life philosophy: that was Bergson, and, of course, Nietzsche, who was at the time academically treated by us as a philosopher of value” (Gadamer 1997/98, 20). And Wilhelm Dilthey, the philosopher most mentioned alongside Henri Bergson and Friedrich Nietzsche as the most influential Philosopher of Life, was massively influential on Gadamer’s hermeneutics, even as Gadamer distanced himself from Dilthey’s views.

What was *Lebensphilosophie*? It was a movement prominent in Germany from 1880 to 1930, according to Herbert Schnädelbach, but having roots traceable back to Henri Rousseau.<sup>2</sup> What united Philosophers of Life was a resistance to mechanical accounts of nature and universalizing claims of science. Life is a fundamental—some would say *the* fundamental—metaphysical category irreducible to any others. They argued not only that there is something fundamentally mysterious about life—they are often labeled “irrationalists”—but also that since all human activities are forms of and expressions of life there could never be a rational foundation for the sciences. In line with this they typically argued that the arts provided key insights into the nature of life and these insights are accessible only through a kind of creative, non-conceptual but intellectual intuition. Let’s consider the roots of these views in romanticism and then see how they were transformed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century under the influence of Nietzsche, Bergson, and others.

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<sup>2</sup> See “Chapter 5: Life” in Schnädelbach (1984). See also Bollnow (1958).

The Romantics were universally concerned with the division they found in Immanuel Kant between the sensible world and the intellectual world and with the Enlightenment's elevation of reason over the passions. They argued it left humans fundamentally divided, uncertain, and "bloodless." The champion of metaphysical unity was Benedict Spinoza, but Spinoza's ultra-rationalism was presented in the Pantheism Controversy as the *reductio ad absurdum* of the Enlightenment commitment to reason. Friedrich Jacobi argued that if reason were the only tribunal, we would be left with fatalism, nihilism, and atheism. Jacobi claimed only if we accept the fundamental intuitive certainty of religious feelings can we salvage morality. One consequence of the Controversy is everyone read Spinoza, and everyone found a version of Spinoza to embrace. The Romantics emphasized Spinoza's pantheism. The way he unified spirit and nature in Substance suggested the possibility of a direct, non-textually mediated experience of the divine through nature. By connecting directly to nature we could become free and whole.

Friedrich Hölderlin was one of the first to think of the monadic substance as "pure life" in which "nature and art are only opposed harmoniously" (Hölderlin 1987, 53). Life as a unifying concept is organically ordered to reconciling opposites; it harmonizes through "the struggle and death of the individual...in the birth of the highest hostility the highest reconciliation appears to be the case" (Hölderlin 1987, 53-54)<sup>3</sup> His early roommates, G.W.F. Hegel and Friedrich Schelling, refused to follow Hölderlin in his irrationalistic vitalism. What Hegel in his early writings would credit to "life" later he will credit to "Spirit." Schelling rejected the overly metaphysical "pure life" arguing the chemical composition of organic bodies was the essential condition for life. For both of them Spirit and/or Nature—the unifying concepts that united the

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<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory* 53-54.

sensible and the intellectual, the mind and the body—unfolded in time according to an organic logic of struggle and reconciliation. The idea of an organism, however, has its conceptual roots in the idea of life. Life was understood to be essentially defined against the world in which it lives, but then is recognized as belonging to that world in its very differentiation from it. It does this in a dynamic way. It is not only that life is a source of change, it's that life persists by changing. Hegel and Schelling prioritized organic explanations for their ability to unify the parts with the whole, reason with the passions, the individual with the world, and the present with the past and future. Gadamer will agree that a sense of life is always a sense of unity, unity of parts and whole, and unity of past, present, and future.

Arthur Schopenhauer changed the debate. He argued that all representation is an expression of Will, specifically the will to life. There are ways we can momentarily escape the will to life—aesthetic, especially musical, experience and ascetic meditation are the two most well known—but for most people most of the time, it is a subconscious drive for life that produces our beliefs and our suffering. The combination of views—not just that everything is unified organically under Will, but that everything serves the Will, and that the Will operates for the most part behind and beyond our conscious control—will lead Georg Simmel to call Schopenhauer the first Philosopher of Life. The idea that our theoretical and practical reasoning is not unified by life, but at the service of life's forces was embraced by Nietzsche in an affirmative way, and became one of the chief influences on the Weimar Philosophers of Life. Nietzsche also claimed that life is ultimately *unergründlich*, unfathomable—“Into your eyes I looked lately, O Life! And into the unfathomable I then seemed to sink” (Nietzsche 2003, 82).

The other significant influence on the rise of the Philosophy of Life was the success of, and response to, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Darwin claimed that all features that

distinguished human from other living things were merely the result of natural selection and sexual selection. We are genetically connected to all life. Even self-consciousness, the highest mark of the human spirit, evolved by natural processes.

The difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind. ... If it could be proved that certain high mental powers, such as the formation of general concepts, self-consciousness, etc., were absolutely peculiar to man, which seems extremely doubtful, it is not improbable that these qualities are merely the incidental results of other highly-advanced intellectual faculties. (Darwin 1888, 126)

The Darwinian picture presents all biological properties as existing because at some time in the past they furthered the adaptive success of the species; everything we might think transcends mere concern for the survival of our species only exists because it facilitates survival of our species. The most common reaction to Darwin's theory of evolution was two pronged. First one would acknowledge it undermined the main justification of teleological, especially divinely guided, theories of nature, namely that nothing else can explain natural complexity but a divine creator. Then one would argue that Darwin's purely mechanical explanations are not enough to explain the nobility of human beings among the animal kingdom. We humans in all our glory could not be the result of random mutations; some other forces must be at work in the world such that evolution followed the path it did. Henri Bergson's arguments were the most influential for the Philosophers of Life as he presented the vitalist idea of a creative life force, inaccessible to reason, as a metaphysical principle more fundamental than Darwin's natural selection--*Élan Vital*. Our awareness of this fundamental level of life comes only through borderline mystical intuition. "Intuition goes in the very direction of life... It is a lamp almost extinguished, which only glimmers now and then, for a few moments at most. But it glimmers wherever a vital interest is at stake" (Bergson 1911, 276). Science can feed our intellect, which is naturally suited to patterns of matter, but the guiding forces of life are not material and thus are not accessible to science.

The youth of Germany were especially taken by the combined influence of Bergson and Nietzsche. The *Lebensphilosophie* was often understood as embodying the optimism of the young certainly in response to the horrors of World War I, but even before then, as a reaction to the lingering conservatism of the *Kaiserreich*. A 21-year old Walter Benjamin captured the spirit in his 1913 essay “Experience (*Erfahrung*).” The “philistines” he refers to are adults.

Nothing is so hateful to the philistine as the “dreams of his youth.” ... He tells young people of that grim, overwhelming experience [*Erfahrung*] and teaches them to laugh at themselves. ... [W]e know a different experience [*Erfahrung*]. It can be hostile to spirit and destructive to many blossoming dreams. Nevertheless, it is the most beautiful, most untouchable, most immediate because it can never be without spirit while we remain young. As Zarathustra says, the individual can experience [*erlebt*] himself only at the end of his wandering. The philistine has his own “experience”; it is the eternal one of the spiritlessness. The youth will experience [*erleben*] spirit, and the less effortlessly he attains greatness, the more he will encounter spirit everywhere in his wanderings and in every person.— When he becomes a man, the youth will be compassionate. The philistine is intolerant. (Benjamin 1996, 5)

Later he will criticize the elevation of *Erlebnisse*, but here Benjamin contrasts the way adults have let becoming “experienced” (*erfahren*) interfere with their ability to experience spirit in a lived way, *erleben*. The youth are not yet corrupted. Nietzsche claims that the Will to Truth is a kind of sickness and that what we need above all else is a new health, one that makes us more alive and more vitally connected to the creative Will to Power. That excited the youth at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century just as it still excites them today.

Bergson and Nietzsche were the two thinkers most associated with the cultural movement of the *Lebensphilosophie*, especially Nietzsche. Georg Simmel was one of the more scholarly proponents of the Philosophy of Life. Gadamer writes that

Bergson speaks of the representation of the whole, and similarly Natorp's concept of inter-relationship is an expression of the "organic" relationship of part and whole that takes place here. It was primarily Georg Simmel who analyzed the concept of life in this respect as “life's reaching out beyond itself.” (Gadamer 2004b, 59-60)

Gadamer called Simmel's book *The View of Life: Four Metaphysical Essays* an “important book of my generation,” and “an early source of inspiration” which “set the course for me...because it



exceeds the boundaries of logic” (Gadamer 1997/98, 20).<sup>4</sup> Simmel’s understanding of *Leben* was a non-teleological reaffirmation of the romantic, Idealist account of life—life as a fundamental metaphysical principle, proceeding through self-transcendence, uniting all living things—though supplemented by the irrationalism of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, so never becoming fully transparent to consciousness and essentially hidden from rational reflection and logical argument.

Simmel’s influence on Gadamer was not as great as the other prominent scholarly proponent of the Philosophy of Life, Wilhelm Dilthey. Gadamer wrote,

Two new philosophical catchwords confronted the Neo-Kantian preoccupation with methodology. One was the irrationality of life, and of historical life in particular. In connection with this notion, one could refer to Nietzsche and Bergson, but also to the great historian of philosophy Wilhelm Dilthey. (Gadamer 1976, 214)<sup>5</sup>

Dilthey is a pivotal figure in the history of hermeneutics. He wrote a biography of Friedrich Schleiermacher updating Schleiermacher’s universal hermeneutics in an attempt to make it a foundation for the human sciences. He was the main philosophical spokesperson for the historicist tradition against both the dominant Neo-Kantian tradition and the burgeoning phenomenological movement. As such he was also the main target of the scholarly criticisms of the *Lebensphilosophie* movement. We need to look at two of his most important views for Gadamer, the argument that an *Erlbenis* is a distinct kind of “lived” experience that gives us access to life, and that life is essentially historical.

The emphasis on life makes perfect sense in the context of late 19<sup>th</sup> century hermeneutics. It was well understood that to interpret a text you needed to understand what the words meant in their original historical context. This insight was taken from rhetoric—an accomplished speaker

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<sup>4</sup> We know both Heidegger and Edmund Husserl also read Simmel carefully.

<sup>5</sup> The quotation continues: “The other catchword was *Existenz*, a term that rang forth from the works of Søren Kierkegaard.”

always tailors his or her speech to the audience—and had been applied to all the written arts. But the 19<sup>th</sup> century hermeneuts also understood it was never enough to simply place a text into its historical context. They appreciated Kant’s point about artistic genius. A work of genius always goes beyond what could have been expected from the times. They also understood that a text does not always express what the author intended it to express. So simply considering the text and its context were never enough—you needed to consider the author’s distinctive contribution. That required understanding something about the author’s particular creative genius, the distinctive “life” the author brought to the topic to enable it to transcend its historical context.

Dilthey argued that all cultural products—all writing, all art, everything studied by the *Geisteswissenschaften*—are expressions. They were created in response to a certain kind of experience, an *Erlebnis*, one that was not learned from so much as lived, for the sake of communicating that experience the only way possible: recreating it in another person. Ideally we are reliving the experience that motivated the creation. According to Gadamer, the word *Erlebnis* has a recent history, dating only to the 1870s and only becoming conceptually central in Dilthey’s writings. The older verb, *erleben*, refers to something that is personally undergone. Much like in English one might experience something “first-hand,” *erleben* contrasts with abstract or discursive knowledge. “Know it? I lived it!” one might say. Living something is more immediate than knowing something and more contentful than mere experiencing something. These moments where we live something stand out from the flow of life often in ways that reveal the significance of what is being lived. John Dewey will refer to these occasions of living something as “having an experience” (as opposed to mere experiencing) and will see them as the focal point of works of art.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Dewey (1934).

Artworks, according to Dewey and Dilthey, express these intimate, transformative moments of living through something—they are the “the ultimate material for all imaginative creation” (Gadamer 2004b, 54)—and the goal of art is to communicate “an experience” for others so others can vicariously live through what the author lived through. A lived through experience can never be fully explicated in language; it can only be reproduced in order to be grasped. As a stand-alone event, living something takes on its identity within the context of a whole life giving that life a distinctive character. *Erlebnis*-experiences are distinguished from *Erfahrung*-experiences in they do not necessarily teach us lessons or make us more experienced. *Erfahrungen* can be widely shared; but *Erlebnisse* defines us. They are the windows in which we feel most alive and let “life be felt as a whole” (Gadamer 2004b, 60).

These moments of individual lived experiences as the material for individual creative expression are only half the story, for every expression belongs to a worldview, a *Weltanschauung*, according to Dilthey. “The infinite richness of life unfolds itself in individual existence because of its relations to its milieu, other humans and things. But every particular individual is also a crossing point of contexts which move through and beyond its particular life” (Nelson 2014, 379).<sup>7</sup> All worldviews are historically shaped, so life, according to Dilthey, is essentially historical and any investigation into life must be a historical one.

Of course this background and exposition of the main figures and themes of the *Lebensphilosophie* is only relevant to extent it influenced Gadamer. The tradition of *Lebensphilosophie* did not itself survive its absorption into National Socialism—the biological themes of life and health fed Aryanism, the critique of science and rationalism in favor of a vital connection to nature fed the idea of *Blut und Boden*, and the irrationalism and esoteric intuition

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<sup>7</sup> Eric Nelson’s “Life and World” has an excellent discussion of these two concepts in the writings of Dilthey, Husserl, and Heidegger.

fed the idea of a great leaders who held insights others lacked. The connection to National Socialism is the main reasons philosophers tend to not look to the tradition of *Lebensphilosophie* as a source of inspiration, even though many of their positions were taken up by existential philosophers, neo-Marxists, and even Husserl.<sup>8</sup>

Born in 1900, excluded from World War I for health reasons, living in an academic household with a chemist father who was dismissive of the humanities as a worthy field of study, Gadamer grew up in the cultural and intellectual context of the *Lebensphilosophie*. Jean Grondin's biography of Gadamer gives numerous examples of the influence of the Philosophy of Life on Gadamer's early development and thought. For example, in his teens Gadamer was struck by the poetry of Stefan George, later becoming a member of the Stefan George Circle. George's esoteric poetry called for a renunciation of public life in favor of a recovery of a lost connection to the spiritual aspects of nature and art that the ancients understood. George asked, "Can he who does not belong to the realm of art possibly claim to partake in life?" (Strathausen 2003, 237). Gadamer will later express agreement with George on the unique power of art for disclosing truths about life. "Art is a special organ for understanding life because ... life reveals itself at a depth that is inaccessible to observation, reflection, and theory" (Gadamer 2004b, 229). Grondin also mentions that Gadamer's first wife introduced him to a number of reading groups, including reading Lessing's *Europa und Asien*, an exercise in what we would now call "orientalism" claiming that the modern, scientific west had lost its spiritual connections to nature, something still preserved in Asian cultures.<sup>9</sup> Gadamer's wife's great aunt, Ricarda Huch wrote a book *Entpersönlichung* that included claims like these: "our time has a strange uncanny

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Staiti (2014).

<sup>9</sup> In an interview Gadamer claims that Lessing's book enabled him to escape "the prevailing militarism" (Gadamer 2004a, 98). In his autobiography he refers to the book as "my liberation from my parents" (Gadamer 1985, 4).

inclination to pursue laws. That we all impute them to the phenomena of nature is nothing new; now we want to find them in all the phenomena of life and mind as well” (Grondin 2003, 60). Moreover Gadamer’s first philosophy mentor at the University of Breslau, Richard Höningwald, introduced him to Neo-Kantianism, something he would get to know even better as he continued his studies at the University of Marburg. Gadamer transcribed word-for-word Höningwald’s final lecture on the nature of science, where Höningwald distinguished two kinds of philosophy. “The one corresponds to model of logic; the other to the Romantic model of non-logical experience. The one derives everything from concepts and conceptions; the other from what is registered in our intuitive life. The one constitutes data on the model of science; the other on the model of art” (Grondin 2003, 64). Höningwald may have favored the former, but Gadamer was on the side of the latter: non-logical experience, art, and intuitive life. Around the same time the neo-Kantian Heinrich Rickert will argue that Husserl’s phenomenology is a version of *Lebensphilosophie* for its reliance on intuition over careful, conceptual reasoning.<sup>10</sup>

Gadamer’s interest in the humanities and phenomenology were connected to his exposure to the *Lebensphilosophie*; Grondin never makes this connection. Gadamer himself says this about the period.

Schleiermacher's appeal to living feeling against the cold rationalism of the Enlightenment, Schiller's call for aesthetic freedom against mechanistic society, Hegel's contrast between life (later, spirit) and "positivity," were the forerunners of the protest against modern industrial society, which at the beginning of our century caused the words *Erlebnis* and *Erleben* to become almost sacred clarion calls. The rebellion of the *Jugend Bewegung* (Youth Movement) against bourgeois culture and its institutions was inspired by these ideas, the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche and Henri Bergson played its part, but also a "spiritual movement" like that around Stefan George and, not least, the seismographical accuracy with which the philosophy of Georg Simmel reacted to these events, are all part of the same thing. The life philosophy of our own day follows on its romantic predecessors. The rejection of the mechanization of life in contemporary mass society makes the word [*Erlebnis*] seem so self-evident that its conceptual implications remain totally hidden. (Gadamer 2004b, 55)

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Rickert 1920.

But to appreciate the influence of the *Lebensphilosophie* on Gadamer, we need to understand how he conceives of the tradition. Gadamer discusses it in his short piece “Dilthey and Ortega: The Philosophy of Life.”<sup>11</sup> Written for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ortega’s birth and the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dilthey’s birth, the article takes up the surprising fact that Jose Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish proto-existentialist, acknowledged Dilthey as a major influence on his views calling him “the most important philosopher in the second half of the nineteenth century” (Gasset 1946, 131). Gadamer traces Ortega’s interest in Dilthey through the combined claims that all inquiries are expressions of life, all life is historical, and life can’t be understood in scientific terms. Life, for Dilthey and for Ortega, becomes a unifying concept, but not one that can provide a secure foundation for understanding, especially—and this was Dilthey’s main worry—in the natural sciences. Ortega did not have this concern, instead arguing that all reason needs to be understood as an expression of life—*razón vital*—rather than transcending it. “I live therefore I think” is the philosophical slogan most associated with Ortega.

Gadamer credits Nietzsche with this view of Ortega’s and turns to a “deeper commonality that was at play between Dilthey and Ortega” (Gadamer 2016, 95). Dilthey and Nietzsche are an odd couple: one the consummate academic, trying to understand everything in the history of philosophy and uninterested in the effects of the unconscious on our decision; the other a radical anti-academic who “plumbed the depths of consciousness” and dared “not only to give up on all of metaphysics, but even to question behind the concept of truth in the sciences.” Yet, even at such extremes, they both conclude “‘life’ is the fundamental fact and ‘cognition’ is at the service of ‘life’” (Gadamer 2016, 96). Gadamer sees the commonality in their relation to

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<sup>11</sup> Collected in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutics Between History and Philosophy*, edited and translated by Pol Vandavelde and Arun Iyer (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

*Lebensphilosophie*, which he presents as ultimately concerned with the relation between consciousness and life.

However the question of the relation between consciousness and life is not new to the Philosophers of Life. Gadamer traces the question back to the ancients, who saw life both in self-movement and self-relation, to the Cartesian philosophers who associate consciousness and substance, and to Kant and the post-Kantian German Idealists who saw the essence of life reflected in the teleology of the world. What is new to the Philosophy of Life is the way they embrace “Nietzsche’s radical emphasis on life and its primacy over all knowing” (Gadamer 2016, 100). Dilthey embraces the Nietzschean conclusion when he argues that Life is *Unergründlich*—literally “un-groundable”, sometimes translate as inscrutable, but better translated as “unfathomable,” which preserves the idea of a fathom as a unit of measurement. Life is unfathomable because it is the context out of which all understanding arises. Ortega embraces the Nietzschean priority of life over self-consciousness and scientific knowledge, though he also succeed in “teaching us to permeate vitality with rationality and to recognize reason in vitality itself” (Gadamer 2016, 102). This discussion of Dilthey and Ortega closes Gadamer’s essay on the *Lebensphilosophie*. It gives us an understanding of what he considers the defining characteristic of the *Lebensphilosophie*—that life is given priority to consciousness, so that knowledge is an expression of and “serves” life. The two examples he gives—Dilthey’s claim that life is unfathomable and Ortega’s claim that rationality is an expression of life—are both views about life he himself argues for.

Across his writing Gadamer defends four views about life. First, repeating Dilthey, “Life is inscrutable (*Unergründlichkeit*)” (Gadamer 2016, 109). Second, echoing Ortega, “life itself is ordered towards reflection” (Gadamer 2004b, 229). Third, following Simmel, “life in accordance

with its own essence exceeds itself” (Gadamer 2016, 66). Fourth, there is an “inner connection...between life and the repression of death” (Gadamer 1996b). I am going to begin with the last, as I have talked the least so far about the conceptual relation between life and death.

Gadamer credits Simmel with properly understanding the relationship between life and death. Death is part of life; to be alive is to be capable of death, and Gadamer agrees with Heidegger that we learn most about life when we keep this in mind. “The existential Interpretation of death takes precedence over any biology and ontology of life” (Heidegger 1962, 290). By attending to our awareness of death we become more aware about what it means to be alive. What is it we should be aware of? Gadamer’s answer is different from Heidegger’s. Gadamer thinks we should be aware of how we occlude our conscious awareness of our death. He claims that an essential part of being alive is veiling our understanding of death—“the repression of death reflects the will of life” (Gadamer 1996b, 64)—and the consequence of repressing our own death is making it difficult to think about death. Gadamer finds neither Plato’s discussion of death nor the Christian attempt to overcome death as fully thinking about death. They are “nothing more than a not willing-to-admit death” (Gadamer 2016, 65). Can death even be thought? Death is an essential uncertainty. The anxiety of that uncertainty parallels an anxiety about life’s uncertainty. By thinking of life as self-transcending—as “a constant overflow” (Gadamer 2016, 67)—life remains essentially uncertain about its future. It always leaves open new possibilities. “As the obverse side to the repression of death, the consciousness of the living still experiences a fearfulness before the mystery of death....The contribution of the scientific Enlightenment reaches an insuperable limit in the mystery of life and death” (Gadamer 1996b, 66). So in thinking about death as part of life, we come to understand life better, but also



at the same time recognize the very self-transcending character of life makes life essentially mysterious—“life is inscrutable (*Unergründlichkeit*)” (Gadamer 2016, 109).

Although Gadamer repeats Dilthey’s phrase, he means something different by his claim that life is unfathomable. He means life is always pushing forward, revealing something new; it can never be conceptually captured once and for all. Dilthey’s claim is more structural—it’s about the place of life as the condition for all understanding. As the motivating source of understanding, it itself cannot be brought into clear understanding; it cannot be grounded upon something else. For Gadamer, on the other hand, the unfathomable character of life stems from life’s essential self-transcendence.

What does Gadamer mean that life is self-transcending? In *Truth and Method* he argues that we should not identify life with self-consciousness, as if self-consciousness were the mark of being fully alive, but recognize that there is a “structural correlation between life and self-consciousness” (Gadamer 2004b, 243). Self-consciousness operates by differentiating itself from consciousness of other things, then recognizing itself as always present in consciousness. Likewise, “Life is defined by the fact that what is alive differentiates itself from the world in which it lives and with which remains connected, and preserves itself in this differentiation” (Gadamer 2004b, 243-4). Gadamer credits Count Paul Yorck von Wartenburg for recognizing that life achieves unity across differentiation by being essentially experimentally self-assertive. In life we assert ourselves; self-consciousness arises out of the feeling of life that arises when we assert ourselves in the presence of something alien. As such, Yorck argued there is a dialectical, metaphysical interdependency between life and self-consciousness. Because of this Gadamer thinks Yorck better realizes “*the speculative import of the concept of life*” (Gadamer 2004b, 242) and that “Understanding is the original characteristic of the being of human life” (Gadamer

2004b, 250).

According to Gadamer, Yorck's account of experimental self-assertion as fundamental to life is built around "projection and abstraction" (Gadamer 2004b, 244). Philosophy is a particularly important way this self-assertion takes place. It is self-consciously critically reflective, which puts it in the best position to realize the general features of life. It is not a break from life, but an expression of life, for Yorck. Gadamer will agree, claiming that "life itself is ordered towards reflection" (Gadamer 2004b, 229). When Gadamer claims that life is speculative and reflective, he does not mean that life is self-reflective or essentially self-conscious. He means life is essentially disclosive through language. In a key section of *Truth and Method* Gadamer argues that language has a speculative structure "not as the reflection of something given but as the coming into language of a totality of meaning" (Gadamer 2004b, 469). Likewise for life, it brings things to consciousness. So life for Gadamer is self-exceeding, unfathomable because of its self-transcendence and because of its intimate connection to death, and always disclosive.

I opened with the suggestion that Gadamer's many comments about a successful interpretation bringing a text to life have roots in the *Lebensphilosophie* of his youth. Let's finally consider what Gadamer says about texts that come alive. Four ways that life is conceptualized by Gadamer help us understand what he means when we say that an excellent interpretation brings a text to life: first, that the experience of life is the experience of the interconnection of parts and wholes; second that the experience of life is the experience of something *unergründlich*; third that the experience of life is the experience of something endowed with the speculative powers of disclosure; and fourth that the experience of life is the experience of something that is productively new and changing, yet continuous with its past.

Gadamer gives two criteria that are jointly necessary for a successful interpretation: (1)

there must be coherence across the text, across the author's work, and to the times in which it is written, and (2) there must be insights revealed by the text as an answer to an engaging question. Gadamer spells these out in detail across his whole corpus; what interests us is how they are connected to the experience of life. The experience of life is essentially an experience of something organically unified where the parts and the whole work together to mutually define each other. We've seen this emphasized by the romantics and the romantically inspired German Idealists. We've also seen this idea in the key Philosophers of Life, Dilthey and Simmel. Gadamer himself, though, makes the connection explicit for us.

Like the coherence of a text, the structural coherence of life is defined as a relation between the whole and the parts. Every part expresses something of the whole of life—i.e., has significance for the whole—just as its own significance is determined by the whole. It is the old hermeneutical principle of textual interpretation, and it applies to the coherence of life insofar as life presupposes a unity of meaning that is expressed in all its parts. (Gadamer 2004b, 218-19)

Here Gadamer presents the parallel between the structural coherence of life and the structural coherence of a text. One of the features of experiencing a text as coming alive through an interpretation is that we come to recognize the mereological unity of a text.

In what way is the experience of interpreting a text the experience of something *unergründlich*? There are two parts of the experience of a text brought to life that fits this description. First, there is no method by which a successful interpretation is guaranteed. Interpretation is an art. There is no theoretical foundation upon which one could build any interpretation. The moment of arriving at a successful interpretation is “achieved through the conceptual and intuitive power of the language in which we live” (Gadamer 2007, 12). All we can do is listen attentively to the conceptuality of the concepts and, hopefully, through our attentiveness, we will, like “the true philosopher” awaken “the intuitive power already resident in language” (Gadamer 2007, 38). Second, there is no independent grounding for the accuracy of an

interpretation other than the way the interpretation makes the text coherent and insightful. The interpretation works or it doesn't. Gadamer is most explicit about this when discussing poetry, but it applies to all texts.

The experience of a text coming to life is also most obviously the experience of a text disclosing its meaning to us, becoming relevant again, and proving us with new insights and challenging us to ask new questions. In the opening quotation Gadamer claimed Heidegger made texts come to life by interpreting them "as answers to real questions" (Gadamer 2007, 11). The "logic of question and answer" is Gadamer's phrase for the need to interpret a text as if it were providing a reasonable answer to a legitimate question. This functions as a principle of charity requiring us to see how the text could solve a problem; but more than that it requires us to engage the issues of the text philosophically rather than just historically. Gadamer distinguishes a hermeneutically successful interpretation from a merely historical one. The way "Hartmann and all the others, even the philologists, treated Aristotle certainly did not present him as a contemporary opponent! It was pure history. But with Heidegger, Aristotle suddenly came alive" (Gadamer 2005, 50). The text "comes alive" by making its questions our own. After all, there is no way to understand a question without asking it oneself and considering what might count as a legitimate answer to the question. Gadamer claims that putting questions to each other is the mark of dialogue. He concludes therefore that through the logic of question and answer we are engaging in conversation with the text, and "conversation is the medium in which alone language is alive" (Gadamer 2007, 371).

The experience of a text coming alive is not simply of a text disclosing meaning in a way relevant to us, but in a new way. "When [a text] does begin to speak, however, it does not simply speak its word, always the same, in lifeless rigidity, but gives ever new answers to the person who questions it and poses ever new questions to him who answers it" (Gadamer 1976, 57). The

newness of the interpretation also places the meaning in the context of past meanings, so that the experience is that we are finally understanding the text properly for the first time. The meaning of the text always exceeds past interpretations. When an interpretation brings a text to life we have the experience of something asserting its presence in a meaningful way, continuous with and differentiated from the past, and with a promise of a continued relevance in the future.

What we've found is some of the key themes about life—that life conveys a sense of unity between parts and wholes, that life points to something new, different from yet continuous with it, that there is something fundamentally unfathomable about life, and that life is reflective in the sense of disclosive—connect to themes found in the *Lebensphilosophie* movement and all help illuminate what Gadamer means when he says that an successful interpretation brings a text to life. What we end up with is perhaps the greatest and most obvious debt to *Lebensphilosophie*. As a description of the phenomenology of a successful interpretation it functions as a criterion for a successful interpretation. Hermeneutics is at the service of life. Recall this is what he found most definitive for the Philosophers of Life—that affirming life functioned as a criterion for the acceptance of a belief or endorsement of an action. This may seem to suggest that Gadamer would embrace inaccurate interpretations as long as the stimulated a feeling of life. Indeed a couple of examples would seem to support this concern. Quite relevant to our topic he wrote:

Heinrich Rickert, who attempted in 1920 to destroy life philosophy through argument, was unable to come anywhere near the influence of Nietzsche and Dilthey, which was beginning to grow at that time. However clearly one demonstrates the inner contradictions of all relativist views ... [h]owever cogent they may seem, they still miss the main point. In making use of them one is proved right, and yet they do not express any superior insight of value (Gadamer 2004b, 329-330).

Rickert may have shown the inner-contradictions of Dilthey and Nietzsche, yet they are the ones who were influential for their “superior insight.” His point seems to be that their texts are more worthwhile because they are more enlivening, even though they are contradictory. But what

Gadamer is arguing here is that an interpretation of a text or a tradition that merely shows it is self-contradictory without at the same time providing any insights as to what is behind the contradictions, without leading us to questions that can inspire thought in us, will never be as successful as an interpretation that does just that. Another example is that Gadamer will often defend Heidegger's interpretations of the Greeks, even while acknowledging Heidegger's interpretations are misreadings. Gadamer with his classical training knew when Heidegger's readings were more Heidegger than Greek. Nonetheless Gadamer defends Heidegger, again suggesting that an enlivening interpretation is preferable to an accurate one. In fact, though, what Gadamer is defending is Heidegger's approach to Greek texts, which may turn out to be mistaken and need to be replaced by more accurate interpretations, yet which preserve the goal of generating a hermeneutic experience through paying close attention to the text. Heidegger, even when he was mistaken, was still seeking questions to which the text is an answer and was seeking ways to make the text come alive for us, the highest responsibility of hermeneutic interpretation.

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