

# THE SUFFERING STRANGER

Hermeneutics for Everyday  
Clinical Practice

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# 1

## What Is Hermeneutics?

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*The person who is understanding does not know and judge as one who stands apart and unaffected but rather he thinks along with the other from the perspective of a specific bond of belonging, as if he too were affected.*

—Gadamer

*H*ermeneutics? It may seem strange for someone as allergic to *H*jargon as my students know me to be to embark on a book about an experience-distant term like *hermeneutics*. Still, I plead for its admission to our conversation on the grounds that it will help us tremendously to understand what we do as clinicians and to discern the different spirits in which we may approach what we do. So let us begin to approach the word itself.\*

Hermeneutics, the study of interpretation, historically functioned as an adjunct discipline, first to theology and later to history, literature, and jurisprudence. Richard Palmer (2002), historian of hermeneutics, wrote a genial history of the origins of the word:

Hermes, you will recall from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, was the messenger of the gods. He carried messages from Zeus to everybody else, especially from the divine realm and level down to the human level. In doing so, he had to bridge an ontological gap, a gap

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\* The substantive form is either *hermeneutics* or *hermeneutic*, and I use both. The adjective is *hermeneutic*. To indicate the practitioner of this art, I use *hermeneut* in preference to *hermeneuticist*, which I find awkward and ugly.

between the thinking of the gods and that of humans. According to legend, he had (1) a mysterious helmet which could make him invisible and then suddenly reappear, (2) magical wings on his sandals to carry him swiftly over long distances, and (3) a magical wand that could put you to sleep or wake you up. So he not only bridged physical distances and the ontological gap between divine and human being, he bridged the difference between the visible and the invisible, and between dreams and waking, between the unconscious and the conscious. He is the quicksilver god [“Mercury” in Latin] of sudden insights, ideas, inspirations. And he is also the trickster god of thefts, highway robbery, and of sudden windfalls of good luck. Norman O. Brown wrote a book about him titled *Hermes the Thief*. Hermes is the god of crossroads and boundaries, where piles of rocks (Herms) were placed to honor him. As psychopomp, Hermes led the dead into the underworld, so he “crossed the line” between the living and the dead, between the living human world and the underworld of Hades. Hermes is truly the “god of the gaps,” of the margins, the boundaries, the *limins* of many things. (p. 2)

Originally the study of methods for interpreting sacred texts, hermeneutics served theological purposes. From the time of the early 19th-century romantics, it broadened its scope to include history, aesthetics, and whatever belonged to the humanities and social sciences generally. Given Freud’s emphasis on interpretation, it might have seemed obvious that psychoanalysis would have been seen as a hermeneutic study.\* Unfortunately, because of his even stronger insistence on the status of psychoanalysis as natural science, our awareness of psychoanalysis as hermeneutics has arrived only more recently, and with some reasonable cautions (Friedman, 2000; Steiner, 1995). Furthermore, other psychotherapeutic traditions, needing to distance themselves from what they have understood—with considerable justification—as an excessively intellectualized interpretive therapeutics in psychoanalysis, have also missed out on what a hermeneutic sensibility can offer.†

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\* See Sass (1989) for a discussion of the complex relations between psychoanalysis, humanistic views, and the history of hermeneutics.

† Gestalt therapists learned, for example, to “never, never interpret,” but now one of their prominent theorists (Stammmler, 2007, 2009) makes extensive use of Gadamer’s dialogic hermeneutics.

In the hands of phenomenologists, first Martin Heidegger but principally Hans-Georg Gadamer, hermeneutics became a general philosophy of dialogical understanding, serving philosophy, the social sciences, and beyond. Now, I suggest, dialogical hermeneutics can become the partner of an ethical clinical sensibility and sense of vocation best expressed in the ethical phenomenology of Emmanuel Lévinas, in whose thinking each of us bears an infinite responsibility to the face of the suffering stranger.

This book therefore has a double task: (a) to explain and illustrate the richness of a hermeneutic clinical sensibility and (b) to illustrate that such a sensibility responds well to the ethical imperative of hospitality to the suffering stranger that we find described in the challenging writings of Emmanuel Lévinas.

This project thus approaches hermeneutics in three ways: (a) it attempts to trace the history of hermeneutics in a user-friendly way so that humanistic psychotherapists of all traditions can recognize their work as hermeneutic and make use of the resources that philosophical hermeneutics offers, (b) it studies work of several especially humanistic psychoanalysts—because this is my own tradition—to show both how these clinicians developed a hermeneutic therapeutics and how a dialogic hermeneutics understands both persons and texts, and (c) it links a dialogic clinical hermeneutics to an ethical concern, shared by these clinicians and by the philosophers Hans-Georg Gadamer and Emmanuel Lévinas, for the voice and the face of the other.

## HISTORY OF HERMENEUTICS: SCHLEIERMACHER

Let us begin with the hermeneutics of the courageous\* romantic-era theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), German theologian and philosopher, contemporary of Goethe and

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\* For my appreciation of Schleiermacher, I am indebted to philosopher and scholar of the early romantics Manfred Frank, who often told me stories of Schleiermacher's personal courage.

Beethoven, an important resource for the so-called hermeneutic turn in contemporary psychoanalysis.

The contemporary or post-Freudian psychoanalysis to which I refer includes British independents and American relationalists, made up, broadly speaking, of interpersonalists, psychoanalytic self psychologists, as well as phenomenologically oriented intersubjectivists and many clinicians worldwide inspired by various relational ideas. We have largely turned away from Freud's natural-science-based psychoanalysis whose "interpretations" explained to the patient\* his or her instinct-based complexes and conflicts. The analyst used to be the silent and distant expert authority on the patient's unconscious conflicts over sex and aggression, the archaeologist/excavator of the depths. Now, instead, most of us work dialogically, hoping more to understand suffering via its background in lived intersubjective experience than to explain or translate unconscious "mental" contents. We believe that our groping together for words for whatever we can come to understand becomes a healing and a liberating process. We realize that the analyst's personal history, our own intimate *Selbstvertrautheit* (Frank, 2000),<sup>†</sup> is involved at every moment in our effort to contact and to understand the suffering other (Orange, 1995) and that the other in turn is always affecting us. Our thinking and our practice has changed profoundly from the distant and impersonal world of what we often call "classical" psychoanalysis.

So what has Schleiermacher to offer us, beyond the example of a man who was willing to place himself at risk for people<sup>‡</sup> whom

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\* Throughout this book, as in my other writings, I use the word patient (from the Latin *patior*, "to suffer, to undergo") to refer to the human beings with whom I work. Clients would be people with whom I primarily have business relationships. Patients are fellow sufferers.

<sup>†</sup> I am using his very carefully defined concept loosely here. He speaks of unmediated familiarity (*Vertrautheit*) and says, "One is conscious of how one feels (or of 'what it is like') even when one does not know in the slightest how one should classify the feeling. (It could happen that I am in love even though I lack a valid theory of love, or even lack the concept itself)" (Frank, 2000, p. 194).

<sup>‡</sup> See, for example, his letters on behalf of the emancipation of the Jews in Prussia (Schleiermacher & Schmidt, 2001).

others considered less than fully human? I have chosen three themes: (a) his recognition that understanding is hard, if not impossible, work; (b) what I would call his proto-fallibilism; and (c) his insistence on holism, or what today we might call complexity, an attitude that resists the enticements of reductionism that continue to tempt clinicians.

Schleiermacher taught that understanding, whether of texts or of people, was hard work and always work in progress. Because every child learns a language, and because so much of daily life passes without our noticing misunderstandings, he had to tell us explicitly that “misunderstanding occurs as a matter of course, and so understanding must be willed and sought at every point” (Schleiermacher & Kimmerle, 1977, p. 110). In contrast to what he called the “lax practice” of hermeneutics, which assumes understanding (Schleiermacher & Bowie, 1998), the “rigorous practice” or “strict practice” always required this hardworking attitude. In my clinical experience, patients are often greatly surprised and relieved when I quote this to them; they have expected themselves to understand their spouses and their partners to understand them, and likewise their analysts or therapists. To see that understanding requires hard effort, and that this should be expected, is already a start in hermeneutics. This work requires, Schleiermacher taught, constant attention to both content and feeling tone of whatever we seek to understand. Moreover, this rigorous practice is a no-fault enterprise: “Non-understanding is partly indeterminacy, partly ambiguity of the content. So it is thought of without any fault on the part of the utterer” (Schleiermacher & Bowie, 1998, p. 227). He seems to have believed that if I want to understand I must go toward the utterer, not force the utterer to come to me. Not surprisingly, then, my interest in hermeneutics helps me to work with patients who suffer from dreadful, even suicidal, forms of shame: If everything is just something to understand, not to despise or to blame, my patients’ self-hatred sometimes gives way to a more self-forgiving *Selbstvertrautheit* (self-familiarity, sense of being at home with oneself).

Even the psychotherapist's struggles to understand patterns of seemingly intractable misery can become more bearable in light of this "rigorous practice." My patient who seems to have everything, including everything that I have never had, but continues to return to a truly abusive partner, one who throws hot soup on her in anger and rages at her in front of friends and family, confounds me. Then I remember that understanding is a difficult practice and that there is clearly something we have not understood together yet. Yes, Schleiermacher helps.

Indeed, Schleiermacher claimed elsewhere, no one, strictly speaking, can understand another person. What can this mean? Schleiermacher held that the art of hermeneutics had two indispensable elements, the grammatical and the psychological:

In order to complete the grammatical side of interpretation it would be necessary to have complete knowledge of the language. In order to complete the psychological side it would be necessary to have a complete knowledge of the person. Since in both cases such complete knowledge is impossible, it is necessary to move back and forth between the grammatical and psychological sides, and no rules can stipulate exactly how to do this. (Schleiermacher & Kimmerle, 1977, p. 100)

This brings us to our second theme. He replaced confidence in Cartesian "clear and distinct ideas" with awareness that all our understanding is partial and fallible, that it comes piecemeal and in degrees. It may be that Schleiermacher's famous or infamous method of intuitive understanding embodied this proto-fallibilism. If, perhaps, he meant that the interpreter makes a reasonable guess, taking historical and other forms of context into account, at the meaning of a text, and then tests it out, this would be very similar to the method of hypothesis in Charles Sanders Peirce (1931). Taking a dream as a text, for example, a clinician might ask whether being chased feels like anything in previous or current life, and work from there. One always intends interpretation as tentative and fallible. Schleiermacher even



termed his oscillating intersubjective search for truth—in Plato’s spirit—*dialectic*.

In clinical work, we work in this spirit hundreds of times a day, testing, discarding, and provisionally keeping our hunches. The famous “squiggle” game of British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott (1971), in which both patient and analyst added lines to a drawing until something emerged, was a form of hermeneutic play, I think. Many of us psychoanalysts probably do the same thing with words as we wonder together about symptoms, dreams, daydreams, bits of traumatic memory, and such. Whenever the understanding seems adequate for the moment, or unable to be taken further for the moment, we let it go for the moment. In this way both patient and analyst become fallibilists, less obsessive about being right and certain, less caught in traumatically generated either-or positions (Orange, 2011). Knowing gradually becomes disengaged from the search for certainty and becomes a shared project.

In Schleiermacher’s own words, in his explanation of the “psychological” aspects of hermeneutic understanding, we find the following, written at least 130 years before Winnicott’s squiggle or before Gadamer’s dialogic hermeneutics:

If we consider a conversation, this is first of all a completely free state, which is based, not on any specific objective intention, but only on the mutually stimulating exchange of thoughts. ... But the conversation does easily get fixed on something and that is even striven for by both sides. In this way a common development of thoughts and a particular relationship of the utterances of the one to the other arises. ... But a conversation also allows breaks. ... The task is to get to know the genesis of such breaks. ... We must go back to the psychological and seek to explain what determines precisely the free, or rather involuntary manner of combination. In doing so we must base this on our own observation of ourselves. ... The most natural thing here is to think of oneself in the state of meditation in such a way that a certain tendency towards the distraction of thoughts is present as an inhibition ... here it is a question of that free play of ideas in which our will is passive though mental being is still active. (Schleiermacher & Bowie, 1998, pp. 124–125)

Here we easily find intimations of the play space Winnicott— influenced by the English romantics, though he may never have read Schleiermacher—would, more than a century later, find so full of creative possibility for development and analysis: “The more freely we let ourselves go in this manner, the more the state is analogous to dreaming, and dreaming is that which is simply incomprehensible, precisely because it does not follow any law of content and therefore appears merely contingent” (p. 125).

This passage makes it clear that Schleiermacher had no simplistic walk-in-the-other’s-moccasins, enter-the-other’s-mind conception of empathy (*Einfühlung*).\* Instead, like Schleiermacher’s hermeneut, psychoanalysts note the ways we find ourselves bound and inhibited in our thinking and feeling with the patient. Thus we come to understand the patient’s world, the language we speak together, and the sources of our misunderstandings. We engage in something like what he called “reconstructing the meditation,” almost dreaming together, understanding how the other or we together arrived where we arrived. Schleiermacher’s famous claim to know the author better than he knew himself then seems less arrogant and far more dialogic, fallibilistic, and capable of being useful to always-learning psychoanalysts. “In general,” Schleiermacher noted,

it is the case that the more someone has observed themselves and others in relation to the activity of thought, the more they also have the hermeneutic talent ... the more difficult the hermeneutic task is, the more its completion demands collective work; the more the necessary conditions are lacking, the more individual directions must unite to complete the task. (Schleiermacher & Bowie, 1998, p. 128)

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\* This is also clear even in the passage often used to support the more simplistic view: “The divinatory method is the one in which one, *so to speak*, transforms oneself into the other person and tries to understand the individual element directly ... [it] depends on the fact that every person, besides being an individual themselves, has a receptivity for all other people ... everyone carries a minimum of everyone else within himself” (Schleiermacher & Bowie, 1998, p. 92, emphasis added). John Donne: “No man is an island” (Meditation 17, 1839, pp. 574–575).

Similarly, just as a good exegete (biblical interpreter) needs other commentaries on a biblical text, we psychoanalysts benefit greatly by long experience and self-knowledge but never lose the need for consultation and collaboration with trusted colleagues. (We also see that Schleiermacher generally made an easy shift back and forth between understanding texts and understanding people; for him the problems and processes were quite similar.)

We have seen that Schleiermacher believed interpretation and understanding to be hard work and to require humility and fallibilistic acknowledgment of the limits of our understanding. From Schleiermacher we can learn, thirdly, a holistic attitude, that is, to embrace complexity and refuse the sirens of reductionism, constant temptations even for post-Freudians. The two current attractions consist in “evidence-based treatment” (the idea that all forms of therapy should be experimentally testable for efficacy) and the worship of neuroscience (a new journal is called *Neuropsychoanalysis*). The first attempts to justify the time and expense that meaning-oriented “talking cures” require as compared with psychopharmacology and short-term cognitive-behavioral treatments, effective as they may be for immediate symptom relief. The second appeals to psychoanalysts themselves who are easily persuaded that now, finally, our work is scientific because we know how emotions work in the brain. We can “see emotions” on these amazing pictures that the neuroscientists show us on PowerPoint presentations at our conferences. Cogent and elegant arguments against these reductionisms appear in a recent article by Irwin Hoffman (2009a). A Schleiermachian sensibility can also keep us focused on the psychoanalytic project of healing through understanding, if that is how we understand our work, as many of us do.

In Schleiermacher, for example, we find that an emphasis on complexity and context did not first appear with Wittgenstein and Heidegger.

Every utterance is to be understood only via the whole life to which it belongs, i.e., because every utterance can only be recognized as a moment of the life of the language-user in the determinedness of all the moments of their life, and this only from the totality of their environments, via which their development and continued existence are determined, every language-user can only be understood via their nationality and their era. (Schleiermacher & Bowie, 1998, p. 9)

Here we find the clinical usefulness of the famous hermeneutic circle, in which every detail takes on sense only from the whole of a situated life, and we understand a life (or a text) little by little from its details. “Nothing which is to be explicated can be understood all at once, but ... it is only each reading which makes us capable of better understanding by enriching that previous knowledge. Only in relation to that which is insignificant are we happy with what has been understood all at once” (Schleiermacher & Bowie, 1998, p. 24). Schleiermacher taught us to be attuned not to how fast we can understand, nor to a quick sort of mechanical matching between words and causes, but instead to the holism and complexity of meaning. He spoke of a “zigzag” between parts and whole. If I understand what he was saying, he would agree with the complexity theorists of today, who say that what is complex, unlike what is complicated, cannot be reduced to simple.

Meaning, for Schleiermacher, was like that. Again and again he said that understanding is not something mechanical, because no rules can be given for it, but more like an art. What it produces, however, is always incomplete, just as in our clinical work. “The successful practice of the art [of hermeneutics] depends on the talent for language and the talent for knowledge of individual people” (Schleiermacher & Bowie, 1998, p. 11). He could easily have been speaking of psychotherapy. We may have further requirements—in the realms of *phronesis* (practical wisdom), vocation, and ethics—but they do not belong to a fascination with brain science or technical efficiency. Understanding in context, Schleiermacher believed, involved understanding the unique individual: “The

possession of the whole spirit of the utterance ... rests on the knowledge of the individuality of the utterer as their inner unity” (Schleiermacher & Bowie, 1998, p. 254). We cannot research, generalize, or subtract out this individuality, the “individuality of style” (p. 255) or “idiosyncrasy” (p. 256). Manfred Frank’s (1999) work on style in philosophy has reminded me of the irreducibility of the personal idiom so valued in Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics. A focus on personal style, developed over a lifetime in intersubjective contexts, remains indispensable to clinical understanding.

Again and again Schleiermacher reminded us that “from the point of view of the hermeneutic task it is not possible to consider the object in isolation” (Schleiermacher & Bowie, 1998, p. 144). His *Frühromantik* religious sense of the infinite could not allow him any form of reductionism and supports the efforts of psychoanalytic hermeneutists and complexity theorists (Coburn, 2002; Gotthold, 2009; Sander, 2002) today to resist temptations to rush to explanation, whether diagnostic, theoretical, neuroscientific, or otherwise.

Here is a brief clinical example, disguised and combined to protect privacy. One young patient had had no previous treatment but was the son of a social worker who had used diagnostic terminology and psychoanalytic jargon on her children. Having filled out the psychologist’s questionnaire in the waiting room, he entered the consulting room for his first session. The therapist took the papers and began to read. Without once looking at the prospective patient, she murmured, “Oh, this is bad ... this is *really* bad.” Before the end of the session, the psychologist offered this young man the option of working with her or of being referred to someone else. The patient, thinking at the time that “at least this is someone who seems to know something,” stayed for a year. During this time, he was repeatedly treated as a case of one thing after another, despite his objections to the know-it-all (*Besserwisser*) interpretations and predictions of the therapist. By the time he left this treatment, his

traumatized state of shock and confusion had worsened exponentially, and he felt seriously suicidal.\*

In this state the patient came to me, and we have been working together for many years. It has been extremely important that our work include at every point the three elements I have been emphasizing in Schleiermacher: (a) the “strict practice” that assumes misunderstanding as the normal condition and works unstintingly to overcome it, (b) the willingness on the part of therapists and analysts to admit mistakes and to try to understand their origins in our own history and emotional convictions, and (c) the attempt we both make together to resist too much knowing and to understand everything as part of the larger picture of violence, invalidation, and domination in the patient’s life experience—psychoanalyst Leonard Shengold (1989) would have called it “soul murder”—while telling and retelling the past and current stories that add up to this picture. All this occurs within the story of the ongoing and always changing connection between the two of us, which has included, as sometimes happens, a kind of emotional adoption. This patient has suffered extensive losses from complex trauma but has many gifts as well as a uniquely personal style that we have learned, Schleiermacher-wise, to understand and to treasure. He has become a good-enough parent and a more-than-decent human being.

## HISTORY OF HERMENEUTICS: DILTHEY AND HEIDEGGER AS TRANSITIONAL FIGURES

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), the next major figure in the history of hermeneutics, taught Martin Buber (the rudiments of whose *Ich-Du* meeting already appear in Dilthey) and influenced the phenomenological hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer. Best known for his insistence that the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) provide their own access to truth, equal in importance to that of the exact

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\* I also told this story in Orange (2009a).

sciences or *Naturwissenschaften*, he brought into philosophy the emphasis on “lived experience”: “An expression of lived experience can contain more of the nexus of psychic life than any introspection can catch sight of. It draws from the depths not illuminated by consciousness. . . . Such expressions are not to be judged as true or false but as truthful or untruthful” (Dilthey, Makkreel, & Rodi, 2002, p. 228). We can already see two important elements of his hermeneutics here: It locates understanding in the lived experiential situation instead of in some inner mind, and it refuses a dualistic conception of truth and falsity. It accepts ambiguity and assumes the intent to be truthful.

As a young man, Dilthey wrote the best biography that we have of Schleiermacher, then in his middle years he turned to larger and more general philosophical concerns, but in his last years he returned to the study of hermeneutics. In what is probably his most important work, *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* (Dilthey et al., 2002) originally published in 1910, Dilthey claimed that hermeneutic understanding meant not reconstructing the individual mind of the author but rather, by way of the famous hermeneutical circle,\* going back to the whole complex purposive system in which the text or historical experience emerged: “All these modes of cooperation manifest a life-concern connected to the human essence that links individuals with each other—a core, as it were, that cannot be grasped psychologically but is revealed in every such system of relations among human beings” (Dilthey et al., 2002, p. 176). For Dilthey, in other words, hermeneutics understands historically, that is, contextually.†

It is crucial for the history of hermeneutics that the young Martin Heidegger, in the early 1920s leading up to the 1928 writing of

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\* This is a key concept in hermeneutics, from Schleiermacher through Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer. It means interpreting back and forth from part to whole and whole to part, because parts gain meaning from contextual wholes, and wholes can be seen, gestalt-wise, only from their parts.

† See Stolorow and Atwood (1984) on Dilthey in relation to the process of psychoanalytic understanding.

*Being and Time* (1962), was reading Dilthey. Having read Dilthey, he transformed Husserlian phenomenology and called his method in *Being and Time* “hermeneutic phenomenology,” joining the two traditions.\* For the early Heidegger, to be was to understand, to interpret one’s given or “thrown” world as possibilities for being. We are “thrown projection,” where “projection” means prereflective, preinterpretive understanding (*Verstehen*) of a situation in terms of one’s possibilities for being in it. Interpretation is a further development of understanding in the direction of thematic, perhaps linguistic, explicitness. Interpretation thus presupposes a fore-understanding of the situation in which we find ourselves. Understanding and interpretation, fundamental modes or aspects of human being-in-the-world, had for Heidegger this structure of fore-understanding to be grasped through the non-vicious hermeneutic circle of whole and part. Meaningfulness arises from this understanding that transforms what we are doing, our everyday practical coping, by placing it in a new light.† But the truth itself appears suddenly, in a flash, like the earlier *Augenblick of the moment of authenticity* (Dostal, 1994). In the hands of Heidegger’s student Hans-Georg Gadamer, phenomenology itself becomes hermeneutics, and understanding comes more slowly, though there may be “Aha” moments. All philosophy becomes, as it was for Socrates, understanding through conversation, *Gespräch*.

## HISTORY OF HERMENEUTICS: GADAMER

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), the subject of a chapter in my recent book (Orange, 2009c), returns here for a somewhat different purpose. There he appeared as an example of what thinking

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\* I am grateful to my collaborator and friend Robert D. Stolorow for pointing this out to me.

† Heidegger’s view of meaningfulness, as well as his view of authentic being-toward-death, has been thematized first by him in *Being and Time* (1962), in the *Zollikon Seminars* with Medard Boss (Heidegger & Boss, 2001), and extensively in the work of Irvin Yalom (1980, 2008).



can do for clinicians. He provided philosophical hermeneutics to help to free us from our enslavement to a natural-science model of understanding in the human sciences and thus showed us an alternative to tempting reductionisms. Here we turn precisely to his hermeneutics—and especially to his emphasis on readiness to listen to and learn from the voice of the other—as a clinical philosophy.

It is difficult for me to write about Hans-Georg Gadamer without betraying the enormous affection I feel for him and my gratitude for what he has left to those of us who want to think dialogically and humanistically in psychoanalysis.\* Thus, fortunately, in this context I need to engage his critics only en passant, because I have done so elsewhere (Frie & Orange, 2009). Nevertheless, I must seriously turn to his conception of philosophical hermeneutics and deepen the account provided in my previous book (Orange, 2009c). Only so can I show what is the main thesis of this book, *dialogic understanding, in a hermeneutic of trust, forms the hospitable response to the suffering stranger demanded by the ethics of infinite responsibility* that we find in the writings of Emmanuel Lévinas. Gadamer's hermeneutics made a radical turn—but he buried the change under mountains of Germanic scholarship, at least in *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, Weinsheimer, & Marshall, 2004)—from a concern with the contents and the methods of interpreting to the style and the spirit in which we engage the interpretive task. The style, seriously playful and dialogic, requires a humble and open spirit. So let us consider some crucial elements of Gadamerian hermeneutics that may be useful for everyday clinical practice. First and last is the priority of conversation.

Gadamer believed, probably mistakenly (Frank, 1977), that Schleiermacher's hermeneutic was too psychological, seeking to

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\* Already in 1979, Steele (1979) wrote extensively about the contribution that philosophical hermeneutics could make to psychoanalytic understanding, though he remained embedded in what Ricoeur (1970) would have called the hermeneutics of suspicion (see Chapter 2). Among those who make use of Gadamer's hermeneutics for contemporary psychoanalytic theorizing, foremost is Donnel B. Stern (1997, 2009).

enter the mind of the author. Likewise, he criticized Dilthey for what he called “historicism,” for thinking it possible to understand a text or an earlier civilization through historical reconstruction, an analogous mistake to the one he attributed to Schleiermacher. Instead, he thought, we can understand only from engaging in dialogue with the other—the text, the person, the work of art—and expecting to learn from the other. The fundamental dialogic attitude consisted for him in this expectation that one had something to learn and should expect to be surprised: “Every experience worthy of the name thwarts an expectation” (Gadamer et al., 2004, p. 350).<sup>\*</sup> Indeed, he claimed,

We say that we “conduct” a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will “come out” of a conversation. Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us. (p. 385)

So conversation takes first place in Gadamerian hermeneutics, and its route remains unpredictable, just as we find in clinical work.

The hermeneutic circle, a second element, remains important for Gadamer as for every hermeneut and appears frequently in his work. “Every experience [*Erlebnis*, in this context, almost adventure] is taken out of the continuity of life and at the same time related to the whole of one’s life” (Gadamer et al., 2004, p. 60). Just

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<sup>\*</sup> Each republication, with revisions, of the English translation of Gadamer’s magnum opus, *Wahrheit und Methode*, or *Truth and Method*, has new pagination, unfortunately confounding all who want to refer or find references and perhaps confirming Descartes’s theory of the *malin genie* (the wicked god who deliberately confuses and misleads us). On the assumption, or in the hope, that most of my readers will be using the latest version, I will refer to the 2004 version.

as the biblical interpreters did from Luther on (p. 176), we read meanings part to whole, and whole to part.

Third, Gadamer's hermeneutics, while nonhistoricist, remains deeply indebted to both Dilthey's contextualism and to his insistence on the possibility of establishing truthfulness within the human sciences. We find him criticizing the notion of self-contained *Eigenbedeutsamkeit* (own- or self-signification) in aesthetics, a concept that suggests that a work of art has or "represents"\* its own significance independent of context or interpretation. On the contrary, he thought, all "understanding must be conceived as a part of the event in which meaning occurs" (Gadamer et al., 2004, p. 157). The *Eigenbedeutsamkeit* resembles one-person psychology with its search for methodical truth and perfect certitudes, to be replaced by the back-and-forth dialogic process of understanding sought in conversation between worlds of experience always existing in traditions to which we belong. Meaning occurs. There is, Gadamer wrote, "something absurd about the whole idea of a unique, correct interpretation" (p. 118).

Fourth, Gadamer transformed Heidegger's existential *Verstehen* (understanding) into his own *Verständigung* (understanding as a dialogic process, coming-to-an-understanding).† Along the way, he revisited Schleiermacher's idea that misunderstanding is always more likely than not, at least a universal possibility. Gadamer believed that Schleiermacher attributed this possibility to the experience of the alienness of the other: "In a new and universal sense, alienation is inextricably given with the individuality of the Thou" (Gadamer et al., 2004, p. 180). Gadamer thought that Schleiermacher did not exactly see that this very alienation creates the possibility of dialogic understanding. When attempts to reach agreement are in vain, "only then does the effort of understanding become aware of the individuality of the Thou and take account

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\* For Gadamer, representation means "coming to presentation" as in an artistic performance, not a copy existing in someone's "mind."

† I grant to both Heidegger and Gadamer scholars that this oversimplifies the relationship.

of his *uniqueness*” (p. 181). In other words, “Schleiermacher’s model of hermeneutics is the congenial understanding that can be achieved in the relation between I and Thou” (p. 233); only when it fails do we have the breakdown that Schleiermacher called misunderstanding and took to be our normal human condition. In Gadamer’s own view, expressed once again at 100 years old,

Hermeneutics is *die Kunst der Verständigung*—the art of reaching an understanding—of something or with someone ... this “coming to an understanding” of our practical situations and what we must do in them is not monological; rather, it has the character of a conversation. We are dealing with each other. Our human form of life has an “I and thou” character and an “I and we” character, and also a “we and we” character. In our practical affairs we depend on our ability to arrive at an understanding. And reaching an understanding happens in conversation, in a dialogue. (Gadamer, Dutt, & Palmer, 2001, p. 79)

Gadamer emphasized, fifth, and most controversially, tradition. He used two words, *Tradition* and *Überlieferung* (handing down), depending on whether he was stressing the content or process of tradition. Jürgen Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel, and others (Apel, 1971; Warnke, 1987) accused him, after the publication of *Truth and Method*, of having created a philosophy without a reference point to protect against falling into uncriticized political ideologies (again!). Gadamer responded that no one can participate in dialogue, including those necessary for civic and political life so valued in Habermas’s emancipatory reflection, except from some standpoint that remains historically grounded. His emphasis on tradition reminds us to take our inevitable perspectives into account. “We should,” he insisted, “learn to understand ourselves better and recognize that in all understanding, whether we are expressly aware of it or not, the efficacy of history is at work” (Gadamer et al., 2004, p. 300). For us clinicians, this means never presuming that we have a perspective-free view of our patient, or of what occurs between us, or even of our own participation in the clinical dialogue. The hermeneutic emphasis on

tradition and prejudice (Wachterhauser, 2002) requires a deeper and more extensive honesty with ourselves and with the other:

In reading a text, in wishing to understand it, what we always expect is that it will inform us of something. A consciousness formed by the authentic hermeneutical attitude will be receptive to the origins and entirely foreign features of that which comes to it from outside its own horizons. Yet this receptivity is not acquired with an objectivist “neutrality”: It is neither possible, necessary, nor desirable that we put ourselves within brackets. The hermeneutical attitude supposes only that we self-consciously designate our opinions and prejudices and qualify them as such, and in so doing strip them of their extreme character. In keeping to this attitude we grant the text [the other] the opportunity to appear as an authentically different being and to manifest its own truth, over and against our own preconceived notions. (Gadamer, 1979, pp. 151–152)

Approaching the other prepared to learn from the other—the “hermeneutical attitude”—contravenes the danger of remaining trapped in the traditions to which we belong and the prejudices we inhabit. Instead, the interplay of questioning and being questioned opens the *Sache*—whatever is under discussion—“revealing the questionability of what is questioned” (Gadamer et al., 2004, p. 357). He often said that we can understand what the other says only by taking it as the answer to some question, a question that we need to find and comprehend. Indeed, in honest dialogue, we attempt to make the perspective of the other as strong as possible, respecting that of the other and risking our own (p. 361):\*

My own hermeneutical project is, with regard to its fundamental philosophical aim, not much more than the expression of the conviction that we arrive at the things themselves only in conversation. Only when we expose ourselves to a possible opposed view have we any chance of getting beyond the confines of our own assumptions. (Gadamer, 1987, p. 30)

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\* “Important is Gadamer’s recognition that all genuine conversation, and certainly all genuine philosophical conversation, involves exposing ourselves and our conviction to what resists, questions, negates or opposes us and them” (Gonzalez, 2006, p. 330).

Granted, Gadamer's emphasis on tradition left him vulnerable to the attacks of those who saw him as unconsciously conservative and hermeneutics as therefore dangerous. Another reading, however, hears him according to all of us a history that we do not choose but that we must take into account if it is not to control us and to destroy our dialogic participation. Awareness of our belongingness in tradition resembles the insistence, in most psychoanalytic groups, on thinking developmentally. Furthermore, awareness of my personal and therapeutic traditions—as well as of my background of cultural, racial, gender, class, and other assumptions—keeps me alert to the limitations of my own perspectives and interpretations. Because my perspective is inevitably a tradition-formed perspective, it remains inescapably incomplete and always needs the dialogic corrective. To repeat, there is “something absurd about the whole idea of a unique, correct interpretation.”

For us psychoanalysts, devoted as we are to the practice of interpretation, Gadamer provided a rethinking of the relation between understanding and interpretation. Though hermeneutic understanding was far more inclusive, interpretation itself, he thought, was always linguistic and verbal, contained within the understanding process, and made the understanding explicit. But he spoke intriguingly of the “disappearing” interpretation:

The verbal explicitness that understanding achieves through interpretation does not create a second sense apart from that which is understood and interpreted. The interpretive concepts are not, as such, thematic in understanding. Rather it is their nature to disappear behind what they bring to speech in interpretation. (Gadamer et al., 2004, p. 399)

He seems at least to mean that interpretation does not add something to understanding or to practice, as Dilthey had thought, but just makes the understanding explicit. The concepts used to do this—in our work, examples might be transference, repression, or any other theoretical ideas—then just disappear in the interpretive process, as clinicians become fluent and experienced in their work.

Paradoxically, an interpretation is right when it is capable of disappearing in this way. And yet at the same time it must be expressed as something that is supposed to disappear. The possibility of understanding is dependent on the possibility of this kind of mediating interpretation. (Gadamer et al., 2004, p. 399)

But perhaps he means more. I suspect that within the *Gespräch*, the conversation, suggested interpretations are proffered so subtly by both partners, most frequently in the form of questions, that they disappear into the ongoing process of emergent understanding. They come and go in the play, like the back and forth in a tennis point, forgotten in the ultimate outcome. As Ogden (2003) also noted, no one even knows who even originally came up with this or that interpretation—this is often my clinical experience too—and what does it matter?

Gadamer reminded us that *how* the interlocutors express their interpretations perhaps does matter, however. Too much force could overpower, overbalance, and keep the interpretation from disappearing. In an essay on the healing arts, he evoked the metaphor from Dilthey of the two-person tree saw:

Our ancient text [I do not know to what text he refers here] on the art of healing offers us a beautiful example with the practice of tree-sawing. As one partner draws the blade the other follows in concert, so that the whole sawing process constitutes what Viktor von Weiszäcker calls a *Gestaltkreis*, an internally unified configuration in which the respective movements of the two tree-cutters fuse to become a single rhythmic flux of movement. And here we come on a significant remark which suggests something of the mysterious character of equilibrium: “Yet if they employ violent force, they will fail utterly.” (Gadamer, 1996, p. 38)

I am told that pushing the saw *at all* stops the tree-sawing process. Likewise, if one of the partners in dialogue, the therapist, for example, speaks too forcefully, the interpretive words do not disappear into the process of understanding but may become forces of domination, triggers for retraumatization, blocks in the therapeutic process. Not that either partner should disappear but that the

equilibrium, in an intrinsically unbalanced situation, always needs careful attention. Just as adults are giants to children, the words of therapists and analysts may carry more weight than we realize, and the equilibrium of the dialogic process will need restoration.

### ELEMENTS OF A HERMENEUTIC SENSIBILITY IN EVERYDAY THERAPEUTICS

Since Freud named psychoanalysis “the talking cure,” psychoanalytic treatment has been seen as language based. Recent emphasis on procedural and implicit relational knowing, together with phenomenological emphasis on embodiment, has vastly enriched this Freudian understanding, but it remains true that most psychotherapies are conducted primarily in words. Language, resonant and heavy with history, is its medium, and the participants inhabit it, as other artists inhabit their media. But analyst and patient cannot be assumed to inhabit identical languages or experiential worlds, and each must constantly work at reaching understanding by learning the language of the other. The primary language-learning responsibility lies, of course, on the analyst, but we often underestimate how much work empathic understanding requires of patients. We call the process of coming to an understanding of the patient’s life in the context of the therapy relationship psychoanalysis or psychotherapy. Though surely not everything can or should be put into words, the attempt to contact the other verbally, and to express in words what comes to be understood together, forms the bulk, perhaps the core, of therapeutic work.

Traditional psychoanalytic practice described itself as providing interpretation of the patient’s “material.” Patients were to lie on the couch, providing free associations and recounting dreams to a mostly silent analyst who would occasionally insert interpretations that explained the unconscious content (according to the analyst’s theory) of the patient’s material. Now in the era of relational psychoanalysis and of infant research with its emphasis on mutual regulation, especially gaze regulation, the patient is more



likely to be sitting face-to-face with the analyst or therapist, the setup is much less authoritarian, and the focus is on conversation and mutual influence. In contemporary hermeneutic philosophy, conversation is the primary means of reaching understanding.

Understanding, in turn, is receptivity and suffering. Contemporary psychoanalysis places heavy emphasis on the personal agency and active participation of both patient and analyst. Without minimizing the concerns that have led to this emphasis, I believe it requires balancing by an awareness of the receptivity and suffering inherent in the process of understanding. In Gadamer's words, "The principle of understanding is founded on an inversion; *what presents itself as the action and suffering of others is understood as one's own suffering experience*" (quoted in Davey, 2006, p. 265, n. 13, emphasis added).

Not only are we required to witness and to participate emotionally in the suffering of our patients, but, in addition, the process of understanding itself means that we place ourselves at risk and allow the other to make an impact on us, to teach us, to challenge our preconceptions and habitual ways of being, to change us for their sake, even to disappoint and reject us (Davey, 2006). Often this work requires clinicians to leave aside\* their own sense of agency and competence for the sake of the other. Working in the dark and experiencing our vulnerability does make us miserable at times.

Suffering, in turn, seems to bring us face-to-face with radical finitude. Gadamer connected what he called "learning through suffering" with finitude:

What a man has to learn through suffering is not this or that particular thing, but insight into the limitations of humanity ... the truly experienced person is one who has taken this to heart, who knows that he is master neither of time nor the future. The experienced man knows that all foresight is limited and all plans uncertain. (Gadamer et al., 2004, p. 351)

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\* Perhaps, as Lynne Jacobs (2010) suggested to me, this leaving aside is itself agentic, a choice, but for me it resembles Ghent's (1990) surrender and often feels more like Lévinasian passivity.

The existential idea of radical finitude has, for me, two important clinical applications for psychoanalytic practice. The first concerns what I have elsewhere called fallibilism, that is, a constant recognition of how limited our perspective on anything necessarily is. This recognition helps us to participate with our patients, in a nonauthoritarian spirit, in the search for emotional understanding. Second, radical finitude means that, though unique and important, we are small in the universe and in the enormously large systems we inhabit, and we are living in the presence of our death. This double recognition has, I believe, a double effect in clinical work. First, it allows us the freedom to play in the clinical situation, to explore possible meanings without feeling too committed to them, to make mistakes and recover with the patient, to learn from the patient, and to make space for the emergence of the patient's own sense of things. Second, it helps our patients and us not to take ourselves too seriously but rather to enjoy whatever gradually becomes possible, given the particular circumstances.

Recognition of our finitude can keep us humble hermeneuts. A great temptation for practitioners in the human sciences—especially dangerous, I will argue, in psychoanalytic work—is the desire to be an expert, one who really knows. An expert is a person who possesses a body of knowledge not readily accessible to the public and who is consulted, either on television or in private, for this expertise. One may have expert knowledge of a foreign political system, of a rare form of cancer, or of the intricacies of tax law. The psychoanalytically oriented clinician, on the contrary, is a practitioner whose expertise consists in Aristotelian *phronesis* (practical wisdom) regarding the emotional life of human beings. This wisdom is not a body of knowledge but a capacity for applied understanding of individual human beings in relational contexts. *Phronesis* is intrinsically particular—just as Aristotle would have said—to this patient, this analyst, this moment in this history. Relinquishing the desire for expertise so that we may acknowledge the experiential uncertainty of practice constitutes a huge personal

challenge, I believe, for most analysts. To learn anything from experience, Gadamer believed, the hermeneut needed to be “radically undogmatic.” We need to be full of humble, but not suspicious, questions.

A conversation that leads to a shared understanding of the patient’s life leaves neither partner to the conversation unchanged. “Openness to the other . . . involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so” (Gadamer et al., 2004, p. 355). From the beginning, the sense that another person tries persistently to understand, often placing the clinician’s previous understandings at risk, surprises many patients deeply and gradually enables them to take similar risks. At every point, the shared search for understanding is transformative. The transformation sought by earlier forms of psychoanalysis (i.e., via interpretations delivered about the patient’s unconscious motivations) was thought to occur because the analyst overcame the patient’s resistances, while the patient accepted and worked through the analyst’s interpretations. A hermeneutic approach, instead, sees interpretation emerging from the shared search for understanding. Unless jointly authored, it is really misinterpretation and misunderstanding. In other words, understandings are not conveyed from one mind into another but emerge from conversation and are thus felt as truthful.

In general, having sketched some relevant history of hermeneutics, we could say that a hermeneutic clinical sensibility includes (a) a strong sense of one’s own situation—including one’s theories, personal history, and personality organization—that constantly and inevitably shapes and limits both one’s actual understanding and one’s capacity to understand a particular patient; (b) a sense of experiential world or system: one’s own, the patient’s, and that formed with the patient; (c) a strong sense of complexity that resists all forms of reductionism and technical rationality in clinical work; (d) a sensitivity to the languages of personal experience, including their nonverbal contexts and forms of expression; (e) a strong developmental-historical sense that gives,

overall, equal emphasis to past and future, that is, a sensibility that attends to processes of emergence, including emergence of defense and dissociation, throughout the clinical process; (f) a sense that understanding is application (i.e., that understanding in the rich sense is curative); and (g) a sense of vocation and devotion similar to Schleiermacher's "rigorous practice." For him, as we have seen, "misunderstanding occurs as a matter of course, and so understanding must be willed and sought at every point" (Schleiermacher & Kimmerle, 1977, p. 110).

### THE HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION

Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005), the most important French philosopher of hermeneutics, contributed a famous distinction in his *Freud and Philosophy* (Ricoeur, 1970). Believing the field of hermeneutics "at war" with itself, divided primarily between psychoanalysis and the phenomenology of religion, he described what he called a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of faith or restoration of meaning. "Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience" (p. 27). The "school of suspicion" included Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, "the three great destroyers." By suspicion he meant not so much interpreting down or disparagingly, reading people's motives as if they were up to no good, but rather looking for motives behind a theory's claims to meaning: impulses, class interests, will to power. What Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud had in common was "the decision to look upon the whole of consciousness primarily as 'false' consciousness" (p. 33). Nevertheless, they were not skeptics, according to Ricoeur, but liberators. More precisely, these 19th-century\* "masters of suspicion" set out to, in Ricoeur's words, "clear the horizon for a more authentic word, for a new reign of Truth, not only by

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\* Had he reached back further into history, I think Ricoeur might particularly have noted Niccolò Machiavelli, though perhaps without the same emancipatory intent, except from illusions of benevolence, even one's own.

means of a ‘destructive’ critique, but by the invention of an art of interpreting” (p. 33). “Beginning with them, understanding is hermeneutics: henceforward, to seek meaning is no longer to spell out the consciousness of meaning but to *decipher its expressions*” (p. 33). In the case of Freud, we see this method not only in his case studies but most explicitly in his *Negation* (1925), where he taught us to read every statement of a patient as meaning the opposite of what the person consciously intended to say. With Habermas, Ricoeur was the philosopher most responsible for making psychoanalysts conscious of our work and theory as hermeneutic.

But Ricoeur also made the *style* of the master of suspicion, including his clever psychoanalyst, clear: “The man of suspicion carries out in reverse the work of falsification of the man of guile” (p. 34). He continued, “Freud entered the problem of false consciousness via the double road of dreams and neurotic symptoms; his working hypothesis has the same limits as his angle of attack, which was ... an economics of instincts” (p. 33). In other words, Freud’s hermeneutics, his theory of meaning, assumes that consciousness always disguises and negates the truth. He therefore had to approach the patient via a tangled theory of underlying and hidden motives, what Ricoeur called a “mediate science of meaning” (p. 33). There could be no direct human-to-human contact. The school of suspicion assumes that the interpreter always faces primarily an effort not to reveal but to conceal. The hermeneut needs, therefore, what Ricoeur called a “double guile” in the attempt to outwit and unmask the motivated falsehoods and deception. What the interpreter seeks to uncover will be unconscious or at least latent. The hermeneut need assume not malicious intent but motivated concealment and disguised meanings. “*Guile will be met by double guile*” (p. 34).

Ricoeur believed that Freud, and the whole psychoanalytic enterprise as he understood it, clearly belonged to this hermeneutic tradition and that this hermeneutics of suspicion made sense insofar as all truth, as Heidegger and other phenomenologists had taught us, is both a revealing and a concealing, that things are and

are not what they seem, that every perspective conceals others. He also, with Habermas (1971), believed that psychoanalysis intended to liberate people and, therefore, that the demystification practiced in its school of suspicion was undoubtedly necessary. To be helpful, the interpreter had to be a skeptic and to teach the patient to be a skeptic. Although Frank Lachmann (2008) critiqued such skepticism, he described it well: “One looks underneath or behind a person’s actions to find the ‘real’ motivations. Behaviors that appear kind, generous, or perhaps even an expression of gratitude and appreciation actually conceal baser, unconscious motivations that are aggressive and narcissistic” (p. 4).

It seems to me that Ricoeur was clearly right about Freud. In his *Negation* (Freud, 1925), he wrote,

The manner in which our patients bring forward their associations during the work of analysis gives us an opportunity for making some interesting observations. “Now you’ll think I mean to say something insulting, but really I’ve no such intention.” We realize that this is a repudiation, by projection, of an idea that has just come up. Or: “You ask who this person in the dream can be. It’s not my mother.” We emend this to: “So it is his mother.” In our interpretation, we take the liberty of disregarding the negation and of picking out the subject-matter alone of the association. It is as though the patient had said: “It’s true that my mother came into my mind as I thought of this person, but I don’t feel inclined to let the association count.” (p. 235)

Thus the content of a repressed image or idea can make its way into consciousness, on condition that it is negated. Negation is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed; indeed it is already a lifting of the repression, though not, of course, an acceptance of what is repressed. We can see how in this the intellectual function is separated from the affective process. (pp. 235–236)

This view of negation fits in very well with the fact that in analysis we never discover a “no” in the unconscious and that recognition of the unconscious on the part of the ego is expressed in a negative formula. There is no stronger evidence that we have been successful in our effort to uncover the unconscious than when the

patient reacts to it with the words “I didn’t think that,” or “I didn’t (ever) think of that.” (p. 239)

Indeed, Freud’s entire dream interpretation method (Freud, 1900) assumes that dreams conceal their true meaning. In general, the patient remains, as does the analyst, an interlocutor who cannot be trusted. Nor does this untrustworthiness yield to a straightforward method like “bracketing” the natural attitude, suggested by Husserl for phenomenologists.

Ruthellen Josselson (2004), who has studied the implications of Ricoeur’s distinction for narrative research, quoted the player king in *Hamlet*:

I do believe you think what now you speak;  
 But what we do determine oft we break.  
 Purpose is but the slave to memory,  
 Of violent birth, but poor validity;  
 Which now, like fruit unripe, sticks on the tree;  
 But fall, unshaken, when they mellow be.  
 Most necessary ’tis that we forget  
 To pay ourselves what to ourselves is debt:  
 What to ourselves in passion we propose,  
 The passion ending, doth the purpose lose.

Conceding to Shakespeare, Freud, and Ricoeur that we are transparent neither to ourselves nor to each other and that we need always to be attentive to complexity of experience, let us consider for a moment some of the clinical costs of a full-on hermeneutics of suspicion. Above all, this suspicious, skeptical, and deconstructive attitude places us at a distance from our patient, and from our patient’s experience, objectifying the patient and reducing the patient’s experience to categories. Second, my clinical attitude may be teaching my patient to take this same attitude toward himself or herself. Third, if as a clinician I am too committed to the hermeneutics of suspicion, I will be distant from my own experience and skeptical toward it and thus less emotionally

available to my patients and in turn more likely to approach them skeptically and with an attitude of veiled superiority.

The hermeneutics of suspicion also, as Josselson (2004) further noted, creates a kind of esotericism: “Nothing is assumed to be accidental ... only those who accept the fundamental premises of psychoanalytic interpretative strategies and understand this orientation to reading signs will find these interpretations coherent and intelligible” (p. 14). One must be initiated into the special language and be accepted as among those “in the know,” among the experts. Even in the name of liberation, elites arise—think how difficult to read is the “theory” of many badly needed cultural and political critiques—speaking languages known only among the critics but meant to unmask the deceptions and pretensions of others. Traditional psychoanalysis has been like that, intending liberation but creating its own dogmatic systems and excommunications.\*

As an interpretative system, the school of suspicion directs its attention to the gaps—indeed Freud used these as his most important argument for the existence of the unconscious (Freud, 1915/1953)—inconsistencies, omissions, and contradictions in the patient’s story. The analyst may or may not be personally suspicious and may or may not intend to keep the patient on edge. But theoretically based assumptions that a question conceals a manipulation, that a gift hides a stratagem, that a “thank you” covers aggressive intentions, that expressions of attachment always hide sexual intentions do tend to keep patients at a distance from us. Even more contemporary assumptions based on more intersubjective and relational theories, where the patient becomes our opponent in a game of chess in which we always need to be anticipating the next moves, can encourage a strong hermeneutics of

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\* Once we enter the hermeneutics of trust, this “esotericism” assumes a different aspect: “It has been an irritating fact to its critics and an embarrassment to its defenders that the deeper aspects of the psychoanalytic experience may only be understood through intimate acquaintance with its practice. In other words, we can only know what psychoanalysis is in the same way that we know what it is to be human” (Reeder, 1998, p. 70).



suspicion. At the very least, we see the other as an opponent who aims to defeat us.

Freud thought his theory of the unconscious justified his version of the hermeneutics of suspicion. Though suspicion may not be cynicism and may remain a part of a devoted search for truth, its *pervasiveness* in psychoanalysis has, in my view, been harmful to both patients and analysts. Taken alone or even predominantly, the school of suspicion is fundamentally pessimistic. It would take more time than I have here to argue for this view, so it must stand as an assumption for now.

Before I turn to the hermeneutics of trust, however, let me say also that I believe the hermeneutics of suspicion, demystification, and unmasking to be both important and unavoidable. This approach teaches us to notice political speech that hides oppression and discrimination. It also remains unavoidable in any psychoanalysis or psychotherapy attuned to complexity and depth in psychological life, where we “suspect” that more is going on than meets the eye. I will therefore most frequently refer, as did Ricoeur, to the “school of suspicion” to signify its pervasive or predominant use. But I will be showing that for a humanistic therapeutics, suspicion must always remain nested within a hermeneutics of trust, where it becomes transformed into the questioning and risking of prejudices within a dialogic process.

## THE HERMENEUTICS OF TRUST

Ricoeur originally\* had somewhat less to say about the hermeneutics of restoration or faith (Grondin, 1994), except to contrast it with the school of suspicion, where he principally located Freud. This school of “rational faith,” in the “very war of hermeneutics” (p. 56), belongs to the phenomenology of religion and seeks restoration of meaning. In Ricoeur’s (1970) own words,

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\* See Chapter 2 for his later thinking influenced by Lévinas.

The imprint of this faith is a care or concern for the object [the text or whatever one interprets] and a wish to describe and not to reduce it. ... Phenomenology is its instrument of hearing, of recollection, or restoration of meaning. "Believe in order to understand, understand in order to believe"—such is its maxim; and its maxim is the "hermeneutic circle" itself of believing and understanding. (p. 28)

Ricoeur did not suggest that we should abandon the hermeneutics of suspicion for this hermeneutics of faith and restoration but rather concluded his discussion of the two by remarking on our perplexity in the face of "harsh hermeneutic discipline" (p. 56).

My own endeavor, however, departs from Ricoeur's at this point while making continual use of it. Because I find an almost unmitigated and merciless hermeneutics of suspicion remaining, often unchallenged, both in psychoanalysis and in popular psychology, including tendencies to shame and blame the victim, I am suggesting that we attempt to describe—if not fully conceptualize—a hermeneutics of trust. My project probably would have proved unwelcome to Ricoeur, though I cannot be sure, because he seems not to have been acquainted much with contemporary trends in psychoanalysis. On the other hand, his friendship with Emmanuel Lévinas might have provided some interest in new forms of therapeutic response, as well as a source of the perplexity (always with Lévinas!) he himself acknowledged.

My own sense of a hermeneutics of trust finds its sources in my long reading of Hans-Georg Gadamer.\* Gadamer scholar James Risser (1997) rightly reminds us that Ricoeur's version of hermeneutics differs from Gadamer's, which assumes a common world and seeks to find meaning within what Robert Dostal (1987) called "the world never lost." A profound sense of belonging—belonging

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\* A related idea appears in philosopher Donald Davidson's (1984) "principle of charity," according to which "if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters" (p. 197).

to world, belonging to conversation, belonging to tradition and history—pervades Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics:

There is always a world already interpreted, already organized into its basic relations, into which experience steps as something new, upsetting what has led to our expectations and undergoing reorganization itself in the upheaval. Misunderstanding and strangeness are not the first factors, so that avoiding misunderstanding can be regarded as the specific task of hermeneutics. Just the reverse is the case. Only the support of the familiar and common understanding makes possible the venture into the alien, and lifting up of something out of the alien, and thus the broadening and enrichment of our own experience of the world. (Gadamer, 1976, p. 13)

Schleiermacher’s dictum that misunderstanding should be expected has to be understood within the hermeneutics of trust, the hermeneutics in which we accord to the other the chance to teach us. Because we live with others in a common world, we risk entrusting ourselves to conversation with others within it and risk reaching out to relieve their suffering.

Gadamer himself, 20 years after *Truth and Method* and 10 years after Ricoeur’s *Freud and Philosophy*, wrote an essay titled “The Hermeneutics of Suspicion,” in which he refused the choice between suspicion and faith that Ricoeur had posed, as Ricoeur himself later did, too. Instead he claimed that all hermeneutics, his dialogic hermeneutics of understanding above all, consists of and depends on participation in a common world:

“Participation” is a strange word. Its dialectic [dialogic conversation in the Platonic sense] is not taking parts, but in a way taking the whole. Everybody who participates in something does not take something away, so that the others cannot have it. The opposite is true: by sharing, by our participating in the things in which we are participating, we enrich them; they do not become smaller, but larger. The whole life of tradition consists exactly in this enrichment so that life is our culture and our past: the whole inner store of our lives is always extending by participating. (Gadamer, 1984, p. 64)

This participatory sense of inclusion and welcome creates a sense that one's questions and thoughts will be treated with respect and hospitality. A climate and style of trust permeates this hermeneutics. British philosopher and Schleiermacher translator Andrew Bowie (2002) noted that Gadamer's whole approach can "serve as a reminder that in many situations the detail of philosophical disagreement is less important than *the preparedness to see that the other may well have a point one has failed to grasp*, and the disagreement may be less important than what is shared by the interlocutors" (p. 2, emphasis added). This attitude, so characteristic of Gadamer, places him as the central philosophical voice of a hermeneutics of trust.

This hermeneutics, further, intends to understand on the assumption that the person—as Shakespeare's player king says—believes in the truth of what he or she is saying. Scrutiny occurs within an atmosphere of trust. In Josselson's (2004) words, "We assume that the participant is the expert on his or her own experience and is able and willing to share meanings" (p. 5). To paraphrase Gadamer in his famous 1981 encounter with Derrida (Michelfelder & Palmer, 1989), we count on the goodwill of both participants in the dialogue as we search for meaning and truth. Furthermore, we expect meaning to be both transparent and hidden, both there to be discovered and emergent from the dialogic process.

We need look no further than Freud's (1952) case of Dora to see the contrast between the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of trust. First, let us note that Dora sought earnestly to get everyone concerned to take her seriously. Still, Freud assumed throughout his account, and presumably throughout the treatment, that everything Dora said meant something else besides what she said it did. (For a splendid example of how things might have turned out otherwise with a different hermeneutic, see Paul Ornstein's, 2005 imagined reanalysis of Dora.)

The hermeneutics of trust does not presume, of course, that the patient will be able to trust us as therapists or analysts, given the background of betrayal and violence that often brings our patients

into our care. Instead this hermeneutics concerns a set of attitudes and values toward our work and toward the suffering strangers who come to us. These attitudes can create a climate in which they may learn—often for the first time—that some parts of the human world are safe to trust and that they can trust their own experience of that world. It is up to the everyday practitioner of this hermeneutics of trust to treat the lost and alienated stranger as one who already belongs to our common world.

At the very least, as Gadamer often said, we listen to the other, expecting that we might learn something and be changed by the other. This critical faith also shares with the hermeneutics of Gadamer an orientation to truth as disclosure, so that being questioned by each other in dialogue becomes our access to what both Augustine and Gadamer called the *verbum interius*, the inner word “that is never spoken but nevertheless resounds in everything that is said” (Grondin, 1994, p. 119; cf. Gadamer et al., 2004, pp. 421–422).<sup>\*</sup> This kind of hermeneutics rests on the assumption that we share with the other, for better and for worse, a common inherited world (Dostal, 1987) within which we attempt to understand whatever we attempt to understand. This is the hermeneutics of trust that I will be illustrating in the courageous psychoanalysts who show up later in this book. It is a kind of *faithfulness* to the other and to the therapeutic task that links with the ethics of Lévinas that I will introduce in the next chapter.

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<sup>\*</sup> Gadamer (1973/1993): “What is stated is not everything. The unsaid is what first makes what is stated into a word that can reach us” (p. 504).