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The Nature and Role of Presupposition: An Inquiry into Contemporary Hermeneutics

Ted Peters

PRESUPPOSITIONS are so basic to human thought that no reflection can do without them. Yet, in the name of clear and honest reasoning, war is often declared against them so that they are to be sought out and eliminated. For the natural scientist and objective historian, presuppositions are like lice in the hair, i.e., something to be cleansed of in order to be made pure and clean. In his work, the ideal scientific thinker believes he must become an innocent *tabula rasa*, a purely open mind onto which the data of his research can inscribe "unbiased" knowledge.

On the other hand, presuppositions earn a living for the philosopher.¹ It is his job to find them, especially the ones located in his opponent's philosophy. They are like termites in a theoretician's house. You examine his home, digging deep into the woodwork, scurry after them, and when you have finally apprehended the elusive little rascals you display them for everyone to see. It would also serve as an appropriate defense to exterminate the bald presuppositions in one's own house. Apparently, bare or unguarded presuppositions make us suspect that the structure of the philosophical system is unsound. Ought this to be the case? Perhaps we need an inquiry into the nature of the presupposition and its role in reflective thought.

In this paper, I am going to suggest that for the philosopher presuppositions ought to be recognized as inevitable and, therefore, he need not be automatically embarrassed when someone else undresses his philosophy to reveal them in their nakedness. Furthermore, presuppositions are the very condition for the possibility of seeking further understanding.

¹ Anders Nygren defines philosophy as the "analysis of presuppositions." *Meaning and Method, Prolegomena to a Scientific Philosophy of Religion and a Scientific Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972) p. 160. W. B. Macomber writes in *The Anatomy of Disillusion, Martin Heidegger's Notion of Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967) p. 20: "The history of Philosophy can be read as a constant search for the presuppositions which underlie human experience. It is these presuppositions, rather than the experience which they make possible, which the philosopher calls reality or truth in the highest degree."

I. FUNDAMENTAL AND CONTINGENT PRESUPPOSITIONS

Presuppositions are different from suppositions and propositions. Presuppositions make suppositions possible, just as suppositions make further suppositions possible. Presuppositions are different because they do not rest upon prior suppositions, but rather derive from a more basic or foundational level of one's way of viewing things. Fundamental presuppositions refer us to the basic structure of one's experience with the world, and this structure makes articulation of that experience possible.

Presuppositions, it would seem, come in at least two varieties: fundamental or ultimate presuppositions and those which are dependent upon them. The latter variety are articulable as suppositions or propositions themselves, and they can become so through drawing out the necessary conditions implied by existing propositions. To state, for example, that "the president is a Republican" presupposes that there exists an office of the presidency, that the man who fills this office truly exists, and other such contingent facts which may also be articulated in propositional form. Of course, once the presupposition is articulated, by definition it ceases to be a pre-supposition and becomes a supposition.

But fundamental or ultimate presuppositions are different. They resist being made into suppositions or propositions. They function to provide the basic framework or pre-understanding which make reflective understanding and articulated propositions possible. They refer us to our fundamental vision of reality and the self-evident truths which are tacitly acknowledged in everything we comprehend and assert.² They can be pointed to as ostensibly present but cannot themselves be fully drawn up into propositional form. It is this character of standing in the background like a horizon that makes such a presupposition what it is.

Hypotheses and axioms could be classified as non-fundamental or non-ultimate presuppositions. A hypothesis is a tentative proposition, intended as a trial explanation for certain empirically observed phenomena. It has a presuppositional capacity in that it serves as a guide for scientific experimentation, as a direction so that the scientist does not engage in the random gathering of unconnected data. Most every working scientist would acknowledge that he uses presuppositions in the sense of hypotheses. But hypotheses are also articulated propositions which are produced

² In asserting that our articulated scientific beliefs rest upon unarticulated foundations, Michael Polanyi writes: "When we accept a certain set of pre-suppositions and use them as our interpretive framework, we may be said to dwell in them as we do in our own body. Their uncritical acceptance for the time being consists in a process of assimilation by which we identify ourselves with them. They are not asserted and cannot be asserted, for assertion can be made only within a framework with which we have identified ourselves for the time being; as they are themselves our ultimate framework, they are essentially inarticulable." *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, Torchbook Edition, 1958), p. 60.

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from empirical data gathering; they are consciously challenged and altered as the data demands. Fundamental presuppositions change too, but it is not a conscious or planned enterprise.

An axiom is a basic assumption, usually conceived as self-evident, and from which certain consequences can be rationally deduced and conclusions drawn by logical necessity. However, axioms are articulated and function as a link in a rational chain with theorems and other axioms. But because they are drawn from basic self-evidence, they come closer than hypotheses to fundamental presuppositions.³

The emerging discipline of philosophical hermeneutics is vitally concerned with the nature and function of presuppositions, especially the fundamental or basic variety. However, what is said may be usually applied to both ultimate and contingent presuppositions, because hermeneutics seeks to deal with the whole range of human experience. The term which appears most frequently is 'pre-understanding' (*Vorverständnis*), but the Heidelberg philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, even uses the term 'pre-judgment' (*Vorurteil*). Critics sometimes lump such terms together with the idea that they all indicate an illegitimate prejudice, i.e., they decide the answer of an inquiry in advance so that nothing new can be learned.⁴ But just the opposite is in fact the case; it is our pre-understanding which makes further understanding possible. For the purposes of the present discussion, the terms 'presupposition', 'pre-judgment', and 'prejudice' may be used interchangeably. Although they have varying connotations in popular language, they logically denote the same phenomenon: a pre-articulated structure of beliefs which directs the consciousness to perceive, organize, and meaningfully understand the objects and events it encounters.

II. PRESUPPOSITIONS AND THE HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE

The idea of the hermeneutical circle maintains that in order to understand the meaning of any one thing we must understand the context or whole of which it is a part, and, in reverse, to understand the meaning of the whole we must understand the individual parts that make it up. Luther and the other reformers employed the circle in the interpretation of Scripture. Presupposing the unity of the Bible, they maintained that

³ Nygren is inconsistent in his presentation. He first states that axioms are based upon basic self-evidence (*Meaning and Method*, p. 193), but then he contrasts them with fundamental presuppositions (which are self-evident) because axioms are "selective" presuppositions (p. 206).

⁴ Anders Nygren, in attempting to isolate what he calls "philosophical presuppositions" (fundamental presuppositions) from other similar concepts, erroneously identifies the hermeneutical concept of 'pre-understanding' with 'prejudice' according to which the "issue is decided in advance, before we even get to the material." *Ibid.*, p. 201. As we shall see, hermeneutical scholars repudiate the contention

one would have to understand the whole of the text before the individual parts could make sense and, conversely, it is only by working through the parts that one arrives at an understanding of the whole. The philologist, Friedrich Ast (1778-1841), employed the insight of the circular relationship between whole and part in his interpretation of classical literature. Schleiermacher recognized that understanding is a referential operation: we understand something by comparing it to something we already know.

Wilhelm Dilthey subsequently applied the concept of the hermeneutical circle to the relationship between the parts and the whole of one's life. And meaning is something historical: it is a relationship of whole and parts seen by us from a given standpoint, at a given time. An event or experience can so significantly alter our lives that what was formally meaningful is shifted and takes on a different meaning in the light of the new context. However, context itself is never drawn from an Archimedean point above history but is always a product of its constituent historical parts.⁵ Interpretation, then, is always an event taking place in a situation, the context (*Zusammenhang*) in which the interpreter and the text or any other expression of life stand. Meaning is, therefore, always meaning in relationship. It is not a something contained within itself or imported from beyond the plane of human history.

Hans-Georg Gadamer further develops the circle in terms of the relationship between a living tradition and its interpretation, which itself is part and parcel of that tradition. The interpretation is therefore always partial and finite, conditioned by the historical situation in which it takes place. For we always interpret a tradition from within a tradition. Tradition provides the basis for interpretation, invites new interpretation, and this renovating interpretation keeps the tradition alive. The hermeneutical event is not so much an encounter between an interpreter and a text but between the horizon of human understanding and the particular historical situation in which it is already involved. Tradition is always in movement, always in transmission, because the historical situation is undergoing constant change. The movement of interpretation is evoked by this very movement of transmission. The two together constitute the circular movement of the hermeneutical event.

What is required for an understanding of texts, or of one's tradition, is some sort of pre-apprehension or pre-understanding of the whole of which the objects of study are parts. This brings us to Gadamer's argument for the necessity of pre-judgment (*Vorurteil*), a subject upon which Heidegger has the definitive position, in Gadamer's estimation.⁶

⁵ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1968), VII, 261-62.

⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1965), p. 277; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Kleine Schriften* (3 vol.; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1967-72), I, 142. The term "pre-judgment," reminding us of the word

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In order to interpret anything, we must begin by projecting a pre-understanding of what it is we are about to interpret.⁷ But, of course, it follows that this preliminary understanding must come from ourselves; it must be constituted by our own expectations, attitudes, and predispositions; in short, it comes from our "prejudices." Because pre-judgment is an intrinsic element in all human understanding, Gadamer cannot say it is intrinsically harmful. In fact, because our understanding of anything is always an interpretation of it through our pre-judgments, there is some guarantee that things will have significance for us.⁸

This analysis of pre-judgment is dependent upon a wider analysis of the relationship between understanding and interpretation. For both Gadamer and Heidegger, what we ordinarily mean by the term understanding is already interpretation. Understanding for these two men is a far more inclusive concept than the thematized or cognitive apprehension (or interpretation) of what is understood. 'Understanding' for them refers to the wider context describing our embeddedness in the world, and 'interpretation' refers to our making explicit or thematizing a part of what we already understand.⁹ This distinction helps to illumine the ground for our pre-judgments or pre-understanding. Whenever we attempt to interpret an event in our life, it is already in some sense understood; and from there we attempt to explicate or articulate it as it is found in that al-

'judgment' (*Urteil*), is the most literal translation of Gadamer's term, *Vorurteil*. However, Gadamer allows the concept of *Vorurteil* to include the connotations of 'pre-supposition', 'predisposition', and 'prejudice' as well. In his polemic against the Enlightenment, the stronger term, 'prejudice' becomes the most appropriate connection, although there may be some risk that the reader will overlook the vital over the distinction between simple pre-judgment and prejudice, as E. D. Hirsch has done, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 258-64.

⁷ *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 251, 275-77; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp. 188 f.

⁸ "We find here the well-known problem which Heidegger analyzed under the title of the hermeneutical circle. The problem concerns the astounding naivete of its subjective consciousness that, in trying to understand a text, says 'But that is what is written here!' Heidegger showed that this is quite a natural reaction, and often enough a reaction of the highest self-critical value. But in truth there is nothing that is simply 'there.' Everything that is said and is there in the text stands under anticipations. This means, positively, that only what stands under anticipations can be understood at all and not what one simply confronts as something unintelligible. The fact that erroneous interpretations also arise from anticipations and, therefore, understanding, could be one of the ways in which the finitude of human nature operates. A necessarily circular movement is involved in the fact that we read or understand what is there with our own eyes and our own thoughts." *Kleine Schriften*, I, 142, tr. by David Linge.

ready understood character. It is this prereflective complex of relationships characterized by understanding that is the ground of meaning. Meaning is not simply superimposed upon experience, but comes to us embedded in experience itself. Thus, on the one hand, there can be no act of interpretation without some sort of presupposition coming into play, but, on the other hand, that presupposition is not an arbitrary imparting of value either.¹⁰

Heidegger describes interpretation as a thematic articulation of a totality of meaningful relationships grasped by the pre-structure of understanding.

The ready-to-hand is always understood in terms of a totality of involvements. This totality need not be grasped explicitly by a thematic interpretation. Even if it has undergone such an interpretation, it recedes into an understanding which does not stand out from the background. And this is the very mode in which it is the essential foundation for everyday circumspective interpretation. In every case the interpretation is grounded in something we have in advance—in a fore-having (*Vorhabe*) . . . in something we see in advance—in a fore-sight (*Vorsicht*) . . . in something we grasp in advance—in a fore-conception (*Vorgriff*).¹¹

The most important consequence of the circularity of understanding for hermeneutics is that there is no pure starting point for understanding because every act of understanding takes place within a finite historically conditioned horizon, within an already understood frame of reference. It is no longer a question of how we are to enter the hermeneutical circle, because human consciousness is always already in it. We understand only by constant reference to what we have already understood, namely, our past and anticipated experience. The experiencing and reflecting subject is never a *tabula rasa* upon which the understanding of raw experience inscribes its objective character; rather, all experience and reflection are the result of a confrontation between one's pre-understanding or even prejudice and new or perhaps strange objects. The inevitable presence of pre-understanding or prejudice is not necessarily the distortion of the meaning of an object by an arbitrary subject, rather, it is the very condition for any understanding at all.

III. PRESUPPOSITION VS. PREJUDICE

We may well ask at this point whether or not the hermeneutical circle is a vicious circle, i.e., a process of coming to knowledge wherein only that which has been previously decided by our prejudices as knowable can become known, thereby preventing the reception of any new knowledge.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 191 f.
¹¹ *Ibid.*

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The very figure of the circle conveys an image of knowledge reissuing from itself without change; each point serving equally as the end and the beginning. But this question is an enduring one. It is sometimes formulated: how does one bridge the gap from what he knows to what he does not know? This problem was raised clearly by Plato in his dialogue, *Meno*:

Meno: And how will you enquire, Socrates, into that which you do not know? What will you put forth as the subject of enquiry? And if you find what you want, how will you ever know that this is the thing which you did not know?

Socrates: I know, Meno, what you mean; but just see what a tiresome dispute you are introducing. You argue that a man cannot enquire either about that which he knows, or about that which he does not know; for if he knows, he has no need to enquire; and if not, he cannot; for he does not know the very subject about which he is to enquire.¹²

If one begins with an ideal of knowledge based upon the Cartesian divorce of the subject from its object, then the subject's presuppositions will be assessed as preventing the clean clear reception of the object into understanding. Heidegger, however, contends that presuppositions are the very condition for any reception of the object whatsoever. His notions of the ontological character of understanding and the primordial connection of subject and object in their pre-reflective relational whole (*Bewandnis*) provides the derivative form of a prior understanding, in which the interpretation is a derivative form of a prior understanding. For him, all in-prior relationship between subject and object is brought to explication. If we try to eliminate pre-judgments or pre-conceptions in order to meet the requirements of objectivist science, then we miss what Heidegger as well as Gadamer mean by understanding.

But if we see this circle as a vicious one and look out for ways of avoiding it, even if we just "sense" it as an inevitable imperfection, then the act of understanding has been misunderstood from the ground up. The assimilation of understanding and interpretation to a definite ideal of knowledge is not the issue here. Such an ideal is itself only a subspecies of understanding . . . What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way. This circle of understanding is not an orbit in which any random kind of knowledge may move; it is the expression of the existential *fore-structure* of *Dasein* itself. It is not to be reduced to the level of a vicious circle or even of a circle which is merely tolerated. In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing.¹³

¹² *Meno*, 80, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, tr. by B. Jowett, (New York: Random House, 1937), I, 359-60.

¹³ *Being and Time*, pp. 194 f; cf. p. 362. Paul Ricoeur writes: ". . . the circle is not a vicious circle, still less a mortal one; it is living and stimulating." *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 351. See also Theodore Kaczynski, "The Symbolism of Evil."

Because of the inclination to reduce the hermeneutical circle to a vicious circle, perhaps an image other than the circle would better convey what we mean by this characteristic of understanding. A comment by E. Schillebeeckx in his essay, "Towards a Catholic Use of Hermeneutics," suggests to me that the image of the spiral may communicate better what is meant.

All understanding takes place in a circular movement—the answer is to some extent determined by the question, which is in turn confirmed, extended or corrected by the answer. A new question then grows out of this understanding, so that the hermeneutical circle continues to develop in a never-ending spiral.¹⁴

The point is that understanding moves in a dialectical progression, and that it is truly a progression. The conclusion, although thrusting one back upon his presuppositions, does not merely leave one back where he started, as the image of the circle might convey. This means that we are not enclosed within a wall of pre-judgments which prohibits anything new from being understood. The answer to a question causes that question to be reformulated, thereby, requiring a new answer. I believe the picture or image of the *spiral* more adequately portrays this character of the hermeneutical process.

The theologian, Rudolf Bultmann, succinctly states the need for presuppositions in interpreting the Bible while enjoining us to avoid illegitimate prejudices.

The question whether exegesis without presupposition is possible must be answered affirmatively if "without presuppositions" means "without presupposing the results of the exegesis." In this sense, exegesis without presuppositions is not only possible but demanded. In another sense, however, no exegesis is without presuppositions, inasmuch as the exegete is not a *tabula rasa*, but on the contrary, approaches the text with specific questions or with a specific way of raising questions and thus has a certain idea of the subject matter with which the text is concerned.¹⁵

The problem with an illegitimate prejudice, of course, is that it determines in advance the result of an inquiry. It passes final judgment before (*prae*) the case has been brought to trial (*iudicium*). But that which makes a prejudice ugly is not that it passes judgment but that it refuses to

of Tradition: The Hermeneutics of Gadamer and Heidegger," *Man and World*, 2 (1969), 362.

¹⁴ E. Schillebeeckx, *God the Future of Man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), pp. 7 f.

¹⁵ "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" in *Existence and Faith*, *The Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, tr. and ed. by Schubert M. Ogden (Cleveland and New York: World Pub. Co., Living Age Edition, 1960), p. 289; cf. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 261 ff. and *Kleine Schriften*, I, 105 f.

alter that judgment when something new is experienced. Human understanding described in terms of the hermeneutical spiral can admit new experience, thereby altering its pre-judgments, if it seriously utilizes the question.

IV. PRESUPPOSITIONS AND QUESTIONING

"Whoever would think must question," says Gadamer.¹⁶ In order to question without restrictive prejudice, the questioner must be open to new experience. But openness is never the pure openness of the *tabula rasa* variety. Due to our inescapable historical finitude, our openness has a certain directedness or intentionality, and the structure of the question actively focuses that directedness. A particular question reflects a *particular* not-knowing; it asks, "how is it: this way or that way?" Gadamer concludes that the structure of questioning is implicit in all experience.

It is obvious that in all experience the structure of questioning is presupposed. Experience is not to be had without questioning. The realization that some matter is other than one had first thought presupposes the process of passing through questioning. The openness which lies in the nature of experience is, logically seen, as openness to thus or thus. It has the structure of the question.¹⁷

The factor of negativity is integral to the nature of the question. To open oneself to new experience by asking questions recognizes implicitly that the answer is not yet determined. A rhetorical question, then, is only a pseudo question, because it presumes its own answer at the beginning and is consequently no longer open to the new. To ask a question is to recognize that one does not know something about something; we know that we do not know (*das Wissen des Nichtwissens*). Gadamer calls upon the Socratic *docta ignorantia* which describes this role of negativity in dialectical questioning.¹⁸

As already stated, openness is not absolute because a question is always directional or intentional in character.¹⁹ The question arises from the pre-understanding of the questioner in the encounter with his ongoing heritage, so that the question provides the condition to which the answer to

¹⁶ *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 357.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 344.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Note in this respect John Macquarrie's discussion of the German term, "Fragestellung," and how the way of "putting the question determines the answer," in relation to the accused anthropocentric theology of Rudolf Bultmann. The Fragestellung of the theologian is the question of human existence, more specifically "my existence." This Fragestellung, Bultmann claims, has its precedent in the New Testament itself. *An Existentialist Theology* (New York: Harper, 1955), pp. 11-12.

¹⁹ *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 345.

that question must conform in order for it to make sense. The answer has meaning only in terms of the question. The placing of a question puts what is questioned in a certain light. By giving it a distinctive form the question lifts the object out from its background or context of relations so that it can be apprehended: in this way it "breaks open" the being of what is questioned. Prior to the *formulation* of the question, and thereby the *formation* of the answer, the answer itself was indiscernibly blended in with the fabric of the questioner's horizon. Thus, there is a finite structure to the way that answers disclose reality to the open questioner. Real questioning, then, seeks the disclosure of what-is; it is open to the unknown. But at the same time, it necessarily specifies the boundaries of what will be disclosed.²⁰

Wrong questions can be distinguished from genuine questions by ascertaining whether or not they provide openness to new understanding. If a question is wrongly posed then it will yield no true knowledge of what-is. Such a question Gadamer labels "oblique" (*eine schiefe Frage*), because it does not lead to an answer that will further one's knowledge.

We do not call them false, but rather oblique (*schief*), because a question nevertheless stands behind them, i.e., an openness is intended—although it does not lie in the direction in which the question was posed . . . The obliqueness of a question consists in the fact that the question contains no real sense of direction, thereby, making no answer possible. Similarly, we may say of assertions (*Behauptungen*) which are neither completely true or false that they are oblique. . . . The meaning (*Sinn*) of what is right must answer in terms of the direction prepared by a question.²¹

The procedure for arriving at the proper question, according to Gadamer, is to immerse oneself in dialogue with the subject matter. Knowledge is dialectical from the ground up and it can be had only by the person who thrusts what he already knows into the dynamic contrasting of "yes" and "no," i.e., only he can have knowledge who has questions. Thus, a dialogue with reality differs from an argument between two disputants, because in an argument the one arguing seeks to retain his opening assertion by negating the credibility of his opponent's position. In dialogue, on the other hand, one accepts the negations of his own assertions and corrects them through posing new questions. "A dialogue does not try to argue down the other person, but one tests his assertions in light of the subject itself."²²

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 345-48; *Kleine Schriften I*, 54; cf. also Richard Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1969), p. 182.

²¹ *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 346.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 346.

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V. PRESUPPOSITIONS AND TRADITION

The Enlightenment viewed prejudice as judgment without basis or grounding in reality, and, therefore, as the source of error in judgment.²³ The Enlightenment protested against the concept of authority, especially in the form of the authoritative tradition of the Church, because it did not fit its own emerging doctrine of man and because authority was held responsible for causing pre-judgments. Authority (illegitimately) imposed judgment. This precipitated the chief hermeneutical concern during the period: if the Bible could not be accepted on authority, then how are we to correctly understand (without pre-judgments) the biblical tradition? The overriding tendency of the Enlightenment was to subject all tradition and authority to the judgment of "unprejudiced" human reason.²⁴

But where do we get our presuppositions? Gadamer says they come from the historical tradition (*Überlieferung, Tradition*) in which we find ourselves.²⁵ This tradition does not merely stand over against our subjective thinking as an object, but rather it is the very context and fabric of relations to which we belong, the horizon within which we do our thinking. Thus, our tradition can never fully become the object of methodical judgments (*Urteile*) because it itself supplies the very conditions for making our judgments, namely, our pre-judgments (*Vorurteile*).²⁶ Our understanding is never that of a transcendent consciousness with a supra-historical rational structure; it is an understanding that is already placed in history and tradition. It is this fact which provides the condition for broadening one's horizon to admit new experiences into understanding, and thereby to alter or enhance one's pre-understanding.

The anticipation of meaning which guides our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, rather it is determined by our participation in the tradition. But this participation is, in relation to the tradition, continuously developing. It is not simply a presupposition, under which we always al-

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 255, 262. "The watchword of the Enlightenment was 'freedom from prejudice.' To this watchword there corresponds the ideal of a presuppositionless science. . . ." "The Power of Reason," *Man and World*, 3 (1970), 11 f.

²⁴ *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 256 ff. 262. One ought to distinguish, however, between the authority of tradition and personal authority at this point. An appeal to personal authority would not be rejected automatically by the Enlightenment mind if it were believed that the person to whom the appeal was directed had himself arrived at his position through the careful use of reason. Such authority would be acceptable because the same insight is in principle available to all minds. The authority of tradition, as the Enlightenment saw it, arbitrarily asserted conclusions without regard for rational analysis and thereby precluded the possibility of correcting its errors. *Ibid.*, p. 263. Gadamer further notes that along with the Enlightenment the Reformation also opposed authoritative tradition. *Ibid.*, p. 262.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 261-75, 288, 437 f.

ready stand, but we produce it ourselves, as we understand and so participate in the tradition-event. . . .²⁷

The pre-understanding is not a formal structure given with human nature but rather it is provided by and moves with the tradition.

The guiding clues for Gadamer's construction of the role tradition plays in understanding are taken from Heidegger's "hermeneutic of facticity." The full significance of what it means to belong to a tradition implies as basic the radical finitude and temporality of facticity, beyond which one cannot go to locate some transcendental ego or independent consciousness. We belong to history much more than it belongs to us, and the pre-judgments bequeathed to us by our tradition much more than our judgments determine the reality of our being.²⁸ Even before they become a problem of knowledge, our "prejudices" are an ontological fact, indicative of the facticity of the historically transmitted pre-understanding on the basis of which we can understand anything at all. The trick is to begin appropriately in knowledge where we have already found ourselves in Being. The problem for finite reasoning, then, is not to discard prejudices in order to arrive at an absolutely objective starting point, but rather to determine what distinguishes legitimate prejudices from the prejudices which obstruct understanding. Reason cannot simply reject the cultivation of tradition on the grounds that it is an illegitimate authority, because tradition itself lives right on in the one doing the reasoning.²⁹ With this in mind, Gadamer reverses what most of us have come to take for granted by contending that reason is dependent upon tradition and authority and, further, that it is the moment of tradition and not reason which is the source of freedom in history.

Gadamer begins to revise our ordinary understanding of authority in a brief but perceptive statement.³⁰ He says that the burden of the idea of authority rests in its acceptance rather than its imposition. For example, a government can be said to be exercising a considerable authority in a situation where its people go about their daily life in full accord with its policies and with very little call for external coercion. On the other hand, a government can be said to be losing its authority in a situation where there is widespread disregard for its laws and decrees, especially if it requires increased police enforcement to maintain order. Open rebellion, even when quashed by government forces, signifies the absence of its authority. Thus, the measure of authority is found in the degree of its acceptance, to the extent that it is found valid and meaningful in people's lives, not in its arbitrary imposition. The condition for that authority's acceptance is its attunement with what already lies more or less pre-reflectively

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in the pre-understanding or accepted horizon of the people.

Gadamer has demonstrated that there is no fundamental opposition between authority in the form of tradition, on the one hand, and reason, on the other. He is not willing, however, simply to substitute tradition for reason as the Romantics did. Tradition is authoritative for us because our very historical finite being (and that is all the being we have) is determined through it. In so far as it is assumed that the structure of reason in the mind corresponds to the structure of what-is in the real world, it can be posited that tradition becomes the ground for validating rational assertions. Reason is dependent upon the tradition in which it finds itself at work.

It is widely recognized by philosophers that the pre-suppositions of any system of thought are not themselves subject to proof; they are the self-evident truths which make proofs possible. That is why they are pre-suppositions and not suppositions. Life precedes thought about life, and one's horizontal vision precedes all rational conceptuality which takes place within that horizontal vision. A. N. Whitehead says it when he speaks about an experience with "evidence" prior to rational explanation of that experience:

Thus evidence is presupposed by logic; at least, it is presupposed by the assumption that logic has any importance.

Philosophy is the attempt to make manifest the fundamental evidence as to the nature of things. Upon the presupposition of this evidence, all understanding rests.³¹

A rational philosophical system is the explication of some prior principles gained through the evidential experience of order and coherency in the nature of things. The principles upon which such a philosophy is founded are themselves then prior to the resulting philosophy and come from the philosopher's experience in his cultural tradition, broadened of course by his own response to the existential predicaments which he as a human being has faced. Such a position does not mean that Gadamer or Whitehead are anti-rationalist. If our experience with what-is affords to us the notion of coherency or order (a 'logos' or 'logical' structure) in nature, then we are not making a mistake when we admit that to our understanding. But the very fact that there is coherency and order already present when we begin to reflect upon our experience is itself not subject to the logical categories of coherency and order which we employ in our rational thinking. The ground of logical principles is not subject to analysis.

³¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 48.

This passage indicates the requirement for an empirical grounding of an adequate philosophical understanding in addition to the internal coherency and logic of its rational formulation. Whitehead concludes that there must be two sides to philosophy: an empirical side and a rational side. *Process and Reality* (New York: Mac-

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 277; cf. Palmer, pp. 182 f.

²⁸ *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 261.

²⁹ Theodore Kisiel, "The Happening of Tradition," p. 362.

sis by those same principles. The rational nature of things is a boat in a wider sea of mystery. Reason requires tradition as an island of solid ground from which to launch its pursuit. Tradition thus becomes an authority which establishes the intentional perimeter to which the reasoning mind finally appeals, whether it is aware of it or not. It is not a question of either tradition or reason for Gadamer, but *both/and*.

CONCLUSION

All inquiry depends upon prior insight. Human being (*Dasein*) anywhere at anytime exists with some insight. The priority of insight places knowledge obtained through methodical inquiry at the level of a secondary mediation of experience.

What is a presupposition? A presupposition helps constitute the unspoken horizon which makes a reflective supposition possible. A fundamental presupposition refers us to the structure of the most basic insight, the pre-reflective connection between the knower and that which is known. And the structure of this insight is basically acquired from the historical and linguistic tradition in which the events of understanding are taking place. It is because one has such an insight, or such a presupposition, which serves as a sort of primal authority, that new understandings can be admitted with the power to convince. Presuppositions are inevitable; they are shared; they determine the form of the questions we ask; and they provide the condition for the possibility of acquiring any new understanding.