

# Chapter 17

## Hermeneutic Ontology

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### 17.1 Historical Presuppositions

#### 17.1.1 *The Perils of Traditional Ontology*

Ontology is traditionally conceived as the investigation of what there is or, a bit more precisely, the attempt to determine the most basic and general ways of being. This endeavor typically entails the project of articulating the fundamental kinds of beings, frequently with the aim of sorting them into a taxonomic order (where some kinds are superordinate or structure the others).<sup>1</sup> The aim of the investigation is to provide inventories corresponding to these sorts and levels of being, inventories that are as complete and ordered as possible, based upon an understanding of the characteristics essential to whatever is, both generally and specifically.

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<sup>1</sup>Though the coinage of the term ‘ontology’ is relatively modern, investigation of this sort is akin to medieval philosophers’ preoccupation with determining the basic categories or predicates (*praedicamenta*) of things, the basic ways of being able to predicate one thing of another (*praedicabilia*), as well as those terms like ‘thing’ or ‘being’ itself that are predicated across the basic categories, the so-called ‘transcendentals’. The discipline of ontology also has obvious roots in Aristotle’s metaphysics or, more precisely, in disambiguating Aristotle’s sometimes confusing remarks about the subject matter of metaphysics. This confusion led Islamic philosophers, at least as they were read by Latin authors, to differing accounts of that subject matter, depending upon whether theology or what was subsequently deemed ‘ontology’ is its center of gravity. Telling in this connection is the question with which Duns Scotus opens his commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*: “Utrum subiectum metaphysicae sit ens inquantum ens, sicut posuit Avicenna, vel Deus et intelligentiae sicut posuit Commentator Averroes?” See Scotus (1893, p. 11). In this traditional context, ontology corresponds to the sort of discipline entailed by the metaphysical investigation of *on he on* (ens inquantum ens) which might be translated ‘being as being’ or, perhaps more clearly, ‘beings insofar as they exist.’ This translation, for which I am indebted to John Tomarchio, complements Aristotle’s differentiation of metaphysics from other disciplines, including mathematics, that study only parts of beings, in detachment from their existence; see *Metaphysics* Γ, 1 (1003a21-31).

There are considerable obstacles to the pursuit of this objective. Not least of these difficulties is the fact that ordinary and even scientific discourse is often notoriously profligate or, at least, uninhibited in assigning reality to a host of candidates in ways that, upon further examination, are not always evidently compatible. Perhaps not surprisingly, the history of ontology itself reflects considerable difference of opinion as to whether the fundamental sorts of being are substantial individual entities (relatively permanent ‘things’ in a more prosaic sense), structures, classes, properties (e.g., quantities or qualities), relations, collections, composites, dispositions, functions, events, processes, and/or any number of other determinations of beings. The options here are multiple but seemingly not unlimited, since no ontology dispenses with hierarchies. Nor can it, given the fact that the prospects of theoretical explanation largely determine the scope and granularity of ontological investigations. For similar reasons, inasmuch as the scientific enterprise of theoretical explanation provides the horizon for descriptions of what there is (as it has since Aristotle), no ontology is purely descriptive.<sup>2</sup>

Debate over the basic ontological categories typically turns on the explanatory horizon informing the determination of the categories. The explanatory power of any ontology depends upon the effectiveness of its differentiation of certain basic categories of being (including categories of their interrelationships) and its capacity to demonstrate the derivativeness of less basic categories (or of even a sub-categorical level). At the same time, ontology is faced with the considerable dilemma of justifying this pretension (its categorical account of what is) for the inaccessible future. Closely connected to this last difficulty is the problem of determining suitable constraints. In the process of trying to get a handle on what is and what is not the case, ontology inevitably and quite reasonably issues constraints. While the aim of formulating these constraints is to facilitate further investigation, ontology must guard against rendering the constraints so restrictive that they serve as impediments to research, pre-emptively foreclosing the emergence of different categories of beings or modes of access to them.

### ***17.1.2 Regional and Formal Ontologies***

Husserl responds to these difficulties by insisting on two (complementary) distinctions. He distinguishes essential (purely conceptual or theoretical) from factual (empirical or existential) characteristics of being. Only essential characteristics are the proper subject matter of ontology. Husserl is by no means the first ontologist to articulate and endorse this distinction. What Husserl contributes, in addition to making the distinction precise, is the requisiteness of a phenomenology as the method for ascertaining the essential characteristics of things. Ontology, he submits, can lay claim to determining such essential characteristics only as the product of a discernment of properly reduced contents of consciousness or, more

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<sup>2</sup>Insofar as a description is made with a view to possible explanation, the description has an explanatory bias.

precisely, the properly reduced contents contained in a corresponding form of consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

This last qualification is necessary since, given the complexities among beings, there is reason to be skeptical that one method and the determination of a single, overriding sort of being suits all subject matters. The second crucial distinction introduced by Husserl is based upon an appreciation of the fact that our access to essential characteristics of being differs from one region to another and across such regions. One region of beings may seem to dictate one approach, while another region appears more open to a different approach (photosynthesis is measurable only in vegetation; you can ask human beings but not spiders how a particular food tastes). Some regional characteristics may prove more general than others and, indeed, such that they subsume more particular regional characteristics (e.g., a capacity to initiate one's movements in contrast to possession of a vertebrate). Research within a region may take the form of specialization or generalization accordingly. At the same time, researchers move from region to region in a way that presupposes a common logical space. Within a given region, for example, it may be possible to differentiate those aspects of being that are generic (e.g., being animate) and those that are particular (e.g., being ambulatory), as well as those aspects of being that correspond to ways of speaking of them across the particular/generic distinction (e.g., as parts and/or wholes). In other words, the movement across regions supposes the possibility of considerations so formal (neutral with respect to their content) that they can pertain to any and all regions. The generalizations within one or more regions (e.g., taxonomies forming 'trees' in the mathematical sense) are not to be confused with determinations of a formal nature that apply equally across regions and across generic as well as more specific levels.

These sorts of considerations prompted Husserl to distinguish generalization from formalization as well as regional from formal ontologies (Husserl 1968, 252ff; Husserl 1980, pp. 23–27, 304–313). Regional or material ontologies are synthetic a priori disciplines about particular regions of objects. Each region is constituted in one way or another in accordance with consciousness and thus delineates in advance (a priori) our modes of access to it (or, equivalently, its manner of presenting itself to scientific scrutiny). On this material or regional level, then, Husserl's working hypothesis is that of an ontological pluralist. He does not assume or look to establish a superordinate set of synthetic a priori statements, with different regional ontologies in a subordinate relationship to it.

Formal ontology is, by contrast, an analytic a priori discipline, basic parts of which are, not identical, but equivalent to formal logic, a discipline that focuses on the essential possibilities of inference (including its various elements, e.g., concepts, judgments, assertions, the truth of assertions). Such principles of formal logic can be transformed into "equivalent" formulations of formal ontology, as focus shifts,

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<sup>3</sup>Husserl (1980, 115ff, 139ff). As the cited sections make clear, the essences described in transcendental phenomenology are fundamentally distinct from those of other eidetic disciplines, such as mathematics.

for example, from principles governing judgments to principles governing states of affairs (*Sachverhalte*), about which judgments are made. So, too, the attention shifts from assertions and their capacity to convey the truth about objects and states-of-affairs to what it is to be an object or state-of-affairs (akin to the shift from *de dicto* to *de re*) as well as what it is to refer to them. However, formal ontology not only entails and thus parallels formal logic but, in another sense, also includes it since propositions and inferences (as well as references) exist no less than objects or states-of-affairs. One of the principal structures of the purely formal relations of objects among themselves and across regions is mereological, with the crucial distinction between dependent and independent parts (Husserl 1968, pp. 216–293).

### 17.1.3 *Phenomenological Ontology and the Task of Grounding*

Ontological considerations at both regional and formal levels make up the presuppositions and the aims of Husserl's phenomenological project. Ontology in regional and formal senses presupposes not only its subject matter but also access to that subject matter, some way of thinking and speaking about beings and the types of beings, in short, a method. As the relation of formal ontology to formal logic and semantics illustrates, an ontology entails some account of its ways of identifying and sorting out the essences of various kinds of beings. Husserl conceives phenomenology as the project of investigating the evidence for the ontological descriptions of the essential features of particular regions and across regions. The principle of all principles, as Husserl puts it, is the need to ground all theoretical claims in intuition (*Anschauung*), a term signifying the adept observations and discernments of – in some cases even the expert insight into – the essential features of the domain about which those claims are made (Husserl 1980, 43f). But observations and discernments are clearly not all of a single stripe.<sup>4</sup> It remains incumbent on a phenomenological ontology, as Husserl conceives it, to take into account essential features of being and our access to those features both on and across various regions, for example, from micro to macro levels and everything in between. While each ontology of this sort is a self-contained sphere unto itself, marked by a certain conceptual closure, Husserl does not set any limits on the number or scope of such regional ontologies. Husserl's differentiation of formal and regional ontologies, together with the open-endedness of the latter, stands in sharp contrast to any traditional ontological pretension to some sort of single taxonomic order ('tree') of beings.

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<sup>4</sup>Husserl in effect follows Aristotle's advice that the subject matter dictates the method and mode of knowing it. See Smith and Smith (1995, p. 32): "In the three books of the *Ideas*, Husserl argued that to every domain of objects there is correlated a form of 'intuition' (*Anschauung*) through which we come to know the given objects in the most adequate achievable way. Observations in nature are known through perception, acts of consciousness are known through phenomenological reflection, values are known through emotions, other people's experiences are known through empathy, ideal species or essences are known through 'eidetic variation,' and so on."

This last observation suggests a ‘bottoms-up’ strategy of working from the accounts of what there is in or across domains, afforded by the respective experts. The same ‘bottoms-up’ strategy holds for formal ontology, though the domain from which the formal ontologist works is universal, namely, formal logic and the aspects of things entailed by formal logic. Immersing herself in the ongoing work of developing scientific accounts of particular regions or across regions, the phenomenologist attempts to identify and describe the essential possibilities at each level on the basis of intuitions or discernments of them or, in other words, in terms of the manners in which those features are given and accessible – and not constructed – in consciousness. Although material reality underlies all other realities for Husserl, he does not consider those other realities reducible to complexes of material reality, arguing instead that each distinctive type of reality has ‘its own constitutive phenomenology’ (Husserl 1980, p. 319). In keeping with his brand of ontological pluralism (noted above), the aim of his phenomenological method is to disclose ‘the complete system of the formations of consciousness constituting the original givenness of all such objectivities [*Objektivitäten*] and thereby make intelligible the equivalent in consciousness to the respective type of ‘reality’” (Husserl 1980, p. 319). Even if phenomenology for Husserl, at least in the order of knowing, takes its cues from particular disciplines, the grounding of the formal and regional ontologies underlying those disciplines is the work of phenomenology.<sup>5</sup>

One of the many morals of Husserl’s deliberations is the mutual dependence of an ontology and its method. Identifying what there is and identifying our mode of access to it are equivalent (albeit not identical) to one another. There is considerable reliable evidence that many entities exist quite independently of the ways in which we attend to them, use them, think about them, and so on. But this sort of ontological realism is itself based upon evidence, evidence that necessarily reflects ways in which human beings relate to the entities. Once again, the sense of the subject matter is inextricably tied to the method of relating to it. For Husserl the job of phenomenology is to secure the intuition of the essential formal and regional possibilities of being. In other words, the aim of Husserl’s phenomenology is ontology, based precisely upon the discernment (eidetic intuition) of essences or, equivalently, a determination of what is fundamentally and essentially given in and to the correspondingly perceptive consciousness. Far from supplanting scientific explanation, these descriptions are supposed to articulate what make it possible. Phenomenological ontology, the pursuit of ever-revisable inventories of essential possibilities, is a process of distilling, unifying, and thereby abetting the work of science.

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<sup>5</sup>Husserl (1980, p. 323). Robert Poli advances a related but more comprehensive distinction between domain-dependent and domain-independent as well as between descriptive and formal ontologies. Poli also helpfully distinguishes a formalized ontology from formal ontologies, labeling the latter ‘categorical’ ontologies in order to avoid confusion of them with formalized ontologies; see Poli (2003).

## 17.2 The Hermeneutics of Fundamental Ontology

Heidegger critically appropriates Husserl's phenomenological approach to ontology, sketched in the foregoing section. Like Husserl, he is interested in phenomenology as a method for ontology in general and, indeed, a basic, reflexive method that underlies but does not itself generate the content of other ontological investigations. Heidegger follows Husserl in not supposing that there is some overarching ontological discipline from which ontological determinations of every region of being might be derived. However, unlike Husserl he conceives his phenomenological method as hermeneutical and, in fact, refers to Husserl's phenomenology as non-hermeneutical. Further departing from Husserl's project, Heidegger conceives this hermeneutical phenomenology as the method, not of a formal or regional ontology, but as the method of what he deems 'fundamental ontology.'

### 17.2.1 *The Critique of Husserl's Unhistorical Ontological Method*

Among his objections to Husserl's phenomenology is what Heidegger deems the insufficiency of its manner of determining and demonstrating ontology at either the regional or categorical level. According to Heidegger, Husserl's phenomenology ultimately fails to explain sufficiently why certain contents are ontologically significant.<sup>6</sup> In other words, he faults Husserl's phenomenological approach to ontology for not providing an adequate grounding of ontological criteria or, equivalently, for not subjecting to critical analysis the conception of being that he employs. In this connection, Heidegger chastises Husserl for taking it for granted that ontology is an *ancilla scientiae*, an attendant or auxiliary to the sciences, one that facilitates *normal* scientific investigation.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, Heidegger questions whether Husserl's account of the foundation of ontology, namely, the discernment, proper to an underlying consciousness (the so-called 'transcendental ego'), of essential features that present themselves within and across scientific pursuits, is as radical and self-critical as it needs to be. Traditional scientific investigations, at the regional and formal level, with an all too ready-made distinction between essences and facts, constitute the unquestioned horizon of Husserl's phenomenological ontology. As such, it can neither guide science to new avenues and domains of investigation nor explain its commitment to conceptions specific to certain domains (regional ontology) or to the trans-regional categories that make up its conception of formal ontology.

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<sup>6</sup>This criticism is interesting given the fact that Husserl does take pains to demonstrate how one would proceed to arrive at essential features (namely, the method of free variation) and given the paucity of argumentation provided by Heidegger for his own choice of the themes relevant to his fundamental ontology.

<sup>7</sup>This is a recurrent theme of Heidegger's first Marburg lectures where he criticizes Husserl's appropriation of the Cartesian tradition and a concern with securing "already known knowledge" (Heidegger 1994, pp. 56–59). By contrast, Heidegger attempts to link his own version of phenomenology to the "productive logic" of Plato and Aristotle (Heidegger 1972, p. 10).

In Heidegger's mind, this obsequious traditionalism on Husserl's part extends not only to normal science, but also to the ontological legacy presupposed by it. Heidegger contends that Husserl's phenomenological ontology, like the sciences that it is meant to serve, takes over uncritically a traditional and excessively reductive understanding of ontology's most basic concept, i.e., its conception of being. Precisely in this connection, Heidegger presses the need for a historical and, as we shall see below, hermeneutical turn in the method of pursuing ontology. For just as a science's normal and normative dimensions only become evident through consideration of its history, so, too, the ontological legacy presupposed by it can only be gathered properly from consideration of the history of philosophy. The ontological legacy in question is a product of the history of Western metaphysics, namely, its conception of being as the essential presence or accessibility of things. Heidegger is convinced that the conception is ill-advised, not least because it is strikingly at odds with a suitably analyzed understanding of the manner of being proper to humans.

Another shortcoming of Husserl's phenomenological ontology, intimately connected in Heidegger's view to the shortcoming just noted, is its location of the founding, reflexive center of ontology in consciousness (*Bewußt-sein*) without an adequate, foregoing account of what sort of being it is that is conscious. Heidegger's particular misgivings in this connection can be gathered, at least in part, from his query to Husserl, during their quickly aborted collaboration on the 'phenomenology' entry to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*: 'Does not the pure ego have a world?' (Husserl 1962, p. 274, note 1). The question reveals Heidegger's basic contention that modes of being, both human and non-human, most basically disclose themselves, not to an observing or perceiving consciousness, but to a manner of being in the world, a manner of being that is presupposed by observation and perception.

In sum, then, Heidegger identifies two principal deficiencies with Husserl's phenomenological ontology, namely, its lack of an historically critical analysis of two central conceptions that it works with: its conception of being in general and its conception of the sort of being who is conscious. These deficiencies are interrelated, in Heidegger's eyes, inasmuch as Husserl uncritically takes over a traditional conception of being as the essential presence or accessibility of things to a conscious observer or perceiver, capable of reflecting on her observations and perceptions. These deficiencies motivate Heidegger's efforts to develop a hermeneutical ontology or, better, a fundamental ontology by way of a hermeneutical phenomenology. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the work of dispositions, understanding, and the ongoing, shared and communicated interpretation of them (including the self-interpretation that such work entails) takes the place of observation or intuition, eidetic or categorical. The work of interpretation, moreover, is required precisely because absences and inaccessibilities of what is interpreted, no less than its presence and accessibility, fundamentally determine its manner of being.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>While there is much to recommend this critique, it is in some respects disingenuous inasmuch as Husserl himself emphasizes the horizontal, never fully adequate character of perception, an emphasis upon which Heidegger undoubtedly draws when he insists that being is not to be equated with

### 17.2.2 *The Fundamental Question and the Reason for Beginning with Human Existence*

For Heidegger the question of what there is cannot be divorced from the question of what it means to say of something that it is. Neither of the two questions that Aristotle poses, among others, for scientific inquiry – the question of whether something is and the question of what it is (*Posterior Analytics*, II, 89b24) – is identical to this fundamental question.<sup>9</sup> A fundamental ontology is the ontology that provides a foundation for other possible ontological investigations, precisely by virtue of addressing this question.<sup>10</sup> But the question itself and any prospects of addressing it presuppose that there is some entity to whom this meaning is disclosed, some entity whose distinctive manner of being-here entails an understanding of being. Heidegger accordingly attempts to ground the prospects for ontology properly by giving an account of how the sense of being is disclosed in and to human existence as mattering to it.

Heidegger's account can be put in the form of a modus ponens argument. Human existence incorporates or realizes qualities specific to it ( $= p$ ). Heidegger identifies four equally primary qualities of this sort, regarding them as 'basic existentials': (1) a foregoing, emotionally charged disposition towards beings, including itself; (2) a corresponding, i.e., predisposed understanding of them in the sense of knowing (more or less) how to deal with them; (3) a shared or common means of expressing and communicating that predisposed understanding; and (4) a struggle over taking possession of (and thus responsibility for) its unique manner of realizing these qualities. Human existence incorporates or realizes these qualities specific to it only if being matters to it ( $p$  only if  $q$ ). Hence, being matters to human existence ( $q$ ) and, indeed, does so by way of being disclosed in and to the predisposed understanding, forms of expression, and struggle for authenticity, all of which uniquely characterize human existence. As noted above, Heidegger refers to these fundamental characteristics as 'existentials,' an expression that is meant to capture both (a) the fact that they are ways of being, enacted or performed by us in a constitutive manner (other actions and practices can be regarded as types and instantiations of them) and

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presence; see Husserl (1950, p. 62); for a balanced treatment of Heidegger's critique of Husserl in this connection, see Gadamer (1972, pp. 241–250).

<sup>9</sup>In other words, if ontology is the study of what is, it presupposes not only an account of what there is and the various ways of approaching the subject matter, but also an understanding of what it means to say that something is or exists. Precisely at this juncture Heidegger introduces his notion of fundamental ontology, the path to which is an existential analysis conducted as a hermeneutic phenomenology. In the 1930s Heidegger makes this distinction more perspicuous, distinguishing Western metaphysics' leading question of what there is from the basic question of what being is.

<sup>10</sup>It bears emphasizing that addressing this question, far from ruling out traditional ontological considerations of what there is, entails considerations of this sort, a point that Heidegger comes to concede, at least in lectures, in the years immediately following the publication of *Sein und Zeit*; see his discussion of 'metontology' in his 1928 lectures (Heidegger 1990, p. 199). I return to this issue which concerns the precise nature of a fundamental ontology, relative to other ontologies, in the final paragraph of this study.



(b) the fact that this enactment is itself disclosive of what it means for us to be (and thus self-disclosive).

Although the characteristics listed above are equally basic (such that their serial treatment in the order given is merely a concession to the demands of exposition), there is also a sense of ‘understanding’ that coincides with all four existentials. Indeed, this primary sense of ‘understanding’ is distinct from at least three other, derivative senses.<sup>11</sup> The primary sense of ‘understanding’ refers to understanding what it means to be, an understanding signified by the expression that ‘being matters.’ This sense is preontological; in other words, we typically do not reflect or make explicit to ourselves the sense of being that is disclosed by the very fact that we exist and thereby realize the qualities specific to us. Nevertheless, this *preontological understanding of being* motivates various predispositions towards what we find in the world around us and our ways of dealing with and, in that sense, understanding them, i.e., projecting possibilities of how to deal with them. In other words, this preontological understanding of being underlies our ways of understanding and coping with all that enters into our concrete, individual fates. Heidegger famously characterizes understanding in this first derivative sense as a kind of know-how, a tool-wielding facility; let us call this sense of ‘understanding’ – corresponding to (2) in the list of basic existentials given above – a *practical, ontic understanding*.

Neither that primary, preontological understanding of being nor this practical understanding of how to deal with beings is to be identified with a theoretical or even proto-theoretical act of consciousness such as observing or perceiving. Observation and experiment constitute a derivative sort of predisposed understanding, the sort that attempts – sometimes quite successfully – to maintain a distance between itself and what it observes and thereby to exercise a measure of deliberate control over its dispositions, understanding, and modes of publicly registering what it understands. Focusing on the constant, iterated or iterable presences of things (presences typically expressed in law-like formula) facilitates this attempt considerably. Let us call this second sort of derivative understanding a *theoretical, ontic understanding*.<sup>12</sup> The requisite distance and control demanded by theory are necessarily absent from the more basic sort of predisposed understanding indicated above, the sort of understanding that is intrinsic to the way a human being exists.

The task of fundamental ontology corresponds to a fourth sense of understanding (the third derivative sense), namely, a *theoretical, ontological understanding*. What distinguishes fundamental ontology from traditional ontology, including regional

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<sup>11</sup> For Heidegger, these different senses correspond to his differentiation of a primary, existentially pre-ontological sense of ‘understanding’ from derivative, existentially ontic (practical and theoretical) senses and a derivative, existentially ontological sense (the formal ontology to be derived from the existential analysis of *Sein und Zeit*).

<sup>12</sup> In Heidegger’s eyes, one of Husserl’s central ‘mistakes,’ a mistake that he shares with most traditional ontologists in the history of philosophy, consists precisely in privileging this derivative sense of understanding over the practical understanding of entities and the primary preontological understanding of being that it supposes. Theoretical understanding, nevertheless, has, in Heidegger’s eyes, “the legitimate task of grasping what is on hand” (Heidegger 1972, p. 153).

and formal ontologies, as Husserl conceives them, is precisely its attempt to retrieve the sense of being that matters in human existence and, indeed, to retrieve it as the sense of being that is fundamental to ontology in general. In Heidegger's jargon, fundamental ontology presupposes existential analysis, i.e., the analysis of the basic qualities distinctive of human existence (the basic existentials) with an eye to interpreting or making explicit the primary understanding of being – the more or less inchoate understanding of what it means for us to be at all – that accompanies, motivates, and reveals itself in those very qualities.<sup>13</sup>

It bears noting that the different senses of 'understanding' in Heidegger's analysis are not exclusively disjunctive. We understand at multiple levels at once, understanding things other than ourselves in view of an understanding of our relations to them and thus in view of an understanding of ourselves. Moreover, these understandings of things, our relations to them, and ourselves are at once ontic and ontological. For example, in understanding something as a fork (the specific ontic conception of it), I also understand it as being-handly (the implicit ontological category of *Zuhandensein*, in Heidegger's jargon).

Our human existence is fundamentally marked for Heidegger, as already noted, by basic predispositions towards and a corresponding understanding of things within a world that we share (and share principally through talking with one another). The manner of being that is disclosed in and to these basic existential characteristics is (a) a worldly existence (entailing an array of relations to things other than ourselves as individuals) that is both (b) settled (present, complete) and (c) unsettled (absent, incomplete). For example, our experience of being disposed or 'undergoing' fears, desires, moods, and the like at once establishes and reveals (a) our concrete way of feeling towards something, (b) the fact that what is feared, desired, and so on, like these dispositions themselves, are already part of the inherited situation in which we find ourselves, and (c) the unresolved character of the situation, i.e., of our relation to what is feared, desired, and the like. We find a similar manner of being disclosed in the possession and exercise of a know-how (the second basic existential and the first derivative sense of 'understanding' noted above). As a degree of competence in using things that we find within the world and using them for our purposes, this know-how establishes and reveals (a) the world that we call our own. At the same time, while (b) reflecting more or less settled and effective practices, this know-how also makes eminently clear (c) that our projects and, indeed, potential-to-be are essentially incomplete. A similar dynamic tension of settled and unsettled possibilities pertains to the discourse or talk by means of which we make that worldly

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<sup>13</sup>Since it is an understanding that coincides with how being matters to us as existing in a world, it also discloses and even expresses senses of being of various entities within the world and, indeed, does so in terms of how we relate to them. But here, too, they are senses of being that cannot be equated with the presence or accessibility of things. For example, being pre-disposed to one's environment we find things fearful, accommodating, alluring and the like, precisely inasmuch as they are not fully present or on hand. Something is ominous only as long as it remains impending; something is desirable only as long as the desire for it is not fulfilled.

existence and any parts of it more or less intelligible and communicable to others and to ourselves. Our ways of speaking are means of sharing a world with one another, but they have only proven themselves in and for the world from which they have been inherited. Just as dispositions and practical understanding only exist in our moods and acquired know-how, so talk only exists insofar as we talk to ourselves and one another, and there is no guarantee, without creative intervention on our part, that ‘tried and true’ ways of speaking are genuinely suited for making intelligible and communicating what lies ahead for us.

The foregoing reprise of the analysis of each of these basic existentials is highly truncated, not least because it misleadingly suggests that they can be treated in relative isolation from one another. Nevertheless, the analysis reveals, in keeping with the distinctiveness of existentials noted above, how human existence is at once a distinctive manner of being and self-understanding (or understanding of that very manner of being). Moreover, what is distinctive about that manner of being and the understanding of it is the fact that possibilities in a certain sense, far more than anything actual, define who we are.<sup>14</sup> These possibilities are, on the one hand, the possibilities of the world into which we have been thrown. Such possibilities correspond to the fact that we are already outfitted with certain predispositions and in certain relationships, that we have already acquired capabilities and beliefs requisite for continuing membership in that world, that we are born with certain genetically and environmentally determined possibilities as well as with the inevitability of death. Yet these possibilities must be enacted or projected by us, some of them deliberately, and our projections of one set of possibilities eliminates another set. To be sure, we are thrown into the world and thrown precisely to project possibilities (as exemplified by our moods and know-how) but that projecting, as far as we know, is not determined – or, better, not overdetermined, i.e., deterministically determined – by the thrownness of our existence. So, too, the world itself, while already historically constituted before we find ourselves in it, is as historically incomplete and rife with possibilities as we are.<sup>15</sup>

The manner of being that is disclosed by the existential analysis is that of a thrown projection (intimated by the expression ‘predisposed understanding’). For Heidegger the horizon or sense of being that is presupposed by this manner of being

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<sup>14</sup>To translate this characteristic into the framework of modalities: Possibility in the existential sense of the term is more fundamental than actuality or necessity. Death itself has a singular, existential significance for us, not as something actual, but as the possibility of the end our possibilities.

<sup>15</sup>The sort of individual discernment, expert knowledge, and intuitive insight so fundamental to Husserl’s phenomenological method is not discarded but reinscribed in an emotive, shared understanding, in Heidegger’s analysis. Intuitions, observations, discernments are part of a process by which human beings, like other animals, orient themselves in their environments with one another for the sake of certain aims; so the intuitions of individuals are always derivative of an emotive process of coping with the environment and understanding how (having the know-how) to do so as a member of a family or group. Heidegger accordingly urges this sort of reinterpretation of intuition, removing it and its variants from a foundational position and placing it in the historical lived experience of human beings.

is a mode of temporality in which a distinctive union of absences – the absence of the past and the future – yields the present. He contends that the traditional conception of being as a present presence trades on a neglect of the way time, so construed, underlies our understanding of what it means to be.

### ***17.2.3 The Reflexivity of the Hermeneutical Circle and Taking Responsibility***

Our review of Heidegger's project of fundamental ontology has so far shown how he departs from Husserl's phenomenological approach to ontology by arguing that the theoretical discernment driving that approach is derivative of a more basic manner of disclosing what it means to be, a self-disclosure characteristic of the essential qualities (existentials) of human existence. Analysis of these qualities reveals a manner of being (and being disclosed to itself) that is defined by possibilities and, indeed, such that time forms the horizon for any understanding of being. The foundation of fundamental ontology, the manner of being and understanding being that is proper to human existence, is not so much something actual or actually present as it is the temporal interplay of presences and absences that gives meaning to the possibilities that define human existence. This temporality is the nexus of presences and absences, a nexus that, like the past and future, is never fully present.

Left unexplained up to this point is why Heidegger characterizes his phenomenological approach to ontology as 'hermeneutical.'<sup>16</sup> But the key to the explanation lies in the connection that has been drawn between the defining possibilities of human existence and their temporal significance. Human existence is, in Heidegger's jargon, a being-in-the-world, an entity whose understanding of being is inseparable from the possibilities that it projects for itself in the historical situation of the discursively shared world into which it has been thrown. While circumstances, typically in the form of crises, can bring this understanding brusquely to the surface as the presupposition for theory and practice, this understanding is largely inchoate, tacit, pre-reflective – and in need of interpretation.

Heidegger emphasizes repeatedly that the two operative senses of human existence – being 'thrown' into the world and being itself a throw or projection of possibilities – belong together (Heidegger 1972, pp. 181, 192, Gadamer 1972, p. 249). There is a basic, irresolvable tension between the possibilities into which human existence has been thrown and the possibilities that it itself projects and thus understands ('projecting' and 'understanding' are metonyms in Heidegger's existential analysis). The possibilities that we project and the projecting itself – from the

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<sup>16</sup>In keeping with the history of the term, I take 'hermeneutics' to designate a theory, practice, and art of interpretation. Theoretical hermeneutics (the ontology of interpretation) provides an account of what constitutes an interpretation, while 'hermeneutical practice' designates a mode of interpreting informed by some conception of what constitutes an interpretation, and 'hermeneutical art' the mastery of a hermeneutical practice.

preontological and practical to the theoretical and ontological senses of understanding – are all a function of having been thrown into the world. We have been cast into the world in such a way as to have to project possibilities and the possibilities that we project, like the projecting itself, bear the stamp of what Heidegger calls the thrownness or facticity of human existence. We sustain our biological states precisely by projecting or, better, continuing to project possibilities that already constitute a necessarily eccentric movement towards and within a particular environment. We do this for the most part without thinking about what we are doing, and something similar holds for a considerable portion of the exercises of predisposed understanding (know-how) that allow us to cope with our world. Even when we manage to keep firmly in mind the purpose of an activity (e.g., driving a car or carrying on a conversation), most of the possibilities that we project in performing that activity are not the product of deliberation or conscious effort. In all these senses, the possibilities that we project and the projecting itself are pre-reflective, testimonies to what Heidegger deems the thrownness of human existence.<sup>17</sup>

Yet the projection itself also delimits the range of possibilities of our being-in-the-world and with this delimitation comes the possibility of making or not making the projected possibilities one's own and of taking or not taking responsibility for them. But in order to assume responsibility for these possibilities, we have to make them explicit or, in some cases, more explicit by unpacking their historical conditions. Making explicit the possibilities that we project in understanding is what Heidegger deems the task of interpretation.<sup>18</sup>

For every interpretation, there is something to be interpreted and, to that extent, something that the interpretation presupposes. Interpretation accordingly remains always a step behind. We typically single out interpretation as an activity that we engage in when something eludes our ordinary ways of understanding, not least when something seems to be other than it is or when it has been taken for something other than it is. But this activity presupposes some acquaintance with what is to be interpreted.

Heidegger accordingly maintains that interpretation trades on a forestructure – the domain that we have in advance before us (*Vorhabe*), a foregoing perspective

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<sup>17</sup>According to Gadamer, Heidegger recognizes that the thrownness and facticity of one's being form the bedrock of all understanding, a recognition that accounts for his break with Husserl's transcendental phenomenology (Gadamer 1972, 249f).

<sup>18</sup>The activity is an attempt to disclose or unpack what is understood more or less vaguely or, at least, inattentively and unthematically, perhaps even improperly. A great deal of our everyday behavior is, as has already been stressed, rote, marked by a tacit understanding of what we are doing, the things of which we avail ourselves in order to do it, and the setting within which we do it. We understand what we are doing in the course of doing it precisely by way of projecting possibilities realized and realizable by the actions. The respective possibilities, like the actions themselves, are typically ordered in some purposive way (e.g., I pick the hammer up by the handle, lifting it at a certain angle, relative to the nail between my fingers, and the wood beneath them, and so on) and, of course, they can turn out to be quite harmful or inappropriate. To paraphrase Kant's old saw, interpretation without understanding is empty, understanding without interpretation is blind.

(*Vorsicht*), and preconception (*Vorgriff*) – implicit in every understanding. For example, when we use a hammer, there is a forestructure to the way we understand/project possibilities for ourselves and it, a forestructure in terms of which the hammer and the hammering have their particular significance. Thus, to continue the same example, within a workshop (*Vorhabe*), we regard certain things and disregard others (*Vorsicht*), thanks to our conception of what hammering can achieve and what the hammer is for (*Vorgriff*). To interpret something is to take it a certain way, for example, to take something *as* a hammer or an activity *as* hammering. But this structure of interpretation (taking *x* as *y*), Heidegger maintains, is founded upon the forestructure of understanding (Heidegger 1972, 149ff, Gadamer 1972, pp. 250–256).

In this account of the relation of interpretation to understanding, I have been relying upon the practical, ontic sense of understanding as know-how. But the basic relation of interpretation to a foregoing structure of understanding holds generally and thus also for the interpretation of what it means to be. Here we see at least one reason why, after identifying phenomenology as ontology, Heidegger insists that the phenomenology of human existence is ‘a *hermeneutic* in the primordial signification of this word, where it designates the business of interpreting’ (Heidegger 1972, 37). Phenomenology is the method of attending to a phenomenon precisely insofar as this phenomenon presents itself of itself. However, the phenomenon in question (human existence) essentially presents itself to itself and does so in the form of a tacit, prereflective understanding that shapes and is shaped by its predispositions and know-how. In short, the phenomenon presents itself as an understanding in need of interpretation – a hermeneutic – in order to be rendered responsibly explicit.

Heidegger has two further reasons for qualifying his phenomenology as hermeneutical, each of which has a bearing on any project of hermeneutical ontology. To the extent that the meaning of being in the case of human existence provides the horizon for further ontological study of other sorts of entities, the study is also hermeneutical, he submits, in the sense of elaborating the conditions of the possibility of any ontological investigation (Heidegger 1972, 37). Presumably, what Heidegger has in mind is the fact that the interpretation or hermeneutic elaboration of the forestructure of the understanding (constitutive of being-in-the-world) doubtlessly has a bearing on the interpretation of the manner of being of other entities as well.

In recounting Heidegger’s critique of Husserl, we already alluded to the third reason why he conceives his phenomenology as hermeneutical. Each of us is his or her past in the sense that we assimilate traditional beliefs and practices, and, not least, ways of interpreting what it means for us to be. We may even be said, as Heidegger puts it, to ‘fall prey’ to such beliefs when the apparent self-evidence of tradition blocks our access to original sources of those beliefs and, indeed, even to the fact that they have a history. From this ‘our own essential historicity’ as well as our tendency to cede control of ourselves to settled traditions, it follows that inquiry into what it means to be must be an historical inquiry, ‘inquiry into the history of that inquiry itself’ if we are ‘to go back to the past in a positive manner and make it our own’ (Heidegger 1972, 20ff).

As the sentence just cited makes quite clear, Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology as the method for fundamental ontology is motivated by a sense of responsibility (corresponding to the fourth basic existential mentioned above), a need to take responsibility for the interpretation. The aim of the hermeneutic is, he insists, not to relativize or undo traditional ontology but to take its measure and, if relevant, even take responsibility for making it one's own. Yet this responsibility for the interpretation is itself both facilitated and limited by the peculiar recursive relation of interpretation to understanding. Insofar as interpretation presupposes understanding, in the sense of making explicit what is always already implicitly understood, interpretation moves reflexively in a kind of circle.

Yet the point of Heidegger's hermeneutical reflections in this regard, as Gadamer stresses, is to demonstrate, not the existence of a circle, but that 'this circle has an ontologically positive sense' (Gadamer 1972, p. 251). Far from disabling, this circular structure is what makes a genuine interpretation possible, i.e., an interpretation that aims at making explicit its own conditions of interpretation. Nor is interpretation in this sense something free-floating or arbitrary; it is, instead, 'the expression of the existential *fore-structure*' of our being-here. Heidegger accordingly insists that, within the circular structure of interpretation, 'a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing' affords itself, a possibility that we genuinely take hold of 'only when the interpretation has understood that its first, constant, and final task is never to allow the domain that we have before us, our foregoing perspective on it, and our preconceptions to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but instead to make the scientific theme secure by working out these forestructures in terms of the matters themselves' (Heidegger 1972, 153). The final words of this text echo the phenomenological demand to return to *den Sachen selbst*. While making clear that this return can only be hermeneutical, i.e., an ongoing task (*erste, ständige und letzte Aufgabe*) of interpretation, the matters themselves are supposed to serve as the constraint for the elaboration of the fore-structure of understanding.

### 17.3 Hermeneutic Ontology: an Outline

In the preceding section we sketched what is, in effect, Heidegger's interpretation of interpretation, as he presents it in *Sein und Zeit*. Interpretation or, equivalently, hermeneutics is essential to his phenomenological method for arriving at the manner of being that is disclosed in and to human existence, the manner of being that can alone serve as the basis for a fundamental ontology. Whatever measure of control and responsibility that we can exercise over our manner of being is dependent upon an interpretation of the very possibilities, not least the discursive possibilities, that we inherit and project for ourselves in the world that we share with one another.

Heidegger does not speak of a 'hermeneutic ontology' explicitly, though his student, Hans-Georg Gadamer, does (Gadamer 1972, p. 415). The remainder of this study attempts to outline such an ontology by drawing on three themes from his project of developing a fundamental ontology through hermeneutic phenomenology.

First, hermeneutic ontology is based upon the notion that what, among other things, enables interpretation to succeed is its essentially historical character. Second, hermeneutic ontology requires an ontological determination of interpretation itself. I accordingly offer an account of interpretation as an activity, relative to an ongoing process of self-interpretation constituted by what I dub ‘the interpretive helix.’ Third, hermeneutic ontology entails not only an ontology of interpretation but also an interpretation of ontology, since the historical process to which interpretation belongs is itself an object of interpretation. Finally, in light of the foregoing outline, I sketch Gadamer’s hermeneutic ontology and his remarks on language as its horizon.

### 17.3.1 *The Historicity of Interpretation*

The expression ‘historicity of interpretation’ is meant to convey the fully and essentially historical character of interpretation. This historical character encompasses the interpreter (*interpretans*), the experience, event, object, text, etc. to be interpreted (*interpretandum*), and the concepts and proto-concepts by means of which they are to be interpreted (*modi interpretandi*). Insisting that the historicity of interpretation applies to the interpreter herself is another way of underscoring that every interpretation is a self-interpretation and every responsible or authentic interpretation is so self-consciously.

The completeness of this historical character is to be understood in three complementary senses or modalities. First, by the time that anyone gets around to interpreting, what constitutes the experience, the ways of registering (describing, classifying) it, and those undergoing the experience are all discursive carriers of a tradition. To take a homely example, the very way we eat and what we take to be eating are traditional in this sense. Something similar holds for an entire range of interpretable events and interpreting activities, not least the more narrowly discursive activities of registering, classifying, discussing matters, and the like. Interpretation inevitably works on a subject matter that has already been interpreted or, at least, avails itself to the interpreter from a standpoint already interpreted and accessible to the interpreter (see the discussion of the *Vorstruktur* above). The interpreter, the interpreted, and the modes of interpretation all have a history, i.e., a past that is intrinsic to their manner of being.

At the same time (and this is the second sense of the historicity of interpretation), the interpretation would not be historical if it failed to appreciate the potential import of the difference between what it can no longer touch (as Robert Lowell, with a poet’s gift, dubbed the past of memory) and the present. Affirming this potential difference does not, by any means, entail that the present is never – especially for theoretical or practical purposes – more than a carbon copy or facsimile of the past. Hempel was right; general laws have a function in history and they could not have that function if there were not sufficient similarities between historical events. But even a carbon copy is a copy and the historically-minded interpreter, i.e., the interpreter cognizant of her ontological status as interpreter, is precisely concerned



with the possibility of determining whether the difference between the past and the present makes a difference.

The third sense or modality of interpretation's historicity is its open-ended, future horizon. The interpreter as well as what is interpreted have such horizons, both in the sense of what they might deliberately and non-deliberately project and in the sense of what they are coming to. These future horizons in both senses determine the interpretation no less than do its past and its present.

In all three modalities, there is an inescapable mix of determinacy and indeterminacy, presence and absence, that is the mark of the ontology of interpretation.

The foregoing senses of the historicity of interpretation, it bears noting, also inform Gadamer's own, self-described hermeneutical ontology. Gadamer stresses how attempts to objectify matters or, equivalently, to discount the interpreter's historical horizon forfeit the historical dimension of the hermeneutic experience. His hermeneutical ontology is accordingly a plea for the historical reality of interpretation as something antecedent to any differentiation of perspective and content (or, equivalently, subject and object, interpreter and tradition, language and world) (Gadamer 1972, pp. 434–439).

### ***17.3.2 The Interpretive Helix***

Given its historical nature, the reflexive character of interpretation is never simply recursive. When the interpreter reflects back on the conditions of the interpretation, they are not simply iterated in the sense of being available to her in exactly the same way as they functioned pre-reflectively or in an earlier reflection. The return is not so much a turn back as it is a turn forward to the conditions as they are considered in the present (conditions deemed similar and accordingly memorialized) in view of something projected (hoped for, feared, awaited, etc.) as the future. In other words, interpretation is a process that is better pictured as a helical than a circular motion. Like a helix, interpretation moves forward by moving back to consideration of the conditions of understanding but it does not and cannot move back literally; rather it moves back in the sense that it moves in the direction it already traversed and perhaps even continues to traverse, precisely in moving forward. The interpreter is engaged in this process as part of her effort to make explicit what she already understands of the subject to be interpreted. This image of the interpretive helix captures a central idea of the ontology of interpretation offered here. Encompassing at once the interpreter, what is interpreted, and the dynamics of their interaction, interpretation is an activity of making explicit the conditions and directions of a process in which the interpreter is already engaged.

Why do interpretations move in helical patterns and why do they move in the directions they do? Though answers to these questions in particular cases depend on the particular arena of interpretation, the historicity of interpretation entails its helical and forward-moving character. Indeed, the helical and forward motion of interpretation is a way of making more explicit the self-interpretation involved in interpretation – though, for reasons already discussed, it would falsify matters to

construe self-interpretation as the provenance exclusively of the interpreter or the interpreted.<sup>19</sup> Taking a further page from Heidegger, moreover, we may add that interpretation generally is subject to alethic constraints. That is to say, the movement is constrained by the ways that concrete possibilities present and absent themselves to the interpreter along the path of the interpretive helix. What is at work in interpretation is neither subjective nor objective but rather, as Gadamer puts it, ‘the interplay [*Ineinanderspiel*] of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter’ (Gadamer 1972, p. 277).

### ***17.3.3 The Ontology of Interpretation and the Interpretation of Ontology***

The foregoing sections have hopefully made clear the sense in which interpretation is a fundamentally historical activity with a certain structure (the interpretive helix) that encompasses the situation of the interpreter, the subject matter to be interpreted, and the modes of interpreting that subject matter. Since this situation is historical in the open-ended sense noted above (Section 17.3.1), hermeneutic ontology entails that an honest or authentic interpretation be self-consciously fallible and inveterately self-correcting, without pretensions to articulating universal and necessary conditions of what is. A hermeneutic practice or even a theoretical hermeneutics can be formal and rule-governed, but with inherent limits that preclude a full and definitive disclosure.<sup>20</sup> Interpretation is necessarily incomplete because what is in need of interpretation, existence, is inherently dynamic and unfinished and because it is exposed and open to horizons beyond its determination.<sup>21</sup> Again, Gadamer makes a similar point with his stress on the ‘absolute openness of the meaning-event,’ on the tradition-bound character of any measure, and on the fact that ‘there is no possible consciousness in which some handed-down subject matter [*Sache*] might appear in the light of eternity’ (Gadamer 1972, p. 448).

Hermeneutic ontology is the sort of ontology that, in the tradition of Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, is concerned with not only what sorts of entities there are and can be, but also with the various ways in which entities are said to be. A hermeneutic ontology, in other words, attempts to determine the senses of ‘being’ that have been and continue to be presupposed in identifying and determining what there is and can

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<sup>19</sup>The forward movement of interpretation is not the same as either a teleological or a teleonomic movement.

<sup>20</sup>For this reason, this account of the ontology of interpretation, as noted earlier, does not exclude the ascertainment of covering laws of explanation and other iterable patterns, but entails the notion that their measure of validity is tied to a convention-driven abstractness and ideality relative to the helical character of interpretation.

<sup>21</sup>There is a sense in which, given the historicity of interpretation and the interpretive helix, hermeneutic ontology – much like Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology of human existence – is a distinctive form of possibilism, where the possibilities that are fundamental are existential.

be. Its aim is, of course, not merely to determine senses of being that have been presupposed, but also determine the appropriate senses and to do so in light of our own prospects. Given the interpretive helix and its own historical character, hermeneutic ontology as the ontology of interpretation entails an interpretation of ontology, conceived as attempt to retrieve ontological legacies that are operative in the historical situation lived by the hermeneutical ontologist herself. The interpretation of ontology is an interpretation of the history of interpretations of ontological concepts, precisely as they inform the language of the interpreter. The mutual entailment of the ontology of interpretation and the interpretation of ontology and its history forms its own interpretive helix.

Hopefully, it is obvious by now that the import of this emphasis on the historicity of interpretation is anything but antiquarian. Precisely by taking seriously that all interpretation is self-interpretation, hermeneutic ontology situates the interpreter and her task of interpretation in a historically determinate but underdetermined situation with the aim of making evident to the interpreter the decisions that she makes and can make in the course of interpreting. Herein lies a major advantage or contribution that hermeneutic ontology can make to the study of ontology. A hermeneutic ontology attempts to understand, interpret, and formulate necessary conditions of formal and regional ontologies by establishing the historicity of the interpretations underlying them. Hermeneutic ontology looks, as we have seen, to the condition of the possibility of understanding. Inasmuch as this understanding underlies in turn the possibility of description and explanation, hermeneutic ontology is necessarily not simply descriptive (there is no such thing) or explanatory, at least in the reductionistic manner that explanation is often understood (e.g., the covering law model).<sup>22</sup> Hermeneutic ontology's contribution is precisely to make explicit or more explicit, as the case may be, the historicity, fallibility, and promise of formal and regional ontologies.

Hermeneutic ontology is not a fundamental ontology in the sense that it subsumes, and cannot be subsumed by, other sorts of ontological investigations. Hermeneutic ontology makes *prima facie* use of categories employed across various regions of being as well as categories restricted to particular regions. Hermeneutic ontology is accordingly dependent upon formal and regional ontologies. However, it

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<sup>22</sup>Hermeneutic ontology does address a phenomenon that contains in some sense the conditions of the possibility of explanation, including scientific explanation. These conditions are historical, i.e., they are received but precisely in the course of being enacted and this enactment (projection of received possibilities as one's own) can but need not take the form of a theoretical reflection. Hermeneutic ontology cannot be conceived in a purely theoretical manner if theory is presumed to be able to abstract from traditions received or from the aims of the theory, i.e., the extra-theoretical purposes that the theory serves and, indeed, perhaps is meant to serve. For this reason hermeneutic ontology also views suspiciously conceptions of ontology as a purely descriptive not explanatory enterprise, at least inasmuch as those descriptions are designed to serve the purposes of explanation, purposes typically but not exclusively attributable to the conscious or unconscious intentions of the theoreticians themselves. See Heidegger's critique of Husserl along these lines; descriptions for the sake of explanation are no more pure descriptions of things than description for the sake of persuasion.

is not so dependent that it cannot take the measure of the ontological commitments of these investigations, systematically and historically. Indeed, as argued above, it is incumbent upon hermeneutic ontology, in its pursuit of the task of determining the ontological make-up of interpretation, to do so. Moreover, it is capable of doing so. For every ontology, including hermeneutic ontology, is in the end an interpretation. Every ontology accordingly supposes an adequate articulation of what it means to be an interpretation and, in that sense, every ontology is beholden to hermeneutic ontology.

### ***17.3.4 Gadamer on Language as the Horizon of Hermeneutical Ontology***

In his major work, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer pleads for the universality of hermeneutics by way of considering the distinctiveness of art, history, and language – the truth of which is irreducible to scientific method. Just as truth, so construed, is bound to interpretation, so ‘the speculative constitution of being that underlies hermeneutics has the same universal scope as reason and language’ (Gadamer 1972, p. 452). Indeed, it is precisely language, on Gadamer’s account, that forms the horizon of what he calls ‘hermeneutical ontology’ and introduces by emphasizing the co-dependency of the language and the world. ‘Language’s primordial human character signifies at the same time the primordial linguistic character of human being-in-the-world’ (Gadamer 1972, p. 419). Whereas animals are constrained in a certain sense by and to their habitat or *milieu*, humans have a freedom with respect to their worlds and environment, precisely due to language.

Moreover, it is language not primarily as assertions about things but as a process – and not mere means – of communication. Gadamer accordingly distinguishes artificial languages designed as means of conveying information (*Mittel zu Informationszwecken*) from the communication in the actual language community (the *Sprachwelt*) that those designer languages presuppose. In keeping with this priority of hermeneutical ontology to the regional ontologies underlying science, Gadamer contends that the natural experience of the world through language does not make it ‘available and usable’ since the world’s manner of being is different from the sorts of things that are available, through objectification, to science.<sup>23</sup> The world is only experienced in the historical act of communicating and there is no meaningful way to distinguish what the world is (ontology) from the interpretation (hermeneutic) inherent in this linguistic act.

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<sup>23</sup>While disputing talk about the ‘world in itself’ (including scientific claims to objectivity), Gadamer’s hermeneutical ontology espouses the fundamental character of “the linguistic character of our experience of the world, prior to everything that is recognized and articulated as being” (Gadamer 1972, p. 426).

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