

From Act to Act:

Gadamer and Augustine on the *Verbum Interius*

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In memory of my grandmother (1928-2017)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.

John 1:1,14

There is, however, an idea that is not Greek which . . . prevented the forgetfulness of language in Western thought from being complete. This is the Christian idea of incarnation.

Hans-Georg Gadamer

Table of Contents

Abstract	4
Acknowledgements	5
Introduction	6
<i>Verbum Interius: The Mirror and Image of the Divine Word</i>	8
“More than a Mere Metaphor”	15
The Historical Nature of the <i>Verbum</i>	18
<i>Verbum Interius: Where We Go from Here</i>	21
Chapter 1: The Identity of Thought and Word	22
Human Understanding and Interpretation	23
The <i>verbum interius</i> and Historically Effected Consciousness	30
The <i>Verbum Interius</i> and the Humanities	33
Conclusion	40
Chapter 2: “It Has Its Being in Its Revealing”	41
The Appearance of the Word	42
The Two Similarities to God’s Word	52
Conclusion	61
Chapter 3: The Incarnate Aspect of the Word	63
The Interdependence of Thought and Speech	64
Speech as Understanding	70
Conclusion	79
Conclusion	80
Bibliography	88

Abstract

This thesis investigates Gadamer's statement that Trinitarian theology relieves western thought from the forgetfulness of language that arguably began when Plato's *Cratylus* depicted words as signs that represent truth and continued with logical positivism, which severed the word from history and culture. I will show that the new dimension that Trinitarian thought offers hermeneutics is the inner word as a movement from act to act, rather than potency to act. In the Trinitarian relation, the Word proceeds not after the Father understands, but proceeds simultaneously with the act of divine intellection, such that there is no divine understanding without divine saying. A movement from potency to act, as one finds in Platonism, would suggest that a concept is formed in an immediate sense and then we speak the word. This would mean that we can see the thing without the word and thus thought would not be historical but a pure act of intellection, divisible from language and history. I argue with Gadamer that the Trinitarian notion of the inner word as a procession from act to act has awakened hermeneutics to the way in which all thought is historical, in showing us that we always already understand what we speak.

Acknowledgements

What I have learned studying Gadamer's hermeneutics is that I am a finite creature enveloped in a conversation that stands prior to my intents and knowing, of which I am in debt to both the past and present that mediates all that I know.¹ The nature of my interdependence upon tradition makes it impossible to thank all to whom I am indebted, but I will mention those who come to my mind. First, I want to thank my supervisor, Sean McGrath. His words and ideas are dispersed across these pages and most especially his insight into what it means for the word to be a procession from act to act. I also thank Peter Harris and Michael Shute for their work as second readers of this thesis, including helping me clarify my thoughts on Aquinas. I thank Andrzej Wiercinski for engaging with me on Gadamer's inner word at the Memorial European Summer School in Philosophy. I am grateful to Jens Zimmermann; without Zimmermann's detailed page-by-page seminar class on *Truth and Method* and his keen ability to place Gadamer in conversation with other great philosophers, this thesis would have never been formulated, let alone come to fruition. I also thank those who have helped me become a more concise and deliberate writer, Leah Cameron and Shannon Hoff, to name a couple. And last but not least, I thank my family, who cheered me along the way, and the puffins, whales, and seals, who made philosophy not merely a philosophical exercise but a full embodied experience.

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Introduction

Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that the world arises for us as a meaningful world because human language participates in the world of human understanding and experience. The world is meaningful because it is handed down to us in a form of conversation or dialogue, in so far as language gathers the world together and constitutes both ourselves and our fundamental way of understanding. In fact, Gadamer argues that language is so intertwined with our mode of understanding that it is essentially indivisible for the insight from which it proceeds, such that the words that break forth in speech and pass through the ages remain connected to the persons and insights being revealed. In Gadamer's mind, the relation of insight and word highlights the capacity of language to bring the world to us. Gadamer illustrates this indivisible bond between insight and word through the Medieval-Trinitarian doctrine of the *verbum interius*, or the inner word of the heart.

In this thesis, I will examine the implications of the theological *verbum interius* for Gadamer's hermeneutics. This theological phrase, which Gadamer discusses in ten pages of the third part of his masterpiece, *Wahrheit und Methode (Truth and Method)*, refers to a theological teaching which compares human thought to the Incarnation, in which the Word became flesh. The *verbum interius* was developed into an analogy by Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas who invoked the procession of the inner word of the heart to elucidate the Father-Son procession implicit behind Christian Incarnation. As the Son proceeds from the Father's intellect in act, so also the inner word of human thought proceeds from the intellect in act. As the Son remains consubstantial with the Father, the fullness of God in flesh, so also human language is the fullness of understanding, the act that speaks insight. The identity of thought and word, as accomplished by Trinitarian-Incarnation theology, reminds hermeneutists that

the world of experience that breaks forth from the word is not alienated from human understanding but is part of the interdependence of language, person, and world. In this thesis, I will highlight what Gadamer saw in theology that penetrates our secular conception of the word, why the theological *verbum* matters for philosophical hermeneutics, and what issues in the history of philosophy are addressed in this central mystery of the Incarnation and the divine procession.

This thesis provides a careful examination of Gadamer's commentary on Augustine, particularly Augustine's *De Trinitate*. As I interpret its meaning, I invoke the commentary of Gadamer's best theological interpreter, John Arthos. It is fair to say that Arthos's 2009 book, *The Inner Word in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, sets a high standard for the future of Gadamer's theological interpretations. Much commentary on Gadamer has overlooked the deep significance of the *verbum interius*. In response, Arthos argues that the *verbum interius* is not a mere example or analogy for the primacy of language, but that it goes deeper, since the Church is the image and unfolding of the divine word.² In this sense that the word is fused with the community, Arthos maintains that world history can be understood as the continuation of the word and the furtherance of the meaning that carries us through the ages.³ This thesis will appropriate Arthos's insights into what it means for the Christian word to be a growth and manifestation of truth.

I have divided this thesis into three chapters. The first chapter discusses the *verbum interius* and the historical and linguistic nature of human thought. The second chapter discusses Augustine's contribution to the *verbum interius* as a word that says or appears.

² John Arthos, *The Inner Word in Gadamer's Hermeneutics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 2-3.

³*Ibid.*, 12.

The third chapter of this thesis takes up the interdependence of thought and speech in the Incarnation as the manifestation of a tradition already full of meaning.

Verbum Interius: The Mirror and Image of the Divine Word

Gadamer teaches that the lingual, hermeneutical experience, in which all human experience and thought is linguistically mediated, finds its way in and out of Trinitarian theology. Long before Gadamer or the Christian-Medieval philosopher, the writer of the Gospel of John in his contemplation of the revelation of the Son in his Incarnation fused together truth, word, and life, when he identified the Son, not in abstract, theoretical terms, as a name which cannot be spoken but rather as *logos*, “God’s self-manifestation in language”⁴: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”⁵ That God is embodied in flesh without loss of his divinity is “strangely different”⁶ from the embodiment of the Greek gods and thereby challenges our western tendency to sever truth and word from history and culture.⁷ In the person of Christ, word is identified with person; concept takes on historical shape. This theological transposition of word with being, as Gadamer’s theological interpreter John Arthos phrases it, directs language away from a “bloodless conceptual abstraction” of truth and emphasises word as truth fused with flesh and history.⁸ The lingual structure of the person elevates language with

⁴ Andrzej Wiercinski, “The Hermeneutical Retrieval of a Theological Insight: The *Verbum Interius*,” in *Between the Human and the Divine* (Toronto: International Institute for Hermeneutics, 2002), 14.

⁵ John 1:1.14, New International Version.

⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimier and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd Revised Edition (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2012), 419, cited in Arthos 2.

⁷ Arthos, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*

hermeneutics, which is to say that all human understanding and experience resides within the continual utterance of the word embodied in historical community.

Gadamer examines human utterance as a participation in the divine utterance, one that encompasses the structure of thought and penetrates our secular conception of language. The Church Fathers, in an attempt to interpret the likeness between God and humanity as portrayed in Scripture, contemplated the depth of the human soul, which was believed to be made in God's image. In light of John's prologue, human thought and utterance was understood as the image of God's Word. The Fathers studied this image as it provided an understanding of what it means for the Word to become flesh. "God has given [the human being] a share in His own image," Athanasius writes in *De Incarnatione*, "in order that through this gift of God-likeness in themselves they may be able to perceive the Image Absolute, that is the Word Himself, and through Him to apprehend the Father."⁹ In his contemplation of this God-image, Augustine discovered triads that suggested that the soul is the *imago Dei*, made in the likeness of the Trinity.¹⁰ Aquinas found the divine procession in the structure of human thought, insisting that the procession of the inner word from human insight resembles the procession of the Son from the Father: "[Divine procession] is to be understood . . . of the intelligible word which proceeds from the speaker, yet remains in him."¹¹ As Arthos points out so succinctly, the course of thought that stimulated these insights into the human soul provided the fertile ground for a hermeneutical understanding of word as fused with thought and history.¹² Just as Trinitarian theology led Augustine and Aquinas to understand the procession of the human

⁹ Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, tran. A Religious of C.S.M.V. (Creswood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1944), 3.11.

¹⁰ Arthos, 70-71. I use Arthos's sentence structure.

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2nd, rev. ed., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1920; New Advent, 2008): 1. a, q. 27, a. 1. <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2001.htm>. Arthos does not reference this passage or insight on page 71, but he does reference Aquinas.

¹² Arthos, 72.

word, their insights would later awake Hegel to the relational structure of the “I,” Heidegger to his “hermeneutics of facticity, and Gadamer to an ontology of language.”¹³ We must turn to Trinitarian theology in order to understand the roots of Gadamer’s hermeneutics.

Trinitarian theology provides a model that shows us that truth and meaning reside within the word that passes through us. Gadamer argues that most of the history of philosophy, with the exception of Trinitarian theology, has in some degree or another taught that word and concept are separate. The word, in this common thinking, is an instrument that guides our way to knowledge but itself does not show or speak truth. In Gadamer’s reading of Church history, the Church Fathers and Scholastics provide a counter argument to the instrumentalisation of the word, because the *imago Dei*, when taken to its conclusion, means that there is no act of intellect divorced from the word, and that the word has an essential relation to truth, as a testimony of the concept.¹⁴ The Fathers arrive at an understanding of an identity of word and truth through a contemplation of the kinship between divine procession and human utterance, with the understanding that the divine Word is not a separate being from the Father but the full embodiment of his understanding. The Son is the uttered Word of the Father’s mind, not an instrument that guides the Father to understanding, but that in which the Father understands himself, such that the Word is intrinsic to the knowing of the Father. In light of the divine revelation, the Fathers are able to understand that the human word proceeds from thought in this similar manner as the divine procession. As the Father understands through the Word, so human understanding is made intelligible through the inner word. This kinship between divine procession and human language establishes language as fused with insight, because the nature of a Trinitarian structure, which is to say the unity of the Father’s mind and

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Arthos refers to the word as the “living realization” of the concept, 301.

the uttered Word, means that insight cannot be severed from the word that speaks it. The inner word is not a sign or copy of prior meaning, which one attaches onto an object but is the enactment of thought, which bodies forth into the world.

Trinitarian theology provides a relief from what Gadamer calls the forgetfulness of language that in his interpretation began when Plato and Greek metaphysics denied that the word manifests and brings forth the fullness of meaning. In Gadamer's reading, Plato compounds the forgetfulness of language because he depicts language as a representation of truth or a lens by which we see truth and thus forgets that the word bears truth. For instance, Plato's *Cratylus* is a dialogue that portrays words in terms of signs derived from social convention and their natural agreement with their objects. In contrast, Gadamer argues, "all this misses the point that the truth of things resides in discourse – which means, ultimately, in intending a unitary meaning concerning things – and not in the individual words, not even in a language's entire stock of words."¹⁵ Gadamer returns hermeneutics to the Christian revelation of the word as fused with the truth of things. That the Word remains within the Father teaches hermeneutics that the word is the fullness of human understanding, and that our encounter with the word is made meaningful through the conversation in our community and culture. The word is transformed under Trinitarian theology because the identity of insight and word means that the word is not a lens through which we see truth but the dynamic that enfolds our very being.

Gadamer turns to Augustine's analogy of the *verbum interius* as the pivotal point that brings us to the word which unfolds human understanding. Gadamer repeated at the end of his life that Augustine was central to his thought¹⁶: "I myself relied on Augustine's . . . teaching of

¹⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 412.

¹⁶ Arthos, 98.

the 'inner word.'"¹⁷ Augustine himself, however, never broke through the surface to the remembrance of language, although he was nearing it towards the end of his career when he wrote *De Trinitate*. The irony of Gadamer's turn to Augustine is compounded by the fact that Augustine had a Platonist education. In fact, it was arguably because of his Platonism that Augustine failed to recognise that human understanding is always already mediated by history and culture. According to Augustine, we have immediate access to what is real and true and then express it in language. Thus, for Augustine, we transition from not understanding to understanding, or from an act that sees the real to later expressing that insight. Thus, for Augustine, we have a first act of understanding. Gadamer undoes this. For Gadamer we always already understand, because we speak the word which has passed through us. The reason Gadamer underplays Augustine's Platonism is that he wants to argue for Augustine's Trinitarian theology and make a non-Augustinian point, namely that all thought is historical, because the word speaks the mind, in the same way that Son speaks the Father's intellect in act. In seeking to understand the Triune God, it is revealed to Augustine a supreme likeness between the divine word and the human word. What follows from Augustine's analogy is a conversation that passes among the Fathers to the Scholastics all the way to Heidegger and Gadamer, in which the historical and lingual nature of thought comes to light. Gadamer kept returning to Augustine in his case for hermeneutics, since we stand within the Augustinian tradition.

Trinitarian theology reveals the inner word as a movement from act to act, as opposed to potency to act, and it is this Trinitarian insight that captures Gadamer's attention. In bringing Augustine's analogy to its fullest conclusion, Aquinas showed the hermeneutical relation of

¹⁷ Gadamer, "Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language," in *Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, edit. Lawrence Schmidt (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2000), 33.

mind and word as one of procession, the emergence of an act of language from an act of understanding.¹⁸ In the godhead, the act of divine utterance emerges directly from the act of the Father understanding himself, as the manifestation of the Father's intellect in act. The act of divine utterance emerges directly from the Father's intellect in act, because God's knowing is immediate and direct. Thus, for the Father to see and understand is to speak the Word, as Aquinas writes, "God by one act understands Himself and all things."¹⁹ Because the Father is never without the Word (the Son is eternally begotten), the divine procession is a procession from act to act, as opposed to a movement from potency to act. A movement from potency to act would mean that the Father transitions from sight to speaking a word, and this in Gadamer's interpretation would lead to the rationalist and dualist belief that we can understand in a pure act of intellect without language and our situation in history. The revelation of Trinity suggests, on the contrary, that to understand is to speak a word, because the Father understands himself in speaking the Word.

The importance of the procession of act to act for hermeneutics is that it shows that a concept is not formulated outside language and then transposed into word, but that the concept is enacted through the word that passes through us and is fused with the insight of the world in which we are enveloped. The word is not a movement from potency to act, an understanding without saying, but a movement from act to act, an understanding in saying. The human mind may be discursive and finite, compared to God's perfected knowing. Yet in the moment in which we proclaim "I understand," a word emerges, much like the way in which the Word emerges in the godhead. Human language is not a movement from sight to word, but the

¹⁸ Wiercinski, 21. This definition of potency originally derives from Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, edit. David Burrell (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 107. I use the structure of Lonergan's definition in order to preserve the meaning.

¹⁹ Aquinas, *ST*, 1. a, q. 34, a. 3.

utterance and manifestation of human understanding. Gadamer summarises the scholastic contribution to human language this way: “the word is not formed only after the act of intellect has been completed . . . it is the act of knowledge itself.”²⁰ The word says or speaks the insight, as the manifestation of it, and all thought is historical because it expresses itself in the word that has carried us.

Theological hermeneutics and philosophical hermeneutics share an understanding of human life as a participation in what Gadamer calls “the conversation that we are.” Drawing upon Christian theology and Heidegger’s philosophical hermeneutics, Gadamer argues that we understand, not in hovering above objects, but in speaking and standing within the culture. The word unfolds dynamically in a mode of conversation, in so far as it brings together the past and present into a kind of conversation which passes through ages in and through the language: “It is true that the historical ‘worlds’ that succeed one another in the course of history are different from one another and from the world of today; but in whatever tradition we consider it, it is always a human – i.e. verbally constituted – world that presents itself to us. As verbally constituted, every such world is of itself always open to every possible insight and hence to every expansion of its own world picture, and is accordingly available to others.”²¹ The word is the horizon through which insight occurs, as the condition of the possibility of understanding. All thought is intrinsically historical, as the language that makes thought possible has a historical context, and the word is a manifestation of a historical insight already present with us. This brings us back to the fact that the word is not a transition from potentiality into actuality, because the word does not work its way into actuality but works from something already mediated by the culture.²² In affirming this, Gadamer says, “What is said in [language]

²⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 423.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 444.

²² Arthos, 301.

constitutes the common world in which we live and to which belongs also the whole great chain of tradition reaching us from the literature of foreign languages, living as well as dead. The real being of language is that into which we are taken up when we hear it – what is said.”²³

“More than a Mere Metaphor”

In a 1988 Heidelberg conversation with his long-time friend and Canadian biographer Jean Grondin, Gadamer relayed in private the hermeneutical significance of *verbum interius* and made it clear that *verbum interius* is not a casual analogy for human language but historically stands as the central key to hermeneutics claim of universality, that is, the claim that all human experience and thought is the embodiment of historical understanding.²⁴ In a point often passed over too quickly in much Gadamerian scholarship but brought to our attention by Arthos,²⁵ Gadamer insists that the *verbum interius* “is more than a mere metaphor.”²⁶ Gadamer grounds the universality of hermeneutics in a tradition that designates the relation between the divine word and the human word as one of participation.²⁷ The relation between the divine word and the human word is not a metaphorical likeness but an analogy that denotes a literal, causal relationship. In other words, the Church Fathers do not compare two relations that have little connection, as for example, when someone links human life and theme parks in the popular metaphor “life is a rollercoaster” but rather invoke two words that share something in

²³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and edit. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 65.

²⁴ Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, tran. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), XIV. Grondin writes, “In a formulaic and unsophisticated way, I asked [Gadamer] to explain more exactly what the universal aspect of hermeneutics consisted in. After everything that I had read, I was prepared for a long and rather vague answer. He thought the matter over and answered, concisely and conclusively, thus, “In the *verbum interius*.”

²⁵ Arthos, 2–3, 250.

²⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 420.

²⁷ Arthos, 250.

common.²⁸ As Arthos has shown, Gadamer is keen to note this kindship. “Divine persons and the process of thought *really have something in common.*”²⁹ “Exegesis interprets the speaking of the word to be as miraculous as the Incarnation of God.”³⁰ “The inner mental word is just as consubstantial with thought as is God the Son with God the Father.”³¹

There is a literal, causal relation between the divine word and the human word, and it is this link that Gadamer argues moves us away from the obsession with what he calls the “ideality of meaning,”³² which is to say, “the unfortunate Greek idea” that the word serves to denote a truth, while remaining separate and removed from that truth.³³ The Trinitarian relations, in which the Word expresses the Father’s mind by his very identity with him, is a model that reminds us that the word is fused with the insight that it expresses and thus the word is not a mere sign but the manifestation and saying of the thing. The intrinsic likeness between the divine word and the human word establishes the fact that the word completes thought in a moment of understanding. Human consciousness is historical, because its thought is not formed in a pure act of the intellect but is enacted in the word that has carried the community. If at any point we begin to speak of the relation between the divine word and the human word as a mere analogy, we lose something of what Gadamer and the Church Fathers are really saying: the word is the manifestation of the truth of things, in a manner analogous to the way in which the Son is the manifestation of the Father’s intellect in act.

It is important to understand how deeply the word as the saying of the thing penetrates Christian theology. The *verbum interius* was not an analogy a couple of men happened upon but

²⁸ Ibid, 3, 250.

²⁹ Gadamer, 423, emphasis mine.

³⁰ Ibid., 419, cited in Arthos, 3.

³¹ Ibid, 420.

³² Ibid., 417.

³³Arthos, 226-227.

was the conclusion of the divine revelation, which was revealed to the Apostles, but passed along to the Fathers and Scholastics. Theophilus of Antioch remembered language in writing an account of creation. He sought to understand how the Father utters the Word and converses with his Word and was led to the conclusion that divine utterance is much like the word which we speak, which is externalised but remains within the intellect.

To externalize the word in the heart is not to lose the word that has been spoken: for the divine scripture itself teaches us that Adam said that he 'heard the voice' . . . What is this 'voice' but . . . the Logos, always innate in the heart of God . . . When God wish to make what he had planned to make, he generated this Logos, making him external, as the firstborn of all creation. He did not deprive himself of the Logos but generated the Logos and constantly converses with his Logos."³⁴

Theophilus may be who Gadamer had in mind when he wrote that "the early Fathers used the miracle of language to explain the un-Greek idea of creation."³⁵ At any rate, what is clear is that for both Gadamer and Theophilus there is something deeper going on here than a "mere metaphor." The Son reveals something about language, which we can understand from multiple angles, but "from within doctrine" being the point. There is a common theme in the speaking of the word in the Incarnation and the speaking of word in creation, because in both the Word does not "consist in separating one thing from other . . . nor in becoming something different."³⁶ In creation and in the Incarnation the Father's understanding is shown forth and made visible in his Son. The Son is the fullness of the Father's understanding. He speaks the Father's mind.

As Arthos points out, it is because the Son is the fullness of the Father that the Church Fathers kept returning to the fact that the procession of the Son is not a loss.³⁷ Athanasius

³⁴ Theophilus of Antioch. *Ad Autolyicum* trans. Robert M. Grant (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), II, 22, cited in Arthos 246. I am using his research.

³⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 419.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Arthos, 246.

writes, “A son is a father’s increase, not acquisition.”³⁸ Hilary of Poitiers confers, “There was not imperfect separation but a perfect begetting, for the birth does not lead to any loss on the part of the begetter, while it includes a gain for the one who is born.”³⁹ Justin Martyr brought divine procession full circle to hermeneutics, when he said that the word is like a fire which grows meaning:

When we speak any word, we beget that word; but not by separating it from us, so as to diminish the word that is in us, by our speaking it. Just as we see also that one fire is lighted from another without diminishing that which is lighted from, that still continuing to be the same; and which is lighted does really exist, but does not diminish that from which it was lighted.⁴⁰

The question of course is why does Trinitarian theology reveal this truth of language, but other competing philosophies do not? If one thing is clear, at least for Gadamer, we cannot understand divine revelation without approaching it from within theology.

The Historical Nature of the *Verbum*

Gadamer turns to the *verbum interius* because its confirmation that all thought is historical upends the hierarchy of scientific empiricism that has undermined the humanities and demoted the study of history to a lesser, secondary truth compared to the natural sciences. That language constitutes our fundamental mode of being confirms Gadamer’s thesis that tradition is the enactment of human understanding, as the language that makes thought possible is already mediated by the tradition and culture around us. In particular, the

³⁸ Athanasius, “In Defence of the Nicene Definition of the Homousion,” 3.16, in *Select Treatises of St. Athanasius*, 25, cited in Arthos, 247. My reading is indebted to Arthos’s research and commentary.

³⁹ Hilary of Poitiers. *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1966), 7.11, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd ser., vol 4 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1982), cited in Arthos, 245-246.

⁴⁰ Justin Martyr, *Justin Martyr’s Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, trans. Henry Brown (Cambridge: McMullin, 1846), LXI, cited in Arthos, 246.

distortions of logical positivism in the twentieth century had reduced truth to that which was supposedly empirically verifiable from a neutral zone, free of presuppositions, concealing the historical nature of the word that makes thought possible. In contrast to a positivist methodology in which the knower is the centre and all else is her object which she peels back under the technique of an objective, mathematical model,⁴¹ Trinitarian theology suggests that we understand because the world is mediated by history and tradition. Human knowledge does not begin with an act of intellect that sees a truth in an immediate sense, aided only by scientific methodology, but grows from an immersion in a truth that resides in discourse and passes through us in the word.

Gadamer invokes the *verbum interius* in order to offer an alternative to logical positivism and Romanticism. In particular, logical positivism had reduced truth to the empirically given and so regarded the human sciences, such as history, philosophy, and literature, as not dealing with truth, since these discourses do not correspond to empirical realities and do not conform to methodological verification. This same pressure led Dilthey to draw a distinction between the natural sciences that testify to the empirically given and the human sciences, which disclose the historical understanding of the human being. Gadamer is unsatisfied with this solution, because it continues to restrict truth to the natural sciences and to verifiable methodology and consign the humanities to the realm of non-truth and mere aesthetic appreciation. In Romanticism, the pressures of the natural sciences concealed the way that truth speaks to the human being and human sciences, by reducing the word to aesthetic appreciation. The emphasis towards the inner life nurtured the aesthetics of genius, emphasising the creative aspect of the human person, which was a genuine breath of fresh air

⁴¹ Ingrid Scheibler, *Gadamer between Heidegger and Habermas* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 137. I use her sentence structure.

in an age of rationalism, but this emphasis on the genius often concealed the artwork's claim on us, which addresses us in its own terms, revealing its truth to us. Gadamer does not want to lessen the creative role of the human being, but he also recognises that a compulsive emphasis on the aesthetic genius can conceal the event of the artwork that speaks to us within tradition.⁴²

The *verbum interius* brings us back to the historical nature of the thought that revitalises the human sciences as a source of knowledge. The Christian word reminds us that the word is an event that unfolds through the human sciences. The word is not a movement from potency to act (sight to word) but a movement from act to act (understanding in saying), and thus there is no sight without the word and text that carries us. We do not see apart from language and history but through it: "Historical consciousness . . . adopts a reflective posture toward both itself and the tradition in which it is situated. It understands itself in terms of its own history."⁴³ What Gadamer is saying is that it is in belonging to tradition that truth is disclosed. The interdependence of thought and word reminds us that all thought is historical and that history and tradition are the very "enactment of understanding."⁴⁴ The human sciences are not a mere aesthetic feeling or second-class truth but are part of this living tradition that enacts human understanding. In affirming this, Gadamer says: "What has come down to us by way of verbal tradition is not left over but given to us, told us – whether through direct retelling, in which myth, legend, and custom have their life, or through written tradition, whose signs are, as it were, immediately clear to every reader who can read them."⁴⁵

⁴² Jens Zimmermann, *Humanism and Religion: A Call for Renewal of Western Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 262. For further reading on the issue of Gadamer's address to German Idealism, the Enlightenment, and German Romanticism, see Zimmermann's entire chapter on Gadamer, 230-268.

⁴³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 228. Italics in the original.

⁴⁴ Zimmermann, 241.

⁴⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 391.

Verbum Interius: Where We Go from Here

Gadamer has said that there is never a last word in a matter of understanding.⁴⁶ My effort here is to partake of the historical conversation on the *verbum interius*. In an attempt to understand the influence of the Christian word, Gadamer provides an exegesis of Augustine's *De Trinitate* and the Thomistic *De Natura Verbi Intellectus*, albeit in pieces that weave through his own hermeneutical presuppositions and commentary. Gadamer's explication contains insight into the implications of the Christian *verbum* for our secular understanding of language, and it invokes this word as a return to a hermeneutical understanding of the human being embedded in the world of history and culture. But Augustine's and Aquinas's text are dense, Gadamer's commentary is brief, and there is always more that needs be said. My hope is that a discussion of these theological insights will elucidate just why, for Gadamer, the word is not an instrument but carries what is meaningful, passing through human conversation.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 581.

The Identity of Thought and Word

Gadamer, Hermeneutics, and the Lingual Nature of Thought

Gadamer summarised the universality of hermeneutics, a phrase he inherited from Heidegger, to denote the fact that all human experience and thought is historical and therefore interpretative, as the *verbum interius*. Aquinas and Augustine formed an analogy between human understanding and language in order to understand the Trinity, one that Gadamer argues brought to hermeneutics's attention the identity of thought and word that grounds human understanding in interpretation: "We are trying to keep in mind the indissoluble unity of thought and language as we encounter it in the hermeneutical phenomenon, namely as the unity of understanding and interpretation."⁴⁷ The human word is a taking up of thought, a saying of insight, so as to disperse itself across conversations and ancient texts. The word is a kind interpretation that enlivens the thoughts and insights from which it proceeds, and thought itself is possible because it conceives this word.

This chapter has two purposes: first, to situate the *verbum interius* within Gadamer's argument that human understanding is historical; and second, to situate the lingual and historical nature of thought within Gadamer's greater hermeneutical project to establish the validity of the human sciences. My argument here will unfold in three sections. In the first section, I will show that the *verbum interius* establishes the historical and lingual nature of consciousness, because the identity of thought and word shows us that we always already understand what we speak. In the second section, I will introduce Gadamer's understanding of

⁴⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 404.

historically effected consciousness, so as to understand the presuppositions that Gadamer brings to his discussion of the *verbum interius*. In the third section, I will demonstrate why historical consciousness is essential to Gadamer's hermeneutical project, namely to show that history and literature are part of the very passage of understanding and our encounter with truth and thus the human sciences are not a lesser truth to the natural sciences.

Human Understanding and Interpretation

Gadamer attributes the hermeneutical turn in philosophy to a causal analogy that Aquinas uncovers between the divine word and the human word, both of which constitute a procession not from potency to act but from act to act. In Gadamer's interpretation, the relation of consciousness and history is built on the fact that we already understand what we speak, precisely because the word is not a transition from not understanding to understanding (potency to act) but is a procession in which the mind expresses its understanding in the very act of language (act to act). Gadamer observes from Aquinas, "The process and emergence of thought is not a process of change (motus), not a transition from potentiality into action, but an emergence *ut actus ex act.*"⁴⁸ Gadamer's reference to this procession of the human word is found in the Thomistic *De Natura Verbum Intellectus*: "There are not two movements from potentiality towards actuality, because the intellect has already been made actual through the idea; rather it is a complete procession from actuality to actuality."⁴⁹ In Gadamer's interpretation, the analogy between the human word and the divine word redirects us to the

⁴⁸ Ibid. 422.

⁴⁹ Aquinas [possibly spurious], *De Natura Verbi Intellectus*, trans. John Arthos, in *The Inner Word in Gadamer's Hermeneutics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), § 275. Thanks to John Arthos for drawing this text to my attention and providing a translation at the back of his book.

historical nature of thought, because the divine pattern of understanding, in which the Father understands in speaking the divine word, is not a transition from not understanding to understanding, nor is it a process of seeing and then speaking a word (potency to act). The relationship is intimate, as the Son proceeds directly from the Father's intellect in act (act to act).

The comparison of the inner word and the divine word derives from Augustine's analogy of the inner word. In *De Trinitate*, Augustine argues that the human word is the *imago Dei*, mirroring God's understanding. Aquinas develops this linguistic analogy in light of Aristotelian philosophy.⁵⁰ According to Aristotle, the world can be explained in terms of potency to act, the emergence of perfection from that which is perfectible.⁵¹ If I close my eyes, I experience the possibility of physical sight.⁵² My eyes represent the material condition (physical, chemical, and biological) for the possibility of seeing. "Seeing" is a potential act of sight. In contrast, there is no potency or transition in God's Word. As God is infinite, God is pure act, *Actus Purus*. The absence of potency in the godhead explains why God's understanding is immediate and not discursive. God's understanding does not work from things known to unknown, or vice versa, because God already knows all things and thus there is no transition in God. Aquinas says, "God by one act understands Himself and all things."⁵³ God's understanding is a simple, complete act that is an expression of himself; in this way, God's understanding is identical with his being.

⁵⁰ Arthos, 300-301.

⁵¹ Lonergan, 107. I use his sentence structure in order to preserve his definition of potency.

⁵² Thanks to Michael Shute for helping me clarify this analogy. I am using his language, though the analogy derives from Aristotle and Lonergan.

⁵³ Aquinas, *ST*, 1. a, q. 34, a. 3.

Aquinas argues that the inner word is the *imago Dei* and thus participates in this procession from act to act,⁵⁴ in our otherwise state of potency to act.⁵⁵ The mind proceeds in a series of acts of understanding. Human understanding begins with a “preconceptual act,”⁵⁶ or “undefined impression”⁵⁷ of the object or idea, which Aquinas calls the species of the thing. At this stage the species or impression still needs the intellect to turn it into a concept or word, but it is already actual and full save its expression in a word or concept.⁵⁸ In this respect, as Arthos says, we are not speaking of potency but of an idea already in the mind and already in act. There is a second act that follows this preconceptual act, namely the act of understanding that produces the inner word or concept. In an act of understanding, a meaning or truth presents itself as a concept or inner word, which refers to that which we now understand. The word moves direct from the intellect in act: “The act of the intellection . . . is prior to the word, and the word the terminus of the intellect’s act.”⁵⁹ What this means is that the human word is an act that manifests thought in act.

⁵⁴ In this paragraph, I use the same order and structure of Arthos, 300-301, because the sequence of the acts of understanding is important to the meaning of the procession of thought.

⁵⁵ Human understanding can be understood as a procession from act to act, which is to say, a movement from an act of understanding to a concept or word; this procession, of course, is what interests Gadamer most. Yet Aquinas also argues that there is another sense, and perhaps a most prominent sense, that human understanding is a movement from potency to act, which is to say, the emergence of perfection in that which is being perfected. In *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas explains that human understanding is a series of incomplete acts, in contrast to divine knowing, in which the Father is a complete act of understanding and the Son a complete act of speaking. “We must consider that our intellect proceeds from a state of potentiality to a state of actuality; and every power thus proceeding from potentiality to actuality comes first to an incomplete act, which is the medium between potentiality and actuality, before accomplishing the complete act.” In the perfection of our ideas, human understanding does in some sense transition from not understanding to understanding and in this respect has no analogy to God who knows all things. The emergence of the inner word, however, is a procession from act to act, since it moves direct from an act of understanding. Aquinas, *ST*, 1a, q. 85, a.3. These definitions of the emergence of the word and the emergence of perfection is discussed by Wiercinski, 21-22, who derives the definitions from Lonergan, 107. Also, thanks to Michael Shute for helping me clarify what it means for human understanding to transition from being in potency to act.

⁵⁶ Wiercinski, 21.

⁵⁷ Lonergan, 107.

⁵⁸ Arthos, 301. I use his sentence structure. The next two sentences are also a summary of this page.

⁵⁹ Aquinas, *De Natura*, § 275.

Now what Gadamer argues is that this inner procession testifies to the fact that human consciousness is a historical consciousness. Partly this historical consciousness has to do with the fact that ideas are not formed without acts of sense, because the mind is absorbed in the contemplation of the material matter. Here is where Arthos is to the point: before we have fully conceptualised the matter in language, the species has already entered the mind, and this means, for Gadamer, that thought is shaped by what has already taken place in the mind.⁶⁰ The species emerges in the mind before we speak a word and thus we have a preconceptual act of understanding before we have put the experience into words. We do not see the world in a neutral vantage point, but in and through the world in which we live. This is why Gadamer says: “The word does not emerge in a sphere of the mind that is still free of thought.”⁶¹ But this is not to imply that we really come to an understanding of something without the word that has carried us. There is a fine line here, and one that brings us to Trinitarian thought. The word proceeds from thought in a manner analogous to the way in which the Son proceeds from the Father’s intellect in act. The way to think of this procession is that the word draws out and brings forth the mind, and it is in these moments in which we conceptualise our understanding that we realise what we have already understood in a preconceptual sense. “Now, the intellect’s first action is the formation of its object (a word) through the idea. Once this is formed, it understands.”⁶² We experience this immediacy in the ‘aha’ moments.⁶³ In the moment of understanding, a word appears in which we understand and proclaim, “this is what I was trying

⁶⁰ Arthos, 301.

⁶¹ Gadamer, 425.

⁶² Aquinas, *De Natura*, § 275.

⁶³ Arthos, 301. Arthos’s point derives from Lonergan’s work on the “ah” moment. See, for example, *Insight: a Study into Human Understanding*, edit. Fredrick Crowe and Robert Doran (London: Longmans, Green & Com, 1952).

to say.” We understand not apart from the word but in the act of generating concepts out of what we already understand.

Gadamer’s hermeneutics is rooted in our interpretative mode of being. As such, his hermeneutics, following Heidegger, is ontological. We do not understand through a rigorous method in which we stand above the object of knowing, but we understand in and through the phenomena in which we are immersed.⁶⁴ “My real concern was and is philosophic,” Gadamer says, “not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing.”⁶⁵ Human understanding is the mode of the human experience: “Understanding is never a subjective relation to any given ‘object’ but the history of its effect; in other words, understanding belongs to the being of that which is understood.”⁶⁶ Understanding occurs when we encounter the world that brings together person, history, and culture in a meaningful experience. The mode in which we understand and interpret is indivisible from the world in which we inhabit. We stand in the world having interpreted it already, as a kind of virtual embodiment of the world that captures us and grasps hold of us in order to reveal itself.

In Gadamer’s interpretation, the *verbum interius* is a model that helps us to understand this interpretive mode of being, because it brings to light the way in which human understanding is consubstantial with language: “The inner mental word is just as consubstantial with thought as God the Son with God the Father.”⁶⁷ In Gadamer’s thinking, human understanding is embedded in the world and thus is an interpretive experience, precisely because language shapes human experience. We understand the world because the world is enfolding within a conversation that passes through the times and in which we

⁶⁴ Zimmermann, 233-234.

⁶⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxvi.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, xxviii.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 420.

participate. Christian thinkers, such as Augustine and Aquinas, were not concerned with this philosophical hermeneutic, but Gadamer argues that they brought us to hermeneutics in drawing to our attention to the lingual nature of human consciousness and interpretation. The model of the Trinitarian relations as an identity of thought with word is not an insignificant matter, because it shows us that thought moves directly into a word, such that there is no understanding without saying, or perhaps more accurately for Gadamer's purpose, understanding comes about in saying. In this way, the model of the divine procession shows us that we are lingual beings. Thought proceeds into the word and to understand is to speak the word. In Gadamer's words, "The word is not formed only after the act of knowledge has been completed – in Scholastic terms, after the intellect has been informed by the species; it is the act of knowledge itself. Thus the word is simultaneous with this forming (*formatio*) of the intellect."⁶⁸ The word is a kind of heuristic that brings forth human thoughts in a moment of understanding.

The lingual structure of thought suggests that all of human experience and understanding is interpretative. The word that enlivens human thought encompasses our entire being. The word overwhelms our understanding. In language, we stand within a world of meaning, which penetrates human experience beyond "our wanting and doing."⁶⁹ We do not step outside interpretation, since we already exist within the world that we have interpreted and understood already. "Hermeneutics," Gadamer explains, "must start from the position that a person seeking to understand something has a bond to the subject matter that comes into language."⁷⁰ We understand the world because language places us in a position of belonging to it, and interpretation is that which arises from the act of understanding that world.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 423.

⁶⁹ Ibid., xxvii.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 295.

Interpretation is what happens when we understand something; it is the manifestation of consciousness in act and thus “understanding and interpretation are indissolubly bound together.”⁷¹ We always already understand and interpret because we speak the word.

For Gadamer, the Trinitarian revelation of the *verbum interius* upends the forgetfulness of language that in Gadamer’s interpretation began when Plato’s *Cratylus* depicted language in terms of a signification system that provides words with a “correct” meaning and was resurfaced with twentieth century logical positivism and correspondence theories of truth. Correspondence theories of truth understand language in terms of representation, while forgetting that language exceeds our understanding. The word, in this thinking, is that which represents the thing but not that which says and shows us the world on its own terms. In Plato’s *Cratylus*, for instance, the interlocutor Cratylus asserts that a name must represent the “true nature” of the person, or the name is useless, failing to correspond to the person. Thus, according to Cratylus, it is not useful to speak the name of Socrates’s friend Hermogenes, because the name is a disjoint from his nature, since he is not of the race of Hermes. In Gadamer’s argument, twentieth century logical positivists followed this forgetfulness of language. In positivism, words are said to be signs that match an object, and words that fail to correspond to a scientifically verifiable object are considered to be meaningless statements. While Cratylus tells Socrates that speaking the name “Hermogenes” is “merely making a noise, going through purposeless motions, as if he were beating a bronze pot,”⁷² the positivist Rudolph Carnap says that words that do not correspond to empirical objects “have no sense, assert nothing, are mere pseudo-statements.”⁷³ The problem for hermeneutists like Heidegger

⁷¹ Ibid., 400.

⁷² Plato, *Cratylus*, trans. Harold North Fowler (London: Heinemann, 1926), 430a.

⁷³ Rudolph Carnap, “The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language” in *Logical Positivism*, trans. Arthur Pap, ed. A.J. Ayer (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1959), 67.

and Gadamer is that these competing correspondence theories conceal the phenomena of world, which unveils itself to us in language. The word is not a correspondence to an object in the world but rather the condition of the possibility of a world. In language we grow into world; it introduces us to a particular orientation to the world. The word does not attach onto or represent the world but is fused with it, indivisible from the insight from which it proceeds, always requiring our interpretation but never clarifying it as much as we want. It is Trinitarian theology that awakens us to the interpretive mode of being, reminding us that human consciousness is embedded in language and indissoluble from it. All thought is historical, because there is no seeing and understanding without saying, and the language that makes thought possible has a historical context. Thought needs language in order to exist at all.

The *verbum interius* and Historically Effected Consciousness

In Gadamer's thinking, human understanding is a historical understanding: "Historical consciousness . . . adopts a reflective posture toward both itself and the tradition in which it is situated. It understands itself in terms of its own history. *Historical consciousness is a mode of self-knowledge.*"⁷⁴ Gadamer repeatedly emphasises that human understanding is an effect of history and insists that one must recognise one's being historically effected in order to recover philosophy from the problems of the Enlightenment that removes understanding from the world of experience. Gadamer refers to the mode of recognising one's being historically effected as "historically effected consciousness."⁷⁵ According to Gadamer, even before we consciously recognise our being historically effected, we have already fused the past and

⁷⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 228. Italics in the original.

⁷⁵ *Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*

present by our very our situated being in the world.⁷⁶ As historical beings, we stand within the past: “we are always already affected by history. It determines in advance both what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation, and we more or less forget half of what is really there.”⁷⁷ We are not disconnected from history, in which history is a separate, isolated compartment in which we define ourselves over and against the object of knowing; rather, history is the “enactment of understanding”⁷⁸: “In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life.”⁷⁹

Gadamer understands language as that which embeds human consciousness in tradition: “The linguisticity of understanding is *the concretion of historically effected consciousness*.”⁸⁰ Partly this lingual experience has to do with the fact that conversation is what allows us to expand our historical perspectives: “The historical movement of human life consists of the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one statement, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon.”⁸¹ The word horizon is a key term in Gadamer’s thought, because the word connotes the idea that historical understanding is a kind of vantage point that expands in the exchange of human understanding and dialogue⁸²:

The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point . . . A person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence over-values what is nearest to him. On the other hand, “to have a horizon” means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see

⁷⁶ Zimmermann, 236.

⁷⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 301, cited in Zimmermann, 243.

⁷⁸ Zimmermann, 243.

⁷⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 278, cited in Zimmermann, 243.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 391. Italics in the original.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 303.

⁸² Zimmermann, 242.

beyond it . . . working out the hermeneutical situation means acquiring the right horizon of inquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter with tradition.⁸³ According to Gadamer, the word expands this horizon, because it brings forth the past which we have “failed to remember” and allows us to contemplate the future.⁸⁴ Arthos has a beautiful way of phrasing this: “This is the particular pathos of human nature, that it is too frail for any real constancy, and yet it is somehow chosen to renew this fitful awareness, to keep its tie.”⁸⁵ Our finitude means that we may not understand meaning in full, yet we still seem to understand it as a whole.⁸⁶ Historically effected consciousness is a recognition of this juxtaposition, both that we are “too weak to see and capable of seeing.”⁸⁷ The word draws out this juxtaposition, in showing that we understand precisely because we stand within a lingual horizon: “The historical life of a tradition depends on being constantly assimilated and interpreted. All interpretation that was correct in itself would be a foolish ideal that mistook the nature of tradition. Every interpretation has to adapt itself to the hermeneutical situation to which it belongs.”⁸⁸

For Gadamer, the word carries the meaning of the world that makes human understanding possible. “Prejudices, tradition, and authority” passed through the word are not obstacles to the truth that one must mitigate through technological precision or empirical investigation⁸⁹ but are the “very enactment” of human understanding.⁹⁰ Gadamer’s optimistic view of prejudices is the conclusion of his work on the historically effected consciousness, because the fact that we are an effect of history means that history and tradition are the

⁸³ Gadamer., 301-302, cited in Zimmermann 242.

⁸⁴ I borrow the structure and insight of Arthos, 254. The quote is Arthos.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid. The quote is Arthos; the reference to historically effected consciousness is mine, though of course, Arthos is essentially making t

⁸⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 398.

⁸⁹ Zimmermann, 237.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 234.

foundation of understanding, one which we cannot and need not escape.⁹¹ According to Gadamer, the positivists saw prejudices as a hindrance to objective knowing and in so doing had a “prejudice against prejudice” that sought to detach the “interpreter from the interpreted.”⁹² What we learn from the word that encompasses human consciousness and passes through us is that the knower belongs to tradition and carries with this a prejudice. In fact, the knower does not have neutral-free zone in which she can escape in order to free herself from all pre-judgments, because her historical consciousness is mediated through history and language. While Gadamer is not suggesting that one should blindly follow the culture norm without questions or critical reflection, Gadamer also emphasises that we should acknowledge the role of prejudgments in our understanding, and indeed, a failure to acknowledge our prejudices would only blind us from our own ideology.⁹³ This is why Gadamer says: “We should learn to understand ourselves better and recognize that in all understanding, whether we are expressively aware of it or not, the efficacy of history is at work. When a naïve faith in scientific method denies the existence of effective history, there can be an actual deformation of knowledge.”⁹⁴

The *Verbum Interius* and the Humanities

Gadamer sees the *verbum interius* as a development that upends the positivist paradigms that

⁹¹ Ibid, 237.

⁹² Gadamer, 272.

⁹³ On this point, Habermas criticised Gadamer’s hermeneutics as failing to allow for an objective perspective. In response, Gadamer defended hermeneutics as an objective phenomenon, a point that the *verbum interius* strengthens, because the notion of the Incarnation fuses together truth and Word, thereby establishing truth within language and history, rather than within “subjective thought.” Though not in reference to Habermas, the second-half of this sentence is from Arthos, 71-72.

⁹⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300.

have devalued the human sciences. Gadamer fights against the technological precision and scientific methods that want to define the truth only in scientific terms, thereby concealing the real importance of the humanities as more than appreciation but rather an encounter with truth. In assuming that one can form a concept in a pure act of the intellect, the positivists and rationalists ignored the truths of the humanities that exemplify our interdependence with history. As a response, Gadamer points out that it is history that makes knowledge possible. Gadamer appeals to the Trinitarian analogy of the *verbum interius* in order to illustrate that all understanding is embedded in the world. As illustrated by the Trinitarian identity of thought and word, Gadamer is able to show that the word is the medium of insight, dispersed through communities and cultures and that meaning resides within the word. Gadamer is then able to show that the historical dispersion of what is meaningful and true through artwork and the humanities is a model that challenges the rationalist and positivist paradigms that want to reduce knowledge to what is ready-at-hand. This dispersion is seen because the Trinitarian relation of insight and word reminds us that meaning resides within the texts that speak to us, because the word is a movement that brings forth meaning and thought, in a similar way that the Son is the fullness of the Father's mind. All of this, Gadamer argues, legitimises the truths of the human sciences, in that the word and text are not a distortion of meaning but the fullness of meaning.

The *verbum interius* also brings us to the truths embodied in the human sciences, in reminding us that there is a kind of knowledge that does not have to do with mastery of an idea but a familiar immersion or indeed a participation in that idea. What we learn from Augustine's Trinitarian speculations is that knowledge is not always a matter of empirical investigation but rather of standing within truths that we do not understand but are yet familiar. In 1997, Jean Grondin asked Gadamer, who was in his late 90s at the time and thus was reflecting back upon

his lifelong work and greatest influences, why he had connected the hermeneutical task of finding the “right word” to Augustine’s *verbum interius*. One might expect that Gadamer would reminisce upon the details of the *verbum* analogy to help us understand intellection or thought and yet as Arthos is apt to point out, Gadamer’s answer was curiously more focused on what Augustine upended, namely the gnostics, who had severed flesh and spirit, in much the same way as Plato had severed the material or tangible word from the truth of things.⁹⁵ Commenting upon *De Trinitate*, Gadamer says: “it took Augustine no less than 15 books to get closer to the secret of the Trinity without falling into the false way of the gnostic presumption . . .

Augustine’s attempt in his books is to say that the greatest mystery of the Christian proclamation and revelation can nevertheless be made somewhat understandable through analogies. To this extent he believed that by using this approach he went beyond the gnostic attacks.”⁹⁶ One of Augustine’s great contributions to hermeneutics is reminding us that there are mysteries that we do not understand in full but are yet somehow familiar. Augustine countered Gnosticism in showing that belief in the divinity of Incarnate Son is not incoherent because we have analogies that are afforded to us from language: “Augustine presented fifteen analogies to the mystery of the Trinity – precisely to show that not everything is governable by humans. There are things that are close and intimate, like the things that are familiar to us and for which we have language.”⁹⁷ In order to understand how the Son proceeds from the Father while remaining within his being, not separate but within, one only need to consider the way in which the word proceeds from thought. The *verbum* helps hermeneutists to conceive human language as a procession from act to act, and human language provides theologians a passage

⁹⁵ I follow the words and sentence structure of Arthos, 6.

⁹⁶ Jean Grondin, in Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 418, edit. Richard E. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 418.

⁹⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 419

into the deepest mysteries of the divine. Gadamer's re-appropriation of the *verbum interius* is not to be mistaken as a statement of faith, and indeed even for Augustine it not a logical proof of God. Rather, it is to say that the same speculation that defeated Gnosticism, namely Augustine's demonstration of the presence of truths that cannot be mastered, also defeats instrumentalism and positivism, because it opens us toward the way of hermeneutics, in which the word is always an expression of what exceeds our understanding, while we remain "capable of seeing"⁹⁸ because we can speak the word.⁹⁹

A hermeneutical perspective of human finitude establishes the validity of the human sciences, precisely because it shows us that human knowledge is not reducible to empirical methodology but only arises from our being creatures of the world. In light of our finitude, we see that it is not dissecting an object into entities that can be represented in language that constitutes knowledge but our situation in history.¹⁰⁰ The nature of the human sciences is one of constant interpretation. In reading a book, we only partially grasp the meaning, for when we read it a second time, new insights are revealed. A book can pass from one generation to another in history, and it carries along with it the conversations and interpretations that have enclosed it, while always being open to new interpretations. In fact, history is not an obstacle to our knowledge of the text, but that which allows us access it in the first place.¹⁰¹ The rationalists who devalue the human sciences and claim that we can evoke knowledge to full presence or can trace a historical text back to its "original" authorial intention conceal that there is always something that escapes our attention. There is much that remains unsaid when we say something but nevertheless lurks underneath human consciousness. This is why

⁹⁸ Arthos, 254.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰⁰ Zimmermann, 236.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 237.

Gadamer connects the unending task of hermeneutics to always trying to find the right word but never having the last word. Hermeneutics confronts our limitations. Our understanding is always incomplete, exceeding the grasp of intention, yet involved in the process of finding a word that expresses the subject matter in order to understand. "What cannot be understood," Gadamer writes, "can pose an endless task of at least finding a word that comes a little closer to the matter at issue."¹⁰² Augustine's analogy is emblematic of this finitude, because it shows that we can approach the subject at hand, while also recognising that our understanding of the matter is incomplete. Human understanding is the embodiment of the world passed through the word: "Understanding is . . . the *original form of the realization of Dasein*, which is being-in-the-world."¹⁰³

The conditioning of the natural sciences and rationalist epistemologies nearly blindsided the best of the intellectual thinkers in the humanities to this historical being-in-the-world so central to the task of the human sciences. Jens Zimmermann's summary of the history of hermeneutics is helpful.¹⁰⁴ As Zimmermann notes, Gadamer argues that many thinkers failed to understand the extent to which we are temporal creatures immersed and embedded within tradition and history and thus could not provide an adequate response to the rise of logical positivism.¹⁰⁵ In its forgetfulness of language, philosophy failed to understand the identity of thought and word. Schleiermacher noted that we should retrace the historical past in order to understand an author, but he also forgot that the word says or shows us the thing, even in historical distance.¹⁰⁶ Ranke similarly understood that tradition influences the present; the

¹⁰² Jean Grondin, in Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 417.

¹⁰³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 250, cited in Zimmermann, 235. Italics in the original.

¹⁰⁴ In the following, I use the words and paragraph structure of Zimmermann, because the sequence matters to the story Gadamer is telling. See Zimmermann, 234-236.

¹⁰⁵ Zimmermann, 234.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 242.

issue, for Gadamer, is that he continued to follow the Enlightenment notion of “the full self-transparency of being,”¹⁰⁷ concealing that we also bring to our historical discussions our own historical consciousness, which means that history also conforms to our understanding.¹⁰⁸ Kant correctly understood that objects conform to our understanding and thus that we do not have a simple presence with the empirical world; yet according to Gadamer, he failed to overcome the privilege given to the natural sciences, because he did not recognise the extent to which human understanding arises from our being-in-the-world (what Heidegger calls *Dasein*).¹⁰⁹ Dilthey correctly understood that human “life and knowing” are indivisible.¹¹⁰ Zimmermann writes, “Dilthey, in effect, tried to recapture, without its Christian underpinnings . . . Vico’s notion that humans can understand what they make.”¹¹¹ The issue from Gadamer’s perspective is that while Dilthey understood that the human sciences disclose the historical understanding of the human being, he continued to assume that the natural sciences speak to the empirically given. While not his intent, his assumption continued to leave truth to the realm of the natural science and methodological investigation and the human sciences to the realm of non-truth. Husserl also tried to dismantle the dualism of the natural sciences and human sciences in showing that both are derived from the “achievements of the intentionality”¹¹² that underline human understanding.¹¹³ Despite these efforts, Zimmermann notes, these thinkers in Gadamer’s interpretation failed to fully understand the extent to which we are embedded within tradition, as the whole underpinning of knowledge. According to Gadamer, Zimmermann argues, it is

¹⁰⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 208.

¹⁰⁸ Zimmermann, 234.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 234. The reference to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* is mine, though the reference to Kant in general is Zimmermann’s.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 249-250, cited in the footnote of Zimmermann, 234.

¹¹³ Zimmermann, 234.

only in recognising that our location in history is the foundation of understanding that we bring the natural and human sciences together and restore the human sciences to truth.¹¹⁴ Despite what the methodology of the empirical sciences have led us to assume, there is no act of understanding apart from our situation in history: “*Understanding* is not a resigned ideal of human experience adopted in the old age of spirit, as with Dilthey; nor is it, as with Husserl, a last methodological ideal of philosophy in contrast to the naivete of unreflecting life; it is, on the contrary . . . *Dasein’s* mode of being.”¹¹⁵

The *verbum interius* represents a high point of Gadamer’s aim to legitimise the human sciences as a vital source of knowledge, because it shows that the word is a growth of truth that is never divorced from the mediation of the world. It is in belonging to tradition that the truth of things is disclosed, and it is the word that carries this tradition, encompassing our entire being. The identity of word with thought reminds hermeneutics that all thought is historical, and so tradition and history are not barriers to overcome but the “very enactment” of understanding.¹¹⁶ There is no disjoint between word and truth, and thus the word says truth, as it resides in the human sciences, as a living conversation that passes through us. This identity means that, contrary to what the method of empirical and rationalist epistemologies may have conditioned us to believe, we do not hover above truth in an objective, “bird’s eye” view of the world but are immersed in it: “What has come down to us by way of verbal tradition is not left over but given to us, told us – whether through direct retelling, in which myth, legend, and custom have their life, or through written tradition, whose signs are, as it were, immediately clear to every reader who can read them.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 234, 241.

¹¹⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 250. Italics in the original. Cited in Zimmermann, 234.

¹¹⁶ Zimmermann, 237, 234.

¹¹⁷ Gadamer., 391.

Conclusion

The Trinitarian relations brought to hermeneutics attention the identity of thought and word that grounds human understanding in interpretation and historical consciousness. The model of Trinitarian relations as an identity of thought with word shows us that thought is made possible in language and is truly fused with it, such that there is no understanding without the word that has carried us. The word enlivens the thoughts and insights from which it proceeds, carrying it across generations, communicating truth in one's belonging to tradition. Thought itself is possible because it conceives this word, which means that human consciousness is historical through and through, in so far as the word that makes thought possible has a historical context. It is a hermeneutical perspective of the *verbum interius* that establishes the validity of the human sciences, precisely because it shows that human knowledge is not reducible to empirical methodology but only arises from our being creatures embedded within the world.

“It Has Its Being in Its Revealing”**Augustine, Gadamer, and the Word that Says**

Augustine of Hippo and Hans-Georg Gadamer are substantially different thinkers, with a common interest in Trinitarian theology. Augustine was for Gadamer a pivotal thinker in western thought, contributing to the forgetfulness of the word and bringing language back to hermeneutics. Augustine forgot that thought is historical and that we always already understand. In Augustine’s thinking, human understanding is not predetermined by history and culture. According to Augustine, we have a direct insight and then speak a word that expresses the insight, and thus transition from not understanding (potency) to understanding (act). Gadamer challenges this. For Gadamer, we always already understand, because we belong to tradition. For Gadamer, human understanding is a movement from an understanding mediated by history (act) to a word that speaks its meaning (act). Gadamer’s turn to Augustine is thus an equivocation, an irony compounded by the fact that Augustine’s realism – Augustine’s belief that we see the real meaning of the thing in an immediate sense and then express it in terms of a word– is derived from Plato’s theory of forms that Gadamer argues was the “epoch-making decision” that “banished” knowledge to the “intellectual sphere,” until we forgot that the meaningfulness of things resides within the word.¹¹⁸ In arguing this, Gadamer says, “Plato’s discovery of the ideas conceals the true nature of language even more than the theories of the Sophists.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 414.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 408.

My work here is to show that Gadamer underplays the difference between his hermeneutics and Augustine's Platonism in order to make a complete non-Augustinian point, namely that all thought is historical and that we always already understand because we speak the word. Gadamer can do this because Augustine's Trinitarian theology deconstructs his own Platonism. In reflecting upon the mystery of the Triune God, Augustine forms an analogy between the divine word and the human word and in this light, he unwittingly restores hermeneutics to the word as that which speaks the mind. I will discuss Augustine's Trinitarian breakthrough in two sections. In the first section, I will show that Augustine led us to a hermeneutical understanding of the word when he substituted the word for the Platonic form, which was a recognition that seeing is not a mere cleaving to an abstract truth but an utterance of a truth. In the second section, I will show that the analogy between the human word and the divine word allows Augustine to show that the word is brought to full expression in the act of speaking and thus the word is not a simple reflection on truth.

The Appearance of the Word

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer summarises the Augustinian contribution of the inner word as one that says or speaks the thing: "[Language] has its being in its revealing." Gadamer writes in direct reference to Augustine, "Exactly the same is true in the mystery of the Trinity."¹²⁰ Gadamer believes that Augustine's Trinitarian analogy between the divine word and the human word begins to awaken us to the fact that the word is not a lens in which we see the thing in an immediate sense, but the word is that which says and speaks the thing to us. Gadamer's reading of the *verbum interius* as a saying that reveals the thing is an extension of a project already begun in Heidegger. Arthos explains that Heidegger reflects upon the inner

¹²⁰ Ibid., 420.

word of Augustine's *Confessions* as a movement between "worldly experience" and "insight."¹²¹ The questions, guilt, and desire that ignites Augustine's passion for God is a kind of a "longing for fulfillment" that "makes possible further growth and becoming-felt."¹²² As Arthos shows in quoting Augustine, Augustine's verbal confession is a movement between his thoughts and his experiences, which serves as a hermeneutical reminder that "our living consciousness is a constant following and interweaving of situations."¹²³ I would add that this enigma of understanding is more than interpretation. Augustine's confessions are an encounter with insight, which takes the form of an event or address that changes us in the process of understanding. The late-Heidegger understood this truth-event well: "hermeneutics means not just interpretation but, even before it, the bearing of message and tiding."¹²⁴ The word is an event, and language itself speaks and shows the thing: "But then does language itself speak? How should it manage to do so, when it is not even equipped with the instruments of voice? Nevertheless, it is language that speaks. What language properly pursues, right from the start, is the essential unfolding of speech, of saying. Language speaks by saying; that is, by showing."¹²⁵ Gadamer's reading of the *verbum interius* is in debt to the late-Heidegger's point that the word does not just see the thing but bears its truth and changes us through its revelation.

It is because of his incarnational theology that Augustine leads hermeneutics to the realisation that language itself speaks. In the climatic *verbum* passage in book 15 of *De Trinitate* that Gadamer cites in *Truth and Method*, Augustine explains that the inner word is "sprung" from the sight of knowledge, emerging from one's understanding of the subject matter being revealed, unable to be severed from it:

¹²¹ In this sentence and the following two, I use the argument and structure of Arthos, 5.

¹²² Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of the Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 250, as cited in Arthos, 5. The quotes are Heidegger; the interpretation and reading is Arthos.

¹²³ Ibid. The quote is Heidegger; the interpretation and reading is Arthos.

¹²⁴ Heidegger, "On the Way to Language," trans. Peter D. Hertz (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1971), 29.

¹²⁵ Ibid., "On the Way to Language," in *Basic Writings: From being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), 411.

“for the word is then most like the thing known, from which also its image is begotten, since the sight of thinking arises from the sight of knowledge . . . [it is] a true word concerning a true thing, having nothing of its own, but wholly derived from the knowledge from which it is born. The word is true, i.e. sprung from things that are known.”¹²⁶ When one understands a subject matter in a moment of conclusion, the act of understanding gives birth to an inner word that remains indivisible from the subject matter. This identification of insight and word resembles the Son’s procession from the Father, because the human word, like the divine word, is nothing by itself but rather remains within understanding. Commenting upon this Augustinian passage, Gadamer explains, “The mystery of the Trinity is mirrored in the miracle of language insofar as the word is true, because it says what the thing is, is nothing by itself and does not seek to be anything: *nihil de suo habens, sed totum de illa Scientia de qua nascitur.*”¹²⁷ Gadamer argues that it is this human resemblance to the Trinity that served as the foreshadow of the breakthrough in hermeneutics to the “saying” of word, as it is immediately after this Augustinian citation that Gadamer writes, “[The Word] has its being in its revealing.”¹²⁸ For Gadamer, the word is not an understanding without saying but an understanding in saying.

It is because of Augustine’s Trinitarian speculation that Gadamer can distance himself from Augustine by agreeing with him. In distinction to Gadamer’s non-instrumental hermeneutics, which recognises the word as a gift of meaning, Augustine had initially inherited from strands of Platonist thought an instrumentalist philosophy that had reduced the word to a mere sign along a mathematical model. We see the remnants of this inheritance when Augustine says “the word that sounds outwardly is the sign of the word that gives light inwardly.”¹²⁹ In this sentence, Augustine is closer to Plato’s *Cratylus* which had suggested that words should be evaluated upon their natural agreement with their object, than

¹²⁶ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 15.22.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 420.

¹²⁹ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 5.20.

to the hermeneutics of early Greek which, similar to Christian thought, believed that a word and thing were so interdependent that a name “belongs to its bearer.”¹³⁰ It is doubtful that Augustine would say, as Gadamer says, that the emergence of the word is a procession from act to act, from a thought always already full of meaning in the mind to a word that speaks its meaning. Augustine would hold this to be exclusive of divine thought, while the human word is to be only understood as potency to act, from not understanding (potency) to understanding (act). Augustine’s instrumentalist inheritance from Plato is why Gadamer argues that Trinitarian speculation would become so crucial to the history of philosophy. When Augustine speaks of God’s Word as the manifestation of divine insight, he unwittingly turns towards hermeneutics in exemplifying the word as a manifestation of meaning, rather than an instrumental sign. Regardless of Augustine’s own background and belief, Gadamer’s argument is that instrumentalism is defeated in his attention to the divine procession because the human word, made in the image of the divine procession, is not a mere cipher of prior meaning but the birth and expression of an insight already there and that is being unfolded dynamically through language and conversation.¹³¹

Gadamer refuses to soften the theological significance of Augustine: Heidegger’s notion of the word as saying is rooted in Augustine’s theological professions. Thirty-six years after the publication of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer told Grondin that he connected the hermeneutical nature of human understanding to the *verbum interius*, “Precisely because it took Augustine no less than 15 books to get closer to the secret of the Trinity without falling into the false way of the gnostic presumption.”¹³² It was Augustine’s formulation of the *verbum interius* as a model for approaching the unknowability of the Trinity that would challenge the division between flesh and spirit under the direction of the Gnostics, and in this similar way would challenge the

¹³⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 406.

¹³¹ Arthos, 224. “Incarnation is a furtherance of an always already involved relation.”

¹³² Grondin, *The Gadamer Reader*, 418, cited in Arthos 6.

western tendency to sever word from truth.¹³³ Gadamer's conversation with Grondin echoes his earlier statement in *Truth and Method* that the *verbum interius* is "not a mere metaphor" for the Trinitarian structure.¹³⁴ Augustine never intended us to conceive of the word as a mere proposition about the mechanics of the Trinity, but it was all along a recognition that our attempt to understand the world which exceeds our grasp is matter of language, which is why Augustine keeps reflecting back towards the inner word as his fundamental way of knowing and being.¹³⁵ The human word is not simply a representation of knowledge but more importantly our ontological mode of being.

Augustine's inner word inches towards the word as a seeing in saying, when he suggests that the *verbum* is a movement between self and God that allows for a moment of understanding. Augustine's inner word is more than a sign that represents concepts along a mathematical grid; for Augustine, the word is hermeneutical because it is a transformative event in which the person is able "to see better and better" what appears through a spiritual, transformative experience.¹³⁶ This circular structure of the word is rooted in Augustine's search for the *imago Dei* in the human person and his belief that the *verbum interius* is an exemplification of this image. Augustine finds a trace of God in his own inner words.¹³⁷ Augustine writes, echoing Paul's confession in 1 Corinthians that we see God dimly as an enigma, that the "word of the mind" is a "glass and an enigma" in which "we see the word of God."¹³⁸ As Arthos points out, the inner word is both the sight of knowledge and the medium

¹³³ Arthos, 6.

¹³⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 420.

¹³⁵ Arthos, 6-7.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 99. The following reading is influenced by Arthos.

¹³⁸ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 15.17. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:12, "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." NIV.

that transforms his understanding.¹³⁹ Augustine learns about the identity of the Father and the divine word, for example, when he reflects upon the identity of human thought and word.

“When we call thoughts speeches of the heart, it does not follow that they are not also acts of sight, arising from the sight of knowledge, when they are true. For when these things are done outwardly by means of the body, then speech and sight are different things: but when we think inwardly, the two are one.”¹⁴⁰ This kinship to the godhead serves as more than a theological conclusion about the triune God. As a model for understanding God, it is the very medium that lifts Augustine’s being towards knowledge. In this way, Arthos argues that Augustine’s inner word is both substance and act.¹⁴¹ The saying which appears is both an encounter with truth and the meaning that transforms the person (spiritually for Augustine), allowing for a moment of understanding.¹⁴²

Augustine paves the way for Gadamer’s breakthrough to the remembrance of language, because it is the word that says or shows something, addressing us as a whole. Hermeneutics begins from the position that we have an awareness of the meaning which presents itself to us.¹⁴³ In listening, we possess an uncanny ability to imagine or discern the meaning of the truths we seek to understand, before we fully understand its meaning or even consciously consider that we understand. This “absent presence” is the essence of the hermeneutical circle that Heidegger developed, although its insight stems from ancient philosophy.¹⁴⁴ The hermeneutical circle attempts to answer the question of how we can discern meaning as a whole, even though the nature of human finitude means that we only experience a part.

¹³⁹ Arthos, 103.

¹⁴⁰ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 9.17.

¹⁴¹ Arthos, 115.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Augustine asks this question in book ten of *De Trinitate*.¹⁴⁵ How can one desire to know God if one is ignorant of his presence?¹⁴⁶ How does one understand human attributes in its perfection if we only experience those attributes within ourselves and others as inadequate and broken? As if anticipating Heidegger, Augustine speaks of this human ability to formulate meaning in terms of part and whole; the mind somehow projects or imagines the meaning of the subject matter at hand through its parts. Augustine writes, "I do not say, [the mind] knows wholly; but what it knows, it knows as a whole."¹⁴⁷ This ability to imagine a subject matter as a whole is Heidegger's hermeneutical circle: "interpretation," Heidegger says, "will be founded essentially upon fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception."¹⁴⁸ Gadamer's example of reading of a book provides an illustration of this capacity to project meaning, to have a fore-sight.¹⁴⁹ The reader understands each sentence and paragraph of a book through anticipation of the whole, an understanding which she will then revise and expand as she reads along. But here is the puzzle. If we are able to approach and understand a subject matter, something must present itself in such a way that understanding is possible, otherwise we would remain unaware of its meaning and unable to imagine its whole. Heidegger explains this understanding this way: "From the very beginning, there occurs a holding together: man's holding himself together with something in such a way that he can come into agreement with whatever he is holding himself together with . . . Only something which is referred to as such in the utterance can be held together, something with which, in uniting it, this holding together agrees."¹⁵⁰As Arthos points

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 100.

¹⁴⁶ In this question and the following, I closely follow Arthos's words, 99. Arthos influenced this entire paragraph.

¹⁴⁷ Augustine, 10.6.

¹⁴⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), §32.

¹⁴⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 269.

¹⁵⁰ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 308, cited in Arthos, 197. I borrow this point from Arthos.

out, Heidegger and Gadamer will argue that the word is what presents itself, holding together mind and world.¹⁵¹ It is the word that lets us imagine the whole, allowing us to understand in and through the way in which we are at home in language and the world. Gadamer says, “Language is the medium in which substantive understanding and agreement take place.”¹⁵² It is the word that “says” or “shows” something to us, addressing us as a whole and us anticipating its address in return.

Both Augustine and Heidegger locate the phenomenon of understanding within the word. Heidegger says that it is the word that allows us to self-understand our understanding, so that we can enter the hermeneutical circle “the right way.”¹⁵³ He writes:

The circle of understanding is . . . not to be reduced to the level of a vicious circle, or even of a circle which is merely to be tolerated. In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing. To be sure, we genuinely take hold of this possibility only when, in our interpretation, we have understood that our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us.¹⁵⁴

All understanding begins with one’s presuppositions. We can recognise our finitude and our being historically effected because we have language. Somehow, despite our historical situation and limited perspective of the subject matter, we can arrive at an understanding and imagine the whole of its meaning. This is where we see that there is a sense in which human understanding is a movement from being in potency to really understanding, because unlike God’s word, we proceed in a series of incomplete acts of understanding that are always being revised along the way. Augustine would note that this miracle of understanding is a matter of

¹⁵¹ Arthos, 197.

¹⁵² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 386.

¹⁵³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §32.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

the grace of God, but he also unwittingly shows that understanding resides within the word that speaks the thing.

Part of the reason Augustine arrives at the word as the pivotal point in the circle of understanding is that he substitutes the inner word for the Platonic form of things, thereby upending any notion that the word is a mere sign of truth. Augustine disrupts his own background in Platonism and the course of western thought more broadly, when he turns to the *verbum interius* as that which utters and says the thing, against the Platonic notion that the mind sees the truth in an immediate sense. The western epistemic means of approaching knowledge through a mind to which all else is an object is subverted, when Augustine's inner word functions as the mediation between the self and truth. In his platonic moments, Augustine retreats into his mind, because he believes the mind is distorted by the mundane, which hinders one's ability to see truth immediately.¹⁵⁵ In his Trinitarian contemplation, however, the human mind is no longer the primary bridge to the divine; rather, it is the inner word that functions as that hinge and thus utters the truth. Augustine had no intention to upend the western emphasis on the mind; he sought knowledge of the divine word and in this effort reconceived the *verbum interius* in light of the Trinitarian relations. Yet language theory took a momentous step when Augustine said that it is the inner word that mediates self and truth. Augustine makes this point when he writes that the word mediates the mind and its knowledge. "A word . . . is knowledge together with love. Whenever, then, the mind knows and loves itself, its word is joined to it by love. And since it loves knowledge and knows love, both the word is in love and love is in the word, and both are in him who loves and speaks."¹⁵⁶ Arthos points out that what Augustine is saying is that the word is circular: one's love and

¹⁵⁵ Arthos, 111.

¹⁵⁶ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 9.15, cited in Arthos, 118. In terms of the Trinitarian analogy, love is the work of the Holy Spirit.

desire for knowledge moves one from “love to word, word to love, and both to and from the mind.”¹⁵⁷ The word mediates self and knowledge and speaks its object.

Here is where Augustine interests Gadamer in his step away from Platonism: Augustine does not say that the word is formed through reason or mathematical notation but that the word is part of a spiritual or transformative experience that happens to us because we love truth and are involved in it. In the act of understanding, born from one’s involvement in truth, the word says or shows the form of the thing. “We behold,” Augustine says, “the form according to which we are, and according to which we do anything” and by this form “we have the true knowledge of things, thence conceived, as it were as a word within us, and by speaking we beget it from within; nor by being born does it depart from us.”¹⁵⁸ Augustine’s idea that the mind contains the form of things is platonic, and Gadamer will certainly not follow this Augustinian metaphysical conviction. However, Augustine also departs from Platonism in one notable way, which I would argue deconstructs Platonism from within Augustine’s own Platonism. In the above passage, Augustine does not see the form of things in an immediate sense and then utter the word but rather sees the thing through the utterance of the word. The human soul loves truth, and the word conceived from this desire transforms the person in understanding. Augustine writes, “by cleaving to that very same form itself which they behold, so that from thence, [the word] may be formed.”¹⁵⁹ Augustine’s inner word breaks through his own Platonism, because it introduces the word as that which says or speaks the form of the thing.

Augustine substitutes the *verbum interius* for the Platonic form in his discussion of justice. Augustine questions how we can recognise and understand the concept of justice, if this

¹⁵⁷ Arthos, 118.

¹⁵⁸ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 9.12.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.9, cited in Arthos, 112.

concept is unknowable via the senses. Augustine is intrigued that it is not sense perception itself that mediates person and truth.¹⁶⁰ Knowledge of immaterial forms, such as justice, provides a clear example of a truth which we gather without the direct aid of the senses. “We know within ourselves what it is to be [just]. For I find this nowhere else when I seek to utter it, except within myself; and if I ask another what it is to [just], he seeks within himself what to answer, and whosoever hence can answer truly, he has found within himself what to answer.”¹⁶¹ When we seek to understand something, we are able to utter an image within ourselves of it, even if we have not yet experienced it within ourselves or ever observed this inner mental state with the human eye. We have an immaterial impression of this being that connects mind and truth in a way that enables understanding. Arthos notes that we might expect that Augustine will call this impression a form, but again Augustine instead calls it the *verbum*.¹⁶² “The word is the image.”¹⁶³ Augustine’s choice to substitute the Christian *verbum* for the platonic form may seem insignificant, but it was ultimately that step which Gadamer argues recovered us from the forgetfulness of language, because it reminded us that the word proceeds from the act of understanding (act to act). What interests Gadamer is that we do not see in an immediate sense, but that we produce concepts that express what we have come to understand.

The Two Similarities to God’s Word

Gadamer was aware that these hermeneutical insights stem from Augustine’s reflection upon a

¹⁶⁰ Arthos, 112.

¹⁶¹ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 8.9.

¹⁶² Arthos, 112.

¹⁶³ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 8.9.

causal link between the inner word and the divine word. "This inner word is the mirror and the image of the divine word. When Augustine and the Scholastics consider the problem of the *verbum in* order to attain the conceptual means to elucidate the mystery of the Trinity, they are concerned exclusively with this inner word, the word of the heart."¹⁶⁴ Augustine's word speaks truth, because the inner word is not a mere metaphor for God's word but one of participation in his being¹⁶⁵: "so when we know God, although we are made better than we were before we knew Him, and above all when the same knowledge being also liked and worthily loved becomes a word, and so that knowledge becomes a kind of likeness of God."¹⁶⁶

My argument in this section is that Augustine's hermeneutics remembers language at the time that the human word most approaches the divine word, as it is in that moment that it is most clear that the subject matter is brought to full expression in the word, as a saying of the meaningfulness of the thing. The ability of the human word to approach the divine word raises questions, however, because Augustine also argues that the inner word resembles the divine word when it is purified from the sensible realm, a complete non-Gadamerian teaching, since Gadamer's hermeneutics works on the assumption that we understand through our involvement in the sensible world. Augustine's devaluation of the sensible world would arguably lead to the attempt to distill the inner life from external influences and would reduce the external word to a sign of the truth conceived inwardly, as we see, for instance, in the common modern belief that language functions as an instrument of the reasoning faculty.¹⁶⁷ Gadamer resists this modern dualism and instrumentalisation for its inability to recognise that the word is the all-encompassing horizon of understanding and its failure to acknowledge that

¹⁶⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 420.

¹⁶⁵ Arthos, 3-4, 101.

¹⁶⁶ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 9.16.

¹⁶⁷ Arthos, 134.

word is not merely that by which one sees but a seeing in saying. Yet Gadamer refuses to entirely fault this instrumentalism on Augustine and in fact, goes as far as telling Grondin that Augustine's *verbum interius* rescues us from this instrumentalism and returns us to the remembrance of language.¹⁶⁸ This equivocation is a puzzle, and one that has garnered negative attention from Gadamarian scholars. "Gadamer's reliance upon Augustine is overstated," David Vessey writes, "Either Grondin—and perhaps Gadamer too—is misreading Augustine."¹⁶⁹ Vessey is prudent to point out the contention between the two thinkers, but I would argue that Gadamer was aware of Augustine's intent. Gadamer cannot be more clear: "the external word, and with it the whole problem of the variety of languages, was explicitly devalued by Augustine."¹⁷⁰ Despite Augustine's devaluation of the word, Gadamer urges us to look deeper, beyond Augustine's Platonism, and into the deeper structure of the word that underlines Trinitarian thought: "it is a quite specific side of the nature of language that comes to light here."¹⁷¹ There is a significant hermeneutical point underneath the contention between Augustine and Gadamer. Gadamer underplays the difference between Augustine's theological hermeneutics and Heidegger's philosophical hermeneutics, in order to make an un-Augustinian point about the historical and lingual nature of thought. In what follows, I will introduce two ways that the human word approaches the divine word as articulated by Arthos but derived from Augustine, and then show that hermeneutics can learn from these two ways that the subject matter is brought to expression in the utterance of the word. We can learn about the nature of the word from these hermeneutical points, despite the contention between Augustine and Gadamer.

¹⁶⁸ Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, XIV.

¹⁶⁹ David Vessey, "Gadamer, Augustine, Aquinas, and Hermeneutic Universality," *Philosophy Today* 55, no. 2 (2001): 158.

¹⁷⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 419.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 420.

Augustine first draws upon the inner word's likeness to the divine word in its pre-formed state. There is a kind of word within us, which Arthos calls the word of "indirect reflection," that is not yet formed into a concept but is the "*a priori* condition" of the concept.¹⁷² Phenomenologically, we know the presence of this deeper, dormant word, because whenever we seek to acquire a new concept, we find ourselves reflecting upon an "inkling" of a word that "makes that reflection possible" in the first place¹⁷³: "But this is a still more hidden depth of our memory, wherein we found this also first when we thought of it, and wherein an inner word is begotten such as belongs to no tongue, -- as it were, knowledge of knowledge, vision of vision, and understanding which appears in [reflective] thought; of understanding which had indeed existed before in the memory, but was latent there."¹⁷⁴ The indirect word of reflection is that which has yet to develop and form into a concept of reflection.¹⁷⁵ The indirect word is the structure of the concept, a word "formable, but not yet formed."¹⁷⁶ Augustine illustrates this word of indirect reflection through his ability to formulate an image of Alexandria. He notices that, although he has never seen Alexandria, he was able formulate an image or concept of Alexandria from an inner word already present, that is, from a vague notion of a city that was waiting to be formed into a precise image or concept. In this sense that the word awakes itself into a concept, Arthos argues that Augustine's word of indirect reflection is its own knowledge, or perhaps more accurately, that the two are the same¹⁷⁷: "When [the word] seeks to know itself, it knows itself now as seeking . . . In the very fact that it seeks itself, it is clearly convicted that of being more known to itself than unknown. For it knows itself as seeking and as not

¹⁷² Arthos., 122-123.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 122.

¹⁷⁴ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 15.40, cited in Arthos, 130-131.

¹⁷⁵ Arthos, 122.

¹⁷⁶ Augustine, *De Trinitate*., 15.25.

¹⁷⁷ Arthos, 123.

knowing itself, in that it seeks to know itself.”¹⁷⁸ The word and knowledge are near synonymous: “Knowledge bears a likeness to that which it knows, that is, of which it is the knowledge.”¹⁷⁹

Gadamer turns to the word of indirect reflection in order to make a hermeneutical point about the way in which the word is revealed, all the while knowing that this word of indirect reflection was a part of the forgetfulness of language in western thought, because it denied the lingual and historical nature of consciousness. Augustine describes the word of indirect reflection as that which is “before all sound, before all thought of a sound,”¹⁸⁰ and “belongs to no tongue.”¹⁸¹ This is problematic phrase for Gadamer, who recognises that the knower is embedded in the word. “We are always already biased in our thinking and knowing by our linguistic interpretation of the world,” Gadamer writes, “To grow into this linguistic interpretation means to grow up in the world.”¹⁸² Augustine denies the lingual nature of thought because he is so focused upon the word as the *imago Dei*, as the mirror of God’s perfect knowing, that he overlooks that we always already understand, precisely because we live within language. For Augustine, as Augustinian scholar Philip Cary reminds us, God’s knowledge is immediate and a perfect expression of his being, and in a similar manner, as the *imago Dei*, the human word can express our mind immediately, without the mediation of history and culture.¹⁸³ This analogy is why Arthos argues that Augustine’s word of indirect reflection is its own knowledge, because the word perfectly reflects the mind.¹⁸⁴ Yet, it was also this emphasis on inwardness that arguably led to Augustine’s forgetfulness of language, in

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 10.6., cited in Arthos, 133.

¹⁷⁹ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 9.16.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 15.22.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 64.

¹⁸³ Philip Cary, “The Inner Word Prior to Language,” *Philosophy Today* 55, no.6 (2001): 192.

¹⁸⁴ Arthos, 133.

which we forgot that the word operates through the world of history, of language, of culture, and of sense.¹⁸⁵ Hence, Gadamer says: “The external world, and with it the whole problem of the variety of languages, was explicitly devalued by Augustine.”¹⁸⁶

Gadamer underplays the inward retreat of the word of indirect reflection, because he wants to make a complete non-Augustinian point, namely that the meaningfulness of the world is shown forth in language: “[the word] has its being in its revealing.”¹⁸⁷ Gadamer can make this point, because the human word is “more than a mere metaphor” for the divine word.¹⁸⁸ It is at the time that the human word most approaches the divine word that theology remembers the word, and it is at this same point that Augustine conceals the word as transposable with the culture, unaware of what is at his fingers: “[the word of indirect reflection] is neither *prolativum* (brought forth) nor *cogitativum in similitudine soni* (thought in the likeness of sound). Hence, this inner word is the mirror and image of the divine.”¹⁸⁹ Part of what Gadamer sees in this word of indirect reflection that is in need of revelation is that word is always appearing out of concealment; this, of course, is also Heidegger’s point and has been brought up by Arthos in relation to Gadamer’s inner word.¹⁹⁰ We have seen that for Heidegger the word is an appearance that speaks the thing and brings it forth. But Heidegger reminds us that it is because the word appears that it was concealed and will keep reappearing and disappearing.¹⁹¹ Part of the world always escapes us because we are finite. As we have seen repeatedly, it is this very finitude and situation within history and language that allows us to have a matter of understanding in the first place. Along these lines, Gadamer’s fellow hermeneutian Jean-Louis

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 134.

¹⁸⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 419.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 420.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Arthos, 253-254.

¹⁹¹ Ibid. 253.

Chrétien noted: “It is always towards what I myself do not understand and cannot master, towards what escapes me, that I must lend an ear.”¹⁹² Augustine’s inner word of indirect reflection that later brings itself forth is an exemplification of this word that escapes us, this word in which we lend our ear in order to move the circle of understanding forward. As Arthos notes, Augustine’s observation that the mind does not know “wholly; but what it knows, it as a whole knows”¹⁹³ reminds us that something appears to us as a whole, while something is always amiss.¹⁹⁴ Gadamer disagrees with the notion of a soundless word untainted by tongues, but he affirms the sentiment that the pre-formed is always developing and emerging from the unsaid, while the word also withdraws, unable to completely utter all that remains to be said, which is why Augustine invokes analogies to approach a God that he cannot fully conceptualise. Commenting upon this, Gadamer says, “I personally believe that this [Trinitarian] doctrine has constantly stimulated the course of thought in the West as a challenge and invitation to try and think that which continually transcends the limits of human understanding.”¹⁹⁵

Augustine also unwittingly makes a hermeneutical turn towards the remembrance of the word in his articulation of the second likeness between the human word and the divine word. This second likeness, also articulated by Arthos, is the formed word; it is the word or concept that has been formed from the indirect word.¹⁹⁶ Arthos points out that Augustine turns to the concept in part because the word of indirect reflection is an incomplete image of God, because it is potential, in contrast to God’s understanding, which is a complete act.¹⁹⁷ In human thought, the word of indirect reflection must evolve into a concept, so that we have an act of

¹⁹² Chrétien, *Ark of Speech*, trans. Andrew Brown (London: Routledge, 2004), 13-14.

¹⁹³ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 10.6.

¹⁹⁴ Arthos, 254.

¹⁹⁵ Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, edit. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 5.

¹⁹⁶ Arthos 131-132

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

understanding. This flux and change within human thought is where the analogy between the divine word and the human word falls apart – where we see an unlikeness between us and God. The divine word is without potency, but the human word has potency.¹⁹⁸ Augustine writes, “We toss it to and fro by revolving it this way or that, while we think first one thing and then another.”¹⁹⁹ Gadamer is well aware of this potency to act: “The human word is potential before it is actualized. It is capable of being formed, though it is not yet formed.”²⁰⁰ In this sense, the intellect is not analogous to the divine word, since God’s understanding does not evolve.²⁰¹ However, once the formation process has been complete, the result is a concept that resembles God’s Word because the concept is complete, and thus mirrors God’s Word that endures.²⁰² At the end of this process is an act of understanding: “A true word comes into being, when, as I said, that which we toss to and fro by revolving it arrives at what which we know, and is formed by that, in taking its entire likeness.”²⁰³ Augustine repeats the word “true word” several times, because it is important to him that the word of indirect reflection can enact itself as knowledge, and without the medium of history, that the new concept can accord with true knowledge²⁰⁴: “For we are usually said to understand what, by thinking of it, we have found to

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 131.

¹⁹⁹ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 15.25.

²⁰⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 423-424.

²⁰¹ This potency is not to erase the sense in which the intellect is already in act when it speaks the word. Aquinas follows Augustine and says that the human intellect can be understood as both in potency and in act. Aquinas can make this distinction in a way Augustine cannot, because Aquinas believes that we receive import from the material world. For Aquinas, the human mind is in potency, in the sense that it is always being perfected along the way. The possible intellect has a potential to understand the material object. However, once the species has emerged, in the active intellect, the mind produces an inner word that proceeds from the act of understanding. The mind in this sense works from an impression, a species, already in act and then brings it to full expression when it speaks a word. This is why, for Aquinas, when we speak the word we are not moving from not understanding to understanding but are bringing the thing to completion. This point derives from Wiercinski, 20-21 and Arthos 300-301, both of course who take the lead from Lonergan and Aquinas.

²⁰² Arthos, 115, 131-132.

²⁰³ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 15.25.

²⁰⁴ As mentioned earlier, that Augustinian word is awakened as its own knowledge is Arthos’s point, but I should add that if the word becomes its own knowledge, then the word is without the mediation of history. This anti-historical aspect is the point that Gadamer critiques.

be true.”²⁰⁵ This is not to suggest that the word invents its own knowledge, but rather that it is in its unfolding that the word is realised. This is close to Aquinas’s movement from act to act, because the act of understanding generates the act of language.

This second likeness between the formed inner word and the unchanging divine word is once again a point of contention between Augustine and Gadamer, and yet it is this word that laid the groundwork for hermeneutics, which recognises that something unfolds in language and history. Augustine’s notion of a “true word” is problematic for Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Augustine wants to argue that the formed word or concept arrives close to God’s perfection and is untainted as such. The knowledge is “a true word concerning a true thing.”²⁰⁶ Augustine’s formed word reaches God’s unchanging attribute, when it is not distracted by the sensible world. It is in perceiving an eternal truth that we generate a word in its true form and access the truth.²⁰⁷ “The bringing forth of the mind is preceded by some desire, by which, through seeking and finding that which we wish to know, the offspring, viz. knowledge itself is born.”²⁰⁸ For Gadamer, in contrast, there is no “true word” or simple presence with knowledge, because language is not an object for consumption but is the condition of the possibility of understanding. In Gadamer’s thinking, there is no act of understanding without the word that speaks it, a point that is denied in Augustine’s “true word” preserved from the mundane world.

Despite Augustine’s Platonism, Gadamer believes that there is something significant about Augustine’s insight that the subject matter is brought to full expression in thinking. Here is where we see Augustine inching towards the word as a procession from act to act, all the while concealing it. When Augustine says the word becomes itself in expressing itself, he is

²⁰⁵ Ibid 15.40, cited in Arthos, 130.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Arthos, 131.

²⁰⁸ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 9.17.

denying that concepts are formed based upon a consensus of what is universal,²⁰⁹ and he unwittingly opens the way for us to see that the subject matter is brought to expression in thinking. Essentially what Augustine's word is pointing towards is that the word is not simply a "reflection of the truth of things,"²¹⁰ but an unfolding of it, in the very act of saying. Gadamer refers to this as the process of concept formation: "The process of concept formation is not content with viewing concept formation as simply the reflection of the order of things."²¹¹ That the word is formed by tossing to and fro in a revolving manner without loss of knowledge means that the word is the appearance of the thing, and while it was always already a word, it is in the very act of saying and unfolding that the word "becomes what it is."²¹²

Conclusion

Augustine's inner word is a pure act of the intellect different than Gadamer's thesis that all thought is historical, as the condition of the possibility of understanding. Yet Augustine turned western philosophy towards the remembrance of language, when his contemplation of the divine revelation showed him a likeness between the divine word and the human word. In Gadamer's interpretation, Augustine's recognition that that word is sprung from the site of knowledge in the same way that the divine word proceeds from the Father's intellect in act would later lead to the hermeneutical notion of the word as an understanding in saying (act to act), rather than a seeing and then saying (potency to act). Augustine did not recognise the procession of the word, but he led us there, in substituting the word for the Platonic form,

²⁰⁹ It was, according to Gadamer, Aristotle that said that words are based upon community. *Truth and Method*, 430.

²¹⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 426.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Arthos, 133.

which itself was a recognition that seeing is not a mere cleaving to some abstract form but is an utterance of truth. As Arthos argues, Augustine's inner word is not a mere message that mirrors a truth but is a movement open toward God; this movement allows the word to grow and increase.²¹³

²¹³ Ibid.

**The Incarnate Aspect of the Word
Thought and Speech in Augustine and Gadamer**

A prominent theme of *Truth and Method's* *verbum interius* section, "Language and Verbum," is the identity of thought and speech as accomplished by Christian Incarnation. Gadamer underlines the Incarnational character of the word in the first two sentences of the section and continues to defend the thesis: "There is, however, an idea that is not Greek which does more justice to the being of language . . . This is the Christian idea of incarnation."²¹⁴ We would miss the significance of Augustine's *verbum interius* if we ignore its foundation in the Incarnation, because the *verbum interius* is not merely about the structure of thought. In light of John's prologue in John 1:14, in which the Word became flesh, the doctrine of the *verbum interius* is ultimately about how the word bodies forth from insight and reveals itself through dialogue with history, transforming the world as it moves along.

In this chapter, I will argue that Gadamer turns to the legacy of the *verbum interius* because it brings together the word of thought with the Incarnational idea of word as a historical event, fused with the meaning of the culture. I will develop insights from John Arthos that the Incarnation gathers the inner word and outer word into a common reality, in which the relation is so interdependent that the one would not be possible without the other: the inner word provides a historical reservoir of tradition for the outer word, and the outer word provides an historical unfolding for the inner word, in a manner analogous to the way in which the Son enters history. In short, I will show that Arthos is right that Gadamer turns to the

²¹⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 418.

verbum interius because the Incarnation elucidates the phenomenon of language, finding that it is the enigma of the word that grants thought the historical embeddedness it needs in order for human insight to manifest and grow through history, as a gradual unfolding of truth.

I will divide this chapter into two sections. In the first section, I will turn to the implications of the Incarnation in the relation of thought and speech. In the second section, I will discuss the word as central to the task of human understanding that carries us through the ages, by bringing in the commentary of Augustinian scholar Edward Morgan. Both of these sections are read in light of Augustine's incarnational analogy in *De Trinitate* that thought's translation into speech resembles the Incarnation as Word.

The Interdependence of Thought and Speech

Gadamer believes that Augustine and the Christian tradition returns hermeneutics to the interdependence of thought and speech, a belief that offers the word as an event of meaning, rather than as a sign of transcendent ideas. This is an Incarnational insight. Arthos points out that Christ's Incarnation, his becoming flesh, births meaning into the world in and through the particular and in so doing disrupts the reduction of the word to a mere sign.²¹⁵ Gadamer explains, "The uniqueness of the word event introduces the essence of history into western thought, brings the phenomenon of language out of its immersion in the ideality of meaning, and offers it to philosophical reflection. For, in contrast to the Greek logos, the word is pure event (*verbum proprie dicitur personaliter tantum*)."²¹⁶ Arthos elucidates the meaning of this

²¹⁵Arthos, 228-230. Arthos argues strong that the Incarnation establishes the concrete, particularity of human language.

²¹⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 418.

passage.²¹⁷ In the *Cratylus* section in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer defines “ideality of meaning” as the Greek Enlightenment idea that the word serves as a sign of truth, apart from human experience and its procession from thought.²¹⁸ Gadamer writes, “Badges, marks, ciphers, and so on have ideality insofar as they are taken as signs – i.e. they are reduced to their referential function”²¹⁹ before continuing, “A word . . . is not an existent thing that one picks up and gives an ideality of meaning in order to make another being visible through it.”²²⁰ The Incarnation suggests that language is an event of truth that is latent with meaning, in its enfolding. Just as the Son represents the fullness of God, so also does “the truth of things [reside] in discourse.”²²¹ The word is not merely that by which we see the thing but that in which we speak the thing.

The Christian move away from obsession with the “ideality of meaning” is a heuristic that reminds us that thought is not an immediate grasp of the real, but that language is a process which brings forth insight and ripens things. In speech, an idea will pass back and forth that comes to life in the moment. An idea is discussed that is then able to emerge to fruition. Gadamer observes, “No one knows in advance what will ‘come out’ of a conversation. Understanding . . . is like an event that happens to us.”²²² We see this same phenomenon in thought: thought always enacts itself through language. All understanding proceeds into a word. What this means, for Gadamer, is that the identity thought and speech is not so much about speech itself, nor an insistence that every word conceived inwardly is expressed outwardly, but more to the point: thought needs language and history in order to exist.

²¹⁷ Arthos, 226-229.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 227.

²¹⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 413.

²²⁰ Ibid., 416-417.

²²¹ Ibid., 412.

²²² Ibid., 385.

Gadamer approaches the temporal nature of word through Augustine's Incarnation analogy. We saw in the last chapter via Arthos that Augustine draws the innermost word of thought near the mystery of the divine word: for example, the inner word mirrors the identity of "knowing and being" in the godhead, although the inner word is still an imperfect image of God.²²³ In book 15 of *De Trinitate*, Augustine extends the likeness between the inner word and the divine word to show that the outer word that proceeds from thought is representative of the divine word becoming flesh. Thought's translation into speech mirrors the Incarnation of God's Word. "For our word is so made in some way into an articulate sound of the body, by assuming that articulate sound by which it may be manifested to men's senses, as the Word of God was made flesh, by assuming that flesh in which itself also might be manifested to men's senses."²²⁴ Just as God's message reaches us in his becoming flesh, so also it is in the word that thought can touch the other, and the other can touch us. Here is where we once again see that Augustine has not quite made the breakthrough to the word as a procession from act to act but has led us to it in his forgetfulness. Augustine assumes that one has an inner thought and then speaks the word and thus that one sees the real in an immediate sense and then says something. Yet his affirmation that thought proceeds into word in the same way as Christ is made flesh is a model which leads us to the realisation that speech and discourse shows or says thought, in and through time and history.

Arthos argues that the Incarnation affirms the interdependence of insight and word: the word is the manifestation of thought, and thought is enacted through the word.²²⁵ This interdependence is an Incarnational insight. Incarnation is both the manifestation of God and an event in history. The Word remains within the Father, but his message is realised in his

²²³ Arthos, 130.

²²⁴ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 5.20.

²²⁵ Arthos, 228-229. The next three sentences derive from these pages as well.

historic unfolding. The event of the Incarnation is repeated in the life of the believer; the manifestation of the Word never stops unfolding in history.²²⁶ The phenomenologist Jean-Louis Chrétien echoes this point: “When my life and my spirit open today to this Word, something of this Word is born in me; there is a nativity of meaning, a new dawn of the eternal truth, a humble and small Christmas that is nonetheless a real Christmas.”²²⁷ As Arthos argues, hermeneutics learns from this interaction that insight and word are so interdependent that they cannot exist without each other: the word is the manifestation of insight, and insight needs the event of the word and the event of the moment in order to express itself.

The word is an interaction in a similar way that Gadamer describes a child playing a game or actors performing a play.²²⁸ In a game, the player participates and is captivated by the event of the moment. In an effort to win, the player may begin to anticipate the next moves of the game or players; the player is neither in control nor a passive bystander. This is why Gadamer says that the played also plays with the player, guiding her and forming her responses. Gadamer writes, “Play fulfills its purpose only if the player loses himself in play.”²²⁹ In the same way, human language is an interactive play between thought and word. As Arthos would say, in the ongoing circle of understanding, there is an interaction between what has been seen and what is still to be seen and between what is thought and what is yet to be spoken.²³⁰ A conversation will bring forth something, allowing it to come to fruition, without us controlling or fully knowing what is happening until an idea breaks through the surface, and we proclaim that we have learned something. This is where we see once again that thought and

²²⁶ Ibid., 231.

²²⁷ Jean-Louis Chrétien, *Under the Gaze of the Bible*, tran John Marson Dunaway (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 4.

²²⁸ This connection between language and play was my supervisor Sean McGrath’s idea, but Arthos does independently mention the two in Arthos, 219.

²²⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 103.

²³⁰ I use the sentence structure of Arthos, 359. The content is slightly different.

word are so historically dependent: thought is tangibly dependent upon language both to manifest itself and to reveal itself on its own terms.

According to Gadamer, the crux of Augustine's veer from instrumentalism is that the outer word is always already a word.²³¹ It is not simply the case that there is a birth of meaning when we speak, but that what is born anew was always already meaning. That we experience the world in the event of the moment does not imply that what is born is a new insight. Arthos says the following about the Incarnation: "It is precisely that the birth of the son, that is to say, of God himself, contradicts the common sense that what is born is new."²³² It is the Incarnation that shows Augustine that the inner word is not changed into something new when it is spoken: "And so our word becomes an articulate sound, yet is not changed into one; so the Word of God became flesh, but far be it from us to say that He was changed into flesh."²³³ Just as the Son is not lessened in his becoming flesh but remains within God's being, so also the inner word is not changed or distorted in speech. Here is where we see the interdependence that Arthos is talking about: human insight is not diminished in the act of speaking, and the outer word is a manifestation of the insight already meaningful and full of the culture of the past. We observe this manifestation of the already in the act of speaking. When we speak, we seek the "right word" so that the right "thing comes into language."²³⁴ The human experience is not wordless, which we later name with a sign, but it is in the act of utterance that all that lags behind can emerge into being.²³⁵ Language is manifestation of the past and an event brought about in the moment. The inner word is not distorted in its utterance but rather represents the tradition in which insight is embedded. To repeat Arthos, we are in debt to Christian theology

²³¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 419.

²³² Arthos, 241.

²³³ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 15.20.

²³⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 417.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

for this insight, because the Son is not changed into something new in his becoming narrative, yet it is in the Incarnation that the Word reached out to us and made its way to us.²³⁶

The Incarnational insight that the spoken word is a movement without loss develops Gadamer's point that the word is a showing or shining. Heidegger is relevant again. As we discussed in the previous chapter, for Heidegger, the word is a showing, a letting something appear. In Heidegger's words, "by unveiling or veiling, showing brings something to appear, lets what appears be apprehended, and enables what is apprehended to be through discussed (so that we can act on it)."²³⁷ Speech is the light that brings forth the world, allowing something to be apprehended. But this showing implies that the spoken word is not a diminution of thought. Thought and speech must be unified, otherwise the spoken word would be a distorted sign of human insight and not a showing forth. Thus, it matters a great deal that God's Word is not lessened in his becoming flesh, because it paves the way for a hermeneutical understanding of the word as a showing forth of insight. This emergence from the already is why Gadamer says, "The greater miracle of language lies not in the fact that the Word becomes flesh and emerges in external being, but that that which emerges and externalizes itself in utterance is always already a word."²³⁸ The spoken word is a showing of the tradition and insight that lies beneath it. The word carries the community and the culture of the past, and the "event of speech" vibrates the whole of this word "at every point of anticipation and recollection, and in every possibility, even that which cannot yet be expressed."²³⁹ The word is a showing forth.

²³⁶ Arthos, 231.

²³⁷ Heidegger, "On the Way to Language," *Basic Writings: Key Selections from Being and Time to the Task of Thinking*, 401.

²³⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 419.

²³⁹ Arthos, 353.

Speech as Understanding

Gadamer wrote that Augustine's contribution to hermeneutics is one in which the word proceeds from an act of understanding: "Augustine refers to this [teaching of the inner word] in order to bring closer to human thinking the mystery of the Incarnation, where the word 'becomes flesh.' . . . The inner word is not the pattern for the expressed speaking, but the whole is a process of its own mysterious structure."²⁴⁰ The word is not simply a sign of thought but an entire movement of understanding. In Augustine's thinking, it is the engagement of human consciousness with the word that enables the mind to move towards an understanding of something.

As always, Gadamer's relation to Augustine is complex, navigating through Augustine's Platonic inheritance. At many points, Augustine wants to preserve the inner word from the flesh, suggesting that the inner word itself does not operate out of language, of sense, of history, and of culture, a point of contrast to Gadamer's word that emerges from language. Augustine writes, "for this it is which belongs to no tongue, to wit, of those which are called the tongues of nations, of which our Latin tongue is one."²⁴¹ Augustine's inner word is in a sense a word set apart, in a similar way that God's people are set apart from the world, as people both immersed in the world as their fundamental way of being, and not of the world, in which they live in discord with their environment. Augustine thus argues, in contrast to Gadamer, that the word does not operate out of the world, in that the world does not constitute its meaning. Despite this distinction between the thinkers, Augustine affirms with Gadamer that the mind produces a word when it grasps something. Augustine recognises that humans enter into language in

²⁴⁰ Gadamer, "Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language," 34.

²⁴¹ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 15.19.

order to clinch an idea in their minds, although that word is preserved in the mind of God and thus is untainted. Gadamer and Augustine accord with one another on the point of language and human understanding being indivisible, although Gadamer says that thought and language operate out of history because all thought is historical, a non-Augustinian assumption.

Augustine's entire repertoire can be read as Augustine coming to terms with the role that language plays in human understanding. Indeed, Augustine's most well-read book is the *Confessions*, in which he invokes the form of autobiography in order to write his confession and devotion towards God, and thus dialogue and language serve as the medium of his ascent towards understanding himself and his relation to God.²⁴² Augustine never stopped contemplating the role of language in his intellectual and spiritual journey. Like Plato, the early Augustine argued that word and thing are separate, with no intrinsic relation.²⁴³ In *Contra Academicos*, for example, Augustine argued that understanding does not emerge in saying but from "an inner light of truth" that we "consult."²⁴⁴ Augustine had failed to remember language as not a mere seeing but a revelation of all that comes before it. Late in his career, the on-going contemplation of the Trinity leads to a shift in Augustine's thought.²⁴⁵ Augustine turns to contemplate the most mysterious and complex concept that one may ponder, the godhead, and in turn, learns that the human word provides a glimpse into this mystery. Augustine makes a momentous leap towards hermeneutics when he comes to realise that the word brings forth the deepest mysteries of the divine and thus is not strictly a sign but a mode of understanding. Gadamer noted: "Augustine's attempt in his books is to say that the greatest mystery of the

²⁴² Edward Morgan, *The Incarnation of the Word: The Theology of Language of Augustine of Hippo* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 7. Morgan also traces the theme of language throughout Augustine's writings, including in *De Trinitate* as I elaborate upon below. I cite Morgan's influence upon my reading in this paragraph.

²⁴³ Wiercinski, 17. I cite Wiercinski's influence on this paragraph.

²⁴⁴ Augustine. *Against the Academicians and the Teacher (Contra Academicos)*, trans, Peter King (Hackett: Indianapolis, 1995), 1.38.

²⁴⁵ Wiercinski, 17.

Christian proclamation and revelation can nevertheless be made somewhat understandable through analogies.”²⁴⁶ It is language that allows Augustine to rise to an understanding of God.

The entire thesis of *De Trinitate* centres around Augustine’s search for the *imago Dei*, his access to understanding the triune God, and his subsequent conclusion that it is the word that represents this image and thereby his ascent to understanding God. Augustine looks into his own soul, the *imago Dei*, in order to understand the triune God, and he discovers triads analogous to God’s word within his mind. These triads are the medium in which he might understand the triune God.²⁴⁷ These various analogies, to the degree to which they reflect the triune God, are his route to understanding the triune God. What is often missed in Gadamerian scholarship, however, but has been brought to attention by Augustinian scholar Edward Morgan in his book *The Incarnation of the Word: The Theology of Language of Augustine of Hippo* (2010), is that Augustine finds all the various analogies in his mind as an imperfect and deficient description of God, with the exception of the Incarnation analogy.²⁴⁸ Of all the various triads in the human soul, and all the various points in which the soul mirrors God, Morgan argues that none approaches the likeness to God’s word more than thought’s translation into speech, and thus that no other triad lifts Augustine’s soul towards knowledge and understanding as much as the analogy of the Incarnation and speech.²⁴⁹ In light of this, I would argue that when Gadamer writes in *Truth and Method* that “this cornerstone of Christian thought . . . had to do with the relationship of thought and speech,” he is not just commenting upon the identity of thought and word but is making the statement that this identity provides us with an understanding of the self and (for the Christian) her relation to God.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁶ Jean Grondin, in Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 418.

²⁴⁷ Morgan, 6.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 418.

Before Augustine's identification of the *imago Dei* in *De Trinitate*, he had already set the tone for the hermeneutical significance of language for knowing. Two examples from Morgan are relevant.²⁵¹ In book 7 of *De Trinitate*, Augustine notes that we invoke language in order to articulate the persons of the Trinity: "Why, therefore, do we . . . say three persons [of the Trinity] . . . unless it be because we wish some one word to serve for that meaning whereby the Trinity is understood, that we might not be altogether silent."²⁵² As Morgan is quick to highlight in Augustine's text, language allows us to understand the Trinity as three distinct persons and not three gods.²⁵³ Language matters: "We say three persons of the same essence, or three persons one essence; but we do not say three persons out of the same essence, as we say three statues out of the same gold; for it is one thing to be gold, another to be statues."²⁵⁴ In book 4, in our second example, Augustine argues that it is in language that he is able to understand the difference between how God exists in his being and how he is manifest to finite, linguistically-dependent humans.²⁵⁵ Augustine writes that in his being, "the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" are "the very same thing, by no temporal motion, above the whole creature, without any interval of time and place."²⁵⁶ When revealed to humankind, however, "The Father, Son and the Holy Spirit are separated, and cannot be named at once, and occupy their own proper places separately indivisible letters."²⁵⁷ While our finitude means that speech cannot adequately express God's being, Morgan is apt to point out that our experience of language – and the experience of the limits of language – teaches us something about the difference between us and God.²⁵⁸ What

²⁵¹ Morgan, 14, 37.

²⁵² Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 7.7, cited in Morgan 37-38.

²⁵³ Morgan, 38.

²⁵⁴ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 7.7.

²⁵⁵ Morgan, 37.

²⁵⁶ Augustine, 4.21, cited in Morgan, 37-38.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Morgan, 38.

this means is that language for Augustine is crucial to our entire mode of understanding. This, of course, is also Gadamer's point: in understanding, we always form concepts or words.

De Trinitate particularly highlights the interdependence of understanding and language when Augustine uncovers the *verbum interius* as the *imago Dei*, which represents his ascent to understanding. When Augustine sets off to find the image of God in the human person, he is interested in how we might understand the Triune God: "by nourishment, our understanding might rise gradually to the things divine and transcendent."²⁵⁹ The operations in the mind form an "enigma or glass" that resemble the Trinity, but as Morgan points out, the all-important point is not the resemblance as such, but how the enigma will nourish and transform one to understand God.²⁶⁰ Augustine explains, "They who see through this glass and in this enigma, as it is permitted in this life to see, are not those who behold in their own mind the things which we have set in order and pressed upon them; but those who see this as if an image, so as to be able to refer to what they see."²⁶¹ The important second half of that sentence means that one must be able to identify the image of God in her in order to rise to an understanding of God. As mentioned above, the various triads that Augustine is able to identify in the human person are part of this search to identify the *imago Dei*, and as Morgan argues, the strength of the triads are judged according to how they orient one to know and love God.²⁶² The thematic purpose of the analogies is to show that we need to identify the *imago Dei* in order for understanding of God to take place.

Augustine works through various triads in the human mind before arriving at the conclusion that the *verbum interius* forms the *imago Dei* that allows him to have a matter of

²⁵⁹ *De Trinitate* 1.2.

²⁶⁰ Morgan, 158.

²⁶¹ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 15.44, cited in Morgan, 168.

²⁶² Morgan, 158.

understanding. One of the first triads within the soul that Augustine discusses and has been highlighted once again by Morgan is what Augustine coins the inner trinity of intellect, memory, and will, because like the three persons of the godhead who are distinct but one being, the inner trinity is “not three lives but one life.”²⁶³ One could quibble with the strength of this metaphor to contest heterodox heresies that Augustine seeks to counter, but this overshadows what Morgan points out as the main weakness of the analogy: Augustine believes that inner trinity is not the image of God²⁶⁴: “This trinity, then of the mind is not therefore the image of God . . . it can also remember, understand, and love Him by whom it was made. And in so doing it is made wise itself.”²⁶⁵ The *imago Dei* is not the attributes of the intellect, memory, and love, but rather, as Morgan points out from Augustine, it is that which mediates the soul towards knowledge and love of God that is the *imago Dei*.²⁶⁶ The *imago Dei* is that which participates in the *Verbum Dei*. When we are moved to understand, remember, and love God, our understanding approaches a kind mirror which resembles divine understanding.²⁶⁷

A second triad, also identified by Morgan, nuances the former and attempts to find the human will as analogous to the Holy Spirit within the Trinity.²⁶⁸ Augustine identifies the human will, closely associated with love, as analogous to the Holy Spirit. He writes, “Therefore there are three things – he who loves, and that which is loved, and love.”²⁶⁹ Within this triad, one can see a trace of the Trinity, because in the godhead, the Father loves, the Son is loved, and the Holy Spirit is the love that links both. This triad is mirrored within the human soul, in which

²⁶³ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 10.18.

²⁶⁴ Morgan, 36, 158.

²⁶⁵ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 14.15.

²⁶⁶ Morgan, 58.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 36, 161.

²⁶⁹ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 9.2. This citation is mine, not Morgan’s.

love, likened to the Holy Spirit, mediates the mind and its word.²⁷⁰ However, like the inner trinity, Augustine concludes that both the human will and human love are not a mirror image to the third person of the Trinity. Writing specifically about the human will,²⁷¹ Augustine writes, “I have warned [the reader] . . . that he must not so compare this image thus wrought by the Trinity . . . so as to think it in all points like to it, but rather than he should discern in that likeness, of whatever sort it be, a great unlikeness also.”²⁷² Gadamer also will echo Augustine’s point that there is a great unlikeness between us and God.²⁷³ For Morgan, as mentioned above, this unlikeness between human love and God partially has to do with the fact that the image of God in us must move us to love and understand God and thus love itself cannot be that image.²⁷⁴ Morgan cites Augustine: “The image of God in the Mind is renewed until the likeness of God is perfected in its blessedness . . . He, then, who is day by day renewed by making progress in the knowledge of God . . . transfers his love from things temporal to things eternal, from things visible to things intelligible, from things carnal to things spiritual.”²⁷⁵ Perhaps it is more accurate to say that it is in our weakness and unlikeness that we become more like God’s image, but at any rate, Morgan’s point being that we are being renewed into God’s image through love of God and thus the image is more than love. We are left with the question: what is this image that is renewed and transformed more into this likeness?

I would contend that the answer first appears in book 8 when Augustine asks the subtle question: “But who loves what he does not know?”²⁷⁶ Augustine assumes that there is

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 9.15. Arthos cites and highlights this point, 118.

²⁷¹ Augustine is not referencing the love triad specifically here, but he is referencing the likeness between the will and love to the Holy Spirit.

²⁷² Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 15.20., cited in Morgan, 158. Morgan makes this point.

²⁷³ See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 423-425, for a lengthy discussion of Aquinas’s commentary on the difference between the human word and the divine word.

²⁷⁴ Morgan, 158.

²⁷⁵ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 14.23, cited in Morgan, 266.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 8.6.

something within us that moves us to love what we do not yet know, otherwise we would not grow to love the Triune God. In the previous chapter, we discussed this movement in terms of Heidegger's hermeneutical circle. We saw that in the circle of understanding we move from part to whole, from things known to things unknown, in effort to understand what we do not know. What Augustine suggests is that it is the image of God in us that allows this movement from part to whole to take place. The image of God in us is the enigma or glass by which we ascend to understanding. "The question is, from what likeness or comparison of known things can we believe, in order that we may love God, whom we do not yet know?"²⁷⁷ It is the image of God in us that nourishes our belief and love of God and mediates our ascent towards God, and this image, Augustine tells us, is the *verbum*. "The word is the image."²⁷⁸ It is no insignificant matter that the *verbum* forms the image of God in us, because it brings us to the word as the centre of our being and fundamental way of knowing. The word participates in the meaningfulness of things. Here is where Augustine is doing hermeneutics: the *verbum* is the very medium that forms our understanding of the self and our relation to God. In Heideggerian terms, the word is a kind of self-understanding that is central to how we relate to ourselves and our world.

It is in contemplation of the Trinity that Augustine works himself from the forgetfulness of language to the remembrance of language. Arthos's inner word of "indirect reflection" that we discussed in the last chapter involves a kind of forgetfulness of language, as the word is said to stand before or outside language. We also saw from Arthos that this analogy of the word of indirect reflection is a weak image, because it fails to approach God's unchangeable attribute as act to act and fails to account for meaningful understanding, because the word is too vague for

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 8.8.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 8.9.

us to yet understand. Augustine is forced to confront human understanding as a weakness that must produce a concept by which we understand; the mind must move from a preconceptual act of understanding to an act of language. In his ongoing search for a true likeness between God's word and the human word, Augustine turns to the word that speaks thought in a manner analogous to God's word who speaks the Father, one which overturns the Platonic notion that the word is insignificant: "For our word is so made in some way into an articulate sound of the body, by assuming that articulate sound by which it may be manifested to men's senses, as the Word of God was made flesh, by assuming that flesh in which itself also might be manifested to men's senses."²⁷⁹ Unlike the previous analogies, as Morgan argues as one of the main theses of his book, Augustine never contests that thought's translation into speech is the *imago Dei*.²⁸⁰ It is thought's translation into speech that forms an image of God in us, and this in turn is a glass or enigma by which we can see and understand God.²⁸¹ If we follow this analogy from Augustine's insistence in book 8 that the image of God is that which moves the circle of understanding forward, we see that the word is the image that moves us from part to whole, from things known to things unknown, from things sensible to things eternal. It is the word that passes to and fro and breaks forth in order to conceptualise God and the world. The word must speak, a point that Augustine may see as a human weakness, but Gadamer, of course, finds at the centre of our hermeneutical being-in-the-world.²⁸²

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 15.20.

²⁸⁰ Morgan, 35-36.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Arthos, 137. I use Arthos's sentence structure.

Conclusion

The Incarnation analogy is both an explanatory analogy for the interactive nature of thought and speech and a defense of the word as central to the task of human understanding. We saw from Arthos that Augustine's analogy and the entire theological belief that underpins it gives us a tangible explanation for why thought and speech are so interdependent that neither can exist without the other. The enigma of speech allows things to come to fruition, and the inner word in turn grants speech a reservoir of meaningful tradition and insight. What makes this Incarnation analogy so effective is that it is more than an illustration of thought's proximity to speech. Because it is the central analogy behind what it means to be made in God's image and therefore to one's understanding of human identity, the analogy is truly a recognition of the word as that which breaks forth into conversation, as part of understanding ourselves and our relation to God.

Conclusion

Gadamer returned to Trinitarian theology throughout his life in order to counter a world that had grown increasingly consumed by logical positivism in the aftermath of the Enlightenment. In January 2002, two months before his imminent death at the age of 102, Gadamer wrote to Andrzej Wiercinski: "I am delighted to know that the conversation between philosophy and theology continues, particularly in North America, where the temptation to forsake the interpretive task in favor of apparently more profitable research can be almost irresistible."²⁸³ For Gadamer, theology draws out the deepest mysteries of human interpretation that remain irreducible to scientific methodologies, and it was for this reason that he kept returning to theology throughout his life. That Christ proceeds from the Father and becomes man without loss in divinity is an enigma that challenges our western tendency to sever truth and word from history and culture.²⁸⁴ Both the enigma of the Trinity and philosophical hermeneutics challenge a metaphysics built upon the truth of things as preserved from the word. Gadamer repeatedly mentioned this common ground between philosophy and theology²⁸⁵: "The greatest mystery of the Christian proclamation and revelation can nevertheless be made somewhat understandable through analogies."²⁸⁶ It was the analogy of the *verbum interius* as it lends attention to the uncanny ability of language to approach the godhead that reminds hermeneutics that the word is connected to the meaningfulness of things.²⁸⁷ The word humbles us, because it is more than we can take or imagine, yet it is also somehow connected to the

²⁸³ Gadamer to Andrzej Wiercinski, January 14, 2002, in *The International Institute for Hermeneutics*, <http://www.ihermeneutics.org/gadamer-letter>

²⁸⁴ Arthos, 2.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 220.

²⁸⁶ Jean Grondin, *The Gadamer Reader*, 418.

²⁸⁷ Arthos, 234.

truth of things, which is why the *verbum interius* both allows us to approach the mystery of the Trinity and causes us to confront the weakness of our own rationality.²⁸⁸

Part of what Gadamer is saying is that a Trinitarian view of language brings together concept, word, and history into one common reality. Philosophies such as substance dualism and logical positivism had led to the problematic idea that a concept is formulated or understood in a pure act of intellect, separate from the world of mundane reality, of which the word denotes. The Christian word collides with this conventional instrumental view of the word, because the divine procession reveals the word as a movement from act to act, as opposed to potency to act. This movement from act to act means that we do not formulate a concept and then transition into the word, but that we understand in and through the word, such that the word enlivens the concept, as a manifestation of it, in a similar way that the Son reveals the Father's mind.²⁸⁹ The word which passes through history provides a kind of completion of the thing, in the sense that the subject matter is brought to full expression in the word.²⁹⁰ The Greeks at times struggled to understand this hermeneutic as much as contemporary philosophers, because they were caught in the Platonic idea that words should be evaluated upon their ability to mirror truth, much like the twentieth century positivists who believed that the word denotes empirical entities. In Gadamer's reading, Trinitarian theology is a counter response to Platonism and the subsequent forgetfulness of language, because the model of the Son who proceeds from the Father while remaining within divine intellection shows that neither concept nor word is depleted in the act of utterance but grows as part of this conversation which we are. The word is similar to what we understand by the concept of love. Just as each new child does not deplete one's love for her firstborn, so also the word that

²⁸⁸ My reading in this paragraph is certainly influenced by the entirety of Arthos's book.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 263.

²⁹⁰ Ibid, 300-301.

passes through us and allows for human understanding never loses touch with the meaningfulness of things but grows the world and brings it forth.

Gadamer's hermeneutical interest in the *verbum interius* is substantially different than the Platonism that always lurked around Augustine's confessions, but this only makes their common ground in Trinitarian theology all the more crucial to our understanding of hermeneutics.²⁹¹ According to Augustine's Platonism, we see the real directly and then only later express it in language. For Augustine, the process of thought involves a transition from not understanding (potency) to understanding (act), in the sense that we come to see directly, without the mediation of prior acts of understanding. In Augustine's mind, we have a first moment of understanding. Gadamer challenges this, arguing that we always already understand because we belong to tradition and language. Thus, for Gadamer, the word is a procession from act to act. The word draws something already historical in the mind out of concealment and into the light, such that the word is a showing or saying of the thing. The word speaks the mind and brings the thing to completion in saying. The reason Gadamer underplays Augustine's Platonism is that he wants to argue for the full implications of Augustine's Trinitarian theology, namely that all thought is historical and that we always already understand because we speak the meaningfulness of the world. Historically, Augustine's Trinitarian theology is the pivotal point that brings us to this word which speaks the mind. The forgetfulness of language that arguably began in Greek Enlightenment is ruptured in that moment when the human word is revealed as the *imago Dei*. The word proceeds from thought in a manner analogous to the way in which the Son proceeds from the Father, which means that as Aquinas later concludes, the word is not merely an instrument by which we understand but

²⁹¹ I borrow the sentence structure of Arthos, 132.

the medium in which we understand, just as the Son is the one in whom the Father understands (the Son is eternally begotten).²⁹² In the process of thought, we generate a concept, an inner word, in order to understand. Augustine does not take the full step to this remembrance, but his Trinitarian theology nearly has him there at the end of his career when he wrote *De Trinitate*. Augustine establishes the remembrance of the word when he substitutes the inner word for the Platonic form of things, showing that knowing is not about decoding or mirroring an immaterial impression; rather, it is lingual experience that is our fundamental way of knowing and being. Augustine's Platonism is also overturned in his attention to the Incarnation as the sight of the *imago Dei*. It is in the Incarnation that God came to rescue us from futility and death and restore us to this image in our inner words, and it is in this way that thought's historical event is a collision point in which human understanding and world emerge. Augustine's theology cannot escape the historical nature of thought, because the Christian word is so inherently historical, proceeding from the historically effected mind and speaking within history in order to transform life, just as the divine Word transforms the world in his manifestation as God in flesh. One can thus easily see why Gadamer turns to Augustine in order to argue for hermeneutical circularity. The "act" that proceeds the human word is tradition, and Augustine is tradition.

The *verbum interius* provides a counter response to the Enlightenment "problem" of historical distance and human prejudices that has been threatening the autonomy of the human sciences, in favour of a supposed objective knowing of the natural sciences. In the Enlightenment, human interpretation and historical consciousness are considered barriers to knowledge, one which we must decode in a zone free of these prejudices in order to see the

²⁹² Aquinas, *Commentary of the John*, trans. James A Weisheipl. Albany: Magi Books, O.P: 1.1. <http://dhsprory.org/Thomas/SSJohn>, cited in Arthos, 313.

things themselves and this in turn, has threatened the value of the human sciences, since the truths of the humanities are not verifiable from a technological or mathematical model. The importance of the *verbum interius* for relieving hermeneutics from these pressures is that it shows that meaning is here with us and that the word speaks the thing, not in spite of human prejudices and historical consciousness but because of it. In order to understand what Gadamer is saying, we have to think of the *verbum interius* on the scale of history. In the formation of its concept, the inner word will toss in mind, thinking of this and another, in order to understand a unified thing, which breaks through the surface in a moment of understanding.²⁹³ A failure to understand that the word brings together all this discursivity into a unified concept in the mind has arguably led to the severance between thought and word and the subsequent instrumentalisation of the word in empiricism. This is because a failure to recognise the unity of word and concept creates a disjoint between our present interpretation and the concept derived from the past. Gadamer's point is that a return to the word as a single conception returns us to the unity of concept and word and this on a historical scale. Despite the passage of time, there remains a sense in which there is only "one word" that we speak. Gadamer writes, "It is always one word that we say to one another and that is said to us (theologically, "the" Word of God)."²⁹⁴ A film adaption of a Shakespeare drama may differ from the "original" tone of its first ever performance in England, but the meaning of the play is still passed through the discourse, and we still participate in its meaning when we engage ourselves in the performance and allow the performance to play with us and speak itself to us.²⁹⁵ Historical distance is not a barrier to our access to the truth of things but part of its very passage, and the meaningfulness of things enacts itself through the play and players. Before we perform a play, the performance

²⁹³ Arthos, 300.

²⁹⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 454. Emphasis is Gadamer's.

²⁹⁵ For Gadamer's discussion on play, see *Truth and Method*, 103-106.

of a play is already full of meaning, and our interpretation is informed by the meaning from which it proceeds. When we perform the word, speak the word, or interpret the word, the truth or concept of things enfolds before us, in which the world is transformed along the way.

The *verbum interius* confirms Gadamer's thesis that all thought is historical, as a manifestation of that which came before it. Human thought enacts itself through the word, as a procession from act to act. Just as the divine word proceeds directly from the Father's mind, so also do acts of language proceed from acts of understanding. We could say that human understanding and human language are indivisible. What this direct procession in the mind means for finite creatures is that human consciousness is a historical consciousness, because the word that makes thought possible has a historical context. Human insights and concepts are brought to full expression in tradition and history, and concepts are given life by the word that allows the insight to come to fruition.²⁹⁶ The reverse is also true. The word is never divorced from the insight from which it proceeds. The word carries tradition, and this historical word gathers our thoughts in moments of understanding. All this destabilises the positivist and rationalist claim of an unbiased, neutral free zone in which the truth of things is severed from mundane life and in which concepts are traced to an original, authorial intent free from presuppositions. Gadamer's point is that history and tradition are not barriers that must be decoded, because they are the enactment of human understanding.²⁹⁷ The historical nature of thought is not to suggest that one should not question one's presupposition, but it is to say with Heidegger that we must enter the hermeneutical circle the right way and acknowledge the presuppositions and traditions that make all thought possible so that we can reflect upon our historicity. Human interpretation is not a "vicious circle,"²⁹⁸ because truth and meaning are

²⁹⁶ Arthos, 313.

²⁹⁷ Zimmermann, 235.

²⁹⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §32.

present with us, residing within discourse and the human sciences, as the conversation that we are. In an odd sense, the positivists and rationalists are so concerned to find truth free from presuppositions that they conceal the truth that is already present with us, in the utterance of the word, which is passed through us in the discursivity of human understanding. In response, the Christian word as proceeding from thought reminds us that we do not hover above truth as our object but are partakers of it. In affirming this, Gadamer says, “the truth of things resides in discourse.”²⁹⁹

We have seen throughout this thesis that these hermeneutical insights were conceived in light of the divine revelation of the Trinity in Scripture. In Gadamer’s interpretation, neither the Platonists nor Aristotelians remembered language, and this raises the question of why it took Trinitarian theology to bring us to the remembrance of language. Part of the reason that the Christian word made a breakthrough to the remembrance of the word is that it is a puzzle to Greek metaphysics.³⁰⁰ In Gadamer’s interpretation, it was Greek metaphysics that led the Platonists to understand the word as a representation of reality and the Aristotelian’s to understand language in terms of concepts based upon a discernment of what is universal, in light of common human experiences. In Gadamer’s reading, both schools of thought somehow overlooked that the meaningfulness of things is brought to completion in the word, and it took the enigma of the Father who knows himself in the act of utterance, as act from act, to awaken history to this remembrance. It was in contemplation of the Trinity that the Fathers came to realise that the word cannot be a mere mirror of truth, if the Son is the embodiment of the Father’s mind, and that concepts cannot be formed merely upon an agreement of what is universal, if there is a completion that occurs in uttering the word. The revelation of the Son

²⁹⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 412.

³⁰⁰ Arthos, 70

also “contradicts the common-sense that what is born is new,” thereby opening the means for us to understand that the word speaks something already full of meaning.³⁰¹ The divine Word is “strangely different” from the embodiment of the pagan gods in which “becoming is not the kind of becoming in which something turns into something else.”³⁰² Because the Trinitarian relation entails no loss or change, neither for the Father nor the Son, the Fathers kept returning the relation of insight and word, one that fused together truth, thought, and speech. Like the Son who speaks divine insight, the inner word is not diminished in the act of utterance. The word is a reappearance without depletion of the thing, an expression of something already full of meaning, and the event of something historical.³⁰³ The inner word is not distorted in its utterance but represents the tradition from which all understanding is possible. As we saw from Arthos throughout this thesis, this revelation helps us rethink our relation to the world and the meaning of things, because it reminds us that concepts enact themselves at that point in which history and understanding collide, and that our very being is transposable with the word. The question again is why does Trinitarian theology reveals these truths of language, but other competing philosophies do not? If anything is clear, it is that the revelation of the Trinity has not just spoken to the Apostles, Paul, Augustine, and Aquinas, but to the whole of philosophical hermeneutics, and we are in the legacy of Trinitarianism if we ourselves make our way to this remembrance of language.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 241.

³⁰² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 412.

³⁰³ Arthos, 228-229. The next two sentences also derive from these pages.

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