AUTHORITY OF THE TEXT
THE HERMENEUTICAL QUESTION

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The authority of the text, as this relates to diverse methods of biblical interpretation, is impossible to determine as objective, binding, and all encompassing. This authority is present in the warp and weft of diverse interpretive practices that emerge from the temporal contours of human language, tradition, issues and questions, yet it has no adjudicating reference point that saturates the field of interpretation. With a primary focus on the temporality of understanding and consequent circularity of interpretation in Heidegger’s Being and Time, Gadamer’s Truth and Method, and Ricoeur’s reading of both in relation to biblical hermeneutics, my thesis is that a focus on the temporality of interpretation, provides a particular schematic context for understanding a subtle “authority of the text”. In the absence of definitive interpretation, biblical writings can generate a subtle, imaginative authority as a site of temporal self-understanding, ethical responsibility, and faith risk.

First, in order to establish the significance of Heidegger and Gadamer for biblical hermeneutics, I will note Ricoeur’s observation of an intriguing relationship between the concept of a “sacred text” (a Scriptural writing) and any “critical editing” (scholarly interpretation) of such a text. Either a text ceases to be sacred, and the idea of sacred has to be rethought, or a text that can be critically “tampered” with, was not sacred in the first place.1 The acceptance of: translation (an intrinsically critical activity); canonisation of writings (with texts having degrees of suitability for inclusion); and critical interpretation (by preserving a founding “equivocacy” in four different, often

dissonant Gospels) in Christian tradition, allayed a strict concept of "sacred text" akin to the "Qur'an".\(^2\) The phenomenon of *writings interpreting writings* in Christian origins (Hebrew Scriptures, Pauline letters, multiple Gospels), meant that *estrangement* from original contexts through writing, and therefore interpretation (hermeneutics), existed as an issue from the beginning.\(^3\) Ricoeur refers to this as "distanciation,"\(^4\) and suggests in relation to distanciation: "Hermeneutics begins where dialogue ends".\(^5\) *Estrangement* through writing transforms an originating discursive event into numerous discursive events. In other words, writing "decontextualizes" a single discursive event ("the saying vanishes"), to "recontextualize" the discourse diversely and multiply ("the said persists").\(^6\) For univocal authority ascribed to an incorrigibly stable text held to be sacred in terms of divine authority, this contextuallising estrangement as a condition of writing is therefore an immense problem.\(^7\) This was not an issue unique to Christian Scripture.

Plato recognised this phenomenon, and privileged the purity of speech (and


\(^7\) Ricoeur questions whether *sacred text* is the same as *authoritative text*. He notes three ways in which texts have been frozen in Christian tradition, each attempting to traverse the tension between sacred text and critical engagement in the quest for authority: orthodoxy in the face of Gnostic and Manichaean heresies ("frozen against heresies"); the hegemony of one authoritative philosophical approach to Scripture during the Middle Ages ("frozen by tradition"); and the sacralizing of the Bible in Protestant tradition ("frozen against tradition"). While Catholic tradition maintained a "magisterium" to adjudicate on texts, Protestants developed a theological magisterium in which texts critiqued texts. Ricoeur, "Sacred Text," 69-71. In both cases, Scripture as textuality required further adjudication.
therefore divine speech—the Logos) over the corrupting tendencies of writing. Ricoeur conveys Socrates’ sentiments on writing: “[w]riting is like painting which generates non-living being, which in turn remains silent when asked to answer.” One way to overcome the effects of textual estrangement, was to locate the meaning and authority of the Word away from written texts. The textuality of Scripture was early, and easily dispensed as a mere husk, when the “spiritual sense” was gained

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8 Ricoeur cites "Plato's critique of writing in his Phaedrus [stating] that when living speech is given over to 'external marks' such as letters and written signs, communication is irremediably cut off. Something is lost that belongs to the voice, the facial expression, and the common situation of interlocutors in a face-to-face setting." Ricoeur, "Naming God," Figuring the Sacred, 219. According to Ricoeur, "Plato's critique of writing as a kind of alienation," raises the issue of "externalization" in relation to writing (25). Plato condemns "exteriority as being contrary to genuine reminiscence." Yet Ricoeur refers to "the condition of exteriority not only as a cultural accident, as a contingent condition for discourse and thought, but as a necessary condition of the hermeneutical process," which he refers to as "distanciation." Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory, 25, 38. For Derrida, too, the diminution of writing occurs in Plato because it is seen to have a merely repetitious function—a simulacrum of speech, but no longer living speech (logos). Further, writing has no authority over interpretation. It is errant, orphaned, without paternal advocacy. Indeed, it does not recognise nor heed its paternity (77). Yet Plato also recognized the necessity of writing as a mnesic "prosthesis," akin to the inscription on a tomb (107, 111). Derrida comments: "As a living thing, logos issues from the father. There is thus for Plato no such thing as a written thing. There is a logos more or less alive, more or less distant from itself. Writing is not an independent order of significations; it is weakened speech, something not completely dead: a living-dead, a reprieved corpse, a deferred life, a semblance of breath. The phantom, the phantasm, the simulacrum (eidolon, 276a) of living discourse is not inanimate; it is not insignificant; it simply signifies little, and always the same thing. This signifier of little, this discourse that doesn't amount to much, is like all ghosts: errant" (143). Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," Dissemination, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 77, 107, 111, 143.

9 Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory, 38-39. In the Phaedrus, “[w]riting is compared to painting, the images of which are said to be weaker and less real than living beings.” The “eikon [. . .] is held to be a mere shadow of reality” (40).

through allegory. In the absence of definitive authority, there is always the temptation to return to the immediacy of divine speech, divine inspiration, or prophetic oracle.

The quest to establish authority at the point of origin or a particular mode of interpreting Scripture, is constantly undone by the temporality of language, textuality, and human understanding, each being reconfigured continually and imaginatively. After Gadamer, temporality is the refusal of an objective stance: because we are immersed in time, we cannot gain an objective standpoint to observe our experience of temporality. We can only reflect on experience after the fact, and then in a circuitous way, for experience is already mediated through reflection, retrospectively, however minute the time lapse between experience and reflection. Following Gadamer’s observation, then, a “text is always understood as a mediation between subjects of historical experience. The thought that one can never work through these mediations to relive the experience that produced them.” Temporality refuses an objective stance, for we can never get around behind its stage scenery, and Scripture as temporally estranged writing and scrubtable textuality, suggests that interpretation always was, and continues to be, a continual and contemporary site of contention over authority. Hence, adjudication of interpretations is inherently fragile, being lodged in a hermeneutical circle of numerous, continuing conversations. This phenomenon is best evaluated by recognizing and exploring what it means to be immersed in the temporality of language.

For example, Origen distinguished between the spiritual WORD (divine Logos and truth) and Scripture, which hovered between participation in the spiritual Word and materiality as sensible signifiers, or “bodily falsehood”, “bitter rind of a nut”, the “veil of the letter”. Origen, “Word as Scripture,” comp. Hans Urs von Balthasar, Origen Spirit and Fire: A Thematic Anthology of His Writings, trans. Robert J. Daly SJ (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1984) 103, 86-108.


Ricoeur describes the hermeneutical circle as arriving “in the middle of a conversation which has begun and in which we try to orient ourselves in order to be able to contribute to it”. The conversation extends beyond a face to face dialogue, encompassing preceding relationships, understanding, and conversations through time, culture, and tradition. Ricoeur, “Phenomenology and Hermeneutics,” 32-33.
Linguistically “wall papered worlds” and hermeneutics

We participate in language before being aware that we do so, for through language we receive a certain cultural or shared world with others.\textsuperscript{16} That is, “speech is heard before it is uttered”; speech already speaks of, and interprets my existence.\textsuperscript{17} Language is always ahead of our perceptions and interpretations, configuring them in certain ways that seem natural and factual,\textsuperscript{18} confirming ready-made patterns of meaning as “views of the world”.\textsuperscript{19} Each language provides “handles” on the world with which “we are able to cope with an experience by grasping it in language.”\textsuperscript{20} Tradition, and all that it contributes to one’s sense of being in a particular world, is language structured: “every language, despite its differences from other languages, is able to say everything it wants.”\textsuperscript{21} Every language correlates with the world, but every language is different, and so is its “world”. There is no known outside to language from which we can ascertain the accuracy of our language and its correlation with the world. Even in another language, we cannot do this without the implicit influence of our indigenous language.

If language is its reality,\textsuperscript{22} or human experience and tradition is “essentially linguistic”,\textsuperscript{23} we are in a linguistic river that seems stable even if it is always changing.


\textsuperscript{17} Ricoeur, “On Interpretation,” 16, 19. According to Gadamer, Plato’s thesis of re-collection suggests the same phenomenon in which understanding is recognition. Tradition in the form of linguisticality is always before us, and flows to us, even if we modify this understanding of reality. For this reason “nothing that is can remain outside the realm of interpretation.” Gadamer, “Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and the Critique of Ideology: Metacritical Comments on Truth and Method,” \textit{The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present}, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (New York: Continuum, 1997) 279.

\textsuperscript{18} Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method}, 403.

\textsuperscript{19} Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method}, 400-401. For example, the word \textit{property} can indicate a different constellation of social values from one language to another.

\textsuperscript{20} Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method}, 411.

\textsuperscript{21} Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method}, 363-364.


This is not a crisis of “linguistic relativism”, but rather, recognition that human experience is intrinsically “hermeneutical.” Language, understanding, and interpretation are inseparable: “understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of a language.” This constitutes a circle out of which we cannot step. Heidegger radicalised this insight to argue a “hermeneutics of facticity”, in which our understanding is always shaped by time, tradition, implicit understanding, specific life contingency, and projection toward the future. Therefore, understanding is unavoidably “prejudiced” by implicit presuppositions, which is a constant source of hermeneutical challenge. What Heidegger described as “preunderstanding”, and Gadamer as “effective history”—being immersed in temporality and its effects—is a hermeneutical circle always present in interpretation. Heidegger’s Being and Time is not directly concerned with biblical writings, and Gadamer in Truth and Method only tangentially so. However, both profoundly influenced biblical hermeneutics in the twentieth century through their philosophical articulation of the temporality of understanding and consequent circularity of interpretation.

Temporal understanding and the hermeneutical circle

In Being and Time Heidegger attends to the manifestation or “disclosedness” of Being (the Being of all being or what it is “to be”) in the thick textures of our “Being-in-the-world,” and asks the forgotten question, “What is the meaning of Being?” If all being is Being, what is it that “is”? Being is familiar, but escapes our

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27 Ricoeur, “The Task of Hermeneutics,” From Text to Action, 67-69, 70-73; “On Interpretation,” 2-3, 7. Ricoeur follows Collingwood: history, as a narrative of human experience, is constant interpretation and reinterpretation, because it is a “work of the imagination” (7).
28 Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962) § 12. “Our aim [. . .] is to work out the question of the meaning of Being and to do so concretely. Our provisional aim is the Interpretation of time as the possible horizon for any understanding whatsoever of Being” (19; English edition page numbers, with sections indicated by §).
29 Heidegger, Being and Time, 21-23. “The Being of entities ‘is’ not itself an entity”; “Being lies in the fact that something is, and in its Being as it is [. . .] in the ‘there is’” (26).
awareness.\textsuperscript{30} Only one being thinks Being—human beings. Being is an issue for humans or Dasein ("Being-there"). Only Dasein thinks about its Being amid all the things that are being.\textsuperscript{31} Dasein is the "disclosedness" of Being.\textsuperscript{32} Dasein is grounded in "Being-in-the-world" (in familiar everydayness), and projects its "Being-there" toward possibilities: that is, \textit{to be or not to be}.\textsuperscript{33} Dasein is its existence, and is never outside its own existence \textit{as such} in posing questions of, and understanding Being.\textsuperscript{34} This understanding is always historical, contextual, projected, and therefore interpretive.\textsuperscript{35}

Being is not \textit{in} time as though Being is an essence outside time; rather, Being is time. Being is temporal; we know of no non-temporal \textit{to be}. The eternal ("supra-temporal") is a concept derived from the temporal, but traditional metaphysics reversed this in order to think Being outside time.\textsuperscript{36} "Being-there" is temporal and understands itself in the context of time—Dasein historicises.\textsuperscript{37} Dasein's past is always ahead of Dasein as its horizon of awareness: "tradition" is Dasein's past \textit{before it}. Dasein inherits specific possibilities for its future, and projects its possibilities toward the future. However, Dasein also falls prey, parochially to its tradition, forgetting the questioning of Being.\textsuperscript{38}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 25. Being is not self evident, is hidden and without definition, and yet, it is already understood implicitly (¶ 1).
  \item Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 27-28, 33 (¶ 2-3). "Dasein is that entity which, as Being-in-the-world, is an issue for itself" (143).
  \item Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 171 (¶ 28).
  \item Dasein "always understands itself in terms of its existence—in terms of a possibility of itself" (Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 33).
  \item Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, ¶ 9. Understanding predisposes the direction of our enquiry into Being: "we always conduct our activities in an understanding of Being. Out of this understanding arise both the explicit questions of the meaning of Being and the tendency that leads us toward its conception." However, while Being is familiar, it eludes our grasp (25).
  \item Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, ¶ 4-6. The thinking of Being is clarified in the face of two misunderstandings: (i) idealism (ontological abstraction of Being as an idea); and, (ii) empiricism (ontic analysis of "present-at-hand" entities: biology, psychology, sociology etc.) (¶ 3) Ontically we can think Dasein from within, because we are Dasein — it is close to us (37); but ontologically, Dasein is also far — it is strange to us, yet we are it. Dasein is concerned with Being (ontology) in the midst of entities that only have significance in Dasein's existence (31; ¶ 4-5).
  \item Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 38-40.
  \item Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, ¶ 5.
  \item Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 41-42.
\end{itemize}
Being temporal, *Dasein* is always “Being-towards-death”, or its *not being there*; it is the only being that thinks and speaks its *not being there*. Yet, its *not being there* enables it to think being, and therefore its *being there* toward its *not being there*. Hence, *Dasein* projects its possibilities, in “Being-towards-death”. Because *Dasein* is being toward its *not there*, it is near and far to its possibilities at the same time. Its existence is acutely visible and opaque. *Dasein* is always approaching this horizon, experiences its demise, but never lives its *not being*, for death is one possibility it cannot actualise and remain *Dasein*. This “spectral” horizon defines *Dasein*’s possibilities—its end without end—an unassimilable horizon that can only be approached properly as authentic “Being-in-the-world”, and responsibility toward *Dasein*’s singular possibilities (“no one can die in my place”). *Dasein*’s authentic being is facing its ultimate temporal contingency, death, and living the possibility of “solicitude” toward others in the meantime.

*Dasein* is “thrown” into a particular time, place, culture, tradition, and possibilities, being *here* and not *there* in “Being-there”. *Dasein* talks, sings, prays, and plays—always in a certain contextual or thrown way. *Dasein* is never without a spatial and temporal *here* that is not *there*, even before it thinks its *being here* instead of *there*. Out of its *being here* instead of *there*, this *there-thrown* understands and projects its possible *there* that is *not yet here*; yet never too far beyond its *here* in its *there*, lest it confuse a *here* with a *there* that could never be *here*. That is, *Dasein* always throws itself further than it is thrown, but never beyond the trajectory of its given possibilities. *Dasein* is always assailed by a “mood” (joy, anxiety, boredom, depression, care) which relates to the *thereness* of “Being-in-the-world” with certain

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40 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 305.
41 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 36-37 (¶ 5, 53). To anticipate the “possible” is to begin to actualise it, but death confounds *being-toward-possibility* as the *impossible possibility* (305-310).
45 *Dasein* is “Mitsein” or “Mit*Dasein*” (“Being-with”; “*Dasein*-with”) as care or “solicitude” toward others (“Being-with-one-another”), because *Dasein* shares the same temporal “Being-in-the-world” (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 149-163).
47 This is “counter-thrust.” Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 188.
possibilities. Dasein is thrownness, and projects possibilities out of being thrown along a certain trajectory.

Implicit understanding of “Being-towards-possibilities” becomes explicit in “interpretation” as Dasein ascribes “significance” and possibilities to what is understood. Interpretation gives understanding “significance” by putting a certain spin on Dasein’s possibilities of “Being-in-the-world”. The “ready-to-hand” such as books, clocks, utensils, and anything Dasein uses in everyday life, has a purpose that is already implicitly understood (“as-structure”). What becomes explicitly understood in terms of “as-structure” through Dasein’s curiosity, was already understood and articulated implicitly in Dasein’s “Being-in-the-world”, right under Dasein’s nose, in “Being-towards-possibilities”. “Meaning” (“judgment”) is understanding interpreted, and Dasein alone is a site of meaning for the “present-at-hand”. Dasein always quibbles, for, being “thrown,” no Dasein is naked, without presuppositions. Everything Dasein does is already understood and interpreted in some way, contingent on being thrown into a trajectory, possibilities, and mood.

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48 Heidegger, Being and Time, ¶ 29.
49 “State-of-mind” is being attuned to mood as the impact of thrown-ness and encountering “counter-thrust” (Heidegger, Being and Time, 185, 188).
50 Heidegger, Being and Time, 188-189. “Interpretation” (¶ 32) is “any activity in which we interpret something ‘as’ something”, and is understanding which is understood. “Interpretation” (uppercase I) is exegetical (19 n. 3).
51 Heidegger, Being and Time, 187.
52 Dasein is always seeking to interpret “ready-to-hand” entities of its world by pulling them apart, in order to look at (“stare”) their purpose (ontic value). Dasein is “existentialia” (“presence-at-hand”) not “essentia” (“present-at-hand”). Dasein misunderstands itself, because it assumes it is essentia not existentialia (made up of so many entities as predicates “ready-at-hand”) (¶ 9). Yet, this quest for the “as-structure” [or “in-order-to”] of the “ready-to-hand” was already there in implicit understanding as a “totality of involvements”, before it was dismantled and explicitly questioned. “In interpreting, we do not [. . .] throw a ‘signification’ over some naked thing which is present-to-hand, we do not stick a value on it; but when something within-the-world is encountered as such, the thing in question already has an involvement which is disclosed in our understanding of the world, and this involvement is one which gets laid out by the interpretation. The ready-to-hand is always understood in terms of a totality of involvements” (190-191).
53 Heidegger, Being and Time, 189-190.
54 Heidegger, Being and Time, 192-193, 195.
55 Heidegger, Being and Time, 190-191.
Dasein never thinks being in the world without implicit presuppositions about its own “Being-in-the-world” (“fore-structure”).

Dasein is therefore immersed in a perspectival interpretive circle. Understanding that was not understood, becomes understanding that is understood to be understanding (interpretation). Implicit understanding precedes explicit understanding of existence (like tacit understanding needed to “get a joke”); existence precedes analysis of existence, which is always influenced by implicit understanding via a “point of view”. Dasein can never read its being or its world as if these are transparent, without tacit presuppositions, interests and questions imposing themselves on the movement toward articulated interpretation. This is Heidegger’s hermeneutical circle. To try to avoid this circle as viciously perspectival, a distortion of truth, is to misunderstand everything. To accept the circle is to enter the “truth of Dasein” as temporal, perspectival, and potentiality, a grounded ground suspended above an indeterminate abyss. Heidegger resists a foundationalist understanding of truth as a pure reference point unaffected by time and space, and asserts an existential perspectival understanding of Dasein as being there, with this there already being interpreted within the circle of temporality. Appropriately, then, we shall turn to Heidegger’s student, Gadamer, and his thesis that history is always “effective” within the implicit “prejudices” of our understanding and therefore interpretations, before teasing out the implications of both for biblical authority though Ricoeur.

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56 Heidegger, Being and Time, 194-195. “[T]he way the world is understood is [...] reflected back ontologically upon the way in which Dasein itself gets interpreted” (36-37).
57 Heidegger, Being and Time, 191-192. From “understanding” to “point of view”: a presuppositional interpretive movement from “fore-having” to “fore-conception”; one becomes the other through a “first cut” (“fore-sight”) to a “point of view” (“fore-having”), an interpretation, tentative or aggressive toward its conception of Being (“fore-conception”) that is already taking something for granted (191-192).
58 Heidegger, Being and Time, 195. Three specified circles in Being and Time: circle one (Dasein): we don’t know what Being is apart from Dasein (27-28); circle two (hermeneutics): we never understand and interpret Dasein without the “presuppositions” of Dasein’s “Being-in-the-world” (“fore-structure”) (194-195); circle three (“projection”): we don’t know what Being is apart from Dasein, yet we can only understand Dasein by understanding existence — “Being-in-the-world” (362-363).
59 Heidegger, Being and Time, 194, 194 n.1.
60 Heidegger, Being and Time, 194-195.
61 Heidegger, Being and Time, 195. Interpretation is putting “into words for the very first time” what is presupposed in our interpretations (362).
Prejudice and effective history

Gadamer’s “effective history” is recognising that we are always implicated in hermeneutics by the prejudices of our historical contingencies and continuities with tradition. Prejudices implicit in interpretation are not self-evident, but their recognition can emerge out of dialogue with tradition.\(^\text{62}\) The context of a text’s production (tradition) cannot be hermetically sealed off in its effects on us, or our interest in the text. However, we are immersed in the effects of our tradition, and we evaluate the past out of contemporary issues and questions.\(^\text{63}\) We cannot fully understand our own tradition, because we are part of it.\(^\text{64}\) The Enlightenment’s quest for rational objectivity divorced from the prejudices (heteronomies) of tradition, was essentially a prejudice against prejudice, and therefore a prejudice against temporality in interpretive method.\(^\text{65}\) However, in dialogue with the past (tradition or text), it is not possible,

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\(^{63}\) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 265, 262-263, 268. “Historicism”, according to Gadamer, is a prejudice against prejudice. That is, the quest, objectively, to situate the past and its texts, is a prejudice against the human contingency of situatedness within tradition, and interested interpretations of the present (240-245). For example, *Historical Critical Methodology* is an attempt to isolate a period of history within a cultural horizon, in order to ascertain the parameters of interpretation. Collins documents this complex quest for the historical origins and conditions of New Testament writings, and some reactions to this quest. R. F. Collins, *Introduction to the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1983) 41-74.

\(^{64}\) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 269. The past as perceived is inseparable from its accumulative effect upon us: “[o]ur historical consciousness is always filled with a variety of voices in which the echo of the past is heard.” Our engagement with the past is contingent on the interests and questions of the present, which is itself shaped by the past. Tradition then, can never be engaged objectively if one is also in it. Tradition (history) refuses to be an object. It is both other and within (251-253, 258-259).

\(^{65}\) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 241-253. As a protest against ecclesial authority in the spirit of Enlightenment’s rational rejection of authority, Reformation hermeneutics was itself enmeshed in an unacknowledged prejudice of reason against tradition (246). Romanticism reacted against the Enlightenment’s prejudice against tradition, with its own pervasive prejudice for tradition in the ancient past. Prejudice for logos over mythos was merely reversed to become a prejudice for mythos over logos. Romanticism’s priority of primitive, mythical consciousness also created an interest in historical retrieval of past tradition—mythical, religious, folk, and cultural. Hence, the critical methods of historicism were initially forged out of the Romantic reaction against rational enlightenment and prejudice against the past, and by which the Romantic movement sought to retrieve and reconstruct antiquity within its epochal integrity (242-244).
entirely, to step outside the prejudices of temporal tradition, history always preceding the subject. “Prejudice” is a necessary condition of temporality. This compares to Heidegger’s “fore-conception” as preunderstanding. Temporality of understanding contrasts markedly with claims for objective authority in either science or religion, and this contrast is registered in textuality.

Texts as a form of temporal tradition are always contemporary to their readers. This is intrinsic to hermeneutics inasmuch as a text, detached from its origins, acquires “simultaneity with every present”, always having a contemporary context in reading. Indeed, the estranging, contemporizing effects of writing must be assumed in the hermeneutical task of understanding a text. Estranged from a context of authorial intention and intended addressee, writing (text) assumes different and wider ambience of meaning. Indeed, a text cannot be isolated from the influence of its contemporary interpretation, for texts are interpreted with a prejudice toward contemporary issues and questions. In their fusion of past and present, and the inseparability of both in understanding, texts are strange and familiar in their distance and contemporaneousness. With this tension, then, hermeneutics is “the art of understanding”, tending beyond existing rules of interpretive theory, to describe rather than prescribe. Its task is to “convince and illuminate without being able to prove”, with its goal being “understanding and explication”. This understanding also encompasses clarification and critique of prejudices, bringing tacit ideologies and deceptions to conscious hermeneutical reflection.

Learning another language is akin to venturing into the unknown, and Gadamer finds in translation a paradigm for the limits and possibilities of interpretation.

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66 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 245. “Prejudice” is a negative term as long as objectivity is regarded as “the measure of knowledge.” Ricoeur, “Critique of Ideology,” 274. To dispense with tradition is to undo the condition of understanding, which is always temporal. *Truth and Method*, 251.


73 Gadamer, “Rhetoric, Hermeneutics,” 275. Translation shows that worlds are different, because language is different, and languages do not correlate precisely, but with varying degrees of slippage. This is also occurs between different periods of time in the same culture. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 405.
Through languages, our perspective of the world is potentially expandable, resisting a definitive worldview, even if every language participates integrally in a real world. Yet a point of objective adjudication between worldviews, suspended above participation, is inaccessible. A linguistic world need not imply exclusivity, for our prejudices can be modified and enriched through the inevitable encounter with difference through language. Hermeneutics is such an activity of conversation and understanding, not a quest for definitive or authoritative adjudication. Because language is temporal, ever changing in the flux of time and contingency, it is an archive of human temporality. This temporality ("effective history") is present in all interpretive activity, constituting a theoretically infinite dialogue, relativising any claim to divine authority. Hence, any "idea of the whole is itself to be understood only relatively". This does not diminish infinity impinging on human enquiry—rather it remains, after Kant’s limits of pure reason, without demonstrative content. To embrace temporality, then, is to be open to negative conditions of possibility for "naming God". The quest for absolute authority in the infallibility of textuality is ironically, to foreclose this negative condition of possibility in the signifiers of a text. The paradox of touching transcendence at the limits of language is explicated in Ricoeur’s thesis of biblical textuality as a site of imagination and possibility. This is a subtly nuanced "authority", consistent with the language contingency of human temporality and biblical writings.

74 Gadamer, Truth and Method, 405-410.
76 Gadamer, Truth and Method, 415.
77 Gadamer, Truth and Method, xx-xxiii. Gadamer acknowledges indebtedness to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason for the recognition of "limits" beyond which we cannot speak. Hence, Gadamer restricts Truth and Method to questions of possible understanding within the limits of human reality, but with a "remembrance" of freedoms and infinite consciousness—"with what is still and ever again real" (xxiv-xxvi).
78 In "naming God" diversely, reference to God is negated, and becomes a trace for what cannot be named, even when a multiplicity of names refer to "God". This is Ricoeur’s "divine negation", naming God polyphonically by negating the capacity to name "God" within, yet poetically at the limits of language. Ricoeur, "Naming God," trans. David Pellauer, Figuring the Sacred, 223-230.
The world in front of the text

For Ricoeur, a text does not refer to a world “behind the text”, but rather opens a world of possibility, of “the power-to-be”, through the redescription of reality “in front of the text”.\textsuperscript{79} The hermeneutical task, alluding to Heidegger, is to tease out “ontological understanding”, which is “always inseparable from a being that has initially been thrown into the world”.\textsuperscript{80} Through a variety of converging and contrasting genres, the bible projects a “world of the text”, which Ricoeur suggests, appealing to Heidegger, presents new ways of “understanding” and projecting our “possibilities” in front of the text. It is in this poetic world of possibility that the bible “can be encountered as the word of God”.\textsuperscript{81} The crucial words are, “can be,” suggesting that faith eludes hermeneutical strategies of interpretive closure (authority), and finds authority in a text’s capacity to project a world of imaginative possibility in the midst of temporality.

Whereas the Stoics believed that we are cast in(to) life with a role determined by an author, in a play that they had no part in writing, Ricoeur suggest that narrative casts us into the role of co-authorship. With and against texts, we narrate our life story, retrospectively and prospectively, synthetically constructing a “life plot” from multiple scenarios of fiction and experience for this hermeneutical task.\textsuperscript{82} We are challenged to cast ourselves in the roles of author, character, or narrator.\textsuperscript{83} A life story as a means of grasping our identity is necessarily synthetic. It cannot be told as a “singular totality”. For example, we can never compose the beginning or ending of our story; we do not know how to tell it, for our beginning precedes our memories, and is entangled in the stories of others before our conception. Our terminal ending likewise will elude our participation. We cannot experience and recite the story of our death (pace Heidegger). Narrative, however, can provide multiple scenarios of beginnings and endings through which we are able to explore the possible plots of our life story, entangled as they are with others, the entanglements necessitating exploration of our story through diverse narrative plots.\textsuperscript{84} Even if life is open-ended, it has a narrative effect (projects simulate this need for a beginning and ending), and

\textsuperscript{81} Ricoeur, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” 95-97.
\textsuperscript{83} Ricoeur, “Praxeology, Hermeneutics,” 310.
\textsuperscript{84} Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, 160-161; Ricoeur, “Praxeology, Hermeneutics,” 309.
we constantly explore possibilities for identity in the narrativity of life.\textsuperscript{85} Narrative also projects a \textit{reality} that configures our possibilities for praxis,\textsuperscript{86} Ricoeur asks how ethical responsibility is possible, if the (modern) subject is without a cohesive sense of identity—a central post-Nietzschean issue, the "shattered cogito", addressed in \textit{Oneself as Another}.\textsuperscript{87} The possibility of "exchanging experiences" grounds the possibility of culminating "practical wisdom." Ethical perspective is gained through fictive experimentation with actions, and imagination in projecting alternative possibilities for conceiving our future. This exchange of experiences is intrinsic to temporality.\textsuperscript{88} Self-understanding through texts exposes the self to otherness in the process of self-understanding.\textsuperscript{89} Narrative, although synthetic, and hovering between textual "seduction" and reader "suspicion," provides the possibility of correlating identity and action in "thought experiments occasioned by fiction".\textsuperscript{90} While the question, "Who am I?" is as much explored in fiction as it is a real question in human life, it is traversed by the vocative address from the other—"where are you?" and the response, "Here I am!"\textsuperscript{91} The response implies responsibility because accountability to an other who calls, thereby necessitating a certain "self-constancy". In this way, the aporia of identity (self-sameness) immersed in temporality maintains continuity in the midst of change, the continuity of self-constancy as accountable responsibility to an other. Indeed, to raise the question, "Who am I?" is intrinsic to the possibility of admitting otherness into a necessary ambiguous gap that exists between identity (selfhood as sameness), and ethical responsibility as accountability to the other (ambiguous selfhood open to the other). This awareness,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{86} Ricoeur, "On Interpretation," 6, 10.
\item \textsuperscript{87} Ricoeur, \textit{Oneself as Another}, 158, 163, 11-23. Ricoeur notes an aporia in identity, in which identity ("Who am I?") requires "sameness," while temporal discontinuities (the "heteronomous") punctuate this sameness. Both dynamics are present in narrative, and provide the opportunity for overcoming the fragmentation of temporal identity, with the possibility of vocative address and response as responsibility (140-141).
\item \textsuperscript{88} Ricoeur, \textit{Oneself as Another}, 164.
\item \textsuperscript{89} Ricoeur, "On Interpretation," 17.
\item \textsuperscript{90} Ricoeur, \textit{Oneself as Another}, 159, 159 n. 23.
\item \textsuperscript{91} Compare Gadamer’s comments: "When you look at something, you can also look away from it [...] but you cannot ‘hear away’ [...] the primacy of hearing is the basis of the hermeneutical phenomenon" (Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method}, 420).
\end{itemize}
according to Ricoeur, is played out in narrative plot with its ambiguity between recognisable plot and unexpected surprises, and, characterisation with its necessary ambiguity between recognisable identity (self-sameness) and self-constancy amid change (responsibility).

Ricoeur locates this capacity to “separate the self from the same” in imagination—the capacity to project and interpret self along another trajectory as “self esteem” that can even subvert selfhood as sameness. Self-understanding, as an appropriation of the text, is subjective and responsible, rather than programmatic or doctrinaire, for it is subjects (in Heidegger’s sense of “Being-in-the-world”) who explore self-understanding through the intersubjectivity presented by the world of a text. In Ricoeur’s theological terms, “divine negation” is a kenosis (emptying) of God as a positive term of reference (and we might add, an ultimate adjudicative authority), through language at its “limits” in the “symbolic ensemble” of Scripture. This “kenosis,” Christologically interpreted, marks the narrative and poetic route of a Christ-formed (“christomorphic”) subjectivity by which we each wager a response to God, the “unnamable”, as a “summoned subject”, without extrinsic authority to certify this risk of faith.

Ultimately, “the authority of the text” is adjudicated through human experience, and faith that is in the process of deformation and reformation through textuality at its limits, in the quest for self-understanding and responsibility toward others. Ricoeur suggests that biblical textuality, like narrative fiction, has the capacity, in collaboration with the interpreter, to project imaginative possibilities for trust and responsibility. This narrative imagination delineates a poetically nuanced authority, compatible with the textual estrangement of biblical writings and the temporality of human experience and understanding—the conditions of a hermeneutical circle. This circle, however, paradoxically points us beyond circular closure, and interrupts our horizons

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92 Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, 165-168.
94 Ricoeur, “Distanciation,” 87. “Reality is [. . .] metamorphosed by means of [. . .] ‘imaginative variations’ that literature carries out on the real.” “Phenomenology and Hermeneutics,” 36. “Appropriation” of a text means “disappropriation” of the self, for “to understand oneself is to understand oneself in front of the text”. We are challenged to rethink and reconceive the self variously in the face of different configurations of reality by texts. Therefore, interpretation is “ultimate self-responsibility” (Ricoeur, “Phenomenology and Hermeneutics,” 37-38).
of meaning, suggesting that there is always more in texts, traditions, and dialogue yet to be invoked. While contingent interpretations and adjudications are necessary, these are consensual, testimonial, synthetic, and tentatively stable in reference. Interpretive conjecture and confirmation recognises that the Scriptures and their interpreting traditions present a diversity of thought and practice, which is continually, to be “performed” akin to the creative variations in musical performances.\footnote{Ricoeur suggests that understanding is a movement “from guess to validation,” recognising that we have no choice but to make an initial guess as to a text’s meaning. Like a “musical score,” the text requires a performative event that extends beyond the written notations, in the “space” for interpretation that now exists between text and authorial intention. Validation is not devoid of guesswork, for approaching the text as a unique artwork requires a perspectival “judgment” about the significance of the whole work from which to give a frame of reference to its parts. This requires guess-work combined with isolating the most likely generic features that will assist understanding. However, there is an unavoidable partiality in making one reading of several readings the “metaphoric and symbolic meanings” of a text is capable of presenting. Like the law, an interpretation can never be verified, only posited on the grounds of “qualitative probability,” and “converging indices,” or even Popper’s “falsifiability,” in which less probable interpretations are excluded. Guess and validation then, constitute a hermeneutical circle (Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory, 75-79).}

Conclusion

Language haunts us with that which is other than us, even as we inhabit it as our home. It is permeated with implicit values, even as it provides us with the means to make our way in the world. The hermeneutical circle of situated and prejudiced interpretation stemming from the temporality of language, sustains the strange newness of estranged texts, in a constant generation of contemporary interpretations.

As textuality, cultural symbol, library, archive of faith testimony, liturgy, story, wisdom, and evocative poetics, the bible authorises us to play - with interpretations and possibilities for creative life and community. The limits of temporal language invoke a sense of infinity in the unnamable; and texts connect us to, and estrange us from the secrets of their origins, even as they solicit imaginative ways of thinking, believing, and acting.

Paradoxically, then, writing as textual estrangement, and interpretation as a welter of strategic possibilities opened by philosophical perspectives, can generate a subtle, imaginative authority of Scripture as a site of - self-understanding, dialogue, faith
risk, responsibility, hope, and imagination. Interpretation, and therefore authority, is configured variously, being issue, context, and tradition contingent - yet with a capacity for texts, continually, to interrupt the solidification of any one of these, or any one combination of these, as a dominant interpretive mode or trajectory. The language contingency of texts, interpreters, contexts, and communities, implicates authority or “authorisation” in a circle of reference.