The Hermeneutic Medium

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In part 1 of this project* I suggested that much work in rhetoric is done within the assumptions of a Cartesian dualist paradigm. I demonstrated connections between rhetorical studies and philosophical hermeneutics, and I posited that a vocabulary grounded in hermeneutics (rather than in epistemology) can provide a way to obviate Cartesian presumptions. One reason for the turn to hermeneutics concerns the underdeveloped but frequently mentioned metaphor of the medium. The idea of a “hermeneutic medium” provides a specific conceptual link between rhetoric and philosophical hermeneutics that is especially useful for obviating the problems of Cartesian dualism. In this paper I develop the concept of the medium in detail. After a general introduction, I explain how the medium is an amalgam of language and tradition. I then discuss how this conception provides an escape from the Cartesian legacy.

The medium in philosophical hermeneutics

The term medium generally connotes an intervening substance or vehicle through which materials, impressions, and messages are conveyed. A medium is a system of delivery, an intermediate instrument or channel, or a means of transmission (OED, vol. 6, 299). This is a common but dualist notion of a medium. A hypodermic needle, for example, is a medium by which medicine is delivered to the body; air is a medium by which sound waves reach ear drums; a television system is a medium through which messages travel to various audiences. In each of these cases the medium stands between two or more objects that exist independently of one another. This concept of the medium as a middle factor, states Raymond Williams, “perpetuates a basic dualism” (1977, 99; see also 158–64). This dualism is especially apparent when language is described as a medium that, with greater or lesser degrees of accu-

*“The Hermeneutic Medium” is a sequel to “Displacing Descartes: Philosophical Hermeneutics and Rhetorical Studies” (Philosophy and Rhetoric 27 [1994]: 300–12).
racy, represents reality. When language is seen solely as a system of representations through which reality is filtered, apprehended, and communicated, a categorical distinction is fostered between “the real” and “talk about the real.”

The term medium, however, does not have to connote a middle ground or delivery system. A medium can also be the pervasive and enveloping substance within which one lives, one’s element, one’s environment, or the conditions of one’s life (OED, vol. 6, 299). The medium might thus be understood as the symbolic equivalent to a biological petri dish: it is the culture within which people develop and from which worlds grow, and it contains the symbolic substance that is the nutrient for society. The medium is comprised, that is, of the meanings and forms that are utilized to create and shape a world.

In philosophical hermeneutics the term medium does connote an encompassing environment of symbolic conditions within which people experience and live their realities. In Palmer’s terms, “Language is the medium in which we live, and move, and have our being” (1969, 9); language is the “repository of cultural experience,” the medium in and through which we exist (27). For Bernstein, “Language is the medium of all understanding and all tradition. And language is not to be understood as an instrument or tool that we use: rather it is the medium in which we live” (1983, 145). The medium encompasses all that exists. Within it, the complex interlacings between people and their environment are cultivated. As Sloan asserts, this makes for “a broader concept of interpretation wherein both the process of understanding and the act of mediating understanding are encompassed” (1971, 103). Understanding occurs not simply through a medium, but within a medium.

To summarize: Because the hermeneutic medium is presumed to encompass and shape everything, it does not presume a dualist separation between subjects and objects. It thus can serve as the basis for an alternative framework that obviates the dualistic problems of the Cartesian paradigm.

The medium has two essential characteristics. First, it is fundamentally linguistic in nature. One cannot speak of a medium without consideration of how it is constructed and sustained in language. In a crucial sense language is the medium. Second, the medium embodies history. To live within a medium means to live within a particular historical tradition and to be guided by the
mores and assumptions of that tradition. One’s experiences, one’s notions of right and wrong, true and false, reasonable and unreasonable, are all measured by the standards of a tradition (or a history) that is contained in the medium of one’s existence.

In what follows I develop and utilize these two characteristics to facilitate a non-dualist conception of the medium. Two preliminary points, however, need emphasis. First, though I explore them separately, the concepts of language and tradition, together with that of the medium, are intricately interrelated and interfused. They can be separated analytically, but they are indissoluble (Palmer 1969, 177). Second, the medium, considered as language and tradition, is ontologically significant (177). All that exists, for human beings, exists within their medium. The medium is an ontological culture within which things are made real; as explained here, it is the ground of human existence.

The medium as language

And what is the medium in and through which ontological disclosure can take place . . . ? What is the medium that is inseparable from experience itself, inseparable from being? The answer must be: language. (Palmer 1969, 201)

Bernstein argues that Gadamer’s primary concern is to demonstrate “what is most characteristic of our humanity”: that we are beings for whom “language is a reality” (1983, 162). This assertion, on its face, is not novel. How Gadamer develops this contention is unique. He asserts that language is not primarily a tool, but an ontological medium. Reality, states Gadamer, “happens precisely within language” (1976, 35). Language is conceived as an “encompassing phenomenon”; it encompasses not only human subjects, but “everything that can become object” for human subjects (Palmer 1969, 204). Language is not a medium between subjects and objects; rather, it is a medium within which subjects and objects exist together. Language, Gadamer writes, is “a limitless medium that carries everything within it—not only the ‘culture’ that has been handed down to us through language, but absolutely everything” (1976, 25). The issue to be addressed here concerns what it means to say that human beings live within a linguistic medium. How does this perspective provide an alternative to Cartesian dualism?
The ontological dimension of language
The medium is ontologically significant because it produces the
only realities that humans will ever know or experience. Deetz
argues this point when he asserts that “the world as experienced is
always already structured and interpreted,” because it “is already
housed in language” (1973, 43, 44; emphasis added). The world,
for Deetz, is the interpreted and understood elements of experi-
ence. Human thought and perception, then, are not reflections of
a reality that is subsequently codified in language; instead, lan-
guage plays a primary role in the initial formation of thought and
perception, for thought and perception become real only in a lin-
guistic medium.

A dualist critic may charge that while this may be true of
thought and perception, it is not the case with regard to the
objects of thought and perception. But even these “objects of
reality” must be part of a linguistic medium if they are to be
accorded status as real. Linge notes, for instance, that “the ap-
pearance of particular objects of our concern depends upon a
world already having been disclosed to us in the language we use”
(1976, xxix). Even objects so hard and fast as California red-
woods and the World Trade Center exist for people only in terms
of a linguistic world or medium within which they make sense and
are accorded meaning. If the World Trade Center were stumbled
upon by some aboriginal tribespeople, it would be ontologically
different for them than for Manhattan natives. This difference
would exist, in large measure, because the former group lives
within a linguistic medium that differs fundamentally from that
inhabited by the latter. Each group belongs to a particular linguis-
tic medium and, in Palmer’s terms, must “conform to its ways”
(1969, 208). Language “pervades the world as the medium in and
through which one sees every object” (231; emphasis added). The
ontological possibilities present in one medium may not be pres-
ent in another, and the extent to which such possibilities differ
will mark the extent to which those who reside within the differ-
ent media will experience different realities. Any interpretation is
constrained by the medium within which it is made.

Interpretation is not conceived here as the systematic appli-
cation of an objective method, but as a ubiquitous element of human
experience that makes the experience meaningful and real. Experi-
ence and interpretation, in other words, are not separate “activi-
ties” or “moments”; instead all human experience is shot through
and through, from the beginning, with interpretation. Indeed, interpretation is “perhaps the most basic act of human thinking,” and in Palmer’s words, one’s very existence may be construed as “a constant process of interpretation” (1969, 8–9). Even initial acts of perception do not simply reflect some sensory input. They always involve meaning and, consequently, are acts of understanding and interpretation (Gadamer 1985, 81–82). One’s experience of any “event,” any physical or emotional “stimulus,” is interpretation, and that interpretation constitutes reality.

An important implication of this conception of a medium is that “reality” always has a linguistic character. All conceptions, objects, and events occur within and are shaped by a medium that is linguistic. That medium, however, is so pervasive and ever-present that, like air, its influence is often unnoticed. “One sees right through it,” writes Palmer, “yet one could not see anything in its own manifestness without it” (1969, 133). The medium is encompassing but unnoticed; it is transparent. People assume, consequently, a world that exists apart from the linguistic medium within which they themselves live. Gadamer asserts that this “illusion that things precede their manifestation in language conceals the fundamentally linguistic character of our experience of the world” (1976, 77). The concept of a hermeneutic medium calls attention to reality’s fundamentally linguistic character by undercutting the “basic distinction between the linguistic and the non-linguistic” (Stewart 1986, 65).

One dominant assumption that helps reify the linguistic-nonlinguistic distinction holds that language represents pure experience and that it “points to” a reality untainted by symbols and interpretation. Language, according to this assumption, is a tool used “to designate non-linguistic objects” (Stewart 1986, 64). Within a hermeneutic medium, however, no nonlinguistic objects exist. Everything is shaped by language. As Stewart states “language is not exclusively and perhaps not even primarily representational; it is constitutive, revelatory” (65). Booth argues that scholars who relinquish the representational view will be more apt to recognize language as an ontological medium that generates both people and their worlds:

Once we give up the limiting notions of language and knowledge willed to us by scientism, we can no longer consider adequate any notion of ‘language as a means of communication’ or as ‘one of many forms of conditioning.’ It is, in recent models, the medium in which
selves grow, the social invention through which we make each other and the structures that are our world. (1974, 135; emphasis added to medium)

Language brings both humans and the human world into being. It is the point at which human reality is generated.

This perspective allows that language can be referential. Language refers to the concepts, objects, events, and people that form aspects of one’s world. The significant issue, however, concerns the nature of that to which language refers. Any “objects” of reference exist within a linguistic medium and, consequently, are ontologically constituted by language before any specific acts of reference occur. While language does operate referentially, it always does so within a linguistic medium that generates the referents.

The social dimension of language

If a hermeneutic medium is linguistic, it is also social, for language is a fundamentally social phenomenon. Any medium is always shared. It encompasses “groups” of people and is sustained by language use within those groups. For Gadamer “language is the medium in and through which one has a ‘world.’” That world, states Palmer, is “not personal and private but a shared understanding which language enables us to have in the first place” (1969,231; emphasis added).

That a linguistic medium is sustained by those who share in it means, fundamentally, that it always transcends any one individual’s subjective experiences and interpretations. Though individuals may influence the medium’s form and content to some degree, the medium is ontologically prior to the individual; it precedes the existence of those who are born into it, and introduces them to particular attitudes and relationships that are objectively real. All experience, all thought, speech, perception, and interpretation occur within and are influenced by the medium (Gadamer 1985,401; Deetz 1973, 46).

Gadamer, for example, states that prejudices are not individual or subjective character traits. They take their form and are contained in the linguistic possibilities present in any given culture (Hyde and Smith 1979, 350). Indeed, perhaps the most important characteristic of philosophical hermeneutics is Gadamer’s grounding of the themes of interpretation, understanding, and meaning in language. Within Gadamer’s system these themes cannot be as-
sumed to describe subjective cognitive processes. Because they are
grounded in language, they are social or communal in nature.

Deetz states concisely this important concept:

> Words do not accumulate meaning from private experience, nor is
> meaning in people. Both World and language are prior to and indepen-
> dent of a particular person's subjective experience. People participate—
> have a World—in an already meaningful language through immersion
> in the stream of heritage. (1973, 48)

From birth, one is immersed and develops within a linguistic me-
dium that has already shaped and made meaningful the world.
Booth notes that even Descartes's dualist project, with its emphasis
on the subjective mind, was "radically social from the beginning.
Descartes, states Booth, "did his doubting in a language that he had
not invented. The 'I' derived from the experiment already existed in
a matrix of other persons before the experiment began; the ques-
tions asked and the data discovered even in the most extreme mo-
moment were tainted, as it were, with community. . . . The formula
should have been 'We think, therefore we are'" (1974, 134). Even
individual thought, then, is not subjective thought.

Within this perspective, true subjectivity is impossible. From the
moment of experience one is already biased, one already assumes
certain basic agreements about what the world is like—politically,
morally, ontologically. One does not subjectively assent to these
agreements; membership in that "community of language" which
constitutes the medium means that one is "already in agreement"
(Gadamer 1985, 405). One lives within a linguistic medium, and
within that medium one grows into the interpretations and mean-
ings that constitute the world. "In all our knowledge of ourselves
and in all knowledge of the world," writes Gadamer, "we are
always already encompassed by the language that is our own," and
that forms the medium of our existence (1976, 62; emphasis added.
Also see 64). While people do participate in the formation and
sustenance of the medium, it exists, importantly, apart from indi-
vidual conceptions, intentions, and actions. The medium, in sum,
is not objective, for it is independent neither from social influence
nor from the language that makes it; but neither is the medium a
subjective phenomenon, for it does exist independent from any
particular person's subjectivity. It takes on a life of its own and
continues to exist as people enter its domain, as they live and act
and, through death, exit.
The medium as tradition

What is the medium in which the cumulative experience of a whole historical people is hidden and stored? . . . The answer must be: language. (Palmer 1969, 201)

This section on the medium as tradition must inevitably be bound up with the preceding discussion of the medium as language. A hermeneutic medium consists of language together with tradition. Language is the primary component of a medium that is “the reservoir of tradition” (Gadamer 1976, 29), or the “repository of the past” (Palmer 1969, 228). Language and tradition necessarily entail one another. “Tradition,” writes Gadamer, exists “in the medium of language,” and any language contains a sense of history, or tradition (1985, 351). No tradition exists without language; no language exists without tradition. Both are components of the hermeneutic medium that encompasses human life and activity.

The ontological dimension of tradition

Many of the same phrases and metaphors used in philosophical hermeneutics to describe language also are employed to describe tradition. Gadamer states, for example, that “history does not belong to us, but we belong to it” (1985, 245). People are born into a sense of history that encompasses them and provides the possibilities for interpretation and experience. “Gadamer’s specific emphasis,” notes Linge, “is not on the application of a method by a subject, but on the fundamental continuity of history as a medium encompassing every such subjective act and the objects it apprehends” (1976, xvi). Tradition, like language, does not stand between subjects and objects as a set of prejudices that must be avoided. Instead, it is a component of the medium that subsumes subjects and objects and makes their very existence possible. Tradition is “not over against us but something in which we stand and through which we exist; for the most part it is so transparent a medium that it is invisible to us—as invisible as water to a fish” (Palmer 1969, 177). And as water makes it both necessary and possible for fish to act in the manner most natural to them, so tradition makes it both necessary and possible for humans to engage in activities that seem natural to them.

Rational thought or reason, for example, is made possible by the traditions within which people live. Reason functions only within some tradition, for tradition provides the “stream of conceptions
within which we stand,” and which we utilize in the processes of rationality (Palmer 1969, 183; Bernstein 1983, 130). People are able to engage in “rational” thought and discourse because they live in a medium of tradition. The medium establishes the boundaries for rationality precisely because it contains the culture’s heritage; it contains the past and all the implications that past has for what makes “sense” currently and for what is or is not “reasonable.”

In this view one’s historical situation is not a distortion that inhibits understanding. Instead, one’s historical preconceptions and historical prejudices are precisely what enable one to interpret and understand anything. Prejudices thus are not impediments that blind one to truth and must be overcome. Rather, they “constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience”; they are the “biases of our openness to the world” and the “conditions whereby we experience something” (Gadamer 1976, 9). All understanding is founded in a historical perspective: a set of presumptions that is “already shaping and conditioning interpretation—it is a preliminary interpretation [that] sets the stage for subsequent interpretation” (Palmer 1969, 22; see also 51). All experience, then, is historical. It arises from and is guided by the perspectives and preconceptions of those who experience.

Historical prejudices, as an essential aspect of interpretation and understanding, are important ontologically. Gadamer asserts that prejudices constitute not only our existence, but also the existence of any things, events, and situations we experience. For those things, events, and situations will, in Bernstein’s words, “be different in light of our changing horizons and the different questions that we learn to ask” (1983, 139). They will be ontologically different according to our different prejudices.

The social dimension of tradition
The concept of a hermeneutic medium is premised upon an ontology of human finitude that recognizes that historical prejudices are not impediments to understanding, but essential characteristics of human reality. “Finite, historical man always sees and understands from his standpoint in time and place; he cannot . . . stand above the relativity of history and procure ‘objectively valid knowledge’” (Palmer 1969, 178). The relativity emphasized here is not in any way a product of individual subjective perceptions. It stems, rather, from a history, or tradition, embraced and validated by a community that stretches over time and space. “All we shall ever
have are a multiplicity of views,” states Campbell, “and that is all we can have. This circumstance has nothing to do with subjectivity and absolutely everything to do with historicity” (1978, 109). One is “always being influenced by tradition,” Bernstein writes, because one always lives within a tradition (1983, 142). Certainly one may broaden one’s horizons and become aware of various alternative traditions. One may even choose to embrace one of them. But one cannot step outside of tradition altogether.

David Tracy notes that our primary responsibilities are to recognize our participation in a particular set of historical prejudices, and to recognize those prejudices as social artifacts that can be countered if necessary. Part of our history as Americans, for example, is a “noble experiment of freedom and plurality.” But for white Americans that history also includes “the near destruction of one people (the North American Indians, the true native Americans) and the enslavement of another people (the blacks)” (Tracy 1987, 68). The Western world’s obligations to ancient Greece are noteworthy as well, but that part of our history also includes “the vindictive policies of imperialist Athens” and the “unexamined role of women and slaves in the polis” (68).

Tracy’s point is not that we should live our lives in contrition and guilt, but that we should recognize the ways in which our community’s historical prejudices work to the benefit and detriment of different groups of people. And most important, Tracy urges people to be responsible for the histories they inherit. To be responsible, he says, means to be “capable of responding”: “capable of discarding any scenarios of innocent triumph written, as always, by the victors; capable of not forgetting the subversive memories of individuals and whole peoples whose names we do not even know. If we attempt such responses, we are making a beginning—and only a beginning—in assuming historical responsibility” (1987, 69). To recognize the social nature of the historical medium within which we live is to call forth various possibilities by which we might intervene in that medium in order to challenge or to support the prejudices that structure our lives.

Gadamer argues that a primary difficulty in the Cartesian dichotomy of subjects from objects is the failure to appreciate a tradition’s profound influence on what it means to be a subject or object at any particular point in time. We must understand, Bernstein writes, “how we are always being shaped by effective-history and tradition” (1983, 166). No experience occurs outside a historical medium.
Summary: The hermeneutic medium

The concept of the medium is central to philosophical hermeneutics. Its importance is seen most easily in what Campbell asserts is Gadamer’s central point: “The world is already meaningful. That is, the world which comes to us in the only way that the human world can come to us, through language, is an already meaningful world” (Campbell 1978, 107). This world is neither internal and subjective nor external and objective; it is the medium of shared understanding that exists in the relationships among people (Palmer 1969, 206). Even one’s “self” is a social phenomenon, “surrounded by, embedded in, made through other selves . . . literally constituted of other selves who are in turn unthinkable except in matrices of human converse” (Booth 1974, 132). The social medium into which people are born provides them with a world that is already structured according to basic relationships and meanings that have been made in social interaction and that are contained in language and tradition. People receive these basic structures and through them experience their reality. These structures provide the sense of permanence and continuity that typically people attribute to the world.

So far in this paper I have developed several characteristics of the hermeneutic medium. The medium, at this point, can be defined as an encompassing and pervasive amalgam of language and tradition that is ontologically significant and socially shared. Each major term in this definition has important connotations. The medium is “encompassing and pervasive” because nothing exists outside of its domain. All experience, all human reality, is constituted in terms of a particular “amalgam of language and tradition.” The medium is thus “ontologically significant”: it provides the only realities humans ever experience. And finally, this medium is “socially shared.” The medium is prior to subjectivity, for all individuals are born into its preexistent and ongoing social flow; and the medium is prior to objectivity, for all conceptualization occurs within its structures. No one can step from its boundaries to posit conformity with an independent reality.

Conclusion: An escape from the Cartesian legacy

The concept of a hermeneutic medium, as developed in this paper, provides an alternative to the Cartesian paradigm that guides most Western thought and action. The medium, understood as a com-
plexly structured composition of language and tradition, guides the ontologically significant activities of interpretation and understanding. In so doing, it furnishes a perspective that “goes beyond the scientism and subject-centeredness of the subject-object schema within which we, today, tend unconsciously to operate” (Palmer 1969, 229). The medium transcends this Cartesian schema in several specific ways.

Because the medium is ontologically productive—because it constitutes human realities—this perspective “rejects the notion that we can get beyond that which is socially mediated (Lyne 1985, 68). Reality is enacted within the medium. The possibilities of an objective world or a subjective observer are extinguished, for all that is experienced and all who experience are shaped by the medium. This perspective thus rejects the central tenet of Cartesian dualism: that a gap exists between mind and matter, between subjective observer and objective observed. Both are shaped by and within an ontological medium of experience.

Once the Cartesian commitment to dualism is rejected, any hope for a fixed and immutable epistemological foundation crumbles. Knowledge is no longer pictured as an edifice grounded in an indubitable substructure, but as “an evolving social phenomenon” (Michael Williams 1977, 180). Truth no longer denotes a subject’s rational certainty that thought conforms to objective reality; instead, truth “amounts to what can be argumentatively validated by the community of interpreters” who act within a hermeneutic medium (Bernstein 1983, 154). Truth becomes a matter of what the medium will allow and what one’s interlocutors will accept. “We shall be looking,” states Rorty, “for an airtight case rather than an unshakable foundation” (1979, 157). The type of case one can make is always constrained by the medium’s structure, which limits the range of possible interpretations or conclusions. But the primary component of truth and reality remains the arguments and good reasons one can offer in support of a particular contention.

Reality and truth, then, find their validation not in an apodictic foundation, but in the language and tradition, the arguments and social practices, that occur within and are part of the medium. Several components of the Cartesian legacy are negated when the medium is conceived in this way. The dream of total objectivity is displaced because values, beliefs, passions, and judgments are part of any medium and always influence what one takes to be true and
real. The Cartesian hope for a specific method of knowledge acquisition also is undermined. The Cartesian method is grounded in the subjective and rational search for certainty. But the perspective offered here grounds knowledge in the social fabric of the medium. Neither subjectivity nor universal agreement on the criteria for rationality obtains. As Schrag states, “In the move to the hermeneutical space of communicative praxis, [the] epistemological subject is decentered and rationality is disseminated into the discursive practices that make up the republic of mankind” (1985, 172). Rationality itself is a product of the medium, of the language and tradition that have established, for the time being, what is considered reasonable and unreasonable. The concept of a hermeneutic medium displaces those elements of Cartesianism most necessary if a single method for the determination of truth is to be postulated; specifically, it displaces the dualist separation of subjects and objects, the possibility of certain and objective truth, and the hope for an immutable foundation against which knowledge claims can be measured.

A rejection of the Cartesian tradition would seem to leave one entrapped within the most powerful remnant of Descartes’s legacy: the Cartesian Anxiety. “Cartesian Anxiety” describes that seductive either/or which asserts that if no fixed foundation for knowledge exists, then humanity is necessarily left to a moral and intellectual chaos characterized by uncertainty and hopelessness (Bernstein 1983, 16–20). The concept of a hermeneutic medium, however, escapes this Anxiety. For though people live within a medium, they are not totally captive to one particular manner of interpretation, understanding, and experience. The possibility exists “of going beyond our conventions and beyond all those experiences that are schematised in advance” (Gadamer 1985, 495). Because different but overlapping social groups contribute to the medium’s structure, it contains various possibilities for experience. People live within a medium that does exhibit preferred understandings and interpretations, but other often unnoticed possibilities do exist within the medium and can be embraced and cultivated. For Gadamer this condition rescues hermeneutics from a morally and intellectually chaotic relativism. Any medium contains a variety of criteria for the comparison of rival interpretations and understandings. But such comparisons do not require belief in a fixed rule by which to measure progress or worth.
The rejection of objectivity, therefore, does not deny that arguments and interpretations are subject to critique and correction (Lyne 1985, 70). Any criticism will appeal to judgmental standards that may be assumed, for the sake of the criticism, to be fixed. This critical activity, however, may be conducted without recourse to the belief “that there is some ultimate foundation or ultimate standards that must be presupposed to make this activity intelligible” (Bernstein 1983, 73). In Bernstein’s words, “We must avoid the fallacy of thinking that since there are no fixed, determinate rules for distinguishing better from worse interpretations, there is consequently no rational way of making and warranting such practical comparative judgments” (91). The medium exerts pressures and limitations that, though they are not eternal, function as standards of appropriateness. Though no ultimate foundations preside, neither does moral nor intellectual chaos. Instead, shared standards exist in the medium’s structures. They are inherited and may be called into question, but at any given point in time they serve as the criteria for rationality.

John Lyne writes that rhetorical scholars need to consider “what kind of leadership we are prepared to offer to an academic movement that is beginning to adopt rhetoric as the appropriate move beyond both objectivism and relativism” (1985, 66). The concept of the medium developed in this paper can contribute to this endeavor. Bernstein nicely encapsulates the thrust of philosophical hermeneutic scholarship and makes clear how this contribution can begin to occur.

What is most important in Gadamer’s work is the way in which . . . he begins to elaborate a way of thinking that is beyond objectivism and relativism and that recovers and explores “an entirely different notion of knowledge and truth.” . . . Reason is not a faculty or capacity that can free itself from its historical context and horizons. Reason is historical or situated reason which gains its distinctive power always within a living tradition. For Gadamer this is not a limitation or deficiency of reason, but rather the essence of reason rooted in human finitude. (1983, 37)

The concept of a hermeneutic medium provides a perspective from which an alternative to the Cartesian paradigm can be offered. This concept, as I’ve developed it here, emphasizes the linguistic and historical dimensions of understanding and truth, the integration of rhetorical concerns into the processes of knowledge, and the movement beyond dualistic options. All of this illustrates
the potential for a vocabulary that presumes, not an epistemological foundation, but a hermeneutic medium.

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Notes

1. This essay is derived from my Ph.D. dissertation (Purdue University, 1986), directed by Barry Brummett. I wish to thank Professor Brummett and Professor R. Bruce Hyde for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, Atlanta, 1991.

2. Palmer is referring to Heidegger’s concept of “world,” but on page 134 he makes clear that this is synonymous with the concept of “medium” developed by Gadamer.

3. Stewart traces the development of this concept from Heidegger to Gadamer on pages 64–65.

4. Also see page 228: “It is through language that something like a world can arise for us. This world is a shared world (emphasis added).

5. Every essay in Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics (1976) develops this connection with language.

6. Also see Palmer (1969), page 177, where he states “that language is the reservoir and communicating medium of the tradition.”

7. Both authors assert that reason stands or functions within tradition.

8. Also see Linge (1976), page xiv; and Palmer (1969), page 182, where they argue this same point.


10. Also see Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics (1976), page 9.

11. Linge notes, in a similar statement, that “the consciousness of effective history is our own consciousness that we are finite, historical beings” (1976, xxvi).

12. This concept is emphasized throughout the philosophical hermeneutics literature. See, for example, Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics (1976), page 15; and in communication literature, see Deetz’s “Words Without Things” (1973), page 43, where he makes the same point.

Works cited


