



Meaning and Interpretation: Can Brandomian Scorekeepers be Gadamerian Hermeneuts?

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Abstract

In his book *Tales of the Mighty Dead* Brandom engages Gadamer's hermeneutic conception of interpretation in order to show that his inferentialist approach to understanding conceptual content can explain and underwrite the main theses of Gadamer's hermeneutics which he calls 'the gadamerian hermeneutic platitudes'. In order to assess whether this claim is sound, I analyze the three types of philosophical interpretations that Brandom discusses: *de re*, *de dicto*, and *de traditione*, and argue that they commit him to an 'ecumenical historicism' that is directly at odds with the hermeneutic approach. Although the variety of *de re* interpretation that Brandom denominates *de traditione* comes indeed very close to the Gadamerian approach, I conclude that if Brandomian scorekeepers were to adopt it, they could become Gadamerian hermeneuts, but once they did, they would not be able to go back to their scorekeeping practices as described by Brandom.

In his book *Tales of the Mighty Dead* (hereafter cited as TMD), Brandom offers a variety of interpretations of the philosophical works of authors such as Leibniz, Hegel, Frege, or Heidegger. Although at first sight the book may seem like a compilation of highly diverse exegetical pieces, Brandom makes clear from the very beginning that 'it is animated by a systematic philosophical ambition' (TMD 1). Indeed, Brandom aims to offer a new way to look at the history of philosophy by showing that authors as diverse as Hegel, Frege, Heidegger, or Sellars belong to a common philosophical tradition deeply concerned with the metaphysics of intentionality. Since this aim represents a direct attack to the standard assumption that the Continental and analytic traditions have nothing to say to each other and thus requires breaking with the received wisdom that most philosophers working in both traditions actually share, Brandom feels the need to offer an explicit reflection and justification of the methodology of interpretation that guides his controversial approach. It is in that context that Brandom engages the Gadamerian conception of interpretation in a section of the book entitled 'Hermeneutic Platitudes'.

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The title of the section already reveals a sympathetic attitude towards the Gadamerian approach to hermeneutics. This attitude is immediately confirmed when Brandom offers a list of the main features of the Gadamerian approach that he denominates ‘the axial Gadamerian hermeneutic platitudes’ and declares that ‘the gadamerian platitudes are just the sort of thing it seems to me we should want to be entitled to say about the interpretation of texts’ (TMD 94). However, for those who may already suspect that Brandom will not turn out to be an orthodox Gadamerian, there is a warning signal directly attached to his endorsement of the hermeneutic approach. Brandom adds:

But earning the entitlement to the commitments those platitudes express requires real work. In particular, it requires a theory of meaning that can provide a model validating such hermeneutic truisms. Making sense of hermeneutic practice, as codified in the gadamerian platitudes, should be seen as a basic criterion of adequacy of a theory of meaning. And conversely, being interpretable in terms of an independently motivatable theory of meaning should serve as a basic criterion of adequacy of our hermeneutic practice. (TMD 94)

Now, taking into account that Brandom has already done the ‘real work’ of articulating an inferentialist theory of meaning in his book *Making it Explicit* (see also *Articulating Reasons*), one may begin to suspect that what will end up being at issue in the comparison between the two approaches is rather whether Gadamer is an orthodox Brandomian. This suspicion seems confirmed when Brandom contends that the specific aim in the comparison will be to indicate ‘how an inferentialist understanding of conceptual content underwrites and explains some of the axial gadamerian hermeneutic platitudes’ (TMD 94). If Brandom’s inferentialist theory of meaning indeed underwrites and explains the main features of Gadamer’s hermeneutics it would have offered the systematic support to the Gadamerian conception of interpretation that Gadamer himself did not even attempt to provide in his masterwork *Truth and Method* (hereafter cited as TM). In other words, if Brandomian scorekeepers can be Gadamerian hermeneuts whenever they engage in the interpretation of texts, this would offer indirect support to the Gadamerian approach to interpretation. But, even more importantly, to the extent that the main features of the Gadamerian conception have become platitudes, the fact that the Brandomian approach can incorporate them would also offer additional support to his inferentialist theory of meaning, as Brandom himself points out. Taking into account all these potential payoffs that are at stake in Brandom’s engagement with Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, let’s first of all analyze in detail whether his approach to interpretation can in fact underwrite and explain the gadamerian platitudes. The platitudes that Brandom discusses are the following:

- (1) *Anti-intentionalism*: the author's intentions have no last authority in determining the meaning of a text.
- (2) *Contextualism*: there is no literal meaning; meaning is always relative to context.
- (3) *Model of understanding as dialogue*.
- (4) *Pluralism of interpretations*: there is always more than one context to determine the meaning of a text.
- (5) *Open-endedness of interpretation*: there are indefinite many contexts to determine the meaning of a text and thus there is no such thing as a complete and definitive interpretation.

Anyone familiar with Gadamer's hermeneutics would agree that this list of hermeneutic platitudes is accurate and uncontroversial. But, strangely enough, the typology of interpretations that Brandom offers seems deeply unsuited for the task it is supposed to accomplish, namely, to 'underwrite and explain some of the axial Gadamerian hermeneutic platitudes' (TMD 94).¹ In particular, the pure cases of *de dicto* and *de re* interpretations that Brandom describes as possible ways of doing intellectual historiography² seem to pretty much coincide with the explicit target of Gadamer's critique of historicism in *Truth and Method*.

According to Brandom's exposition, a purely *de dicto* interpretation would aim to tell us something about what the author *intended* to claim, that is,

what the author took it that she was committing herself to by making a certain claim, what she would have regarded as evidence for it or against it . . . So it tells us something about *how she understood what she was claiming*. (TMD 96)

However, Brandom also indicates that 'besides the question of what one takes to follow from a claim one has made, there is the issue of what *really* follows from it' (TMD 100). Now, in order to address this second issue, that is, in order to assess the truth of what the author intended to say, the interpreter needs to specify the content of the claim correctly. For this purpose a different type of interpretation may be needed. In contradistinction to a *de dicto* interpretation, a purely *de re* interpretation would aim to:

say what *really* follows from the claims made, what is *really* evidence for or against them, and so what the author has *really* committed herself to, *regardless of her opinion about the matter*. (TMD 102; last emphasis mine)

As is well known, the assumption that a purely *de dicto* interpretation of a text is possible³ (i.e., a meaningful enterprise genuinely distinguishable and totally separated from a *de re* interpretation) is one of the main targets against which *Truth and Method* is directed. It is precisely the assumption of historicism, according to which

- (1) in interpreting a historical text all the interpreter should aim to do is to explain what the author intended to say;

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- (2) and in so doing the interpreter should abstain from evaluating it with regard to its truth, for any such evaluation would violate the evaluative neutrality necessary for objective, scientific investigation.

From this perspective, it seems that Brandom agrees with the historicist approach regarding the types of interpretation that are possible. He just disagrees with historicism about the evaluation of the legitimacy of interpretations of the second type. According to Brandom, evaluating the truth of a text through a *de re* interpretation is as legitimate an enterprise as describing what the author intended to say through a *de dicto* interpretation. These types of interpretation simply situate the text in different contexts and no interpretation is possible without a context. We could characterize Brandom's position as a sort of ecumenical historicism, according to which:

- (1') one possible aim in interpreting a historical text is merely to explain what the author intended to say through a *de dicto* interpretation
(2') another possible aim is to determine whether what the author intended to say is correct through a *de re* interpretation.

However, this ecumenical variety of historicism seems as incompatible with Gadamer's approach as the traditional one. To see this, let's first recall why Gadamer disagrees with assumptions (1) and (2) of traditional historicism. In a nutshell, his argument is as follows: it is not possible to identify what the author intended to say without identifying first what she was talking about, and the only way the interpreter can identify this is by using his own beliefs about the matter (TM 294). This is so for the following methodological reason.

In trying to understand a text, we have to apply the methodological principle of charity.⁴ That is, we have to assume that the text is understandable, i.e., plausible.⁵ But we can have no merely tentative or potential attitude towards what is plausible and what is not.⁶ That is, in choosing the most plausible among the possible interpretations, we can only be guided by what seems indeed plausible to us.⁷ Without adopting an evaluative stance, the interpreter would be entirely at a loss in choosing which interpretation to ascribe to the author at any difficult juncture of the interpretative process. This process of triangulation between the interpreter, the text and the world requires an evaluative stance on the interpreter's part and thus it necessarily involves the interpreter's own beliefs about the matter.⁸ Consequently, the aim of providing a purely *de dicto* interpretation is not just a difficult,⁹ but a deeply misconceived task: If the interpreter does not adopt an evaluative stance (i.e., if she is not interested in truth, to put it in Brandom's terms) she will fail to provide any genuine interpretation whatsoever, according to Gadamer.¹⁰

But there is more. On the basis of this argument, Gadamer can also criticize the alternative assumption that the more ecumenical variety of

historicism contemplates, namely, that the interpreter could, once she has accomplished a purely *de dicto* interpretation of a text,

(2') evaluate it with regard to its truth through a purely *de re* interpretation, that is, through a *different but correct* specification of the content.

His argument against (2') is based on a further consequence of the methodological constraint used to argue against (1) and (2): any such interpretation remains a priori inferior to one in which ascriptions of incorrectness are not necessary. For ascriptions of incorrectness are indistinguishable from failures of understanding.¹¹ Therefore, for methodological reasons, the interpreter is constrained to assume that 'what the text says is the whole truth about the matter' (TM 294). In other words, the interpreter is methodologically obliged to maximize agreement. For the more of the author's claims turn out right according to an interpretation, the better (i.e., more plausible) that interpretation is. But once the interpreter succeeds in providing a plausible interpretation of the text's claims, it will be already too late for her to ask what she herself should believe: what is plausible 'passes into one's own thinking on the subject' (TM 375). Thus, after a successful interpretation has emerged, the interpreter will no longer be able to offer 'a different but correct specification of the content' of the author's claims.¹²

From this methodological perspective, it is easy to identify what is wrong with both pure *de dicto* and pure *de re* interpretations in Gadamer's opinion: *Neither of them takes seriously the text's claim to validity*. On the one hand, in *de dicto* interpretations as described by Brandom, the orientation towards the validity of what is said in the text is missing. This lack of engagement on the interpreter's part, however, closes up the possibility of genuinely learning something from the text. On the other hand, in *de re* interpretations as described by Brandom, the orientation towards the validity of what is said in the text is present, but what is missing is the openness towards the possibility that what the text says could be valid for us. This also precludes the possibility of learning from the text. Far from being genuine ways of doing intellectual historiography, both types of interpretation constitute, in Gadamer's view, failed steps in the process of reaching a genuine understanding of the text.¹³

In contradistinction to them, the model of understanding as dialogue is supposed to offer a better model of interpretation for genuine historiography. According to Gadamer, the key feature of the model of dialogue, in contradistinction to the historicist model, consists in the fact that the text is not considered merely as an object to be interpreted by a subject. The text is never just an object in the world, for it is itself about something in the world, about some subject matter. This is the sense in which it speaks to us like a 'Thou'. Thus, in interpreting a text, as in a dialogue, we are always confronted with at least two dimensions: we are trying to reach *agreement with someone concerning some subject matter*.¹⁴ But if the

interpreter's aim is to reach agreement concerning the subject matter or, as Gadamer also puts it, if the aim is to understand how what the author says could be right, a successful interpretation is precisely one in which the distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* specifications of the subject matter is no longer possible. This is precisely what Gadamer means by 'fusion of horizons', namely, to 'regain the concepts of a historical past in such a way that they also include our own comprehension of them' (TM 374). Only in this way is it possible to recuperate (and keep alive) the normative significance of a past tradition, according to Gadamer.

It is not my intention here to defend the correctness of Gadamer's approach to hermeneutics against Brandom's approach. In fact, I find Gadamer's arguments only convincing to the extent that they show the need for the interpreter to adopt an evaluative stance. But I agree with other defenders of the possibility of a critical hermeneutics that not every encounter with a past tradition puts the interpreter in a situation of subordination.¹⁵ As in a real dialogue, adopting an evaluative stance opens up two possibilities, not just one: that we may have something to learn from the author and that the author could have something to learn from us. In spite of this, it is true that Gadamer's position has a methodological advantage: all other things being equal, an interpretation that succeeds in showing how the author's descriptions of the subject matter can be correct would in principle be superior to one in which the interpreter must offer a 'correct but different description'. But it also has a methodological disadvantage. As Davidson recognizes, it makes it hard to explain error (see *Truth and Interpretation; Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*). In other words, maximizing agreement (with excessive charity) can lead to a crude ascription of the interpreter's own views to the author who is being interpreted (i.e., what Brandom calls 'hermeneutic ventriloquism'). Thus, the model of understanding as dialogue certainly requires taking seriously the text's claim of validity, but precisely in so doing it must leave open how much agreement a successful interpretation will (and should) bring about in each particular case.

But even if we think of hermeneutics in this broader way, Brandom's acceptance of the possibility of a purely *de dicto* interpretation¹⁶ as well as the correlate claim that purely *de dicto* and purely *de re* interpretations are on equal footing when it comes to conceptual interpretation are still problematic from a hermeneutic point of view.

According to Brandom, in the case of a *de dicto* interpretation the inferential context (from which the auxiliary hypotheses used to illuminate the author's claims are drawn) is constituted by other claims by the same author or from the same work. He explains:

Drawing the auxiliary hypotheses for extracting the inferential consequences of a claim from other commitments by the same author, or from the same work is one natural way to privilege a class of inferential contexts. (TMD 96)

However, it seems doubtful that by taking into consideration all the author's claims in a given text we have actually privileged anything, if what is meant by that is 'providing a genuine key for interpretation'. From a Gadamerian perspective, it would seem that all we have done so far is to identify the initial task, namely, to get into the hermeneutic circle of understanding: trying to understand the whole text by understanding each of its parts and vice versa. Brandom's ecumenism regarding *de dicto* and *de re* interpretations notwithstanding, there seems to be a crucial asymmetry between these two types of interpretation, as he describes them: in the case of a *de re* interpretation the interpreter surely adds a genuinely new source of interpretative clues by taking as auxiliary hypotheses her own beliefs about the matter discussed in the text. For this kind of inferential context provides auxiliary hypotheses *that the interpreter already understands*. In contradistinction, the class of auxiliary hypotheses constituted by the author's other claims is part of the very object that is in need of interpretation. Thus the question unavoidably arises: how is the interpreter supposed to reach an understanding about any of these other claims in the first place? It is surely correct that any interpretation of a text will need to go back and forth in trying to interpret each single claim in light of all other claims and vice versa. But precisely for that reason this process does not single out a particular way of interpreting a text. It just indicates what the task is. In other words, the circle of understanding is not a possible solution to the difficulties of interpretation. It is just the very problem of interpretation. Gadamer's central claim concerning the hermeneutic circle of understanding is that without the crucial contribution of the interpreter's own beliefs about the matter, that is, *without the evaluative stance characteristic of de re interpretation as described by Brandom*, there is no way into the circle.¹⁷ That may be wrong. But it is hard to see how rules of paraphrasing, however exact they were spelled out, could all by themselves constitute an alternative, equally productive way of providing a genuine understanding of a text (i.e., something in addition to the text itself). Paraphrasing is not a way of interpreting, but a way of repeating accurately.

These differences also illuminate an important contrast between Gadamer's and Brandom's explanation of the anti-intentionalist platitude. According to Brandom, the intentions of the author are not the last authority in determining the meaning of the text simply because there are other, equally legitimate authorities for that determination (such as the interpreter's present context, etc.). That is, it is *perfectly possible* and legitimate to provide an accurate description of what the author intended to say in the author's own terms. It is just that there are many other things that can be illuminating in interpreting a text. In contradistinction, the sense in which for Gadamer the intentions of the author are not the last authority in determining the meaning of the text is much stronger. According to Gadamer, *there is no such thing* as an interpretation of a text that just describes what the author intended to say in the author's own

terms.¹⁸ This claim of impossibility constitutes a crucial difference between Gadamer's and Brandom's explanations of the anti-intentionalist platitude. It is also internally bound to another, perhaps the most crucial Gadamerian 'platitude', which directly conflicts with the acceptance of *de dicto* interpretation as a genuine way to do intellectual historiography, namely, that *all interpretation involves application*.¹⁹

Now, Brandom does discuss a particular variant of *de re* intellectual historiography that seems to come close to Gadamer's hermeneutics. Although he does not provide a name for it, he introduces it in the context of distinguishing among *de re* ascriptions of conceptual content between those he calls 'immediate' and those he calls 'de traditione'. Whereas in the case of 'immediate' *de re* ascriptions the commitments defining the inferential context from which the interpretative hypotheses are drawn are those acknowledged by the interpreter, in the case of *de re* ascriptions 'de traditione' such inferential context is supplemented 'by further claims made by others whom the interpreter, but not necessarily the authors involved, retrospectively sees as *engaged in a common enterprise, as developing common thoughts or concepts*' (TMD 28). Thus, *de re* ascriptions *de traditione* point to a kind of intellectual historiography in which the interpreter, the text and other authors are all 'engaged in a common enterprise', they are all trying to find out what to believe about some subject matter, and they do so by 'developing common thoughts or concepts'. And given that traditions cannot be inherited but must be established, as Brandom makes clear, in order to do so

the interpreter must, among other things, *do what he would do if those commitments [of the other author/s, CL] were his own* and he were making an immediate *de re* ascription. *The interpreter must, in all but the de dicto cases, in this sense implicitly adopt the perspective from which the content-specification is being offered.* (TMD 28; italics mine)²⁰

It seems thus that *de traditione* readings come closest to the kind of intellectual historiography that Gadamer's hermeneutics singles out as *the* model for successful interpretation. For in those cases the interpreter must not only adopt an evaluative stance towards the validity of what is claimed in the text (like in all *de re* ascriptions), but also take the text's claim to validity seriously, that is, 'do what he would do if those commitments were his own' or, to put in Gadamer's terms, try to figure out how what the author says could be right. It is just that Gadamer's standard for success is higher than Brandom's. Whereas Gadamerian hermeneuts won't rest content in the attempt to retrieve what the text has to contribute to the common enterprise they themselves are engaged in until most of the commitments attributed to the text can also be undertaken by them (and their readers), Brandomian scorekeepers may rest content if in the end they can at least spell out who believes what and why through a *de dicto* interpretation.

However, interpreting the difference between Gadamer's and Brandom's approaches along these lines would not only require *giving priority to de traditione interpretations over purely de dicto or purely de re ones* (against Brandom's explicit ecumenism). Once this is done, the claim that the aim of reaching a purely *de dicto* interpretation constitutes a *genuine, equally legitimate way of doing intellectual historiography* would become problematic as well.²¹ For once we recognize that *de dicto* interpretations are the result of those cases in which most of the commitments attributed to the text cannot be undertaken by the interpreter, that is, those cases in which almost nothing can be learned from the text or the tradition to which the text belongs, it becomes unclear what the point in keeping track of those particular commitments could be. So long as the interpreter is trying to learn something about some subject matter from a text, a purely *de dicto* interpretation remains the unsuccessful case rather than the goal. As Gadamer puts it, 'it is only when the attempt to accept what is said as true fails that we try to "understand" the text, psychologically or historically, as another's opinion' (TM 294). From this perspective, it seems that Brandomian scorekeepers may *become* Gadamerian hermeneuts. But once they do, there will be no way back to a practice of keeping score of alien commitments just for the sake of it. The meaningfulness of the aim to keep two separate sets of books simply collapses.²²

But if we leave aside for a moment the exegetical discussion on the proper interpretation of the hermeneutic platitudes, and situate Brandom's general line of argument in the context of a systematic debate about the relative superiority of different models of interpretation, his claims concerning the different types of interpretations acquire a quite different significance. First of all, it is clear that the point of Brandom's argument is not to argue for the possibility and legitimacy of *de dicto* interpretations. He assumes that this type of interpretation is generally not in question and argues for the legitimacy of *de re* interpretations in general (and of those *de traditione* in particular). In fact, he is not only arguing in favor of that kind of interpretation. More importantly, he is at the same time producing paradigm examples of this type of interpretation regarding the common topic of intentionality as treated by authors in both the Continental and the analytic traditions.²³ In so doing, he is actually displaying all the skills, requirements and assumptions necessary for a successful interpretation according to Gadamerian standards.

Now, if we look at his overall argument from this more systematic perspective, it seems clear that Brandom is actually advocating a way of doing conceptual interpretation in philosophy that, *pace* Gadamer, is quite far from being the prevailing model of interpretation in philosophical historiography. Moreover, it is an approach that could have extremely fruitful consequences if it were generally adopted. Here I am not referring to Brandom's defense of *de re* interpretations in general. For, although he may be right that *de re* interpretations are less popular nowadays with

regard to the exegesis of classical texts, it is clear that in general *de re* interpretations are the customary way in which philosophical discussions of current texts are conducted in both the analytic and the Continental traditions. However, some of the features that Brandom highlights in his explanation of those *de re* interpretations that he calls 'de traditione' have actually the potential to shatter the recalcitrant Continental/analytic split that, unfortunately, has so deeply marked philosophy for the past hundred years. Let me just briefly refer to two of these features.

First of all, the hermeneutic 'platitude' that Brandom associates with that type of interpretations, namely, that traditions cannot be inherited but must first be established, if it were to be taken seriously, could deeply undermine the confidence that many philosophers on both sides of the split have in determining who the relevant dialogue partners are, who belongs to one's own tradition and who does not, who and what should or should not be read, etc. For it could turn out, as in Brandom's own examples, that such disparate authors as Hegel, Frege, Heidegger, and Sellars actually belong to a single tradition deeply concerned with understanding intentionality or that Davidson, Dummett, and Gadamer may all have mutually relevant things to say concerning meaning and interpretation. Needless to say, it would be very hard to keep a decent Continental/analytic split under such deeply confusing conditions.

Secondly and more importantly, the hermeneutic 'platitude' that the most basic condition for understanding comes from a common concern with the same subject matter, could shatter yet another confidence internally related to the previous one. This becomes perhaps more clear if we pay attention to what this condition rules out, namely, that the basic condition for understanding could come from a shared way of specifying conceptual contents. Realizing that interpretations *de traditione* are a species of *de re* interpretation, as Brandom shows, could challenge the tacit assumption shared by many philosophers on both sides of the split that *different conceptual specifications cannot be specifications of one and the same content*. Brandom's explicit attempt to undermine this assumption is surely one of the most significant features of his argument in the present context. For once one realizes that the fact that the conceptual specifications characteristic of different philosophical traditions diverge does not rule out that they may be concerned with the same subject matter, any appearance of legitimacy that the Continental/analytic split may still have definitively collapses. If it could turn out that disparate philosophers such as Heidegger and Quine share ontological concerns or that Gadamer and Davidson share interpretative concerns and thus at times have mutually relevant things to say concerning the same subject matter, the inference from conceptual divergence to irrelevance would just turn out to be false. Without this inference, though, there is no legitimate basis for drawing the Continental/analytic distinction as an excuse for ignoring what the best authors of other philosophical traditions have to say about the same

subject matters. Brandom's fruitful attempts to bring about a fusion of horizons of these two philosophical traditions in his *Tales of the Mighty Dead* suggest that far from being a scorekeeper obsessed with keeping two separate sets of books, he is a genuine Gadamerian hermeneut.

Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ Let me explain. My impression is that Brandom's approach explains four of the hermeneutic platitudes (anti-intentionalism, contextualism, pluralism, and open-endedness). But it does so for importantly different reasons than those characteristic of Gadamerian hermeneutics. As a result, it would be somewhat misleading to affirm without further ado that Brandom's approach actually 'underwrites and explains' the Gadamerian platitudes. However, with regard to the third platitude, the model of understanding as dialogue, I think that it would be really a stretch to claim that Brandom's approach either underwrites or explains it. I think that it is precisely with regard to this 'platitude' that the crucial differences between Gadamer's dialogical and Brandom's scorekeeping model of understanding come to the fore. But I do not have the space here to discuss this issue in sufficient depth. I've analyzed in detail the main features of Gadamer's dialogical model of understanding in my *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*.

² Here I am not referring to Brandom's distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* specifications of conceptual content as such, that is, understood as possible ways of rendering individual claims or beliefs. I find this distinction very plausible and also compatible with Gadamerian hermeneutics. My focus is the further distinction that Brandom builds on its basis between *de dicto* and *de re* interpretations, understood as possible ways of doing intellectual historiography. On the differences between both distinctions see note 17.

³ Considering the sociology of the recent contributions to the history of philosophy, Brandom distinguishes between *de dicto* and *de re* intellectual historiography and makes clear that he considers these two types of interpretation both possible and equally legitimate: 'Besides admitting *de dicto* intellectual historiography, we ought also to acknowledge the legitimacy of *de re* textual interpretations . . . I hope it is clear that I don't think there is anything wrong with going about things in either of these ways . . . Both are wholly legitimate ways of specifying the contents of the very same conceptual commitments expressed by the words on the page' (TMD 104).

⁴ Gadamer's own term for designating this methodological principle is 'the anticipation of completeness' (*Vorgriff auf Vollkommenheit*). See TM 293ff.

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⁵ For if it weren't, no plausible interpretation would be possible anyway.

⁶ According to Gadamer, 'this is why understanding is always more than merely re-creating someone else's meaning' (TM 375). What can be understood, 'is always more than an unfamiliar opinion: it is always possible truth' (TM 394). For the whole argument in detail see TM 369–79.

⁷ In this context, Gadamer relies on Heidegger's conception of the fore-structure of understanding and claims that 'a person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting' (TM 267). For the whole argument in detail see TM 265–307.

⁸ As Gadamer puts it, 'the most basic of all hermeneutic preconditions remains one's own fore-understanding, which comes from being concerned with the same subject matter' (TM 294). Consequently, according to Gadamer, hermeneutic sensitivity 'involves neither "neutrality" with respect to content nor the extinction of one's self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices' (TM 269).

⁹ Brandom discusses in detail some of the difficulties in trying to specify exact rules for valid *de dicto* interpretation (see TMD 96–9). However, nothing in his argument suggests that these difficulties should be seen as reasons for skepticism concerning the meaningfulness of *de dicto* historiography.

¹⁰ Gadamer makes this point repeatedly in *Truth and Method*, whenever he explains what an interpreter *must do* if he wants to understand at all. He explains: 'The interpreter dealing with a traditionary text tries to apply it to himself. But this does not mean that the text is given for him as something universal, that he first understands it per se, and then afterward uses it for particular applications. Rather, the interpreter seeks no more than to understand this universal, the text – i.e., to understand what it says, what constitutes the text's meaning and significance. In order to understand that, he must not try to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. *He must relate the text to this situation if he wants to understand at all*' (TM 324; my italics). This claim is not peculiar to Gadamer's hermeneutics, but it is central for any approach to interpretation in which the methodological principle of charity plays a crucial role, such as Davidson's *Truth and Interpretation*, for example.

¹¹ As Gadamer argues, nothing could be stronger evidence of having misunderstood a text than the fact that the author's claims turn out to be mostly incorrect. On this issue see also note 14.

¹² Here it is important to realize that the disagreement with Gadamer's approach cannot be solved just by recognizing, as Brandom does, that (1) ascriptions of correctness are nothing other than the interpreter's own beliefs about the matter (Gadamer would certainly agree to that) or that (2) interpretation is always contextual, and the context of the interpreter's own beliefs is as legitimate as any other. The disagreement does not concern these platitudes, but the interpretation of the principle of hermeneutic charity.

¹³ As Gadamer puts it, 'it is only when the attempt to accept what is said as true fails that we try to "understand" the text, psychologically or historically, as another's opinion' (TM 294).

¹⁴ For a detailed analysis of this dual character of interpretation as a key feature of the Gadamerian model of dialogue see my *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*.

¹⁵ For a defense of this claim see Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*; 'Hermeneutics Claim to Universality'; *Theory of Communicative Action*. For Gadamer's rejoinder see 'Rhetorik'; 'Replik zu Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik'.

¹⁶ At one point Brandom seems to deny the possibility of a global *de dicto* interpretation, when he claims that 'any privileging of *de dicto* over *de re* ascriptions must be *local and temporary*, rooted in pragmatic, rather than semantic considerations' (TMD 106). If this were interpreted in the sense that *de dicto* and *de re* ascriptions must be seen as elements of any interpretation rather than as genuinely separate enterprises, I think that Brandom's approach to interpretation would be much more convincing and surely more akin to Gadamerian hermeneutics. But it is clear that following this suggestion would require dropping all the other, explicit claims concerning the possibility and legitimacy of *de dicto* interpretations as such, which Brandom repeatedly makes. For additional sources of uncertainty on this issue see also notes 10 and 17.

¹⁷ This is why the perspectives characteristic of *de re* and *de dicto* interpretation cannot be on equal footing according to Gadamer's hermeneutics. The logical priority of the former over the latter is the systematic reason behind the central claim of the hermeneutic approach, namely, that *all* interpretation involves application. See TM 308, 324.

¹⁸ Here, again, it should be clear that the disagreement between Gadamer's and Brandom's approach cannot be solved by adding the perspectival note that such a *de dicto* description, however accurate it may be, will always be given from the interpreter's own perspective (i.e., what the interpreter takes the author's intentions to have been). Gadamer would certainly agree to that. But this is not Gadamer's reason for the impossibility claim. It is the logical priority of *de re* over *de dicto* interpretation that is at issue here (see note 17).

¹⁹ In fact, Gadamerian hermeneutics stands or falls with this claim. As Gadamer argues in the chapter on the exemplary significance of legal hermeneutics in *Truth and Method*, the type of applicative interpretation involved in the exegesis of authoritative texts (be they sacred or legal texts), that is, texts that are still binding for the interpreter but require application to the interpreter's current situation, provides the right model for *any* genuine interpretation of a past tradition.

²⁰ Here there seems to be some tension in Brandom's explanation of how *de dicto* interpretation is supposed to work. According to a prior characterization, in a *de dicto* interpretation 'one wants to be able to say what the author would in fact have said in response to various questions of clarification and extension' (TMD 99). However, it is hard to see how an interpreter should be able to meet that condition without 'implicitly adopting the perspective from which the content-specification is being offered' (TMD 108).

²¹ See note 17.

²² For Brandom's account of the need of scorekeepers to keep two separate sets of books see *Making it Explicit*.

²³ See Brandom's historical essays on the works of Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel, Frege, Heidegger, and Sellars in the second part of TMD.

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