2. Overcoming Representationalism

One of the great achievements of recent work in the pragmatist and Idealist traditions has been to lay out in detail the rationale and structure of a thoroughgoing non-representationalist paradigm for philosophy. In brief, the representationalist paradigm the pragmatists and Idealists aim to dismantle takes the representational relation – say between thought and object, word and thing, language and the world – as primitive, so that representations figure as first in the order of explanation of what we are able to think, know, and say. Without doubt, most contemporary philosophers and theorists of ‘the mind’ work within this paradigm, and the sheer ubiquity of it, as Robert Brandom remarks, makes it hard to think of ‘alternatives of similar generality and promise’ (Brandom 2001, p. 7). Brandom notes that alternatives have been suggested, or gestured at, by previous anti-representationalist philosophers such as Dewey, the Heidegger of Being and Time, and the Wittgenstein of Philosophical Investigations. But for Brandom, as for many of the new wave of Idealists, it is only by being integrated into something like Hegel’s inferentialist framework that the insights of these other anti-representationalists can contribute towards the overcoming of the dominant representationalist paradigm. Hegelian inferentialism has a ‘staying power’ – to borrow Habermas’s expression – that other kinds of anti-representationalism cannot match (see Habermas 2000, p. 322).

In a recent essay on Gadamer, Robert Pippin expresses a similar view about philosophical hermeneutics (see Pippin 2002a). There are, as Pippin remarks, ‘strands of deep solidarity’ between Gadamer and Hegel, which are nowhere more evident than in their shared rejection of the representational model of the mind (ibid., p. 218). Just as, for idealism, we are conscious ‘self-consciously’ – and so not just in virtue of some representational machinery – so for Gadamer we exist ‘understandingly’ or interpretively: whatever representational content there may be to experience arises only through this reflexive structure of self-consciousness or understanding. But Pippin agrees with Brandom that in the end it is Hegelianism, rather than
Gadamer’s Heidegger-inspired hermeneutics, that is really able to deliver on this insight, or deliver it in a manner that can really carry conviction today. Like pragmatism, Hegelian Idealism can do this by construing the distinctiveness of human experience in terms of its ‘responsiveness to reasons’ or, as Pippin says borrowing another formulation from Sellars, in terms of experience being ‘fraught with ought’, as normative through and through (ibid., p. 234).

I want to make a small contribution to this emerging debate between philosophical hermeneutics and Idealism by considering it through the lens of Taylor’s own version of non-representationalism. Taylor’s critique of the representationalist model of ‘mindedness’ has drawn on many sources over the years, as is evident from his very first published philosophical work on Merleau-Ponty in the late 1960s (see Taylor and Kullman 1958), his work on Hegel in the 1970s (see Taylor 1972, 1975), and his interpretations of Herder, Heidegger and Wittgenstein published in the 1990s (see Taylor 1995). But the alternative conception he endorses owes much more to hermeneutics and existential phenomenology than it does to Hegelian inferentialism or pragmatism. Taylor’s work thus provides a useful vantage point from which to reflect critically on the claim implicitly expressed by Brandom and Pippin above: that the Hegelian-pragmatist paradigm of non-representationalism can incorporate all that is worth preserving in the hermeneutic-existential challenge to representationalism. Drawing on Taylor’s and Gadamer’s formulation of this challenge, I shall suggest (though by no means demonstrate) that anti-representationalists can get something from hermeneutics that they may not be able to get – or get as well, or as powerfully – from Idealism or pragmatism.

1. Taylor’s anti-representationalism

Let me first briefly rehearse some of the key points of Taylor’s anti-representationalism. Its purpose is not so much to present a theory of ‘the mind’, but to loosen the hold that a ‘picture’ has on us, one that makes a certain kind of theory seem necessary. According to Taylor, the picture that hermeneutic reflection seeks to release us from manifests itself in theories that take human knowledge and language to be essentially a matter of representation. Release from the imprisoning conception of ourselves involves a kind of purifying reflection on the nature of human knowledge and language, in particular on the origins of our undoubted representational capacities. Such emancipatory, therapeutic insight is the goal of much of Taylor’s work in epistemology and philosophy of language.

I can only hope to trace the outlines of Taylor’s reflections here. Regarding knowledge, Taylor retreats paths previously explored by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (and indeed Hegel) to dispose of the classical doctrine that perceptual knowledge has its basis in discrete, self-contained mental items or representations. Such representations are self-contained in the sense that they are only contingently related to the world. As is now widely acknowledged, this account is quite unsatisfactory as a phenomenology of mind: the units of awareness posited by the classical Cartesian and empiricist theories are static, reified entities that bear little resemblance to lived experience. By reminding us of the complexity and richness of the perceptual field, hermeneutic reflection can correct the phenomenological crudity of traditional representationalism. But the therapy also requires an account of why we are tempted by the representationalist phenomenology in the first place. Why do we still need to be reminded of its manifest shortcomings? The answer may be that hermeneutic philosophers is that under pressure to think objectively about experience, we unwittingly introduce elements of objectification into experience. As Taylor puts it, the distortion arises from the ‘ontologisation of rational procedure’ (Taylor 1995, p. 61): the method of analysing a complex phenomenon into simple components, treating them as neutral bits of information, and rationally re-ordering them, is projected onto the very being of the knowing subject, which then appears as if it were constituted by this procedure of objective or rational representation.

At this point it could be objected that the classical Cartesian and empiricist phenomenology is an adventitious addition to representationalism, since the latter can take on board a more nuanced description of experience while still insisting that representations are first in the order of explanation of what we know. Taylor’s response to this move is to question the idea that representation is ever sufficient for knowledge, which presumably it must be if it is really to be first in the order of explanation (and so not dependent on anything else). If the claim that representations are first in the order of explanation for knowledge amounts to the claim that human knowledge can in principle be built up from such representations, it seems to exclude something that is required to make objective, representational knowledge intelligible at all. This is the relation of dependence that holds between representation of the world and a ‘background’ involvement with the world. Without going into the details of Taylor’s Heidegger- and Merleau-Ponty-inspired argument, this ‘background’ of engagement provides the ultimate,
non-transcendable and non-representable context for even the most abstract, objective, and unambiguously representational knowledge claims. It provides a condition of their intelligibility as knowledge claims. As such, the background eludes empirical representation, yet without it empirical representations would be impossible. Invoked at this 'transcendental' level of reflection, the background serves as a reminder of the non-self-sufficiency of objective representational cognition, and more generally, of the inescapable finitude of human knowledge. This insight suggests that there is something philosophically incoherent, as well as phenomenologically implausible, about the idea of a totally objectified world.

Taylor is of course just as anti-representationalist about language as he is about perception, as one can tell from the contrast he draws between his own 'expressivist' approach to language and orthodox 'designative' theories of meaning (see Taylor 1985, pp. 215–292, 1995, pp. 61–126). Designative theories resemble expressivist ones to the extent that both maintain that language is normative: for both theories, there is a qualitative difference between getting something right in language and participating in some causal chain. But the normativity recognised in designative theories has just one source: truth as the correspondence between a representation or literal description and its object. It is the norm of designation, the ability of a word or sentence to designate or represent an object or state of affairs, that enables words or sentences to mean something. Designation or representation is thus first in the order of explanation for meaning according to such theories, and 'getting things right' in language is essentially a matter of having the designative or representational linguistic function in order.

Taylor is convinced that this is a much too narrow conception of the normativity of language. We are able to 'get things right' in language in a host of ways – for instance by articulating a feeling properly, by evoking the right mood, or by establishing an appropriate inter-personal relation – many of which are not at all a matter of designating or representing things. Furthermore, unlike the designative use of language, these forms of language use are not 'about' something that stands independently of the articulation itself. Taylor is impressed by the fact that an articulation can help constitute the emotion, mood, or social relation it expresses. Consequently, new kinds of feeling and sociality can be brought into being through language. But this does not prevent such modes of articulation from being right (when they are right). In other words, there are forms of language use that are constitutive and productive of their objects, and productive in a way that is 'true to' or 'right' for them. Inevitably, Taylor points out, such forms of articulation get screened off within the designative, representational paradigm. This paradigm thus screens off a crucial dimension of distinctively human experience.

Creatures whose feelings, actions, and social relations are constituted by the ways they are articulated in language are in a clear sense 'self-interpreting animals': what they are as animals – the quality of their experience, they ways they act, and how they behave together – is inseparable from how they interpret themselves. For Taylor, this is the core truth of philosophical hermeneutics. In order to be able to articulate this truth, hermeneutics must obviously have access to a more expansive theory of meaning than the designative one. But Taylor, in line with other hermeneutic theorists, does not simply claim that the expressive/constitutive capacity of language sits alongside the designative capacity. The claim is that the power of expression – the power of disclosing and constituting a human 'world' – is fundamental and originary. The capacity of language to designate things is one amongst a series of possibilities immanent to the power of expression itself. Theories that put designation first in the order of explanation, in Taylor's view, suffer from a parallel flaw to the representationalist epistemology we considered a bit earlier. For just as the rational, objective processing of neutral informational input at the level of perception has its genesis and intelligibility-condition in agent-knowledge, so neutral talk about objects, or true descriptions of objective states of affairs, draws on a prior, more fundamental capacity for expression, which is 'always already' in place whenever we describe literally, neutrally and accurately. According to Taylor's hermeneutic theory of meaning, representational language domesticates, without ever eliminating, primordial expressive powers. Representation is but one of the many potentialities of expression.

2. Taylor and Gadamer

While Taylor is persuaded by the merits of anti-representationalism in the philosophy of language, he does not situate himself in the pragmatist tradition of anti-representationalism. Contemporary pragmatists such as Brandom and Habermas seek to steer a way out of the representationalist paradigm by developing a systematic theory of the formal pragmatics of speech. Taylor's anti-representationalism, by contrast, is motivated more by the kind of considerations that drove the later Heidegger and Gadamer in their reflections on language. Like Gadamer, Taylor is impressed above all by the power of language to connect: to connect us to the past, to other
speakers, and to hitherto unknown dimensions of our inner selves. Also like Gadamer, Taylor is alert to the ways in which our thinking about language can strengthen or weaken these linguistically constituted connections. In a context where those connections are imperilled, or in danger of being forgotten, it matters that philosophical reflection remind us of them. Such reminding or ‘recovery’ is in an important sense a re-awakening of our connectedness as language beings, and this essentially practical aim gives the anti-representationalism shared by Gadamer and Taylor a different shape to that of pragmatism and contemporary Absolute Idealism.

While both Gadamer and Taylor seek to recover a proper sense of the historicity (connectedness to the past), dialogicity (connectedness with other speakers), and finitude of human existence in their reflections on language, Taylor is more explicit than Gadamer about the anthropological provenance of this task. That is to say, for Taylor representationalist theories of meaning typically presuppose and reinforce a certain philosophical anthropology, or conception of human nature, which the hermeneutic philosophy of language is ‘strategic’ in correcting (Taylor 1985, p. 216). Taylor admits that such theories often have the surface appearance of neutrality on the topic of human nature. The hermeneutical task, according to Taylor, is therefore first to reveal the anthropology or ‘ontology of the human’ hiding beneath the surface of such theories, and then in a second move to expose the shortcomings of that anthropology (see Taylor 1985, pp. 1–12).

Taylor argues that, at least in the case of the classical Cartesian, Hobbesian, and empiricist designative theories, a powerful ideal of self-transparency and instrumental freedom is in play. That is to say, such theories present language as a tool or resource which human beings potentially have the freedom to do with as they will. On this account, humans are not only capable of manipulating and reshaping language according to their own designs and purposes; they have a responsibility to achieve such mastery and control, for otherwise they are led into error and illusion about the world and themselves. The classical designative theories depict non-designative elements as sources of such error and bewitchment, and thus as hindrances to the subject’s self-defining instrumental freedom. An ideal of disengaged freedom – or as Taylor puts it an ‘anthropology of disengagement’ – thus lies behind the classical designative theories of meaning, and although Taylor does not consider contemporary representationalism in the same detail, the hypothesis is that a similar anthropology is at work in them too.

Taylor then contrasts this view with expressivist theories of meaning. According to these theories, the fact that human beings are language animals means that they can never achieve full self-possession. The thinking and acting subject is always already situated in what Taylor calls the ‘linguistic dimension’ – in which the ‘rightness’ of articulations is an issue – and so is subject to norms that are in some sense ‘given’. The linguistic dimension is, in principle, independent of the will and must escape objectification by the will. This also militates against the idea of absolute cognitive self-possession. For if there are experiences, feelings and social relations that are constituted by the way we express or interpret them, and these things help define who we are, our self-understanding can never be complete. These features of human existence are not objects waiting to be represented by the right kind of designative language. There is no final, ‘self-authenticating’ vocabulary for them. In addition, the language of self-interpretation is beyond the individual’s control because language has an inherently intersubjective character. The language ‘I’ speak, if it is to say anything, is always the language of a ‘we’. Behind the expressivist theory, then, lies a non-voluntarist ontology of human finitude that reawakens us to our connectedness with history, others, and potentialities for experience by way of contrast with the anthropology of disengagement.

Turning now to Gadamer’s hermeneutics, we still find a critique of representationalism prosecuted by way of ontological self-clarification. But in Gadamer’s case, the focus is on the experience of ‘understanding’ – or understanding as constitutive of our being in the world – and the ways in which this experience is foreshortened, distorted and truncated in representationalist models of the human sciences. To the extent to which these models hold sway, Gadamer argues, we need to recover the experience (in the proper sense) of understanding through philosophical re-articulation. In Truth and Method, of course, Gadamer identifies two cases where the need for such retrieval is most palpable: the encounter with art and the encounter with history. Let me very briefly consider each in turn.

In the case of art, Gadamer is concerned by the way in which representationalist assumptions can blind us to the world-disclosing capacities of an artwork. Such assumptions, Gadamer believes, inform the ‘aesthetic’ approach to art, that is, the way of encountering and conceptualizing artworks as loci of pure ‘aesthetic value’. To encounter or conceptualize an artwork as a possible site of pure aesthetic merit, Gadamer argues, is to be alienated from the specific truth-claim of the work. Rather than the claim presenting itself to an ‘aesthetic consciousness’, it becomes manifest through
a kind of self-transformative experience with an ‘other’— an ‘Erfahrung’ rather than ‘Erlebnis’ experience — which is at once a form of understanding (see Gadamer 1993, p. 100). So long as we think of an artwork as an object eliciting a representation in the mind of a subject, the very possibility of such a cognitively and affectively significant encounter will elude us. Gadamer reminds us that experiencing a work of art is not a matter of possessing certain mental representations; at its best it involves understanding that arises from a mutually transformative fusing of the horizons of subject and work. A singular event takes place that exceeds the contents of any particular consciousness, but which by no means exhausts the meaning of the work. The importance of Gadamer’s reminder lies not just in correcting what he takes to be a subjectivistically foreshortened phenomenology of art, but also in pointing to a phenomenologically enriched account of what it is to understand.

In Gadamer’s view, the predicament of the historian also points to the need for a more expansive, non-representationalist notion of human understanding. Gadamer distinguishes two ways in which the historian can orient herself in relation to her subject matter. On the one hand, she can regard it as containing a meaning that is already there in its fullness. She can then gear her interpretive activity towards the reconstruction of the antecedently given meaning. Gadamer rehearses many of the problems that beset this approach, but his main point is that it confounds a fundamental structure of human understanding: its finitude. For Gadamer, the finitude of human understanding, and the non-recuperability of temporal distance, can be acknowledged if we can think of the historian’s task not as the reconstruction of self-contained totality of past meaning but as a kind of integration of the past and present. To think of the historian’s relation to her subject matter in this way — to think of it, as Gadamer writes, as ‘thoughtful mediation with contemporary life’ (Gadamer 1993, p. 169) — is to transform a merely external relation to the past into an internal relation of involvement and participation: we move from mere consciousness or representation of something from the past to an historical experience (Erfahrung) of our emplacement in tradition. This is the crux of Gadamer’s key notion of ‘historically effected consciousness’. Historically effected consciousness overcomes the alienation or abstraction, in Gadamer’s words, ‘between history and the knowledge of it’ (ibid., p. 282); or as we might say, between the representor and the represented. In drawing attention to this point, philosophical hermeneutics is not so much prescribing a particular method for discovering truths about history as attempting to reclaim or retrieve the historicity of historical truth itself.

Gadamer’s reflections on aesthetic consciousness and historicism, which make up the bulk of parts one and two of Truth and Method, are, according to the interpretation I’ve just sketched, motivated by the need to overcome forms of alienation generated by representationalist constricts of experience. In response to the distortion and truncation of experience generated by the representationalist paradigm, hermeneutic reflection undertakes a kind of philosophical retrieval or recovery. In the third part of Truth and Method, Gadamer turns to the linguistics of understanding, and the sense in which language constitutes humans as the distinctive kind of being they are. Here Gadamer draws attention to many of the features of language discussed by Taylor: the origins of language in expression, the role language plays in articulating distinctively human modes of experience, in opening up a shared world, and in establishing properly social relations. Far from being accidental, derivative, or secondary features of language — as representationalism has it — so features that can in principle be absent from language, for Gadamer they capture the essence of language: to absent them is to plunge ourselves into a kind of philosophical self-oblivion. Here again, hermeneutic reflection aims at something like retrieval or self-recovery.

3. Hermeneutics vs Idealism?

It is clear that Taylor and Gadamer reject the central thesis of representationalism, namely that representations come first in the order of explanation of human thought, knowledge and language. I noted at the beginning that this minimal anti-representationalist position is common to philosophical hermeneutics, pragmatism and Absolute Idealism. However, pragmatists and Idealists doubt that hermeneutics has the requisite staying power to usher in a paradigm shift away from representationalism, and they distance themselves from key aspects of the hermeneutic anti-representationalist agenda. Robert Pippin, one of the leading exponents of Idealist/pragmatist anti-representationalism, has recently expressed such reservations about Gadamer’s hermeneutics.3 While Pippin finds much that is congenial in Gadamer’s thought, it is his critique of Gadamer, and the reasons he gives for favouring an Idealist/pragmatist over a hermeneutic conception of the tasks of an anti-representationalist philosophy, that I now want briefly to examine.
Pippin begins by expressing his sense of the obsolescence of the hermeneutic paradigm. He writes: ‘we stand now in some sense on the other side of the early debates with relativists and positivists and neo-Kantian, “scientific” naturalists about the very legitimacy of the category of meaning and the relation between understanding (Verstehen) and explanation (Erklärung)’ (Pippin 2002a, p. 230). If this is supposed to mean that the legitimacy of the category of meaning has now been secured, so that philosophical argument is no longer necessary to redeem the category, the view looks curiously complacent: after all, orthodox representationalism is still geared towards either the complete elimination of meaning or its reduction to non-meaning. Pippin’s main point, though (if I’ve understood it correctly), is that the category of meaning does not need to be secured for the reasons Heidegger and Gadamer thought it did. Ontological hermeneutics, according to Pippin’s reading, offered a way out of an impasse generated by psychologistic naturalism on the one hand and Husserlian meaning-Platonism on the other. But now that we are no longer asking ourselves how to avoid these options – because we are no longer even drawn towards them, and because more plausible theories have taken their place – philosophical hermeneutics has also lost its point. Since the debate that provided the initial impetus for Gadamer’s hermeneutics has played itself out, hermeneutics is something we no longer need.

Of course, it is wholly within the spirit of hermeneutics to read a text as if it were in dialogue with the present, and if, despite our best efforts, Truth and Method sounds irremediably wooden, better to leave it behind. But if, as I have suggested, we read Gadamer through the lens of Taylor’s hermeneutics, and if we take Gadamer to be doing the kind of thing Taylor does when trying to overcome representationalism, his hermeneutics starts to look more promising. According to the reconstruction just sketched, the primary issue on which philosophical hermeneutics takes its stance is not the relation between understanding and explanation, or the question of method in the human sciences, or how to steer a path between the Scylla of psychologism and the Charybdis of Platonism. The crucial issue for hermeneutics is rather phenomenological and ontological rather than epistemological. That is to say, it is the representationalist foreshortening and distortion of experience, and so of what it is like to be human, rather than the merits of knowledge claims about the human, that prompts the anti-representationalist agenda and indeed practice of hermeneutic reflection. By issuing reminders of how representationalist models of mind can render unintelligible, and blind us to, experienced connectedness – to the past, others and our inner selves – hermeneutics performs a crucial therapeutic function. The need for such therapy is unlikely to diminish so long as representationalism, and its attendant atomist ontology of the human, continues to hold sway.

Pippin gives insufficient weight to the therapeutic or practical function of hermeneutic reflection. But his argument with hermeneutics is not just that it is an answer to a question no one now asks. He also claims that on the issues that do matter – the questions that philosophers have been asking themselves over the past twenty-five years or so – Hegelianism rather than philosophical hermeneutics has taken the lead. Pippin mentions two such issues (or sets of issues). First, there is normativity: what is it in virtue of which thought and action is subject to standards of correctness? Second, there is a set of social and political issues that Hegelianism rather than hermeneutics has helped to define.

Pippin suggests that Gadamer’s hermeneutics suffers from a fundamental obscurity, or lack of articulacy, on the issue of normativity. This is allegedly evident in Gadamer’s reliance upon various metaphors – such as ‘fusion of horizons’ and ‘transmission-event’ – to convey the unformalizability of human linguistic practices, and the impossibility of recuperating such practices rationally at the level of reflection. Now, however satisfactory one finds Gadamer’s metaphors, his mere recourse to them is surely not itself tantamount to a failure to make normativity intelligible. At best, that objection would presuppose the truth of Hegelian rationalism read a certain way, namely the doctrine that metaphors give impure, but purifiable, expression to strict conceptual content. We need a further argument to show that hermeneutics must leave normativity shrouded in mystery, especially when one considers that, beyond the metaphors, Gadamer explicitly invokes tradition as a source of the standards of correctness to which human thought and action is subject.

At this point Pippin concedes to Gadamer that traditions have a rational, self-correcting character. Even so, tradition cannot account for normativity, Pippin argues, since ‘without Hegel’s argument for the relevance of criteria of genuine success’ – without, that is, the ‘Absolute viewpoint’ – we have only matter of fact corrections, successes, agreements, and so forth (Pippin 2002a, p. 232). We need the idea of the Absolute viewpoint, in other words, to keep us from floundering in a sea of contingent ‘happenings’ and ‘events’. Only in this way can we do something more than report narratively on the norms and standards that have come to prevail in our or any other form of life. Pippin cannot imagine anything by way of philosophical insight issuing
from such descriptions. Bereft of the ‘normative animus’ the Absolute standpoint makes possible, philosophical hermeneutics becomes mere (armchair) ‘historical anthropology’ (ibid.).

But do we really need the Absolute standpoint to make sense of the idea of criteria of genuine success in the evolution or self-correction of a tradition? Gadamer has at last got more to offer on this issue, as have, in more or less related ways, MacIntyre and Taylor himself. It is also unclear why narratives need the backing of an Absolute standpoint to retain a normative animus. The suggestion that they do seems to re-introduce a distinction that is notoriously difficult to sustain between philosophical knowledge and historical understanding, as if only the former were robust enough to provide a framework for critical reflection, and as if the latter marked some kind of retreat from normativity. Not only is this strategy in danger of placing the bar for philosophical discourse too high, it also endangers the specific dignity of the human sciences. The irony here is that by attributing to philosophical hermeneutics an irresistible tendency to degenerate into mere descriptive ‘historical anthropology’, we end up resurrecting the hoary issue of a norm-free social science – just the kind of ‘hermeneutical’ theme that we supposedly have no more interest in discussing.

Admittedly, we should not let ourselves be thrown off course by the expression ‘Absolute standpoint’, which works, to be sure, at the epistemic rather than metaphysical level. But the very fact that it does operate epistemically rather than metaphysically or ontologically raises another danger, one that threatens to re-instate elements of the representationalist paradigm. Pippin’s fundamental claim is that the source of the deepest disagreement between the Idealist and the Heidegger-influenced hermeneutical project is ‘the idea of meaning or intelligibility in general as a result of normatively constrained or bound human practices’ (Pippin 2002a, p. 233). For Idealism – contra hermeneutics – ‘tradition’, or ‘the way we go on’, or for that matter ‘the world’ or ‘nature’, cannot ultimately count as sources of normativity, that is, as the source of reasons we are responsive to in our practices. This of course is a huge issue but two quick points are worth making. First, it is surely open to Gadamer and other Heidegger-influenced hermeneutics to reply that reason-giving and participating in tradition, or being answerable to other subjects and being answerable to the world, are not from the hermeneutical point of view rival conceptions, alternatives we have to choose between. And second, the idea that we can stipulate a priori, on epistemological grounds alone, what the ultimate source of normativity is; the notion that we can say without recourse to the

possibilities of lived experience what the measure of that experience must be: looks suspiciously like a restoration of the ‘subjectivistic’ truncation of experience that – according to the reconstruction above – endures to motivate the post-Heideggerian hermeneutic project.

As I mentioned, Pippin cites normativity as one key issue on which Hegelian Idealism, rather than post-Heideggerian hermeneutics, has proved an enduring source of insight. The second area in which Idealism seems to have left hermeneutics in its wake is social and political philosophy. Insofar as social and political philosophy attempts a diagnosis of the times, Hegelianism rather than hermeneutics has helped to provide its bearings. Pippin writes: ‘If the language of identity and alienation is as indispensable as the language of rights or the language of finitude in understanding the modern social and political world, then the Hegelian language of subjectivity, reflection and Geist’s “reconciliation with itself” will also be ultimately indispensable’ (Pippin 2002a, p. 251). This is surely right. But does it follow that the post-Heideggerian hermeneutical language of anti-subjectivism, world-disclosure and responsibility to something other than ‘Geist’ has no role to play in understanding the modern age? It is interesting here that Pippin notes the publication of Taylor’s book Hegel (1975) as an important stage in the development of a self-confident, increasingly influential Hegelian framework for social philosophy. For without wanting to question the continuing relevance of that framework, the conclusion of Taylor’s 1975 study was precisely that the hermeneutical expressivism explored by the likes of Herder, Hölderlin, and later Heidegger contrasts favourably with Hegelianism as a way of articulating the pervasive modern aspiration to connect with a larger order of meaning. If we think of the rise of ecological consciousness over the past twenty five years or so as an expression of this aspiration, it is not hard to understand why there has been a revival of interest in post-Heideggerian hermeneutics amongst social and political theorists alongside the Hegelian renaissance.

4. Conclusion

There is of course a complex, fascinating debate between Hegelians, hermeneutics and others about how best to understand the ‘spiritual’ situation of the age. Taylor is one of the key contributors to this debate, and the issue goes to the heart of his own philosophical project. Indeed, for Taylor the question of overcoming representationalism, and of delineating the tasks of a non-representationalist philosophy, is just one part – albeit a
crucial one – of this larger diagnostic project. As I have tried to bring out in
this chapter, Taylor’s critique of representationalism is primarily directed at
an ontology of the human that sever the connections between self, world,
and others. As these connections are in part constituted by the way we think
about them, we can lose the potential for connectedness – and indeed for
experience (Erfahrung) – by the way we interpret ourselves. But of course
the way we think about ourselves is only partly a matter of philosophical
preference. It is much more powerfully shaped by prevailing social prac
tices. And so long as these practices continue to make representationalism
seem obvious and natural, we will need something like Taylor’s and
Gadamer’s version of anti-representationalism to help put us right.

Notes
1 I take hermeneutic reflection to be continuous with phenomenological
description, just as I take philosophical hermeneutics and existential phenomenology to be
engaged in the same fundamental enterprise. For a now classical account of
the common orientation of phenomenology and hermeneutics, see Paul Ricoeur (1991).
2 This is in fact a reworking of Merleau-Ponty’s diagnosis of the problem (see
3 See Pippin (2002a). See also the related defence of Hegel’s version of anti-
representationalism – or ‘anti-Cartesianism’ – vis-à-vis Heidegger’s in Pippin (1997).
4 This is not to dismiss the significance of such issues, but to signal their sub-
ordination to other matters.
5 For an attempt to marry MacIntyre, Taylor and Gadamer on this issue, see Smith
(1997).
6 I suspect Pippin has Habermas’s distinction between the natural sciences, the
interpretive sciences, and critical theory in the background here. If I had the space,
I would argue that this distinction is too heavily invested in the contrast between
the transcendental and the empirical to be able to deliver an adequate conception of the
possibilities for well-grounded or rational self-critique.
7 In “Leaving Nature Behind: Or Two Cheers for ‘Subjectivism’” (Pippin 2002b),
Pippin uses the same strategy to show what he thinks is wrong with McDowell’s
(overly Gadamerian, in Pippin’s view) work.
8 For an argument like this, see McDowell (2002).
9 For further consideration of Taylor’s reading of Hegel and his reasons for
ultimately favouring a non-Hegelian expressivism, see Smith (2002, chapter 3). I
have drawn on Taylor’s reading of Heidegger to show the relevance of hermeneutics
for ecological politics in Smith (1997, chapter 7).

References
Brandon, Robert (2001), Articulating Reasons, Cambridge MA, Harvard University
Press.
Habermas, Jürgen (2000), “From Kant to Hegel: on Robert Brandon’s Pragmatic
Philosophy of Language”, tr. Maeva Cooke, European Journal of Philosophy 8 (3),
322–355.
McDowell, John (2002), “Responses”, in Nicholas H. Smith (ed.), Reading McDowell:
Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1962, 1945), Phenomenology of Perception, tr. Colin Smith,
Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1963, 1942), The Structure of Behaviour, tr. Alden L. Fisher,
Boston, Beacon Press.
and Sociality”, in Robert B Pippin, Idealism as Modernism, Cambridge, Cambridge
University Press, pp. 375–394.
in Hermeneutics II, tr. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson, London, Athlone
Smith, Nicholas H. (1997), Strong Hermeneutics: Contingency and Moral Identity,
Smith, Nicholas H. (2002), Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity, Cambridge,
Polity.
Metaphysics 12, 103–132.
Taylor, Charles (1972), “The Opening Arguments of the Phenomenology”, in
Alessadire MacIntyre (ed.), Hegel: A Collection of Critical Essays, Garden City, NY,
University Press.
sity Press.