

HERMENEUTICS AND NIHILISM

MEANING, AGENCY, AND THE DIALECTICS OF NEGATIVITY IN GADAMER'S THOUGHT

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Abstract

Nihilism, as a pervasive destructive tendency that permeates all aspects of modern life, is rooted in an established perceptual stance characterized by the dominance of a particular kind of agency. Philosophical hermeneutics is arguably the most suitable approach to provide both a comprehensive diagnosis and an effective remedy. Its diagnostic and therapeutic potentials are linked to its notion of the meaningful, which is not distilled from an experience laden with material, bodily,

and other “contaminations,” but rather coincides with the radical—and, in this sense, normative—self-disclosure of the livable, or truly human, world. In this article, I examine the potential of Gadamerian hermeneutics for revealing and disseminating forms of agency that offer alternatives to the destructive attitudes deeply embedded in contemporary cultures.

Keywords: hermeneutics, nihilism, agency, laterality, ordinary transubstantiations.

Hermenevtika in nihilizem. Smisel, delovanje in dialektika negativnosti v Gadamerjevi misli

Povzetek

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Nihilizem kot vseprisotna destruktivna težnja, ki prežema vse vidike sodobnega življenja, ima svoje korenine v uveljavljeni perceptivni držji, za katero je značilna prevlada posebne vrste delovanja. Filozofska hermenevtika je verjetno najprimernejši pristop, ki lahko zagotovi tako celovito diagnozo kot učinkovito zdravilo. Njeni diagnostični in terapevtski potenciali so povezani z njenim pojmovanjem smiselnega, ki ni destilirano iz doživljanja, obremenjenega z materialnimi, telesnimi in drugimi »kontaminacijami«, temveč sovpada z radikalnim – in v tem smislu normativnim – samorazkrivanjem živega oziroma resnično človeškega sveta. V tem članku obravnavam potencial Gadamerjeve hermenevtike za razkrivanje in uveljavljanje oblik delovanja, ki ponujajo alternative destruktivnim odnosom, globoko zasidranim v sodobnih kulturah.

Ključne besede: hermenevtika, nihilizem, delovanje, lateralnost, običajnostne transsubstanciacije.

1. Introduction

Admittedly, nihilism has many faces. This is perhaps one reason why it is not always recognizable as such. Moreover, at times, either we or others tend to deny nihilism any relevance and traction. We may even dislike the very word “nihilism,” which today carries somewhat archaic and moralistic overtones. We might reject the use of this word altogether (it is not difficult to imagine people who find the notion behind it too pessimistic), but even in this case—or precisely because of this—“the return of the suppressed” will be all the more stubborn. Our refusal to discuss or even acknowledge what may be called nihilistic will not prevent us from encountering it, causing trouble in the physical world as well as worries in the social and psychic spheres. Various unsettling forces, tendencies, and even feelings persistently return after every tactical success in our incessant efforts to expel them from our experiential horizons. Even if we distrust general concepts or any kind of common denominator, we will hardly be able to ignore the long series of signs and factors either intermittently dissipating along manifold and barely observable orbits or temporally coalescing into a single—sometimes viscerally felt—vector. In this sense, we could distinguish between the objective and psychological sides of nihilism. Forms of manifestation of the objective side are well-known: the flourishing of unstoppable developmental logics in economics, science, and technology, leading to ever-growing dehumanization of these spheres. De-humanization is to be understood in this case literally: human beings are playing mostly subsidiary roles. They are increasingly not just subjected to but both mentally and physically squeezed into various trajectories and channels, shaped by aims and processes indifferent to the immanence of the human lifeworld. This kind of abduction of the “human,” its seemingly voluntary surrender of itself to the power of the above-mentioned logics, constitutes the subjective or psychological side of nihilism. I should acknowledge that “subjective” and “psychological” are not entirely adequate terms, since what they signify in this case extends beyond any personal stances and individual predispositions. We are caught in a kind of vortex or invisible framework, one that pretends to be as natural and seamless as the air around us. For this reason, it would likely be more appropriate to use

the more capacious term “affectual.” This term allows us to account for the various aspects of the interconnection between the individual as well as both the external physical and social world—aspects too subtle and complex to be grasped through standard theoretical (objectifying) optics. For example, some paradoxical forms of action in contemporary society, such as “interpassivity” (Pfaller 2017) or “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011), first became visible within the framework of broadly understood affect theory. However, this term, and by extension the very perspective of affect theory, also has its weaknesses, especially its inevitable subjectivist and anti-intellectualist connotations.

98 In what follows, I outline the potential of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics as one of the most consistent non-nihilist stances. The word “stance” here primarily refers to “the whole way of life” that is indifferent to the traditional, yet far from self-evident, distinction between theory and practice. To a large extent, this categorical distinction itself serves as both an indicator and a catalyst of nihilistic tendencies in contemporary societies: attributing access to the whole to theory and the access to the particular to practice, deprives human experience of its generative (meaning-making) potential, relegating it to a semi-isolated agent lost in, and predetermined by, an unobservable network of pre-established relations and objects. In contrast to the nihilistic incommensurability between practice and theory, philosophical hermeneutics provides an alternative route to a more comprehensive, well-balanced, and, most importantly, non-nihilistic perspective on the relationships between thinking and acting, perceiving and understanding.

Paradoxically, hermeneutics’ contribution to dismantling nihilistic tendencies mainly draws on negativity inherent in many of its essential aspects and operations.¹

1 The inherent negativity of philosophical hermeneutics has intermittently attracted attention in Gadamer scholarship. Recently, Gianni Vattimo and Nicholas Davey have engaged with this topic. Vattimo, for instance, characterizes hermeneutics itself as “nihilistic” (Vattimo 2021, 51), while Davey (Davey 2023) treats the negativity of hermeneutics as an entailment of its unfulfilled promise of “completeness.” For both thinkers, modern cultural “positivism” remains a normative horizon.

2. Negativity

Many, if not all, of the “annihilating” tendencies associated with the umbrella term “nihilism” are tied to a deep cultural preference for the positive. The positive is not reducible to the notorious notion of “positivism”; rather, in our context, it signifies a persistent attitude towards making everything, including ourselves, constantly available. “Making available” inevitably entails making definite—that is, among other things, repeatable, clear-cut, sustainable, graspable, identifiable, and, last but not least, symbolically expressible.²

Return to experience

This drive towards the definite or the given finds its most powerful expression in early Husserl’s notion of intentionality as a transcendental structure of the entire human experience as well as in the overall methodological stance of the phenomenology of consciousness. Although the term “experience” was and continues to be a defining feature of the entire phenomenological project, it reached its full potential only when the phenomenological movement underwent a hermeneutical shift. In this shift, experience ceased to function merely as a “noetic correlate” of intentional acts and became the realm of the phenomenological itself. One might reasonably anticipate that hermeneutics would prioritize interpretation and meaning. However, and this may seem ironic, phenomenological hermeneutics rather emphasizes the experiential or performative dimension. This shifts the focus of phenomenology from questions of transcendental structures and the “apodictically” given to questions of the radical facticity of human experience. “Meaningful,” in this case, can only be encountered as an integral component, dispersed or spread over the entire experiential field. In other words, “meaning” is not “given in an act of consciousness,” but is rather undergone, experienced, and reverberated in non-intentional, event-like, and non-directional encounters that constitute their own time-space.³

² Recently, Hartmut Rosa has provided an apology of unavailability from a sociological perspective (Rosa 2020).

³ Otherwise highly productive efforts to situate Gadamer’s reflections on language and meaning within the framework of philosophy of language inevitably lead to a

Laterality

In all these characteristics, one might detect a lack of clarity or even poetic overtones. This is due to the paradoxical character of this type of experience: while it serves as the source of positivity (e.g., experiential givenness, perceptive discernibility, symbolic articulation), it remains largely accessible only through a sequence of negative, if not destructive, procedures.⁴ As for the general direction of phenomenological hermeneutical operations, it may be described as anti-progressive. Its focus is not on expanding the field of what is given but on moving inwards, towards the dense sphere of micro-events of becoming. This latter direction turns into non-directionality: as we enter this sphere, our experience loses its focus and directionality, merging with the entire experiential space. The result of such a transformation, on the one hand (in epistemological perspective), could be assessed negatively as a loss in conceptual clarity and other epistemological virtues. On the other hand (in existential-ontological terms), it leads to an enhancement of life's intensity (and, at least in this sense, its quality) and a broadening of experiential horizons.⁵ This broadening—somewhat contradictory to my earlier remarks about non-directionality—may be referred to as laterality. To give this abstract notion a bit more substance, I would like to recall Gadamer's formula regarding the nature of decoration. According to Gadamer, decoration, on the one hand, draws attention to itself, but, at the same time, redirects our attention "away from itself to the greater whole of the context of life which it accompanies" (Gadamer 1979, 140; Gadamer 1990, 163). To put it differently, decoration is not merely a facultative embellishment—an additional layer on the foundational ground of being. It is what makes surrounding spaces livable (literally transforms their matter), which, among other things, means

neglect of the extent, to which Gadamer's notion of language is intertwined with the performativity and materiality of world experience. See, for example, the programmatic work by Carlo DaVia and Greg Lynch (DaVia and Lynch 2024).

4 It is sufficient to recall, for example, Heidegger's characterization of the phenomenological method as "destruction."

5 Cf. Nicholas Davey's thoughts on dialectics of negativity and positivity within epistemological and ontological points of view (Davey 2023).

perceiving them in a scattered, spatially distributed, in short, lateral manner. I would dare to expand the scope of this thesis a bit more than Gadamer himself might have intended. This laterality, initially introduced within the realm of aesthetics, encompasses a broader range of phenomena than “the whole span of the decorative, from municipal architecture to the individual ornament” (Gadamer 1979, 140; Gadamer 1990, 163). It manifests itself in several kinds of daily experience, including reading, writing, walking, and engaging in social and religious rituals. All of these phenomena are characterized by what we might call constant stepping back or withdrawing from focusing on a frontal object towards merging with what fills and supports our every endeavor and movement, beyond the distinction between mental and physical. It is a kind of receding from what confronts us into what envelops us.

3. Meaning

It is only in light of the question of meaning that one can fully understand how this receding can be both destructive and revealing in any experience structurally resistant to nihilism. How else could we defend the priority—or prior ontological status—of laterally articulated experience? “Laterally articulated” refers primarily to experience that extends into the realm of the indefinite, which serves as the foundation for all forms of articulation and phenomenal appearance capable of symbolic expression. So, how can the prelinguistic, indefinite, lateral, and sub-thematic—if not subterranean—be meaningful?

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Gebilde [*structure*]

At first glance, the meaningful and the meaningless appear to be in a relationship of mutual exclusion. Moreover, the dividing line between the two is typically located within mental acts, and this distinction is usually resolved through explicit utterance. For Gadamer, as well as within hermeneutical phenomenology in general, the meaningful is largely implicit, scattered across, or even merged with the space of pre-theoretical experience. In other words, meaning is embedded in the overall pre-reflexive—i.e., laterally inflected—experiential encounter, rather than being extracted from it. Hence, the

preference for using the term “the meaningful” (in German: *das Bedeutsame*) instead of “meaning.” One of the most eloquent indicators of the special role of the lateral—and, in this sense, negative—dimension in Gadamer’s hermeneutics is his preference for addressing questions of semantics, language, and even understanding in an indirect manner. On his way to the core of his philosophical project, Gadamer consistently takes a detour. Of course, this could be seen as yet another sign of negativity. In *Truth and Method*, the detour leads from the non-verbal experiences of art, architecture, and décor (a sequence that is itself quite telling) to the medial, speculative, and thus unconscious experiences of language, which emerge only when revealing something other than itself. Gadamer describes the genesis of the meaningful as a transpersonal process of densifying matter and experiential contents, culminating in what he refers to as “transformation into structure and total mediation.” The word “structure” in this context is an unfortunate translation of the German *das Gebilde*, which emphasizes the non-difference between structural and eventual components, while also highlighting the etymological link to the word “image” (*das Bild* in German). It is *Gebilde* that signifies the turning point in the process of densifying—and, by extension, intensifying—the complex performative constellation that Gadamer calls “play.” It is worth recalling that, for Gadamer, play is a phenomenon that bridges the categorical gap between nature and culture. The scope of the play phenomena extends beyond human and animal play. This leads us to recognize a developmental continuum between matter and meaning—a teleology structurally embedded in every manifestation of play, which comes to full embodiment only in its most consistent, primarily artistic, forms. In a sense, on its ideal path from the initial point of the continuum to the final one, matter enters a kind of transformative vortex or a gravity point. At the stage of the emergence of art, this vortex reaches its highest potential in terms of the density of experiential fabric, equilibrium between its elements, and the inseparable oneness of performative and structural aspects. All of this constitutes the primary meaningfulness that serves as the foundation for all subsequent linguistic, pre-linguistic, and non-linguistic forms of meaning. Meaningfulness in this case—at the stage of *Gebilde*—is not a qualification of the given performed by the cognitive acts but rather an aggregate state of the whole experiential field. This

“aggregate state” points to what Gadamer calls the “ideality” of play, which primarily refers to the fulfillment of its teleology, its being for itself. This, in turn, signifies the attainment of a kind of zero-point—a performative space characterized by the highest degree of livability. I will return to a more detailed discussion of this zero-point in the next subsection. For now, I would like to briefly explore the interconnection between *Gebilde* and *Bild* (image) and its significance in resisting nihilistic trends.

Bild [*image*]

This term—*das Bild*—was also incorrectly translated into English. Both existing English versions of *Truth and Method* render it as “picture.” Even the more accurate translation, using the English word “image,” conveys only a portion of the relevant meanings.⁶ First of all, in the case of such a translation, the etymological and conceptual connection between image (*Bild*) and *Gebilde* is lost. This connection also clarifies to what extent an image (*Bild*) differs from a picture. Among other things, this distinction is crucial for understanding the anti-nihilistic potential of Gadamer’s thought. A picture is a kind of object designed to be placed in front of a perceiving subject (at a distance specified by the function of the picture), whereas an image (*Bild*) need not have a material vehicle and cannot be perceived frontally. Even when the perception of an image is mediated by a material vehicle (as with so-called visual images like photography), we engage in the same dual movement as in the previously mentioned case of décor, which, in *Truth and Method*, completes the developmental logic of *Bild*. Image/*Bild* is not merely an object passively awaiting frontal perceptual grasp. On the contrary, image/*Bild* delays and redirects the perceptual act, causing it to move laterally along spatial and temporal horizons opened by its being as *Gebilde*. These horizons—like any horizon—simultaneously disclose and conceal, creating a livable space and the indefiniteness inherent within it. The image is not a mere duplicate but a radically meaningful form of presence, manifesting more as an enveloping force that surrounds us rather than something merely presented in front of

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⁶ For an explanation of the differences between image and *Bild*, see the informative discussion by Marion Müller (Müller 2007)

us.⁷ In this way, image/*Bild* is something that “happens” simultaneously before, behind, and—in a sense—within me. The space of consciousness and the surface of the image coincide, forming the oneness of the aforementioned zero-point or *Gebilde*, which remains neutral to the habitual distinctions between the given and the meaningful, the outer and the inner—almost pure negativity! This negativity, however, turns positive the moment we shift our focus to the meaning dimension of this zero-constellation. Quite telling here is the term Gadamer prefers to signify the mode of perception specific to image/*Bild*—namely, “lingering over” (*Verweilen* in German). This mode involves at least a loosening, if not a complete departure from, the usual focus on an object at a fixed distance. Many visual symbolic forms are meant to be quickly grasped, not scanned in detail over time. I would describe this type of perception as being “channeled,” constrained within a set trajectory designed for specific purposes in particular historical and social contexts. Such cases involve receiving meaning from the outside as a “subject matter.” By contrast, lingering over/*Verweilen* signifies a form of presence that arises in response to the encounter itself, both disclosing and filling the entire experiential space, momentarily fusing the material, the meaningful, and the perceptual. In this instance, perception transforms from a discrete act of consciousness within a specific and predetermined domain into a fluctuating continuum, lacking a discernible initiator or direction of action. An integral part of such a transformation is a fundamental change in the aggregate state of the environment, in which—and as a part of which—this transformative event takes place. Gadamer describes this shift as a “coming to language,” which refers neither to an additional act of symbolic expression nor to the experience reaching a developmental stage, where it could—or should—progress further along the path of language (Gadamer 1979, 432; Gadamer 1990, 479). Rather, it signifies a substantial change in and of the environment itself or, in theological terms, a transubstantiation. What was once merely sound becomes

7 Many contemporary Gadamer scholars, while emphasizing the performative nature of Gadamer’s notion of the “meaningful,” still consider it as an isolatable entity. For example, Nicholas Davey defines one “meaningful” entity tautologically through another: “[...] to experience a work as meaningful is to experience its framework of meaningful relations [...]” (Davey 2013, 176).

the meaningful presence of enworlded things and events in the context of an engaged conversation or within literary—and especially poetic—texts. What was once merely a striated and dotted physical surface transforms into an exceptional experience of the visible. In both cases, the material components—sound and surface—neither vanish nor recede into the background in favor of the semantic (the visible or understandable). On the contrary, they create a dense, perceivable environment for experience that is both perceptual and interpretive simultaneously. This suggests, among other things, that meaning-making is also a material process.

Ordinary transubstantiations (the extraordinary within the ordinary)

Of course, Gadamer neither uses the term “transubstantiation” nor, to my knowledge, addresses the material dimension of what he calls hermeneutic experience—at least not in the way I am attempting to, by interpreting the hermeneutical “meaningful” as an aggregate state of matter. Nonetheless, alongside his discussion of the aesthetically peripheral phenomena of architecture and décor—whose pivotal role in developing a specifically hermeneutic, or what we might term lateral, notion of experience I have already mentioned—, we also find in Gadamer’s later writings the notion of “bodily understanding” (Gadamer 2022, 96) and a brief inventory of the “building blocks of meaning: motives, images, and sounds” (Gadamer 2006, 77). In Gadamer’s reflections on the paradigmatic role of aesthetic experience, architecture and décor, in particular, fulfill a dual function. On the one hand, they culminate the general tendency of Gadamer’s thought towards the merging of the world with its imaginal manifestations (where the image, unlike a picture, is not a symbolic representation of an event or object but the final stage of their ontological genesis). On the other hand, they productively “trivialize” the tone and outcomes of earlier discussions on “higher” aesthetic forms, such as painting, music, and theater, allowing for their reintegration into the fabric of the lifeworld. There are two ways to look at the transformative potential of hermeneutic experience: the strong and the weak. This is important to keep in mind, especially when it comes to our main question about the dialectical link between hermeneutics and negativity, and

by extension, between hermeneutics and nihilism. The weak version places greater emphasis on what takes place within the sphere of consciousness or culture, broadly speaking, while relegating the material aspect to the periphery or neglecting it entirely. The strong interpretation, by contrast, emphasizes much more extensive outcomes, longer-lasting consequences, and their certain irreversibility. What is most important in this case is that the outcomes of hermeneutic experience primarily entail substantial changes to the material component—“substantial” in the literal sense of transforming from one material substance to another. Of course, instantiating this notion outside of religious terminology and contexts is not straightforward. Nevertheless, my thesis is that it serves as an indispensable precondition for overcoming the nihilistic tendencies pervasive in contemporary societies. Only by promoting the strong interpretation of hermeneutic experience as the dominant pattern of individual self-awareness can we effectively counteract the aforementioned nihilistic vortex. This means that the strong interpretation—for the sake of maximizing the anti-nihilistic effect—should be counterbalanced, or rather connected, with the “weaknesses” of its everyday embodiment. Even the most trivial forms of daily experience, such as reading, participating in social rites, photographing, small talk, or even walking, can (and at times must) reveal their generative potential by producing new meaningful-material compositions (events and environments). This introduces another “dialectical” moment in the development of phenomenological hermeneutics: what is revealed through refined theory must be validated by pre-theoretical experience within its own temporality. This suggests, among other things, that the theoretical and the practical must form a distinct connection. The tension or imbalance between the strong and the weak, the affirmative and the negative, raises a series of methodological questions. How can one recognize such experiences? How can one linger in them and, even if only for a moment, become comfortable with them? How can one learn to speak about what lies beyond symbolic articulation without rendering it meaningless? These questions anticipate the issues to be addressed in the next subsection.

Now, I would like to return to the concept of “transubstantiation” in its major and minor forms or its strong and weak interpretations. How is this distinction reflected in Gadamer? In *Truth and Method*, as well as in his writings from the

same period, Gadamer prioritizes the weak interpretation. This is especially evident in his effort to expand self-awareness of the humanities beyond their epistemological self-understanding. It seems critically important for Gadamer to maintain a connection with the discursive norms of his time. Nevertheless, we observe a shift towards a stronger interpretation in the concluding subsections of *Truth and Method*, where he discusses the “speculative structure” of the central aspect of the linguisticity (*Sprachlichkeit*) of human experience, which he refers to as its middle (*Mitte* in German).

The speculative middle

Let me begin with a brief discussion of translation issues. In the two existing English translations of *Truth and Method*, the German phrase *Mitte der Sprache* is rendered as “the center of language” and “language as medium,” respectively. In my opinion, neither of these translations is entirely accurate. What the German term emphasizes, and what Gadamer likely had in mind, is a kind of performative space, a place of concentration, where—for a time—the categorical distinction between world and language disappears, and both are brought to the same level, compelled to transform into one another. In other words, it refers to an over-dense and over-intensive transformative event that affects the entire experiential constellation. The densification and intensification of the experiential environment could also be described as a vortex. However, unlike the nihilistic “vacuum pump,” which absorbs spatiality, temporality, and materiality of the lifeworld into pre-established symbolic forms, institutions, and trajectories, the hermeneutic experiential vortex gathers these elements into a fluctuating and vibrant field, propelling their inherent developmental tendencies to their peak. Thus, in translating the German *Mitte* into English, I would prefer the term “middle.”

The “middle of language,” according to Gadamer, is both a point of convergence between language and the world and a starting point, from which they begin to diverge, moving in diametrically opposite directions. These two alternate vectors—centripetal and centrifugal—constitute the core structure of hermeneutic experience. Convergence (the centripetal vector), in this case, could be described as an event of transubstantiation: a reciprocal exchange of

substances between world and language. This event possesses its own spatiality and temporality, granting it a semi-autonomous and semi-transcendental status. Divergence (the centrifugal vector) works to loosen and dissipate this transubstantial vortex, allowing its elements to become available to the self-conscious subject, which itself only emerges as a result of this loosening and dissolution. The middle of language, “whence our whole experience of the world, and especially hermeneutical experience, unfolds” (Gadamer 1979, 415), Gadamer also calls “the speculative unity,” which he describes as follows:

What comes into language is something different from the spoken word itself. But the word is a word only because of what comes into language in it. It is there in its own physical being only in order to disappear into what is said. Again, that which comes into language is not something that is pre-given before language; rather, it receives in the word its own definition. (Gadamer 1979, 432; Gadamer 1990, 479.)

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Three things are especially important at this point. First, the unity in this case is dynamic: it is a distinction within itself, “that between its being and the way in which it presents itself, but this is a distinction that is really not a distinction at all” (Gadamer 1979, 432; Gadamer 1990, 479). This dynamic is not dialectical, i.e., not mediated by an external notion of self-consciousness, but rather speculative, meaning that the elements of the dynamic relationship mutually mediate each other. It is precisely in this sense that we can speak of a centripetal vector or even the implosive character of this overall process. For a while, the middle (on the skirts dissolving its density) becomes a quasi-insulated space without borders—a place of pure intensity or implosive differentiation. Such places are everywhere. The most obvious and common examples include various types of visual images and screens. For instance, the perception of a painting often unfolds as an implosive, centripetal differentiation of the pictorial surface. We are not merely capturing the subject matter depicted nor simply scanning or reading the surface in detail, but rather moving into the depth of the pictorial textures—a movement that inevitably alters both our consciousness and bodily reception, which, in a sense, merge into one. To an extent, something similar occurs during walking, which, from a non-engaged and thus irrelevant viewpoint, may appear as merely moving

from one point to another. In reality, from the walker's perspective, walking is an intensive, inwards-directed experience, generating "circuits of energies and affects" (Bennett 2019, 93).⁸

Second, what occurs within this event of mutual mediation between what is presented and the medium of presentation is an exchange of substances. Gadamer, of course, does not go so far as to consider "transformation into structure/*Gebilde*" as an event, involving literal changes in material substances. However, without this step, "the universality of hermeneutics" would be scarcely imaginable with complete coherence. Moreover, Gadamer's reluctance to adopt a more consistent stance on the material dimension of the transformative potential of hermeneutic experience undermines the clarity of his reflections on the speculative middle. In fact, without this shift towards a more radical (and consistent) view of hermeneutic transformational dynamics, the very notion of the "speculative" becomes difficult to grasp. Unfortunately, Gadamer limits himself to examples that, while illuminating, are either metaphorical or confined to the so-called cultural and social realm. This, to a large extent, prevents hermeneutics from becoming an effective strategy for countering nihilism, which is characterized, among other things, by the systemic oppression, defamation, and eventual destruction of the semi-autonomous sphere denoted in phenomenology by the capacious term "lifeworld."

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Third, the middle of linguisticity, with its speculative structure, serves as an opening to alternative forms of practice and non-nihilistic developmental trajectories. It is precisely the "materialistic" interpretation of "the speculative movement" that allows for the possibility of its affirmative feedback—a positive reverberation into spheres and modes of being that lie beyond this highly dense, intensive, and transitory realm.

It presupposes at least some degree of continuity between the centripetal and centrifugal vectors, or phases, of hermeneutic experience. Of course, given the diametric opposition of these vectors, such continuity seems implausible. Nevertheless, the notion of affirmative feedback gains traction when we

⁸ For insights regarding "atmospheric affections" generated by walking, see Jane Bennett's recent book (Bennett 2020). Tim Ingold also discusses walking as a generative practice that is neutral to the differentiations of realms of objects and levels of being (Ingold 2010).

consider the strong interpretation of “speculative movement”—as a perceptual-material process of transforming the given into the livable. I understand how strange it may sound: something indefinite, radically performative, and, as a result, unavoidably transitory is founded on its own, modified but still material substance, while simultaneously constituting the realm, where the primary phenomenal and the primary meaningful are one and the same. But precisely this structural connection to matter and meaning establishes “the speculative unity” (the highest manifestation of hermeneutic experience) as the normative horizon for all possible forms of distinctly human ways of being.⁹ This cannot help but transform many, if not all, human dispositions, including the question of a non-nihilistic view of agency.

4. Agency

110 But what does a nihilistic view of agency look like? To answer this question, it would be sufficient to gather the notes concerning this topic scattered across the previous sections. Agency fraught with nihilistic implications (but not necessarily entailing nihilism in its outright forms) will bear the following traits. Such agency is:

- predominantly intentional: it is frontal, activist, coercive, and distilling in nature;
- channeled: conceptually and pragmatically overdetermined “from outside,” limiting flexibility or spontaneity;
- object-oriented: it ignores perceivable textures exceeding respective categorical boundaries—what I prefer to call the lateral dimension and vector of the experiential field;
- predominantly mono-sensorial: focused on a single sensory channel, limiting, or even preventing, multi-sensorial engagement;
- transitional: almost always embedded in a relatively long chain of other experiences, thereby becoming self-oblivious;

9 Günter Figal offered the notion of intangible matter, occupying “an intermediary position between thing and space” (Figal 2018), which can be considered an attempt to conceptualize matter beyond the frameworks of physics. Nevertheless, his reflections remain limited to artistic phenomena.

– external to itself: it occurs in space and time external to it, overshadowing its own spatiality and temporality.

What is specifically nihilistic about all of this? Admittedly, none of these traits are overtly nihilistic, even if we are ready to acknowledge the alienating tendencies embedded within them. On the contrary, they epitomize and embody the common, even normative, view of how experience is (or ought to be) constituted. Many of these traits are unavoidable for us to function in both everyday life and scientific contexts. Nevertheless, it is precisely this normativity that carries the seeds of nihilism, which begin to germinate as this type of agency, characterized by the aforementioned traits, becomes an unquestionable model. And this inevitably happens, since this type of experience is an integral part of contemporary social imagination. Nihilism consists, above all, in the fact that this imagination is now reaching a point of no return, where it becomes the only option for self-understanding and collective existence, leaving no room for alternatives. This lack of alternatives is sustained by the affective side of the story. (Hyper)activism, even when merely declared, is self-rewarding in two senses at once. On the one hand, it garners consistent social approval, and on the other, it generates an affective upheaval tied to the corresponding bodily regime characteristic of a person attuned to the activist patterns of agency. In a sense, we can speak, in this case, of affective stimulation both from within and from without. This makes the drive towards nihilism—towards annihilating the non-directional, non-channeled, non-transitional lifeworld experiences—nearly inescapable. As we can see, nihilistic tendencies may unfold not only at the macro-level of institutions and historical trends but also at the micro-level of experience.

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Normativity, neutrality, and disclosure

Perhaps one of the most significant merits of Gadamer's hermeneutics is its ability to highlight the normative impulses that, being embedded in the very structure of human experience, steer us away from nihilistic forms of action and agency. The "middle" of human experience, constituted by linguisticity (*Sprachlichkeit*), according to Gadamer, is "the speculative unity"—a dynamic oneness of the experiential, substantial, and meaningful, where each mirrors and transmutes into the others.

What is most important in the normative implications of “speculative unity” is its performative character. This may sound strange, even contradictory, because any norm typically possesses a temporality quite different from that of an event or object it seeks to normatively determine. That, of course, is true. Yet, “speculative unity,” as the highest manifestation of the hermeneutic phenomenon, is not something pre-given or fixed in place; rather, it happens—it is performed. Since we are always involved in this occurrence, which, however brief, transforms us entirely—making us part of the event that reveals the realm of the primary meaningful and the primary present in their interconnection—, this performativity illuminates the specific relationship between ethics, understanding, and practice. All of these fall under the same category: agency.

112 Agency in Gadamer—like in many contemporary philosophical and sociological theories, from New Materialism to Actor-Network Theory—is not necessarily human, always distributed, and shot through with competing elements and energies. However, unlike other theories, the hermeneutic notion of agency remains profoundly humanistic, as its elements, movements, and energies, in their dense intertwining, give rise to a dynamic livable space—livable not merely in the biological sense but in a distinctly human one. “Human,” in the context of philosophical and phenomenological hermeneutics, does not refer to the domain or conditions of human habitation but rather to the sphere of the primary present, which inevitably coincides with the primary, pre-linguistically meaningful. It is at this point that the normative and the performative reveal their genetic and structural interconnection. In contrast to the paradigmatically activist—and in this sense nihilistic—notion of agency, the normative in hermeneutic experience is not imposed from the outside. On the contrary, it emerges from an overall feeling of freedom—a sense of open horizons, vitality, energy, and the impression that, at this moment and at this “place,” almost anything is possible. All of these elements and movements are geared towards a single overall effect: the disclosure of all possible “virtual realities,” that is, agency itself in its full potential.¹⁰ In other

10 “[...] realities are neither virtual nor real—rather, they are ‘virtually real,’ drawn out of the potentially multiple ways in which things, sensations, experiences and meanings

words, hermeneutic agency is an event that discloses the agential itself—a moment, when all possible actions, thoughts, and directions have yet to be actualized, but are nonetheless already present. In a sense, it is a point of neutrality, the preservation of which constitutes a normative drive embedded in every “hermeneutic phenomenon.”¹¹ This leads to an ongoing practical task, accompanying every hermeneutic endeavor in the realm of theoretical work: to keep the hermeneutic experiential zero-point open and remain within it, one must persistently make decisions. Not deliberately, of course—as the word “persistently” suggests—, but by engaging our entire presence, including both its frontal and lateral dimensions.

Culture without contents: practices of laterality

I would now like to briefly dwell on the practical implications of the endogenous laterality of hermeneutic experience. Earlier, I mentioned the possibility that the relatively brief, yet highly intense moments of speculative unity might reverberate into the more “ordinary” realms, extending their influence beyond the immediate scope of those moments. This reverberation, or echoing, stems from the radical creativity inherent in speculative unity, which represents the highest form of hermeneutic experience (what Gadamer also refers to as “the coming to language”). The radical creativity of speculative unity lies in its function as a transformative vortex, turning here into there, the factual into the meaningful, hearing into seeing, and the perceivable into the livable. The effects of such a transformation manifest as moments of radical openness or what we have previously called the disclosure of agency—a zero-point, from which all possible actions, events, and experiences emerge. It is no surprise that such an event can—and should—profoundly impact our lives in its aftermath. But how exactly does this occur? Let me explain.

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could become manifest” (DeNora 2014, 123). DeNora’s book offers a significant sociological counterpart to our considerations. Drawing on ethnomethodology and theories of perception, she attempts to elaborate on the various perceptual techniques involved in disclosing the world and “making sense of reality.”

11 I would like to emphasize once again the specific endogenous nature of hermeneutic (or performative) normativity. It is not a normativity of law or principle, but rather one of health and breathing.

Actually, when it comes to the ways, in which “hermeneutic phenomena” shape our perceptions and behaviors, there are two interconnected options that we should nevertheless carefully differentiate from one another. The first option is the immediate appeal generated by the experiences of speculative unity, which we have already touched upon in the previous pages. The examples of this option would include various artworks, broadly understood: a painting, a photograph, a book, or a film. It does not matter whether they belong to the realm of institutionally recognized art or not. What they all share is the ability to dissolve their substance into “the flesh of the world.” At the same moment, what also dissolves is the so-called subject matter. Something similar happens, for example, when, while looking at a photograph of an acquaintance or relative, we begin to engage with them in a new way—gaining access to aspects of their personality and temporality that were hidden from us in face-to-face encounters. In such situations, we are not merely dealing with visual information or subject matter; we are encountering a (re)presented person. The material and performative elements of the presentation merge into the event of the person’s presence, transforming from mere objects into an experiential medium. Just as we do not only hear the sounds of someone’s voice in conversation, but listen through them to the meaning—literally hearing the meaning—,¹² the same applies to looking at a photograph. The person (re) presented—not just their visual likeness—becomes an experiential event in and through the photographic medium, which, in this case, transcends (or, better, transforms) the photograph as a mere material object.

The second option involves distributing and scattering the experienced across much broader and more mediated chains and surfaces. This process presupposes a dismantling—or at least a weakening—of the extraordinary unity, fullness, and intensity inherent in radical forms of hermeneutic experience. This may happen, for example, when, after leaving a museum or finishing a book or movie, we retain a connection to the acquired experience, which subsequently undergoes a peculiar transformation. It fades and, to some extent, becomes fragmented and dispersed. Mainly, this process unfolds

12 “One not only reads the meaning, one hears it.” (Gadamer 2022, 206; Gadamer 1993, 274.)

without our excessively active participation. It can even take on a ventricular form—what could perhaps be called “metabolic understanding” or weak hermeneutic experience. The core task of this understanding is to maintain continuous connections to the lateral dimension of our experience, making it less intense but, at the same time, more sustainable. In other words, I suggest broadening the scope of “the virtually real whole,” towards which, according to Gadamer, every conscientious hermeneutic endeavor is directed. In a sense, we could identify here a continuum, stretching from the most intense forms of hermeneutic phenomena to less dense and salient ones, which nevertheless still echo the transformative potential of the former. In this way, I believe hermeneutic experience can overcome its insularity, which persists even in Gadamer’s clearest assertions about the openness of the experience of art to the world. Once again, we encounter the paradoxical positivity of a lacking: deficiency and weakness transform into a new—and distinctly human—form of agency. This is not an alienating, frontal action, but rather a lateral practice—work that explores and expands the scope of existence. To highlight its true uniqueness, it might be more precise to call it a practice of laterality—a practice that unfolds within and is shaped by the lateral dimension.

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Planarizing matter und culture

To fully unfold its potential, this kind of non-nihilistic practice requires support from material and institutional structures. Paradoxically, it receives such support as a result of processes that are part of nihilistic tendencies—what I prefer to call “the planarization of matter and culture.” By planarization of culture, I primarily mean the process of de-hierarchization within culture. The most eloquent sign, and at the same time the most powerful driver, of this de-hierarchization is that art has ceased to be the normative horizon of our cultural practices and understanding. It entails an enormous expansion of the cultural field and, as a consequence, its democratization. Culture now appears more as a dense milieu rather than a steadily growing collection of artifacts. Today, it is nearly impossible to exert institutional—or any other form of—control over what counts as a culturally relevant practice and what does not. One of the most important consequences of this is the pluralization of the

very notion of practice, expanding it beyond the understanding of practice as merely a form of purposive and observable action. Practice becomes more distributed and less symbolically articulated, even less content-oriented—in a word, more lateral, more scenic.¹³

The planarization of matter in the contemporary social world is closely linked to late capitalist economies: materiality is increasingly freed from being embedded in (often inconspicuous) functional relationships, instead coalescing into vast ecologies of aestheticized surfaces. These two processes—the planarization of culture and the culturalization of material surfaces—support and stimulate each other, leading to a shift in the vector of overall developmental dynamics: expansion gives way to differentiation and quantitative explosion transforms into qualitative implosion. These processes of planarization—if my diagnosis is correct—provide necessary support for fostering non-nihilistic forms of agency, that is to say, forms that are not obsessively activist or frontal. Though seemingly negative or even destructive, these processes, somewhat paradoxically, produce positive effects. One of the most important in our context is their infrastructural support for the gradual weakening of radical forms of hermeneutic experience, while simultaneously reinforcing the role of hermeneutic experience as a whole. Despite this supportive role, these infrastructural changes are merely the prerequisites for establishing a non-nihilistic stance as a more standard—or at least common—form of agency. What is still needed is a persistent gravitational pull, originating from the experiential fields opened by these processes.

Extended hermeneutics: hesitation, friction, viscosity

What might this gravitational pull look like or, more consistently, what might it feel like? It is not easy to envision in full detail, as nihilistic stances and forms of agency have long solidified into an unquestionable reality. Nevertheless, it seems natural to lean on forms of experience that, substantially supported by the aforementioned global and unstoppable tendencies, are gradually beginning to draw more and more people into their orbit.

13 For an elaborated theory of the scenic as a primary topology for all human experience, see the works of Wolfram Hogrebe (for example, 2009).

The planarization of the cultural sphere—inevitably supported by the counter-process of the culturalization of matter—leads to a weakening of its symbolic dimension and, by extension, to a loosening of the grip of the symbolic in other spheres of social life. I use the term “symbolic” in the sense similar to the one found in the works of Jacques Lacan: a pre-given interpretative matrix, into which we are inevitably socialized. Unlike Lacan, I believe in the possibility of maintaining a distance from the symbolic. This belief is grounded in several theoretical foundations, such as the critique of Lacan offered by Julia Kristeva (Kristeva 2024), and more recent approaches developed in contemporary rhetoric (Davis 2010; Rickert 2013). Moreover, the symbolic, in its oppressive functions, has more “mundane” embodiments: notions, concepts, stereotypes, political parties, programs, leaders, as well as pop icons, artworks, and ultimately every “subject matter.” Flattening this once-striated, hierarchically structured field, which may appear purely destructive, actually produces an emancipatory effect: a shift from a fast mode of experience to a slower one. Fast mode is the aforementioned frontal and channeled act of intellectual comprehension, which interpellates us as mere social variables, expelling our facticity and severing our connections to the lifeworld. Slow mode, on the other hand, might be epitomized by what could be called “experiential accretion”—a mode of perceiving culture as a dense and heterogeneous ecology, where the cultural circulates primarily through imprints, trails, reverberations, echoes, overlaps, and so on. Rather than a discrete, extraordinary encounter with something unconditionally significant, the promising model for a performative, yet sustained experiential stance is a continuous and inconspicuous accretion of potentials for dwelling and agency.

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It is worth noting that Gadamer never went so far as to outline the contours of such an extended hermeneutics—one that extends towards the notion of a constant and therefore weakened hermeneutical stance. In my view, the reason for this was his rather conservative understanding of culture—even a neglect of culture as a synchronic dimension of hermeneutic experience. In *Truth and Method*, he was primarily concerned with how cultural phenomena persisted over time (the diachronic dimension), thereby downplaying the role of culture in favor of tradition.

But to strengthen and develop hermeneutics as a strategy for resisting nihilistic trends in contemporary culture and society, it is necessary to find a way to allow its repercussions to reverberate into experiential spaces beyond hermeneutic phenomena in the strictest sense of the term. Precisely at this point, the role of the notion of culture as an intensive material environment becomes especially salient.

118 “Understanding” within under-articulated, symbolically diluted environments becomes, to a significant degree, a series of bodily-affective encounters. Even when we are reading a text or watching a series, we are rarely fully immersed in the symbolic or diegetic space. Instead, we hesitate at a threshold, caught in the viscosity of texture and matter at the very moment of their speculative transformation or experience a kind of epistemological friction that accompanies any attempt to weave a vivid—and livable—communicative fabric with someone or something. In all such cases, we are redirected by the lateral dimension of the lifeworld, offering not only an opportunity to notice this dimension, but also to accept it as a space for dwelling and practice. All these withdrawals, hesitations, and frictions—though they may sound negative—are exceptionally affirmative, as they give much more than they take: the indefiniteness of the only space, in which we can truly breathe.¹⁴

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to summarize the main points of the article, using slightly modified terminology.

1. Nihilism, as a pervasive destructive tendency, affecting all aspects of modern life, is rooted in an established perceptual stance, a kind of “perceptual faith” in the sense of Merleau-Ponty. Consequently, we can identify two levels of nihilism: macro and micro.

2. Micro- or the perceptual level of nihilistic tendencies serves as the common ground for all visible and, consequently, more dramatic manifestations of

¹⁴ Petri Berndtson has recently made a significant attempt to offer a comprehensive “respiratory ontology,” a project that seems particularly relevant to our considerations at this point (Berndtson 2023).

nihilism in the social and physical realms. This complicates both the diagnosis and the remedy for the nihilistic implications of the modern world's trajectory.

3. Philosophical hermeneutics is arguably the most suitable approach to provide both a comprehensive diagnosis and an effective remedy. Its diagnostic and therapeutic potentials are linked to its notion of the meaningful, which is not distilled from an experience laden with material, bodily, and other "contaminations," but rather coincides with the radical—and, in this sense, normative—self-disclosure of the livable, or truly human, world. In other words, meaningfulness is an integral part of hermeneutic experience, an inherent characteristic of matter involved; it is, almost literally, its "aggregate state." This entails, among other things, the laterality of the hermeneutic phenomenon in particular and hermeneutic experience in general.

4. The highest manifestation of hermeneutic experience is what Gadamer refers to as "the speculative middle," the apex of the entire transformational process inherent in the hermeneutic phenomenon. At this point, the performative, the meaningful, and the medially material converge—if only briefly—into a unified whole. The speculative middle is a radically anti-nihilistic phenomenon, which, though extraordinary, nevertheless forms an essential part of everyday life. Certain visual images, conversations, texts, and even social or religious rites may exhibit this structure. But they are nevertheless too rare and too insular to become a factor in resisting the global malaise.

5. Help comes from the very tendencies typically associated with nihilism: two developmental dynamics of late capitalism. One is planarization, or the ecologization, of the cultural realm; the other is the culturalization of material surfaces. In their interconnection, they foster lateral forms of practice, which downplay the role of "symbolic forms" altogether and emphasize a "metabolic" perception of cultural "quanta" scattered across culturalized surfaces. These practices, forming an ecology and a permanent stance, are likely the most effective—if not the only—remedy against the annihilating tendencies of the contemporary socio-technological world.

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