

# Transcendental Hermeneutics

Grounding interpretation in the hermeneutical circle

By

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*To Sofia*

# Abstract

The argument of this dissertation is built through sustained and critical dialogue with several figures in the (Western) history of hermeneutical thought and pivots on a problem that defined the early development of hermeneutics: the problem of the criterion for interpretation. This problem poses a unique set of philosophical challenges and moves us in the direction of a distinguishing mark, not merely for the justification of some *particular* interpretation, but a mark that would testify to the legitimacy of hermeneutical inquiry itself. Although this dissertation pays tribute to the far-reaching, substantial, and severely neglected history of hermeneutics, and contributes to expanding our understanding of the hermeneutical beyond canonical figures and boundaries, tribute is not its main objective. Instead, the deeper profit of this amplified vista – which stems directly from my retrieval of the problem of the criterion – is the recovery of a systematic unity of approach to the hermeneutical stretching across the confines of historiographical division. It is thus the reconstruction of an integrated line of thought, rather than lines of historical influence, that is the chief purpose of this work.

Specifically, this dissertation aims to provide (1) the reconstruction of a line of response to the problem of the criterion for interpretation – and the problem of grounding interpretation; (2) the general formulation of this line of argument as one that involves a transcendental modality, and (3) its defense. To these ends, Chapter 1 retrieves the problem of the criterion for interpretation, initially posed in the context of a strand of semantic skepticism endemic to the German Enlightenment called “exegetical skepticism”. Chapter 2 examines the doctrine of hermeneutical probability in the work of Christian Thomasius, distinguishes it from exegetical skepticism, and diagnoses its failure to reply to the skeptic. Chapter 3 provides an analysis of

Christian August Crusius' reply to the problem of the criterion and associates it, if successful, to the idea of “transcendental grounding”. Next, Chapter 4 leverages the apparent similarity between the Crusian and Gadamerian positions into an opportunity to further define transcendental grounding as an approach to understanding in Gadamer. Chapter 5 then presses the Crusian line of argument further and reconstructs a Gadamerian reply to the problem of the criterion, defending it against the skeptic. Aims (1) and (3) thus attained, the final two chapters shift focus from the hermeneutical to the transcendental in pursuit of aim (2). Accordingly, Chapter 6 identifies an engagement with a version of the problem of the criterion in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, the Transcendental Deduction specifically. And, finally, Chapter 7 draws a comparison between the proof-structure of Kant's Transcendental Deduction and the transcendental line of reply to the problem of the criterion that will have been my focus.

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# Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: SKEPTICISM ABOUT MEANING IN THE GERMAN ENLIGHTENMENT</b>	<b>10</b>
1.1. INTRODUCTION	10
1.2. SKEPTICISM IN THE GERMAN ENLIGHTENMENT	11
1.3. THE BEGINNINGS: PFEIFFER VS. SPENER	14
1.4. CRISIS AND DISORIENTATION	29
1.5. PHILOSOPHICAL CLARITY	32
1.5.1 <i>Johann Heinrich Callenberg (1694-1760)</i>	32
1.5.2 <i>Joachim Justus Rau (1713-1745)</i>	35
1.6. AFTERMATH	39
1.7. EXEGETICAL AND SEMANTIC SKEPTICISM	41
1.8. CONCLUSION	42
<b>CHAPTER 2: HERMENEUTICAL PROBABILITY: A PROBLEMATIC, BUT PROMISING RESPONSE TO SKEPTICISM</b>	<b>44</b>
2.1. INTRODUCTION	44
2.2. HERMENEUTICS IN THE EARLY GERMAN ENLIGHTENMENT	46
2.2.1 <i>Hermeneutical probability</i>	48
2.3. CHRISTIAN THOMASIVS' THEORY OF INTERPRETATION	51
2.3.1 <i>The epistemological background of Thomasius' hermeneutics</i>	53
2.3.2 <i>The probability of interpretation</i>	55
2.3.2.a. Probability and the question of certainty	56
2.3.2.b. Probability and the question of skepticism	58
2.3.2.c. Two concepts of probability	61
2.3.2.c.i. Logical probability	61
2.3.2.c.ii. Epistemic probability	64
2.3.3 <i>Hermeneutical probability and exegetical skepticism</i>	66
2.3.3.a. Contemporary accusations	67
2.3.3.b. The compatibility problem	73
2.3.3.b.i. The case of interpretation	76
2.3.4 <i>Answering the problem of the criterion</i>	80
2.4. CONCLUSION	85

<b>CHAPTER 3: CRISIUS' "TRANSCENDENTAL" REPLY TO MEANING-SKEPTICISM: A COPERNICAN REVOLUTION IN HERMENEUTICS</b>	<b>86</b>
3.1. INTRODUCTION	86
3.2. CRISIUS' TRANSFORMATION OF PROBABILITY	87
3.2.1. <i>The received view</i>	88
3.2.2. <i>Probable knowledge and certainty in Crusius</i>	89
3.3. CRISIUS'S HERMENEUTICS	94
3.3.1. <i>The presuppositional structure of interpretation</i>	96
3.3.2. <i>Secure grounds of interpretation</i>	100
3.3.2.a. The probabilistic strategy	102
3.3.2.b. The prudential strategy	106
3.3.2.c. The transcendental strategy	111
3.4. CONCLUSION	117
<b>CHAPTER 4: GADAMER'S TRANSCENDENTAL GROUNDING OF UNDERSTANDING</b>	<b>119</b>
4.1. INTRODUCTION	119
4.2. GADAMER'S RELATION TO TRANSCENDENTAL PHILOSOPHY	120
4.3. THE TRANSCENDENTAL NATURE OF THE GADAMERIAN PROJECT	124
4.4. THE PRECONDITIONS OF UNDERSTANDING AND THE STRUCTURE OF DIALOGUE	131
4.5. AGREEMENT AS A PRECONDITION OF UNDERSTANDING	137
4.5.1. <i>Ein tragendes Einverständnis</i>	138
4.5.2. <i>Die grundlegende Übereinkunft</i>	151
4.6. THE TRANSCENDENTAL GROUNDING OF UNDERSTANDING	168
4.7. CONCLUSION	173
<b>CHAPTER 5: AGREEMENT, CRITERIA, AND CORRECTNESS</b>	<b>175</b>
5.1. INTRODUCTION	175
5.2. TRUTH AGAINST METHOD	176
5.3. PRINCIPLES AND AXIOMS OF INTERPRETATION	178
5.4. CRITERION OF CORRECTNESS	185
5.4.1. <i>The question of truth</i>	186
5.4.2. <i>The question of ground</i>	193
5.4.2.a. The instrumental account	193
5.4.2.b. The constitutive account	195
5.4.2.c. The transcendental account	199
5.5. CONCLUSION	204

<b>CHAPTER 6: THE CRITIQUE AND THE CRITERION</b>	<b>206</b>
6.1. INTRODUCTION	206
6.2. THE CRITERION OF TRUTH	207
6.3. THE CRISIS OF METAPHYSICS	209
6.4. THE PROBLEM OF THE CRITERION	217
6.4.1. <i>Hume against the dogmatist</i>	221
6.5. CONCLUSION	231
<b>CHAPTER 7: THE TRANSCENDENTAL DEDUCTION AND THE STRUCTURE OF TRANSCENDENTAL GROUNDING</b>	<b>233</b>
7.1. INTRODUCTION	233
7.2. TRANSCENDENTAL ARGUMENTS AND TRANSCENDENTAL GROUNDING	234
7.3. “ON THE DEDUCTION OF THE PURE CONCEPTS OF THE UNDERSTANDING”	237
7.4. TRANSCENDENTAL GROUNDING	249
7.5. CONCLUSION	253
<b>CONCLUSIONS</b>	<b>254</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>260</b>

# Abbreviations

Citations from primary sources are located by reference to the pagination of the first or the scholarly editions. Where they are not my own, the translations used are cited after the original texts, and are separated by semicolon (e.g., “WM:319; TM:312”). Modification of cited English translations occurs in the interest of terminological consistency, or felicity of expression, and is duly acknowledged. To not multiply abbreviations, citations from Kant's works other than the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Prolegomena* are given from the so-called *Akademie Ausgabe* of Kant's works (*Kants gesammelte Schriften*; see Bibliography) by volume and page number (e.g., “AA 24:823”). Unless otherwise indicated, translations from Kant's works follow *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (edited by P. Guyer and A. Wood; see Bibliography).

Cross-referencing between the individual chapters of the dissertation is done by section number (e.g., “see 4.6” refers the reader to section 4.6, located in chapter 4). Similarly for footnotes (e.g., “see fn35”).

A / B	Kant, <i>Critique of Pure Reason</i> (1781 [A] and 1787 [B])
PFM	Kant, <i>Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics that will be able to come forth as a Science</i> (1783) [AA 4:253-383]
SZ	Heidegger, <i>Sein und Zeit</i> (1927) [see Bibliography]
TM	Gadamer, <i>Truth and Method</i> (English translation of WM) [see Bibliography]

- W Crusius, *Weg zur Gewißheit und Zuverlässigkeit der menschlichen Erkenntniß*  
(1747)
- WM Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960) [see Bibliography]
- EHU Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748)

# Introduction

The quest to secure the appropriate relation between interpretation and interpreted text – whether understood in terms of correctness, fidelity, or some other notion – was historically never far removed from the center of (Western) hermeneutical reflection. It suffices to recall how such reflection began in the West, propelled by a disquiet over the interpretation and translation of Scripture. Think, for example, of the 'legend of the Septuagint' and of the seventy-two translators of the Old Testament into Greek. As Philo Judaeus tells the story, while each translator worked

in seclusion with none present save the elements of nature ... they [all] became as it were possessed and, under inspiration, wrote, not each several scribe something different, but the same word for word, as though dictated to each by an invisible prompter. ...[T]hese writers, as it clearly appears, *arrived at a wording which corresponded with the matter, and alone, or better than any other, would bring out clearly what was meant.* (Philo Judaeus, *De vita Mosis*, 37-39; emphasis added)

According to Philo, the translators' coincidence of output, a sign of divine inspiration, testifies to the veracity of that output. This was but an early sign of an anxiety over Biblical translation and interpretation that would accompany hermeneutical reflection for centuries.

Yet, identifying a mark to certify that the required correspondence obtains is essential not only for securing understanding in matters pertaining to the divine. Indeed, the quest for criteria of correctness remained a central thread running through the early outlines of what was

then called *hermeneutica generalis*, a discipline that concerned the interpretation of all discourse. Thus, Johann Conrad Dannhauer (1603-1666) stipulates this central requirement in the very title of his *Idea boni interpretis* (1630). There, Dannhauer lays the foundations for a new science, for which he coins the name “*hermeneutica*”, a science that 'teaches us to distinguish the true meaning from the false in all the writings and speeches of authors, and fully answers the question: *Whither do you know that this is the meaning and not another?*' (Dannhauer 1630:title).

Despite the centrality of Dannhauer's programmatic question for the development of hermeneutics – as will become apparent in the discussion to follow – his question now seems to have subsided from the mainstream of hermeneutical interrogation. This is certainly true if we take – as I believe we can – the Heidegger / Gadamer lineage as definitive of modern hermeneutical thought. For many working within this tradition, the quest for correctness is illegitimate because it threatens to return us to a conception of truth which both Heidegger and Gadamer explicitly abandon in favor of a more fundamental kind of truth, from which “correctness” is derivative. Thus, Gadamer writes that, in *Truth and Method*, he 'did not intend to produce a manual for guiding understanding in the manner of the earlier hermeneutics', nor to explicate 'what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing' (Gadamer 1965a:438; TM:xxvi). The preceding verdict stays true even if we take – as I believe we should – Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics as a tributary of that mainstream. For, Ricoeur's starting point in much of his work is not the question '*Whither do you know that this is the meaning and not another?*', but the conflict – an internal dialectic, in fact – that emerges from a principled inability to answer it. As he writes, 'there is no general hermeneutics, no universal canon for exegesis, but only disparate and opposed theories concerning the rules of interpretation. The hermeneutic field ... is internally at variance with itself' (Ricoeur 1970:26-7). Seemingly, modern hermeneutics has overcome Dannhauer's concern.

One of the aims of this dissertation is to reclaim Dannhauer's question for hermeneutical inquiry, which involves restoring its eroded philosophical credentials, as well as its urgency. I pursue this goal via a historical recovery of a form of skepticism endemic to the German Enlightenment and partly responsible for the shape hermeneutics took in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a standalone sector of philosophical inquiry. Exegetical skepticism, as it was called, involved claims about the uncertainty of interpretations due to their underdetermination by evidence, culminating in a version of the ancient Pyrrhonian *problem of the criterion* applied to interpretation. Roughly, in posing such a problem, the exegetical skeptic targets the possibility of rationally answering Dannhauer's question by maintaining that any criterion used to certify the truth of interpretations requires proof, and yet any proof, if it is to count as true, requires in turn a criterion. Facing the problem of the criterion, by the natural drift of the skeptic's questioning, is bound to ensnare the respondent in ever more foundational issues. “*Whither do you know?*” thus becomes – as of course it must – the unrelenting refrain of the skeptic's interrogation.

When seen in the light of the problem of the criterion, the philosophical relevance of Dannhauer's question is redeemed. For, when asked in this skeptical context, it moves us in the direction of a distinguishing mark, not merely for the justification of some *particular* interpretation, but a mark that would testify to the legitimacy of hermeneutical inquiry itself. What fixes its urgency, thus recontextualized, is that, as a question that threatens to dislodge hermeneutical theorizing from its foundations, it belongs *essentially* and *unavoidably* to hermeneutical inquiry. Thus, the question of the correctness of our understanding turns into a question of the ground of understanding, and, in this guise, forms the pivot around which the present dissertation will turn.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I should note that although I will employ the vocabulary of *ground* and *grounding* – which are much debated issues in contemporary metaphysics – the grounding that is at issue in responding to the problem of the criterion is *not* a *metaphysical* grounding.

This dissertation aims to achieve the following: (1) the reconstruction of a line of response to the problem of the criterion – and thus the problem of grounding understanding; (2) the general formulation of this line of argument as one that involves a transcendental modality; and (3) its defense. Before expanding on how I intend to achieve these goals, it may be fruitful first to survey the perimeter of my topic, and what might lie beyond it.

Over the following investigation, several distinct criteria of correctness will be discussed, examined, and, on occasion, their status as criteria of correctness will be defended. However, they will not be probed for points of pragmatic failure, as developing a methodology of interpretation is beyond the scope of this investigation. This may convey a strong hint of question-begging. After all, if anything is to survive the skeptical problem of the criterion, that, surely, must be a criterion of correctness, a filter that is neither too coarse – so as not to let misinterpretations through – nor so fine that it would winnow out the grain with the chaff. And so, it would appear that whatever is submitted to the skeptic's cross-examination will have to satisfy a number of conditions geared towards establishing that the submitted criterion is, in fact, sufficient to guarantee correctness. It seems to follow that any defense of a line of response to the skeptic – like the defense attempted in these pages – should *first* establish practical success.

That is not so, however. To be sure, the skeptic will request that her target provide some proof of the criterion they endorse, yet she will not require that such proof show that the criterion satisfies the conditions for establishing correctness. While the requisite proof may indeed proceed along lines that appeal to the criterion's practical success, such a proof is neither sufficient to put an end to the skeptic's questioning, nor, importantly, is it necessary. Indeed, none of the replies to the problem of the criterion surveyed in the following chapters take that line, although such replies *do* involve the claim – as of course they must – that the criterion under scrutiny is, in fact, a criterion of correctness in the sense specified above. One of the

aims of this investigation – aim (1) – is precisely to reconstruct a line of argument that establishes the validity of the criteria in question, along with their status as criteria of *correctness*, in a way that bypasses the question of pragmatic success, namely by identifying such criteria as necessary conditions for the possibility of understanding.

Having fixed its perimeter, we can now survey the argument of the present investigation. Its first chapter, “Skepticism about Meaning in the German Enlightenment”, is devoted to recovering the philosophical vitality of the question of interpretive correctness. I begin by providing the first modern analysis of exegetical skepticism, a strand of semantic skepticism running through the *Aufklärung*, which I trace back to a theological debate between August Pfeiffer (1640–1698) and Philipp Jacob Spener (1635–1705). I argue that exegetical skepticism involved a commitment to the thesis of interpretational underdetermination, which I compare with modern versions of what some view as a form of semantic skepticism, notably Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of translation, and Davidson's related doctrine of the indeterminacy of interpretation. I show, finally, that exegetical skepticism contributed to the birth of hermeneutics as a standalone philosophical discipline, by posing, among others, a version of the Pyrrhonian problem of the criterion, and thus compelling hermeneutics to address the question of its own philosophical grounding.

Recovering exegetical skepticism and the problem of the criterion has the benefit of shedding new light on events and figures historically downstream, thus permitting a new and more fruitful engagement with long forgotten hermeneutical thinkers. One philosopher who explicitly attempted to refute such skepticism is Christian August Crusius (1715-1775), the last member of the Thomasian tradition. The Thomasian school is a severely neglected<sup>2</sup> school of

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<sup>2</sup> There is absolutely no mention of the Thomasian hermeneutical tradition in either of the following: *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics* (Malpas & Gander 2015), *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics* (Keane & Lawn 2016), *The Cambridge Companion to Hermeneutics* (Forster & Gjesdal 2018).

hermeneutical thought which, by developing a hermeneutical theory built on the notion of probability, set the agenda for Enlightenment hermeneutics. Or so I argue in chapter 2, “Hermeneutical Probability: A Problematic, but Promising Response to Skepticism”.

There, I examine the doctrine of hermeneutical probability in the work of Christian Thomasius (1655-1728), a doctrine which forms the conceptual backbone of Crusius' reply to skepticism (to be considered in chapter 3). I begin by showing that “hermeneutical probability” is one of the concepts which had come to cluster around “exegetical skepticism” and was often criticized for an alleged proximity to skeptical views. I analyze several such critiques and argue that they accurately identified inconsistencies in the theory of hermeneutical probability, before defending Thomasius' original view against the alleged conflation with exegetical skepticism. Despite an initially promising engagement with the problem of the criterion, I show that Thomasius' project ultimately miscarries in terms of providing a viable solution to that problem.

In chapter 3, “Crusius' “Transcendental” Reply to Meaning-Skepticism: A Copernican Revolution in Hermeneutics”, I begin by considering the transformation undergone by the concept of hermeneutical probability in Crusius' work, a transformation that I argue avoids the shortcomings of the Thomasian reply to the problem of the criterion. I then examine Crusius' theory of interpretation and show that he bases the notion of understanding in a presuppositional structure closely related to Gadamer's fore-structure of understanding. Finally, I put Crusius' view to the skeptic's test and reconstruct three lines of response that might be (and sometimes have been) attributed to Crusius. I argue that the first two strategies – which I call the “probabilistic” and “prudential” strategies – are unsuccessful against the skeptic. Finally, I reconstruct what I argue is the strategy implicit in Crusius' account, which I call an instance of *transcendental grounding*, a strategy that proceeds to reply to the skeptic by connecting criteria of correctness for interpretations with conditions for the possibility of

interpretation. I argue that only by holding Crusius' anti-skeptical argument in Kant's own light, thus recognizing in it a transcendental bent, can we truly appreciate Crusius' achievement, and the success of the line of response I reconstruct on his behalf.

What emerges from my dialogue with Crusius is a line of argument which, coupled with already apparent connections to the Gadamerian point of view, provides an unexpected springboard to my inquiry. Specifically, it prompts and orients an innovative re-reading of Gadamer's view in a way that brings its transcendental dimension to the fore and that also connects the question of the possibility of understanding with the question of interpretive correctness. This part of the investigation begins in chapter 4, "Gadamer's Transcendental Grounding of Understanding," by first exposing and resolving a deep ambivalence in Gadamer's relation to transcendental reflection. I then argue, against prominent commentators, that Gadamer's grounding of understanding in a fore-structure should be understood as posing none other than the quintessential transcendental question, framed by Kant in terms of the possibility of *a priori* knowledge of objects. I substantiate this claim by providing an analysis of the Gadamerian fore-structure that departs from the canonical reading, distinct even from the analysis Gadamer himself provides in *Truth and Method*. The proposed alternative involves taking the preconditions of dialogue as a starting point for inquiring into the fore-structure of understanding and, drawing on several later texts by Gadamer, provides an analysis of the fore-structure as a two-layered matrix of *agreement*, "*Einverständnis*" and "*Übereinkunft*", respectively. The benefit of my re-reading of Gadamer's position is a boosted immunity against some well and lesser-known objections, but primarily concerns an explication of the relation between the conditions for the possibility of interpretation and interpretive correctness. I argue that Gadamer's grounding of understanding in a fore-structure proceeds by making manifest the matrix of *normative* commitments in which interpretation is always already situated.

This line of thought is then pursued in chapter 5, “Agreement, Criteria, and Correctness”, where I test the account's ability to face the skeptical problem of the criterion. To begin with, I examine some of the interpretive norms that Gadamer argues implicitly underlie any hermeneutical engagement, with an eye to assessing their fitness to provide criteria of correctness in the sense required by the skeptic. Against some classical and more recent accounts, and by building on the argument in chapter 4, I reconstruct a reading of Gadamer's argument for the necessity of such norms that I take to be exegetically more reconcilable with Gadamer's writings and, crucially, systematically more satisfactory. I argue that, on a transcendental reading, Gadamer is able to put a stop to the skeptic's questioning. And so, by this point, I will have achieved my first and third aims, reconstructing and defending an argument against the problem of the criterion for interpretation.

In the final two chapters, I will shift my focus from the hermeneutical to the transcendental in pursuit of my second aim, namely to show that the argument I will have reconstructed relies on transcendental methodology. In chapter 6, “The *Critique* and the Criterion”, I explore Kant's own engagement with the problem of the criterion. I argue that, despite appearances, Kant in fact not only seriously poses that problem in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but even takes himself to have solved it in the Transcendental Deduction. I support this thesis by drawing on (1) Kant's conception of the history of metaphysics as a battle fought between dogmatism and skepticism, and (2) Kant's endorsement of Humean arguments against Wolff's dogmatic method of metaphysical proof.

Finally, in chapter 7, “The Transcendental Deduction and The Structure of Transcendental Grounding,” I turn to the focal point of Kant's search for a criterion in the *Critique*, namely the Transcendental Deduction, with the intention to provide an analysis of its proof-structure. To this end, I distinguish the notion of transcendental argument, as it came to be understood in Anglophone philosophy in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from what I have

been calling “transcendental grounding”. I argue that what is essential to the argumentative structure of Kant's Transcendental Deduction is its self-referentiality. Finally, I draw Kant's approach closer to the Crusian and Gadamerian lines of argument considered previously. I argue that there is a significant methodological similarity between the latter and Kant's own transcendental methodology, thus substantiating my claim to have been developing a transcendental line of argument all along.

## *Chapter 1*

# Skepticism about Meaning in the German Enlightenment<sup>3</sup>

### 1.1. Introduction

Before developing his general theory of interpretation, Christian August Crusius (1715-1775) states as the first objective of such a theory that it should forestall 'exegetical skepticism' (W:§632). Despite renewed interest in the work of Crusius – part of the so-called 'Thomasian school', after Christian Thomasius (1655-1728), and the chief opponent of Wolff's dogmatic rationalism in Germany – the exegetical skepticism he and many others were opposing in this period remains completely unknown. The most recent work to examine its tenets in fact predates Crusius' own efforts to refute it by over a decade (Rau 1735). In this chapter, I provide the first modern systematic analysis of exegetical skepticism<sup>4</sup> and argue that it shares essential features with modern varieties of meaning skepticism that have been 'an almost constant preoccupation of philosophers of language since the middle of the twentieth century' (Miller 2006:91). I argue that exegetical skepticism is a type of epistemological skepticism first

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<sup>3</sup> A version of this chapter was published in Lazurca (2025).

<sup>4</sup> In recent decades, Lutz Danneberg has done much to bring this phenomenon to contemporary attention. Indications about the role played by exegetical skepticism in connection to Biblical scholarship and the theory of hermeneutical probability can be found in several of his works (see for instance Danneberg 1994a:33; 2003:61; 2009:398–402). Danneberg does not, however, offer a systematic reconstruction of this view.

introduced as a philosophical position in a theological debate between August Pfeiffer (1640-1698) and Philipp Jacob Spener (1635-1705). Under contention, so I argue, was the idea that interpretation is never certain because it is necessarily underdetermined by the evidence. Following the effects of this controversy, I show that exegetical skepticism caused a great deal of unrest in German letters in the eighteenth century and can be seen to contribute to the great proliferation of hermeneutical theories in the *Aufklärung*, indeed to the very birth of hermeneutics as a standalone discipline.

I will begin, first, by chronicling the development of exegetical skepticism from unassuming beginnings in theological debates (section 1.3), and its initial effects on the learned literature of the period (section 1.4). Then, I will follow its rise to philosophical clarity, the development of the problem of the criterion for interpretation (section 1.5), and its effects on the philosophy of interpretation (section 1.6). Finally, I will bring it into contact with some modern versions of semantic skepticism (section 1.7). I wish to start, however, by discussing the current state of scholarship, and some questions concerning the methodology I will be pursuing in my analysis (section 1.2).

## 1.2. Skepticism in the German Enlightenment

The commonplace picture of Enlightenment *hubris*, with its defiant confidence in and optimistic reliance on the powers of human understanding, has recently been coming under some scrutiny. Against earlier scholars, who saw the period as triumphantly breaking the chains of superstition and authority, and hailing everywhere the progress of science over prejudice, recent scholarship has shown that the Age of Reason was in fact deeply consumed by philosophical skepticism and a corresponding anxiety about the abilities of the human mind. Research into the history of Enlightenment skepticism, however, has tended to neglect the

German scene at the start of the eighteenth century, in particular the reaction to Wolff's rationalism among the Thomasians and the influx of skeptical ideas from France, thus perpetuating a bias cemented already before that century had passed.

In his two-volume history of skepticism, Karl Friedrich Stäudlin omits the Thomasian school entirely, even when charting the eventual decline of Wolff's philosophy, now credited to this tradition (see Stäudlin 1794:v.2:261). The same omission characterizes much contemporary work on the topic.<sup>5</sup> Yet Germany was not unaffected by skepticism, and Kant's critical project offers sufficient testimony of that fact. There is indeed evidence to suggest that a strong anti-skeptical current was present in the German-speaking territories already in the mid-1600s (see Popkin 1976). The lack of scholarly attention to the development of skepticism and anti-skepticism on the German scene, and in particular to the role played early on by the Thomasian tradition, is all the more significant as the Enlightenment took a very different form in Germany as compared to England and France for instance, and some have indeed argued for fundamentally different Enlightenments emerging in these areas (Tonelli 1971; see Wolff 1949; Beck 1969), permeated by equally distinct skeptical and anti-skeptical currents.<sup>6</sup>

The position examined in this chapter plays a significant role in this contrast. It generated a current of anxiety in German letters in the late-seventeenth to early-eighteenth centuries strong enough to spawn an anti-skeptical reaction that propelled the surge of hermeneutical theories in the mid-eighteenth century. Many names referred to it: "exegetische Zweifelsucht" – translating the much more common *scepticismus exegeticus* – *scepticismus hermeneuticus*, *pyrrhonismus exegeticus*, *pyrrhonismus hermeneuticus*, and even *pyrrhonismus philologicus*.

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<sup>5</sup> The author of *The Specter of Skepticism in the Age of Enlightenment* (Matytsin 2016), those contributing to *Scepticism in the Eighteenth Century: Enlightenment, Lumières, Aufklärung* (Charles and Smith 2013) and *Academic Scepticism in the Development of Early Modern Philosophy* (Smith and Charles 2017) make no mention of any philosopher from the Thomasian tradition. Moreover, of the nine essays in *The Skeptical Enlightenment: Doubt and Certainty in the Age of Reason* (Burson & Matytsin 2019), only one deals with the German scene, and, albeit only tangentially, with Thomasius (Mulsow & Laursen 2019).

<sup>6</sup> On historical Pyrrhonism and its different features in France or Germany, see Scheele (1930).

To put it briefly, exegetical skepticism, as I shall be denoting it, is the view which states that the true meaning of texts can never be known with certainty, because the evidence on which interpretation relies is compatible with conflicting interpretations. In its expanse and influence, this phenomenon has no clear parallel, nor can these terms be attested, elsewhere in Europe.

It is not my intention to argue that the German *Aufklärung* was an island philosophically, nor that illuminating parallels cannot be drawn with other non-German thinkers. Indeed, such parallels are often invoked by some of the authors considered below. I do argue, however, that such a narrow focus as pursued in this chapter is illuminating in itself, for two reasons. First, this chapter traces a view that does not appear to have had direct external philosophical influences. The reaction to exegetical skepticism that would become so strong in the mid-1700s cannot be understood purely by reference to great Enlightenment thinkers such as Leibniz, Locke, or Wolff. Instead, the systematic opposition that Crusius and – as we’ll see – so many others mounted against it was an opposition to a view forged and influenced by figures which have remained, oftentimes literally, anonymous. This chapter therefore pursues, and this is the second reason for its narrow focus, a sort of “history from below” approach to the historiography of philosophical skepticism, tracing theological controversies and academic works of subordinate importance – book reviews, periodical articles or academic dissertations – to understand the cultural climate leading to the recognition of exegetical skepticism as a philosophically important form of skepticism that threatened received views in the philosophy of interpretation. Only by following such a strategy can we ascertain what exegetical skepticism was, the success of the various attempts to refute it, and its influence on subsequent philosophy.

### 1.3. The Beginnings: Pfeiffer vs. Spener

The term *scepticismus exegeticus* and the view it denotes originated in a theological dispute spanning several years between August Pfeiffer (1640-1698) and Philipp Jacob Spener (1635-1705). This controversy immediately involved the question of skepticism in Scriptural interpretation, though initially this question did not have the importance it would later acquire. While Pfeiffer, who launched the polemic, had already established his anti-skeptical position in a defense of Lutheran orthodoxy against the alleged skepticism of the Catholic Church (see Pfeiffer 1679:68-74; 1683:240-254), this dispute with Spener would be the first time he addressed the position examined here, for which he coined a new term.

Unfortunately, the initial discussion of this issue was bogged down by a typographical error in Pfeiffer's first accusation. In the preface to his *Klugheit der Gerechten*, in fact, his intended 'sceptice' was printed as 'scoptice' (Pfeiffer 1693:28), and the charge of skepticism in Scriptural interpretation he levelled against Spener became one of irreverence and mockery<sup>7</sup> towards the Holy Writ, which the latter rejected outright (see Spener 1694:100). Pfeiffer immediately corrected the misprint and repeated the accusation in his *Gerechte Sache* (Pfeiffer 1695:62/210) where he explained that by 'sceptice' he had meant a manner of interpreting that casts doubt on what had previously been posited as certain or suspends judgement on a particular matter or on the truth of a particular proposition (211). What remained unclear, however, was the degree to which casting doubt on a supposedly certain interpretation and suspending judgement on the truth of some proposition could be equivalent. Indeed, Spener immediately took issue with this statement in his *Rettung der gerechten Sache* and insisted that expressing doubt about some generally held views did not amount to skepticism. Instead, he argued that reasonable doubt ('bedachtsames zweiffeln') was often the only way to certainty

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<sup>7</sup> "Scoptice" as the latinized version of "skōptikōs" (σκωπτικῶς), which means "mockingly" or "in jest."

(Spener 1696:95). The perplexity of this initial encounter reflects the struggle to approach the real crux of the matter between the two and is a sign that the question of skepticism in interpretation had not yet acquired the importance it soon will.

The most comprehensive charge, and – to my knowledge – the first recorded use of *scepticismus exegeticus*,<sup>8</sup> would come later that same year, in Pfeiffer's *Scepticismus Spenerianus tripartitus* (1696). Here, skepticism takes center stage. Additionally, Pfeiffer refocuses his attention away from the issue of doubt as such. He does not, in fact, reject Spener's suggestion that reasonable doubt is compatible with an anti-skeptical position, indicating that doubt as such was not the issue. Instead, the question of indeterminacy will come to be at the core of their controversy. Pfeiffer indeed concedes that Spener could evade the charge of skepticism 'if he takes a stand regarding the contested points distinctly with a yes or a no, or makes room for truth without further contradictions' (1696:np). In other words, what Pfeiffer takes most issue with is his opponent's indeterminate position, not his doubt about one or another exegetical point. This will become much clearer as we survey Pfeiffer's critique. As the view we are concerned with first surfaces in this work, which contains its most comprehensive discussion, I will consider it in some detail.

The skepticism Pfeiffer examines and attacks in his (1696) is theological, and its species are *exegeticus*, *dogmaticus* and *practicus*. In general, Pfeiffer's conception of skepticism follows broadly Pyrrhonian lines. He characterizes skepticism, which he associates with both Pyrrho and Sextus Empiricus, as the position of 'those *philosophi* who ... called all things into doubt, reached no certain conclusion regarding any question, but left everything *in suspenso* and let it come to an *ἐποχή* or a *Non liquet*' (Pfeiffer 1696:3). Accordingly, the issue of suspending judgment or *epochē* (ἐποχή) will be the pivot around which all subspecies of

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<sup>8</sup> But see also Neumann (1695), which, influenced by Pfeiffer (1695), assigns a '*libertinismus* and *scepticismus interpretandi*' to Spener (Neumann 1695:59).

theological skepticism will turn. When the central teachings of the Church are at issue, and 'one does not want to take a stand either with a yes or a no on whether a point of *doctrine or opinion in matters of faith* is true or false, or in accordance with the H. Writ', then it is a matter of *dogmatical skepticism* (5). If, instead, 'one does not want to take a stand on whether such and such is just [*billig*] or unjust, responsible in conscience or not', then it is a *practical skepticism* that is at issue (5-6).

Pfeiffer dedicates the first part of this work to a view he introduces as *scepticismus exegeticus*, or 'when one does not want to take a stand on whether an interpretation of Scripture is right or wrong; or tries to make its clear meaning uncertain' (Pfeiffer 1696:5). Pfeiffer acknowledges that to oppose exegetical skepticism is not to hold that every Biblical passage has a clear and transparent meaning. Conceding that the Bible is not semantically perspicuous throughout is therefore compatible with an anti-skeptical position. Instead, he opposes treating every passage as being in principle open to doubt and especially leaving their interpretations indeterminate. Doing that, 'we could nowhere gain a firm foothold', and there would be no solid ground on which to justify doctrine, or on which to interpret Scripture at all (7).

It will help to consider the details of Pfeiffer's attack in order to flesh out the position of exegetical skepticism he is critically outlining. Although his dispute with Spener will remain motivated by doctrinal considerations, and hence frequently revolves around the interpretation of Scriptural passages, it is by no means purely a debate about Biblical exegesis. What Pfeiffer is chiefly attacking is not Spener's reading of the Holy Writ, but his 'wavering and uncertain manner in interpreting Scripture' (Pfeiffer 1696:9). More specifically, Pfeiffer targets his opponent's *principia hermeneutica*, the principles and method of interpretation, which, so he argues, give rise to exegetical skepticism (10).

In what follows, I will reconstruct Pfeiffer's critique of four such principles he attributes to Spener. I will not be providing an interpretation of Spener's position, nor evaluating

Pfeiffer's critique in light of it. My aim is simply to clarify how Pfeiffer himself read his opponent's stance and why he thought it amounted to exegetical skepticism. In my analysis, I will therefore primarily be concerned with interpreting and systematizing the views and arguments involved, and this will sometimes require conveying them in a language that departs from that used by their authors. To that end, I wish to introduce at the outset a distinction between what I call assertable and endorsed interpretations. The former denotes one among several adequate interpretations of an utterance, whereas the latter denotes one uniquely endorsed as true.<sup>9</sup> A convenient way to frame this distinction is against the background of the Pyrrhonian emphasis on *epochē*. A core tenet of Pyrrhonism is the idea of *equipollence* (*isostheneia*), meaning "equal force on both sides", and referring to the equal persuasive force of arguments for contradictory propositions. Instilling this realization in their opponents is the goal of the skeptic's arguments. In the situation of equipollence, while either  $p$  or  $\neg p$  can be rationally asserted, there is no justification for endorsing one of them, as the grounds for asserting  $p$  are counterbalanced by those for asserting  $\neg p$ . This prompts suspension of judgment on the question at issue. This distinction between assertable and endorsed interpretations is pivotal to the controversy between Pfeiffer and Spener as their dispute concerns primarily the conditions which must be satisfied for an interpretation to be assertable, the reasons that must be adduced to justify its endorsement, and the epistemological status of interpretations generally.

The first of Spener's alleged *principia hermeneutica* under attack is the idea that

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<sup>9</sup> This is not a distinction Pfeiffer or Spener employ, though it builds on one they use: what I call "assertable" interpretations, they refer to as "possible", opposing them to "certain" interpretations (Spener 1694:24; 1696:8-9; Pfeiffer 1696:14-15). I prefer to employ the terms above not only for perspicuity – as it remains unclear exactly what kind of possibility is invoked here – but also because the requirement of certainty is one neither Pfeiffer nor Spener would subscribe to. As already shown, both authors admit the presence of doubt in Biblical exegesis and seemingly concede that doubtfulness is not always an obstacle to endorsement.

if one can only show some *connection* in the text, then one can *explain* ... the words and expressions ... in the passage under dispute as one might see fit, though they had such a *signification* nowhere else. (Pfeiffer 1696:10)

Pfeiffer refers here to Spener's remark that even if some expression 'could not be encountered anywhere with this meaning, it is enough that, among all others, it fits best the rest of the text' (Spener 1696:214).

The object of Pfeiffer's critique here is what we might call a *principle of localism*, the idea that what is relevant to determining the meaning of a word or expression is its immediate context, rather than the whole text. Spener expresses a similar principle just before the passage cited above, where he claims that 'above all, the circumstances of the text must tip the balance regarding word-meaning', and not 'other examples', by which Spener means here other Scriptural passages (Spener 1696:213). What justifies this view is the possibility that 'a word can have, at one place in Scripture, a different meaning than anywhere else' (47). On Pfeiffer's reading, Spener's emphasis on the circumstances (*umstände*) of the text seems to be taken quite literally, as the context immediately surrounding the word at issue. On this view, local consistency in the assignment of meanings to words or expressions is sufficient for establishing an interpretation as assertable, and global consistency is not required. For Pfeiffer, instead, this counts as a clear repudiation of the principle of constancy of meaning, and the validity of exegetical induction from parallel passages (Pfeiffer 1696:11; see 41). According to him, Spener's procedure invites an arbitrary interpretation of Scripture, since, without the constraint of constancy, 'anyone could give the words whatever interpretation he wished, under the pretext that in this context it means thus and so, no matter what it may mean elsewhere' (*ibid.*). For Pfeiffer, as a result of this view, 'the ἀσφάλεια [stability] and certainty of Scripture would fall' (*ibid.*).

Note that Pfeiffer's critique is not entirely accurate, as localism only entails that the relevant frame for determining what counts as constancy of meaning is the immediate context, not the entire text. Hence, Spenerian interpretation, to the extent that it is committed to localism, is in principle still bound by the constraints of constancy of meaning, but it is local constancy, not global. Nevertheless, the point of Pfeiffer's attack is clearly that consistency throughout an interpreted text is required for assigning meaning, and that relinquishing a principle of global constancy denies the possibility of achieving certainty in interpretation and renders the quest for meaning futile.

The second hermeneutical principle under attack is the idea that

[i]t is not necessary to prove that the passage under dispute must be understood in such and such a way, but it is sufficient to show that it could also be understood in such, or in a different, way, or that it is differently interpreted by others. (Pfeiffer 1696:13)

Here, Pfeiffer is striking at the heart of the matter under contention between the two theologians. Consider also Spener's own reading of their disagreement:

According to Mr. D. Pfeiffer, it should come to it that the conclusion states that *the text must be so understood*, which necessity is proven with some difficulty, but easily dismantled; for my part, there is no more need than to show that *the passage can*, without doing it violence, *be so understood*, for which *apodictica argumenta* are not exactly required. (Spener 1696:9)

What is at issue here is what we might term the *principle of open choice*: the choice between competing interpretations does not require evidence additional to the evidence establishing an interpretation as assertable. In other words, if there is a multiplicity of equally assertable interpretations, an interpreter does not have to give reasons, or rule other interpretations out, as grounds for their endorsement of one. Instead, any interpretation can legitimately be endorsed.

As we will soon be able to recognize, what justifies this principle is the idea that no such additional reasons can be given.

It will help clarify the principle of open choice if we consider what Spener argues must be satisfied for an interpretation to be a candidate for endorsement. For him, it is a necessary and sufficient condition for an interpretation to be assertable that there are no *media hermeneutica* against it (see Spener 1696:205-206). The concept of *media hermeneutica* denotes here the set of interpretive principles, rules, and criteria that an interpreter must follow in interpreting a text.<sup>10</sup> This array forms a set of sufficient and necessary conditions, call them *C*, which together establish an interpretation as assertable, i.e., a candidate for endorsement. We already encountered one such condition in the principle of localism just discussed. The principle of open choice can therefore be restated as follows: the endorsement of a candidate for endorsement does not require more evidence than that it satisfies *C*, which it does by definition. The necessary and sufficient conditions for assertability, therefore, are necessary and sufficient conditions for endorsement.

Pfeiffer's critique of this principle turns on three points. First, he argues that equating the conditions under which an interpretation can be asserted as plausible with the conditions under which it can be endorsed as true completely evacuates interpretation of any certainty and determinacy. He asks:

what sort of argument can this even yield: the passage is differently explained by others, e[rgo] this cannot be the correct meaning? For indeed there is no interpretation ... that does not have its patrons, sometimes even among the learned. (Pfeiffer 1696:14-15)

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<sup>10</sup> The concept was introduced by Dannhauer, who taught Spener, to replace and generalize the more common *media interpretationis*, which used to refer to the different principles of Scriptural interpretation endorsed by various confessions (Jäger 1974:44-49). After Dannhauer (1630), *media hermeneutica* came to denote a set of interpretive principles with general validity and applicability.

If failure of uniqueness suffices to reject any among the set of competing interpretations, 'then no single interpretation of a particular passage would be certain, instead all could be put in doubt' (Pfeiffer 1696:109) and nothing could ever determine an interpretation except, perhaps, a consensus among interpreters, which would not however preclude the possibility of error. Second, Pfeiffer argues that an interpreter's choice is never open in the relevant sense and that endorsing an interpretation does require providing a positive reason or piece of evidence that rules all competing interpretations out: 'when one undertakes to interpret a Scriptural passage, one must reject all other interpretations' (109). There is here the suggestion that the very assertability of multiple interpretations is itself a reason against endorsing any single one. Finally, Pfeiffer argues that the evidence required for endorsement is in principle available to an interpreter. Invoking Spener's assertability conditions, Pfeiffer contends that if

sometimes even learned people do not find the correct meaning, [this] does not always stem from the fact that the *media hermeneutica* or the explanatory means were not adequate, but because such people did not use them correctly, or not all. (Pfeiffer 1696:14-15)<sup>11</sup>

Pfeiffer argues therefore that meaning is in principle determinable. Moreover, his argument is immediately concerned with the possibility of hermeneutics, understood as a methodology of interpretation composed of principles, rules, and criteria, to determine meaning with certainty.

The third principle that Pfeiffer attacks is the claim that it is sufficient to cast doubt on an established interpretation to thereby lend credibility to a competing one, without the latter being in any way more certain. Pfeiffer relies here on passages such as the following, which refers to the most passionately contested point between the two theologians, their interpretation of Luke 18:8 (see Pfeiffer 1695:ch.1, for an overview):

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<sup>11</sup> Pfeiffer's suggestion that sometimes *media hermeneutica* are insufficient does not commit him to a skeptical position any more than his avowal that not all of Scripture is semantically perspicuous.

[T]hat the common opinion is false, I hold to be fully certain ... but I have conceded regarding my own interpretation, or that chosen by others, that I cannot assert it with equal certainty, yet I hold it to be the best among all others. (Spener 1696:22)

The principle that Pfeiffer attacks here seems a corollary of the principle of open choice: if alternative interpretations are available, and all have some countervailing evidence against them, additional reasons are not required as grounds for endorsing one interpretation among them. The interpreter's choice, instead, is open, as evidenced by Spener's preference for a view he concedes to have some doubt against it. Pfeiffer's critique of this corollary of the principle of open choice follows the same lines as his previous attack. He argues that rejecting a prevailing interpretation, 'common to all the theologians of our churches', on the grounds that it has some countervailing evidence against it (which he implicitly seems to grant) is illegitimate if that interpretation is replaced by one equally uncertain, and, therefore, no more assertable (see Pfeiffer 1696:17/24-25). Pfeiffer suggests that the two interpretations in question (the prevailing and Spener's own) are equivalent not only in the sense of being equally assertable, but also in the sense of both having a set of reasons for and against them which cannot be weighed against one another such that one emerges with a clear edge. Pfeiffer reiterates that Spener's principle completely negates the possibility of interpretation and forever precludes knowledge of the truth (19).

Before continuing with Pfeiffer's critique, I should point out some problems with the coherence of his reconstruction of Spener's position. Note, first, that the idea of countervailing evidence seems at odds with the Spenerian requirements for assertability, namely the condition that an interpretation have no *media hermeneutica* against it. To the extent that it is committed to the principle of open choice, the Spenerian account cannot accommodate countervailing evidence which only counts against endorsement, but not assertability. If assertability is

ascertained, additional facts simply do not matter for endorsement. Furthermore, Spener affirms this requirement for assertability precisely when presenting the interpretive dilemma Pfeiffer brings up here, stating that his own interpretation 'must be so constructed that no *medium hermeneuticum* stands against it, although not all can be used with equal assurance and clarity' (Spener 1696:205-206). While conceding that the application of interpretive principles is not always clear, Spener's view is that it does not count as evidence against endorsement.

But there is an additional problem, now in Pfeiffer's arguments against Spener's position: it is inconsistent to reject an interpretation on the basis of countervailing evidence and endorse another with equivalent countervailing evidence against it. For, either the evidence counts, or it does not. If it does, both alternatives must be rejected; if it does not, neither may legitimately be rejected. It is consistent with the Spenerian principle of open choice that such supposed evidence is simply irrelevant, and that endorsement does not require taking account of such reasons. This situation seems therefore to pose more problems for Pfeiffer than for Spener, and Pfeiffer's critique of this alleged third principle ought to be seen more as revealing complications in his own position than as an attack on Spener's.

Indeed, what is at issue here is a situation of equipollence, characterized by two equally assertable interpretations of Luke 18:8, and insufficient reasons for any given one to be endorsed. As already stated, this poses no problems for Spener. By contrast, Pfeiffer argues, consistently with his rejection of the principle of open choice, that the equal assertability of different interpretations does not constitute sufficient reason for rejecting any single one. However, he counsels endorsing the prevailing interpretation of the passage in question (see Pfeiffer 1695; and 1696:33-77). But does this not contradict his previous suggestion that the multiplicity of available interpretations constitutes a reason against endorsing any given one, that 'one must reject all other interpretations' (Pfeiffer 1696:109)?

Pfeiffer's account could be saved if he were seen to be relying here on an early version of the principle of doxastic conservatism, according to which, in the face of evidentially equivalent alternatives, one is justified in continuing to hold the belief one already holds (see 'differential conservatism' in Vahid 2004:102). Pfeiffer's view indeed seems to be that while the availability of multiple interpretations is not sufficient reason for rejecting any given one, it does not count as a reason against endorsing one of them if the interpreter already holds that interpretation to be true. While a potential appeal to a principle of doxastic conservatism would alleviate the contradiction of Pfeiffer's position, it is more difficult to see its standalone contribution, as such an appeal could lend support to any competing position, provided one already held it. Of course, Spener's principle of open choice already delivers him from the need for such a defense of his own view, as he can simply state that the endorsement of an interpretation requires no more than that it satisfy *C*. On this view, indeed, there would be nothing inherently preferable about the view one already had.

Let us suspend these questions and proceed with Pfeiffer's critique. The fourth principle he attacks is the claim that

[e]ven if some interpretations of Scripture are such that they cannot be overturned by all of reason's cunning, because they rest on immovable ground, one is still permitted not to take a stand on which one accepts and endorses and which not, but one can accept and endorse whichever one wishes. (Pfeiffer 1696:19-20)

Pfeiffer is referring here to Spener's praise of *Examen Antilogiae Simonianae* (Anonymous 1695), for which Spener wrote the preface.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the above passage paraphrases Spener's own words. He writes that the truth of the *Examen*

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<sup>12</sup> According to Heike Krauter-Dierolf (2005:195), the work may have been authored by Heinrich Georg Neuß (1654-1716).

would not be capable of being overturned by any *theologis*, even if all of reason's cunning were to be brought to bear on it, because it rests on God's word, and therefore on immovable ground. (Spener 1695:290)

What Pfeiffer takes issue with is the contradiction between this statement and Spener's assertions that he 'cannot claim to be fully assured of the certainty of each and every explanation' and that he does not 'agree with quite everything' in the *Examen* (excerpts from Spener's prefaces to the *Examen* and the *Halcyonia ecclesiae certo futura* (Anonymous 1696),<sup>13</sup> respectively; cited in Pfeiffer 1696:280-281). Due to this ambivalence, Pfeiffer 'cannot omit to make a note of Spener's *scepticismus exegeticus*, namely of how he ... does not wish to be held to the interpretations of this *autor*, whose book he nevertheless holds to be irrefutable' (Pfeiffer 1696:280).

The hermeneutical principle that Pfeiffer seems to be encircling here differs substantially from the principle of open choice. Whereas the principle of open choice states that no reasons are necessary to justify the endorsement of one among competing interpretations, this fourth principle suggests that no reasons could be given which would require an interpreter to endorse a particular interpretation. Pfeiffer is not only attributing an inconsistency to Spener here but seems to impute to him a view concerning the weakness of reason to prove something beyond doubt. For, if "irrefutability" does not necessitate endorsement, it is because the strength of even the best evidence is insufficient to provide warrant.

I want to claim that what is at stake here is what is commonly called the *principle of underdetermination*: interpretation is underdetermined by the evidence. The principle of underdetermination allows for the possibility at issue in Pfeiffer's critique on this point, in which a single rationally irrefutable interpretation is assertable, yet not endorsed by the

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<sup>13</sup> Possibly also authored by Neuß; see Krauter-Dierolf (2005:218).

interpreter. Given the principle of underdetermination, since all possible evidence necessarily underdetermines interpretation, no evidence can possibly necessitate endorsement. The interpreter can therefore freely choose which candidate to endorse, or indeed whether to endorse a candidate at all.

Pfeiffer continues to discuss three additional principles which, since they concern Scriptural interpretation exclusively, are of no direct philosophical relevance (see Pfeiffer 1696:20-24). The accuracy and pertinence of Pfeiffer's critique notwithstanding, surveying his side of the controversy with Spener shows much more clearly that Pfeiffer was not attacking uncertainty or doubt in the interpretation of Scriptural passages, despite the ambiguity of his initial position. Urged perhaps by the awkwardness of their initial debate, he revealed that he opposes exegetical skepticism as a philosophical position. We can now summarize it in the following argument:

- (1) There is a single true interpretation *I* of any sentence *S*.
- (2) *I* is a candidate for endorsement (*cfE*) if and only if it satisfies a set of conditions *C*.
- (3) *C* encompasses all the facts relevant to interpretation.
- (4) It is possible for a set of interpretations *I*<sub>1</sub>, *I*<sub>2</sub>, *I*<sub>3</sub>, ... *I*<sub>*n*</sub> of any *S* to all satisfy *C*.
- (5) If *I* does not satisfy *C*, it is not a *cfE*. [From (2).]
- (6) Among multiple *cfEs*, a single one is true. [From (1) and (4).]
- (7) Satisfaction of *C* is necessary but insufficient to endorse a *cfE*. [From (4), (5), and (6).]
- (8) Interpretation is underdetermined by the facts. [From (3) and (7): principle of underdetermination.]
- (9) No additional evidence is required for endorsing a *cfE* than satisfaction of *C* because no additional evidence is possible. [From (7) and (8): principle of open choice.]

The fundamental thesis of exegetical skepticism is (8), the principle of underdetermination, from which the principle of open choice follows. To delineate the skeptic's position more sharply, it will be useful to distinguish the principle of underdetermination from the thesis that there is no uniquely correct interpretation. This is the thesis of translational indeterminacy advanced by W.V.O. Quine, who famously argues that there are different ways of translating a language, but no fact of the matter about which translation is correct. What is at issue in this thesis is not knowledge, but ontology. As Quine explains it, 'the intended notion of matter of fact is not ... epistemological, not even a question of evidence; it is ontological, a question of reality' (Quine 1981:23). Pfeiffer, on the other hand, does not impute to Spener the view that there is nothing an interpretation can be right or wrong about. Rather, the central claim of the exegetical skepticism he attributes to Spener is that an interpreter will be unable to rationally discover the true meaning of a text or utterance because the evidence in principle available to her will always be compatible with competing interpretations. The interpreter, instead, is left before an open choice. Exegetical skepticism, therefore, is a type of *epistemological* skepticism and concerns the scope and limits of reason, and the extent of what an interpreter can know, not what there is to be known. The right interpretation cannot be ascertained because our best means for determining meaning uniquely are not up to the task.

But there is an apparent contradiction between (7) and (9) above. The problem is that, if satisfaction of *C* is necessary but not sufficient for endorsing a *cfE*, what seems to follow is not that an interpreter may endorse whichever candidate they please, but that they should endorse none. This seems to be more in line with an orthodox Pyrrhonian position, which, in cases of equipollence, counsels suspension of judgment as the sole rational response. The coherence of the position of exegetical skepticism may be rescued, however, by considering Quine's views

on translation once more. For Quine argues that, where multiple translation manuals fit all possible evidence equally well, if our choice were to be determined by anything, it 'would be determined simply by the accident of hitting upon one of the two systems of translation first' (Quine 1970:180). Since the evidence fits both, we cannot look to the evidence to enforce our adoption of one over the other.<sup>14</sup> Returning to the exegetical skeptic, she would have to hold, or so it appears, that endorsing an interpretation is parallel to the rational investigation of the evidence for it: it is not against reason, but outside reason. Crucially, this leaves the truth-value of ascriptions of meaning to meaningful utterances intact. Interpretations may be true or false, and there is a 'fact of the matter' about which. But that fact remains forever out of reach.

Throughout their subsequent dispute, Spener never acknowledged the position Pfeiffer attributed to him, and the question remains whether this attribution was justified. Nevertheless, through this controversy, *scepticismus exegeticus* found its way into the mainstream of German letters in the eighteenth century, fueling debates for decades to come. Although Pfeiffer's controversy with Spener was theological and turned primarily on Biblical exegesis, the former's critique of exegetical skepticism was not a critique of a skeptical exegesis. Instead, Pfeiffer outlined and opposed a view in the philosophy of interpretation concerning the nature, conditions, and limits of interpretation. In the following, I evaluate the effect this controversy had on the intellectual scene of Early Enlightenment Germany and reveal the general anxiety it created. Exegetical skepticism entered the scene as a feared, but misunderstood, threat, before reaching philosophical clarity in the 1730s.

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<sup>14</sup> It is well known that for Quine this entails the indeterminacy thesis, which would run against (1) above. But there is a way to preserve a commitment to the idea that our choice of which interpretation to endorse is underdetermined by the evidence, *and* the idea that what they interpret is invariant. I return to this point in 1.7.

## 1.4. Crisis and Disorientation

Already in 1702, there were voices lamenting the pervasive intrusion of exegetical skepticism in German letters and warning of a looming crisis which would later overrun Germany's learned journals. Writing in the weekly *Unschuldige Nachrichten...*, an unnamed author cries out: 'one cannot sufficiently bemoan the way in which *Scepticismus Exegeticus* is now entering our country almost everywhere. Unfortunately, we have not yet done what we were supposed to do in this respect' (Anonymous 1702:216-217). The author attributes the extensive rise of exegetical skepticism not to Biblical scholarship itself, but to bad scholarship (218). Specifically, they blame the improper investigation of the original Hebrew version, which would suffice to dispel any doubts (219). Thus, in one breath, the author blames bad Biblical criticism and reaffirms *sola scriptura* as a remedy against exegetical skepticism and interpretive ambiguity.

We may note straightaway that the term *scepticismus exegeticus* seems already to have lost its philosophical edge. It no longer describes a view regarding the relation between evidence and interpretive hypotheses, and therefore the possibility of certainty in interpretation, but the interpretability of particular passages. This misunderstanding would persist on the German scene for decades, and it is characteristic of the early part of the eighteenth century that *scepticismus exegeticus* is used to denote an uncertain or doubtful attitude in the interpretation of Scriptural passages, and to attack claims about the ambiguity and lack of transparency of the Holy Writ. This period will also see the emergence of several related terms, all used in the sense just defined.

A few years later, a review of Thomasius (1704-1707: vol. II) will support the idea that exegetical skepticism arises because of bad scholarship. The unnamed reviewer, critiquing an interpretive mistake, claimed that such carelessness in exegesis as displayed in this work may

produce a *scepticismus exegeticus* which can harm the interpreter himself and many more beside him (Anonymous 1705:430). Later, in 1716, an anonymous reviewer of Feller (1714-1718) will ascribe *pyrrhonismus philologicus* to Hermann von der Hardt, based on a letter to Leibniz published in the reviewed work. In this letter, the former had expressed skepticism about the Adamic language being Hebrew, as he believed it was not older than the exodus from Egypt (Anonymous 1716:148). Similarly, Johann Christoph Coler will ascribe *scepticismus exegeticus* to Canstein (1718) because his interpretation of Luke 3:16 left some matters in doubt (Coler 1721:457-458).

The association between biblical scholarship and accusations of exegetical skepticism will soon acquire a new target, namely Jacques Saurin (1677-1730). In a review of Saurin (1720-1730), an anonymous reviewer accuses him of 'exegetical Skepticism or Pyrrhonism' (Anonymous 1721:24).<sup>15</sup> Both the review and the work reviewed make it clear that *scepticismus* or *pyrrhonismus exegeticus* designate the undecidability of particular Scriptural passages. The reviewer's likely target are Saurin's remarks concerning the ambiguity of the holy language. When discussing various equally plausible interpretations of Exodus 32:4, Saurin concludes in fact that this clash of interpretations is an argument in favour of a "Critical Pyrrhonism", by which he means a suspension of judgement in a particular instance (Saurin 1720-1730:v.I:373). We should note that Saurin's claim concerns the contingent unavailability of sufficient evidence, not the insufficiency of all possible evidence.

It would not take long, however, for the haphazard use of such terms to be exposed and criticized. In a lengthy review of Johann Lorenz von Mosheim (1726-1731), the reviewer accused him of proximity to exegetical skepticism: 'Scepticismus exegeticus is indisputably something very bad, and dangerous. But pray tell: how far from it is this kind of explanation?'

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<sup>15</sup> Another reviewer, commenting on the German translation of this work, argues that the accusation is inappropriate (Anonymous 1723:569).

(Anonymous 1726:444). A few years later, von Mosheim will retort, exposing the vacuity of the widespread accusations of exegetical skepticism which condemn any interpreter lacking a dogmatic assurance in their own opinion, or merely promoting an unorthodox view:

Is he who explains in a new way those oracles ... about which interpreters differ among themselves guilty of exegetical skepticism? ... I do not understand in what sense he, who, in virtue of his modesty, calls his interpretations *divinations*, and then delivers himself and the judgement on those to wise and experienced men, can be said to be close to *exegetical skepticism*. ... This learned man [referring to the reviewer] does not think, does he, that those who, when it comes to more obscure passages, which interpreters explain in various ways, confidently assert that nothing is more certain than their own opinions ... are strangers to the house of *exegetical skepticism*? (von Mosheim 1731:62-63)

The extensive presence of this and other associated terms in the learned journals of the German *Frühaufklärung* testifies to the pervasive penetration of this question in the German-speaking realm, as well as their role in facilitating its spread. It is a symptom of a growing unease concerning Biblical interpretation, and certainty in interpretation more broadly. Regarding the latter, I would briefly note the persistent resistance to attempts at enriching and developing the hermeneutical instruments used in interpretation, as seen in the passage just quoted. This was not the only instance where conjecture and divination, as explicit hermeneutical devices, were regarded as heralds of exegetical skepticism.<sup>16</sup> The widespread use of such accusations, along with the opposition to hermeneutical developments, will soon compel theories of interpretation to address the threat of exegetical skepticism head on, devoting entire works to its definition and subsequent refutation.

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<sup>16</sup> Johann Christoph Wolf accuses Oeder (1729) of promoting exegetical skepticism precisely because of his use of the theory of conjecture in his interpretations (Wolf 1725-1735:v.III:preface).

## 1.5. Philosophical Clarity

In the third decade of the eighteenth century, three studies on exegetical skepticism were published in quick succession. Von Mosheim himself contributed to this topic with an academic piece (von Mosheim 1734), examining the extent to which various interpreters were rightly or wrongly accused of exegetical skepticism (according to Wolle 1736:159). More noteworthy, however, are Johann Heinrich Callenberg's *Commentatio de scepticismo exegetico* (1730) and Joachim Justus Rau's *Commentatio de pyrrhonismo hermeneutico* (1735), which represent the first explicit attempts to define and refute the type of skepticism discussed here as a general standalone view. Sections 1.5.1 and 1.5.2 will detail their attempts. To my knowledge, these three works – written during the third decade of the eighteenth century – are the only studies expressly dedicated to systematically defining this kind of skepticism in the early Enlightenment, and indeed ever since.<sup>17</sup>

### 1.5.1 Johann Heinrich Callenberg (1694-1760)

Completed in 1722 but published in 1730, Callenberg's *Commentatio de scepticismo exegetico* stands out for its scope and ambition, aiming to demonstrate that the hallmark of all heretical sects was their attack on Scripture. The work is divided into thirteen chapters: the first five address the nature, causes, support, effect, and remedies of exegetical skepticism, while the remaining eight trace the historical development of this view (1<sup>st</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries). This work

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<sup>17</sup> While several other authors will continue to make passing reference to exegetical skepticism even after the turn of the century, none will attempt to offer a systematic reconstruction of the view after Rau (1735). Instead, familiarity with the position will simply be assumed – e.g., in Wolle (1736) and Chladenius (1742); see 2.3.3.a – or the term will become a weapon in the service of discrediting one's theological opponent; see 1.6.

shows that, despite the apparent break with Pfeiffer's conception in the early part of the eighteenth century, exegetical skepticism as a philosophical position remained a relevant issue in the intervening period.

From the outset, Callenberg emphasizes the relevance and novelty of his work, asserting that no others had addressed the topic (see "Praefatio", np). His is indeed the first systematic and historical work on exegetical skepticism, though Callenberg credits his mentor, August Hermann Francke (1663-1727) – a Biblical scholar and disciple of Spener's – with encouraging the project. Despite this indirect link to Spener, and Callenberg's mention of a 'book on [Spener's] threefold skepticism', wrongly attributed to Anton Reiser (Callenberg 1730:11), Callenberg displays no knowledge of Pfeiffer (1696). This renders the continuity between the two accounts all the more significant.

Callenberg characterizes exegetical skepticism as a species of theological skepticism concerning the authority and meaning of Scripture (Callenberg 1730:12). Before establishing the object of his study in more detail, however, Callenberg exposes the misuse of the term in theological debates. He notes, for instance, that the label is misattributed to some interpreters simply because they acknowledge their ignorance regarding the true meaning of certain passages and, comparing various interpretations, leave the choice open to their readers (12). Additionally, he distinguishes exegetical skepticism from the alleged tactic of atheists who use the cover of skepticism to obscure their true motives. Thus, instead of rejecting Christianity and the Scripture openly, they take on a skeptical attitude and attack its ambiguity.

Callenberg argues that true exegetical skepticism can be taken in a wider and a narrower sense. In the wider sense, exegetical skepticism includes doubt on the divine origin of Scripture, which Callenberg describes as a skepticism regarding the material object of interpretation. Biblical scholars who argue that the Hebrew or Greek codices were corrupted either by the malice or the fallibility of the scribes, those who prefer the Hebrew codex to the translation, or

who correct the transmitted version accordingly, are examples of exegetical skeptics in this wider sense (Callenberg 1730:15). Callenberg, however, adopts a formal point of view and considers exegetical skepticism in its narrower sense, as the claim that 'nothing ... can be understood with certainty in divine scripture: so great is its obscurity, even in those [passages] which we rightly call the clearest' (12). The distinction at play here seems to be between a skepticism motivated by historical or theological concerns, and another, more philosophical stance, rooted not in ambiguities in the text, but in considerations about interpretation more generally.

Callenberg's characterization of exegetical skepticism displays an understanding of this position very much in keeping with Pfeiffer's original account. The narrower sense of exegetical skepticism, as a thesis not about the origin of Scripture but about the uncertainty and inconclusiveness of its interpretation, does not immediately impose restrictions on its scope. Indeed, it is consistent with this definition that exegetical skepticism pertains to all interpretation and does not derive from causes exclusive to Scripture, despite Callenberg's intention to expose it as a source of heresy. Consequently, Pfeiffer's outline of exegetical skepticism, as epitomized in the thesis of the underdetermination of interpretation by the facts, is compatible with Callenberg's definition.

There is additional continuity with Pfeiffer's conception in the connection between theological heresy and the attack on Scripture (see Pfeiffer 1696:7-9) and the definition of exegetical skepticism as a species of theological skepticism. Most importantly, however, for both theologians, exegetical skepticism is not a position entailed by any specific exegetical hypothesis and does not pertain to the interpretation of particular passages. Instead, as we saw above, it is the view that interpretation is in principle indeterminable because the facts that determine an interpretation as correct are unknowable. We can conclude that, despite the haphazard and polemical use of the term in contemporary theological debates, exegetical

skepticism as the thesis of interpretational underdetermination remained a live and persistent issue in the early part of the eighteenth century.

While Callenberg's work reflects the era's characteristic anxiety about religious truth and the need for its firm grounding, it also demonstrates an awareness of the need to clarify the position of exegetical skepticism, identifying its causes, presenting the arguments in its favour, and, most importantly, refuting it and proposing remedies for it.

### 1.5.2. Joachim Justus Rau (1713-1745)

Rau's *Commentatio de pyrrhonismo hermeneutico* (1735) is only a portion of a larger projected work. The full treatise would have encompassed three additional sections, one establishing the certainty of Scriptural interpretation, another refuting the foundations of skepticism, and a final historical section. Only the initial part was ever published, addressing the nature, causes, dangers, and promoters of what Rau calls *hermeneutical Pyrrhonism*. In this work, the form of meaning skepticism central to this chapter finds its clearest articulation, while also becoming more distinctly Pyrrhonian. Let me address this latter point first.

Rau opens his work by acknowledging a crisis in Biblical interpretation: 'It is of course a strange thing ... that today there is so little agreement among the renowned interpreters of the holy scriptures, that one seems to the other to pave the way for *exegetical skepticism*' (Rau 1735:1). After giving a brief overview of such accusations in theological dissertations – some of which we have already seen – Rau adds that 'the learned journals are full of examples' as well (3). Unlike Callenberg, however, Rau's primary focus is not theological. Instead, one of the main purposes of this work, and the one I will focus on here, is terminological: to introduce and discuss an original distinction between *exegetical* and *hermeneutical* Pyrrhonism.

But first, it is worth pausing to examine Rau's shift from *scepticismus* to *Pyrrhonismus*. What stands out in this shift is Rau's effort to underscore how these terms, though often used interchangeably in the period, represent a distinction without a difference. Rau devotes significant attention to defining Pyrrhonism, arguing against its characterization as an epistemic virtue – a reasonable stance between the extremes of dogmatism and self-defeating skepticism.<sup>18</sup> Instead, he disputes the claim that Pyrrhonism is a kind of 'educated doubt' and describes it instead as the 'art of debating on both sides, of not deciding anything' (Rau 1735:19), epitomized in the thesis that contrary or conflicting statements can be equally probable (21). Specifically, he defines Pyrrhonism as the view which 'denies that anything can be defined in such a way that no opposite proposition, or at least no different one, may be equally true' (23).<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, knowledge of the truth can never be attained, and inquiry must always end with a suspension of judgment (21). This emphasis on *epochē* implicitly rejects the principle of open choice that was the target of Pfeiffer's critique of Spener's alleged exegetical skepticism. In doing so, Rau dissolves the tension at the heart of that position.

It is at this point that Rau introduces his distinction between *hermeneutical* and *exegetical* Pyrrhonism. He begins by noting that the Greek *hermēneus* (ἑρμηνεύς) refers to someone who 'narrates the sayings of another in words more suitable to our understanding' (Rau 1735:24). Accordingly, hermeneutics is defined as the 'art which provides the laws or method which

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<sup>18</sup> We may suppose that Rau's *Commentatio de pyrrhonismo hermeneutico* takes aim at Friedrich Wilhelm Bierling's conception of Pyrrhonism in his *Commentatio de pyrrhonismo historico* (1724). In that work, Bierling sought to portray Pyrrho as a proponent of a tame, moderate, and reasonable skepticism, and to establish *historical Pyrrhonism* as a scientific methodological approach to the study of history (see Matytsin 2016:115-118/255-259). Rau (1735:19-20), however, ascribes this favorable view of Pyrrhonism only to Thomasius.

<sup>19</sup> Rau's construal of the Pyrrhonian position here seems at odds with the tenor of his argument, reading more as a statement of relativism than skepticism. For, if contradictory statements could be 'equally true', it would seem to follow that one should believe both, rather than suspend judgment. However, Rau's statements elsewhere show that his concern is not with the truth of contradictory statements but with their plausibility or, as he puts it, their probability. Consequently, a more accurate rendering of the skeptical view he opposes is that contradictory propositions can be equally well-supported by argument. This interpretation aligns with the Pyrrhonian emphasis on *equipollence*.

someone must follow in explaining another's speech, in order to discover their intention' (*ibid.*). *Hermeneutical* Pyrrhonism, in the context of Biblical interpretation, is thus characterized as the view that 'calls into doubt, or denies completely, the certainty of this knowledge [obtained] in virtue of that art which prescribes the laws to be observed in expounding the speech of the holy spirit, so that the sense intended by God may be defined' (*ibid.*).

*Exegetical* Pyrrhonism, on the other hand, is a different view. According to Rau, an exegete is a person who writes commentaries on other authors, or interprets matters related to the worship of the gods (Rau 1735:24). He understands exegetical Pyrrhonism as pertaining exclusively to Biblical interpretation and holding that a certain and determinate interpretation of Scripture is impossible. Rau sharpens the contrast between the two positions by again invoking the idea of interpretive rules. For him, exegetical Pyrrhonism is a form of skepticism that concerns only the application of such rules in the practice of Biblical exegesis. In contrast, hermeneutical Pyrrhonism is driven by the view that 'the laws of interpretation themselves have no value, and no indubitable principles can be established' regarding interpretation generally (25). Whereas both the exegetical and the hermeneutical Pyrrhonist argue that Biblical interpretation is indeterminate, the former grounds his thesis in perceived ambiguities or difficulties in the Holy Writ. The hermeneutical Pyrrhonist, on the other hand, argues that interpretation is uncertain because the principles and rules by which interpretations are reached, and which therefore ground their epistemic status, are themselves uncertain. Consequently, hermeneutical Pyrrhonism is not limited to Biblical interpretation but extends to all forms of interpretation of written speech.

Note that, in his description of hermeneutical Pyrrhonism, Rau characterizes the skeptic as implicitly anticipating an objection to their position. If the skeptic were perceived as merely questioning the certainty of interpretations obtained 'in virtue of that art which prescribes the laws to be observed in expounding ... speech' (Rau 1735:24), they would be vulnerable to the

challenge that such a view rests on flawed interpretive principles. Such a challenge reflects elements of the Pfeiffer-Spener controversy. Rau's hermeneutical Pyrrhonist, on the other hand, implicitly appeals to a well-known weapon in the skeptic's arsenal: the problem of the criterion.<sup>20</sup> In their reply to the Pfeifferian objection that certainty can be achieved in interpretation through the application of the right principles, the Pyrrhonist will question the criterion by which the anti-skeptic grounds such certainty. In other words, they question the epistemic status and validity of the rules and principles of interpretation. Hermeneutical Pyrrhonism immediately thus emerges as a more radical position than the exegetical skepticism Pfeiffer attributed to Spener. Recall that, in Spenerian exegetical skepticism, conditions *C* functioned as necessary but insufficient criteria for adjudicating between competing interpretations, guiding us toward the one true interpretation without guaranteeing its attainment. Rau's construal of hermeneutical Pyrrhonism radicalizes this position by stripping *C* of any utility. Consequently, Pfeiffer's appeal to different hermeneutical principles entirely misses the mark. The new challenge posed by the hermeneutical Pyrrhonist, then, is to establish the epistemic foundations of interpretation in a way that does not beg the question of the criterion.

Rau's distinction between hermeneutical and exegetical Pyrrhonism marks a significant turning point in the debate over skepticism about meaning during the German Enlightenment. For the first time, it expressly reached the level of a general philosophical view, distinct from a skepticism that primarily, or even exclusively, concerned Biblical interpretation. While Pfeiffer and Callenberg viewed exegetical skepticism as a species of theological skepticism that implicitly extended to all interpretation, Rau's hermeneutical Pyrrhonism is a hermeneutical thesis that is explicitly general in scope.

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<sup>20</sup> See Popkin (2003:c1) on the history of the problem of the criterion in connection with the epistemic status of religious knowledge.

## 1.6. Aftermath

Unfortunately, Rau's articulation of hermeneutical Pyrrhonism as a philosophical position had little measurable influence on subsequent uses of the term. Although such terms continued to appear in academic dissertations and book reviews, the same confusion about their philosophical meaning persisted as before the 1730s.<sup>21</sup> Despite the concerted efforts of Callenberg and Rau to refine and clarify the position first outlined by Pfeiffer, terms like *scepticismus exegeticus*, *pyrrhonismus exegeticus*, and *pyrrhonismus hermeneuticus* remained primarily tools for polemical accusations against theological opponents. Over time, these terms gradually fell out of use. Nevertheless, while the position itself was not further elaborated, it played a crucial role – as a view assumed to be familiar – in the subsequent development of hermeneutics. Callenberg's and Rau's efforts to invalidate it were later advanced by Christoph Wolle (1736) and, more significantly, by Crusius, who recognized exegetical skepticism as a challenge that extended to all interpretation and explicitly set out to refute it.

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<sup>21</sup> As lack of space prohibits a more detailed treatment of these works, I refer the reader to several characteristic examples: a review of Chrysander (1746) in "Helmstädtische Sachen" (Anonymous 1746), Huth (1750:2), Heumann (1750:823–824), Besenbeck (1759:viii-viii), Müller (1762:82-8fn.i), and Breitingner (1776:72-73). "*Pyrrhonismus exegeticus*" makes a particularly noteworthy appearance in Königsmann (1754), where exegetical Pyrrhonism is explicitly endorsed. Here, critiquing Luther's translation of Acts 20:35, Königsmann acknowledges that he is calling into question a common view, but argues instead in favor of 'the habit of *exercising doubt in scriptural explanations*, (*pyrrhonismum exegeticum*) so long as it does not run riot and goes beyond its target', which he sees as 'a good means through which unknown truths can often be discovered' (1754:130). This conception of *pyrrhonismus exegeticus* stands in clear opposition to Rau's and instead recalls the favorable view of *pyrrhonismus historicus* championed by Bierling, seemingly having the same instrumental value. Indeed, Königsmann's understanding of exegetical Pyrrhonism contrasts so sharply with the skeptical stance discussed thus far, that those opposing the latter might readily embrace the former. Recall, for instance, Pfeiffer's endorsement of Spener's claims that "reasonable doubt" was often the only path to certainty. Callenberg, too, argued in favor of legitimate doubt ("legitima dubitatio"), a virtue he considered divinely mandated, and which he positioned between the vices of true skepticism and credulity (Callenberg 1730:3).

Consequently, an acute awareness of that threat remained on the German intellectual landscape. In fact, it grew as the threat itself intensified. What began as a controversy about the possibility of an accurate interpretation of the Bible gradually expanded into a pressing concern about the very viability of hermeneutics as a (philosophical) discipline. A pivotal figure in this development is Johann Martin Chladenius, who set himself the task of separating hermeneutics from its traditional place in logic and establishing it as an independent branch of inquiry. A necessary step in this project, however, was confronting the challenge of hermeneutical skepticism. Chladenius (1742:§§735-753) identifies and categorizes several forms of skepticism that obstruct the establishment of hermeneutics as a standalone discipline:

- (1) Skepticism about the certainty of understanding specific texts – corresponding to what Rau termed exegetical Pyrrhonism and Callenberg referred to as exegetical skepticism *usu verborum latiori*.
- (2) Skepticism about the certainty of understanding texts in general – aligned with Pfeiffer’s notion of exegetical skepticism and Callenberg’s exegetical skepticism *sensu stricto*.
- (3) Skepticism about the possibility of achieving certainty in the art of interpretation – what Rau defined as hermeneutical Pyrrhonism.

For Chladenius, the task of founding hermeneutics as a separate science must 'deduce, on the one hand, the certainty of the understanding that a reader or hearer obtains from speeches and texts, and, on the other, the certainty of the rules of interpreting, or of the art of interpretation, from clear and certain grounds' (1742:§735). His project demonstrates that it was precisely in response to the threat posed by exegetical skepticism that hermeneutics, as both a scientific and a philosophical form of inquiry, was compelled to address the question of its own grounding

so as to secure its autonomy and validity. Thus, I conclude that the emergence of hermeneutics as a distinct philosophical discipline coincided with, and was partly driven by, its reinforcement against the challenges of exegetical skepticism.<sup>22</sup>

## 1.7. Exegetical and Semantic Skepticism

I began this chapter by claiming that its subject matter has a philosophically significant connection to recent views in the philosophy of language and interpretation. Terms such as “skepticism about meaning”, “meaning skepticism”, or “semantic skepticism” gained prominence in analytic philosophy following Kripke (1982) and have since been retroactively applied to certain views in Quine (Miller 2006), Putnam (Jorgensen 2010), Davidson (Kusch 2006), and Wittgenstein (Kripke 1982). Another related term, “hermeneutical skepticism”, denotes a view attributed to Hans-Georg Gadamer (Hirsch 1965; 1967; Apel 1980), among others. These diverse positions, emerging from very distinct philosophical traditions, form a cluster unified by the central thesis that interpretation – for reasons constitutive of language and the conditions for its intelligent use – is indeterminate: narrowing interpretations to a single, determinate meaning is fundamentally impossible.

However, one might object that this juxtaposition is misleading. Indeed, I have drawn a sharp distinction between the view that has been the focus of this chapter and another it might readily evoke: Quine’s indeterminacy thesis. I noted that exegetical skepticism, unlike the indeterminacy of translation, involves an *epistemological* thesis rather than an *ontological* one. Consequently, it might seem inappropriate to discern any philosophically significant similarity between exegetical skepticism and modern varieties of meaning skepticism. However, not all

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<sup>22</sup> As I will show, exegetical skepticism also had a very important influence in the development of the theory of hermeneutical probability; see 2.3.3.a and chapter 3.

such varieties adhere to the ontological implications of Quine's thesis. Davidson, for instance, who shared Quine's commitment to indeterminacy throughout his career, explains that, for him, 'indeterminacy does not threaten the reality of what is described' (Davidson 1999:596) and thus has 'no ontological significance whatever' (597; see Davidson 1993). Davidson instead understands the indeterminacy of interpretation as involving only an *epistemological* dimension, which he illustrates by comparing interpretation to the measurement of weight. Just as there exists variation among the systems for measuring weight, so too there exists variation among the ways in which we can interpret someone's speech. But if switching from kilograms to pounds gives us no reason to question the reality of what we measure, then the change in translation manual should not lead us to conclude that there is no such thing as meaning. There is therefore a distinction to be made, with respect to what I call "skepticism about meaning", between an epistemological skepticism regarding our ability to know the determinate meaning of texts with certainty, and a skepticism that calls into question the very idea of determinate meaning.<sup>23</sup> The former, rather than the latter, has been the subject of this chapter.

## 1.8. Conclusion

My aim in this chapter has been to provide a reconstruction of exegetical skepticism, to begin charting some of its influence on hermeneutical thought in the German Enlightenment, and to argue for its philosophical relevance by bringing it into contact with more recent views. What

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<sup>23</sup> I note that Davidson does *not* endorse semantic skepticism – whether "ontological" or "epistemological" – though many have taken his views to be indistinguishable from (Luper-Foy 1987), or 'near-identical' to (Kusch 2006), (a version of) semantic skepticism. I do not wish to engage with this question. My intention, in appealing to Davidson, is merely to show the philosophical benefit of linking exegetical skepticism with more modern versions of semantic skepticism. The chief difference between Davidson and the exegetical skeptic is that, unlike the skeptic, Davidson decouples uniqueness and correctness. Thus, Davidson holds that there is no uniquely correct way interpreting discourse. Instead, 'many theories will do equally well' (Davidson 1979:19). The exegetical skeptic, if properly so-called, must hold (1) above (p.26), and derive failure of correctness – and thus of understanding – from failure to secure uniqueness.

I wish to carry forward into the next chapters is what I take to be exegetical skepticism's most important challenge, and that is the problem of the criterion for interpretation. This will be the fulcrum of the following investigation. In the next chapter, I will formalize the problem and start on the task of articulating a response.

## Chapter 2

# Hermeneutical Probability: A Problematic, but Promising Response to Skepticism

### 2.1. Introduction

1747 marks the date of a curious clash. On the one hand, it is the year in which Martin Chladenius' efforts to reinforce the new science of hermeneutics (among others) against skeptical attack acquired a new target in what he called 'the idol of the age', the doctrine of *probability* (Chladenius 1747; German transl. 1748). The view that most of human knowledge was not certain but could at best attain the status of probability and was consequently 'connected with some degree of uncertainty', is what he held responsible for the rapid spread of hermeneutical and especially historical Pyrrhonism among his compatriots (Chladenius 1748:c1:§9). Moreover, he argued that it amounted to a new form of skepticism.<sup>24</sup> However, that very same year, in his *Weg zur Gewißheit und Zuverlässigkeit der menschlichen Erkenntniß* (1747), Christian August Crusius would deploy and defend the theory of what he called

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<sup>24</sup> Chladenius 1748:c1:§9; see also Thorschmid's note, who translated and annotated the work, on p.7-8: 'Consequently, the kind of Pyrrhonism by which, under the name of probability, the certainty of all events in which one either is or was not present is denied, is an utterly new invention.' Recent scholarship has also drawn attention to the alliance between skeptical arguments and the theory of probability that emerged as a form of *reasonable* or *mitigated skepticism* in the Enlightenment (see Matytsin 2016:33-4/118-22/141-44/174-181/151-53; and Popkin 2006:435-37).

*hermeneutical probability*, yet not in the service of promoting skepticism about interpretation, but precisely in order to refute it.

In this chapter, I aim to examine (1) whether the doctrine of hermeneutical probability, a specimen of a much wider probabilistic epistemology, is a surrogate of exegetical skepticism, and, if not, (2) whether it can adequately respond to it. To do so, I first (section 2.2) question some assumptions emerging in recent scholarship concerning the concept of hermeneutical probability under investigation. Secondly, I re-examine the original formulation of this doctrine in the work of Christian Thomasius (sections 2.3.1 and 2.3.2) which will form the background for my subsequent analysis of some critiques of hermeneutical probability as a substitute for exegetical skepticism. I argue (section 2.3.3.a) that such accounts accurately identify inconsistencies in the theory of hermeneutical probability, but that Thomasius' original view does not amount to exegetical skepticism. Then (section 2.3.3.b), I raise some additional concerns about Thomasian epistemology in general but show them not to affect his hermeneutical account. Finally (section 2.3.4), I formalize the exegetical skeptic's problem of the criterion for interpretation and test Thomasius' potential reply to it, arguing that his project fails in this regard. Despite these negative results, however, I will in outline have restored the viability of the Thomasian hermeneutical project, providing an analysis which will lay the foundation for my examination of the originality of Crusius's reply to exegetical skepticism (in chapter 3).

## 2.2. Hermeneutics in the early German Enlightenment

The usual way of mapping the philosophical landscape of the *Frühaufklärung* marks out a Wolffian and a Thomasian<sup>25</sup> province, they being the two 'founders' of the German Enlightenment (Beck 1969). This historiographical division reflects the historical reality of this embryonic period, characterized by a 'turbulence of bitterly opposed programs for the cultivation of human reason' led by Christian Wolff (1679-1754) and Christian Thomasius (1655-1728) respectively (Hunter 2001:2).<sup>26</sup> So great was the turmoil, in fact, and so sharp the line of bisection, that several scholars have argued in favor of abandoning the idea of a unified German Enlightenment, proposing instead a fragmented picture of two rival Enlightenments (see Schmidt-Biggemann 1988; Beck 1993; Hunter 2001; Koch 2006).

From a philosophical perspective, this blanket parceling of matters as either Wolffian or Thomasian radiates from the metaphysical and epistemological pivot of the historical polemics towards issues closer to the periphery of their philosophical programs. One such marginal sector of inquiry – only relative to its distance from the core controversy, not its philosophical importance – is the general theory of interpretation. Though research into the concept of hermeneutical probability in the eighteenth century is still at its inception, the emerging view in recent scholarship is that the theory of hermeneutical probability – one of the central and most controversial topics of the logical treatises of this period in Germany (Danneberg 1994a:27; Spoerhase 2010:253) – is a more or less uniform account developed within the

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<sup>25</sup> The Thomasian tradition customarily includes Johann Franz Budde (1667-1729), Joachim Lange (1670-1744), Andreas Rüdiger (1673-1731), August Friedrich Müller (1684–1761), Adolph Friedrich Hoffmann (1707-1741) and Christian August Crusius (1715-1775). There is however some debate regarding the adequacy of this designation. Others prefer to speak of a “Thomasian-pietistic tradition” (Carboncini 1989) or of a Rüdiger-school, with roots in Thomasius' teachings (Scholz 2016; Spoerhase 2009).

<sup>26</sup> We should be cautious not to overestimate the range of the Thomasian project. Being primarily a legal scholar, Thomasius did not build a philosophical 'school' in the same way that Wolff did, despite his great influence (see Tonelli 1971; Bühler & Cataldi Madonna 1994; Grunert, Hahmann & Stiening 2021).

Thomasian tradition, and so restricted to it (see Bühler & Cataldi Madonna 1994; Danneberg 1994a; 2009; Alexander 1996), one that emerged, furthermore, as a remedy to exegetical skepticism (Spoerhase 2009; 2010).

An advantage of the emerging view is the ready-made explanation it can provide for the 1747 clash. A Wolffian and a Thomasian respectively, the conflict between Chladenius and Crusius around the concept of hermeneutical probability may be regarded as a matter of the rivalry between the two schools.<sup>27</sup> Seen as an outgrowth of the opposition between the optimistic Wolffians and the 'gloomy'<sup>28</sup> Thomasians, Chladenius' polemic would then not be an attack on skepticism, but on Thomasian epistemology. This perspective yields a charitable explanation for what might initially be discounted as straightforwardly wrong: Chladenius' labelling of hermeneutical probability – the very doctrine meant to refute exegetical skepticism – as a form of Pyrrhonism. This way of untangling the conflict, however, obscures the virtues of Chladenius' critique. As I will go on to argue, it is only by acknowledging this critique that we can understand how hermeneutical probability could become, in Crusius' *Weg* (1747), a real remedy against exegetical skepticism. This involves, first, a critical re-evaluation of the emerging view.

In the next section, I argue against the emerging view on the basis of its historical inaccuracy. I claim that the theory of hermeneutical probability was not restricted to a particular tradition and that the Wolffians-vs.-Thomasians nomenclature has the effect of obscuring both the convergence between some members of either tradition, as well as some fissures within the 'Thomasian' tradition in particular. Moreover (section 2.3.3), I will show that the doctrine of

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<sup>27</sup> However, some scholars have recently expressed doubt about the adequacy of incorporating Crusius exclusively within the Thomasian tradition; see Cataldi Madonna (2000; 2021:c.5); Prunea-Bretonnet (2021).

<sup>28</sup> See Spoerhase (2010:255): 'In comparison to the epistemological optimism of Christian Wolff and his school, Thomasius and the group called the 'Thomasians' maintain a gloomier perspective of the intellectual powers of rational beings.'

hermeneutical probability predates the emergence of exegetical skepticism, and so could not have been developed in order to refute it (though it *was* later developed for anti-skeptical purposes (see chapter 3)).

### 2.2.1. Hermeneutical probability

It speaks in favor of the emerging view that the project of a probability-based general theory of interpretation first surfaced in Christian Thomasius' work. Specifically, it emerged against the background of Thomasius' bifurcation of human knowledge into two separate domains. What we find in Thomasius is an attempt to legitimize – alongside *demonstrable* knowledge – a form of knowledge he maintained made up the majority of what we can claim to know, and which formed moreover a necessary part of science: *probable* knowledge (see Danneberg 1994a; 2009; Alexander 1996). While credit for the concept of *probabilitas hermeneutica* goes to Thomasius' disciple Andreas Rüdiger – who introduced it in his *De sensu veri et falsi* (1709), where he distinguished between five separate categories of probability – it was Thomasius who first advanced the idea that interpretation was one of the several sectors of human knowledge in which probability was the best that could be obtained.<sup>29</sup> There are several reasons, however, for thinking that the concept of hermeneutical probability gradually became detached from its Thomasian source.

A first clue comes from philosophical dictionaries and lexica of the period, which supply a convenient, if not completely accurate, means of surveying philosophical views in early eighteenth-century Germany. Of great importance here is Walch's *Philosophisches Lexicon* (1726), which connects interpretation with probable knowledge already in the 'Auslegungs-

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<sup>29</sup> Thomasius sometimes credits the Dutch legal scholar Hugo Grotius with inspiring his probabilistic hermeneutics (see Thomasius 1688:222; and 1690, cited in Scholz 1994:160). On Grotius' influence on Thomasius' hermeneutics, see Danneberg 1997:260-297.

Kunst' entry. Here, Walch maintains that in matters of interpretation 'we can seldom achieve more than a probability' and have thus no possibility of attaining an 'infallible truth' (Walch 1726:158). The cursory nature of Walch's assertion, his only statement linking the theory of interpretation and probability in this entry, is already an important indicator of the spread of such a connection in the period. Furthermore, Walch additionally discusses hermeneutical probability as a standalone concept, as part of his 'Wahrscheinlichkeit' entry. Of note in this entry is that the concept is seemingly treated independently of any philosophical tradition. While it is true that Walch cites Thomasius's general conception of probability, and that his discussion explicitly adheres to Rüdiger (1709) and Müller (1733)<sup>30</sup> (both Thomasian philosophers), this gives us no reason to suspect partisanship on Walch's part. Indeed, throughout his *Lexicon*, Walch gives impartial treatment to some of the more contested matters between Wolff and Thomasius' growing following. For instance, he presents both sides of their main point of disagreement, concerning the role of syllogism in philosophy (see the 'Syllogismus' entry). Furthermore, Walch even defends aspects of Wolff's system against some Thomasian criticisms, for instance Wolff's conception of philosophy as *Weltweißheit*, understood as the 'science of the possible' (see the 'Welt-Weisheit' entry).<sup>31</sup>

Another good survey of *Aufklärung* philosophical debates is the *Grosses vollständiges Universallexicon*, published by Johann Heinrich Zedler in 68 volumes between 1731 and 1754. Though it draws significantly on Walch (1726), the *Universallexicon's* much lengthier discussion of hermeneutical probability as part of the general entry on probability is no less important. Here, the author also acknowledges a debt to Rüdiger (1709) and Müller (1733),

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<sup>30</sup> First edition 1728. While this work postdates the publication of Walch's *Lexicon* by two years, individual chapters had already been printed and were circulating, especially among Müller's students, by the time Walch finished compiling his dictionary (see Zenker 2008:9).

<sup>31</sup> In particular, Walch addressed Janson (1713), published under pseudonym in the *Neue Bibliothec*, a frequent mouthpiece for the Thomasians' anti-Wolffian polemics. Walch attributes the text to Christoph August Heumann (1681-1764) (Walch 1726:2888). For more context, see Arndt (1989:279-281).

works claimed to contain the most detailed analyses of the theory of probability. Zedler's dictionary additionally touches on hermeneutical probability in its entry on "hermeneutics" (misprinted 'Hermenraetic'). What is noteworthy about this entry is that it presents no rival account to the doctrine of hermeneutical probability, outlining thus a conception on which a theory of interpretation is necessarily a theory of the *probability* of interpretation. This position contrasts sharply with the view upheld by Walch (1726), where interpretations frequently, but seemingly not by default, had probable status. Whereas Walch implicitly leaves open the possibility of achieving certainty in interpretation, this entry does not. What may be able to explain the conclusiveness of this account is Müller's likely authorship of the 'Hermenraetic' entry (see Dreitzel 1994:122). Its alignment with the Thomasian view would then not be conspicuous. What is remarkable, however, independently of its author, but even more so if the author was Müller, is that the *Universallexicon* cites both Thomasius *and* Wolff as authorities in support of this probabilistic conception (Zedler's *Universallexicon*, v.12:1730).

A brief survey of hermeneutical treatises by philosophers associated either with the Thomasian or with the Wolffian tradition confirms that the concept of hermeneutical probability crossed the boundary between the two schools. Not only does it play a role in the work of several Wolffians,<sup>32</sup> but recent scholarship suggests that the attribution of a theory of hermeneutical probability to Wolff himself in the *Universallexicon* may not have been inaccurate (see Cataldi Madonna 1994:33; 2018:52-3). I argue therefore, against the view emerging in recent scholarship, that while the concept may be specific of members of the Thomasian tradition, it is not sufficient for differentiating them from their Wolffian counterparts. Instead, the connection between a theory of interpretation and the theory of

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<sup>32</sup> See, for instance: Reusch (1734:§673-687), who cites Rüdiger's theory of probability; Zur Linden (1735; see Cataldi Madonna 2018:49-55); Wolle (1736:c.1:§§2-4), a student of Rüdiger's; Ahlwardt (1741:cs.16-21; see 2.3.3.a); Pfeiffer (1743:c.17); Reimarus (1756); Meier (1757; see Alexander 1996:151-55; Danneberg 1994b:149-54); Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten (1769; see Danneberg 1994b).

probability seems to have been well entrenched in Enlightenment hermeneutics by 1747, irrespective of philosophical tradition (see also Cataldi Madonna 2018:52-3).

Against this more nuanced historical picture, Chladenius' attack on an 'idol of the age' that 'distorts and infects everything in advance' (Chladenius 1748:c1:§10), if not motivated by school membership, seems more acute than exaggerated. It is for this and the above reasons that Chladenius' critique of this doctrine deserves closer consideration. But first, we must examine the original formulation of the doctrine of hermeneutical probability in the work of Christian Thomasius.

### 2.3. Christian Thomasius' theory of interpretation

Christian Thomasius (1655-1728) was responsible for one of the two directions the Enlightenment took in Germany: the 'Pietistic Enlightenment' (Beck 1993), the 'civil enlightenment' (Hunter 2001), or simply the 'Thomasian Enlightenment' (Koch 2006). While not a philosopher by profession, but a jurist, Thomasius' influence and teachings would still be felt in Kant's philosophical environment (see Serck-Hanssen 2003:12).

Thomasius' enduring engagement with issues of textual interpretation, a concern that surfaces in much of his writing,<sup>33</sup> is primarily connected to his background in jurisprudence. Indeed, in his *Introductio ad Philosophiam aulicam* (1688), it is chiefly the discipline of jurisprudence, along with theology, that he credits with advancing the doctrine of interpretation. According to Thomasius, however, hermeneutics is a discipline that belongs properly to philosophy, in particular to logic, as it involves the 'prudence in understanding the mind of others' (Thomasius 1688:220-224; Germ. transl. 1710:266-270).

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<sup>33</sup> See Danneberg (1997:257-260) for an overview of the main texts.

What secures hermeneutics its place in logic is its essential connection to reasoning. Indeed, Thomasius emphasizes the social and testimonial<sup>34</sup> origins of thought and reasoning:

Thought consists of internal discourse, but this presupposes an external discourse ... which is a sign of the thought of others. Hence it follows that children first grasp what *others* think about the essence of things, and only then can they themselves think what to say. (Thomasius 1691b:c13:§§7-8; transl. Beck 1969:250)

Of course, some reasoning *is* necessary for interpreting, since interpretation requires the ability to 'investigate the true meaning of an obscure discourse, either of a dead or an absent person, and to distinguish it from the false one' (Thomasius 1688:221). Yet the ability to test, by the light of one's own reason, whether what others 'think about the essence of things' is right or wrong requires the ability to correctly understand their discourse. Thus, Thomasius' rejection of authority, a feature that came to characterize his teaching, and his emphasis on 'investigat[ing] truth through individual reflection' (1691a:1) presuppose his hermeneutics.

Thomasius' most detailed general account of interpretation is developed in his applied logic, the *Auszübung der Vernunft=Lehre* (1691a). Because this account is strongly embedded in Thomasius' epistemology, I want to briefly discuss the latter first.

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<sup>34</sup> The connection between testimony and linguistic understanding is not unusual in Early Modern reflections on textual interpretation. Indeed, it may be taken as distinctive of early hermeneutical accounts to be advanced in the service of questions regarding knowledge acquisition from written or spoken testimony, leading to the frequent subsumption of issues regarding understanding (*intelligere*) under issues regarding learning (*discere*) (see especially Alexander 1993:33-56). Indeed, what Schleiermacher later called the 'art of understanding' would first be known as *ars discendi*, the art of acquiring knowledge (Clauberg 1654). It is precisely this connection that initially afforded hermeneutics philosophical status and demanded its more urgent safeguarding from forms of skepticism that threatened it. See fn57, p. 95.

### 2.3.1. The epistemological background of Thomasius' hermeneutics

In general, Thomasius' work in epistemology can be characterized as a reaction to an ideal of science and knowledge that he found much too demanding for most sectors of inquiry and science. What Thomasius is rebelling against is a long-standing conception of science according to which scientific statements ought to form an axiomatic system of propositions, with all non-fundamental statements being derived from a limited set of certain principles (see de Jong & Betti 2010). According to this axiomatic conception of science, scientific knowledge had to be certain and demonstrable, i.e., inferable from more basic, and certain, propositions. Mere probabilities could not constitute true knowledge. This ideal of (scientific) knowledge would be the object of much debate in this period, both in general epistemology (see Demarest & van den Berg 2022) and in the natural sciences (see van den Berg & Demarest 2020; and 2024).

Christian Thomasius opposed this epistemic ideal by maintaining not only that most of our knowledge was merely probable and could therefore not aspire to the ideal of absolute demonstrability, but that probabilities were part and parcel of, and therefore essential to, many branches of science. We may therefore describe his position both as a restriction of the scope of the classical ideal of science, as well as an expansion of science itself, since the legitimacy of particular sciences was no longer measured against that axiomatic ideal (see Cataldi Madonna 1989).<sup>35</sup> Much of Thomasius' work in the *Auszübung* (1691a) and especially his *Einleitung zu der Vernunfft=Lehre* (1691b) will be devoted to establishing probable knowledge as a legitimate form of knowledge distinct from its demonstrable counterpart, a project which

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<sup>35</sup> The opposition between a stricter and a broader conception of science can often be tracked in the period through the lexical distinction between the rigorous axiomatic *scientia* and the less rigorous, and empirical *Wissenschaften* (see van den Berg & Demarest 2020:390).

would then be carried on by his disciples (see Alexander 1996; van den Berg & Demarest 2020; 2024).

To set the two domains of knowledge apart, Thomasius appeals to the principle of non-contradiction, and distinguishes between two kinds of truths: indisputable and probable truths. Truths are said to be indisputable insofar as their negation yields a contradiction and probable insofar as they are associated with uncertainty or 'some doubt that the matter might be different' (Thomasius 1691b:c5:§22; see Cataldi Madonna 1989). For Thomasius, the first type of truth can be inferred from certain principles, i.e., demonstrated, because the connection posited between subject and predicate is a necessary one. Conversely, probable truths posit a non-necessary connection between subject and predicate and are therefore characterized by the conceivability of their negation: however improbable, their negation remains conceivable and can therefore never be fully excluded from consideration. It is worth noting, before turning to the question of interpretation, that, although Thomasius originally couches this distinction in terms of truths the negation of which entails contradiction and truths the negation of which does not, he immediately draws consequences for the epistemic status of such statements. In other words, the distinction between demonstrable and probable statements seems equivalent to that between certain and uncertain statements.

I will return to this issue in the next section, where I expose an ambiguity in the Thomasian account and distinguish between two senses in which interpretations can be said to be probable. As I will later show (section 2.3.3.a), it is ultimately this equivocation which makes the account vulnerable to attack by Chladenius and others.

### 2.3.2. The probability of interpretation

Thomasius defines interpretation as

a clear explanation, based on probable conjectures, of what someone else meant in his writings, [the meaning of which] is somewhat difficult to understand, or obscure. (Thomasius 1691a:c3:§25)

Interpretations are characterized here quite straightforwardly as claims stating in clear language the meaning of obscure statements made by others. Immediately, Thomasius gives special emphasis to interpretation's necessary reliance on conjecture and presupposition and argues that the best it can achieve is a *demonstratio hypothetica* of the content of its objects (Thomasius 1691a.c3:§57).<sup>36</sup> Consequently, for Thomasius, interpretation falls squarely in the category of probable knowledge. We should immediately note, however, that Thomasius restricts the concept of interpretation and has it hinge on the type of object it concerns: obscure, primarily written,<sup>37</sup> statements. He argues that interpretation only pertains to obscure passages because 'if they were already clear and distinct, they would need no interpretation', and would therefore be comprehended without need for mediation or explanation (§32).

While the restriction of interpretation to obscure passages was commonplace in the period, Thomasius' distinction between straightforwardly understanding a sentence and interpreting it seems to imply that understanding, not relying on conjecture, might involve the acquisition of knowledge about the contents of other's sentences, and therefore minds, that is, in some sense, demonstrable. Yet, this looks like the wrong conclusion to draw. While understanding does not presuppose conjecturing in the sense in which interpretation does, a

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<sup>36</sup> See 2.3.4 for what this conjecturing consists of.

<sup>37</sup> Thomasius does however admit that the methodology of interpretation will apply to oral communication as well (Thomasius 1691a:c3:§27), suggesting that interpretation may equally be required for obscure spoken discourse.

hearers' understanding of speakers' utterances cannot be demonstrable in the sense of being based on an inference from certain principles. Instead, this restriction of interpretation to obscure discourse requires us to revise our initial identification of demonstrability with certainty, and probability with uncertainty. Understanding Thomasius' position therefore requires making sense of this restriction and the understanding / interpreting distinction on which it relies. In turn, this will demand taking a closer look at the distinction between clear and obscure discourse from which it derives.

### *2.3.2.a. Probability and the question of certainty*

Thomasius gives extensive treatment to the causes of obscurity as they pertain to interpretation (Thomasius 1691a:c3:§37-55). After briefly discussing the obscurity that is a matter of the external form of the words under hermeneutical review, such as might be caused by copying or typing mistakes, or by the omission of words in print, Thomasius turns his attention to the most serious obstacle to understanding: *semantic* obscurity. Among its causes, Thomasius lists unknown abbreviation conventions (§39), words that have fallen out of use (§44), foreign words or technical terms (§46), ambiguous words (§§47-51) or contradictions (§§52-55). Without wanting to go into much detail, we can immediately note that, save for the last two, all other cases of obscurity relativize clarity to speakers: it is deficiencies in the speakers' knowledge which lead to a perceived semantic obscurity. Consequently, while we may accept Thomasius' claim that clear discourse obviates the need for interpretation, we should not conclude that what removes this need is its transparency, which renders knowledge of its meaning certain for competent speakers. Instead, what is clear to some will be impenetrable to others. Competent readers of Shakespeare and competent speakers of English differ exactly in this sense. When the former furnish the latter with an interpretation of a given passage, they

are often clarifying what is obscure to the uninitiated but transparent to the expert. Consequently, if clarity is relative to speakers, and not passages, the distinction between discourse that can be straightforwardly understood and discourse that requires interpretation is equally speaker-relative.

What, however, remains of certainty? Does the speaker-relativity of clarity not imply, at least in the cases in which interpretation is successful, that it functions by clearing up obscurities, and therefore that the apprehension of the meaning of interpreted discourse by competent speakers should be modelled as the acquisition of certain knowledge? This is not so. Not only does Thomasius not think that the interpretation of obscure passages yields certain knowledge, but neither does everyday, unequivocal, communication. In fact, even if speakers 'arrange their speech ever so clearly, still no indisputable knowledge is thereby roused in others' (Thomasius 1691a:c3:§57). This is so, Thomasius argues, because

neither can we immediately grasp the thoughts of other people by means of general sensations, nor can we divine another's thought through the *ideas* and *abstractiones* which are common to the entire human species. (Thomasius 1691a:c3:§56)

Since our access to the thoughts of others, as the sole source of meaning for their words, is indirect, communication cannot beget any indisputable knowledge. For this reason, interpretation, understood as the clear explanation by a hearer of what was obscurely said by a speaker, is in even less of a position to 'direct its aim at anything beyond a probability' (Thomasius 1691a:c3:§58). Both in the realm of interpretation, therefore, as well as in ordinary linguistic understanding, certainty is entirely unattainable.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, Thomasius has

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<sup>38</sup> Though there are variations, due to the opacity of Thomasius' own views, this is the conventional reading of Thomasius' stance on interpretation (Cataldi Madonna 1990, Bühler & Cataldi Madonna 1994, Alexander 1996, Danneberg 1997, Spoerhase 2010). Some, however, argue that for Thomasius certainty is not excluded in interpretation (Petrus 1997).

effectively severed the connection between clarity and certainty. For, while demonstrable knowledge is necessarily certain, claims about the meaning of other sentences, whether opaque or transparent, will always be probable, and that means necessarily *uncertain*.

### 2.3.2.b. Probability and the question of skepticism

The general question of Thomasius' own skepticism is quite difficult to answer. At points, Thomasius seems to acknowledge a connection between the mere probability of some type of knowledge and epistemological skepticism. In a public announcement for a course led by Georg Michael Heber (1652-1702), Thomasius writes:

Although I will not deal here of elsewhere with the party of scepticism any more, there are disciplines in which something certain beyond probabilities cannot be hoped for and where we are often forced to recognize that what we seek is not clear. That is the case, at least in my judgment, in jurisprudence. (Thomasius 1693:125; transl. Mulsow & Laursen 2019:73)

There is here an implicit reasoning from the probability of the knowledge specific to jurisprudence to skeptical consequences for that sector of inquiry. This implication is strengthened by Thomasius' recommendation of Heber's views, an avowed Pyrrhonian, whom he calls a 'patron and friend from Wittenberg, that professes the same heresy' as himself (Thomasius 1693:125; transl. Mulsow & Laursen 2019:73).<sup>39</sup> Statements like these have opened the question of Thomasius' own skeptical sympathies, with some ascribing to him a moderate legal skepticism (Herberger 1981:322-330; Mulsow & Laursen 2019), or a historical skepticism (Scheele 1930:102-110; Mulsow 2015:206-238).

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<sup>39</sup> A few years later, Heber would publish a work arguing for the unavailability of a criterion of truth in legal interpretation; see Heber (1700).

It is, however, important to stress, as Danneberg in particular has done, that Thomasius' insistence on the probable and uncertain character of interpretation does not derive from an underlying *epistemological* skepticism (Danneberg 1997:303). Instead, the aim of such probabilistic considerations, indeed the impulse behind Thomasius' entire epistemology, is to underscore the bounds of reason. This would be a distinguishing feature of the Thomasians in general, who were 'among the principal assertors of the limits of human understanding' on the German philosophical scene at that time (Tonelli 1971:39-40). Uncertainty and probability are part and parcel of the human condition, and, far from blocking the way to any epistemology, they constitute the ground upon which Thomasius built his.

Consequently, we should guard against thinking that, when it comes to interpretations, since they are all probable, they are therefore all on equal epistemic footing. Instead, Thomasius devotes a great deal of attention to this issue and cements what will become a dominant metaphor in subsequent accounts of probability. In his *Einleitung zu der Vernunfft=Lehre*, Thomasius compares probability to the 'tongue' or indicator pin of a scale, which, when something tips its balance, tilts in the direction of the item closest to the truth (Thomasius 1691b:c10:§8). If the reasons for a claim outweigh the reasons against it, then it will be judged more probable – closer to the truth – than its negation.<sup>40</sup> In the case of equilibrium, where the reasons balance each other out, the matter is 'neither improbable, nor probable, but remains unknown' (§13). However, Thomasius thinks that the scales mostly tip to one side. It is already an indication of Thomasius' anti-skeptical stance that his view relies upon confidence in reason's ability to perform this measurement.

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<sup>40</sup> Thomasius avoids talk of degrees of probability in this passage and prefers instead to describe hypotheses as either 'probable' or 'improbable'. But the two descriptions are intertranslatable, since for Thomasius 'probable' and 'improbable' are shorthand for 'probable truth' and 'probable falsehood'. And to recognize a statement as improbable, or probably false, is to recognize that it could also be true (Thomasius 1691b:c5:§33). As such, '*p* is improbable', '*p* is probably false', or '*p* is a probable falsehood' are all equivalent to '*p* is less probable than  $\neg p$ ', ' $\neg p$  is more probable than *p*', or ' $\neg p$  is a probable truth'.

In matters of interpretation, Thomasius draws our attention to the frequency of situations in which, 'if the words are ambiguous, then rational conjectures can be adduced for each of these ambiguous interpretations' and it cannot be ascertained which among them is the more probable (Thomasius 1691a:c3:§58). The appraisal of candidate interpretations is impossible in such an instance because the evidence weighs equally on both sides, providing well-founded support for either option. Consequently, 'one cannot determine anything, but must leave the matter in doubt' (*ibid.*). It is important to note that Thomasius' injunction to suspend judgment here is not an endorsement of skepticism. For, while this case fits the skeptic's description of a situation of equipollence, it may not be confused with the skeptic's view that equipollence characterizes all knowledge claims. Indeed, while the experience of textual interpretation may be well-stocked with examples of such practical equipollence, Thomasius does not think it is paradigmatic of all interpretation. The interpretive task can therefore be characterized as that of narrowing down the plurality of probable interpretations to determine, not which candidate is true, but which is the more probable.<sup>41</sup>

Thomasius' view, we can now conclude, is that, while all interpretations are probable, some are more probable than others. Thus framed, the Thomasian stance does not appear devoid of plausibility, certainly if contrasted with exegetical skepticism. For, even if one would be hard pressed to defend the apodictic certainty of a given interpretation, one might still accept it as *more likely* than another. Quite apart from its plausibility, however, it should immediately strike us that there is either a contradiction, or else an equivocation, in the Thomasian view. For, the idea that subjective degrees of probability play a role in the determination of truth values seems *prima facie* incompatible with the Thomasian contention that all comprehension

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<sup>41</sup> This plurality is entailed by the definition of probable truths as propositions associated with a degree of uncertainty or 'some doubt that the matter might be different' (Thomasius 1691b:c5:§22). Thus, for any interpretation *I* of statement *s*,  $\neg I$  can never be ruled out. Consequently, any endorsement of *I* cannot exclude that  $\neg I$  might be true of *s*, hence it follows that  $\neg I$  is also, in a certain sense, probable as an interpretation.

of speech is probable, irrespective of the degree of clarity interpreters recognize in another's discourse. Since it is preferable, in light of my goal of assessing the viability of the Thomasian hermeneutical program, to dissolve an equivocation rather than to declare incoherence, I want to argue, in the next section, that there are two distinct concepts of *probability* at play in Thomasius' position, concepts which I will now attempt to decouple.

### 2.3.2.c. *Two concepts of probability*

#### 2.3.2.c.i. Logical probability

I noted that Thomasius introduces his conception of probability when distinguishing between different kinds of truths, indisputable and probable truths. What distinguishes them has of course nothing to do with their truthfulness, but with the kind of proposition they express, or their logical form. As we already saw, Thomasius characterizes this distinction as one between propositions marked by a necessary connection between subject and predicate, and ones not marked by such a connection (Thomasius 1691b:c7:§49; 1688.c8:§5; see Cataldi Madonna 1989:118). It is this necessary connection that renders the former type of proposition demonstrable. The distinction between indisputable and probable truths is thus based on an exclusive and exhaustive logical distinction between demonstrable and non-demonstrable propositions, the latter of which Thomasius denotes as *probable*. Let us call this type of probability, which emerges as a distinction in the logical form of two types of propositions, *logical probability*, which identifies a non-necessary connection between subject and predicate. For this reason, a proposition's *logical probability* does not entail a proposition's truth.

To better understand this property, recall Thomasius' use of the principle of non-contradiction in setting the two kinds of truth apart. Whereas to negate an indisputable truth

results in contradiction, to negate a probable proposition does not. Thus, Thomasius fixed as the mark of probable truth that it was 'accompanied by some doubt that the matter might be different' (Thomasius 1691b:c5:§22). We can usefully explicate such doubt in terms of reasons for asserting. Recall the distinction introduced in chapter 1 between the propositional attitudes of asserting and endorsing. According to that distinction,  $p$  is assertable if it is a candidate for truth. In other words,  $p$  is assertable iff it is *truth-apt*. Framed in terms of assertability,  $p$  is a probable truth as long as there is some reason to assert  $p$  and some reason to assert  $\neg p$ . Since logical probability is indifferent to truth value, we can define logical probability without appealing to it, in the following way:

(LP)  $p$  is logically probable iff there is no logical impediment to asserting that  $p$  and no logical impediment to asserting that  $\neg p$ .

We now recognize more clearly why logical probability tells us nothing about whether the proposition at issue is probable or improbable in any *epistemic* sense. In fact, there is no logical space for the category of logical improbability, since propositions that are not non-demonstrable are simply demonstrable.

Thomasius' usage of the concept of probability in this logical sense certainly jolts modern expectation. What lessens its surprise, however, is the recognition that it echoes an older, medieval, usage of “probable”, according to which probability signified merely the 'approvability of opinion', specifically by reference to some authority (see Hacking 1975:c.3). This sense of probability characterizes, for instance, the theological doctrine of probabilism, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit principle of casuistry. What the principle states is that, if one is in doubt regarding the truth of some doctrine, one ought to follow an opinion that is authorized by someone or other. According to probabilism, to follow a “probable”, i.e., an “approved”, course

of action, one need not follow the most *plausible* opinion, or that best supported by evidence, but merely one 'recommended by some authority, even when more or weightier authorities counsel the opposite course of action' (Hacking 1975:24).

Thomasius' work is not the sole, nor indeed the most recent, example where this older sense of "probable" survived outside theology.<sup>42</sup> The disconnection of truth from the logical concept of probability is moreover consistent with Thomasius' denial that truth could be based on authority, or, as he says, on the 'conceited delusions of those who call themselves learned' (Thomasius 1691b:c5:§3). Instead, as we saw above, Thomasius advocated *Selbstdenken*, or thinking for oneself, and maintained accordingly that first and foremost 'your own thoughts will convince you that something is true' (§5). Thus, Thomasius may be seen to be in alignment with this older conception in linking the logical concept of probability with reasons for asserting propositions. However, insofar as he appeals to the principle of non-contradiction in his definition of probability, he departs from that conception by replacing *approvability by authority* with *approvability by the light of reason*.

I argued above that logical probability is indifferent to truth value. The same is true for its sister concept, demonstrability: for Thomasius, propositions that admit of demonstration can be demonstrably true, and demonstrably false (Thomasius 1691b:c5:§34). However, while the properties of demonstrability and logical probability do not entail truthfulness, both types of propositions are truth-apt. Accordingly, when it comes to allocating truth values, demonstrable propositions may be demonstrably true or demonstrably false and logically probable propositions may be probably true, or probably false, or, alternatively, express a probable truth, or a probable falsehood. In employing this terminology, Thomasius draws our attention again to the fact that logical probability entails no determination of truth values: 'Just as we have

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<sup>42</sup> For instance, a footnote in Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* reads: 'Such a fact is probable, but undoubtedly false' (quoted in Hacking 1975:19).

hitherto classified truth, so falsity is also either indisputably false, or accompanied only by some probability' (§31), the latter verdict carrying the implication that 'the matter could finally also be true' (§33).

### 2.3.2.c.ii. Epistemic probability

In connecting a proposition's probability to its truth, Thomasius additionally employs the concept of probability in an *epistemic* sense. It has become standard in recent work on probability to distinguish between a *physical* probability, which refers to the frequency or propensity of a state of affairs to occur, and an *epistemic* probability, which refers to 'the degree of belief in the occurrence of the state of affairs, the willingness to act on its assumption, a degree of support or confirmation, or similar' (Romeijn 2022). In opposition to the unfamiliar medieval resonances of *logical* probability, much of Thomasius' work displays continuity with our modern notion of *epistemic probability*. Thomasius' concern with degrees of belief is already apparent in his definition of probable truth as a relation between contradictory propositions. We can again appeal to the asserting / endorsing distinction above to clarify the epistemic concept of probability. Whereas logical probability is a property of propositions which I have above associated with their assertability, epistemic probability involves a determination of the knower's reasons for belief, or endorsement. For a proposition to be logically probable is for it to be assertable, whereas for a proposition to be epistemically probable is for it to be reasonably believable. Hence, we can formalize epistemic probability – or probable truth – in the following way:

(pT)  $p$  constitutes a probable truth iff there is some reason to endorse  $\neg p$  but more reason to endorse  $p$ .

And similarly for probable falsehood:

(p⊥)  $p$  constitutes a probable falsehood iff there is some reason to endorse  $p$  but more reason to endorse  $\neg p$ .

Thus, when  $p$  and  $\neg p$  are compared, the reasons for endorsing either proposition are weighed against one another such that the proposition with weightier reasons in its favor is judged closer to the truth and is therefore judged to be true with a higher degree of probability than its negation. Thomasius' scale metaphor – which compared probability to the indicator pin of a scale – highlights gradeability as essential to Thomasius' conception of probability, and, since logical probability does not admit of degrees, shows his commitment to an *epistemic* notion of probability.

It may be worth dwelling for a moment on the additional conditions for epistemic probability as compared to logical probability. Specifically, we should note that the principle of non-contradiction is insufficient for establishing a proposition as epistemically probable. Consider  $q$  and its negation:

$q$         The present king of France is bald.  
 $\neg q$       The present king of France is not bald.

Given that neither  $q$  nor  $\neg q$  are contradictions, and there is therefore no logical impediment to asserting either that  $q$ , or that  $\neg q$ , the sentence 'The present king of France is bald' satisfies the requirements for logical probability. Both  $q$  and  $\neg q$ , therefore, are truth-apt. However, both propositions are arguably false: the present king of France is neither bald, nor is he not bald.

There simply *is* no present king of France. For this reason, sets of propositions like  $q$  and  $\neg q$  cannot be substituted in the definitions of probable truth ( $p\top$ ) or probable falsehood ( $p\perp$ ) above, since, on condition that one knows that France is not a monarchy, there are no epistemic reasons to endorse either  $q$  or  $\neg q$ .

Thomasius therefore assumes that, for a proposition  $p$  to be a candidate for probable truth,  $p$  and  $\neg p$  cannot both be true, *and* that one of them must be true. Consequently, Thomasius' *epistemic* notion of probability requires that  $p$  and its negation obey not only the principle of non-contradiction, but also the law of excluded middle. If a set of logically probable propositions  $p$  and  $\neg p$  satisfies this additional requirement, then either proposition will be epistemically probable to the extent it is nearer to the truth than its negation. Once we have distinguished, within the Thomasian conception of probability, between a logical and an epistemic concept of probability, we have also made sense of the idea that, while all interpretations are probable, some are more probable than others. For any interpretation  $I$ , if it is a candidate for probable truth,  $I$  and  $\neg I$  are both logically probable, yet differ with respect to their degree of epistemic probability, such that one interpretation is epistemically more probable than the other.

As I will argue in the next section, it is precisely this equivocation between two distinct senses of probability which renders accounts of hermeneutical probability vulnerable to attack.

### 2.3.3. Hermeneutical probability and exegetical skepticism

Epistemologies pivoting on the concept of probability were a frequent target of attack in a climate saturated with anti-skeptical feeling, and a generalized anxiety concerning the potential of the human mind. While the concept and view of *scepticismus exegeticus* emerged in 1696, five years *after* Thomasius' work on interpretation, and achieved wide-spread circulation by

the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, *hermeneutical probability* quickly became one of the concepts which had come to cluster around exegetical skepticism. The connection is obvious: the hermeneutical probabilist's contention that probability was the most that could be attained in interpretation became associated with the exegetical skeptic's claim that interpretations never amounted to certainties. And Chladenius was not the lone, nor indeed the first, person to notice this proximity. In fact, we have already encountered similar allegations against *probabilitas*, to which I now return.

### 2.3.3.a. Contemporary accusations

In his anti-skeptical *Commentatio de pyrrhonismo hermeneutico*, Rau argued that one of the core principles of the Pyrrhonism he opposed was the thesis that 'both sides of a contradiction are equally probable' (Rau 1735:17; see 1.5.2). We already saw that Rau blamed Thomasius for Pyrrhonian sympathies (fn18). Moreover, Rau also criticized Thomasius for endorsing Pierre Bayle's (1647-1706) claim that 'anything unlike can always be equally true' (Rau 1735:21).<sup>43</sup> When applied to the case of Biblical interpretation, this Pyrrhonian principle yields the thesis, which Rau attributes to Bayle, that it is impossible to interpret Scripture in such a way that there is never a sufficient reason in favour of the opposite interpretation (4). Rau's characterization of hermeneutical Pyrrhonism not only as a thesis concerning the certainty of interpretation grounded in the underdetermination thesis (as Pfeiffer, Callenberg and Chladenius all do), but moreover as a claim about the consequent equal plausibility or probability of contradicting statements, already reveals a latent confusion about the specific difference between the two views in question, hermeneutical Pyrrhonism, and hermeneutical probability.

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<sup>43</sup> On the relativistic resonances of Rau's construal of the skeptic's position here, see fn19, p. 36.

The same confusion is reported by the theologian Christoph Wolle (1700-1761), who sets about resolving it. In his *Hermeneutica Novi Foederis Acroamatico-Dogmatica* (1736), Wolle argues that one of the chief pillars of exegetical skepticism is in fact an inadequate understanding of the doctrine of hermeneutical probability. He distinguishes, accordingly, between what he calls a '*hermeneutical hypothesis*, which, in itself, is a *mere possibility*' and for which the only requirement is that it 'make some sense' ('*posse aliquem sensum habere locum*'), and *exegetical truth* (Wolle 1736:159). Genuine probability only pertains to exegetical truth, whereas the former is nothing but 'bare conjecture' and is not to be confused with probable truth (160-161). Guilty of exegetical skepticism are precisely those interpreters of the Holy Writ that 'dwell on this *possibility* and embrace it as *truth*' (159).<sup>44</sup>

It is worth noting from the outset that Wolle is not deploying the term *scepticismus exegeticus* merely as a weapon against theological opponents (see 1.4). Instead, his brief discussion of this view displays an understanding of exegetical skepticism as a general view about the possibility of interpretation. Specifically, in identifying the 'crime ... called Exegetical Skepticism' with the apparent claim that exegetical possibility is sufficient for exegetical truth, Wolle is attributing to the skeptic the *principle of open choice*. This core principle of exegetical skepticism states that the choice between competing interpretations does not require evidence additional to the evidence establishing an interpretation as assertable.<sup>45</sup> In contrast to the skeptic's thesis, Wolle maintains that not all merely possible – here, assertable

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<sup>44</sup> The philosophical correspondent of Zedler's *Universallexicon* (probably Müller, see 2.2.1) draws the same distinction. First, they define hermeneutical truth as 'a probability, by means of which one concludes from the correspondence with the hermeneutical circumstances that a discourse or a text ... has such and such a meaning' (*Universallexicon*, v.12:1730). Accordingly, the author writes: 'if an interpretation does not correspond perfectly with these circumstances, then it is not to be held a probability, but a mere possibility' (1732).

<sup>45</sup> For the principle of open choice, see 1.3. I note here again that adherence to this principle is not compatible with Rau's definition of hermeneutical Pyrrhonism; see 1.5.2.

– interpretations are, by this very fact, also probable in an epistemic sense and, consequently, that there are further requirements governing their endorsement as true.

What Wolle is encircling here is the idea that any support that the exegetical skeptic can derive from the doctrine of hermeneutical probability trades on the equivocation between a weaker sense of probability – which he calls *mera possibilitas* and which for him entails no more than assertability (*'posse aliquem sensum habere locum'*, Wolle 1736:159) – and a stronger sense which entails reasons for belief and presupposes evidential support. It is only in the latter sense that probability commands assent and can be called a 'hermeneutical truth' (149). I argued above that a similar equivocation was inherent in the Thomasian project. In fact, the distinction Wolle asks us to entertain is equivalent to that between a *logical* and an *epistemic* concept of probability. Thus, Wolle reproaches the skeptics who 'dwell on this *possibility* and embrace it as *truth*' (Wolle 1736:159) for their endorsement of a logically probable proposition as though it were epistemically probable. The implication of Wolle's line of reasoning is that logical probability does not entail epistemic probability.

While Wolle remained primarily concerned with defending the doctrine of hermeneutical probability against suspicion of exegetical skepticism by discovering and addressing the causes of this association, in his *Idolum saeculi: probabilitas* (1747; Germ. transl. 1748), Martin Chladenius will forcefully establish this connection once more. Although Chladenius had addressed forms of exegetical skepticism before (see 1.6), here, he argues that the doctrine of probability was the most recent incarnation of skepticism, affecting not only hermeneutics, but historiography, and natural science as well. In this work, he decries probability as an *idol*, a generalized prejudice of his age which 'distorts and infects everything in advance' (Chladenius 1748:c1:§10). In the greatest peril, however, were the sciences, for they presupposed certainty, and probability was necessarily associated with uncertainty and persistent doubt. Chladenius therefore writes:

One cannot marvel enough at how this made-up doctrine has been able in such a short time to expand its kingdom much farther than certain knowledge has. For, if the whole of history, the whole of hermeneutics, and the whole of physics belong in it, then the bounds of certainty are staggeringly curtailed. (Chladenius 1748:c1:§9)

Chladenius' attempt to rescue these sciences from probability takes shape polemically against the philosopher Peter Ahlwardt (1710-1791). This is already a significant development. As contrasted to Wolle, Chladenius is not objecting to some interpretive practice, but to skeptical arguments rooted in a particular epistemology. His choice of target, more specifically Ahlwardt (1741), is explained by the alleged clarity of Ahlwardt's exposition of the doctrine and concept of probability, which Ahlwardt defines as 'a truth that is connected with some degree of uncertainty or a fear of the opposite' (Ahlwardt 1741:§501). We can already note that, while standing primarily within the Wolffian tradition, Ahlwardt's views on probability owe much to the Thomasian conception, and this influence is already evident in Ahlwardt's definition of probability, which echoes Thomasius' own (Thomasius 1691b:c5:§22).<sup>46</sup> We need not run through the basics of this conception again here. Let us instead consider Chladenius' main contention that, through the doctrine of hermeneutical probability, 'the art of interpretation ... is transformed into an art of doubting' (Chladenius 1748:c2:§3).

Chladenius unfortunately only devotes a few pages to hermeneutical probability. There, he attacks skeptical arguments which

conclude from *the ambiguity of words* that a passage can have a manifold sense, and [that] therefore one does not know for certain what the true sense of this passage must actually be. (Chladenius 1748:c2:§6)

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<sup>46</sup> Ahlwardt elaborates his conception of probability especially in dialogue with Rüdiger (1709), but also cites Thomasius (1691a); see Ahlwardt (1741:c16-21).

In his brief engagement with this type of argument, Chladenius strikes not at the principle of open choice, which was at issue in Wolle (1736), but rather at the epistemological foundation of that principle, *the principle of underdetermination*. For, the argument Chladenius rejects here presupposes that the plurality of candidate interpretations cannot adequately be set apart by appeal to evidence, and hence that it is impossible to narrow interpretation down to a single, determinate one. Against this view, Chladenius retorts that, while it is true that most words have several meanings, their context of use is sufficient to determine their meaning. Words, thus, are 'just like simple numbers', which

when they are compounded with others, sometimes mean ten, sometimes a hundred, sometimes a thousand, and more. (Chladenius 1748:c2:§6)

While in some sense all 'possible', the several different meanings of words are not all on a par epistemically, and so Chladenius concludes that lexical ambiguity 'does not diminish the certain meaning of passages and books in the slightest' (Chladenius 1748:c2:§6).

We can see here that Chladenius is also taking issue with the equivocation between what I analyzed above as the two concepts of logical and epistemic probability, as well as the inference that, since they are all logically probable, all competing interpretations of an utterance are epistemically probable as well. Leaving aside the details of Chladenius' positive account (see Beiser 2011:27-62; 2015), as well as the accuracy of his critique of Ahlwardt, what we may retain for present purposes is that the main feature of the theory of hermeneutical probability that Chladenius attacks as a cornerstone of Pyrrhonism corresponds to what Wolle had identified as lending support to exegetical skepticism, namely its confusion between two senses of probability and its alleged inability to distinguish between different senses in which interpretive hypotheses are labelled "probable".

As already noted, this was an ambiguity inherent in Thomasius' account, hence Wolle's and Chladenius' attacks are not entirely unjustified. However, whereas he might be accused of carelessness, Thomasius' views cannot be read as endorsing the inference from logical to epistemic probability. Instead, he often cautions that, when the grounds in favor of a particular hypothesis and those against it cannot be adequately weighed against one another, none of the candidates ought to be endorsed. In such cases, as we have already seen, 'one cannot determine anything, but must leave the matter in doubt' (Thomasius 1691a:c3:§58). Thomasius recommends a suspension of judgement in this case, *not* the principle of open choice, and he claims that such matters 'remain unknown' and are therefore 'neither true nor false, since both for what is true and for what is false some knowledge is required' (Thomasius 1691b:c10:§15; c5:§40).<sup>47</sup> While there is a sense in which both equipollent alternatives remain probable, i.e. *logically* probable, and it is unfortunate that this ambiguity persists in the account, they are not *epistemically* probable since, for any proposition to be epistemically probable there must be more reason for endorsing it rather than its negation (see (pT) above). This preponderance is exactly what is denied in cases when nothing tips the balance.

I argued in this section that, once disambiguated, Thomasius' probability-based hermeneutics prevails upon its contemporary critics. However, if it is to stand out as a viable project, it must face another objection. In the next section I first formulate 'the compatibility problem', which raises suspicions of skepticism once more, and then I defend the Thomasian hermeneutical account against it.

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<sup>47</sup> Thomasius does occasionally use the language of probability in this connection, as when claiming that, in cases of equipollence, 'the matter is neither improbable nor probable, but remains unknown' (Thomasius 1691b.c10:§15). However, the reference to knowledge makes it plain that the sense of probability invoked in such passages is *epistemic*.

### 2.3.3.b. *The compatibility problem*

The Thomasian conception of probability (both logical and epistemic) as a relation between a proposition and its negation, as I have analyzed it above, yields the following problem: it presupposes that all epistemically probable propositions are compatible. Let  $p$  and  $q$  be scientifically adequate explanatory hypotheses for some phenomenon  $x$  in a branch of natural science – medicine, for instance.<sup>48</sup> Assume furthermore that the physician has determined, after carefully weighing the evidence for each proposition, that there is more reason to endorse  $p$  than  $\neg p$  as an explanation of  $x$ , and more reason to endorse  $q$  than  $\neg q$ . Consequently, since both  $p$  and  $q$ , taken individually, have evidential support and are therefore more probable than not as an explanation of  $x$ , they both satisfy the conditions for probable truth. Furthermore, it would seem to follow that if  $p$  and  $q$  are probable truths, so is “ $p \wedge q$ ”. For, since all truths are consistent, so too must they be. It follows therefore that “ $p \wedge q$ ” is a probable truth.

This straightforward inference however highlights the compatibility problem, which I will articulate below. First, however, I must specify that this problem is not an *epistemic* problem and does not concern the sources of justification for the knower's beliefs. The question is thus not whether the physician's justification for endorsing “ $p \wedge q$ ” follows from their justification for endorsing  $p$ , coupled with their justification for endorsing  $q$ . The problem, rather, is *conceptual*, and relates to the conditions that govern the application of the concepts of epistemic probability and probable truth. We can now formulate the compatibility problem. To begin with, recall first the definition of probable truth:

(pT)  $p$  constitutes a pT iff there is some reason to endorse  $\neg p$  but more reason to endorse  $p$ .

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<sup>48</sup> *Medical probability* was indeed one of Rüdiger's five categories of probability (Rüdiger 1709).

Substitution yields the following:

$(p \wedge q)$  is a pT iff there is more reason to endorse  $(p \wedge q)$  than there is to endorse  $\neg(p \wedge q)$ .

If the inference from the probable truth of  $p$  and the probable truth of  $q$  to the probable truth of “ $p \wedge q$ ” is correct, it entails that it is more probable that  $p$  and  $q$  are both true than it is probable that either they are both false *or* only one of them is true. But if it is more probable that both propositions are true than that both are false or only one is true, then it is more probable that they are compatible than that they are incompatible. This is where the account begs the question. For, it is certainly not a sufficient condition for the compatibility of  $p$  and  $q$  that each proposition should be more probable than its negation. For, compatibility concerns the relation between  $p$  and  $q$ , not between  $p$  and  $\neg p$  and between  $q$  and  $\neg q$ . Thus, what seems to be additionally required to establish compatibility is that there exist no inferential relations between  $p$  and  $\neg q$ , or between  $q$  and  $\neg p$ . In other words, no proposition should entail the negation of the other. Yet the conditions that govern probable truth, that  $p$  and  $\neg p$  cannot both be true and cannot both be false – the principle of non-contradiction and the law of excluded middle (see 2.3.2.c.ii) – have no implications for the relation between these propositions and others. In other words, the Thomasian conditions for probable truth are too weak to establish compatibility.

One answer to the compatibility problem is to weaken the conditions for the probable truth of the conjunction of individual probable truths in a way that does not presuppose their compatibility. For instance:

$(p \wedge q)$  is a pT iff there is more reason to endorse  $(p \wedge q)$  than there is to endorse  $(\neg p \wedge \neg q)$ .

This is a weaker condition because it only stipulates that it is more probable that  $p$  and  $q$  are both true than that they are both false. Hence, it does not presuppose compatibility. This solution, however, seems to create additional problems for the concepts of epistemic probability and probable truth. For, in allowing for the propositions' incompatibility, the revised condition entails the possible falsity of one of the propositions in question. I must stress again that this is not a question of the scientific method for estimating degrees of probability but concerns the conditions for probable truth. The problem is that, if we grant that  $p$  and  $q$  may be incompatible, we cannot continue applying “probable truth” to both  $p$  and  $q$ , since, on condition of incompatibility, one proposition must be false. And so, it appears that this revision, while no longer begging the question of compatibility, does even more damage to an account that already demanded careful analysis to be made viable. Indeed, it seems that compatibility between epistemically probable propositions is a necessary condition for the account's viability, and yet the account fails to establish it.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Though it falls beyond the purview of this chapter, it may be instructive to consider how Thomasius might avoid this problem. Recall that what was required were provisions for the compatibility of epistemically probable propositions which specify the inferential relations, not only between  $p$  and  $\neg p$  above, but between these and  $q$ . The problem is solved by Crusius, who distinguishes between two ways in which propositions can be set against one another: by contrary opposition, or by contradictory opposition (W:§250). On this picture, in relation to  $p$ ,  $\neg p$  is a *propositio contradictoria*, and  $q$  is a *propositio contraria*. Crusius holds that the contradictory proposition *includes* all contrary propositions. Thus, Crusius writes that

Among two propositions that are opposed *contradictorie* [by contradictory opposition] one is necessarily true. For this very reason [and presupposing the doctrine that the contradictory includes all contrary propositions] among all propositions that are opposed *contrarie* [by contrary opposition], but adequately, one is necessarily true. (W:§359)

Thus, Crusius does not simply presuppose the compatibility of epistemically probable propositions because epistemic probability is no longer understood as a relation between a proposition and its negation, but between a proposition and its negation *as inclusive of all potentially competing propositions*.

All, however, is not lost. For, while Thomasiaus' general account of probability may fall prey to the compatibility problem, his hermeneutics does not. Let us therefore return to the specific issue of interpretation, for in this sector of inquiry the problems we just encountered do not arise.

### 2.3.3.b.i. The case of interpretation

I showed (2.3.2) that Thomasiaus views interpretations as statements about what certain other statements mean. On this conception, one quite natural way to think of interpretation is in terms of sentences or expressions that replace, in the interest of semantic perspicuity, whatever sentence or expression they interpret. Thus, 'a period of fourteen days' interprets 'a fortnight', 'The child I'm carrying doesn't really seem like an inconvenience' interprets 'They don't really look like white elephants', and 'Agnus Dei' is interpreted as 'the Lamb of God', both referring to Christ. This “substitutional” paradigm of interpretation enjoys a certain plausibility, chiefly due to the central constraint placed on interpretation that it be meaning-preserving.

Thomasian probability theory, however, cannot accommodate the substitutional paradigm because this paradigm undercuts a key requirement for probable truth. Recall, first, the requirements. For  $p$  to be epistemically probable,  $p$  and  $\neg p$  have to obey the principle of non-contradiction, and the law of excluded middle. In other words,  $p$  and  $\neg p$  cannot both be true and cannot both be false. Consider now the following example. Take  $s$  as the expression to be interpreted and  $p$  as the interpreting expression, such that

$s$	'C'était une journée agréable.'
$p$	'It was a pleasant journey.'
$\neg p$	'It was not a pleasant journey.'

Clearly, if anything is a journey then it either is or it isn't pleasant, and so  $p$  and  $\neg p$  satisfy the principle of non-contradiction. However,  $s$  predicates pleasantness of a different subject – not a journey, but a day. For this reason, both  $p$  and  $\neg p$  fail to convey the meaning of  $s$ , and are thus both false. What the substitutional paradigm cannot integrate, therefore, is the requirement that, for a proposition to be a candidate for epistemic probability, it and its negation must additionally obey the law of excluded middle.

To preserve this condition, we should conceive of interpretations, and their negations, along the following lines:

$I$         ' $s$  means  $p$ .'

$\neg I$       ' $s$  does not mean  $p$ .'

Call this way of formalizing interpretation the “explicative” paradigm because it serves to explicate the implicit semantic relation between interpreted and interpreting expressions. It differs from the substitutional paradigm in that it ensures that any proposition that might be offered as an interpretive hypothesis will respect the Thomasian requirements for probable truth. For, instead of negating the predicate in  $p$ ,  $\neg I$  simply negates the semantic relation between  $p$  and  $s$ . Since  $s$  either does or does not mean  $p$ , it is impossible that both  $I$  and  $\neg I$  could be false, thus securing their obedience to the law of excluded middle.

The chief benefit of the explicative paradigm is that it avoids the compatibility problem. As I argued above, that problem emerged because the conditions for probable truth were insufficient to establish the compatibility of probable truths, and yet compatibility was required for the account to be viable. I suggested that the troubles could be bypassed if the conditions for probable truth included provisions for compatibility in the form of stipulations concerning

the inferential relations between competing hypotheses. In the case of interpretation, the Thomasian account does not beg the question of compatibility because, on the explicative paradigm at least, competing hypotheses entail each other's negation.

To clarify this point, let us put before the interpreter the same dilemma as was faced by the physician. Consider  $p$  and  $q$  to be adequate hermeneutical hypotheses for some sentence  $s$ . Assume, moreover, that that  $p$  and  $q$  assign different meanings to  $s$  and are not paraphrases of one another.  $p$  and  $q$  are thus competing, incompatible interpretations. The interpreter has before her the following options:

$I$         ' $s$  means  $p$ .'

$\neg I$       ' $s$  does not mean  $p$ .'

and

$I'$         ' $s$  means  $q$ .'

$\neg I'$       ' $s$  does not mean  $q$ .'

We may grant that the interpreter, like the physician, has determined that there is more reason to endorse  $I$  than  $\neg I$ , and, independently, that there is more reason to endorse  $I'$  than  $\neg I'$ . However, we may not grant her the inference from the epistemic probability of  $I$  and  $I'$  to the probable truth of " $I \wedge I'$ ". What blocks this conclusion is the logical structure of the hypotheses themselves, namely that both interpretations entail each other's negation, such that:

$I' \rightarrow \neg I$

and

$I \rightarrow \neg I'$

To paraphrase, if  $s$  means  $q$ , then  $s$  does not mean  $p$  ( $I' \rightarrow \neg I$ ); and if  $s$  means  $p$ , then  $s$  does not mean  $q$  ( $I \rightarrow \neg I'$ ).  $I$  and  $I'$  are no longer assumed to be compatible, because the reasons in favor of one count against endorsing the other, and vice versa.

The source of the compatibility problem in the physician's case was that each explanatory hypothesis had seemingly independent evidential support. Since that was all that was required for epistemic probability, both hypotheses were labelled "true". However, what was additionally needed for the label to stick was for the compatibility of the two hypotheses to be established. This is what the account could not do. In the case of interpretation, on the other hand, as soon as competing hypotheses appear on the interpreter's horizon, the question of their probability must be asked anew. For, whatever recommends one, discounts the other. Since, on the explicative paradigm, competing interpretations are mutually exclusive, the account does not beg the question of their compatibility, but rules it out.

My defense of Thomasian hermeneutics against the compatibility problem has important consequences for the question of Thomasius' skepticism. It is true that Thomasius never recommends a generalized suspension of judgment, but I argued that his conception of probability does entail a sort of pluralism, where competing probable truths could not be compared in terms of their degrees of probability. In this section, I have established that an interpretive account built around the concept of probability can, at least in principle, attain uniqueness. The interpretive task, on this view, is straightforward: to place interpretive claims on a spectrum of proximity to truth, or to locate them in an ordered series of propositions, from probable falsehood to probable truth.

In the next section I will establish that, while Thomasian hermeneutics can withstand Chladenius' attack, it cannot answer the exegetical skeptic's challenge, the problem of the criterion for interpretation. Surveying Thomasius' failure, however, will highlight what *is*

required to face the challenge, thus setting the backdrop for my analysis of Crusius' attempt (chapter 3).

#### 2.3.4. Answering the problem of the criterion

The problem of the criterion is an ancient epistemological problem, arguably 'one of the most important and ... most difficult of all the problems of philosophy' (Chisholm 1973:1). There are, however, many versions of this problem. Some distinguish between an epistemological problem of the criterion, aimed at determining what is true, and a meta-epistemological problem, which targets the question 'do we have knowledge?' (see McCain 2014). Others additionally identify a conceptual problem of the criterion, concerned with 'how to identify necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of epistemic concepts like knowledge and justified belief' (Fumerton 2008:34). What unites these, and indeed all modern versions of the problem of the criterion is that they involve questions of epistemic priority, specifically the question of how epistemological theorizing can get started, if at all, without making epistemic assumptions (see McCain 2014; Cling 1994). And yet, such modern versions, heirs to Chisholm (1973), do not pose the same problem as that which came to us through Sextus Empiricus (see Amico 1993). When asked in its original, Pyrrhonian context, the problem of the criterion is the problem of settling a dispute between disagreeing parties. Since exegetical skepticism, as argued in chapter 1, also emerges within a broadly Pyrrhonian framework, I take the exegetical skeptic to be posing the Pyrrhonian problem of the criterion as it arises in the context of interpretation.

Suppose there is a dispute over the truth of some interpretation  $I$ , where one party holds  $I$  and the other holds  $\neg I$  (see the formalization in 2.3.3.b.i). The Pyrrhonian wants to show that such disagreements are incapable of rational settlement. Thus, she argues that for one party to

rationally assert their claim – say,  $I$  – they must do so critically, i.e., by an account or proof which establishes that  $I$  is true, and  $\neg I$  false. Yet, the skeptic continues, this requires a criterion of truth for differentiating between truth and untruth, or, in the interpretive case, between understanding and misunderstanding. For, absent such a criterion,  $I$  can count as no more than bare assertion, no more valid than  $\neg I$ . Once a criterion is provided, the argument continues, either it is claimed to be true by the supplying party, or it is claimed to be false. However, to prove the truth of  $I$ , the criterion must be held true. Since the truth of the criterion cannot simply be held but must be proved, the skeptic now demands proof. The next steps are predictable. For, if proof of the criterion is now provided, and the supplying party considers the proof itself to be true, then the skeptic will object, by parity of reasoning, that the proof can only count as true once a criterion of *its* truth is proffered. If such a criterion is not supplied, the proof will be considered inadequate. If it is, on the other hand, then either *this* criterion – submitted to validate the truth of the proof which established the first criterion of truth (for  $I$ ) – is the same criterion, or it is another. In the former case, the criterion is established by a process of circular reasoning, since it is now used to validate the very proof by which it is established. If the criterion provided is different, on the other hand, then the justification of  $I$  must continue, and yet cannot be concluded, except viciously. It appears that proofs and criteria alike are entangled in an infinite, or else circular process of reasoning. The Pyrrhonist therefore concludes that the dispute is incapable of settlement, and that suspension of judgment – where we endorse neither  $I$  nor  $\neg I$  – is the only rational option.<sup>50</sup>

Let us now return to Thomasius. We saw (2.3.2.b) that Thomasius conceives of interpretation as a process of weighing evidential support for hermeneutical hypotheses. The concept of “circumstance”, common in the period, well approximates our contemporary notion

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<sup>50</sup> See Amico (1993:35-6) for a more comprehensive account of Sextus' argument.

of evidence.<sup>51</sup> According to Thomasius, adequate consideration of various circumstances is essential for assessing the degree of probability of interpretive hypotheses. He therefore counsels paying great attention, for instance, to facts concerning the person, affect and inclination of the author, the topic or subject matter of the text or passage to be interpreted, including an author's other writings on the same topic (see Thomasius 1691a:c3:§§65, 67, 70 and 85). Because she does not have direct access to an author's *Meynung*, the interpreter must infer their meaning from such circumstances, akin to a physician diagnosing a sickness from its symptoms. Indeed, later accounts of hermeneutical probability will define the epistemic probability of an interpretive hypothesis precisely in terms of correspondence with 'hermeneutical circumstances'.<sup>52</sup>

Thomasius cautions however that such circumstances are 'almost innumerable', which renders interpretive conjectures 'ever so changeable ... due to the multitude of circumstances' (Thomasius 1691a:c3:§§64/85). Nevertheless, there is a method to keep some of this multitude at bay. To this end, Thomasius formulates a set of five 'fundamental rules according to which one ought to understand the opinions of others' (1691a:c3:§19), rules which help determine which circumstances are relevant to interpretation and which are not. Consequently, such rules establish an evidential base of interpretation and therefore govern the interpreter's assignment of degrees of epistemic probability to competing hypotheses.

Take, as an example, Thomasius' third rule of interpretation, which counsels the interpreter to take account of portions of the texts which precede and follow the passage to be interpreted. What makes this a valid rule is, for Thomasius, the idea that 'one does not easily presuppose that an author would contradict his previous opinion and himself' (Thomasius

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<sup>51</sup> For general discussion of "*circumstantia*" in the hermeneutical literature of the period, see Petrus (1997:112-123).

<sup>52</sup> E.g. Walch (1726:2831): '[hermeneutical] probability is founded in the correspondence with certain hermeneutical circumstances'. See also Zedler's *Universalexicon* (v.12:1730-1732), quoted in fn44, p. 68.

1691a:c3:§70). Just as illnesses present specific pathologies and are commonly, but not necessarily, accompanied by certain symptoms, so rational discourse is commonly, but not necessarily, accompanied by coherence and consistency. Accordingly, if it is improbable that an author would contradict himself, then it is probable that what he said previously, or elsewhere, bears on the interpretation of the passage at hand. The interpreter can therefore conjecture, based on the presumption of consistency, that an interpretation which supports the correspondence between preceding and subsequent passages and the passage in question is epistemically probable to a higher degree than one which does not. Parallel passages therefore constitute evidence that can tip the scale in favor of the hypothesis consistent with more of them.

This line of argument, to my mind, is very important. Now, Thomasius was certainly not the first to formulate hermeneutical rules, indeed they have been part and parcel of reflections on textual interpretation ever since Antiquity (see Scholz 2016:13-34). Nor, indeed, was Thomasius the first to connect interpretive rules to the juridical concept of *presumption* (see Weise 1696[1681]:446). However, in integrating such principles into a probabilistic hermeneutics, Thomasius made them essential components of an admittedly rudimentary probabilistic calculus. This gave them a role in the evaluation of competing hypotheses, a question with which Thomasius was explicitly concerned. What is remarkable, therefore, is the association of hermeneutical principles, rules of thumb which govern an interpreter's engagement with their *interpretandum* – and which in the period usually prescribe little more than that the interpreter should have adequate knowledge of the language, purpose, and person of their author – with *correctness criteria*, a set of conditions that govern the attribution of *meaning* to the *interpretandum*. Interpretive principles no longer govern what the interpreter ought to do, but what their objects *mean*. I will return to this question in more detail in the following chapters.

For the moment, let us test the adequacy of Thomasius' criteria by submitting them to the skeptic's challenge. Answering the problem of the criterion for interpretation requires establishing the truth of correctness criteria by means of a proof that neither presupposes the criterion it establishes, nor requires grounding by a different criterion. Yet it is not in the principles' proofs that Thomasius' account encounters difficulties, but in the epistemic status of these interpretive principles themselves. Recall that the skeptic's line of questioning begins by requesting that the provided criterion be held true. Thomasius, however, holds that, since

conjectures are usually inferred from multiple and almost innumerable circumstances, so it is easy to appreciate that ... in the theory of interpretation, *one cannot encompass the entire art [of interpreting] in a few certain rules*, since the change of the slightest circumstance must often also change the conjecture on which *interpretation* is founded. (Thomasius 1691a:c3:§64, emphasis added)

Consequently, Thomasius argues that any general hermeneutical rules concerning the appraisal of candidate interpretations from their degree of evidential support 'can never be grounded on indisputable truths' (Thomasius 1691a:c3:§56), but are instead 'based only on probabilities' (1691a:151).<sup>53</sup> It follows that correctness criteria, due to their probability – and hence uncertainty – are unfit to withstand the skeptic's attack. While Thomasius would certainly not endorse the skeptic's view that uncertainty conflicts with the ideal of knowledge, Thomasius' statements regarding the epistemic status and validity of his hermeneutical principles curiously echo Rau's hermeneutical Pyrrhonist's view that 'the laws of interpretation themselves have no value, and no indubitable principles can be established' regarding interpretation generally (Rau

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<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, Quine's formulation of the *principle of charity* similarly ascribes to it a mere *probable* status. Indeed, Quine recommends this principle because 'assertions startlingly false on the face of them are *likely* to turn on hidden differences of language' (1960:59; emphasis added). And later: 'The common sense behind the maxim is that one's interlocutor's silliness, beyond a certain point, is *less likely* than bad translation – or ... linguistic divergence' (*ibid.*; emphasis added).

1735:25). Though the doctrine of hermeneutical probability may be a viable view in the philosophy of interpretation, it cannot, at least not in its Thomasian iteration, provide a viable answer to the problem of the criterion, and so does not provide a viable alternative to exegetical skepticism.

## 2.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I defended Thomasian hermeneutics against internal inconsistency and external attack. I showed that it does not amount to a form of exegetical skepticism, *pace* Rau, Wolle, and Chladenius, but that its interpretive methodology for evaluating competing interpretations is unable to provide an adequate answer to the problem of the criterion. Nevertheless, I claim that his attempt to solve the problem of interpretive normativity by establishing such a methodology constitutes one of the great merits of Thomasius' hermeneutical project.

## Chapter 3

# Crusius' "Transcendental" Reply to Meaning-Skepticism: A Copernican Revolution in Hermeneutics

### 3.1. Introduction

Christian August Crusius (1715-1775), once listed among 'the most penetrating philosophers of [his] age', was quickly absorbed into the shadow cast by the author of that comment (AA 1:397; transl. Kant 1992a:17). In this chapter, which concludes my investigation of skeptical and anti-skeptical arguments in Enlightenment hermeneutics, I intend to shine Kant's own light back in Crusius' direction, to illuminate Crusius' explicit reply to exegetical skepticism. I argue that the Kantian perspective offers the optimal backdrop against which Crusius' neglected contribution to hermeneutics can truly stand out. My aim here is not to relocate the origins of these quintessentially Kantian elements, but to shed light on a forgotten facet of German Enlightenment hermeneutics, and to align Crusius, not so much with Kant's own work, but, through it, with Hans-Georg Gadamer's.

In the following (section 3.2), I argue first that the concept of probability underwent a significant transformation in Crusius' philosophical system, on which the success of his reply to exegetical skepticism essentially depends. I then (section 3.3.1) briefly survey the main elements of Crusius' general theory of interpretation, identifying its chief weaknesses to

skeptical attack, namely the question of the validity of the hermeneutical principles that underlie it. Next (section 3.3.2,) I examine the account's ability to reply to exegetical skepticism and to solve the problem of the criterion for interpretation. I reconstruct three possible strategies to ground the validity of hermeneutical criteria that might be (and sometimes have been) attributed to Crusius. I argue that the first two strategies – which I call the probabilistic (section 3.3.2.a) and prudential (section 3.3.2.b) strategies – are unsuccessful. Finally, I submit what I argue is the true grounding strategy implicit in Crusius' theory of interpretation, the transcendental strategy (section 3.3.2.c).

### 3.2. Crusius' transformation of probability

Crusius was the last member of the Thomasian tradition, and, in his work, effected the same bifurcation of human cognition into two branches: demonstrable and probable knowledge (see 2.3.1). Often, Crusius' achievements in connection with the doctrine of probability are downplayed in comparison to those of earlier Thomastics (see Danneberg 2009; Cataldi Madonna 2021:c5). It is true, of course, that Crusius' conception builds on that of his predecessors, and indeed he acknowledges his debt to his teacher Adolph Friedrich Hoffmann (1703-1741) in the prefaces both of his *Entwurf* (1745) and his *Weg zur Gewißheit* (1747) (see the respective *Vorreden*, np). I want to claim, however, that the doctrine of probability undergoes a significant, indeed beneficial, transformation in Crusius' work. To begin with, let us consider the views of his immediate predecessors, Hoffmann and Hoffmann's teacher, August Friedrich Müller (1684-1761), focusing especially on their distinction between demonstrable and probable knowledge.

### 3.2.1. The received view

In Müller's work, and later in Hoffmann's, we encounter the typical Thomasian emphasis on the weakness of reason, and the non-demonstrability and uncertainty of the best part of human cognition. Both authors, following Rüdiger (1709), dedicate lengthy chapters to the concept and doctrine of probability. Müller, for instance, assigns demonstrative certainty only to mathematical and metaphysical truths, and argues that all remaining truths, while not consigned to 'complete uncertainty', must contend with probability (Müller 1733:v.I:c19:§9). According to him, there is much in human cognition which,

however, 1. according to its existence, does not even enter the senses, namely neither immediately, nor mediately by means of a certain inference: least of all, though, 2. the *abstracta causalia*, i.e., the fundamental causes, and therefore the essence of the things which exist there. These both constitute therefore what is uncertain, which God and nature have entrusted to our capacity to surmise about. (Müller 1733:v.I:c9:§14)

Müller then proceeds to classify the domain of uncertain cognition, and to distinguish between the probability of the historical, hermeneutical, physical, political, and practical domains of knowledge.<sup>54</sup>

Hoffmann, who exerted a much greater influence on Crusius's philosophical views, articulates a similar conception of the scope and nature of probable knowledge. He writes:

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<sup>54</sup> This partition is commonplace in the period (see Walch 1726, and Zedler 1735), and can be traced back to Rüdiger (1709), with 'medical probability' instead of 'practical probability'.

all knowledge that arises through the conviction of reason is either probable, or certain. Those [truths] in the case of which the impossibility of the demonstrative falsity of the contrary cannot be proven, may not be known with complete certainty. Therefore, they may not be known otherwise than as being probable at best. (Hoffmann 1737:v.II:c8:§24)

Hoffmann goes on to distinguish, like Müller, between different kinds of probability, yet, unlike Müller, cautions from the outset that the sciences dealing with contingent truths, and therefore trading in probable knowledge, will never attain certainty. It is a vain hope to 'think that, with time, everything might still become certain in those sciences' (Hoffmann 1737:v.II:c8:§26).

Hoffmann, Müller and Thomasius (see 2.3.2.a), all separate demonstrable from probable knowledge-claims on the basis of their degree of certainty: the former are certain, the latter probable, which is to say, uncertain. As I will show, this received view is sharply criticized by Crusius.

### 3.2.2. Probable knowledge and certainty in Crusius

At first glance, Crusius' logical textbook seems indeed to repeat many of the distinctions drawn by Müller and Hoffmann. Like his predecessors, Crusius recognizes two distinct types of knowledge, demonstrable and probable knowledge. They are distinguished by what Crusius calls their *Erkenntnißweg*, the manner, or 'path', by which knowledge claims are acquired and justified. Accordingly, the 'way of demonstration' consists of demonstrable or apodictic proof, which proceeds by arguing from the inconceivability or contradiction of the negation. It is opposed to the 'way of probability', which rather establishes a proposition's "probability", which Crusius defines as follows:

probability, in virtue of its first concept, means that property of a proposition in virtue of which one is inclined to hold it to be true, or inclined nevertheless to hold it rather than its opposite to be true, disregarding that its opposite can also be thought, disregarding, that is, that the opposite neither contains something contradictory, nor aims to have such concepts separated, of which one, in virtue of its essence, cannot be thought without the other, nor again aims to have such concepts connected, of which one, in virtue of its essence, cannot be connected with the other in a single concept. (W:§360)

Plainly, this definition of probability, which corresponds to what, in chapter 2, I labelled *logical probability*, does not stray from Thomasian doctrine.

Crusius' radical innovation in the theory of probability comes into view in his distinction, not between demonstrable and probable knowledge claims, but between the type of proof by which a proposition is established and its resulting epistemic status. In tacit but direct opposition to his teacher Hoffmann, Crusius argues that

one must not confuse the epistemic way [*Erkenntnißweg*] which one follows in their proofs with certainty, and ascribe certainty only to one type of proofs, nor must one think that the certainty itself which the proofs yield depends on them alone, and adequately, or always [and] immediately. To be proven and to be certain are *abstracta* which are introduced with different intentions. The proven is opposed not only to the unproven, but also to the immediately clear, and concerns the epistemic way. Certainty [*das Gewißseyn*] is opposed to doubtfulness and concerns the security one has that they are not deceived in what they admit [to be the case]. (Crusius 1760:27-28)

Crusius is reacting here against the widespread tendency in the period to reserve certainty exclusively for demonstrable propositions and the inference that 'since what is demonstrated is certain ... what cannot be demonstrated cannot be certain' (Crusius 1760:28; see 1745:§10). This is a false inference because it relies on the above conflation between a procedure of proof, and the epistemic status of the conclusion. For Crusius, instead, certainty is

merely something in the intellect ... We know something certainly when we perceive secure grounds for the sake of which we no longer have cause to fear that our thoughts, which we entertain about the matter, deceive us, regardless of whether the matter is necessary or contingent. (Crusius 1745:§10; see W:§420)

In Crusius' transformed conception of probability, the bisecting line between demonstrable and probable knowledge is not permitted to fuse with the boundary that separates certain and uncertain knowledge. This is of the utmost importance. Indeed, it is the most significant theoretical update of the doctrine of probability within the Thomasian tradition, one which confounded Crusius' contemporaries<sup>55</sup> and seemingly continues to perplex scholarship (see Van den Berg & Demarest 2020; 2024). The reconciliation of certainty and probability indeed constitutes a break within the Thomasian tradition and interrupts the philosophical lineage from Thomasius (1691a) – through Rüdiger (1709), and Müller (1733) – to Hoffmann (1737). What is more important, from the perspective of the present discussion, is the effect Crusius' incorporation of certainty into probable knowledge has had on the fundamental tension at the heart of the Thomasian conception of probability, namely its equivocation between a logical and an epistemic concept of probability (see 2.3.2.c.i and 2.3.2.c.ii).

As apparent above, Crusius' definition of (there, logical) probability concerned only the *first* concept of probability. For probability is not only a property of propositions in virtue of which the knower is inclined to give them her assent, but also a degree of the knower's belief. Crusius elsewhere laments this built-in ambiguity with which the received doctrine of probability is encumbered. The difficulty, he argues, is that, as contrasted to the way of

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<sup>55</sup> See, for instance, Thorschmid's comment in Chladenius (1748:20-1): 'It cannot actually be determined what Herr Prof. Crusius believes. ... one would think that this famous philosopher also professes, both with regard to the comprehension of passages and books, as well as interpretation, a universal uncertainty. At the same time, he speaks in §632, p. 1084, of secure grounds of interpretation.'

demonstration, 'no really convenient word was introduced for the other epistemic way of the human intellect' (Crusius 1760:28). What is inconvenient about the designation 'the way of probability' is that 'the ambiguity of the word *probable* misleads all too easily' (30). For, Crusius argues, "probable" can be taken in two quite distinct senses, one in which it refers to the method of proof permitted by a proposition's logical form, and another in which it refers to its epistemic status. This is a dangerous ambiguity, since

*probable propositions and those which are known through the way of probability are not to be deemed, to the detriment of the latter, identical ... For the latter may also be fully certain; whereas by a probable proposition one customarily understands merely one which possesses only a moderate degree of probability. (W:§410)*

The distinction we are asked to entertain here is none other than that between *logical* and *epistemic* probability, and is drawn on the basis of the more basic distinction between a proposition's *Erkenntnißweg* and its epistemic status. Accordingly, Crusius distinguishes between three degrees of epistemic support for propositions 'known through the way of probability'. At the lowest level, there is *verisimilitude* (*Wahrscheinlichkeit* proper), which entails that some proposition is judged merely more likely than its negation. Such propositions are mere conjectures [*Muthmassungen*] (W:§361). Some other propositions, on the other hand, have a higher degree of epistemic support, and 'deserve to be admitted as true to such a degree, that one can act according to them without hesitation, [and] which are called reliable [*zuverlässig*] (*probabile*) or credible [*glaubwürdig*]' (§361). At the highest level, finally, there are those propositions which

we hold to be absolutely and irrefutably true, although their negation can in itself be thought ... This property of a proposition is called *moral certainty*. One can also call it the certainty reached *through*

*the way of probability*, in contrast to the certainty reached through the way of demonstration.

(W:§361)

For Crusius, this kind of certainty encompasses the vast majority of what we can claim to know and is much more attainable than might be suggested by his reliance on Thomasian epistemology. Indeed, for him,

the use of language, all history, testimonies, the use of books, and nearly all the business of common life, insofar as they are certain, are based on moral certainty. Yet everyone knows that this certainty can be had often and easily enough. (Crusius 1760:29)

We will later have the opportunity to dwell more on this appeal to experience and practical success in linguistic communication.

Understanding Crusius' transformation of the received doctrine of probability through the double distinctions charted above is essential to appreciating his anti-skeptical achievements and might be taken to constitute an implicit acknowledgement that the received ambiguity in the Thomasian view represents its main vulnerability to skeptical attack. That Crusius preserves this ambiguous, and indeed inconvenient, terminology, while quite unfortunate and confusing, should not detract from the philosophical and historical significance of his sharp separation of the two concepts of probability. For, thus, Crusius has dissolved the equivocation that underpinned an unfortunate association between hermeneutical probability and exegetical skepticism (see 2.3.3.a) and has effectively gained immunity from any suspicion of skepticism.

Additionally, by no longer excluding certainty from the knowledge gained 'through the way of probability', Crusius is no longer compelled to resort to the Thomasian strategy of countering epistemological skepticism by relaxing the conditions on knowledge and falling

back on a weaker sense of “knowledge”, which involves less than certainty.<sup>56</sup> As I argued previously (2.3.4), the Thomasian strategy is insufficient to reply to the skeptic's challenge, due to the conditions on the requisite correctness criteria. Instead, Crusius can oppose the skeptic directly, on the skeptic's terms. In the next sections, I will present Crusius' general theory of interpretation and reconstruct his line of argument in response to the skeptical problem of the criterion for interpretation.

### 3.3. Crusius's hermeneutics

What is remarkable about Crusius' theory of interpretation is that it is explicitly anti-skeptical. It promises from the outset to deliver 'general and secure grounds of interpretation' intended to 'forestall exegetical skepticism' (W:§632). Equally notable is that in Crusius (1747), like the synchronous Chladenius (1747), but unlike so many other contemporary works (see 1.4 and 1.6), exegetical skepticism surfaces as a philosophical view with wide-ranging consequences. As showed in chapter 1, exegetical skepticism questions the epistemic status of interpretations and argues that they do not amount to knowledge because they lack the requisite certainty. The exegetical skeptic contends instead that interpretations are fatally uncertain and that the contents of linguistic utterances fall beyond the scope of what can be known. One consequence of exegetical skepticism is that it attacks not merely the certainty of texts, 'but also abolishes the *certainty* of such doctrines, which are based on books' (Chladenius 1748:c2:§2). In other words, the skeptic is not only challenging our claim to know what some text means but calls

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<sup>56</sup> See 2.3.2.b. See also, e.g., Müller (1733:v.I:c19:§8), where the doctrine of probability is presented as a *via media* between dogmatism and skepticism. This recalls those forms of “moderate”, “mitigated” or “reasonable” skepticism which proliferated across the European continent in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries as a challenge to Aristotelian and Cartesian natural philosophies. While rejecting claims that reality could be known with absolute certainty, such forms of “skepticism” maintained that probable knowledge about the nature of reality was attainable, and sufficient for practical purposes; see fn24, p. 44.

into question a much broader domain of knowledge: for, texts are an important mode of knowledge acquisition, and for some forms of knowledge – notably knowledge of the past – indispensable. As exegetical skepticism was engendering alarm throughout Germany, not least because of its theological consequences, Crusius too recognized that exegetical skepticism dissolves the possibility of 'language itself, as an indispensable means of sociability, indeed as a means of receiving instruction from others' (W:§635). Thus, Crusius' guiding objective in establishing a theory of interpretation was safeguarding, along with the epistemic status of interpretations, the communicative function of language, and testimonial knowledge-claims more generally.<sup>57</sup>

Crusius' approach to interpretation is heir to the Thomasian not merely because it hinges on the notion of *hermeneutical probability*, but also because of its emphasis on an interpretive methodology designed, as it was in Thomasius, to assess the degree of evidential support for interpretive hypotheses. To better see how the 'way of probability' leads to the acquisition of morally certain probable knowledge, let us begin from the concept of hermeneutical probability. According to the definition given above, the (logical) probability of a hermeneutical hypothesis will denote that property in virtue of which an interpreter is inclined to hold it to be true – namely, as giving the correct meaning of the linguistic item in question – or to be more likely to be true than its negation, where the negation is also conceivable. In terms of epistemic status, on the other hand, interpretations may be certain, probable, dubious, improbable, or evidently false (W:§634). On this view, the epistemic status of any interpretation *I* falls somewhere on the spectrum ranging from 'morally certain of *I*' to 'morally

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<sup>57</sup> On the connection between testimonial knowledge acquisition and linguistic understanding, see fn34, p. 52. Recent work on testimony has been shedding new light on the links between the epistemologies of testimony and linguistic understanding, specifically the degree to which the former may hinge on questionable accounts of communication (Rysiew 2007; Peet 2019; Pollock 2023). Philosophers argue that, not only do some accounts of linguistic understanding serve to undermine key requirements for testimonial belief acquisition (Peet 2016; Davies 2019; Pollock 2023), but some presuppose exactly what testimonial epistemologists seek to ground, namely the reliability of testimony as a source of knowledge (Rysiew 2007).

certain of  $\neg I$ . And the 'way of probability', as it applies to the business of interpretation, denotes that procedure of inquiry and justification which secures moral certainty by ascertaining which among a set of interpretive hypotheses has the highest probability.

In the next section, I will examine Crusius' hermeneutical methodology and argue that it constitutes not a mere set of interpretive rules, but what I will call a *presuppositional structure*, analogous in key ways to what Gadamer will later designate the *fore-structure* of understanding.

### 3.3.1. The presuppositional structure of interpretation

At the heart of Crusius' hermeneutics lies his theory of *hermeneutical presumptions*, a body of interpretive rules that underlie the acquisition of certain knowledge about the meaning of texts and utterances. I noted already that the provision of such rules has accompanied philosophical reflection on interpretation since Antiquity. Indeed, Crusius does not stand apart by the kind of presumptions or interpretive principles he postulates, but, as I will argue, through the way in which he justifies their application. For now, let us examine Crusius' 'most general presumptions of hermeneutical probability' (W:§636).

First, Crusius puts forth a presumption of consistency:

As long as one does not have reliable proof of someone's folly, unreflexiveness, or of a mind which has not grown for the matters at hand; and his words either still fall short of a comfortable interpretation, or yet it cannot be proven that they are incapable of one according to the most general grounds of interpretation: so one must not presume that he contradicts himself. (W:§636)

To presume a speaker's inconsistency, Crusius continues, would conflict with 'the most natural condition of human beings', and it would additionally be an injustice 'to blame someone without reason' (W:§636).

Crusius' second general presumption urges the interpreter to assume

of anyone that he speaks clearly and wants to be understood, so long as the opposite is not proven, or the ground of the presumption weakened. (W:§636)

There are two aspects to this presumption: (1) the presumption of a speaker's clarity, and (2) the presumption of the speaker's intention to be understood. According to Crusius, it follows from this second presumption that one 'also presumes that [the author] *speaks according to linguistic usage*, and that he *avoids obscurity and ambiguity*. For, it is the natural purpose of speech that one wants to be understood' (W:§636). Let us call this presumption, a corollary of the second presumption, the presumption of linguistic conformity.

The last two presumptions are of somewhat lesser interest for my purposes and can be briefly summarized. The third is a presumption of instrumental rationality, namely 'that an author says what is appropriate to his purpose ... For, the purpose is a cause that is efficient in him, and sufficient in itself' (W:§636). The fourth hermeneutical presumption dictates that an interpreter assume that 'everyone speaks in accordance to their state [of mind]. E.g., if someone is in the heat of passion [*im Affect*], one presumes that they speak in accordance with their passion' (*ibid.*). This last presumption yields an interesting restriction to the second, limiting how much an interpreter ought to take literally from a passionate speaker. For, in such a state, Crusius argues that 'one readily says the same thing in several ways, for one has thought the same thing for a long time' (§642).

Crusius will continue to deduce a variety of special rules from these presumptions, discussion of which will occupy most of his exposition. They need not concern us here. What

I wish to draw attention to, instead, is that the Crusian methodology of interpretation, which articulates a hermeneutical probabilistic calculus aimed at the 'determination of the correct understanding of words' (§637), is not a mere assortment of rules, but constitutes a hierarchical, structured system of presuppositions.

Consider, first, the disadvantages of a methodology built on an unstructured set of rules. Take  $I_1$  to be an interpretation of a sentence  $s$  which contradicts the author's statements elsewhere.  $I_2$ , on the other hand, resolves the inconsistency, yet only by attributing to the author a language use that departs radically from that of his fellow speakers. In this case, the presumption of consistency speaks in favor of  $I_2$ , while the presumption of linguistic conformity makes  $I_1$  more probable. If presuppositions had equal weight as correctness criteria, it appears such a case would be irresolvable.

Yet Crusius holds in fact that there exists a hierarchy among the hermeneutical presumptions, a structure. Discussion of such a ranking occurs first in his chapter on probability (see especially §§407-409). Of particular importance for the theory of interpretation here is an example where the presumption of rarity, in itself weaker than any other, is nevertheless correct:

e.g., in interpretation one must grant a rare meaning if else one would have to grant an absurd interpretation, as is the case if one would otherwise have to say that an author, who is intelligent and thoughtful, must have contradicted himself. (W:§408)

Here, Crusius considers the situation where interpretation either obeys the presumption of consistency or the presumption of linguistic conformity. He argues unequivocally that the former presumption is weightier than the latter, and so gives more probability to the interpretive hypothesis which accounts for consistency, rather than that which accounts for linguistic conformity. In the example above,  $I_2$  is more probable than  $I_1$ .

In his chapter on interpretation, Crusius again discusses the relative weight of hermeneutical presumptions. For instance, he argues that 'a grammatical presumption is of greater weight in interpretation than a dogmatical one'. What this entails is that:

a ground of proof that is founded on the nature of language and the customary construction of words within it counts for more in the art of interpretation than one that is taken from the nature of the subject matter, or rather our insight into it. (W:§639)

It follows that a speaker is less likely to express a true belief (by the interpreter's lights) at the expense of grammar, than to be wrong while using conventional language.

We can now advance our analysis of Crusius' hierarchical structure of presuppositions by one more degree. Recall that the presumption of consistency overrides the presumption of linguistic conformity. Now, given that the latter presumption is itself 'founded on the nature of language and the customary construction of words within it' (W:§639) we can surmise that the former, the presumption of consistency, tilts the hermeneutical scales *more* than a dogmatic presumption. In other words, the cost of attributing inconsistency is higher than the cost of attributing what the interpreter takes to be a false belief. Consequently, unless the applicability of the stronger presumption is impeded – say, there is reason to believe that the author changed their mind and no longer holds the false belief – it is more probable that the speaker is consistently wrong than inconsistently right. Note that, despite appearances, there is no difficulty in reconciling inconsistency and true belief, so long as what counts as true is relativized to the interpreter. For, it suffices that the interpreter's beliefs are themselves inconsistent.

To summarize, I argue that Crusius articulates his anti-skeptical hermeneutics in a methodological framework for interpretation composed as a unitary presuppositional structure of interrelated hermeneutical presumptions and derivative rules. Such principles, Crusius

argues, secure certain hermeneutical knowledge by operating as criteria of correctness in the appraisal of candidate interpretations. On the Crusian account, since only one interpretation can be true, and hermeneutical principles secure moral certainty, such principles function as guides to truth in interpretation. We will have occasion to return to their concrete operation in interpretive practice.

In the next section, I want to consider the adequacy of Crusius' hermeneutics as a reply to the problem of the criterion for interpretation. As we already saw, to meet this challenge, a theory of interpretation must show that the principles by which interpretation proceeds are well-founded in a way that does not beg the skeptic's question once more. Their grounding, in other words, can fall prey neither to circularity of reasoning, nor to an infinite regress. I distinguish between three possible strategies to ground the validity of hermeneutical presumptions that can be attributed to Crusius. The first, which I call the *probabilistic grounding strategy*, is what most interpreters wrongly argue to be at play in Crusius. I distinguish it from the *prudential strategy*, which is explicitly endorsed by Crusius but, so I argue, is insufficient to reply to the skeptical challenge. I then introduce a third strategy, which I show is implicit in Crusius (1747) and comes to light more prominently in his (1760), namely the *transcendental grounding strategy*, which can plausibly meet the skeptic's objection.

### 3.3.2. Secure grounds of interpretation

Let us begin with a comparison. Recall from my reconstruction of a Thomasian engagement with the problem of the criterion, that the first obstacle an answer to this problem encounters is the question of the epistemic status of any proposed hermeneutical criteria. As I argued, Thomasius was unable to claim more than mere epistemic probability for his hermeneutical rules, which did not satisfy the skeptic's requirements (see 2.3.4). On the face of it, Crusius'

hermeneutical presumptions fare better than his predecessor's. Certainly, Crusius does not similarly restrict the validity of the principles he proposes. Problems seem to emerge however, when considering the conceptual backbone of Crusian hermeneutics, the concept of *presumption*.

An essential part of his doctrine of probability, Crusius defines presumptions as 'general probable proposition[s] under which others can be subsumed' (W:§397). These are various principles of empirical inquiry – examples of which will be given below (see 3.3.2.a) – which determine the degree of epistemic probability for logically probable propositions. The problem I want to call attention to is that, if hermeneutical presumptions are mere probable propositions, the claim that they establish moral certainty in interpretation comes under severe skeptical scrutiny. For, such unsteady ground seems unable to provide the secure foundation required for certain knowledge. In reply to this objection, we must note that the sense of probability invoked here is that which opposes demonstrability and refers to the type of proof that is available for a given proposition, not the epistemic results of justification. As I read it, at least, 'probable' in this definition is not meant as an epistemic modifier – a synonym of “likely” – but should be explicated to mean 'known through the way of probability', or, more simply, non-demonstrable. As already shown, for Crusius (but not for Thomasius) such propositions are not, at least not in virtue of this very fact, uncertain, or likely. For this reason, Crusius' methodology of interpretation does not share the vulnerability of the Thomasian.

We can now ascertain whether Crusius can make good on his promise to deliver secure grounds for interpretation.

### 3.3.2.a. *The probabilistic strategy*

The probabilistic grounding strategy expresses one attempt to establish the validity of hermeneutical presumptions. We saw that, like Thomasius', Crusius' account of interpretation builds on a general theory of probability. When considered at all, most philosophers have understood the relationship between Crusius' hermeneutical account and the general doctrine of probability as a case of derivation, where the general theory is applied to a particular scientific domain (see Alexander 1996; Spoerhase 2009). Call this 'the probabilistic grounding strategy', namely the attempt to ground the validity of hermeneutical presumptions 'by appeal to the principles of inductive reasoning' (Alexander 1996:147), or what Crusius refers to as 'the general presumptions of probability'. On this account, the hermeneutical presumptions would possess a derivative validity. The frequent references throughout Crusius' hermeneutical account to such general presumptions certainly lend credence to the thesis that the more specific hermeneutical principles are grounded by such a derivation. In this section, I argue that this is not the case and that Crusius should not be seen to be appealing to general presumptions as grounds for his hermeneutical principles. Leaving aside that such a strategy simply begs the question of ground, deferring it instead to the ground of other principles, it is also exegetically and systematically wrongheaded. In the following, I will primarily consider the role of such a strategy in grounding hermeneutical presumptions in connection with the interpretive method of comparing parallel passages.<sup>58</sup>

An initial piece of textual evidence that may corroborate the probabilistic strategy surfaces in direct connection to Crusius' formulation of the second hermeneutical presumption. There, after fleshing out what interpretation must presume, he argues that assuming the

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<sup>58</sup> For simplicity, I combine here two procedures Crusius prefers to keep separate: comparison of the *interpretandum* with preceding and subsequent passages of the same text (W:§647), and comparison of parallel passages proper (W:§§648-650), either from other works by the same author, or by other authors.

opposite would violate the *praesumptio repugnantiae* (W:§636). Crusius defines this presumption as the principle that:

one does not presume what goes against already existing and sufficient causes. (W:§403)

Advocates of the probabilistic grounding strategy take the passage in question – namely W:§636 – to suggest that interpretation must presume clarity and linguistic conformity, among other properties of the *interpretanda*, because experience reveals authors to be conventional in linguistic expression for the sake of clarity (see Alexander 1996). The short way to refute this claim, taken here as an attempt to ground – and not merely to illustrate – the hermeneutical presumption of linguistic conformity, is to invoke familiar Humean reasons against such inferences. For Hume, the appeal to past experience to ground future experience (or some construal of present experience) is circular because it presupposes what it attempts to prove (see 6.4.1). In this particular case, if Crusius indeed derives the principle of conformity from the *praesumptio repugnantiae*, he presupposes that speakers act in accordance with past behavior to ground the principle prescribing the same kind of uniformity, namely conformity to the speakers' prior linguistic usage, on condition that their prior usage adhered to wider linguistic conventions.

More promising evidence in favor of this strategy in the Crusian account surfaces in connection to the interpretive method of comparing parallel passages. For Crusius, 'consideration of the text itself and the comparison of several words and passages with one another' is 'the most important ground of knowledge in interpretation' (W:§633). Comparison of multiple passages with one another, he argues, can yield moral certainty, if at all, either positively, by confirming a hypothesis, or negatively, by ruling one out (§648). Thus, he writes:

If we already know of an instance of what is posited in a proposition, then, in otherwise identical circumstances, this is a more real logical possibility than its opposite, for which we do not know such an instance, and is therefore probable ... [F]or this reason, the meaning of a word which can be shown through parallel passages is ... preferred to another which cannot be shown through these. (W:§380)

The more parallel passages a hermeneutical hypothesis accords with, therefore, the more probable it will be against one which accords with fewer.

What sanctions this method is clearly the first and second hermeneutical presumptions, of consistency and linguistic conformity respectively. As Crusius argues – connecting the method with the presumption of consistency – hypotheses justified through parallel passages will be certain 'to the same degree to which it is certain that the author did not contradict himself or change his mind, which one may not presume without a strong reason' (W:§648). Similarly, the interpretation of a word thus corroborated is warranted insofar as 'it is certain that the causes for the same use of the word existed in [the author], and it is only a question of whether they had been equally efficient in the passage to be explained' (§650). Such interpretations are therefore certain because the hermeneutical presumption on linguistic conformity dictates a positive answer to this question. Some, however, have taken Crusius to seek a deeper ground for this method – and therefore the hermeneutical presumptions that underlie it – in more general presumptions, notably the *praesumptio mirabilitatis* (see Spoerhase 2009). I will now turn to this account.

Crusius distinguishes 'simple' or 'bare' phenomena from 'harmonious' or 'mutually agreeing' phenomena, the latter of which stand in such a relation to one another that they must be explained from a single hypothesis, lest we contradict some other general presumptions (W:§391). Accordingly, he argues that

the more such possibilities which must come together in mutual agreement by accident are presupposed in or by means of a proposition, the more is assumed therein without proof, and so it becomes, in comparison with another in which the same is not assumed, improbable. (W:§377)

This insight is condensed in what Crusius calls a 'presumption of a wonderful accident', or *praesumptio mirabilitatis*, which urges not to presume 'that [hypothesis] wherein many possibilities had to come together by accident' (W:§400), where 'by accident' means 'without an intelligible cause producing this effect' (§377). Conversely, therefore, if the *explananda* are harmonious in the sense of coming together in mutual agreement, then a single common cause must be presupposed for them.

Crusius argues that comparing parallel passages in interpretation 'produces ... *praesumptiones mirabilitatis* which very soon yield a moral certainty and confirm what in the beginning we had posited only as possible' (W:§647). Comparison of different passages secures certainty by revealing the harmonious arrangement of the *explanandum* and, via *praesumptio mirabilitatis*, warrants the assumption of a common cause. Whether it be a single thought underlying an author's multiple statements on a topic, or a single concept shepherding their manifold uses of a word, surveying different textual sources will bring such causes to light. It therefore steers the interpreter towards the one true interpretation, which accounts for the *interpretandum* and its harmonious relation to other phenomena.

We would do well to note, however, that what was at issue in justifying this method was precisely the question of whether an author's manifold statements should be presumed harmonious or not. What required grounding, therefore, were the hermeneutical presumptions dictating that they were to be presumed as such. While the *praesumptio mirabilitatis* warrants inferring a single cause from harmonious phenomena, the validity of the comparative method pivots on an inference running in the opposite direction. Namely, comparing parallel passages yields epistemic results only insofar as interpretation is justified in treating parallel passages as

harmonious, not *because* they are so. That the process of interpretation is justified to proceed on this basis is stipulated by the hermeneutical presumptions. Conversely, the *praesumptio mirabilitatis* must always presuppose harmony, and cannot establish it.

Similar difficulties arise if we take Crusius' appeals to another presumption, the *praesumptio analogiae*, to constitute an attempt to ground the hermeneutical presumptions and the comparative method. The presumption of analogy counsels to presume 'what has thus far occurred constantly or several times' (W:§402). Yet, once again, it is precisely this constancy that the hermeneutical presumptions presuppose. The presumption of analogy can only function in interpretation on the basis of the first two hermeneutical presumptions: only on the assumption of someone's consistency and conformity can their prior statements be granted explanatory weight. The fault of the probabilistic grounding strategy in this case, as with the appeal to the *praesumptiones repugnantiae* and *mirabilitatis*, lies in its circularity: it presupposes the harmony or uniformity it aims to ground.

I conclude, thus, that an exegetically and philosophically likelier reading of the relevant passages is instead that the *praesumptiones repugnantiae*, *mirabilitatis* and *analogiae* arise as an effect of comparing parallel passages, lending the comparative method further support, but are *not* what grounds this method (see. §647 and §649).

### 3.3.2.b. *The prudential strategy*

In contrast to the probabilistic strategy, the prudential strategy involves the attempt to ground hermeneutical presumptions through their connection with certain ends of human action. This attempt trades on a feature of Crusius' epistemology that was brought to contemporary attention only recently (see Gava 2019; Chance 2019). I argue that this strategy is at work in Crusius' account of interpretation but that it is insufficient by itself to establish the validity of

hermeneutical presumptions. To see how Crusius derives epistemic warrant for beliefs from their connection to certain ends of agents, it helps to consider first his definition of “belief”.

Crusius distinguishes between two senses of “belief”. In its wide sense, “belief” is simply synonymous with “assent”, or “holding-true”, which he defines as ‘the state in which we represent a proposition as true and decide to let it count as a true proposition in our practice’ (W:§444). In its narrow sense, Crusius demarcates belief from sensation, insofar as the latter yields immediate certainty (§446), and from knowledge secured by way of demonstration (§447). Belief in the narrow sense, thus, pertains exclusively to non-demonstrable knowledge. Of particular importance here is the extent to which belief in this narrow sense can be called rational:

Rational belief is when one either perceives a moral certainty ... or when, in virtue of the cognized connection of a probability with one's final ends, or even in virtue of a legal obligation ... one intentionally represses the arising doubt and decides to accept as true the propositions to be believed, and to act according to them, as according to true propositions, with complete assent. (W:§447)

The connection described here as warranting assent to an uncertain, even doubtful, proposition, is what Crusius elsewhere calls an *obligation of prudence*, namely:

that moral necessity in virtue of which we must do or refrain from doing something, if we do not want to lose our own final ends. (W:§413)

For Crusius, such an obligation originates in

the fact that accepting and acting in accordance with the probable knowledge is the *only means* to certain human final ends ... [since] some things are in general capable of none other than probable cognition. (W:§414)

The connection between a belief and final ends yields therefore a practical justification of belief in  $p$  just in case a subject's assent to  $p$  and their acting in accordance with  $p$  is a necessary and sufficient condition for achieving those ends, rendering belief rational. If an agent pursues an end requiring assent to, and acting in accordance with, a proposition or a set of propositions, then belief in such propositions is justified. In the following, I will argue that hermeneutical presumptions are just such propositions.

Although Crusius does not explicitly connect obligations of prudence with hermeneutical presumptions, there are indications that prudential obligations nevertheless play a role in grounding such presumptions. Even before introducing the hermeneutical presumptions, Crusius establishes four *Hauptsätze*, or fundamental principles, of interpretation. The first is noteworthy in this connection:

In general, what would make all interpretation uncertain and doubtful is itself false, and not to be admitted into the art of interpretation. For, herewith, the epistemic way of probability, according to which rational interpretations can be justified, would be dismissed as incorrect and useless. (W:§635)

As I read it, Crusius' concern in this passage, which refers back to §414 – where Crusius first defines the obligation of prudence – is with defeating exegetical skepticism by appeal to obligations of prudence. Implicit here is the idea that, whatever doubt arises in the interpreter about the adequacy of the methodology of interpretation, as part of the epistemic way of probability, whether owing to or independently of the skeptic's attacks, must be repressed, and she must decide instead 'to accept as true the propositions to be believed, and to act according to them ... with complete assent' (W:§447). That it is precisely the validity of hermeneutical presumptions that is at issue here becomes quickly apparent:

By wanting to do this, one would be fighting against himself, for in innumerable cases he understands the words of others *according to the rules of interpretation*, and *must act in accordance with them*, and is not deceived in doing so. (W:§635, emphasis added)

By calling the validity of hermeneutical presumptions into question, the skeptic is not only denying the possibility of interpretation, but of communication and testimony in general, for, as we saw,

language itself, as an *indispensable means* of sociability, indeed as a means of receiving instruction from others, would be made unusable. (W:§635, emphasis added)

Consequently, if one were to jettison hermeneutical presumptions, 'one would lose all reliable guidance' in interpretation (W:§639), since 'then the possibility of a reliable discovery of [another's] thoughts would disappear entirely' (§641). Instead, obedience to them is 'the only way of discovering [another's] thoughts reliably' (§640). For Crusius, therefore, conforming to hermeneutical presumptions, and all derivative rules, is not only sufficient for successful interpretation, but necessary as well. In other words, to spell out their connection to obligations of prudence, hermeneutical presumptions constitute the kind of propositions 'accepting and acting in accordance with [which] ... is the *only means* to certain human final ends' (§414).<sup>59</sup> Accordingly, belief in them is rational, epistemically warranted, as well as morally certain: the validity of hermeneutical presumptions is well-grounded in an obligation of prudence.

Before proceeding to what I take to be the ultimate grounding strategy at work in Crusius' account, let me dwell briefly on the question of the adequacy of the prudential strategy in

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<sup>59</sup> My reading of Crusius' first *Hauptsatz* is confirmed by Justin Elias Wüstemann, who, in his digest of Crusius' teachings parses the justification for this principle thusly: 'For, in such a way [i.e. by admitting into the art of interpretation what would render it uncertain and doubtful], any possibility for communicating one's thoughts to another, either through words, or in writing, would be abolished' (Wüstemann 1757:§276).

response to exegetical skepticism. One reason the skeptic might be unsatisfied with this attempt involves the kind of answer it provides. The skeptic's challenge was, of course, *epistemic*. The prudential strategy, however, is to argue that our justification for accepting presumptions as valid is *pragmatic*,<sup>60</sup> since absent such acceptance we would have to abandon our goal of understanding others or of gaining knowledge from testimony. Consequently, the skeptic may contend, Crusius has only established the necessity for us to act *as if* presumptions were true, and not their truth.

Independently of such a worry, however, there is another reason for thinking this strategy is insufficient. Recall that Crusius' project of grounding interpretation in a series of valid *a priori* principles is coordinated from the outset with the attempt to forestall exegetical skepticism by providing criteria of correctness for interpretations. Indeed, Crusius responds to the skeptic's quest after such criteria by introducing valid hermeneutical presumptions as their source. The skeptic may well object, however, that the connection between the question of the validity of hermeneutical presumptions and the question of their role in providing correctness criteria for interpretations is not at all clearly established. For, it does not immediately follow that, since the interpreter must obey such principles if she is to attain her aim, so must the objects of interpretation. Crusius may accordingly be seen to run two very different issues together. This is one of the topics I aim to address in the next section, where I present the full picture of what I argue is Crusius' true grounding strategy, and the one able to answer the problem of the criterion for interpretation.

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<sup>60</sup> Such responses have recently garnered new philosophical attention; see Rinard (2022).

### 3.3.2.c. *The transcendental strategy*

The probabilistic and prudential strategies are both attempts to establish the validity of hermeneutical presumptions by appeal to some independent external ground. The former aimed to derive such validity from that of more basic presumptions, whereas the latter proposed for it other, non-evidential and pragmatic, grounds. What I call here the transcendental grounding strategy appeals not to external grounds, but instead to interpretation itself, more precisely to the way the presuppositional structure of interpretation unfolds in the experience of coming to understand.

Part of outlining this strategy involves attending to the skeptical objection just surveyed. To address it, I argue that, in connecting hermeneutical presumptions with correctness criteria, Crusius is implicitly connecting the conditions for the possibility of interpretation with the sorts of properties hermeneutical objects *must have* if they are to be meaningful. For, the idea that a given interpretation is correct if and only if it conforms to what is presupposed by the hermeneutical principles is intelligible only on condition that *interpretanda must* thus conform for them to be meaningful at all. To wit, Crusius can only derive evidence of correctness from evidence of intelligibility if the latter is at once evidence of meaningfulness.

There are intimations, in Crusius' account of denotation, that such a connection is not only implicit. Crusius conceives of words as signs of thoughts, and argues that

thoughts are not sought for the sake of words, but words for the sake of thoughts, so also words must conform to thoughts, i.e., they must be arranged such that they comfortably express the content and difference of thoughts. (W:§212)

In clear anticipation of the first hermeneutical presumption, Crusius argues that for this reason

one should not connect words with such meanings as contain something contradictory, or ... do not permit any true thoughts ... For one would act herewith against the aim of thoughts, which ought to be the truth. (W:§212)

Crusius concludes that such assignments of meaning constitute misuses of words, which no longer designate any concept, since a contradictory concept, as well as one not conducive to thinking truly, is not a possible object of thought. To misuse words in this way, therefore, is not to use words, but to make meaningless noise. For,

where there is nothing that is designated, there also the signs have no meaning, and one contradicts oneself if one calls them signs. (W:§187)

We find here a conception of what determines linguistic intelligibility as involving, not primarily the transmission of meaning, but meaningfulness itself. Crusius suggests that incomprehensibility is a case of inconceivability as well as meaninglessness. Words are unintelligible not because they contain an undecipherable meaning, but because they fail to contain anything. Intelligibility is therefore the touchstone for what determines meaningfulness, for if words do not transmit content, they do not have it. I argue therefore that Crusius can be seen to establish a relation of biconditionality between intelligibility and meaningfulness: statements are intelligible if and only if meaningful, and meaningless if and only if unintelligible. From this follows the meaningful yet unintelligible statements are impossible, and hence that the necessary conditions for intelligibility are at once necessary conditions for meaningfulness.

Let us return to Crusius' theory of interpretation and examine how this thesis connects with that account. Recall that hermeneutical presumptions presuppose a set of features of the *interpretandum*. Such projected properties of any hermeneutical object are, for instance, logical

consistency, linguistic uniformity, and broad compliance with the linguistic usage of a wider community. Consider, secondly, the argument previously surveyed which established the validity of hermeneutical presumptions from their connection to the agent's final end of communication. Crusius argued there that validity can be so derived because acting in accordance with hermeneutical presumptions was a necessary and sufficient condition for interpretation. As such, the anticipated properties of hermeneutical objects – properties like consistency and conformity – are necessary and sufficient for their intelligibility. *Interpretanda* are only cognitively accessible on the basis of the anticipatory nature of hermeneutical presumptions. But the conditions on such accessibility must also apply to the contents made accessible, for whatever facts make utterances interpretable is alone what render them meaningful. Accordingly, if the experience of meaning must exhibit conformity to what the presumptions postulate, and meaning can only be accessed within such an experience, then meaning itself must exhibit the very same conformity, as the necessary condition of its possibility.

Once we recognize the impossibility of meaningful yet unintelligible statements, we more clearly see the mechanism of Crusius' move from intelligibility to correctness. For, interpretations can be correct if and only if they satisfy the conditions for intelligibility. If they did not, then the objects of interpretation – utterances, texts, etc. – would collapse as objects of a possible experience of understanding. Consequently, it is only because hermeneutical presumptions accurately project something about the objects of interpretation before their being given to us that they can say anything about the conditions under which the way such objects are given to us is the right way. Whether or not such conditions additionally establish uniqueness, and so certainty in interpretation, remains, as mentioned, an open question. That they do was assumed above for reasons of space, as well as emphasis, as I believe the highlight of Crusius' contribution to hermeneutics lies elsewhere. In the remaining, I will briefly

elucidate what I think that contribution is, and why it is an instance of *transcendental* grounding.

As is well known, Kant's Copernican Revolution is epitomized in the idea that *a priori* knowledge of objects is possible only if it is not our faculty of intuition that must conform to the nature of what is an object for it, but 'if the object (as an object of the senses) conforms to the constitution of our faculty of intuition' (Bxvii). As argued, Crusius holds hermeneutical presumptions to exhibit *a priori* the necessary features to which the objects of such an experience must conform. Meaning therefore comes into the interpreter's view only against the backdrop of what is necessarily presupposed in interpretation. What thus gives content to the connection between necessary conditions of interpretation and correctness criteria for interpretations, to put it now in a way which draws out the link to Kant more explicitly, is the idea that the conditions for the possibility of an experience of meaning are simultaneously conditions for the possibility of the objects of such an experience (see B197).

We previously encountered various appeals to experience as attempts to ground the hermeneutical presumptions. In a later work, where he briefly returns to these issues, Crusius again draws our attention to the peculiar relationship between hermeneutical principles and the experience of understanding that they enable. What is noteworthy in this text is that the question of the validity of hermeneutical presumptions seemingly dissolves completely. We can discern here no clear attempt at either probabilistic or prudential grounding. Furthermore, Crusius abandons his previous terminology, and has interpretation no longer depend on *presumptions*, but on

*postulata*, I mean on such propositions the truth of which is perceived through manifold experience and practice, which however can also not be instilled into another as true otherwise [than by reference to experience]. (Crusius 1760:38)

What is noteworthy here is Crusius' emphasis that such exegetical postulates 'are not to be demonstrated', and the burden of disproof is instead thrown onto the skeptic (Crusius 1760:63-64). This is not an admission of defeat, however, for we have already established why attempts to disprove hermeneutical principles must fail: the skeptic would be 'fighting against himself, for in innumerable cases he understands the words of others according to the rules of interpretation, and must act in accordance with them, and is not deceived in doing so' (W:§635). This is a familiar *reductio* argument: skeptical doubt about the validity of hermeneutical presumptions is incoherent because it presupposes what it negates (see also W:§425).

I argued above that appeals to experience fell flat due to their circularity. With the benefit of Kantian hindsight, we can see to what extent, from the perspective of a different grounding strategy, such appeals may be justified. For

[t]he unfolding of the experience in which [concepts supplying the objective ground of its possibility] are encountered ... is not their deduction (but their illustration), since they would thereby be only contingent. Without this original relation to possible experience, in which all objects of cognition are found, their relation to any object could not be comprehended at all. (A94/B126-7)

Accordingly, Crusius can appeal to experience as ground, and not mere illustration, of the hermeneutical presumptions because he takes them to express the necessary conditions for the possibility of any experience of meaning. Without this relation to any such possible experience, in which all meanings are found, the relation between necessary conditions and correctness criteria cannot be made coherent. The appeal to experience is now justified, since, like the principle that 'every event has a cause', any hermeneutical presumption can be said to have

the special property that it first makes possible its ground of proof, namely experience, and must always be presupposed in this. (A737/B765)

I claim that Crusius' attempt – implicit in his (1747) and prominent in his (1760) – to establish the validity of hermeneutical presumptions in relation to their operation in the very experience they make possible, if seen from the vantage point of the foregoing discussion, exemplifies a type of relation between experience and the conditions of its possibility taken by some as the hallmark of transcendental inquiry. The connection at issue here is characteristic of transcendental projects insofar as they are 'concerned with a form of grounding that is not achieved by reference to anything other than what is to be grounded' (Malpas 2003:83).<sup>61</sup> What makes Crusius' reply to exegetical skepticism transcendental in this sense is not only its explicit concern with establishing necessary conditions for the possibility of what the skeptic doubts is possible. Instead, it has to do with a kind of self-referentiality<sup>62</sup> or self-directedness<sup>63</sup> of the argument.

Addressing the skeptic's challenge to ground interpretation and understanding, Crusius dismisses the idea that such an undertaking can take the shape of a demonstration from some independent ground:

to wish to demonstrate the meaning of words would be an impossible, even laughable endeavor.  
(Crusius 1760:29)

Instead, Crusius grounds interpretation by reference to interpretation itself. His strategy is to show how correct interpretation is possible by exhibiting its necessary presuppositional structure. The transcendental grounding strategy Crusius deploys cannot be set in motion

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<sup>61</sup> See Malpas (1997) for more detailed discussion of this relationship and the extent to which it is non-viciously circular.

<sup>62</sup> See chapter 7 for a more in-depth discussion of this property of transcendental grounding.

<sup>63</sup> See Cassam (1999) on such transcendental arguments and their contrast to 'world-directed' transcendental arguments. See chapter 7.

independently of the experience in which the presuppositional structure unfolds, because what it aims to show is that such a structure is always operative in the experience of understanding. Only through the functioning of this structure, presupposed both by the attempts to exhibit its operation, as well as those to negate it, can anything stand out as meaningful. The attempt to demonstrate the validity of hermeneutical presumptions from some other independent principle fails because meaning itself is no longer understood as reified, simply *there* independently of the interpreter. Instead, the interpreter participates in coordinating the phenomena against the background of which meaningfulness is constituted. There is consequently no other way to reply to the skeptic and establish the validity of hermeneutical principles than by showcasing, as their ground of proof, the way in which they operate in the experience of understanding they make possible.

### 3.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have aimed to argue, first, that Crusius' theory of hermeneutical probability avoids some of the shortcomings I have previously identified in the Thomasian doctrine. Additionally, and more importantly, I have been concerned to put the Crusian account to the skeptic's challenge and test the adequacy of Crusius' answer to the problem of the criterion. In response to this problem, I reconstructed, appealing to Kant's first *Critique*, what I took to be the only promising line of response to the problem, which I argued was implicit in Crusius' writings on interpretation.

In the next chapters, I will attempt to bring Crusius into alignment with Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics – an alignment which may already be apparent to those familiar with the Gadamerian project. Specifically, I will be concerned to bring Gadamer in contact with the idea of transcendental grounding developed here, which, I will argue, comes to expression

more illuminatingly in Gadamer's works. My aim, in other words, is not to draw out similarities of doctrine – which might appear implausible in view of Gadamer's sustained critique of the Enlightenment – but similarities of philosophical methodology and approach. The profit of such a comparison will be a more comprehensive account of the Gadamerian position, now found less vulnerable to some standard and some non-standard objections (chapter 4), and the retrieval of a refined line of reply to the problem of the criterion for interpretation (chapter 5).

## Chapter 4

# Gadamer's Transcendental Grounding of Understanding

### 4.1. Introduction

*Truth and Method* occasioned a profound renewal of hermeneutical thought by attempting to break with hermeneutical tradition. Yet, one thing it shares with hermeneutical theories like the Thomasian and Crusian is the thesis that linguistic understanding embodies a distinctive sort of knowledge, and lays claim to a distinctive sort of truth. And that, consequently, the inquiry into the phenomenon of understanding is concerned with the legitimation of a type of knowledge that lacks the seal of indubitability (see WM:1; TM:xx). Thus, Gadamer writes that 'a hermeneutics of the human sciences ... has nothing to learn from mathematical ... knowledge', which 'depends on proof' (WM:319; TM:312). Like Crusius, Gadamer also distinguishes between two kinds of certainty, corresponding to the two orders of knowledge. There is Cartesian certainty, associated with a lack of doubt, and the 'certainty acquired in life', the 'immediate living certainty that all ends and values have when they appear in human consciousness with an absolute claim' (WM:243; TM:231-2). This immediate certainty pertains to what Gadamer calls the 'historicity of understanding', which he aims to elevate 'to the status of a hermeneutical principle' (WM:270; TM:268).

In this chapter, I intend to argue for some of the advantages we accrue if we understand the Gadamerian project – the “elevation to the status of a principle” of our situatedness – along

transcendental lines. I begin (section 4.2) with Gadamer's ambiguous attitude towards transcendental inquiry, and then (section 4.3) I refine the sense in which Gadamer's project may be called transcendental, by contrasting its aims with those of the Husserlian, Heideggerian, and Kantian inquiries. Next, I present a novel analysis of the fore-structure of understanding by first motivating my line of approach via the preconditions of dialogue, specifically agreement (section 4.4), and by analyzing two interconnected levels of “agreement” (sections 4.5.1 and 4.5.2) and linking them directly to the fore-structure of understanding. Finally (section 4.6), I argue that, not only does Gadamer pursue transcendental aims, but the philosophical methodology by which its results are obtained is an instance of “transcendental grounding”.

## 4.2. Gadamer's relation to transcendental philosophy

Gadamer's relation to transcendental philosophy is marked by a deep ambiguity. On the one hand, Gadamer sometimes stresses the Kantian character of his work. Prefacing the second edition of *Truth and Method*, in a passage sometimes invoked as evidence of the transcendentalism of his project (see Apel 1981:v.1:34; Scholz 2005:448; Dostal 2022:173), Gadamer connects his investigation to Kant's inquiry into the conditions and the extent of our knowledge, adding that his work 'also asks a philosophic question in the same sense. ... It asks, to put it in Kantian terms: How is understanding possible?' (Gadamer 1965a:439; TM:xxvii). Readers of *Truth and Method* will recognize that such talk of conditions of possibility is not at all foreign to Gadamer's hermeneutical account of understanding.

Not only does Gadamer's presentation oftentimes proceed in ways that at least recall Kantian vocabulary, but he sometimes explicitly embraces talk of transcendentalism as well, such as when professing his debts to Heidegger's *Being and Time*. In *Truth and Method*,

Gadamer claims to pay special attention to 'the *transcendental* significance of Heidegger's problematic' – which he finds transcendental 'in the same way that Kant's inquiry was transcendental' – specifically to 'Heidegger's transcendental interpretation of understanding' (WM:268; TM:254). Gadamer is referring here to Heidegger's analysis of the fore-structure of understanding, the basis for Gadamer's own hermeneutical analysis of understanding. Only a few lines later, however, Gadamer praises the early Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity over 'the transcendental constitution research of Husserl's phenomenology' (WM:268-9; TM:254). Moreover, a few pages earlier, Gadamer finds fault with Heidegger because '*Being and Time* does not completely escape the problematic of transcendental reflection' (WM:260; TM:246). These remarks, immediately preceding what is arguably the most celebrated section of Gadamer's work, the 'Elements of a theory of hermeneutic experience', raise an important question concerning the transcendental status of Gadamer's own philosophy.

Scholarship is similarly divided on this issue. Not only is there no consensus in the literature, but a comprehensive study of Gadamer's ambiguous relationship to transcendental inquiry, transcendental idealism, and indeed Kant, remains a *desideratum* for scholarship. As will become apparent from the brief literature overview to follow, the main value of such an investigation into Gadamer's views on the relation of his own investigation to transcendental thinking would be to clarify the many senses of “transcendental” that might be at issue for Gadamer. However, while the exact kind of transcendental Gadamer aims to give his project remains obscure, scholarship appears more united regarding some of the characteristics of what Gadamer rejects. In their monograph surveys of Gadamer's philosophy, both Grondin and di Cesare distance Gadamer from the transcendental orientation about which he seems to be in two minds. Both<sup>64</sup> connect Gadamer's rejection of transcendental thinking with a rejection of foundationalism, and thus a repudiation of a conception of the transcendental imprinted by

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<sup>64</sup> Grondin sometimes expresses a more nuanced view; see fn65, p. 123.

Neo-Kantianism and especially Husserl's later concern with *Letztbegründung* (Grondin 2003; di Cesare 2013). Di Cesare rightly stresses Gadamer's critique of the foundationalist project as a Cartesian residue, especially when connected to a kind of grounding that appeals to subjectivity – like Husserl's *transcendental ego* or *Ur-Ich* (di Cesare 2013:77/80). Similarly, Grondin argues against identifying Gadamer's emphasis on history and tradition as a disguised form of foundationalism, since tradition does not function in Gadamer as a determinate basis for understanding from which the latter could be procured by a kind of derivation (Grondin 2003:77; see also Grondin 1994a:1). Thus, Grondin accentuates that tradition 'marks the limit of every strictly transcendental perspective which aspires to explain understanding from a principle' (Grondin 2003:77). Dostal, who reads Gadamer as a transcendental thinker, agrees that Gadamer's rejection of the Husserlian concern with final grounding is an explicit rejection of a form of transcendental thinking which Gadamer sees as a 'remnant of Cartesian subjectivism' (Dostal 2022:170).

While Gadamer's ambiguous relationship to the transcendental does not receive much treatment in the literature, his philosophical hermeneutics has often been viewed to comprise some form of transcendentality. Habermas and Apel, early critics and admirers alike of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, are noteworthy as having immediately recognized its transcendental dimension. Habermas, for instance, speaks of Gadamer's 'real accomplishment as his demonstration that hermeneutical understanding is related, with transcendental necessity, to the articulation of an action-orienting self-understanding' (Habermas 1967:168; transl. Habermas 1990:162, mod.). Apel devotes a more comprehensive discussion to Gadamer's so-called "transcendental hermeneutics" and explicitly relates the transcendental status of Gadamer's philosophy to its reliance on Heidegger's existential fore-structure of understanding (see Apel 1981:v.1:22-68). In a letter to Heidegger, Pöggeler too remarks that 'it is quite odd to see how Gadamer takes up without further ado at the end of his book the metaphysics of

Being that sees in language a transcendental determination of Being' (cited in Grondin 2024:82).

Despite such leading philosophers all perceiving some form of engagement with transcendental themes in Gadamer's thinking, the heterogeneity of their verdicts suggests not only confusion regarding what precisely determines such thinking as transcendental, but concerning the meaning of “transcendental” itself. This temptation is intensified by the frequent yet passing references made in the literature connecting the transcendental dimension of Gadamer's thought to a sundry array of concepts and topics. Some – like Gadamer himself – connect it to philosophical hermeneutics' Heideggerian heritage, and so to concepts like the fore-structure of understanding, prejudice or the fore-conception of completeness; others, on the other hand, connect it to Gadamer's emphasis on *Wirkungsgeschichte*, historicity (see Gadamer 1965b:412; TM:527), or tradition; and finally some others, like Pöggeler, connect it to the third part of *Truth and Method*, thus to language or linguisticity.<sup>65</sup> However, to take this miscellaneous evidence of a supposed transcendental bent in Gadamer's thought as evidence of the miscellaneous senses of “transcendental” would be the wrong conclusion to draw. For, the concepts listed above are unified: they are all, at bottom, determinants of the hermeneutical situation. What unites these disparate attributions of transcendentality to the Gadamerian project is that all are expressions of the various ways in which interpreters are situated, whether it is by virtue of their prejudices, their historical location, their culture, or their language. Assuming that the link between such concepts and the idea of the transcendental is correctly drawn, the meaning of “transcendental” is unified too.

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<sup>65</sup> For some characteristic examples, see: on the Heideggerian heritage, see Grondin (1994a:141/143); Scholz (2005:448-49); Braver (2011:150); Davey (2024:78-111); on historicity, see Bubner (1994:74-75); Crowell (1999:33); Grondin (2003:94); Chiurazzi (2010:247); Dostal (2011:180); Kögler (2022:299); and on linguisticity, see Dostal (2022:173). Gadamer himself will later concede that for him linguisticity involves a 'quasi-transcendental condition of possibility' (Gadamer 1994:155).

As I will argue in the following, Gadamer does not repudiate transcendental philosophy, but merely replaces a conception of the transcendental that relates it essentially to the notion of subjectivity, with one that redirects attention – through, among other things, the just-mentioned miscellaneous phenomena – to intersubjectivity. I will argue that this is an attempt which entails no foundationalism, no derivation from a principle, but a *transcendental grounding*. With his fundamental insight that 'understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition' (WM:295; TM:291), Gadamer abandons the ego-logical Husserlian-Cartesian direction in favour of the inter-subjective, and trans-subjective, focus on 'the conversation that we ourselves are' (WM:383; TM:370).

#### 4.3. The transcendental nature of the Gadamerian project

Heidegger's disclosure of the fore-structure of understanding<sup>66</sup> – on which Gadamer's project hinges – affords a fitting point of entry into the Gadamerian problematic and simultaneously brings to light the transcendental dimension of that problematic. For, what the fore-structure of understanding is supposed to lay out and make explicit are nothing but the necessary and sufficient conditions for understanding. In this way, the analysis of the fore-structure of understanding is supposed to answer the Kantian question 'How is understanding possible?'. And so, Gadamer's appropriation of Heidegger is evidence that, not only can the question pursued in *Truth and Method* be given a Kantian framing, but the answer too has a transcendental facet – 'in the same way that Kant's inquiry was transcendental' (WM:268; TM:253).

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<sup>66</sup> Since Gadamer does not distinguish, as Heidegger does, between “understanding” and “interpretation”, they are used interchangeably here.

The upshot of Heidegger's analysis of interpretation in *Being and Time* is the idea that 'interpretation is never a presuppositionless grasping of something previously given' (SZ:150; transl. Heidegger 1996:141). Instead, it is grounded in what Heidegger calls fore-having [*Vorhabe*], fore-sight [*Vorsicht*], and fore-conception [*Vorgriff*], which together go into the making of the fore-structure. While Gadamer does not adopt this exact terminology – with perhaps the exception of *Vorgriff*, although a link to the Heideggerian concept should not simply be assumed – he does retain Heidegger's understanding of the fundamental circularity of the interpretive process. In contrast to the traditional description of the hermeneutical circle – as involving a part-whole relationship in which the meaning of the passage to be interpreted is determined by the meaning of the whole text, and determines it in turn – Heidegger's insight was to show that all understanding is made possible by the interpreter's anticipation of meaning for the whole. The fore-structure of understanding, on the basis of which such anticipation proceeds, is a necessary and unavoidable part of comprehension. As Gadamer explains:

A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there. (WM:271; TM:269)

Interpretation thus starts with a fore-conception that is projected onto the *interpretandum*, and is accordingly revised, and so replaced, through the confrontation with the meaning that thereby emerges. The steady process of renewed projection – the “working out” of our fore-conception – is what characterizes the circularity of the movement of interpretation and understanding. On this view, the event of understanding is conceived as the confirmation of the interpreter's final and revised projection. As such, the hermeneutical circle does not only

designate the parts-whole interdependence characteristic of any meaningful unit, but 'describes an element of the ontological structure of understanding' (WM:299; TM:294). In other words, the hermeneutical circle illustrates the way understanding is always given over to what is understood.

The circularity at issue here is thus not merely formal, but material too. Gadamer presses this point by arguing that any understanding is guided by what he calls the 'fore-conception of completeness', namely the presupposition that 'only what really constitutes a unity of meaning is intelligible' (WM:299; TM:294). This is not only a matter of a formal unity, an internal coherence of what is interpreted. Instead, the interpreter

is likewise guided by the constant transcendent expectations of meaning that proceed from the relation to the truth of what is meant. ... [W]e understand traditionary [*überlieferte*] texts on the basis of expectations of meaning drawn from our own prior relation to the subject matter. (WM:299; TM:294 mod.)

The material side of the hermeneutical circle thus highlights Gadamer's debts to Heidegger's insight that 'every interpretation which is to contribute some understanding must already have understood what is to be interpreted' (SZ:152; transl. Heidegger 1996:142). This is an idea on which the issue of interpretive normativity will hinge directly, and one crucial to understanding the transcendental of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.

Yet, before we can further refine the sense in which Gadamer's project is transcendental, we should clarify the sense in which it is not. And that involves surveying the ways in which it gains distance from Husserl's. First of all, Gadamer's analysis of understanding in terms of enabling prejudices is connected with a rejection of subjectivity. As he expresses it in a celebrated passage:

The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.* (WM:281; TM:278)

Gadamer's analysis therefore shifts the focus from self-transparent subjectivity to something which both precedes and enables it:

The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition. (WM:298; TM:293)

Instead of a Cartesian consciousness, Gadamer speaks of a historically effected consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*), which he connects to a consciousness of the hermeneutical situation, i.e., 'the situation in which we find ourselves with regard to the tradition that we are trying to understand' (WM:307; TM:301). What Gadamer is fundamentally driving at is that in the human – as contrasted to the natural – sciences it is not a matter of disinterested or disengaged *objectivity*, but of the knower's prior relation to what is known. The aim, consequently, is to replace the ideal of objective knowledge with the ideal of participation. To that end, Gadamer replaces what he describes as the *mono-logic* of science with the logic of dialogue:

In my work I have tried to show that the model of dialogue is significant because it illuminates the structure of this form of participation. For dialogue is distinguished by the fact that no one participant can survey what comes out of it and then claim that he can master the subject on his own, but instead that we share together in the truth and in one another. (Gadamer 1980:323; transl. Gadamer 1998:56)

Let me briefly postpone the discussion of Gadamer's dialogical model of understanding. What I would like to note for now is that Gadamer's refocusing on the structure of dialogue occurs not only in the context of his rejection of subjectivism, but it is part of his repudiation of a certain conception of the transcendental. Let us consider two passages which exhibit this connection most clearly. The first comes from “Text and Interpretation”, where Gadamer argues that

[i]n view of the scope of what understanding is, the circularity that moves between the one who understands and that which he understands can lay claim to genuine universality, and it is precisely on this point that I believe that I have followed Heidegger's critique of the phenomenological concept of immanence, a critique that is directed against Husserl's notion of an ultimate transcendental justification [*Letztbegründung*]. The dialogical character of language, which I tried to work out, leaves behind it any starting point in the subjectivity of the subject, and especially in the meaning-directed intentions of the speaker. (Gadamer 1983:335; trans. Gadamer 1989b:26)

Here, Gadamer connects the dialogical character of language to the Heideggerian conception of the hermeneutical circle, and explicitly to an abandonment of the Husserlian transcendental project. In his autobiographical “Selbstdarstellung”, Gadamer similarly connects dialogue with a rejection of Husserlian transcendental philosophy. As he puts it:

It seems to me evident that we cannot get behind [*nicht hintergebar*] the recourse to the original dialogic of human world-having [*Welthabe*]. This holds even if what is demanded is some final accountability or “ultimate foundation” [*Letztbegründung*], or if what is advocated is the “self-realization of the spirit”. (Gadamer 1975:505)

Gadamer's appeal to *Unhintergebarkeit* here concerns not only the fundamental opacity of the dialogical structure and ground of understanding, but the theoretical structure of any grounding

procedure itself. It is due to the *Unhintergebarkeit* of the fore-structure of understanding that no theoretical attempt at grounding, and so no answer to the Kantian question of 'how is understanding possible?', can evade. Husserl's *Letztbegründung* miscarries precisely because it attempts to step outside of the hermeneutical circle, and, so, to evade the *Unhintergebarkeit* of the fore-structure. Yet, the fantasy of a presuppositionless grasping of the world denies the conditions under which alone any grasping is possible.

On the other hand, operating within the hermeneutical circle to describe the phenomenon of understanding involves a transcendental of its own, since a theory of understanding is concerned with an account of understanding in terms of an enabling structure, found to be operative in all understanding and which necessarily precedes it. An account of such – *prima facie a priori* – conditions is certainly consistent with a transcendental account of what grounds understanding. It is noteworthy that, while Gadamer unequivocally abandons any claim to a Husserlian “final grounding”, he does not abandon the vocabulary of grounding. Indeed, he deploys it when formulating the 'fundamental epistemological question for a truly historical hermeneutics', namely:

[W]hat is the ground of the legitimacy of prejudices? What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from the countless others which it is the undeniable task of critical reason to overcome? (WM:281-2; TM:278)

What is remarkable about this passage is that it articulates an illuminating dependence between two separate questions: the basic question of hermeneutics is framed here not only as a question of ground, but as a search for a criterion, for identifying the distinguishing marks of legitimacy. As I will argue in the following, both questions – of possibility and validity – will be answered by an account which exhibits the presuppositional fore-structure of understanding as a structure

which is prior to any given event of understanding, and with which understanding is always already entangled.

I want to claim that the transcendental dimension of Gadamer's investigation does not reduce to its Heideggerian heritage. For, Gadamer's fundamental question after the validity of the fore-structure converges in another important way with the Kantian rather than Heideggerian project. What is at issue for Gadamer is not only the question 'how is understanding possible?', but the way in which an interpreter's beliefs – or prejudices – about an object of interpretation can be true of that object in advance of the interpretive encounter. Here, the Kantian link suggests itself. For, Gadamer's question concerning the legitimacy of our prejudices echoes none other than the quintessential transcendental question, framed by Kant in terms of the possibility of our *a priori* knowledge of objects. And so, the answer to the question concerning the legitimacy of prejudices is 'occupied not so much with objects but rather with our mode of cognition of objects insofar as this is to be possible *a priori*' (B25), and consequently, if known to be true, would constitute an instance of transcendental knowledge. As I will show in the following, Gadamer's answer will also mirror Kant's strategy in the Transcendental Deduction (discussed in 7.3), namely it will involve a demonstration of the validity of the knowledge we already possess.

After setting the stage for what is to come, I should briefly mention that what I defend in the following is not a mere exposition of Gadamer's view. While I take myself to provide a Gadamerian answer to a Gadamerian (and Kantian) question, the answer I provide differs substantially from the one Gadamer himself offers in *Truth and Method*, and from the conventional recounting of his position. I will begin, in the next section by motivating my decision to start from Gadamer's conception of dialogue.

#### 4.4. The preconditions of understanding and the structure of dialogue

“*Dialog*” or “*Gespräch*” designates for Gadamer the very 'structure of linguistic understanding' (Gadamer 1972:474) and, since for him understanding is essentially linguistic, 'the basic model of all understanding' (Gadamer 1968:116). Thus, if we are after the preconditions of understanding, starting from the preconditions of dialogue seems to be on the right track. And yet this is a highly unusual road to take. The conventional approach to interpreting Gadamer on this issue involves first locating the preconditions of understanding in a fore-structure construed in terms of an aggregate of prejudices, and second establishing tradition and the history of effects [*Wirkungsgeschichte*] as the source of the prejudices' validity.<sup>67</sup> This standard approach is of course not unfaithful to the text of *Truth and Method*: indeed, it precisely mirrors Gadamer's framing of his fundamental question and the general direction of his inquiry. However, as I will argue, when the analysis of the preconditions of understanding – i.e., the explication of the fore-structure – centers exclusively on prejudice, it begins to strain the message of Gadamer's thought, and puts it on course towards objections it could otherwise bypass. Let us first consider some problems with the conventional approach, before challenging its fidelity to Gadamer's teaching after 1960, and motivating my alternative focus on dialogue.

The orthodox account of the Gadamerian position regarding the preconditions of understanding – prejudices validated by tradition – takes the inquiry into the possibility of understanding to a well-known dead end. The objection is variously formulated. Emilio Betti, one of Gadamer's earliest critics, frames it in terms of the autonomy of the *interpretanda* (see Betti 1962). Betti takes issue with Gadamer's stress on the constitutive nature of the interpreter's prejudices and argues that his account cannot guarantee the correctness of interpretation. He

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<sup>67</sup> This approach is too widespread to permit precise attribution, yet perhaps equally so to require it. For some paradigmatic recent examples, see: Gander (2015:140-145); Fehér (2016:281-285); Grondin (2021:55-60); Culbertson (2022:144-150).

reproaches Gadamer for affording the interpreter a monopoly on truth, and hence for surrendering any ambition to secure objectivity in interpretation. The issue of validity in interpretation forms the focal point of another early critique, advanced by E.D. Hirsch (1967). Like Betti, Hirsch maintains that, on the Gadamerian view, the objects of interpretation are made to conform to the interpreter's own view of the truth and are thus consistently and irrevocably distorted. These are versions of an objection recently discussed in the literature as “the normative critique”, “normative” because it alleges that 'Gadamer's hermeneutics leaves us unable to account for the *normative* dimension of interpretation, for the distinction between correctly understanding a text or utterance and misunderstanding it' (DaVia & Lynch 2024:82; see also Liakos 2022).

This normative critique is closely related to another, the charge of ethnocentrism.<sup>68</sup> For reasons of space, I will not examine this criticism here. Suffice it to say that framing the Gadamerian account of the preconditions of understanding in terms of tradition and historically-effected prejudices raises important doubts about our access to the texts and members of other cultures and traditions. Additionally, the Gadamerian insistence that such access must remain mediated by the interpreter's historical and cultural standpoint invites the worry that understanding is at bottom an assimilation of the foreign, and so entails a reduction of the cultural other to the self. Gadamer's theory of interpretation and understanding, the objection continues, fails to do justice to the otherness of the other and to account for an unmediated, and thus undistorting, access to the texts and members of other traditions. To put this point in a way that connects to the normative critique, philosophical hermeneutics does not supply a conceptual basis against which the unadulterated content of the objects of

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<sup>68</sup> For a good, if slightly dated, survey of the debate, see Hofer (1998:119-143). More recent versions of the charge are advanced by Gjesdal (2009; 2017), among others. See Wright (2022) for an overview of the charge in relation to non-Western, specifically Chinese, philosophy. The German-language literature on the problem of *Fremdverstehen*, for instance Kogge (2001) or Kapsch (2007), is also a good source of criticism.

interpretation can come into view. And this, in turn, calls into question the ability of Gadamerian hermeneutics to answer its fundamental question. According to Betti, in fact, the project miscarries precisely because Gadamer's method for 'distinguishing true from false prejudices ... does not supply a reliable criterion for the correctness of understanding' (Betti 1962:41). What is needed to reply to such objections – the charge of Ethnocentrism as well as the normative critique – is to account for the normative dimension of interpretation.

Instead of a laborious examination of the details and various versions of such objections, and the adequacy of some proposed replies to them, I want to frame my investigation into the preconditions of understanding in a way which precludes such objections, while accounting for the normative dimension of interpretation and simultaneously shedding light on the transcendental aspect of Gadamer's thinking. I submit that all these goals can be attained by seeking the preconditions of understanding in the structure of dialogue. For, as we already saw, the structure of dialogue illuminates a form of participation that is distinctive of the hermeneutical, marking the moment of understanding as an event of common meaning in which 'we share together in the truth and in one another' (Gadamer 1980:323; transl. Gadamer 1998:56). Consequently, taking the dialogical structure of understanding as a guide mitigates the subjectivizing tendencies of some of Gadamer's exposition – in formulas like 'the prejudices of the individual' (WM:281; TM:278) or in his framing of the task of application as one for the interpreter who 'tries to apply [the text] to himself' (WM:329; TM:321) – and so no longer permits the opposition between 'self' and 'other' on which the above objections rely. Self and other, whether text or person, now become interlocutors in a conversation that encompasses them: not each of them in turn, but both together, as a unity. Indeed, insofar as they converse, the interlocutors simply are a conversation (see WM:383; TM:380).

The shift in focus I advance here does not stem from an excess of charity, but from the pursuit of fidelity in relation to the progression of Gadamer's thinking. It is obvious that prior

to 1960 Gadamer was involved with questions that afterwards concerned him much less, like the scientific status of the *Geisteswissenschaften* and the question of their claim to truth. Yet *Truth and Method* still bears the stamp of such concerns, and their influence is quite visible in the so-called *Urfassung*, the first manuscript of the work, persisting especially in the second, and theoretically the most important, part of the published version.<sup>69</sup> Some of these early preoccupations, however, eventually gave way or lost some of their significance, and Gadamer credits their later clarification and emendation to the critical reception of his views, by Habermas or Derrida specifically (Gadamer 1985b:4).

In relation especially to the problem of cultural alterity, Gadamer himself frequently emphasized the inadequacy of the original framing of his hermeneutical account in *Truth and Method*. Referring to his treatment of the productive role played by temporal distance from the *interpretandum* (see WM:296-305; TM:291-299), Gadamer acknowledges that his discussion in that section

does not entirely satisfy me. The systematic treatment of history was too much on my mind there.

Later, I indicated that we are not only dealing with the distance between ages but more so with the otherness of the other which makes one reflective. (Gadamer 1997b:96)

So dissatisfied was Gadamer with that subdivision that he modified it in later editions of the work (see WM:304fn228). What is more relevant for my purposes here, however, is that Gadamer shifts the focus from the shortcomings of his initial argument precisely by calling attention to his conception of *dialogue*. The argument for the significance of temporal distance, Gadamer claims in his “Reflections on my Philosophical Journey”,

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<sup>69</sup> On issues relating to the composition of *Truth and Method*, see Grondin (1994b:1-23); for an English translation, see Grondin (1995).

was a poor preparation for discussing the fundamental significance of the otherness of the other and the fundamental role played by language as dialogue. It would have been more in tune with the subject matter ... to speak of distance and its hermeneutic function in a more general way. After all, interpretive distance does not always have to be historical distance; ... for example, in the encounter between persons who try to find a common ground in dialogue, and also in the encounter with persons who speak an alien language or live in an alien culture. Every encounter of this kind allows us to become conscious of our own preconceptions. (Gadamer 1985b:8/9; transl. Gadamer 1997a:45; see Gadamer 1989a:280)

The emphasis on the structure of dialogue or conversation offsets here the one-sidedness of Gadamer's original argument in a way which highlights its intersubjective aspect. As established, the structure of dialogue dissolves not only the subjectivity of the interpreter, but, with it, the objectivity of what is to be interpreted. And so, the suspicion of distortion, exploited by the standard objection, is simply dispelled by the focus on dialogue.

The emphasis on dialogue also serves to highlight the transcendental dimension of Gadamer's project. For, in dialogue, the object of interpretation no longer stands against the interpreter as invariant. For this reason, 'hermeneutics has to see through the dogmatism of a "meaning-in-itself" in exactly the same way critical philosophy has seen through the dogmatism of experience' (WM:477; TM:468). Gadamer is here expressing a view sometimes called "interpretivism" or "interpretationism",<sup>70</sup> roughly the idea that semantic content is constituted by interpretation, specifically by its anticipatory structure. We can already see the transcendental character of Gadamer's inquiry coming to the fore in this thesis, which is none other than what I previously described as a Copernican Revolution in Crusius' hermeneutics (see 3.3.2.c): the thesis that the conditions of intelligibility coincide with the conditions of meaningfulness. The dialogical structure of understanding uncovers how, in Kantian fashion,

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<sup>70</sup> DaVia and Lynch (2024) refer to this thesis as Gadamer's 'event semantics'; see 5.4.2.b.

answering the transcendental question concerning our *a priori* knowledge of objects involves the thesis that such objects are themselves constituted by our cognitive makeup, by what enables our projection of meaning.

There is a final caveat I must voice before proceeding with my analysis. The obvious place to start an inquiry into Gadamer's transcendental grounding of understanding by inquiring into the preconditions of dialogue would be the linguistic requirement that 'every dialogue presupposes a common language' (WM:384; TM:371).<sup>71</sup> Yet following the trail of Gadamer's conception of language may return us back to the impasse we were trying to avoid. For, Gadamer's conception of language is not instrumental: language is not a simple and transparent tool for the expression of thoughts. Instead, to say that dialogue presupposes a common language is to stress what is talked about as much as the idiom used. For,

[I]inguistic form and traditionary content cannot be separated in the hermeneutic experience. If every language is a view of the world, it is so not primarily because it is a particular type of language ... but because of what is said or handed down in this language. (WM:445; TM:438/9)

Language is conceived here not only as the means of expression, but also as the repository of contents which, through history, have sedimented into it. This entails that different languages embody different worldviews: 'language ... has its actuality as world-aspects of different cultures' (Gadamer 1970:192; transl. Gadamer 2022a:147, mod.). Thus, the language in which a culture or tradition addresses the interpreter cannot be neatly distinguished from the tradition itself. Indeed, language and tradition form a unity (WM:445; TM:439). Consequently, the

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<sup>71</sup> Notoriously, this is a point of disagreement between Gadamer and Davidson. For more about the linguistic requirement and this disagreement, see Malpas (2002; 2011); Braver (2011); Fultner (2011); Vessey (2011; 2012); Lynch (2014); Lazurca (2022).

linguistic requirement threatens to take us back to the intra-cultural perspective we aimed to avoid and does not set us on a path away from ethnocentrism.

I want therefore to focus my analysis, not on the nature of the shared language, but on the kind of sharing that is required for dialogue. In the next section, I will center my discussion on the notion of *agreement* as a better way of explicating the fore-structure of understanding, and thus the necessary conditions for interpretation. The upshot of my re-reading of the Gadamerian position will be an analysis of the fore-structure which no longer favors exclusively linguistic and conceptual – in brief, propositional – elements (“prejudice”, “preconception”, “preunderstanding”, etc.), but which additionally recognizes a practical component as well.

#### 4.5. Agreement as a precondition of understanding

The first thing to note about Gadamer's conception of agreement as a necessary condition for understanding is the conceptual manifold obscured by translation and scholarship alike. Behind “agreement” as found in most English translations of Gadamer's works lie in fact several distinct words. Conceptually the most important are “*Einverständnis*” and “*Übereinkunft*” (or *Übereinkommen*). In the following I will refer to these in their original German, since my intention is to draw attention to a conceptual difference between them. There is in fact a significant distinction to be made between two separate kinds of agreement in the Gadamerian position, a distinction completely missed by scholarship thus far.<sup>72</sup> Let us begin with *Einverständnis*.

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<sup>72</sup> This and the following sections substantially develop section 2.2 of my Lazorca (2022).

#### 4.5.1. Ein tragendes Einverständnis

Notoriously, Gadamer's account of understanding emerges from his critique of Romantic hermeneutics, Schleiermacher's in particular. Here is where the concept of *Einverständnis* acquires philosophical importance, though its real significance will develop with time. Indeed, it is only in the wake of *Truth and Method* that *Einverständnis* comes into its own – namely, into conceptual proximity to the fore-structure of understanding.

Gadamer's chief objection is to what he considers the 'tacit premise of [Schleiermacher's] entire hermeneutics' (WM:172; TM:159), namely the idea that 'misunderstanding results as a matter of course and understanding must be desired and sought at every point' (Schleiermacher 1977:92; transl. Schleiermacher 1998:22). For Schleiermacher, what accounted for the frequency with which interpretation missed its mark was a fundamental disunity between the interpreter and what they interpret, due ultimately to the irreducible individuality of author and interpreter, but gravely exacerbated by linguistic or cultural differences between them, as well as historical distance. Schleiermacher's theory of interpretation is aimed at methodically bridging this gap.

For Gadamer, instead, the undeniable reality of misunderstanding was not permitted to dissolve the fundamental unity between the interpreter and what they interpret. Gadamer therefore shifts the focus to a conception of understanding which is not the result of a methodical overcoming of separation, but is rather a participation in an event of common meaning (WM:297; TM:292). Consequently, Gadamer proceeds on the assumption that

to understand means to come to an understanding with each other. Understanding is, primarily, agreement [*«Verstehen heißt zunächst, sich miteinander verstehen»*]. *Verständnis ist zunächst Einverständnis*. (WM:183; TM:180)

Gadamer stresses here that the goal of understanding and communication is *Einverständnis*, agreement. Interlocutors in dialogue will understand one another if they reach an agreement, i.e., a shared understanding of the matter at issue between them. *Einverständnis* should of course not be understood as a complete identity of opinion (see Gadamer 1985b:16): to understand *Mein Kampf*, to give a famous example, is not to agree with it in the sense of sharing its opinion (see Grondin 2003:57-58). Reaching an agreement is understood rather as reaching a position from which the original dissent is no longer in view (Gadamer 1970:188), a position from which the differences between the two partners in dialogue come into sharper focus. As such, *Einverständnis* describes the relation between conversation partners once understanding is achieved about a particular subject matter: not (necessarily) a shared view, but a shared point of view.

Gadamer's critique of Schleiermacher has faced fierce opposition, too broad to consider here (see Gjesdal 2006; 2007). I want to note, however, that Gadamer's objection to Schleiermacher on *this* point already seems off track. For, if *Einverständnis* denotes only the destination of the interpretive process, Gadamer's change of emphasis does not conflict with the Schleiermacherian description of the interpretive journey itself. Though Schleiermacher starts from the ubiquitous experience of misunderstanding, his description of interpretation as a methodical striving for grasping the individuality of the other is compatible with a characterization of that end goal as a state of agreement. Additionally, if *Einverständnis* is a synonym for *Verstehen* and *Verständnis*, a mere redescription of what happens to interlocutors when they reach an understanding, it makes little sense to recognize in it any enabling condition. For these reasons, the concept of "*Einverständnis*", bound up with a questionable critique of Schleiermacher, does not appear to play a lead role in *Truth and Method*, at least in terms of laying out the preconditions of dialogue. However, in Gadamer's later thought,

“*Einverständnis*” escapes the narrow orbit it occupied there and acquires a new, transcendental, dimension.

This transformation is already prefigured in Gadamer's “Man and Language” (1966b). Here, returning to Schleiermacher's definition of hermeneutics as the art of avoiding misunderstanding, Gadamer clarifies and expands his view. He concedes that Schleiermacher's description of the interpretive process is not entirely wrongheaded: surely the strangeness and unfamiliarity of the *interpretandum* can easily lead to misunderstandings, as happens in cases of extended temporal distance or changes in word-meanings (Gadamer 1966b:222-23). Indeed, Gadamer elsewhere marks the problem of overcoming alterity as a central motif of any hermeneutics (Gadamer 1976:285), as well as 'the most difficult of human tasks' (Gadamer 1990:345). Yet, he urges that an analysis of understanding must be divorced from a picture which gives precedence to the distortions to which understanding can fall prey. This prioritizing of misunderstanding, according to Gadamer, amounts to an artificial displacement of the communicative know-how that characterizes the human way of life and its social being, which is replaced with a picture of communication in which understanding needs to be labored at (Gadamer 1978:313). Such a picture misses the point that 'every misunderstanding presupposes a sustaining agreement [*ein tragendes Einverständnis*]' (Gadamer 1966b:223). Even to address another in dialogue, to recognize them as a possible interlocutor, rests on the same foundation in *Einverständnis*: 'We all know that to say “thou” to someone presupposes a deep agreement' (223). As Gadamer characterizes it here, Schleiermacher's description of the task of hermeneutics had the matter back to front:

It is firstly the support of the familiar and agreement that makes the venture into the alien possible.  
(Gadamer 1966b:230; transl. Gadamer 2007b:87, mod.)

“*Einverständnis*” comes to denote here the necessary consensus which alone allows misunderstandings to emerge. Moreover, *Einverständnis* also comes forth as the necessary condition for understanding *tout court*. Whereas in *Truth and Method*, *Einverständnis* was the *telos* of dialogue, and was therefore posterior to the interpretive interaction, here Gadamer promotes *Einverständnis* to a condition of the possibility of understanding, making it therefore implicitly prior to it. This transformation will only become clearer with the progression of Gadamer's thinking.<sup>73</sup>

In “Classical and Philosophical Hermeneutics” (1968), Gadamer draws on *Einverständnis* against Derrida's deconstructive project and Habermas' critique of ideology. Here, he recapitulates his view in *Truth and Method* that 'every effort at grasping a meaning is in principle directed toward ... a possible agreement [*Einverständnis*]', but immediately underscores the insufficiency of this requirement. For, such an effort

*must already rest on a general agreement [*Einverständnis*] that is binding, if it is to come about that one understands and is understood.* This is not some dogmatic assumption but a simple phenomenological description of coming to an understanding. When there is no common ground linking two parties together, no dialogue can succeed. (Gadamer 1968:114-115; transl. Gadamer 2007a:68, mod., emphasis added)

Gadamer appeals here to *Einverständnis*, not merely as the *telos* of understanding, but as its necessary presupposition, a condition that must be met *prior* to the event of understanding. This marks a clear departure from Gadamer's earlier conception, where *Einverständnis* was

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<sup>73</sup> It is plausible, given Gadamer's remarks (1985b:4), that this transformation was prompted by the critical reception of *Truth and Method*. Indeed, Gadamer's *Die Universalität des hermeneutischen Problems*, discussed here, is devoted to a question which dominated the early reception of this work in Germany, and which additionally formed one of the pillars of Habermas' engagement with, and critique of, philosophical hermeneutics: the question of hermeneutics' claim to universality. In fact, after Habermas' publication of his (1967), where he challenges Gadamer on the universal aspect of hermeneutics, *Einverständnis* increasingly becomes associated with Gadamer's defense of hermeneutical universality.

understood to conclude a dialogue, and not to precede it. Additionally, with this development Gadamer finally completes his rejection of Schleiermacher's approach to interpretation: a conception of *Einverständnis* as prior to the interpretive interaction is obviously incompatible with an approach that takes, not consensus – or agreement – , but misunderstanding as the primary hermeneutical concept. For Schleiermacher, at least as Gadamer understands him, understanding – and indeed agreement – can only emerge once an original divergence is overcome. For Gadamer, instead, divergence can only emerge against the backdrop of an original agreement.

To be sure, Gadamer does not forgo his earlier conception, but merely supplements it. While *Einverständnis* remains the goal of every interpretive engagement, it is now conceived as a destination to be reached not by departing from some given perspective to encompass that of an interlocutor, but by a return to something that encompasses them both:

The ultimate goal is ... to return to that fundamental agreement which alone makes it at all meaningful for one to talk to another person. (Gadamer 1968:115)

Dialogue, and so coming to an understanding, describes the process by which an original commonality which unites the interlocutors prior to interpretation is “worked out” (see WM:271; TM:269).

It should be stressed too, that this view is not incompatible with the theme of Gadamer's *magnum opus*, or with Gadamer's own characterizations of that project. In the postscript to the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of *Truth and Method*, he indeed reformulates his view in precisely these terms. There, he addresses what he then considered the 'weightiest objection' to his philosophy, namely the charge of having

derived the fundamental significance of agreement from the language dependence of all understanding and all coming to an understanding, and thereby hav[ing] legitimated a prejudice in favor of existing social relations. (Gadamer 1972:465; TM:569)

Not only does Gadamer accept the criticism, but even endorses this formulation of his position.

He writes:

that is in fact right, and in my view it remains a real insight: namely that *coming to an understanding can only succeed on the basis of an original agreement*, and that the task of understanding and interpretation cannot be described as if hermeneutics had to overcome the opaque unintelligibility of the transmitted text or even primarily the errors of misunderstanding. ... All coming to understanding in language presupposes agreement not just about the meanings of words and the rules of spoken language; much remains undisputed with regard to the “subject matter” as well – i.e., to everything that can be meaningfully discussed. (Gadamer 1972:465; TM:569, emphasis added)

Here, Gadamer again outlines his conception of *Einverständnis* as a condition for the possibility of coming to an understanding. Yet what is truly noteworthy about this passage is that *Einverständnis* transcends the province of Gadamer's opposition to Schleiermacher and spills over into his systematic account of what makes understanding possible, taking on a role previously reserved primarily for such notions as “prejudice” [*Vorurteil*]. This statement finally brings *Einverständnis* into the orbit of the *Vorstruktur*.

To my knowledge, the first explicit connection between *Einverständnis* and the analysis of the fore-structure occurs in Gadamer's “Hermeneutics as a Theoretical and Practical Task” (1978), which thus completes the transcendental transformation of this increasingly central concept. Motivating once more his departure from Romantic hermeneutics, subjectivity, and especially the scientific ideal of the unengaged, non-participating, observer, Gadamer draws renewed attention to the emphasis placed in his work on the fact that

the being of the interpreter belongs intrinsically to the being of what is to be interpreted. Whoever wants to understand something already brings along something that anticipatorily joins him with what he wants to understand – a sustaining agreement [*ein tragendes Einverständnis*]. (Gadamer 1978:317; transl. Gadamer 2007d:263, mod.)

Tacitly alluding to Schleiermacher's dictum that understanding must be desired and sought, Gadamer appeals to *Einverständnis* here as a way of explicating the structure of the necessary belongingness between interpreter and interpreted which alone enables understanding. In every interpretive engagement, Gadamer argues, prior to any conscious effort to understand, the interpreter *already brings along* a substantive connection with what is to be understood, on the basis of which alone interpretation is possible. *Einverständnis* here becomes more encompassing and no longer holds only between conversational partners but holds of everything that can be understood. It is no longer only a condition for identifying misunderstandings, a frame of reference for mapping out intelligible differences, but, qua necessary condition for understanding, it becomes a condition for identifying items as intelligible. For, if the required *Einverständnis* fails to be present, we are not able to recognize anything (or anyone; see Gadamer 1966b:223) as something to be understood. Consequently, *Einverständnis* stands as a necessary condition for content.

To summarize, I have argued that in Gadamer's later work "*Einverständnis*" extends beyond the conceptual province of *Truth and Method*: *Einverständnis* is no longer conceived of as a result of dialogue, a goal to be reached, but as its precondition. This transformation lands *Einverständnis* on a trajectory that outstrips the bounds of Gadamer's critique of Schleiermacher and brings it into the orbit of the fore-structure. This proximity between *Einverständnis* and the *Vorstruktur* is apparent in the terms and themes that begin to cluster around this concept. As we saw, in Gadamer's later work, *Einverständnis* is described in terms

of an anticipatory connection, a precondition for interpretation and content, and in terms of belongingness. It is particularly instructive to follow the different stages of this conceptual shift. Recall that Gadamer first signals a break with the *Truth and Method* conception of *Einverständnis* by arguing that understanding is not only directed towards *Einverständnis*, but must already rest on it (see Gadamer 1968:114-115). However, in the passage surveyed above – which brought up the idea of belongingness – *Einverständnis* is no longer conceived along these lines, merely as a 'common ground linking two parties together' (Gadamer 1968:114-115; transl. Gadamer 2007a:68), or a relation between the interpreter and the *interpretandum* as independent *relata*. Instead, in that later work, *Einverständnis* condensed the idea that 'the being of the interpreter belongs intrinsically to the being of what is to be interpreted' (Gadamer 1978:317; transl. Gadamer 2007d:263). Here, *Einverständnis* is no longer a mere relation between determinate items, but a relation understood as inclusive – and indeed constitutive – of the items thus related. For, what marks the difference between inkblots and text, and what makes a creature into an interpreter, is that text and interpreter are anticipatorily joined, embedded in a relation of *Einverständnis*.

I claim that, for these reasons, “*Einverständnis*” is one way of explicating the fore-structure of understanding. The main advantage of articulating the fore-structure in terms of *Einverständnis* is that it eliminates the remnants of subjectivity still present in *Truth and Method*. This way of spelling out the preconditions for understanding avoids reference to notions like “fore-conception”, “fore-understanding” or “prejudice”, concepts which may help to construct a picture of understanding not yet fully divorced from subjectivity. Not only do these mental states seemingly presuppose a subject to possess them, but also a kind of representational directionality, where a subject projects a meaning for an object, with both items seemingly standing apart in isolation. On this directional model, the standard objection – that Gadamer cannot prevent the interpreter's imposing their own perspective onto the text –

is all too plausible. Centering on *Einverständnis*, on the other hand, means that both interpreter and *interpretandum* are 'encompassed by a context of mutual agreement' (Gadamer 1978:317; transl. Gadamer 2007d:264), and questions regarding the autonomy of the object no longer have the conceptual resources to arise.

Despite such progress, however, Gadamer may now be vulnerable to an even more damaging objection. I noted above his commitment to interpretivism, the view that the content of utterances or beliefs is constituted by interpretation and cannot be given any substantiality independently of it. For Gadamer, dialogue is an event which constitutes the meaning – and, as we saw, the being – of what is interpreted. Yet, if the objects of interpretation are constituted by the dialogical interaction, then the question of whether interpreter and *interpretandum* agree on anything prior to interpretation, and so stand in the requisite *Einverständnis* relation, cannot be given a determinate answer. There is therefore a puzzling tension between Gadamer's commitment to interpretivism and his inference from the fact that interpretation can never reveal massive disagreement, to the existence of a determinate, and shared, prior *Einverständnis*.

We can devise a defensive strategy against this objection by drawing on Gadamer's "Language and Understanding", where he is concerned to answer a related critique, of the idea that understanding is essentially a linguistic event. Let us call this *the linguisticity of understanding thesis*. The challenge is posed by phenomena like 'speechless astonishment' or being 'struck dumb with admiration'. According to Gadamer, these

are phenomena about which we can clearly say: it renders us bereft of words. It renders us bereft of words precisely due to the fact that it is so evident [*einleuchtend*], that it stands there before our ever more encompassing gaze, far too enormous for words to be sufficient to grasp it. (Gadamer 1970:185; transl. Gadamer 2022a:141, mod.; see Gadamer 2007c:93)

Such phenomena bring a counterargument to the linguisticity of understanding thesis by severing the connection between language and understanding. In such instances we can recognize that understanding took place even in the absence of adequate verbalization, and consequently that not all understanding must, or even can, be linguistic.

Pressed by such objections, Gadamer restores the viability of the linguisticity of understanding thesis by contrasting once more his and Schleiermacher's positions. Gadamer's objections to his predecessor are not those of *Truth and Method*, but echo those developed in its wake, directed specifically against the priority of misunderstanding. Gadamer again stresses that 'agreement [*Einverständnis*] is presupposed where there is a disruption in agreement' (Gadamer 1970:186; transl. Gadamer 2022a:142) and contends that the appeal to a 'purposeful will to understand' (*ibid.*) – an obvious allusion to Schleiermacher – is motivated only by the relatively rare obstacles and disruptions in understanding. Against this perspective, Gadamer urges that

[w]e need to recognize that agreement is more original than misunderstanding, so that understanding always flows back again into the restored agreement. (Gadamer 1970:187-88; transl. Gadamer 2022a:144)

What is immediately striking about this passage is its description of the ineluctable circularity of understanding. We know that 'understanding is, primarily, agreement [*Einverständnis*]' (WM:183; TM:180). In this section, I showed that the process by which two interlocutors reach an understanding in dialogue – and hence come to an agreement – is a process of working out an original enabling commonality, which Gadamer also denotes here as *Einverständnis*. Yet, of course, the *Einverständnis* reached by the interlocutors cannot be identical with that which rendered the encounter possible in the first place. If it were, there would be little point, and even less content, to communicate: everything would be agreed upon already. Instead, the

*Einverständnis* reached in dialogue, let us call it 'posterior *Einverständnis*', though it develops out of that original and enabling commonality, now constitutes a new commonality, an achievement Gadamer notoriously describes as a *fusion of horizons*. What is thus particularly noteworthy about the passage above, and this text in general, is that it describes the process by which not only interpreters, but understanding itself, flows back into an original agreement that is now “restored”. Let us now see this process in more detail.

After his initial positioning in relation to Schleiermacher, Gadamer turns to the main topic of the lecture, which is securing the linguisticity of this original, prior *Einverständnis*, which Gadamer denotes now as 'tacit' agreement (Gadamer 1970:188; Gadamer 2022a:144). Gadamer therefore asks:

Why does the ‘tacit agreement’, which establishes itself time and again as the commonality of our orientation in the world, mean linguisticity? To question in this way implies the answer. It is language which is constantly building and supporting this commonality of the orientation in the world. ... A common aspect of what is talked about is constituted in talking with one another. What constitutes the proper reality of human communication is that the dialogue does not set the opinion of one against that of the other or append the opinion of one to that of the other, as if it were an addition. The dialogue transforms both. A successful dialogue is of the kind that we cannot fall back again into the dissensus which sparked the dialogue in the first place. A commonality which is so common that it is no longer my opinion and your opinion but the common manner of interpreting the world which first *makes moral and social solidarity possible*. What is right and is considered right demands, in accordance with its essence, the commonality which is established in the self-understanding of human beings. In fact, common opinion is constantly built in talking with one another and *then sinks back* into the tacitness of agreement [*Einverständnis*] and self-evidence. (Gadamer 1970:188; transl. Gadamer 2022a:144, emphasis added)

Gadamer's analysis here centers on the linguisticity of understanding but can easily be repurposed to address the objection voiced above, concerning the tension between his commitment to interpretivism and the inference from the impossibility of radical disagreement between speakers to their prior agreement. To reiterate, what seemed objectionable was Gadamer's willingness to assign a determinate content to prior *Einverständnis* – understood as an agreement 'not just about the meanings of words and the rules of spoken language', but 'with regard to the “subject matter” as well – i.e., to everything that can be meaningfully discussed' (Gadamer 1972:465; TM:569) – while holding that the objects of interpretation are constituted in the interpretive process. For, if only interpretation can reveal agreement or disagreement, on what basis can we specify, prior to interpretation, whether we are, or are not, in the relevant relation of agreement with respect to the subject matter of the dialogue? What Gadamer says here can be repurposed to address this objection because the question regarding the linguisticity of tacit *Einverständnis* is one with the question regarding its linguistic, intelligible *content*. Being essentially linguistic, *Einverständnis* embodies determinate and shared ways of making sense of the world, one another, and our place in it – because language itself is a repository of contents which, through history, have sedimented into it (see 4.4). The reason such a conception does not come into conflict with the interpretivist thesis is that the source of the linguisticity of *Einverständnis* is located in actual interpretive encounters between interlocutors. Though it must precede any *one* interaction, *Einverständnis* is built up in dialogue, it is *established*, through repeated and coordinated interaction, as a 'common manner of interpreting the world', which then sustains the 'self-understanding of human beings' (Gadamer 1970:188; transl. Gadamer 2022a:144). In other words, to the extent that there is any identifiable content in that sustaining, *enabling* agreement, that content must itself originate in previous dialogues. Yet, that commonality *established* in personal dialogues must leave a trace, and cannot sink back into oblivion. Instead, it acquires a supporting role, and becomes

sedimented as a type of commonality which at once eclipses and enables the individual encounter, and is now expressed as a trans-subjective linguistic, traditional, or historical commonality.

Gadamer's analysis of *Einverständnis* in his (1970) illuminatingly exhibits the circular unfolding of understanding, and gives more tangible content to his discussion of the material dimension of hermeneutical circularity. For, *Einverständnis* is shown here to come full circle. It is the foundation upon which understanding is built up, the ground which allows disagreement to come into view and be overcome, and is then modified in light of what has been overcome. Gadamer therefore does not contradict the interpretivist thesis that independently of interpretation and dialogue there are no determinate contents, but merely extends the bounds of dialogue to encompass much more than two or several interlocutors, such that, at any conscious moment, we are 'in the middle of a dialogue' (Gadamer 1992:408).

To summarize, in this section we saw that, for Gadamer, the presupposition of prior *Einverständnis* is 'not some dogmatic assumption but a simple phenomenological description of coming to an understanding' (Gadamer 1968:114-115; transl. Gadamer 2007a:68). Here, Gadamer is pressing the Heideggerian point that:

no freely chosen relation toward one's own being can get behind the facticity of this being. Everything that makes possible and limits Dasein's projection ineluctably precedes it. (WM:268-9; TM:254)

For this reason, there is of course no entry point into the hermeneutical circle, no way to obviate the 'original dialogic of human world-having' (Gadamer 1975:505). Instead, we must start from within the circle. While the specific content of *Einverständnis* can only be apprehended in the dialogical event of understanding, yet it must always be presupposed.

We would not be wrong to recognize in the preceding analysis of *Einverständnis* similarities with Gadamer's positive conception of prejudice. Indeed, both concepts embody

ways of explicating the fore-structure of understanding. However, while prejudices can be divided into legitimate and illegitimate, *Einverständnis* cannot be so classified. Instead, it is always legitimate. Herein lies the chief advantage of analyzing the fore-structure in terms of prior agreement rather than 'the prejudices of the individual' (see WM:281; TM:278): *Einverständnis* only encompasses *legitimate* prejudices, and denotes only the structure of belongingness between interpreter and *interpretandum*. In such a way, *Einverständnis* uncovers the manner in which the question of the possibility of understanding is already entangled with the question of its normativity. Both the transcendentalism of Gadamer's project as well as the problem of the validity of a hermeneutical correctness criterion hinge on this entanglement, which will be explored in the following sections.

Another reason for focusing on agreement is to gain a healthy distance from the prominent characterization of the fore-structure of understanding in exclusively propositional terms. While I have suggested that *Einverständnis* can be parsed in terms of legitimate prejudices, and several interpreters have understood Gadamerian prejudice to reduce to propositions – or *judgements* – *Einverständnis* is not the only kind of agreement Gadamer argues must be in place for communication to be possible. Let us therefore turn now to the notion of “*Übereinkunft*”.

#### 4.5.2. Die grundlegende Übereinkunft

“*Übereinkunft*” plays a different role in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics compared to “*Einverständnis*” and surfaces in a different range of arguments. Before proceeding with its analysis, however, it is worth dwelling for a moment on what is at stake in making a distinction between two concepts of agreement. We saw that *Einverständnis*, insofar as it is presupposed by interpretation, involves a commonality at least partly expressed as an agreement on the

meanings of words and the rules of syntax for the language in which the dialogue is carried out. Now, this language should not be identified with the semantic and syntactical structure of a given natural language, as there is no neat distinction between the idiom and the content of a dialogue. Yet, *Einverständnis* does seem to require an agreement concerning which language is being spoken, where *that* can roughly be specified by appeal to a natural language like German or English. Moreover, we saw that the source of *Einverständnis* was located in past interpretive interactions between individuals and manifested itself as a commonality of language, history, and tradition which stood as a basis for communication. However, if this is so, *Einverständnis* cannot be required for cases of understanding in which any such agreement is evidently absent. I'm referring of course to instances of mutual understanding which operate across linguistic and cultural barriers. For, unless the requirement of *Einverständnis* is weakened, it seems we would have to contend that understanding is impossible in such situations, where no natural language or culture are shared and whatever is common – like our biology – seems insufficient to enable interpretation.

This inference from Gadamer's requirement of prior *Einverständnis* to its application to cross-linguistic exchanges overlooks that “*Einverständnis*” only describes the kind of agreement existing in a given cultural community and presupposed by linguistic interaction between its members. The intelligent interaction between members of different linguistic and cultural traditions can therefore not rest on its basis, nor can the process by which another language is acquired, for that is a process by which a new *Einverständnis* is obtained. It would be wrong to conclude, however, that cross-linguistic understanding or the acquisition of a second language does not depend on any prior agreement. For, any purported ability to do without it belies Gadamer's claim to its necessity in the intra-linguistic case. And so, it is precisely in order to preserve the necessary priority of agreement in both cases (intra-, and inter-linguistic) that safeguarding the distinction between *Einverständnis* and *Übereinkunft* is

so important.<sup>74</sup> As I will argue, apart from evading these complications, drawing this distinction in the Gadamerian position will enable us to answer another old objection: that Gadamer's account neglects some of the practical requirements for interpretation. But let us first turn to the analysis of *Übereinkunft*.

In *Truth and Method*, “*Übereinkunft*” first appears as a translation of the Greek *synthēkē* as it features in Aristotle’s conception of language. Gadamer reminds us that Aristotle maintained – a view Gadamer endorses – that sounds or signs are only able to designate anything in virtue of them being *symbola*. Aristotle distinguishes natural sounds, like the inarticulate sounds of animals, from *symbola* which are meaningful not by nature, but *kata synthēkēn*, or “by convention”<sup>75</sup> (see Aristotle, *De interpretatione*, 16a19-29). However, Gadamer is immediately concerned to distance this view he shares with Aristotle from a naïve conventionalism, according to which language is meaningful in virtue of an agreement on a means of designating items previously given to the understanding. Accordingly, he urges that Aristotle, in grounding the meaningfulness of speech in *synthēkē* – for which he prefers the translation “*Übereinkunft*” to the usual “*Konvention*” – is not endorsing an ‘instrumental theory of signs’:

Rather, the *Übereinkunft* according to which the sounds of language or the signs of writing mean something is not an agreement on a means of understanding – that would already presuppose language; it is the agreement on which human community, its harmony with respect to what is good and proper, is founded. (WM:435; TM:430)

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<sup>74</sup> This distinction continues to be missed by scholarship, even scholarship on the question of agreement in Gadamer's hermeneutics, like Culbertson (2024). In the few instances in which this verbal distinction is noted, that is only in order to smooth it over, and fuse the two into one lopsided account (see Di Cesare 2007:190; 2016:232; and Dostal 2022:122).

<sup>75</sup> This is also how the English translators of *Truth and Method* construe “*Übereinkunft*” here (TM:430). For Gadamer's critique of this translation of *synthēkē* see Gadamer (1985c:353; 1960.74).

Gadamer stresses here that the meaningfulness of language cannot be reduced to an agreement on an arbitrary system of signs, as such an agreement could only be reached linguistically. Indeed, *Übereinkunft*, which stands here as a condition for languagehood, is precisely not a matter of a deliberate agreement:

In the case of language, this would not only be a circle, but an obvious nonsense, that people come to an agreement in language to speak thus and so. (Gadamer 1985c:353; transl. Gadamer 2000a:12, mod.)

This initial negative characterization of *Übereinkunft* already gestures towards the fundamental difference at play between the twin concepts of “*Einverständnis*” and “*Übereinkunft*”. For,

[t]he agreement in using verbal sounds and signs is only an expression of that fundamental *Übereinkunft* in what is good and proper. (WM:435; TM:430)

Gadamer refines “*Übereinkunft*” here by contrasting it with a common conception of linguistic conventionality, namely speakers' convergence in linguistic usage. “*Einverständnis*”, which denotes this convergence, is therefore an agreement derivative on a more basic structure of agreement, *Syntheke* or *Übereinkunft*. In other words, though the possibility of understanding and linguistic content hinges on a determinate *Einverständnis* prior to the interactive event in which meaning comes to presence, *Einverständnis* is not a sufficient condition. Understanding additionally presupposes *Übereinkunft*.

Let us thus return to *Übereinkunft*, which we saw is sharply distinguished from a deliberate agreement on a means of understanding, as such an agreement is necessarily linguistic. Indeed, Gadamer stresses that the more fundamental commonality on the basis of

which mutual understanding and deliberate agreements must rest is one in the case of which any beginning is inconceivable. Drawing again on Aristotle, Gadamer writes:

The concept of “*syntheke*”, of mutual agreement, implies first that language constitutes itself in the with-one-another insofar as understanding develops therein, by means of which one can come to agreement. This mutual agreement is of extraordinary importance. There is in it no first beginning, but there is manifest in the meaning of the German expression a coming together, a continuum of transition which guides the life of humans from the family, the small community of life and dwelling, until the final development of a verbal language in larger linguistic communities. (Gadamer 1985c:354)

Gadamer often makes this point by contrasting natural and artificial languages. What distinguishes the two is the fact that the latter 'have no basis in a community of language or life; they are introduced and applied only as means and tools of communication' (WM:450; TM:443). For this reason, they must always presuppose such a community, in which linguistic understanding unfolds in lived dialogue:

[i]t is well known that the consensus by which an artificial language is introduced necessarily belongs to another language. In a real community of language, on the other hand, we do not first decide to agree but *are always already in agreement* [*immer schon übereingekommen*]. (WM:450; TM:443)

If in understanding one another we reach, in language, an agreement about something, the language in which we reach it is not *some thing* in the same sense. Indeed, neither language nor understanding

is to be grasped simply as a fact that can be empirically investigated. Neither is ever simply an object but instead encompasses everything that can ever become an object. (WM:408; TM:405, mod.)

Consequently, language only comes into its own within a context of mutual engagement within a community, and it is this context which then enables linguistic understanding to unfold. For this reason, it would be wrong to conclude that the acquisition of language depends upon a prior acquisition of *Übereinkunft*. Indeed,

[w]ithout our being *always already* in agreement [*übereingekommen*] in this sense, no speaking is possible. Yet, we do not start first with an agreement when we learn to speak. The essential intrinsic connection between language and convention [i.e., *syntheke*] only tells us that language is an event of communication in which human beings are in agreement [*übereingekommen sind*]. (Gadamer 1981a:260; transl. Gadamer 2022b.194, emphasis added)

*Übereinkunft* and language, and so *Einverständnis*, are inseparable. Learning a language, on this picture, just *is* acquiring an agreement, of both kinds. There is no identifiable moment when language is acquired, but instead a 'continuum of transition', which starts, as we will see, long before the first exchange of intelligible sounds.

I want to take stock of the results of my analysis. Up to this point, I have been following Gadamer's conception of language and the role played in it by *Übereinkunft*. I noted that “*Übereinkunft*” conveyed a more basic sense of agreement as compared to the sense embodied in “*Einverständnis*”. Additionally, I stressed the lack of a point of origin for it: insofar as there is language and mutual understanding, there is always already *Übereinkunft*. This marks another difference between *Übereinkunft* and *Einverständnis*, as the latter could, at least partly, be traced back to its source: namely prior linguistic interaction. While this may suffice to persuade one of the presence of a conceptual, and not merely verbal, distinction at play, this analysis tells us little about what *Übereinkunft*, the 'fundamental agreement in what is good and proper' consists in.

To approach this question, I want to revive an old polemic between Dreyfus, Taylor, and Rorty, regarding the difference between the natural and human sciences. In his “Holism and Hermeneutics” (1980), Hubert Dreyfus is ostensibly concerned to uphold an essential difference between the two fields of inquiry. His case builds on a distinction, and this is the real thrust of his argument, between two accounts of interpretation: theoretical vs. practical holism. What is at issue is the question of what portion of the background implicit in every interpretation, if any of it, can be made the explicit object of analysis. For the theoretical holist, who treats all understanding as a matter of theoretical explication, this background reduces to a complex and interrelated array of explicit and implicit beliefs which can in principle be explicitly articulated. On this view, allegedly advocated by Rorty, Quine, and Davidson,

understanding a person from an alien culture or understanding a radically different sort of science involves making a total theory about a total theory, that is, making a translation into your language of the theory implied in the other person's behavior or language. (Dreyfus 1980:6)

Practical holism, on the other hand – purportedly developed by Heidegger in *Being and Time* and implicit in Wittgenstein's later philosophy – is the view that although understanding involves the kinds of beliefs or hypotheses posited by theoretical holists, such beliefs can only stand out as meaningful against the backdrop of shared practices. The practical holist maintains moreover that such practices cannot be mapped out in terms of implicitly held beliefs because such alleged implicit beliefs do not function causally as beliefs in practice, nor can they account for the flexibility inherent in the practice they are supposedly implicit in. Instead,

what makes up the background is not beliefs, either explicit or implicit, but habits and customs, embodied in the sort of subtle skills which we exhibit in our everyday interaction with things and people. (Dreyfus 1980:8)

For Dreyfus, such social skills – like the competence manifested in keeping an appropriate distance from another person in conversation depending on their age and gender, the nature of the conversation (formal or intimate), and many other factors – do not reduce to propositional knowledge.

We already encountered Heidegger's insight into this practical, non-propositional, condition of understanding, which was framed in terms of the fore-structure of understanding. Dreyfus builds in particular on the Heideggerian notion of *Vorhabe*, which he understands as the 'totality of cultural practices ... which "have us" or make us who we are, and thus determine what we find intelligible' (Dreyfus 1980:10). Since the habits and customs that make up our *Vorhabe* stand as the ineluctable condition of the intelligibility of the world, all our cognition – including cognition of the background itself – is molded by an *implicit ontology*, located 'in our practices as ways of behaving towards things and people, not in our minds as background assumptions which we happen to be taking for granted' (11).

Dreyfus has argued on several occasions for reviving the Heideggerian insight into the practical preconditions of understanding, an insight, he claims, Gadamer seems to have forgotten. For Dreyfus, Gadamer replaces "*Vorhabe*" with "*Vorurteil*", an implicit belief or assumption, and therefore 'seems to side with cognitivists like Quine' (Dreyfus 1980:11) in holding that 'our beliefs about value and meaning are *in principle* objectifiable and, hence, just more facts about the world' (20). I do not wish to critique here Dreyfus' reading of Gadamer, especially since it is so widespread, as shown above<sup>76</sup> (but see Rorty's reply to Dreyfus; Rorty 1980:42). Instead, I have brought up Dreyfus' distinction between theoretical and practical holism because it captures precisely what is essential in the distinction between *Übereinkunft*

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<sup>76</sup> See fn67, p. 131; Kögler (1992) develops a similar argument against Gadamer, drawing partly on Dreyfus (1980).

and *Einverständnis* as between two distinct levels of presupposed agreement. Or so I will claim in the following, drawing primarily on one of Gadamer's last works, “Zur Phänomenologie von Ritual und Sprache” (1992).

We already encountered hints of a practical dimension in *Übereinkunft*. We saw that it denoted the 'agreement on which human community, its harmony with respect to what is good and proper, is founded' (WM:435; TM:430), which was sharply distinguished from *Einverständnis*, or the kind of harmony one might find embodied in a belief system. The practical dimension of *Übereinkunft* comes to the fore much more strongly, and much more explicitly, in Gadamer's (1992). This unusually lengthy essay, published only in vol. 8 of Gadamer's collected works, is one which, for some, signals a sharp break in Gadamer's thinking, even a renunciation of central tenets of *Truth and Method* (Figal 2022). Most, however, discern in it a continuity with Gadamer's earlier thinking (Palmer 1997; 2000; Grondin 2000; Schmidt 2000; Dostal 2003; Keane 2021a), and yet it is undeniable that it yields a significantly deeper and enriched picture of the Gadamerian position, specifically in relation to language.

Gadamer's chief concern in this work – at least in its second, titular, section – is to call more explicit attention to the extent to which linguisticity presupposes active participation within a concrete lifeworld. He draws out the connection between language and its embeddedness in a structure of mutual interaction not by differentiating between the practical and cognitive dimensions of human life, but rather by comparing human and animal forms of togetherness. Accordingly, he distinguishes between the

“together-with” (*Mitsamt*), which dominates in the area of animal behavior, and ... the “with-one-another” (*Miteinander*), which, on the basis of natural determination of humans due to human language, supports human being with-one-another. (Gadamer 1992:409; transl. Gadamer 2000b:26)

While non-human animals act and interact in ways that are species-specific and appear governed by instinct, specifically the survival instinct, among human beings the same rigid homogeneity cannot be observed. Instead,

a multiplicity of customs and norms develop within the same species that are, in whatever way, willed and established. (Gadamer 1992:410; transl. Gadamer 2000b:27, mod.)

In distinguishing here between animal *Mitsamt* and human *Miteinander*, Gadamer is not separating humanity from the natural order. Indeed, he underscores that the two sides of our humanity cannot be separated, and we remain an 'interlacing of together-with and with-one-another' (Gadamer 1992:410; transl. Gadamer 2000b:27). Nevertheless, Gadamer's reflection centers on the *Miteinander* and the way in which human modes of behavior escape biological determinism and enter a special sort of normativity Gadamer sees embodied in rituals.

Rituals, Gadamer argues, do not reduce to patterns or forms of behavior. No matter how complex, non-human animals do not engage in ritual action, primarily because their behavior lacks a normative dimension. In the case of human beings,

there are forms of correct behavior that are called rituals in the authentic sense and there are norms with their exacting authority, which differ greatly in different cultures. They are so refined that it is often hardly possible for someone from one culture to behave correctly in relation to those of another culture. (Gadamer 1992:410; transl. Gadamer 2000b:27)

By disclosing and enforcing a normativity that is peculiar to human beings, the rituality of human behavior distinguishes it from animal behavior by producing *cultural* specificity, and not mere *specificity*. Gadamer immediately illustrates the normative heterogeneity characteristic of human *Miteinander* by appealing to the concept of *Übereinkunft*. He writes:

within each and every culture there exists *Übereinkunft* and *Übereinkommen*. With the term “*Übereinkommen*”, language indicates that such a thing does not go back to an explicit institution or contract, but has rather “come over” [*überkommen*]. (Gadamer 1992:410; transl. Gadamer 2000b:27, mod.)

Gadamer repeats here the idea that the agreement in which human community is grounded lacks an identifiable point of origin. Nor is the link implied here to normativity altogether new, for the *Übereinkunft* 'in what is good and proper' (WM:435; TM:430) always encompassed a normative dimension. Instead, what Gadamer calls attention to here is a normativity that emerges in a practical engagement with others.

The normativity manifest in rituals and *Übereinkunft* alike is not characterized by conformity to some pre-given norms, whether institutionally established (laws) or dictated by reason (rational principles). What “correct” means in the context of ritual action 'is not simply measured by the given purpose of the activity or by the learned rule' (Gadamer 1992:413; transl. Gadamer 2000b:29). And the same can be said for linguistic activity. According to Gadamer, both speaking and acting, to the extent that they can be called 'correct' in the sense relevant here, fall under the same concept of correctness. In the linguistic case, that is because speaking

is so embedded in a structure of behavior where [words] accomplish their meaning that they, as carriers of meaning, must not be completely realized. This is the case with “thank you” and “please”, which we shake over every social intercourse like a kind of courtesy salt. (Gadamer 1992:413; transl. Gadamer 2000b:30)

There is a distinction to be made here. On the one hand, Gadamer stresses that language is rooted in actual practice within a community of creatures engaged in common activity. Such activity is additionally regulated by norms of conduct the validity of which does not depend on a form of contract, but is simply handed down, as in a ritual. On the other hand, Gadamer points

to the apparently insignificant rituals of intersubjective courtesy – insignificant both because they appear unimportant and because the words used seem at least partially devoid of their customary meanings – as paradigmatic examples of the unity and solidarity engendered by practical being with-one-another. Naturally, language does not always follow the predetermined path of ritualized exchanges. Indeed, there is a sense in which language is not yet fully what it can be when used in that mode. As Gadamer emphasizes, 'where ritual is involved, language also becomes an acting', and the type of understanding achieved here 'is a completely different understanding than what one seeks, when one wants “to say something to someone”' (Gadamer 1992:414; transl. Gadamer 2000b:30).

Gadamer's investigation into the connection between ritual and language identifies a use of language that operates at a deeper level than the level of dialogue, and so the level of merely linguistic agreement in the sense of *Einverständnis*. Here, one comes to realize 'how little there is of dialogue [*Gespräch*], and how much is all a whole [*Gesamt*]' (Gadamer 1992:415; transl. Gadamer 2000b:31). What is apparent in cases like the customs around greeting or norms of politeness is

how a language community structures a common life. What is simple custom will be observed by everyone. There is no freedom in the use of words, no real choice of words. It is an acting together, and through such customs the whole social space becomes organized. (Gadamer 1992:414; transl. Gadamer 2000b:30)

Insofar as it is ritualized, what is paramount in our being with-one-another is not the meaning of the words we say to one another – like “please” or “thank you” – but the fact of being with-one-another, 'the fact that everyone together participates' (Gadamer 1992:416; transl. Gadamer 2000b:31). Ritual illustrates what it means for all to be coming together in 'harmony with respect to what is good and proper' (WM:435; TM:430), since ritual is a form of acting together

which is 'sustained by the whole of the gathered people or their representatives, *who all demand the observance of customs*' (Gadamer 1992:415; transl. Gadamer 2000b:31, emphasis added).

In underscoring the ritual character of human solidarity, Gadamer pinpoints the source of the normativity of our acting. At the close of his argument, Gadamer summarizes that the 'correctness' or 'rightness' that has been his focus

does not mean correspondence to a prescribed rule, but rather its opposite, the correct application of rules. What we mean everywhere by "correct" goes beyond the pre-given and prescribed, and points in this direction: to behave correctly; to make the correct judgment; to find the correct word; to give the correct advice; to understand what a correct prayer is; to read a text correctly; to carry on a correct conversation; to become involved with a poem that one reads or recites to oneself; to go along with music; to go along with the scene on stage. (Gadamer 1992:439; transl. Gadamer 2000b:50, mod.)

To understand what correctness means in all these cases, and so to understand the practices themselves, is to be able to take part, with others, in such activities. This is not a type of understanding that reduces to propositional knowledge, or a belief system, either explicit or implicit. In fact, it is now apparent that *Übereinkunft* eclipses what can be an object of propositional knowledge because it is an agreement located, as Dreyfus notes, 'in our practices as ways of behaving towards things and people, not in our minds as background assumptions which we happen to be taking for granted' (Dreyfus 1980:11). Like knowing the correct distance to keep from one's interlocutor in conversation, a distance shifting with our interlocutor's age, gender, and the nature of our relation to them, so the knowing required and embodied in the above situations, as Grondin observes, 'is supported in its correctness by an *ethos* which, in its hidden effectiveness, is more practiced and applied than actually known consciously' (Grondin 2000:56). Not only, to conclude, is Gadamer not a theoretical holist, but for him the practical is indeed prior to, and in excess of, the theoretical. And it is exactly the

priority of *Übereinkunft* which opens a point of entry into another language and culture, and so a different world.

I argued that what was at stake in hammering out a distinction between different kinds of what English-language translators call 'agreement' in Gadamer was the problem of accounting for intercultural understanding. The issue was that the possibility of any such understanding could not be based on a prior *Einverständnis*, which was excluded by definition. Equally, the success of intercultural encounters could not be explained by circumventing the necessity of agreement without fatally undermining Gadamer's account of its requirement in intracultural understanding. In tackling this puzzle, I want to return to an issue which I have suspended above, namely the relation between *Übereinkunft* and *Einverständnis*, as between an agreement we are always already in, and one which has a determinate origin. For, in understanding this relationship, we understand the practical basis of linguisticity, and so not only the acquisition of another culture's language, but our first entry into language.

The question of the origin of language features prominently in Gadamer's account of ritual. Here, as on many other occasions, Gadamer highlights the fallacy of the 'first word'. He writes:

Although parents always like to celebrate the first word of their awakening child, it is clear that that is not a word and not speaking. There can be no first word if there is not a second word, and there can be no second word if there is not language. There is language, however, only in the with-one-another of conversation. (Gadamer 1992:404; transl. Gadamer 2000b:22, mod.)

The acquisition of language is a matter neither of teaching by the parents, nor of learning by the infant. That there is any *learning* going on, for Gadamer, is merely a manner of speaking. Instead, the process ought to be understood as a 'game of imitation and of exchange', one in which

[t]here are always prelinguistic experiences of meaning that have been going on long before [the child's first understanding of meaning], and surely also the exchange of looks and gestures, so all the crossings over from prelinguistic to linguistic understanding flow smoothly. (Gadamer 1985b:5; transl. Gadamer 1997a:42)

For Gadamer, the misconception of the 'first word' artificially suspends human beings' involvement in a linguistic world, where they are 'always already at home' (Gadamer 1966a:149), and 'always already in agreement' (WM:450; TM:443; see Gadamer 1981a:260). Accordingly, Gadamer writes that

[i]n so far as thinking and language accompany one another, we always stand in the middle of a conversation. Even between mother and child, the conversation has already been transpiring for a long time before the first exchange of glances and gestures. (Gadamer 1992:408; transl. Gadamer 2000b:25)

Naturally, Gadamer does not mean here an actual *Gespräch* between mother and child, and at other times he prefers to describe the mother-child interaction as *play* (Gadamer 1985b:5), or a *pre-linguistic dialogue* (Gadamer 1985c:357). During this stage of 'shared building-up of understanding' (*ibid.*), this 'mutual attunement with one another' (356; trans. Gadamer 2000a:14), the child is already a participating member in communal life, in the with-one-another, so much so, in fact, that Gadamer claims that

it would have learned [the word 'ball'] without the help of the mother. It was well underway towards learning language. (Gadamer 1985c:356; transl. Gadamer 2000a:13)

While Gadamer's statement is quite provocative, and no less puzzling, I believe that what is described here is nothing other than the emergence of *Übereinkunft*, the process of coming together in engaged togetherness, which, as already noted, 'implies first that language constitutes itself in the with-one another' (Gadamer 1985c:354; transl. Gadamer 2000a:12). What is described is that *continuum of transition* which shepherds the child on its way to language, and which is rooted in a background of shared practices within a community. What is more, the child's first acquisition of speech precisely mirrors the emergence of language in general. For, 'the child's slow awakening into a linguistic community', Gadamer writes,

has its counterpart in the beginning of linguistic communities as they develop in rites, customs, morals, and all structured activities, and finally lead to linguistic exchanges. How the words are developed that one needs and how one learns the correct words, and so learns how one learns things, that is not conscious learning and practicing. Nevertheless this process of linguistic exchange accomplishes the solidification of the use of language. (Gadamer 1992:417; transl. Gadamer 2000b:33)

And so, it is only within a world of living interplay, of practical engagement, that language emerges.

We can now approach the question regarding the possibility of intercultural understanding. For, it is the same continuum of transition that also characterizes an interpreter's acculturation to the foreign. As she begins interacting with the members of another culture, the interpreter slowly becomes habituated to the unfamiliar form of life, and, by taking active part in its rituals, gradually comes to grips with some of its norms. As she hones her skill in carrying out this pre-linguistic dialogue with her interlocutors, the interpreter understands more and more about them, yet this remains a different sort of understanding as compared to the linguistic understanding she will soon acquire. Nevertheless, to the extent she gets it right, she has entered

*Übereinkunft* with them, and has come to master some of her subjects' rites, morals, and customs. Not only is this a necessary step in acquiring a second language, but a necessary and irreducible part of what it means to understand another culture.

We can finally explicate the relationship between *Übereinkunft* and *Einverständnis*. *Übereinkunft*, an *enacted* agreement, slowly crystallizes and takes linguistic shape as a determinate semantic and syntactic structure, a language and a world-view. We may, with Dreyfus, refer to the latter as a set of beliefs. This secondary structure, which I have been calling the structure of *Einverständnis*, is a reflection of that fundamental structure, which it expresses (see WM:435; TM:430). But it cannot express it exhaustively: *Übereinkunft* does not reduce to *Einverständnis*, though, as with the mother-child interaction, all we recognize is a path towards language. Moreover, *Übereinkunft* constitutes the ground not only of our language, but of our thinking and rationality. For Gadamer, our rationality does not boil down to theoretical argumentation, but instead is integrally tied to the practical:

[t]he rationality of practical reason derives its normative power not so much from arguments as from what Aristotle called our “ethos”, that means from the determination of one's emotional life that shows practical reason at work in education and moral training. But the normative force of practical reason is not the power of the stronger argument, but rather is due to a comparatively slow imprinting of the life-direction, which is at work already before the awaking into linguistic communication, and which completely unfolds in growing into the linguistic community. (Gadamer 1992:437; transl. Gadamer 2000b:48, mod.)

What Gadamer emphasizes here is that language, rationality, and factual engaged togetherness in a shared concrete world are inseparable. Put in the Aristotelian language that Gadamer prefers, it is a matter of the interconnectedness of *logos* and *ethos*. As he explains:

I have expressed the human interlocking [*Ineinander*] of *ethos* and *logos* precisely because of its rational and normative side through the concept of ritual. (Gadamer 1992:438; transl. Gadamer 2000b:49, mod.)

It is this *Ineinander* that Gadamer thinks best accounts for the conditions of our linguisticity, our understanding of the world, one another, and ourselves. I want to claim, at the end of my analysis, that, as language and ritual are interdependent, so *Übereinkunft* and *Einverständnis* are interdependent elements within a unitary structure, and that that structure is none other than the fore-structure of understanding.

#### 4.6. The transcendental grounding of understanding

At several instances in the preceding sections, I emphasized the circularity between understanding and its ground. This circularity was particularly apparent in Gadamer's discussion of *Einverständnis* in "Language and Understanding" (1970), where *Einverständnis* emerged as a "tacit" agreement, developed by a process of sedimentation from individual dialogical encounters over time. As a repository of cultural and historical understanding, *Einverständnis* is the enabling condition for any one individual interpretive interaction, yet is constituted precisely by the accumulation of the – historical, cultural, or simply personal – traces left by such interactions. For this reason, Gadamer refers both to the ground of understanding, and to understanding itself – seen as an accomplishment of dialogue – as *Einverständnis*.

What I want to call attention to in this final section is less the circularity that obtains within the structure of understanding – a reciprocity between the ground and what is grounded –, than to the circularity of the *inquiry* into the ground of understanding. What I wish to raise, in other words, is a question of philosophical methodology. I noted above the transcendental

thrust of Gadamer's project, which asks the Kantian question, 'How is understanding possible?' (Gadamer 1965a:439; TM:xxvii). Furthermore, I suggested that that project is concerned with the possibility conditions of a particular type of knowledge, namely *a priori*<sup>77</sup> knowledge of the objects of interpretation. I want to argue now that the methodology of the Gadamerian grounding project is a transcendental methodology. Let us begin by distinguishing this project from another kind of philosophical grounding, Husserl's *Letztbegründung*.

As shown above (see 4.3), Gadamer argues that the Husserlian project miscarries because it attempts to evade the implications of our historical and hermeneutical situatedness and so disregards the ineluctable circularity of understanding as such. Put in methodological terms, the problem with foundationalist enterprises, like Husserl's *Letztbegründung*, is that they are guided by the idea of a philosophical system, which, for Gadamer, 'requires deductibility from a highest principle' (Gadamer 1992:402; transl. Gadamer 2000b:21). Such projects proceed essentially by derivation or demonstration from some rationally indubitable *ground*. Yet, a philosophical hermeneutics, a project that takes seriously the linguisticity of human being, cannot pursue such an undertaking. For,

how should [language] come together with such guiding concepts as system, principle, justification and deduction, which, following the model of Euclid, have ruled modern philosophical thought since Descartes? What should be the first in the structure of language? (Gadamer 1992:404; transl. Gadamer 2000b:23)<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> On the *a priori* in Gadamer, see 7.4.

<sup>78</sup> Gadamer's rejection of Husserl here may read as an implicit rejection of Kant, whose philosophy was certainly ruled by such guiding concepts. The question of how much of what I have been calling 'transcendental grounding' can be seen as distinctly Kantian is answered in chapter 7, where I also show that Kant's *Transcendental Deduction* is, in fact, *not* a "deduction" in the sense seemingly at issue for Gadamer here, of a valid chain of syllogisms.

Instead, as we already saw, Gadamer's "first", his *arche*, is the *middle* of conversation, which for him is *unhintergebar*. And yet, while the inception of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics *in medias res* reflects a commitment to the impossibility of the foundationalist enterprise understood according to a "systematic" ideal, it does not signal a rejection of the grounding project as illegitimate. In the preface to the second edition of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer concedes that 'the present investigations do not fulfil the demand for a reflexive self-grounding made from the view-point of the speculative transcendental philosophy of Fichte, Hegel, and Husserl' (Gadamer 1965a:447; TM:xxxiii). Yet, he rhetorically asks,

is the dialogue with the whole of our philosophical tradition – a dialogue in which we stand and which, as philosophers, we are – groundless? Does what has always supported us need to be grounded? (Gadamer 1965a:447; TM:xxxiii.)

Clearly, Gadamer equivocates here for rhetorical effect. While what has always supported us does not need to be "grounded" in a Fichtean, Hegelian, or Husserlian sense, still Gadamer cannot simply assume *that* we have hitherto been supported. Hence Gadamer's master-question: 'what is the ground of the legitimacy of prejudices?' (WM:281; TM:278). In opposition to the foundationalist picture, Gadamer's grounding of understanding unfolds not by derivation, but by making manifest the structure of understanding as it operates in dialogue. Thus, by starting from the 'original dialogic of human world-having', Gadamer is basing his hermeneutics upon a ground that is no longer open to the Husserlian question concerning its own ground. For, to realize its "original" significance means to jettison the idea that understanding – i.e., our contact with the world and one another – requires any sort of epistemological foundation, understood as a base from which, by derivation, its legitimacy can be established. Similarly, it means to resolve the anxiety – exploited by the objections to the alleged ethnocentrism of the Gadamerian perspective (see 4.4) – that inhabiting a language and

a worldview entails some form of containment. Thus, taking the lead of language and dialogue means relinquishing as illegitimate any ambition to a “final” grounding, and therefore any commitment to a form of transcendental inquiry understood to require it.

Seen from the perspective of the argument developed in the preceding pages, the project of grounding understanding does not proceed via a question-begging appeal to contingent empirical experience, but by finding a ground 'in the givens of our finite Dasein' (Gadamer 1980:325; transl. Gadamer 1998:58). What this entails is that the inquiry into ground unfolds by raising the actuality of understanding – the very fact which stood in need of grounding – to the level of a principle. As Gadamer explains:

how can factuality [*Tatsächlichkeit*] take on the character of a principle, of the primary and definitive starting point? Here, “fact” does not refer to the factuality of a strange fact that one copes with by learning how to account for it. It is the factuality of the convictions, values, and habits that we all share with the deepest inner clarity and the most profound communality, the quintessence of all that goes to make up our way of life. The Greek word for this quintessential factuality is the well known concept of *ethos*, the being that comes about through practice and habituation. (Gadamer 1980:325; transl. Gadamer 1998:58)

It is worth dwelling for a moment on this matter, as Gadamer is not always cautious when expounding it. The factuality at issue here is not merely some account of the various facets – historical, cultural, ritual, etc. – of our “situatedness”. And Gadamer can be quite misleading on this point. For instance, as shown above, he claims that

every effort at grasping a meaning ... must already rest on a general *Einverständnis* ... if it is to come about that one understands. (Gadamer 1968:114-5; Gadamer 2007a:68, mod.)

However, he immediately dilutes this conclusion, designating it 'not some dogmatic assumption but a simple phenomenological description of coming to an understanding' (*ibid.*). The implication in this label (“phenomenological description”) is that what is being proffered is some contingent account. And yet, the statement above expresses a necessity, and does *not* give notice of a matter of fact. It is a substantive philosophical conclusion. What it means for the factuality of understanding to take on the character of a principle is for such factuality to be identified as ground, which in turn is a matter of making explicit its relation to what it grounds, as a condition for its possibility.

Although the question of possibility seemed entitled to a certain priority within an inquiry into ground – evidenced by Gadamer linking his project to Kant's – we can now see why framing such an inquiry in terms of possibility conditions may be slightly misleading. For, Gadamer never in fact established *that* understanding is possible, but merely assumed its actuality, endeavoring instead to explicate the conditions in which understanding, as a matter of fact, takes place. He did so by building on the Heideggerian conception of the fore-structure of understanding, which, in *Truth and Method* at least, he spelled out in terms of prejudices. In this chapter, I defended a reinterpretation of Gadamer's fore-structure as a double-layered structure of agreement, *Einverständnis* and *Übereinkunft*, corresponding to a theoretical and a practical agreement. Gadamer answers the Kantian question by laying out the structure of the hermeneutical situation in which dialogue occurs, and by showing the way in which dialogue is always already entangled with its own ground.

Often Gadamer describes this structure as one of belonging, the idea that 'the being of the interpreter belongs intrinsically to the being of what is to be interpreted' (Gadamer 1978:317; transl. Gadamer 2007d:263). What this means, at bottom, is that the basic structure in which understanding is grounded is a *normative* structure. And so, the question of possibility turns out in fact to be a question of validity. Hermeneutics, as a branch of practical philosophy

presupposes that we are already shaped by normative conceptions [*Vorstellungen*] in the light of which we have been brought up and that lie at the basis of the order of our entire social life. That does not at all suggest that these normative perspectives remain fixed immutably and would be beyond criticism. ... But it would surely be an illusion to want to deduce normative notions *in abstracto* and to posit them as valid with a claim of scientific rectitude. (Gadamer 1978:317; transl. Gadamer 2007d:263)

Grounding understanding, therefore, is a matter of reclaiming the dimension of lived, norm-governed praxis that goes into the making of our linguisticity, and that means not only 'assigning language and linguistic transmission their central place, but also making explicit the normative implications which lie in what is linguistically transmitted' (Gadamer 1980:327).

#### 4.7. Conclusion

In this chapter, my aim has been to provide a transcendental reading of the Gadamerian project. I have argued that, not only is that project set in motion by distinctly transcendental aims and concerns, but that the methodology by which it achieves its aims is an instance of “transcendental grounding”. In chapter 3, I argued that Crusius approached the problem of the criterion for interpretation by deploying this strategy. There, I preliminarily characterized such a strategy by indicating its self-referentiality, the idea that it carries out a grounding by appeal to what is to be grounded. Examining Gadamer's project has had the benefit of yielding a richer characterization of “transcendental grounding” as a distinct philosophical methodology and approach to the hermeneutical. Gadamer's transcendental grounding of understanding proceeds by making manifest the web of normative commitments in the grips of which interpretation always already stands. The transcendental grounding of understanding and interpretation

tackles the normative question not by formulating universal principles, but by making explicit the principles implicit in the normative structure of understanding. The next chapter will leverage this transcendental account to reply, on Gadamer's behalf, to the hermeneutical problem of the criterion.

## Chapter 5

# Agreement, Criteria, and Correctness

### 5.1. Introduction

In chapter 4, I argued that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics straddles the questions of the possibility and normativity of understanding and answers the Kantian query 'How is understanding possible?' by exhibiting the normative commitments that understanding and interpretation always already involve. To grasp how understanding is possible just is to gain a purchase on these commitments, to make them explicit.

In this chapter, I examine some of the interpretive norms that Gadamer argues implicitly underlie any hermeneutical engagement and assess whether they can provide criteria of correctness in interpretation. This involves submitting Gadamer's transcendental account to the problem of the criterion and constructing a Gadamerian reply to the skeptic. First (section 5.2), I briefly discuss one possible objection to my search for a Gadamerian response to that problem. Then (section 5.3), I recover several interpretive norms from the Gadamerian account, locating their source in the preconditions of dialogue and understanding. Finally, I inquire into whether these norms – specifically the fore-conception of completeness – conform to the skeptic's conditions for criteria of correctness (section 5.4.1), and into whether Gadamer can offer satisfactory proof of their validity. Against some classical (section 5.4.2.a), and some more recent interpretations of Gadamer's arguments for the validity of the fore-conception (section 5.4.2.b), which I argue are unsuccessful against the skeptic, I propose a new reading (section 5.4.2.c), based on the argument developed in chapter 4, which I take to be exegetically more

reconcilable with Gadamer's writings and, more importantly, systematically more satisfactory against the skeptic.

## 5.2. Truth against method

My aim in this chapter may strike some Gadamerians as questionable. To identify the difficulty, it will help recalling what is at stake in the problem of the criterion.

The original *mise en scène* of the problem of the criterion is dialectical: a dispute over the truth of some claim. Suppose one of the quarrelling parties holds the belief that  $p$ , while the other holds  $\neg p$ . The skeptic's objective is to demonstrate that such disagreements are incapable of rational settlement. She therefore argues that for one party to rationally assert the truth of their claim – say,  $p$  – they must do so by an account or proof that establishes the truth of  $p$ , and the falsity of  $\neg p$ . Yet, the skeptic continues, this can be achieved only by means of a criterion of truth for differentiating between truth and untruth, or between appearance and reality. For, if no such criterion is provided, then  $p$  is no more than bare assertion, no more valid than  $\neg p$ . Once such a criterion is provided, the skeptic continues, either the criterion is claimed true by the supplying party, or it is claimed false. However, to prove that  $p$ , the criterion obviously cannot be held to be false.<sup>79</sup> The truth of the criterion, in turn, can only be established, the argument proceeds, by some proof. The next step is predictable. For, if the supplying party now provides proof for their criterion, and again considers the proof itself to be true, the skeptic, by parity of reasoning, contends that the proof counts as true only if a criterion of *its* truth is

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<sup>79</sup> Despite appearances, this clause is not artificial. For, while the skeptic's opponent would be found guilty of contradiction if they supplied a criterion of truth that they claimed to be false, there are some further stipulations on what 'a claim to be true' entails for the skeptic. I showed that Thomasius failed to adequately reply to the problem of the criterion because he supplied criteria of correctness that fell short of these requirements: Thomasius' criteria were uncertain, merely probable truths, and their validity in particular cases was contingent on 'circumstances' (see 2.3.4).

provided. If such a criterion is not forthcoming, the proof will be deemed inadequate. But if it is, then either the criterion provided now – to account for the truth of the proof of the first criterion of truth – is the same criterion, in which case the reasoning is circular, or it is different, in which case the search for a final criterion must continue, and yet cannot come to an end. Proofs and criteria alike are therefore caught in an unending or circular process of reasoning. Since the dispute is incapable of settlement, the Pyrrhonist concludes that the only reasonable option is suspension of judgement, where we assent neither to  $p$  nor to  $\neg p$ .

As we saw in chapters 2 and 3, what made the Thomasian and Crusian hermeneutical accounts ripe targets for skeptical attack – one that Crusius takes head on – was their provision of rules and principles of correct interpretation. Their theories of interpretation are emblematic of approaches to hermeneutics which Gadamer clusters under the term “*Kunstlehre*”. What Thomasius and Crusius provide are precisely *Kunstlehren*, canons of rules and principles geared towards securing the validity of interpretive results. Methodologies of this sort maintain that interpretations can be recognized as correct because they are authorized by the rules that interpretation must follow. And it is precisely the suggestion that interpretive correctness is sanctioned by such a criterion (rule / principle) that the problem of the criterion targets and rejects.

However, it is precisely this suggestion which Gadamer also rejects, as he frames his philosophical hermeneutics in opposition to projects aimed at the calibration of a method for correct interpretation. For Gadamer, the task of philosophical hermeneutics – contrasted here to “classical” approaches, like the Crusian –

is not to develop a procedure of understanding, but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place. But these conditions do not amount to a “procedure” or method which the interpreter must of himself bring to bear on the text; rather they must be given. (WM:300; TM:295)

In rejecting such methodological – or “procedural” – approaches to interpretation, Gadamer seems to renounce any continuity of approach with *Kunstlehre*-style hermeneutical theories. More importantly, he seems to block any form of argument that might fall prey to skeptical attack.

Thus, forcing a Gadamerian response to the problem of the criterion seems to lose the thread of Gadamer's argument and threatens to misconstrue it. This is a line of argument taken by several interpreters who maintain that Gadamer declines any entanglement in questions of “correctness” because his target is a deeper, more fundamental, sort of *truth* (see DaVia & Lynch 2024:113fn8 for an overview of this position). However, Gadamer's recurrent – and often criticized – objections to hermeneutical method may not be allowed to deflect attention from the distinctly procedural and prescriptive flavor of his purportedly descriptive account. Indeed, as I will go on to show in the next section, Gadamer gives expression to several interpretive principles, some indeed recalling very “traditional” formulations, and on occasion even affirms their role as criteria of correctness.

### 5.3. Principles and axioms of interpretation

The procedural dimension of interpretation in Gadamer, despite his own tendency to downplay it – and, we will see, the highly condensed and sometimes incautious<sup>80</sup> nature of his remarks on interpretive procedure – has been brought to the fore in large part through critical engagement with other thinkers. One example is Gadamer's famous encounter with Derrida. It is well known that, during their debate, Derrida took a critical stance toward what had been for Gadamer quite a minor point. In Gadamer's *Text and Interpretation*, written for this occasion,

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<sup>80</sup> See Gadamer's fluctuating terminology for the fore-conception of completeness – sometimes labelled 'the presupposition of completeness', or even 'the prejudice of completeness' (WM:299; TM:294).

he remarks that the 'fundamental condition' for successful dialogue is that '[b]oth partners have the good will to understand one another. And so, good will exists everywhere understanding is sought' (Gadamer 1983:343). Derrida used this remark as a springboard to mount his critique. We need not rehearse Derrida's objections here, who claimed to identify in Gadamer's statement a commitment to an ethical axiom and a metaphysics of the will (see Evink 2022). What is important is that, pressed by Derrida's objections, Gadamer further elucidated the procedural implications of his position. After denying that the good will has anything to do with morality and ethical axioms, Gadamer made plain that having the good will to understand entails that

one does not go about identifying the weaknesses of what another person says in order to prove that one is always right, but one seeks instead as far as possible to strengthen the other's viewpoint so that what the other person has to say becomes illuminating. Such an attitude seems essential to me for any understanding at all to come about. (Gadamer 1984:59; transl. Gadamer 1989c:55; see Gadamer 2006:58)

This encounter may be credited with raising an interest in Gadamer's methodology of interpretation, specifically the principles and presuppositions that underlie it.

Since then, Gadamer's so-called *principle of good will* has gained in significance, especially in Anglophone scholarship, through a parallel to another philosopher, and another principle: Donald Davidson's *principle of charity*.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, it is such comparisons that have encouraged, mostly but not exclusively in Anglophone scholarship, an engagement with the question of the procedural, norm-governed nature of interpretation implicit in Gadamer's hermeneutics. The connection to the principle of charity has been made most convincingly in the case of what Gadamer himself calls 'an axiom of all hermeneutics' (WM:376; TM:364),

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<sup>81</sup> See, e.g., Weinsheimer (2000:408), Dostal (2011:168-169), and Keane (2021b:393/398).

namely the fore-conception of completeness, which we have already encountered briefly (in 4.3).<sup>82</sup> While I do not intend to explore the Davidsonian connection further, I will return to this principle in more detail in the remainder of this section.

Despite such interest in the potential for deriving an interpretive methodology from the Gadamerian account, there is one very noticeable gap in the scholarship on this issue. For, the principle of good will and the fore-conception of completeness are *not* the only interpretive principles that Gadamer upholds. In fact, there is another, one whose absence from scholarship is all the more conspicuous in light of how commonplace such a principle is in the history of hermeneutics. In *Truth and Method*, this is labelled the *Vormeinung des Sprachgebrauchs*. There, Gadamer defines it as the 'general presupposition' that

[s]omeone who speaks the same language as I do uses the words in the sense familiar to me . . . . The same thing is true in the case of a foreign language: we all think we have a standard knowledge of it and assume this standard usage when we are reading a text. (WM:272; TM:270)

There are obvious connections to be drawn here to Crusius' interpretive methodology, specifically his *presumption of linguistic conformity* (see 3.3.1). Indeed, Gadamer's principle can be seen to follow from considerations similar to what we found in Crusius. Thus, one way to understand the underlying rationale for Gadamer's *Vormeinung* is to associate it directly with the principle of good will, as its derivative. For, insofar as interlocutors are animated by the good will to understand one another, and to make themselves understood, they must also be motivated to employ a language they expect to be familiar to their counterpart. As I showed in

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<sup>82</sup> On points of contact between the fore-conception of completeness and Davidson's principle of charity, see Bubner (1994:81), Lafont (1999:110), Weinsheimer (2000:419), Jung (2001:128-130), Höhle (2004:124-136), Scholz (2016:138-141), DaVia & Lynch (2024:105-111).

chapter 3, this is a line of argument Crusius himself employs.<sup>83</sup> Of course, this expectation may be wrong, and the partners may have to adapt their language to one another. Yet, without making this assumption, it seems we would stand little chance to understand our interlocutor, and interpretation could not get off the ground. This is precisely what is implicit in the above passage, and the *Vormeinung des Sprachgebrauchs* is nothing less than a necessary precondition of interpretation. To better recognize this, let us examine how Gadamer derives this presupposition, not from the principle of good will, but from the circularity of the hermeneutical process, specifically the anticipatory fore-structure of understanding. The profit of reconsidering the hermeneutical circle is not restricted to understanding the source of the *Vormeinung*. Indeed, the circularity of understanding additionally provides the basis for the fore-conception of completeness (see 4.3), and the principle of good will.

I have already attended to the Heideggerian heritage of Gadamer's hermeneutics in the previous chapter, specifically the ontological significance of 'the circularity that moves between the one who understands and that which he understands' (Gadamer 1983:335; transl. Gadamer 1989b:26), to which I gave a *transcendental* significance. Yet I have not called much attention to where master and disciple diverge. Indeed, while for Heidegger the ontological conception of the hermeneutical circle supplants the traditional conception, for Gadamer it merely supplements it. Gadamer thus endorses the traditional conception of the hermeneutical circle as a hermeneutical rule:

We recall the hermeneutical rule that we must understand the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole. This principle stems from ancient rhetoric, and modern hermeneutics has

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<sup>83</sup> See Crusius' formulation of the second hermeneutical presumption: 'One presumes of everyone that he speaks clearly and wants to be understood, so long as the opposite is not proven, or the ground of the presumption weakened. Hence one also presumes of him that he speaks according to linguistic usage, and that he avoids obscurity and ambiguity. For it is the natural purpose of speech that one wants to be understood' (W:§636).

transferred it to the art of understanding. It is a circular relationship in both cases. The anticipation of meaning in which the whole is envisaged becomes actual understanding when the parts that are determined by the whole themselves also determine this whole. (WM:296; TM:291)

What is even more remarkable is that Gadamer unwaveringly sanctions deriving correctness criteria from the traditional part-whole description of the hermeneutical circle. Thus, he writes that

the movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole. Our task is to expand the unity of the understood meaning centrifugally. The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding. The failure to achieve this harmony means that understanding has failed. (WM:296; TM:291)

This connection is highly important and signals anew how the question of interpretive normativity converges with the question of the conditions that enable dialogue, and so the event of understanding. What this passage additionally reveals is that Gadamer not only tolerates the question of “correctness” but engages with it head on.

To understand how the *Vormeinung des Sprachgebrauchs* is grounded in the traditional conception of the hermeneutical circle, let us first return to the fore-conception of completeness and its relation to hermeneutical circularity. As shown, Gadamer makes this connection from the outset:

The circle, which is fundamental to all understanding, has a further hermeneutic implication which I call the “fore-conception of completeness.” But this, too, is obviously a formal condition of all understanding. It states that only what really constitutes a unity of meaning is intelligible. So when we read a text we always assume its completeness, and only when this assumption proves mistaken –

i.e., the text is not intelligible – do we begin to suspect the text and try to discover how it can be remedied. (WM:299; TM:294)

The fore-conception of completeness is demanded by interpretation because “completeness” is precisely what is required for the object to stand out as meaningful. For, if the text under hermeneutical consideration were not granted the possibility of expressing an internally consistent and coherent view, we would then not be engaging in interpretation, we would not even be relating to the text as a text. The fore-conception of completeness, therefore, expresses our commitment to allowing the text to speak. It should be plain, by now, that the formal aspect of the fore-conception of completeness is directly entailed by the traditional part-whole description of the hermeneutical circle (see also Schmidt 1987:398; Davey 2024:80; DaVia & Lynch 2024:104). For, the principle obliges the interpreter to integrate her interpretation of the parts with her interpretation of the whole, and vice-versa, into a consistent unified interpretation.

It is in pursuit of the very same unity of meaning that the *Vormeinung des Sprachgebrauchs* is also introduced. Here, too, what is at issue is a formal<sup>84</sup> part-whole harmony, though it now exceeds the bounds of the text and encompasses the entire language that gives it expression. What the maxim demands is that the interpretation of parts of the relevant language be consistent with each other and form a unified whole. For this reason, I argue that the *Vormeinung des Sprachgebrauchs* is already implicated in the fore-conception of completeness.

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<sup>84</sup> Gadamer opposes the *Vormeinung des Sprachgebrauchs* to the 'fore-meanings concerning content with which we read texts, and which make up our fore-understanding' (WM:272; TM:270). These are of course none other than the material prejudices guiding our interpretation, which, if they are legitimate, constitute the *Einverständnis* between interpreter and text.

Yet the *Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit*, as we had occasion to survey in the previous chapter, encompasses not only a formal, but a material aspect as well. Thus, as Gadamer explains:

Not only does the reader assume an immanent unity of meaning, but his understanding is likewise guided by the constant transcendent expectations of meaning that proceed from the relation to the truth of what is being said. (WM:299; TM:294)

This additional dimension of what completeness entails places a further constraint on interpretation. Not only must the interpreter assume that the text expresses a coherent and unified point of view, but also that what it expresses is, at least implicitly, a claim to truth. A new unity is anticipated here: not only of the text with itself (an *immanent* unity), but of the text with the subject matter that it gives voice to (a *transcendent* unity). In other words, the fore-conception of completeness includes the presupposition that what is being said is 'the complete truth' (WM:299; TM:294). This is an aspect of Gadamer's interpretive methodology which is of the utmost importance and yet has mostly been missed by scholarship. For, what we find implicit here, as Lawrence Schmidt has frequently emphasized, is that the fore-conception of completeness is necessary for allowing the interpreter to call their own prejudices into question (see Schmidt 1987; 2010; 2020). On Schmidt's view, which I will return to, the fore-conception of completeness delivers, therefore, a necessary corrective to the interpreter's prejudices, thus underpinning not only the intelligibility of the *interpretandum* but also the *correctness* of interpretation.

As should hopefully be apparent from my discussion in the previous chapter, what Gadamer is encircling here in presupposing a relation to truth is the thesis that understanding can only take place 'on the basis of expectations of meaning drawn from our prior relation to the subject matter' (WM:299; TM:294), a relation I have analyzed in terms of the structure of

*Einverständnis* and *Übereinkunft*. And so, the ground of the fore-conception of completeness – and of its implicit corollary, the *Vormeinung des Sprachgebrauchs* – is none other than the fore-structure of understanding. While there is insufficient textual evidence to associate the principle of good will directly to the fore-structure, Gadamer does connect that principle to *Einverständnis*, and so, indirectly, to the fore-structure.<sup>85</sup> Consequently, anticipating the results of my investigation, to the extent that what we encounter in Gadamer's discussion of interpretive principles is indeed a kind of “procedure” of interpretation geared towards correctness, then, for him, working out such a procedure is nothing but a matter of 'making explicit the normative implications which lie in what is linguistically transmitted' (Gadamer 1980:327).

For now, let us turn our attention to the problem of the criterion and ascertain whether Gadamer can provide criteria of correctness for interpretation that can satisfy the skeptic. In the following, I will concern myself mainly with Gadamer's master-principle, the fore-conception of completeness.

#### 5.4. Criterion of correctness

Answering the problem of the criterion for interpretation to the skeptic's satisfaction requires delivering a criterion of correctness that is (a) asserted to be universally true (an omission that spelled Thomasius' undoing) (b) through grounds capable of breaking the entanglement between criteria and their proofs. It will benefit us attending to the two matters separately.

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<sup>85</sup> 'Thus it seems to me justified to begin from this process in which *Einverständnis* is shaped and reshaped in order to describe the functioning of language and of its possible written forms. This is really no metaphysics, rather it gives expression to the presupposition that any partner in a dialogue must make, including Derrida, if he wants to pose questions to me' (Gadamer 1984:60; transl. Gadamer 1989c:56, mod.).

### 5.4.1. The question of truth

If the fore-conception of completeness is to function as a criterion of correctness, it must possess unbounded applicability. Yet this is precisely what is often denied of it. Lawrence Schmidt has championed a reading of the fore-conception as an 'initial assumption' that 'refers only to the initial phase of interpretation' and is then abandoned (Schmidt 1987:397; see Schmidt 2020). DaVia and Lynch similarly endorse this view and construe the fore-conception as a 'defeasible assumption', maintaining that, on the Gadamerian view, 'understanding will sometimes require the interpreter to depart from the fore-conception of completeness' (DaVia & Lynch 2024:104). Let us refer to this as the *defeasibility thesis* and first examine its textual basis.

Straightaway, I must reiterate that any reading of Gadamer's understanding of the fore-conception of completeness will have to contend with a paucity of textual evidence, as there are only a handful of occasions in *Truth and Method*, and not more anywhere else, where that principle is discussed. Yet the evidence brought in support of the defeasibility thesis seems particularly scarce. One source of support for it may be found in Gadamer's initial characterization of the principle. He claims there that

when we read a text we always assume its completeness, and only when this assumption proves mistaken – i.e., the text is not intelligible – do we begin to doubt the text's transmission and try to discover how it can be remedied. (WM:299; TM:294, mod.)

Although Schmidt does not uphold any explicit interpretation of this passage, he adduces it as evidence in support of his view that 'the [fore-conception of completeness] can be overthrown' (Schmidt 1987:398). However, it is quite unclear that Gadamer is describing here a failure in

the application of that principle. As shown above, the maxim simply counsels projecting a formal and material unity of meaning onto the object of interpretation. In other words, the interpreter presupposes that their text expresses a unified meaning, and that what it expresses is the complete truth. Insofar as the text manifests such a double unity, understanding is secured.

In the passage above, Gadamer is describing a situation in which the text appears to not be unified in the sense presupposed by the fore-conception. For Schmidt, such inconsistency constitutes evidence against the validity of the principle, which can now be questioned. Notice, however, that this is *not* the conclusion Gadamer himself draws. It is not the principle that is brought in question for him, instead, 'we begin to doubt the text's transmission' (WM:299; TM:294, mod.). Consequently, I claim (*pace* Schmidt) that Gadamer confirms the validity of the fore-conception of completeness by suggesting that failure to continue applying it simply constitutes evidence of failure to understand, and, thus, such failure of application warrants suspicion that there may be something amiss with the text itself. Indeed, Gadamer immediately refers to 'the rules of textual criticism' that must be applied to remedy such faults, whether they be due, say, to transcribers' mistakes, misprints, or some other form of error.<sup>86</sup> When the fore-conception seems mistaken – that is, when our projection yields a disunified meaning – we suspect the text, not the principle.

It may be worth dwelling for a moment on the question of inconsistency, since it surfaces often in discussions of the fore-conception in the literature. Inconsistencies are, of course, plentiful, and it would be absurd to insist on applying the fore-conception where it cannot justifiably be applied: a text like the 'lorem ipsum' will never yield a unified meaning, despite some of it being actual Latin. But we misunderstand the point of the fore-conception of

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<sup>86</sup> Gadamer elsewhere points out that our tendency to 'read over' (*überlesen*, 'to overlook') the various textual defects (like misspellings and misprints) confirms that 'the fore-conception of completeness belongs in general to all apprehension of meaning' (Gadamer 1981b:252).

completeness if we think its applicability hindered by inconsistencies in the *interpretanda*. Indeed, the fore-conception simply 'states that only what really constitutes a unity of meaning is intelligible' (WM:299; TM:294). It would equally be wrongheaded to summon up, as counterexamples to this claim, instances of intelligible yet inconsistent texts, meaningful items that fail to display the unity purportedly required for meaning. That such texts are meaningful cannot be denied, nor can it be denied, however, that, when taken as a unity, they are not. Inconsistency simply is a case of failure to achieve the requisite 'harmony of all the details with the whole' (WM:296; TM:291). As such, an inconsistent text is *partially* intelligible, which is to say that though our interpretations of its parts cohere in themselves, they cannot be made to cohere with one another and join together into a unified interpretation of the whole. Talk of partial intelligibility, and so of *partial completeness*, is only oxymoronic if we misunderstand what the terms refer to. When we call such a text meaningful, we mean the local intelligibility of its dislocated parts, and when we call it inconsistent, we refer to their lack of articulation: the coherent parts are unable to mesh with one another in a way that yields complete global intelligibility, where that is understood as a unity of meaning. I conclude that, far from constituting evidence for its defeasibility, such cases simply reconfirm the unbounded validity of the fore-conception. As in the case above, when the fore-conception seems mistaken, we suspect the text, not the principle.

Confusion about this matter can be traced back to an unclarity in Gadamer's exposition. On the one hand, Gadamer argues that 'when we read a text we always assume its completeness', an immanent and a transcendent unity of meaning (WM:299; TM:294). Later on the same page, however, in another passage sometimes invoked in support of the defeasibility thesis (see e.g Schmidt 1987:398; and DaVia & Lynch 2024.105), Gadamer writes:

It is only when the attempt to accept what is said as true fails that we try to "understand" the text, psychologically or historically, as another's opinion. The prejudice of completeness, then, implies not only this formal element – that a text should express its meaning completely – but also that what it says is the complete truth. (WM:299; TM:294, mod.)

The source of ambiguity in this passage is not Gadamer's avowal of limits in the range of texts that can be taken to express the complete truth. That there are such limits is beyond question. Rather, the cause of unclarity is the suggestion that the fore-conception reduces to a set of claims about the objects of interpretation. We can summarize such claims – which correspond to the immanent and transcendent unities presupposed by interpretation – in the following terms:

(M) that the *interpretandum* expresses its meaning completely,

and

(T) that what the *interpretandum* expresses is the complete truth.

If we understand the fore-conception of completeness to reduce to this set of claims – a reading admittedly supported by the passage just quoted – then the fore-conception is effective as long as interpretation can lend support to (M) and (T). In other words, the validity of the fore-conception is conditioned by the interpreter's discovery that the *interpretandum* expresses its meaning completely, and that what it expresses is the complete truth.

We can immediately see how this “reductionist” reading of the fore-conception of completeness lends support to the defeasibility thesis. Indeed, DaVia and Lynch argue in favour of the defeasibility thesis precisely from the untenability of (M) and (T). As they argue, 'with

respect to at least the vast majority of texts, [an interpretation that fully accords with the fore-conception of completeness] is simply not possible', a failure attributable to the fact that 'an interpreter will often (if not always) discover that a text simply does not allow an understanding on which it expresses the truth about its subject matter completely or perfectly' (DaVia & Lynch 2024:105). On the "reductionist" reading, which DaVia and Lynch seem to favour, the fore-conception is defeasible because (M) and (T) are unlikely verdicts of 'at least the vast majority of texts'.

But there is another reading of the fore-conception of completeness, a reading more in line both with its axiomatic character, and with its origin in interpretive circularity. I argue that the fore-conception of completeness should be understood along the following lines.

(Fore-conception of completeness)      Assume (M) and (T).

If the assumption that (M) and the assumption that (T) are both defeasible, and trivially so, the imperative to make these assumptions is not. Indeed, it is only the continued effectiveness of the interpretive principle to assume (M) and (T), even after the assumptions can no longer be upheld, that secures understanding. Grasping this involves the realization that, in the passage cited above, the accent falls not on the interpreter's failure to 'accept what is said as true', but on the conditions on understanding the text, 'psychologically and historically, as another's opinion' (WM:299; TM:294). For, to understand a text, psychologically or historically, *as an opinion* still requires correctly identifying the *Sache* at issue, and this can only occur against a shared background agreement over what both interlocutors – interpreter and text – hold to be true. As Gadamer argues, in a reply to Derrida, we would be unable even to speak past one another, and so presumably to speak at all, 'if we had not travelled a long way together, perhaps without even acknowledging it to ourselves' (Gadamer 1984:61; transl. Gadamer 1989c:57). Consequently, the falsity of our interlocutor's view can only stand out against the truth of our

shared beliefs about the subject matter. If we were to abandon the principle once we abandoned our commitment to (T), we would no longer be in a position to hold the *Sache* constant, and so neither would we be in a position to understand the text *as an opinion*, or as anything at all for that matter. This is precisely why Gadamer uses scare quotes when discussing our attempts to “understand” the text as an opinion. For, as we know '[u]nderstanding is, primarily, agreement' (WM:183; TM:180). Accordingly, this “*understanding-as-a-historical-opinion*”, as Gadamer explains in the footnote to this passage,

is *secondary* in character and confirms the “fore-conception of completeness”. (WM:299fn223; TM:375fn39, emphasis added)

To understanding an author's *opinion* on a matter is to understand the ways in which their opinion fails to capture the truth about the *Sache*, the ways in which it speaks past the *Sache*. Consequently, just like failure to identify a unity of meaning raises suspicions about the text, and not about our assumption that (M), so failure to accept what is said as true does not put our assumption that (T) in question, but only the truth of the author's beliefs.

When put in these terms, the connection to the hermeneutical circle becomes obvious, too. In order for the *interpretandum* to be intelligible at all, the interpreter must understand it to be expressing *mostly* the truth about the subject matter. In other words, most of what the text expresses about its *Sache* must be true. Only by comparison will those aspects in which it falls short of that ideal become accessible to understanding. Gadamer affirms as much in the only passage (to my knowledge) in which he limits the application of the fore-conception of completeness. In a lengthy footnote, he writes the following:

There is one exception to this fore-conception of completeness, namely the case of writing that is presenting something in disguise, e.g., *a roman à clef*<sup>87</sup>. ... This exceptional hermeneutical case is of special significance, in that it goes beyond interpretation of meaning in the same way as when historical source criticism goes back behind the tradition. Although the task here is not a historical, but a hermeneutical one, it can be performed only by using understanding of the subject matter as a key to discover what is behind the disguise – just as in conversation we understand irony to the extent to which we are in agreement with the other person on the subject matter. Thus the apparent exception confirms that understanding involves agreement [*Einverständnis*]. (WM:300fn224; TM:375fn40, mod.)

It is telling that the only exception to the fore-conception Gadamer discusses in *Truth and Method* is called merely an “apparent” exception, one that validates the fore-conception, and confirms *Einverständnis* as a necessary condition for understanding. This should come as no surprise. I already called attention to Gadamer's appeals to hermeneutical circularity and *Einverständnis* – in short, the fore-structure of understanding – as sources of the principle's validity. As I will argue (see 5.4.2.c.), based on my transcendental reading of Gadamer's project (in chapter 4), this is because such principles do nothing but make explicit that structure of agreement – as the necessary fore-structure of understanding.

For now, having established that the defeasibility thesis is exegetically untenable and that the *Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit* is claimed by Gadamer to be universally true, let us move to the question of ground and investigate whether the Gadamerian criterion can be philosophically grounded in a way which disentangles itself from an infinite or viciously circular process of reasoning.

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<sup>87</sup> 'A 'novel with a key', in which real people appear under fictitious names, lightly disguised but still recognizable' (Ousby 1993:808).

### 5.4.2. The question of ground

Once we recognize that the fore-conception of completeness is intended by Gadamer to pertain necessarily to all interpretation, as a 'condition of all understanding' (WM:299; TM:194), we must ask the skeptical question concerning the source of this alleged necessity. What, in other words, grounds the validity of the fore-conception of completeness, and so its ability to yield good results? Is it a mere pragmatic maxim, a rule of thumb validated by an acceptable, yet by no means perfect, track record of interpretive success? Or can it act as a real interpretive norm, a true correctness criterion? I want to approach these questions by initially following DaVia and Lynch (2024) and considering first the answer they interpret Schmidt to be giving (section 3.2.a.), and then their own answer to these questions (section 3.2.b.), before presenting my own (section 3.2.c.).

#### 5.4.2.a. *The instrumental account*

As already mentioned, Schmidt maintains that the fore-conception of completeness is necessary for calling one's prejudices and fore-understandings into question (Schmidt 1987; 2010; 2020). He writes:

If one does not oppose one's own opinions by granting that the other could be correct, then one can only naïvely continue with one's own unquestioned prejudices and conclude that the text presents a falsehood if it disagrees with one's own position. On the other hand, if one grants this fore-conception concerning truth for the text, then one can call into question one's own prejudice concerning the truth of the subject matter and confront one's own idea with the conflicting idea of the text. (Schmidt 2020:3)

On this account, the fore-conception has an essential role to play in answering Gadamer's fundamental epistemological question: 'What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from the countless others which it is the undeniable task of critical reason to overcome?' (WM:281; TM:278). What Schmidt is appealing to here, as DaVia and Lynch point out, is the experience of being "pulled up short" by what we are interpreting (see WM:272; TM:270). This experience, in which our initial projection of meaning falls through, flags some of our fore-understanding as unbefitting the *interpretandum*, and so prompts its revision. Schmidt argues that without approaching the object with the fore-conception of completeness, we could never be in a position to foreground our prejudices. Only on the assumption that what the text says is true can the interpretive machinery of projection and revision be put to work, and only then can the interpreter escape the orbit of their own prejudices. This, in the terminology employed by DaVia & Lynch (2024), is an "instrumental" grounding of the fore-conception of completeness, instrumental because, without it, 'the core task of interpretation can never get off the ground' (DaVia & Lynch 2024:108).

We immediately detect similarities between Schmidt's instrumental reading and what, in chapter 3, I called the *prudential strategy* for grounding interpretive principles. I argued there that according to the prudential reading, Crusius grounds the validity of hermeneutical presumptions by appealing to their role as a necessary and sufficient means to agents' rational end of understanding one another. In other words, unless we want to forgo the task of interpretation, we must proceed on the assumptions embodied in the hermeneutical presumptions. Were we to abandon them, we 'would lose all reliable guidance' (W:§639) in interpretation and 'the possibility of a reliable discovery of [another's] thoughts would disappear entirely' (W:§641). On Schmidt's reading, similarly, the fore-conception of completeness 'is the necessary presupposition that the interpreter must assume to be confronted by different ideas, test her own prejudices, and avoid naïve interpretation' (Schmidt 2020:3).

Since testing one's own prejudices and allowing oneself to be confronted by different ideas is the only way to achieve the goal of understanding, obedience to the fore-conception of completeness is, to put it with Crusius, 'the only way of discovering [another's] thoughts reliably' (W:§640). However, as we now know, the prudential reading fails because it cannot account for the connection between the interpretive principles' necessity in guiding the interpreter, and their role in guaranteeing *correct* understanding. As I argued (3.3.2.c), that connection requires a grounding which makes reference not only to the rationality of the interpreter's action but also to features of the *interpretanda*. In other words, what remains to be established is the connection between an *instrumental* dimension – that the interpreter must obey the fore-conception of completeness if she is to attain her aim – and the *normative* dimension – that she is *right* in proceeding the way she is, and that in so doing she is arriving at a *correct* understanding of the objects of her interpretation.

This is precisely the sort of objection DaVia and Lynch put forward against the instrumental account.

#### 5.4.2.b. *The constitutive account*

In contrast to Schmidt, DaVia and Lynch propose what they (drawing on Weinsheimer 2000) call a “constitutive” grounding. While they accept Schmidt's claim that the fore-conception of completeness enables interpreters to become aware of their unconscious and illegitimate prejudices, and that without it interpretation cannot get off the ground, they contend that, if that is all the fore-conception is called upon to do, then *any* initial assumption could perform this task just as well. Approaching a text with the expectation that it might be illuminating, entertaining, contrarian, or simply false, may all offer the same opportunities for disappointment, and thus provide similar prompting to revise those particular expectations. If

we want to contend, as Gadamer and Schmidt surely do, that a fore-conception of *completeness* is required, then, DaVia and Lynch argue, we must assign it more than a merely instrumental role. They write:

If it is true that an assumption of completeness is a *necessary* means to foregrounding those prejudices that lead to misunderstanding, that can only be because completeness plays some role *in defining what counts as a misunderstanding in the first place*. (DaVia & Lynch 2024:108; emphasis added)

I think DaVia and Lynch are quite right to insist on the requirement of connecting the fore-conception of completeness with correctness, and on the role completeness plays – or, more precisely, the notion of “completeness” – in defining what correct understanding consists in. Let us consider their argument.

DaVia and Lynch establish the requisite connection between what interpreters must presuppose and the correctness of interpretation by recalling (as I did in 3.4.3, in relation to Crusius), the connection between intelligibility and meaningfulness, a key feature of what they call Gadamer's *event semantics*. They argue:

For Gadamer the meaning of a text is the event in which its subject matter becomes intelligibly present, and to approach the text with the aim of participating in such an event *just is* to interpret it charitably [i.e., in accordance with the fore-conception of completeness]. ... Properly understood, the [fore-conception of completeness] does nothing more than spell out the conditions that discourse must meet in order to be intelligible as discourse – that is, to be a site at which an event of meaning can potentially take place. (DaVia & Lynch 2024:110)

On this account, the fore-conception of completeness – unlike any other initial assumptions about the text – is necessary for interpretation because it is *constitutive* of what interpretation is. While there are many ways in which one can relate to another's discourse – in an attempt to

refute it, or silence it, for instance – 'only when those interactions are aimed at discovering the truth about the subject matter do they constitute *interpretation* in the genuine sense of the term' (DaVia & Lynch 2024:110).

There is of course much that I agree with in DaVia and Lynch's reading, which fits well with my own view put forward in chapter 4. I find myself in full alignment, particularly, with their claim that the fore-conception of completeness 'does not tell us *that* we are obligated to understand any particular bit of discourse ...; instead, it tells us the sort of normative commitments that interpretation, as such, involves' (DaVia & Lynch 2024:110). I argued in chapter 4 that Gadamer's Kantian project of grounding understanding proceeds by laying out the structure of the hermeneutical situation in which interpretation – understood as a dialogical event – unfolds, and without which it could not take place. As already indicated above, fulfilling this task is a matter of 'making explicit the normative implications which lie in what is linguistically transmitted' (Gadamer 1980:327). On the account I have been upholding, the possibility of understanding – and that of course means the possibility of *correct* understanding – is secured by grounding understanding in a *normative* structure which is always already implicated in it. Seemingly, then, my reading is compatible with DaVia and Lynch's constitutive account. On their view, the source of the fore-conception's normativity – its necessity for interpretation – is located in its constitutive relation to the practice of interpretation, an activity understood as one manner among several to approach and relate to another's discourse. Accordingly, DaVia and Lynch claim that 'for Gadamer, what makes an interpretation incorrect is ... that it falls short of what interpretation, in the fullest and most genuine sense, is' (DaVia & Lynch 2024:112). If they intend to engage in interpretation, interpreters must approach the text charitably, that is, by presupposing the fore-conception of completeness.

Where I think DaVia and Lynch's constitutive account goes wrong is not only in their commitment to the defeasibility thesis, a thesis that I rejected, but in the way they connect the fore-conception of completeness to the idea of correctness. I argued above that DaVia and Lynch presuppose what I called a “reductionist” reading of the fore-conception of completeness, a view on which the fore-conception reduces to a set of claims about the object of interpretation. For this reason, they argue that 'with respect to at least the vast majority of texts, [an interpretation that fully accords with the fore-conception of completeness] is simply not possible' (DaVia & Lynch 2024:105). Yet, they insist on the necessity of obeying the principle, and argue that, when 'interpreters transgress this norm [the fore-conception of completeness] from time to time ... they are rightly subject to the charge that they have interpreted wrongly' (111). However, it is quite unclear on what basis we can draw a distinction between a wrong interpretation in this latter sense – caused, in particular, by the interpreter's transgression of the norm – and a correct interpretation of a text for which an understanding that fully accords with the fore-conception of completeness is not possible. Recall, however, that this was precisely the task the fore-conception of completeness was called upon to perform.

For,

[i]f it is true that an assumption of completeness is a *necessary* means to foregrounding those prejudices that lead to misunderstanding, that can only be because completeness plays some role *in defining what counts as a misunderstanding in the first place*. (DaVia & Lynch 2024:108; emphasis added)

What the fore-conception of completeness needs to account for – if it is to remain a necessary norm of interpretation and to have any role as a criterion of correctness – is not only the idea that the object of interpretation can only come to intelligible presence if the interpreter approaches it with the fore-conception of completeness, but that approaching it in such a way

is necessary for allowing the object to come to intelligible presence *as the object that it is*. The shortcoming of DaVia and Lynch's constitutive account, as I see it, is that it only holds *interpreters* to the fore-conception of completeness, and not the *objects of interpretation*. As I argue in the next section, to be able to play a role as a criterion of correctness – and to survive the skeptic's challenge – completeness must characterize the *interpretandum* as well.

#### 5.4.2.c. *The transcendental account*

The account I propose to safeguard Gadamer's axiom of interpretation from skeptical attack follows straightforwardly from my transcendental reading of the Gadamerian project in chapter 4. Before proceeding with that account, let us first briefly recall the difficulties involved in answering the problem of the criterion.

As I argued in chapter 3, in relation Crusius' hermeneutics, we can only give content to the idea that an interpretation's conformity to interpretive principles entails interpretive correctness if the meaning of *interpretanda* essentially *depends* on such conformity. In other words, the conditions that govern a text's accessibility to interpretation, the conditions of its intelligibility to the interpreter, must also govern the contents thus made accessible. For, unless interpretive principles accurately project features of the objects of interpretations before they are given to us, we have no grounds for asserting anything about the extent to which the manner in which they are given to us is right or wrong. Consequently, unless the conditions for intelligibility and the conditions for meaningfulness coincide, we cannot derive evidence of correctness from the former. I argued that this is the case on the Crusian account, and I have accordingly ascribed to him the thesis I have been calling 'the Copernican Revolution in hermeneutics', summarized in the claim that the conditions for the possibility of an experience

of meaning are simultaneously conditions for the possibility of the object of such an experience (see 3.4.3).

As indicated at the close of the previous section, what is required for Gadamer to be able to assert the necessity of the fore-conception as a norm of interpretation and a criterion of correctness is precisely to connect interpretation's requirement of conformity to the fore-conception as a condition of intelligibility, and the role such conformity plays in establishing correctness. As I hope to be apparent from my preceding discussion (in 4.4), what I think facilitates the task of building a bridge from intelligibility to correctness on the Gadamerian account is that account's commitment to the dialogical structure of understanding. For, within the structure of dialogue, the object of interpretation no longer stands apart in isolation from the interpreter, as an invariant meaning-in-itself. Instead, the object – whether text, work of art, or the sound produced by the person before us – is itself an interlocutor and must therefore be treated as such. Interpretation, so conceived, is not a matter of a subject relating to an object from which it is detached, but a matter of these participating, together, in an event of meaning. In virtue of its reciprocity, the connection between interpreter and interpreted is in fact better construed as a *relationship* than as mere *relation*. We do not understand our interlocutor, the *other*, but we reach an understanding *together with them*. For this reason, the other too must be held to the same norms that interpretation demands of the interpreter. In other words, insofar as the fore-conception of completeness governs the possibility of dialogue, and insofar as meaning is nothing more than the accomplishment of dialogue, as that 'event in which [a] subject matter becomes intelligibly present' (DaVia & Lynch 2024:110), the fore-conception of completeness governs not only what can be intelligible to the interpreter, but what can be meaningful *simpliciter*. For this reason, if both participants must have the aim of participating

in an event of meaning, then no interlocutor is insulated from the responsibility to obey the fore-conception of completeness.<sup>88</sup> It is only because the objects of interpretation must fulfil this condition for them to be meaningful at all that we can derive from it any conclusions about correctness in interpretation. In other words, the only reason we can say anything – if we want to follow Gadamer – about whether an interpretation that accords with the fore-conception of completeness is right or wrong, is because “completeness” describes not only the conditions for the possibility of an experience of meaning (or, as DaVia and Lynch put it, an event of meaning), but also the conditions for the possibility of the objects of such an experience.

Now that the fore-conception of completeness has been furnished with the right credentials to secure correctness – namely, the connection between intelligibility and meaningfulness – I should note that all I have established thus far in this section is a *conditional*: that *if* the fore-conception of completeness is a valid principle governing interpretation, then it is a valid criterion of correctness. While we saw above that Gadamer does not endorse the defeasibility thesis, we have not yet put the fore-conception of completeness to the skeptic's test. Having rejected the instrumental and constitutive accounts, let us now turn anew to the question of the validity of this principle as an interpretive norm and therefore – if the conditional relation holds – as a criterion of correctness.

The skeptical line of argument, once the first requirement – that the criterion be claimed true – is fulfilled, proceeds by demanding proof for the criterion. I argued in the previous chapter that Gadamer's transcendental grounding of understanding addresses the question of interpretive normativity, not by eliciting obedience to universally valid principles, but by making explicit the principles already implicit in the structure of understanding. To recognize the validity of these principles is to recognize them as implicit in the fore-structure of

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<sup>88</sup> Gadamer underscores this requirement of reciprocity especially in connection to the principle of good will: 'Both partners have the good will to understand one another. And so, good will exists everywhere understanding is sought' (Gadamer 1983:343).

understanding. We can therefore satisfy the skeptic's demand of proof for the criterion by reiterating Gadamer's transcendental grounding of understanding and showing how the fore-conception of completeness – and indeed the *Vormeinung des Sprachgebrauchs* – belong intrinsically to the anticipatory structure of understanding, in particular the structure of prior *Einverständnis*.

Let us begin by recalling some of the hallmarks of Gadamer's notion of *Einverständnis*. I argued (see 4.5.1) that, for Gadamer, *Einverständnis* denotes a form of agreement that is necessary for interpretation to be possible, and that anticipatorily joins interpreter and *interpretandum* together. Two elements are particularly important for *Einverständnis*: an agreement in language, and an agreement in *Sache*:

All coming to understanding in language presupposes agreement [*Einverständnis*] not just about the meanings of words and the rules of spoken language; much remains undisputed with regard to the “subject matter” as well – i.e., to everything that can be meaningfully discussed. (Gadamer 1972:465; TM:569)

We know that, for Gadamer, this characterization of the presuppositions involved in the interpretive process is 'not some dogmatic assumption but a simple phenomenological description of coming to an understanding' (Gadamer 1968:114-115; transl. Gadamer 2007a:68).

And so, we can now understand how, by promoting the factuality of understanding to the level of philosophical foundation, Gadamer has endowed a descriptive account with normative force. For, if *Einverständnis* involves a commonality at least partly expressed as an agreement on the meanings of words and the rules of syntax for the language in which the dialogue is carried out, then we must assume – and are justified to do so – that 'someone who speaks the same language as I do uses the words in the sense familiar to me' (WM:272; TM:270). The

validity of this assumption – the *Vormeinung des Sprachgebrauchs* – stems directly from its place in the matrix of normative commitments in which interpretation is situated. Similarly, if *Einverständnis* involves a commonality expressed as a common world-view, or, in particular, a shared set of beliefs about the *Sache* at issue, then the interpreter must presuppose – and is justified to do so – that the *interpretandum* expresses the truth about the *Sache*. For, if she did not, she would stand no chance of identifying the *Sache*, and so no chance of identifying what the text was false *of*. This assumption expresses, of course, the presupposition of the “transcendent unity” of the *interpretandum*, the second of the two aspects of the fore-conception of completeness. I already showed above that the “immanent” dimension of the fore-conception, namely the assumption that the *interpretandum* expresses a unity of meaning, is a consequence of the traditional conception of hermeneutical (part-whole) circularity (see 5.4). For these reasons, the validity of the fore-conception of completeness derives similarly from its place in the web of normative commitments that characterize the hermeneutical situation. Formulated as hermeneutical maxims, principles of interpretive “procedure” and criteria of correctness, they simply exhibit that situation, and make explicit some region of that matrix.

I claim that this line of argument for securing the validity of the fore-conception of completeness, which I am calling “the transcendental account”, is systematically more satisfactory, and exegetically more tenable, than the alternatives considered in 5.4.2.a., and 5.4.2.b. However, that is not all that was needed to satisfy the skeptic. Indeed, once proof of the validity of the criterion is provided, the skeptic will demand a criterion for the proof. For, so the argument goes, unless such a criterion is provided, the truth of the proof itself hangs in the balance. And so, it appears, Gadamer has not yet provided a satisfactory answer to the problem of the criterion.

On the transcendental account, however, the skeptic's demand for a criterion of the proof is a demand for something that cannot be given. In reply, we can again stress the Gadamerian / Heideggerian point that 'no freely chosen relation towards one's own being can get behind the facticity of that being' (WM:268/9; TM:254). For Gadamer, the demand for a criterion of the proof is illegitimate because it requires obviating the 'original dialogic of human world-having' (Gadamer 1975:505). Such a detachment from our original situatedness would disconnect us from the very ground that enables understanding. What spells the skeptic's defeat, on this transcendental account, is the account's self-referentiality. By grounding the normativity of interpretation only by reference to what is to be grounded, in the 'factuality of the convictions, values, and habits that we all share with the deepest inner clarity and the most profound communality' (Gadamer 1980:325; transl. Gadamer 1998:58), Gadamer has put an end to the skeptic's questioning by denying its legitimacy, together with its urgency. For, though it cannot be grounded in some independent principle, or structure, the 'dialogue in which we stand and which ... we are' , is not, for this reason, groundless (see Gadamer 1965a:447; TM:xxxiii). Instead, Gadamer's rhetorical question – 'Does what has always supported us need to be grounded? (*ibid.*) – receives a firm negative answer.

## 5.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, my aim has been to examine some of the interpretive norms that, on the Gadamerian account, are implicit in every hermeneutical engagement, and then to assess their ability to function as criteria of correctness in the sense required by the skeptic. This involved submitting Gadamer's view to the problem of the criterion. I argued that, on a transcendental reading that follows from the argument constructed in chapter 4, Gadamer can survive the skeptic's challenge. In the next chapters, I aim to draw out the similarities between my

transcendental reading of Gadamer's inquiry into the ground of understanding and the inquiry Kant pursues in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

## Chapter 6

# The *Critique* and the Criterion

### 6.1. Introduction

Throughout this dissertation, my focal point has been a version of the Pyrrhonian problem of the criterion that emerged in the German Enlightenment and was posed in a hermeneutical context. When asked in this context, the problem of the criterion moves us in the direction of a distinguishing mark, not merely for the justification of some hermeneutical item or principle, but a mark that would testify to the legitimacy of hermeneutical inquiry itself. Thus, for Chladenius, as shown in chapter 1, the project of establishing hermeneutics as a standalone science was intimately tied to articulating a response to the problem of the criterion.

By drawing on the hermeneutics of Christian August Crusius (in chapter 3) and of Hans-Georg Gadamer (in chapters 4, and 5), I have been developing and defending a transcendental line of response to the problem of the criterion for interpretation. My constant, if mostly implicit, reference has been the work of Immanuel Kant, primarily the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In the next two chapters, I aim to locate the source of such an approach more explicitly in Kant and to draw out the connection between his transcendental methodology and the transcendental approach that has been my focus in the previous chapters. I will eventually be aiming to achieve this goal by connecting the idea of “transcendental grounding” to Kant's most celebrated argument, the Transcendental Deduction.

But first, in this chapter, I want to show that Kant presented the critique of pure reason as a project that itself engages with a version of the problem of the criterion. Specifically, I

argue that Kant articulates his inquiry into the possibility of metaphysics as a search for a criterion for the validity of metaphysical principles, effecting again the connection between the problem of the criterion for a determinate type of knowledge, and the legitimacy of a domain of philosophical theorizing. To establish this, I first (section 6.2) recall Kant's dismissal of the general formulation of the problem of the criterion. Then (section 6.3), I present Kant's account of the crisis faced by metaphysics in relation to the project pursued by the *Critique*. Finally (section 6.4), I bring Kant's picture of the perplexities of metaphysics into direct contact with the problem of the criterion by considering Kant's own conception of his critical project as an elaboration of 'the Humean problem' (PFM:261).<sup>89</sup>

## 6.2. The criterion of truth

In the first pages of the *Critique's* Transcendental Logic, in a section titled “On the division of general logic into analytic and dialectic”, Kant is purportedly concerned with

[t]he old and famous question with which the logicians were to be driven into a corner and brought to such a pass that they must either fall into a miserable circle or else confess their ignorance, and so the vanity of their entire art ... [namely,] what is the general and certain criterion of the truth of any cognition? (A58/B82)

Discouragingly, however, he immediately proceeds to observe that:

It is already a great and necessary proof of cleverness or insight to know what one should reasonably ask. (A58/B82)

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<sup>89</sup> English translations from the *Prolegomena* are given from Kant (1997).

Not only does Kant not view the question as reasonable, but he even caricatures attempts to take it seriously, later comparing them to 'the ridiculous sight (as the ancients said) of one person milking a billy-goat while the other holds a sieve underneath' (A58/B82-3). So, why does he think that asking such a question is unreasonable? Kant boils the problem down to the dual demands placed on the required criterion, namely that it be (1) universal (and so hold of *all* objects of cognition), and (2) material (and so hold of *particular* objects). According to Kant, such a requirement is contradictory. For it to be universal, the criterion must be

valid of all cognitions without any distinction among their objects. But it is clear that since with such a criterion one abstracts from all content of cognition (relation to its object), yet truth concerns precisely this content, it would be completely impossible and absurd to ask for a mark of the truth of this content of cognition, and thus it is clear that a sufficient and yet at the same time general sign of truth cannot possibly be provided. (A58-9/B83; see AA 24:823)

A criterion of truth cannot therefore be both universal and hold of objects. And so, it would appear that Kant's engagement with the problem of the criterion boils down to a blunt dissolution of it on grounds of illegitimacy.

Kant gives less abrupt consideration to this problem in his logic lectures, and on several occasions takes issue not with the contradictory nature of the demanded criterion, but with the concept of truth itself.<sup>90</sup> Yet, the details of Kant's arguments are not important here. What is important is that Kant briefly discusses the problem of the criterion, a problem he identifies by its ancient name – *diallelon* (see A57/B82; AA 9:50; AA 24:81/718/822) – and then dismisses

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<sup>90</sup> See, for instance Kant's *Bloomberg Logic* (AA 24:81), and *Vienna Logic* (AA 24:822), where the problem emerges due to 'difficulties that can arise with the concept of truth' (AA 24:81; transl. Kant 1992b:61). That Kant follows a different line of argument in the *Critique* may be explained by the fact that, there, 'the nominal definition of truth, namely that it is the agreement of cognition with the object, is ... granted and presupposed' (A58/B82). For more discussion, see also Kant's *Jäsche Logic* (AA 9:50), and the *Dohna-Wundlacken Logic* (AA 24:718).

it as illegitimate. Nevertheless, I want to argue, in the next section, that Kant not only seriously poses the problem of the criterion for a special category of knowledge, but even takes himself to have solved it.

As should hopefully be clear from the discussions in previous chapters, the problem of the criterion can be posed in such a way that what is demanded is not a criterion of truth *simpliciter*. When posed with respect to interpretation, for instance, what is demanded is a criterion of *correctness*, or, if we wish, a criterion of truth for interpretations. But it should be obvious that this is not a criterion of truth *simpliciter*, since the truth of our interpretation and the truth of the *interpretandum* can come apart. For, we can correctly interpret a statement, such that our interpretation is true to the meaning of that statement, but the statement itself can be false. Importantly, this is not to equivocate with respect to the truth predicate, but merely to say that, insofar as some *I* is a correct interpretation of some sentence *s*, “*I interprets s*” is true whatever the truth value of *s*.

Consequently, the problem of the criterion can be posed of a subset of statements, like interpretations, understood as knowledge-claims about the meaning of *interpretanda*. The kind of knowledge for which a problem of the criterion emerges in the *Critique*, so I will argue, is metaphysical knowledge. Accordingly, I wish to start with what, by Kant's lights, was the crisis facing metaphysics.

### 6.3. The crisis of metaphysics

Kant's master concern in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is with metaphysics. In particular, he aims to reach a 'decision about the possibility or impossibility of a metaphysics in general, and the determination of its sources, as well as its extent and boundaries, all, however, from principles' (Axii). Kant's understanding of metaphysics is quite distinctive: he characterizes it

in terms of 'cognitions after which reason might strive independently of all experience' (*ibid.*). Accordingly, metaphysics, as Kant understands it, is concerned with *a priori* knowledge of objects or, in other words, with *synthetic a priori judgments*. Hence – since establishing the possibility of metaphysics concerns establishing the status of such judgments – we arrive at the question that famously guides Kant's investigation, namely 'how are synthetic judgments *a priori* possible?' (B19).

The *Critique* is not, however, exclusively concerned with a 'laying of the ground of metaphysics' – to quote Heidegger (1929:1) – but is itself a work of metaphysics, at least by its author's own definition of that domain of inquiry. It may, for this reason, be helpful to recall Kant's division of philosophy. The *Critique of pure reason* is an instance of what Kant calls “pure philosophy”, which he understands as “cognition from pure reason”, and distinguishes from “empirical philosophy”, or “rational cognition from empirical principles” (A840/B868). However, “pure” philosophy consists of two separate moments: a “critique” (of pure reason), 'which investigates the faculty of reason in regard to all pure *a priori* cognition' and is merely preparatory, and metaphysics proper, or 'the system of pure reason (science), the whole (true as well as apparent) philosophical cognition from pure reason in systematic interconnection' (A841/B869). Making this distinction is essential to understanding Kant's aims, as well as his achievements in the *Critique*. Kant's preparatory “critique” of pure reason is accomplished once a decision about the possibility or impossibility of metaphysics is reached. As is well known, Kant claims to have reached such a decision relatively early in his investigation: metaphysics, understood to involve synthetic *a priori* judgments, is possible according to Kant so long as it concerns the conditions of the possibility of experience (A158/B197). Yet this is not the most celebrated result of Kant's *Critique*. Instead, it is Kant's positive account, presented in the so-called “constructive” section of the *Critique* – the Transcendental Analytic – of what exactly the conditions of the possibility of experience are. A notorious example is the principle

that 'Every event has a cause', which expresses one such condition. Thus, Kant's analysis in *The Analytic of Concepts* and *The Analytic of Principles* – the two books of the *Transcendental Analytic* – insofar as it lays out the conditions for the possibility of experience 'in systematic interconnection', is an instance of metaphysical cognition in Kant's sense of that term.<sup>91</sup> It is worth bearing this in mind, as, on occasion, Kant seems to identify “metaphysics” with a kind of inquiry that attempts to transcend the bounds of possible experience. Let us now consider the crisis of metaphysics.

The conventional account of Kant's *Critique* reads it as the synthesis of early modern rationalism and empiricism. On this picture, the crux of Kant's work is defending the possibility of purely rational *a priori* cognition from empiricist criticism. But this is not how Kant himself presents his investigation in the *Critique*, nor does it encapsulate what he thought was the challenge facing metaphysics. First, it is important to note the urgency that Kant attaches to his work: for him, the impulse to metaphysical theorizing was as natural to human beings as is their impulse to breathe (PFM:367; see B21). But the crisis that prompted a critique was not the dispute between rationalism and empiricism. Instead, Kant sets his project against the background of the classical dispute between dogmatism and skepticism. According to him, the conflict between these two positions epitomizes both the nature and historical development of metaphysics. His sketch of the history and predicament of metaphysics in the A-Preface is well known:

In the beginning, under the administration of the dogmatists, her rule was despotic. Yet because her legislation still retained traces of ancient barbarism, this rule gradually degenerated through internal wars into complete anarchy; and the skeptics, a kind of nomads who abhor all permanent cultivation of the soil, shattered civil unity from time to time. But ... they could not prevent the dogmatists from continually attempting to rebuild. (Aix)

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<sup>91</sup> For more, see Willaschek (2018:c1).

For this reason, Kant characterizes metaphysics as a 'battlefield of endless controversies' (Aviii).

One of the purposes for which Kant frames the troubles of metaphysics as a conflict between dogmatists and skeptics is to present his own view as the only viable alternative. The *Critique* is thus intended to 'steer human reason between [the] two cliffs' of dogmatism and skepticism (B128) and to put a halt to the endless controversies of metaphysics. Another purpose of *this* framing – rather than, say, a conflict between Wolff / Leibniz rationalism and Humean skepticism, on which what Kant calls “dogmatism” and “skepticism” were undoubtedly modelled – is to portray the crisis of metaphysics as a crisis of reason. To see exactly how Kant's project can be brought into contact with the problem of the criterion for metaphysical cognition, let us begin by considering the dynamic between dogmatism and skepticism.

A main feature of dogmatic metaphysics, according to Kant, is its unsteadiness and tendency to break up into factions. Because metaphysics started off dogmatically, its infancy was characterized by strife and internal conflict, and 'one metaphysics has always contradicted the other, either in regard to the assertions themselves or their proofs, and thereby metaphysics has itself destroyed its claim to lasting approbation' (PFM:271). Skepticism, on this picture, emerges as a reaction to the apparent hopelessness of metaphysical theorizing and attempts to bring an end to metaphysical controversies. 'Skepticism', as Kant understands it, is 'a principle adopted to break with dogmatism, but not ... with the aim of introducing ... true conviction against it, but rather only in order to topple the persuasions of others' (AA 18:294; transl. Gava 2023a:264). For this reason, Kant views skepticism as a 'cure for dogmatic self-conceit' (A757/B785). Yet, in regard to metaphysical cognition, as we will see, while the skeptic's

diagnosis is correct, their remedy is not. So, what does Kant understand by “dogmatism” and “skepticism”?

Despite the importance of this framing for Kant's investigation, it remains difficult to characterize these views in much detail. This is especially true regarding the meaning of dogmatism, which most tend to connect to particular philosophers (as Kant himself connects it to Wolff or Baumgarten) or generalizations of their views. A highly valuable analysis in this context is Gava (2023a), which, unlike classical commentaries like Vaihinger (1881-92) or Kemp Smith (1918), does not link dogmatism to past philosophers, but analyzes it as a methodological approach. Gava distinguishes between three senses of dogmatism that he takes to be at issue for Kant (see Gava 2023a:c8): '(1) dogmatism as the pursuit of a demonstration “from concepts”; (2) dogmatism as the absence of critique and the unwarranted use of synthetic *a priori* principles; and (3) dogmatism as the affirmation of the theses of the Antinomy of Pure Reason' (Gava 2023a:235).<sup>92</sup> Leaving a more detailed analysis for the next section, what I want to note here about the first two senses is their connection to philosophical methodology, and especially to questions of justification. “Dogmatism(1)” refers to a particular account of metaphysical proof, whereas “dogmatism(2)” has to do with an unjustified use of metaphysical synthetic *a priori* principles as valid principles.

Kant's conception of skepticism, on the other hand, has received considerably more attention. It is well established that skepticism plays a leading role both in the *Critique* itself, and in Kant's transition from his pre-critical to his critical period. The question of exactly what kind of skepticism is at issue for Kant, however, has been the subject of much dispute. Without wishing to go into too much detail here, it is common to distinguish between three strands of skepticism which the *Critique* addresses or responds to: (1) Cartesian skepticism, which forms

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<sup>92</sup> See Walschots (2023) and Gava (2023b) for a debate concerning the compatibility of these different senses of dogmatism.

the topic of the Fourth Paralogism and the Refutation of Idealism; (2) Humean skepticism, addressed primarily in the Transcendental Analytic and especially the Deduction; and (3) Pyrrhonian skepticism, with which the Transcendental Dialectic, specifically the Antinomy, is concerned (see Guyer 2003:6-10; Stern 2006; Forster 2008; Kelsey 2014).

In opposition to earlier interpretations, which read the *Critique* in terms which prioritized the refutation of external-world skepticism (pioneered by Strawson (1966)), there seems now to be general agreement that Cartesian skepticism is not the *Critique's* chief target, if responding to skepticism is Kant's goal.<sup>93</sup> However, it remains disputed which of the two remaining forms of skepticism should take precedence. On the one hand, certainly in the *Prolegomena*, Kant attributes to Hume an essential role in the genesis of the *Critique*. On the other hand, the presence of Pyrrhonian themes in Kant's philosophy also seems indisputable. Consequently, there are some who argue in favour of a compartmentalized conception of Kant's understanding of skepticism and who accordingly take the *Critique* to engage with both Humean and Pyrrhonian skepticism distinctly (Guyer 2003; Forster 2008). However, while it is certainly true that Kant's fight against skepticism takes place on multiple fronts,<sup>94</sup> it is not clear why this should lead us to assume multiple opponents. Against this divided picture, some attempt instead to reconcile the various strands of skeptical views present in Kant and fit them into a more unified conception. Accordingly, they endeavor to show that Kant conceived of Humean skepticism as a form of Pyrrhonian skepticism and that, for him, the former reduces to the latter (see Kuehn 1983; Kreimendahl 1990; Ertl 2002; Stern 2006; 2008; Chance 2012; Kelsey 2014; Gava 2023a). On this, seemingly more promising, reading, the *Critique* engages with a singular, Pyrrhonian skepticism, which it takes to be fundamental with respect to its more modern versions, in particular Hume's.

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<sup>93</sup> Guyer (2003) expresses reservations on this point.

<sup>94</sup> To borrow a metaphor from Beck (1978).

I already mentioned that Kant's understanding of the crisis of metaphysics in terms of the controversies between dogmatism and skepticism has wider implications for him. Indeed, the picture of dogmatism and skepticism and their conflict is not meant merely as an account of historically located philosophical systems, epitomized in Wolff and Hume respectively.<sup>95</sup> Instead, their emergence and conflict reflect the structure of reason itself. Thus, the historical conflict that characterizes the discipline of metaphysics, as it plays out both among the dogmatists and between them and the skeptics, is in fact a conflict internal to reason itself. This conflict is famously what the Transcendental Dialectic, and, in particular, the longest chapter of that division – named after this conflict – are about: namely, the antinomy of pure reason. In that chapter, Kant is concerned to uncover an illusion to which reason quite naturally and unavoidably falls prey:

there is a natural and unavoidable dialectic of pure reason, not one in which a bungler might be entangled through lack of acquaintance, or one that some sophist has artfully invented in order to confuse rational people, but one that irremediably attaches to human reason. (A298/B354)

What is illusory in this dialectic of pure reason is the persuasive force of each side, pulling us in opposite directions and giving rise both to conflicting dogmatic systems, as well as to the skeptical reaction to them. For, this natural dialectic

leads reason into the temptation either to surrender itself to a skeptical hopelessness or else to assume an attitude of dogmatic stubbornness, setting its mind rigidly to certain assertions without giving a fair hearing to the grounds for the opposite. (A407/B434)

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<sup>95</sup> I should note that Kant conceives of the history of philosophy in terms quite different from ours: as 'the history, not of opinions which have chanced to arise here or there, but of reason developing itself from concepts' (AA 20:343; transl. Gava 2023a:263).

It is this natural and inevitable conflict of our reason, which is here 'divided against itself' (A758/B786), that is responsible for the crisis faced by metaphysics that Kant wants to put to rest. It also explains why the skeptical attitude must be wrong, for even after the illusion is exposed and the mirage lifted, that illusion 'will still not cease to lead our reason on with false hopes' (A298/B354-5). Accordingly, Kant characterizes skepticism as a 'resting-place for human reason', where reason can 'reflect upon its dogmatic peregrination' (A761/B789). But skepticism cannot be a 'dwelling-place for permanent residence', for it cannot put a permanent stop to the temptation to dogmatism (*ibid.*). The conflict at the heart of reason must be addressed, and cannot be ignored as a mere sign of reason's finitude. Thus, Kant's self-appointed task in the *Critique* is not to settle the matter between dogmatists and skeptics by vindicating one side against the other, since 'either alternative is the death of a healthy philosophy' (A407/B434). Against these fatal alternatives, Kant presents his own *critical* project. As he famously puts it in the A-Preface, his chief goal is

to institute a court of justice, by which reason may secure its rightful claims while dismissing all its groundless pretensions, and this not by mere decrees but according to its own eternal and unchangeable laws; and this court is none other than the *critique of pure reason* itself. (Axi-xii)

Kant promises to establish reason's rightful claims, thereby arguing against the skeptic's proclamation of ignorance, but not dogmatically, 'by mere decrees', while also accepting the skeptic's diagnosis of the failures of dogmatism and dismissing reason's 'groundless pretensions'.

To summarize, the crisis of metaphysics, as Kant presents it, is a failure of the dogmatic method of philosophical proof, exposed by the skeptic. While aptly called a 'battlefield', metaphysics is in fact characterized by 'mock combat', where 'no combatant has gained the least bit of ground' (Bxv). The antinomies of reason – which instantiate the unresolvable conflict at

the heart of metaphysics – illustrate the collapse of dogmatism, and seemingly of metaphysics itself. To resolve this conflict is to provide a grounding for metaphysics and to arrange 'a peaceful retirement for reason' (A757/B785). Yet if this *ataraxia*, or tranquility, yearned for by the skeptic is to be attained with respect to the domain of metaphysical cognition, the ground provided must be one for which the question of its own ground can no longer be asked.

#### 6.4. The problem of the criterion

Let us now take a closer look at the way in which Kant's picture of the perplexities of metaphysical inquiry might be brought into contact with the problem of the criterion. Let us recall, first, the dialectical setting of that problem. In its original Pyrrhonian formulation, the problem of the criterion emerges in the context of a dispute over the truth of some statement or other. The skeptic's contention is that such disputes cannot be rationally settled. Suppose that one of the disputants holds that  $p$ , while the other party holds that  $\neg p$ . The skeptic argues that for anyone to rationally assert some claim, say,  $p$ , they must account for the truth of  $p$  and the falsity of  $\neg p$ . This, the skeptic contends, requires a criterion of truth. For, if no such criterion is provided,  $p$  is no more than bare assertion, and its truth cannot be ascertained over  $\neg p$ . Once a criterion is provided, and is claimed true,<sup>96</sup> the skeptic will challenge the supplying party to provide some argument or proof for their criterion. We can anticipate the next step. For, as soon as proof of the criterion is provided, and the proof is considered true, the skeptic will only accept such a proof as true once a criterion of *its* truth is provided. If a criterion is not provided, the skeptic will reject the proof. On the other hand, if a criterion is provided, then the criterion is either the same criterion, or different. If it is the same, then it is used to validate the very proof by which it was justified. If the criterion is different, and held to be true, then the process

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<sup>96</sup> See fn79, p. 176.

of justification must start over. And so, the skeptic concludes, proofs and criteria alike are caught in a viciously circular, or unendingly regressive, process of reasoning. Since the dispute is incapable of settlement, the Pyrrhonist concludes that, if we do not wish to jettison our rationality, the only reasonable option is suspension of judgement: the epistemic state of withholding our assent from  $p$  and from  $\neg p$ .

We can immediately recognize several relevant similarities between the scenario at issue in the Pyrrhonian problem of the criterion, and Kant's account of the troubles of metaphysics. First, both cases are framed dialectically, as disputes over the truth of opposing claims: 'one metaphysics has always contradicted the other, either in regard to the assertions themselves or their proofs' (PFM:271). Second, Kant describes the relationship between dogmatic metaphysics, skeptical attack, dogmatic regrouping, and metaphysical rebirth as cyclical. In other words, there is an initial conflict which the skeptic exposes in order to topple the dogmatists' conviction in their metaphysical claims. Yet, because the metaphysical impulse is natural, this will not stop the dogmatist from attempting to rebuild and provide a new foundation for their metaphysics. Hence, the sequence repeats. Kant sometimes explicitly decries the circularity of (here, transcendent) metaphysical investigation, for instance when lamenting that, seemingly, it 'perpetually turns round on the same spot without coming a step further' (PFM:256).

As I will argue in the following, the cyclical progression of (transcendent) metaphysics mirrors the circularity between proof and criterion that characterizes the problem of the criterion. Additionally, and this may be the most notable point of convergence between that problem and Kant's description of the crisis of metaphysics, the dialectical setting employed by both scenarios is a situation of equipollence, of "equal weight on both sides" of the relevant dispute. For Kant, the conflict at play in the antinomies cannot be settled, because either

alternative is apparently justified: the crisis of dogmatic metaphysics is ultimately a crisis of reason.

The above would certainly not suffice to connect Kant's account of the crisis of metaphysics to the problem of the criterion, were it not for the fact that Kant himself suggests such a connection. In a letter to Bernouilli, dated November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1781, the year of the *Critique's* first publication, where Kant recounts the original impulse behind the work, he states that already in 1765 he had come to the realization that

this putative science [metaphysics] lacked a *touchstone with which to distinguish truth from deception*, since different but equally persuasive metaphysical propositions lead inescapably to contradictory conclusions, with the result that one proposition inevitably casts doubt on the other. (AA 10:277; transl. Kant 1967:97; emphasis added)

Kant's reference here is obviously to the problems discussed in the Antinomy, identified here as the seed of what was to become the *Critique*. However, it is Kant's diagnosis of these problems which holds our attention: the predicament of metaphysics is attributed to the lack of a criterion, 'a touchstone with which to distinguish truth from deception'. Claims to a similar effect can be found on the first pages of the *Critique*. As Kant understands it in the A-Preface, the failure of dogmatism, and the reason it is unfit for metaphysics, stems from the fact that 'the principles on which it is proceeding, since they surpass the bounds of all experience, no longer recognize the touchstone of experience' (Aviii). It is important to understand in this regard that Kant is not only suggesting in such passages that a criterion *could* settle the dispute between equipollent metaphysical propositions. Instead, such a criterion is *necessary* if metaphysical statements are to have any validity at all. And so, it seems that, for Kant, the possibility of metaphysics hinges on the possibility of a criterion, not of truth *simpliciter*, but

one to distinguish truth from falsity *in the realm of metaphysical cognition*. To lay the ground for metaphysics, therefore, is to supply such a criterion.

This is indeed how Kant sometimes describes his critical project. As he states in the Introduction, his transcendental critique 'does not aim at the amplification of the cognitions themselves, but only at their correction, and is *to supply the touchstone of the worth or worthlessness of all cognitions a priori*' (A12/B26; emphasis added). While the skeptic might wish to persuade us to abandon all metaphysical inquiry and stick instead to the empirical, Kant's solution to the problem of grounding metaphysical cognition will involve, as is well known, a reversal in the method of proof in relation to experience. Kant's demonstration of the validity of (some) synthetic *a priori* principles will proceed 'not directly from concepts', in the manner of dogmatism, but 'only indirectly through the relation of these concepts to ... possible experience' (A737/B765). As already mentioned, this is a task which Kant will tackle in the so-called "constructive" division of the Transcendental Logic, namely the Transcendental Analytic.

In the next section, I want to give more content to the claim that the cyclical progression of metaphysical theories mirrors the circularity between proof and criterion at issue in the problem of the criterion. For, if the problem that the *Critique* addresses does not exhibit the requisite circularity, the *Critique* should not be read as engaging with *the problem of the criterion*, Kant's statements notwithstanding. I want to approach this question by considering Kant's reading of Hume. I want to take a moment here to briefly note that Kant's relation to Hume's views, chiefly because of Kant's autobiographical "confession" in the *Prolegomena* (PFM:260), is one of the oldest and most controversial questions in Kant scholarship. There continues to be widespread disagreement, not only regarding what exactly in Hume's writings interrupted Kant's "dogmatic slumber", or whether Kant understood the arguments as Hume had intended them, but even whether Kant's statement should be taken seriously as a piece of

autobiography. Some scholars have even gone so far as to suggest that Hume had no discernible influence on Kant's transition to the critical period (see Anderson 2020:1-42, for an overview of the main strands of the debate on this issue). For these reasons, I should make it quite clear that my purpose is not to ascertain the fidelity of Kant's interpretation of Hume, nor the influence that the latter may have had on the *Critique*. I aim, instead, merely to arrive at an understanding of how Kant himself viewed the position that he claims awoke him from his slumber, and to lay out some of the coordinates of that view, especially in relation to dogmatism. Focusing primarily on the *Prolegomena*, I argue that Kant took Hume's arguments against the existence of causal powers in objects to be pertinent to the critique of the dogmatic method of metaphysical proof. More importantly, however, I argue that the Kantian reading of Humean arguments as arguments against metaphysical dogmatism presents striking similarities to the Pyrrhonian formulation of the problem of the criterion. Finally, I want to make plausible the claim that the problem of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, insofar as that problem is, in turn, 'the elaboration of the Humean problem in its greatest possible amplification' (PFM:261), is identical to a problem of the criterion for metaphysical cognition.

#### 6.4.1. Hume against the dogmatist

I showed above that Kant conceives of dogmatism as a method of metaphysical proof that operates either “from concepts”, or simply assumes metaphysical principles on some other basis. As Kant characterizes it in the B-Preface, in a way that immediately connects it to his own critical project, dogmatism is

the presumption of getting on solely with pure cognition from (philosophical) concepts according to principles, which reason has been using for a long time without first inquiring in what way and by

what right it has obtained them. Dogmatism is therefore the dogmatic procedure of pure reason, without an antecedent critique of its own capacity. (Bxxxv)

I showed that, for Kant, such a manner of proceeding has a natural appeal, insofar as the principles in question have been found successful in their application to experience. Newtonian physics is perhaps the most obvious example of such an application. Kant is, of course, a known admirer of Newtonian physics. Thus, the fault he finds with the dogmatist is not, say, their endorsement of Newton, but the fact that the dogmatist places a 'blind trust' (AA 9:83-4) in the principles in question on account of their 'constant confirmation in application to experience' (AA 8:226-7; transl. Gava 2023a). Because such principles seemingly do not require additional proof, the dogmatist lays them down as a foundation and infers other principles from them (see AA 29:772).<sup>97</sup> This characterization immediately makes plain the shortcoming of this method for establishing metaphysical claims, namely its vulnerability to Humean attack. Let us now consider this attack in more detail.

As mentioned, Kant sees the dogmatist who posits a metaphysical principle, say the principle of causality, to be implicitly arguing that such a principle does not require proof because it is validated by its successful application to experience. Obviously, it is not this application which makes the principle true. Instead, the dogmatist posits it as an *a priori* truth of reason, and so contends that reason has 'generated this concept in her womb' (PFM:257). Against this view, the skeptic, personified here by Hume, questions our entitlement for relying on such principles. What was at issue for Hume, at least at Kant understands matter, was not 'whether the concept of cause is right, useful, and, with respect to all cognition of nature,

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<sup>97</sup> See Walschots (2023) for discussion of Wolff's philosophical method in connection to Kant's conception of dogmatism.

indispensable, for this Hume had never put in doubt' (PFM:258; see Hume 1745:21-22; EHU:8:25 / SBN:95).<sup>98</sup> Instead, Kant takes Hume to have issued a challenge to reason, namely

to give him an account of by what right she thinks that something could be so constituted that, if it is posited, something else must necessarily also be posited thereby; for this is what the concept of cause says. (PFM:257)

The Humean question, in other words, is whether we are *right* to rely on such principles, and whether successful application to experience is sufficient to determine that we are.

I want briefly to call attention to an exegetical difficulty regarding the principle Kant takes Hume to have challenged. The standard reading of Kant's confession has it that it was Hume's doubts about the principle that every event has some cause which woke Kant from his slumber, a principle which the Second Analogy, the *locus classicus* of Kant's reply to Hume in the *Critique*, is concerned to defend (see Guyer 2008 for an instance of this reading). However, regardless of the fact that the A and B versions of the *Critique* present two different formulations of the principle at issue,<sup>99</sup> only the latter explicitly mentioning a causal relation, Kant also seems to associate it to a different metaphysical principle. In his summary of the Second Analogy, Kant claims to have proved that 'the principle of the causal relation in the sequence of appearances is valid for all objects of experience (under the conditions of succession), since it is itself the ground of the possibility of such an experience'

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<sup>98</sup> Citation from Hume's works follows the standard practice of giving the part and paragraph numbers of Hume's original text and the page number of the standard edition (see Bibliography). Here, I'm referring the reader to a passage from the *Enquiry*, part 8, §25, page 95 of the standard edition.

<sup>99</sup> In the A-edition, the 'Second Analogy' is concerned to prove the *principle of generation*, namely that 'Everything that happens (begins to be) presupposes something which it follows in accordance with a rule' (A189). In the B-edition, the 'Second Analogy' concerns the *principle of temporal sequence according to the law of causality*, namely that 'All alterations occur in accordance with the law of the connection of cause and effect' (B232).

(A202/B247).<sup>100</sup> Just on the previous page, however, Kant had argued that 'the ground of possible experience' is, not the causal principle, but 'the principle of sufficient reason' (A201/B246). The same confusion between the causal principle and the principle of sufficient reason resurfaces later, in *The Transcendental Doctrine of Method*. There, while discussing the structure of transcendental proofs, Kant maintains that what is unique about such a proof is that it

does not show ... that the given concept (e.g., of that which happens) leads directly to another concept (that of a cause), for such a transition would be a leap for which nothing could be held responsible; rather it shows that experience itself, hence the object of experience, would be impossible without such a connection. (A783/B811)

According to Kant, the unaccountability of such a leap via direct, conceptual connection, explains why 'all attempts to prove the principle of sufficient reason have also, according to the general consensus of experts, been in vain' (A783/B811).

The distinction between the causal principle and the principle of sufficient reason (PSR) has been a matter of dispute in the literature. Guyer, for instance, argues that Kant read Hume as expressing skeptical doubts about the general principle that 'every event has some cause' and that it is this very principle which Kant defends as the PSR (Guyer 2008:93-4). More recently, however, Anderson has argued that what is at issue in Kant's discussion of Hume is not the causal principle governing experience – which Anderson parses as the principle that 'every event has some cause' – but is the extension of that principle *beyond* experience – this is something that Anderson associates with what the pre-critical Kant, following Leibniz and Wolff, called the 'principle of sufficient reason' (Anderson 2020). Longuenesse, on the other hand, argues that it would be a mistake to understand Kant's allusions to the PSR in the *Critique*

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<sup>100</sup> See (A767/B795), where Kant associates Hume with a critique of the causal principle.

in terms of his pre-critical writings because Kant's mature defense of that principle involves a reversal in the method of proof, and 'the discovery of a completely new reason or ground' (Longuenesse 2005:119). I do not wish to settle this question, and doing so is immaterial to my purposes here. Instead, I aim to exploit the connection Kant establishes between the causal principle and (some version of) the PSR, which allows me to draw on a wider set of passages from the *Critique* and the *Prolegomena*, to construct a more detailed picture of Kant's reading of Hume's position as pertinent to a critique of dogmatic metaphysics. For, regardless of whether the principles at issue are different, they are both metaphysical principles and their validity is put in question by the skeptic.

Let us therefore take up the question of validity and investigate our entitlement for relying on the metaphysical principles that are at issue for Kant, Hume, and the dogmatist alike. First, consider a dogmatic proof. One option available to the dogmatist for grounding the causal principle, for instance, is to argue that it is simply analytically true and can therefore be demonstrated "from concepts" (this, in the terminology above, corresponds to "dogmatism(1)"). Such an attempt will not be successful against someone like Hume – at least as Kant understands him – because Hume thinks the relationship between cause and effect is not one of containment. As he puts it in the *Enquiry*:

The mind can never possibly find the effect in the supposed cause, by the most accurate scrutiny and examination. For the effect is totally different from the cause, and consequently can never be discovered in it. (EHU:4:9 / SBN:29)

As is well known, Kant read Hume to be arguing that the idea of the effect is not contained in the idea of the cause. Kant fully accepts this argument, which for him

proved indisputably that it is completely impossible for reason to think such a connection *a priori* and from concepts. (PFM:257; see 310)

Earlier, in the first edition of the *Critique*, Kant had reiterated the Humean critique, associating it explicitly with dogmatic attempts at demonstration. There, he argues that

[i]f we had wanted to prove ... dogmatically, i.e., from concepts – ... that every occurrence presupposes something in the previous state, which it follows in accordance with a rule<sup>101</sup> ... – then all effort would have been entirely in vain. For one cannot get from one object and its existence to the existence of another on its way of existing through mere concepts of these things, no matter how much one analyses them. (A216-7/B263-4)<sup>102</sup>

The dogmatic attempt to ground our employment of the causal principle is therefore completely idle, since it endeavors to prove a synthetic principle analytically, “from concepts”.

As Kant presents matters in the *Prolegomena*, part of what interrupted his slumber and made him abandon dogmatic metaphysics was Hume's critique of the idea that the effect was contained in the cause, which Kant understood as an attack on the analyticity of the causal principle. And in the first edition of the *Critique*, Kant had applied this Humean critique to proofs of the causal principle which proceed dogmatically, from concepts. In the *Prolegomena*, however, Kant extends Hume's alleged critique of the analyticity of this principle to pertain to a conception of analyticity which Hume could not have been taken to attack. In addition to proofs appealing to the containment definition of analyticity, proofs which Kant takes Hume to refute, Kant also rejects dogmatic proofs that appeal to a definition of analyticity via the principles of identity and contradiction. Defined in this way, a statement is analytic only if it

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<sup>101</sup> This is Kant's formulation in the A-edition of the principle defended in the Second Analogy. See fn99, p. 223.

<sup>102</sup> See AA 5:50-1.

follows from the principles of identity and non-contradiction (for more on this topic, see Anderson 2015:12-13). This leaves it open for the dogmatist, if he accepts the Humean critique regarding the containment of the idea of the effect in that of the cause, to defend the analyticity of the causal principle by deriving it from the principles of identity and contradiction.

This, indeed, is one of Wolff's most distinctive metaphysical theses, the idea that the PSR can be straightforwardly derived from the principle of non-contradiction. This is a view that caused significant debate among Wolff's contemporaries (the young Kant included – see Perin 2015), and one that Kant attacks also in the *Prolegomena*. There, having presented his views as inheriting and furthering Hume's, Kant argues that it is due to a neglect for the analytic / synthetic distinction that dogmatic philosophers 'like the famous Wolff, or the acute Baumgarten following in his footsteps, could try to find the proof of the principle of sufficient reason, which obviously is synthetic, in the principle of contradiction' (PFM:270). What is implicit here, indeed in the *Prolegomena* as a whole, is that Kant takes the insight into the synthetic *a priori* status of the causal principle or the PSR – an insight he credits Hume with awakening in him – to be relevant to the critique of the dogmatists' method of metaphysical proof.

What is even more important, however, is that, in the *Prolegomena*, Kant not only extends the Humean insight into the synthetic *a priori* status of the causal principle to attack arguments which presuppose a different notion of analyticity, but he generalizes this insight to all metaphysical principles. As he writes:

So I tried first whether Hume's objection might not be presented in a general manner, and I soon found that the concept of the connection of cause and effect is far from being the only concept through which the understanding thinks connections of things *a priori*; rather, metaphysics consists wholly of such concepts. (PFM:260)

And so, Kant presents the project pursued in the *Critique* itself as an 'elaboration of the Humean problem in its greatest possible amplification' (PFM:261), understood now as concerning not just the validity of the causal principle, but the very possibility of metaphysical inquiry itself, insofar as it 'consists wholly of such concepts' (PFM:260). I showed above that Kant presents his critical project as a search for a criterion, and so connects the possibility of metaphysics with the possibility of the relevant criterion. We have just seen that the problem which the *Critique* aims to solve is a generalization of a problem Kant finds in Hume. I now want to show that 'the Humean problem' is a version of the problem of the criterion, which Kant poses with respect to metaphysical cognition.

Hume's problem, of course, is what came to be known as 'the problem of induction', which Hume poses in the context of his analysis of causality. For Hume, as is well known, the relation of cause and effect is the foundation of all our reasoning concerning matters of fact. What, however, is the basis of our reasoning and conclusions about *this* relation? When asked in Kantian fashion, this question concerns the possibility 'that when I am given one concept I can go beyond it and connect another one to it that is not contained in it, and can indeed do so, as though the latter *necessarily* belonged to the former' (PFM:277). As shown above, Kant is interested in the validity of the causal principle as a synthetic *a priori* principle. For Hume, the only basis for such a connection is experience, in particular the observation of constant conjunction between objects. He writes:

*I have found that such an object has always been attended with such an effect, and I foresee, that other objects, which are, in appearance, similar, will be attended with similar effects. (EHU:4:16 / SBN:34)*

Hume now wants to know what, if anything, can justify this type of inductive inference. Could experience be sufficient to ground the causal principle?

This is where Hume presents his problem of induction. As was already apparent in the passage just quoted, causal inferences must presuppose that the future will resemble the past, a presupposition commonly called *the principle of the uniformity of nature*. Only on the basis of such a uniformity can we infer from observed instances to unobserved ones. And so, Hume concludes, constant conjunction cannot serve as a justification of the causal principle: it begs the question of the uniformity principle. Can such a principle be proved independently? First, Hume considers whether the uniformity principle can be proved deductively, by what he calls reasoning 'concerning relations of ideas'. This attempt fails, since

it implies no contradiction, that the course of nature may change, and that an object, seemingly like those we have experience, may be attended with different or contrary effects. (EHU:4:18 / SBN:35)

Expressed in Kantian vocabulary, the uniformity principle, like the causal principle, is non-analytic. Can the uniformity principle be grounded differently? Can it be justified from experience? Hume again thinks this is not possible, since

[a]ll our experimental conclusions proceed upon the supposition that the future will be conformable to the past. To endeavour, therefore, the proof of [the uniformity principle] by ... arguments regarding existence, must be evidently going in a circle, and taking that for granted, which is the very point in question. (EHU:4:19 / SBN:35-6)

Proof of the uniformity principle by appeal to experience must be circular because, as we saw, 'all arguments concerning existence are founded on the relation of cause and effect' and 'our knowledge of that relation is derived entirely from experience' (EHU:4:19 / SBN:35). In other words, the uniformity principle cannot be justified inductively because induction presupposes it.

What I want to retain from Hume's argument is that, for him, understanding seems to be caught in a very similar loop of circular reasoning regarding the justification of causal inferences as that which characterizes the problem of the criterion. Indeed, some scholars have argued that Hume's argument about induction was not original, but was instead 'nothing other than a special case of the ancient problem of the criterion' (Weintraub 1995:462; see also Wieland 2011). I do not wish to defend that claim. Instead, I will restrict myself to considering Kant's own reading of Hume and the extension of 'the Humean problem' to metaphysical cognition.

Recall, first, the problem of the criterion. What was at issue there was the idea that proof of a claim must be accompanied by a criterion of truth. For, if it is not, the proof will be discredited. But the criterion itself must be true, and so proof must be provided, in turn, for *it*. Thus, the skeptic concludes, proofs and criteria alike are caught in a viciously circular, or unendingly regressive, process of reasoning. Hume argues that attempts to prove the causal principle will necessarily be caught in a *vicious* circle. This is because the proof of the causal principle can only succeed by presupposing the truth of the uniformity principle. And, since the latter acts here as a criterion of truth, it requires proof itself. However, proof of the uniformity principle can only succeed by presupposing the truth of the causal principle, which therefore acts here as *its* criterion of truth. The circularity involved here is vicious because proof of the truth of either principle presupposes the truth of the other. Consequently, as Kant reads it, the Humean problem threatens the possibility of metaphysics because it argues that metaphysical principles – like the causal principle – cannot be justified by *a priori* reasoning concerning relations of ideas because it is synthetic, yet cannot be justified by *a posteriori* inductive reasoning either, because that reasoning is viciously circular. Thus, there can be no criterion to testify to the legitimacy of our employment of metaphysical principles.

Kant, as is well known, was dissatisfied with the Humean conclusion that the concept of cause, as he memorably put it, 'is really nothing but a bastard of the imagination ... impregnated by experience' (PFM:258). Nevertheless, he remained indebted to Hume's discussion of the difficulties involved in finding the source of such a connection. Instead of concluding from the alleged subjective origin of the concept of a cause that metaphysics was impossible, Kant aimed to defend the claims of reason against skepticism without falling back into dogmatism, thus reforming the discipline of metaphysics itself.

## 6.5. Conclusion

I have been arguing that Kant's description of metaphysics as an opposition between dogmatists and skeptics, and his employment of Humean arguments against the dogmatic method of metaphysical proof, presents striking similarities to the Pyrrhonian formulation of the problem of the criterion. I have shown that Kant describes the task of his own critical philosophy as that of finding a *via media* between the treacherous and deadly alternatives of dogmatism and skepticism and associates this task with the search for a criterion. We are now in a better position to specify the role that such a criterion must fulfil in grounding the fundamental principles of metaphysics. As shown above, such principles cannot be established by conceptual analysis or by derivation from supposedly foundational and self-evident principles such as the principles of identity or contradiction, since they are synthetic *a priori*. Additionally, as Hume powerfully argued in connection to the causal principle, such principles cannot be derived from experience because arguments from experience must presuppose them.

Instead, as I will show, Kant's justification of our employment of such principles will not involve any kind of derivation at all, and will not appeal to any external ground or principle, but to 'a unity that subsists on its own, which is sufficient by itself, and which is not to be

supplemented by any external additions', namely the unity of pure understanding (A65/B89-90). Thus, Kant argues that 'the sum total of its cognition [i.e., the pure understanding] will constitute a system that is to be grasped and determined under one idea, the completeness and articulation of which system can at the same time yield *a touchstone of the correctness and genuineness of all the pieces of cognition fitting into it* (A65/B89-90; emphasis added). This is a task accomplished by the Transcendental Analytic, and especially the Transcendental Deduction, which, in providing the requisite criterion, will 'settle the possibility of a metaphysics' (PFM:261). What we find in this programmatic statement is the quintessentially Kantian idea of the justification-conferring formal unity of experience. This is a unity, described here as a system, which will be found to underlie all our empirical cognition, and so to be presupposed by it, a unity which nevertheless grounds that very cognition. We find here the idea of a justification or grounding strategy which proceeds not by derivation from some external source, but by appeal to the necessary unity of what is to be grounded. This strategy is none other than what I have been calling "transcendental grounding".

In the next chapter I want to relate more closely the strategy pursued by Kant in the Transcendental Deduction to the transcendental grounding strategy I have argued is at play in Crusius' and Gadamer's hermeneutics.

## Chapter 7

# The Transcendental Deduction and the Structure of Transcendental Grounding

### 7.1. Introduction

In chapters 3, 4, and 5, I have been reconstructing a transcendental line of argument concerning the ground of understanding and I have exhibited its usefulness as a reply to the hermeneutical problem of the criterion. I have characterized this line of argument as a “transcendental grounding”, distinguished by the fact that it proceeds by making explicit the structure of the domain in question – understanding or interpretation – as a condition of its possibility.

In this chapter, I want to compare the transcendental grounding I argued to be implicit in Crusius' and Gadamer's hermeneutics with Kant's methodology of transcendental proof, specifically the methodology at play in the Transcendental Deduction. My aim is to arrive at a characterization of the transcendental grounding strategy in relation to understanding as a distinct form of argument that is sufficiently Kantian for the “transcendental” label to be meaningful, yet open-ended enough for it to tolerate the broader use I have been putting it to in this dissertation. I begin (section 7.2) by motivating my departure from the more conventional notion of “transcendental argument” in favour of “transcendental grounding”. My goal here is to illuminate a form of circularity central to transcendental inquiry that the focus on *arguments* tends to obscure. Then (section 7.3), I examine the methodology of the Transcendental Deduction to better define the circularity, or self-referentiality, that

characterizes that argument and that also implicitly underlies Kant's search for a criterion in the *Critique*. Finally (section 7.4), I draw Kant's own approach closer to the Crusian and Gadamerian lines of response to the hermeneutical problem of the criterion considered previously.

## 7.2. Transcendental arguments and transcendental grounding

Kant's transcendental methodology has been the subject of philosophical debate since its introduction. In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, renewed attention was cast in its direction – chiefly, but not exclusively, in the Anglophone world – in the wake of Strawson's influential book, *The Bounds of Sense* (1966). The ensuing debate centered especially on the notion of *transcendental argument*, with many philosophers working to define the logical structure, aims, weaknesses, and specific contributions such arguments might have over other types of argument. Here, I want to move away from the notion of transcendental *argument* and instead develop in more detail – now by appealing to Kant – the idea of transcendental *grounding* that I argued is implicit in the Crusian and Gadamerian philosophies of interpretation. The debate over transcendental arguments is of course extensive and deserves more comprehensive discussion than I can offer here. Let me, however, give some indications to motivate my shift in focus.

For reasons not always explicitly stated, but likely due to its relative clarity and brevity, the notion of “transcendental argument” has been modelled on the Kant's Refutation of Idealism (see Stern & Cheng 2023). There, Kant is concerned to reject what he calls “problematic idealism”, or what is now called “external-world skepticism”, or simply “Cartesian skepticism”. Fixing the Refutation as the paradigm “transcendental argument” has led to a misleading identification of what is distinctive of such arguments with their anti-

skeptical aims, and hence to a conflation of their logical structure and their conclusions. Additionally, it has set the stage for a wide-ranging disillusionment with the transcendental strategy in general, due to an important and highly influential objection made by Stroud.

In his “Transcendental Arguments” (1968), Stroud argues that, if such arguments involve reasoning from some feature of human thought or experience to the conclusion that some aspect of the external world exists, then the *existence* of that aspect of the external world can never be proven, because mere *belief* in its existence will always suffice to establish the anti-skeptical conclusion: ‘the skeptic can always very plausibly insist that it is enough ... if we *believe* that *S* is true [where *S* is a description of some aspect of the external world, the truth of which is a necessary condition for thought or experience], or that it looks for all the world as if it is, but that *S* needn’t actually be true’ (Stroud 1968:255). Much of the literature on transcendental arguments that developed in the wake of Stroud's critique reflects a struggle to respond to it, thus bearing the stamp of its author's presupposition that transcendental arguments should ‘give a complete answer to the skeptic about the existence of things outside us’ (242).

Several attempts have been made in the literature to modify and classify transcendental arguments into those that succumb to the objection, and those that survive it. This opposition takes several forms. In the succumbing camp, there are *truth-directed* (Peacocke 1989; Stern 2000), *world-directed* (Cassam 1999), and *third-personal* (Walker 1999) transcendental arguments. To these are opposed the *self-directed* (Cassam 1999; see Golob 2013; Giladi 2016), *second-personal* (Walker 1999), and a variety of *belief-directed*, *experience-directed*, or *concept-directed* ones (Stern 2000). Thus, in response to what has been recognized as the immoderate ambition of Refutation-type transcendental arguments, the trend has been to cast transcendental arguments in such more “modest” roles (see Stern 2007). Yet these construals

still conflate what is distinctive of transcendental arguments, with their “direction”, or their aim.

One reason to relinquish the confines of the debate over “transcendental arguments” is that there are many more arguments worthy of that designation in Kant's 900-odd page *Critique* that deserve at least comparable consideration to that 5-page appendix to the B-edition that is the Refutation. The primary reason to do so, however, is because the characterization of such arguments in terms of their aims obscures an essential feature of Kant's transcendental method of proof. This feature is one that also belongs integrally to the idea of transcendental grounding as I have been developing it, namely its apparent circularity, or self-referentiality.

This, of course, is something Kant recognized clearly. Recall Kant's proof of the causal principle surveyed in the previous chapter, which established this principle as a necessary condition for the possibility of experience. For Kant, the principles of the understanding, the causal principle being one, 'anticipate experience' (A762/B790; see A767/B795; A786/B814). And yet, they can do so only if the possibility of experience itself is presupposed. For, if transcendental proofs deliver a justification of synthetic *a priori* principles by showing that the possibility of experience necessitates their implicit operation within experience itself, then such proofs must presuppose the possibility of experience. For this reason, Kant claims of the causal principle that it 'has the special property that it first makes possible its ground of proof, namely experience, and must always be presupposed in this' (A737/B765). This statement announces a form of circularity at the very heart of the transcendental enterprise, which will constitute my focal point in the following.

Let us begin by considering the argument of the 'Transcendental Deduction', where, as I argued in the previous chapter, Kant is concerned to answer the problem of the criterion for metaphysical cognition.

### 7.3. “On the Deduction of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding”

The Transcendental Deduction occupies Kant in book one, chapter two of the *Transcendental Analytic*. As Kant explains, the *Transcendental Analytic* is concerned with the 'analysis of the entirety of our *a priori* cognition into the elements of the pure cognition of the understanding' (A64/B89). These elements are the concepts and the principles of pure understanding, which, respectively, form the focus of books 1, and 2, of the *Analytic*. This *analysis* of the faculty of our understanding, however, is simultaneously its grounding, or *deduction*, which is what Kant is ultimately after. As I showed previously (see 6.5), Kant's grounding of the concepts and principles of pure understanding will appeal to the unity of the very item that is in question: the pure understanding. The purpose of this section is to clarify this idea.

As is well known, Kant's *Transcendental Deduction* is the most important and most influential chapter of the first *Critique*. Kant himself thought it his greatest achievement in theoretical philosophy, writing in the A-Preface that he was 'acquainted with no other investigations more important for getting to the bottom of that faculty we call the understanding' (Axvi) than the *Deduction*. At the same time, it is also the most difficult and puzzling part of the *Critique*. Commentators often lament its impenetrability, and Kant himself tried to attenuate its obscurity for the B-edition by rewriting it entirely. I do not intend here to take on the task of interpreting the several, published or manuscript, versions of this piece. Instead, I wish only to discuss its characteristic structure.

Kant famously begins the *Deduction* by marking the distinctiveness and novelty of its approach. To this end, he draws on a distinction borrowed from jurisprudence:

Jurists, when they speak of entitlements and claims, distinguish in a legal matter between the questions about what is lawful (*quid juris*) and that which concerns the fact (*quid facti*), and since they demand

proof of both, they call the first, that which is to establish the entitlement or the legal claim, the *deduction*. (A84/B116)

This distinction serves to set out the aim of the Deduction in the following way. Kant wants to separate his transcendental deduction of the pure concepts of the understanding from a so-called “empirical deduction”, which answers the *questio facti* and 'shows how a concept is acquired through experience and reflection on it, and therefore concerns not the lawfulness but the fact from which the possession has arisen' (A85/B117). To attempt such a derivation of the categories from experience is 'futile work', according to Kant, because it cannot answer the fundamental question of how the categories relate to their objects (see A85/B118). Since the categories are 'related to their objects without having borrowed anything from experience for their representation' (A86/B118), locating their source in experience cannot account for the *legitimacy* of our employment of the categories in experiencing and thinking about objects.

Instead, Kant aims to offer a different sort of justification, and show that

the objective validity of the categories, as *a priori* concepts, rests on the fact that through them alone is experience possible (as far as the form of thinking is concerned). For they then are related necessarily and *a priori* to objects of experience, since only by means of them can any object of experience be thought at all. (A93/B126)

The aim of the Deduction, therefore, is not to locate the source of *a priori* concepts in experience by identifying some original impressions from which they might derive, as Hume did,<sup>103</sup> but to prove that the categories hold of *all* our conscious experience as conditions of its possibility. While the possibility of the categories themselves is still 'founded in the relation of

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<sup>103</sup> While Kant only mentions Hume here in the B-edition (B127-129), it is clear that Hume's account of causality – an “empirical deduction” – is among Kant's targets here.

the understanding to experience', that is no longer understood 'in such a way that they are derived from experience, but that experience is derived from them, a completely reversed type of connection that never occurred to Hume' (PFM:313).

This summary characterization of the Transcendental Deduction already helps to indicate an essential feature of the transcendental strategy pursued there, and in the *Critique* generally: its self-referentiality. I want to begin by drawing on Bubner's understanding of this relation. In his “Kant, Transcendental Arguments and the Problem of Deduction” (1975), Bubner defines self-referentiality as a relation between what a transcendental argument is concerned to establish and the possibility of transcendental argumentation itself. Drawing on Kant's understanding of transcendental cognition as a form of cognition 'in which knowledge<sup>104</sup> is thematized concerning its specific possibilities', Bubner argues that

that knowledge which is called transcendental takes as its object, together with the general conditions of knowledge, the conditions of its own genesis and functioning. *Self-referentiality characterizes the transcendental argument.* (Bubner 1975:462)

This self-referential structure, *conditio sine qua non* of transcendental proofs, according to Bubner (1982:310), is a consequence of what such arguments aim to establish. Since their

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<sup>104</sup> This is an issue of some contention in recent literature, namely whether “cognition” [*Erkenntnis*] and “knowledge” [*Wissen*] are distinct or whether they coincide for Kant. While some argue in favor of the identification of cognition and knowledge, others claim that, in some cases, it can be 'a serious mistake that can prevent one from understanding some of Kant's most important claims and arguments' (Willaschek & Watkins 2020:3196). In my own discussion of Kant's views – in the present and the previous chapters –, I have been mindful of this distinction. In Bubner's defense, I want to note that in the German, mostly identical, version of the article I'm quoting here (Bubner 1974), he frames his argument correctly, in terms of *Erkenntnis* and its cognates. I have chosen to quote Bubner (1975) both because he appears to be its translator and because it is this paper which has been most influential in the literature. Additionally, below, I will draw significantly on Dieter Henrich, who – in English as well as German papers – uses “cognition” and “knowledge” indistinctly (see Henrich 1973; 1989; Henrich et al. 1984). Since what I'm after is a meta-level explication of the argumentative structure of the Deduction, this terminological difference should not engender complications.

target is the conditions for the possibility of knowledge (whether empirical or metaphysical), transcendental proofs must be able to explain their own claim to knowledge. In other words, their account of the conditions supporting empirical and metaphysical inquiry can only be valid if such arguments can answer for their own ability to supply such an account. For, as Bubner writes, the conditions into which transcendental arguments inquire also make possible, among other things, these arguments themselves: '[I]n talking about the condition for the possibility of meaningful talk about the world we always explicitly also talk about the conditions for the possibility of such talking. Transcendental argumentation is ... the transcendental-philosophical [*transzendentalphilosophische*] clarification of transcendental-philosophical practice' (Bubner 1982:321). In this sense, Bubner's conception of self-referentiality serves to highlight that what is at issue in the *Critique* is precisely the possibility of a critique of pure reason.

While Bubner, throughout his development of this conception, always draws on the Deduction to capture what is essential to the self-referential structure of transcendental argumentation, later he explicitly restricts his account to the Deduction, as the 'real core of transcendental philosophy, without which all other transcendental labels are but eponyms [*Nachbenennungen*]' (Bubner 1982:310). As Bubner describes it, what characterizes the setting of the Deduction is that it 'finds itself in a situation in which no other knowledge is available, while the knowledge given seems insufficient and needs legitimation' (Bubner 1975:463). As shown above, legitimation cannot start from supposedly self-evident concepts or principles, at least not if it wants to avoid dogmatism. Instead, '[t]he knowledge we in fact have can be legitimated at no other level than that of the facticity of knowledge', and that, in turn, 'is only possible as a demonstration of the *lack of alternatives* to that knowledge' (*ibid*). Thus, transcendental argumentation makes a decisive advance beyond the level of facticity, beyond the *quid facti* of the Humean empirical deduction. And the advance of the transcendental

deduction over the empirical depends on the structure of *self-referentiality*. To quote Bubner in full:

[i]f it becomes apparent that even reasoning about factual forms of knowledge and the clarification of their preconditions is not possible without making use of certain elements of that form, then it is not a merely factual state of affairs which is demonstrated. Rather, it is a logical structure that shows the validity of the form of knowledge in question. Not only does it so happen that there are no alternatives, one cannot in principle conceive of such a thing as an alternative. Our way of thinking about it on a metalevel confirms the general structure of knowledge since it cannot help applying the same structure. (Bubner 1975:464/5)

Before attempting to get a clearer sense of self-referentiality as it might be at play in the Deduction, I want to call attention to an equivocation in Bubner's account. Recall Bubner's characterization of the self-referentiality of transcendental argumentation as a relation between the aim of such argumentation and the conditions of its own possibility. Transcendental arguments are self-referential in this sense because they must also account for the legitimacy of transcendental discourse in general. Call this “self-referentiality(1)”. On the other hand, when discussing the Deduction specifically, Bubner takes self-referentiality to involve a different relation, between what the argument seeks to legitimate and – not the argument itself – but its 'starting point' (Bubner 1982:315-6). Call this “self-referentiality(2)”, exemplified by the Deduction because, there, 'the attempt at legitimation starts with that which is to be legitimated' (Bubner 1975:463). Self-referentiality(2) does not only surface in Bubner's discussion of the Deduction. He writes, for instance:

The self-referentiality of transcendental arguments consists in the fact that their talk about a lack of alternatives takes place inside the same meaningful discourse with which we also communicate to one another about the world. Whoever argues transcendently always includes himself and his

activity in his argument. He does not argue simply for or against something from some external standpoint. In discussing possible alternatives to the existing form of linguistic communication about the world, he argues while simultaneously paying heed to his own arguing. (Bubner 1982:313)

Bubner is here replying to Rorty, who argues that 'all self-referential arguments are *ad hominem* arguments – arguments against a certain proposal by showing that the proposal tacitly presupposes what it purports to deny' (Rorty 1979:82). Evidently, Rorty read Bubner to be defining the structure of transcendental argumentation in terms of self-referentiality(2). Thus, in his reply, Bubner emphasizes self-referentiality(1), stressing that transcendental arguments must pay heed to their own possibility. And yet, Bubner cannot avoid placing such arguments within some pre-given meaningful discourse about the world. But any talk of a standpoint from which the argument proceeds, and so of a starting point, involves a different sense of self-referentiality, which, as Rorty rightfully points out, refers, not to the argument itself, but to what the argument presupposes.<sup>105</sup>

It may be claimed, of course, that self-referentiality(1) and self-referentiality(2) do not come apart in transcendental argumentation. And one way in which they indeed seem connected is well exemplified by the *Critique* itself, where the possibility of transcendental philosophy depends upon the success of one particular transcendental proof, the Deduction. But the two concepts ought nevertheless to be sharply distinguished, as they involve two very different relations, which in turn depend on two distinct conceptions of the “self” that self-referential arguments are supposed to refer to. In the case of arguments displaying self-referentiality(1), the relevant sense of “self” is the argument itself.<sup>106</sup> On the other hand,

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<sup>105</sup> The equivocity is reflected in the literature. While most philosophers drawing on Bubner (1975) advance a conception of self-referentiality(1) (see e.g., Genova 1981, Piché 1995, Malpas 1997, Crowell 1999 and Piché 2008), Rorty takes issue with self-referentiality(2) (see also Palmer 1985, who follows Rorty). In later works, Malpas has also been giving priority to the latter sense (see e.g., Malpas 2003; 2012).

<sup>106</sup> Consider also Hintikka (1972), a paper to which Bubner (1975) acknowledges a debt. According to Hintikka, what distinguishes transcendental arguments from others is that 'the conclusion (the possibility of

arguments characterized by self-referentiality(2), like the Transcendental Deduction, refer not to the argument itself, but to what the argument presupposes.<sup>107</sup>

As mentioned, self-referentiality(2)<sup>108</sup> is a feature of transcendental proof that Kant recognized clearly, since the conclusion of such a proof 'makes possible its ground of proof' (A737/B765). And yet it is precisely *this* sense of “self-referentiality”, rightly identified by Bubner as the hallmark of transcendental proofs, which has also been taken to constitute their characteristic weakness, since they seem to presuppose exactly what they attempt to prove. And so, it appears that any grounding by transcendental reasoning must involve a *petitio principii* and beg the very question it addresses. Körner (1967) develops an influential objection along these lines and argues that transcendental deductions are either impossible or else viciously circular. Gram (1974) similarly claims that transcendental arguments fail because they already presuppose what they purport to demonstrate. I do not intend to examine such arguments here, only their presuppositions. Staying in the context of the Transcendental Deduction, to claim that it involves a vicious circularity understood in the relevant, logical sense, between the premise and the conclusion, presupposes that the argument Kant advances in that section is a “deduction” in the straightforward, logical sense, a valid reasoning from premises to conclusion.

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certain conceptual practices) is arrived at by reasoning which itself relies on these practices. *The conclusion makes possible the very argument by means of which it is established'* (Hintikka 1972:278; emphasis added).

<sup>107</sup> One example argument in which self-referentiality(1) and self-referentiality(2) come apart is this, borrowed from Cling (2003:280):

- (p1) If sentences with the form “if *p*, then *q*” mean that *p* is sufficient for *q*, then *modus ponens* is valid.
- (p2) Sentences with the form “if *p*, then *q*” mean that *p* is sufficient for *q*.
- (C) Therefore, *modus ponens* is valid.

This argument is concerned to prove the validity of *modus ponens* but constitutes itself an instance of *modus ponens*. Such arguments, if valid, exemplify a relation of self-support (see Cling 2003). In the terms I have been examining here, such arguments are self-referential(1), but not self-referential(2), as they do not involve a circularity between what they presuppose and their conclusion.

<sup>108</sup> Henceforth simply “self-referentiality”.

In his influential “Kant's Notion of a Deduction and the Methodological Background of the First *Critique*” (1989), Dieter Henrich defends the claim that the proof structure of the Deduction is not “deductive” in the logical sense.<sup>109</sup> Instead, if we are to understand Kant's argument, Henrich maintains, we must look at the juridical setting in which it is framed.<sup>110</sup> Thus we discover that what Kant entitles a “deduction” has direct links to a legal tradition reaching back to the late 1300s and a type of publication which by the 18<sup>th</sup> century came to be known as a “*Deduktionsschrift*”. These so-called deduction writings were widespread in the period, works of varying length and subject matter, but unified in terms of their general aims. In short, the main goal of such “deductions” was the justification of legal claims in matters of controversy between various rulers within the Holy Roman Empire, meant to aid the claimant in finding support from other sovereigns, especially if military intervention loomed large. Henrich argues that Kant, in his own Deduction, was consciously adhering to the practice of *Deduktionsschriften*.

That it would be a “deduction” – in this legal sense – which would yield the requisite touchstone to settle the possibility of metaphysics (see PFM:261) should however come as no surprise. As I argued previously (6.3 and 6.4), the crisis faced by metaphysics, which arose from a conflict between dogmatism and skepticism over reason's claim to be in possession of *a priori* cognitions, is none other than the problem of the criterion for metaphysical cognition. And a “deduction” is precisely the kind of text intended to settle such disputes by showing that

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<sup>109</sup> See also Henrich et al. (esp. 1984:84-92), that records the proceedings of a 1981 conference, where Henrich first presented these ideas.

<sup>110</sup> Bubner seems to advance a similar claim. He too concludes that the self-referential structure of the Deduction is incompatible with 'a strict and logically compelling deduction' (Bubner 1975:466). In a later paper, he suggests that the juridical framing of the Deduction might provide a clue about its argumentative strategy. According to him, this 'juridical context alters in an essential way the procedure, something that the predominant part of the Kant-literature does not pay attention to and treats deduction as an equivalent for demonstration' (Bubner 1982:307). Interpreted in this context, the Deduction would connect with the metaphor of the 'court of justice' (Axi-xii), and offer, not deductive proof, but the demonstration of an acquired right (Bubner 1982:331fn10). Bubner does not clarify, however, just how such a demonstration is supposed to proceed, and how it could avoid the charge of *petitio principii*.

one party's claim is legitimate, or by distinguishing between what is and what is not legitimate. As we know, Kant's target is the latter, a 'touchstone of the worth or worthlessness of all cognitions *a priori*' (A12/B26). However, if a philosophical “deduction” taken in this juridical sense need not consist of a well-formed chain of syllogisms, what kind of proof structure does it possess? For, having a fixed justificatory aim poses no obvious restrictions on the argumentative strategy one should or could pursue. Moreover, there remains the question of how whatever strategy *is* employed can validate a claim by a self-referential process of reasoning, whether that is a *petitio principii* or not.

As should be clear from my discussion in the previous chapters, the answer lies in the relation between the *quaestiones facti et juris* that Kant spends so much time distinguishing in the opening pages of his Deduction. Returning to juridical deductions, Henrich shows that, in general, such texts target the justification of a particular type of rights, namely acquired rights. Such rights are distinguished from innate – sometimes called “absolute” – rights, which belong to human beings in virtue of their nature. Acquired rights, on the other hand, have a particular origin, designated usually as a *factum*, a “fact” or “action”, as a result of which the right is acquired. For this reason, Henrich argues, the justification of such acquired rights – such as the right to employ synthetic *a priori* principles – the only rights to need a deduction,

can never be given without reference to the facts from which our knowledge originates. We cannot arrive at, and don't need a comprehensive understanding of, the genesis and constitution of these facts in themselves. Yet we must arrive at an understanding of the aspects of them that suffice to justify the claims attached to our knowledge. (Henrich 1989:37)

Accordingly, the Transcendental Deduction, too, insofar as it is concerned to prove that our employment of the categories is legitimate, must reference the *factum* by virtue of which the right to our employment of the categories was first acquired. But how should such reference

be understood? Certainly, it should not be understood to take us back to the *quid facti* of the empirical deduction. Yet it should also not be seen to involve any derivation of rights from facts. How, then, should the relation of the transcendental deduction to an original *factum* be understood?

To explain this, Henrich appeals to the Kantian distinction between *reflection* and *investigation*. As contrasted to an “investigation” (*Untersuchen, examinatio*), which arises through deliberate effort by the philosopher, “reflection” (*Überlegen, reflexio*) refers to a type of non-explicit awareness of the operations of one's own mind. Because our mind performs a variety of heterogeneous operations, it must implicitly know – as a condition of its ability to perform these operations – what is specific to each and must be able to ascertain that it performs them one at a time. Without an awareness of the operative principles of various mental processes, known by contrast to others, we would confuse various operations together, like counting and calculating (Henrich 1989:42). Consequently, 'we always spontaneously know (albeit, informally and without explicit articulation) about our cognitive activities and about the principles and rules they depend upon. Reflection in this sense is a precondition of rationality' (*ibid.*).

Since deductions, in Kant's specific sense, are based on some partial knowledge concerning the origin of our cognition, Henrich concludes that they should be seen to be founded on reflection, as the factual epistemic basis without which they cannot establish their transcendental conclusions. In contrast to an empirical deduction, which refers us to some particular facts – such as instances of an observed constant conjunction between determinate objects – the transcendental deduction refers us, not to particular facts, but to an entire domain of factuality: not to experiences, but to experience itself.

That the self-referential structure of Deduction-type transcendental arguments does not entail a logical premise-circularity should hopefully be clear. For, prior familiarity with the

operations of our own mind and the principles on which they rely is not postulated as a premise from which the necessity of those very same principles is then deduced syllogistically. Indeed, the necessity that accompanies our cognition of such principles is never a *logical* necessity. The categories and principles of the pure understanding are not established dogmatically, 'directly from concepts alone, but always only indirectly through relation of these concepts to something altogether contingent, namely, *possible experience*' (A737/B765). Consequently, the self-referentiality evident here, if we insist on relating it to a kind of circularity, is not a circularity that characterizes the structure of the argument, but the way the inquiry into the ground of experience relates essentially to experience. Thus, we arrive at a clearer understanding of the self-referential structure of transcendental argumentation in Kant. To quote Henrich again: '[S]ince the deduction, as an investigation, always depends internally on what reflection provides ... no deduction can get under way unless it relies primarily on arguments that refer directly to what is revealed by reflection' (Henrich 1989:43). Since any deductions must rely on reflection, 'by which the multidimensional system of our cognitive capacities is accessible to us, persistently and prephilosophically' (*ibid.*), they are made possible only by our own prior acquaintance with the very capacities that deductions are meant to validate. And so, proof that the cognitions delivered by these capacities are actual achievements that can boast of objectivity depends upon familiarity with the *factum* of our own experience as its starting point.<sup>111</sup>

The self-referential character of the Deduction, elucidated by its jurisprudential background, when coupled with the interpretation of the *Critique* as posing the problem of the criterion for metaphysical cognition, substantiated in the previous chapter, directs an entirely

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<sup>111</sup> More recently, other philosophers have characterized transcendental arguments in terms of a similar structure. Sacks, for instance, has argued that transcendental arguments necessarily involve a relation to "situatedness". For him, transcendental proofs 'always start from the basic situatedness of thought: from the fact that I have experience, or that all my experiences are *mine*' (Sacks 2005a:452; see Sacks 2005b).

new light not only on Kant's critical project, but on the transcendental strategy for replying to the skeptic's challenge. We can now understand why Kant's answer to this problem had to proceed via an analysis of precisely what stands in need of a criterion. For Kant's *analysis* of the pure understanding is in fact its *Zergliederung* (see A65/B90), its “dissection”, or, more adequately, its “disarticulation”, and the subsequent exhibition of its interdependent components. We can now grasp why Kant thought it was the 'articulation' of the systematic unity of the pure understanding which would 'yield a touchstone for the correctness and genuineness of all the pieces of cognition fitting into it' (A65/B90). For, the *articulation* Kant is after is nothing but the exhibition of the elements of our understanding in their unity and systematic interrelation. This is a structure which, though it can be broken down into component parts, can nevertheless tolerate no prioritizing of one element over the rest, as the supposed source of the others (see the dogmatic metaphysical methodology 6.4 & 6.4.1). And so, Kant's transcendental grounding of experience proceeds by explicating the structure within which *a priori* categories and principles operate to anticipate the kind of experience of which we are reflectively aware, the only kind of experience that is possible for us. Some form of circularity, therefore, characterizes not only the argumentative structure of the Deduction, but the structure of experience itself, as a reciprocity between the ground of experience and the empirical as such. For, what characterizes our experience – if phenomenological vocabulary be permitted here – is that within experience our understanding is “given over” to a world of appearances, and the world of appearances is always already entangled with the structure of the understanding: for it is only within such an entanglement that experience is at all possible for beings like us.

In the next section, I want briefly to compare the transcendental grounding I argued to be at work in Crusius' and Gadamer's hermeneutics with Kant's transcendental “deduction”.

## 7.4. Transcendental grounding

In previous chapters, I have appealed to a notion of transcendental inquiry and transcendental grounding characterized by its self-referential character. It is now apparent that such a characterization is very much in line with a Kantian understanding of the transcendental.

In chapter 3, I examined Crusius' hermeneutics with an eye to its anti-skeptical motive: to reply to the problem of the criterion. The challenge, as I showed, was to ground the validity of a set of hermeneutical principles – called “presumptions” – in a way that was neither viciously circular nor regressive. Crusius attained that goal, I argued, by appealing not to some external ground as source of the requisite validity, but to interpretation itself. He claimed that hermeneutical presumptions, such as the presumption of consistency, were necessary for understanding to be possible at all, and if the interpreter were to relinquish them, 'the possibility of a reliable discovery of [another's] thoughts would disappear entirely' (W:§641). I cautioned that, here, Crusius should not be seen as appealing merely to pragmatic or prudential reasons, for such reasons are powerless to account for normativity. What is required is to connect the interpreter's obedience to interpretive principles and the role that such conformity plays in determining correctness. I argued that this link can only be secured by a transcendental grounding, on which conformity to hermeneutical presumptions is a requirement for meaningfulness. Seen from this transcendental vantage point, Crusius is providing a grounding for interpretation, and a consequent reply to the skeptic, by uncovering the way in which a set of interpretive principles operates to anticipate understanding. This grounding could not proceed otherwise than by reference to what is grounded because the presuppositional structure of interpretation is something from which interpretation cannot be disentangled.

In chapter 4, I developed and defended a novel analysis of the Gadamerian fore-structure of understanding, divided into two interdependent kinds of agreement, *Einverständnis* and

*Übereinkunft*. That analysis served to uncover not only the dual preconditions of understanding – theoretical and practical – but the reciprocal relationship that obtained between them and what they conditioned. This was a reciprocity between the fore-structure and understanding itself which came to the fore illuminatingly in Gadamer's description of *Einverständnis* in his (1970), where “*Einverständnis*” denoted understanding itself and what enabled it. Hence, I argued that Gadamer answers his Kantian question by uncovering the structure of the hermeneutical situation and showing the way in which understanding is always already entangled with its own ground. This is a reciprocity which, as shown above (see 7.3), obtains in Kant as well. I have also suggested that Gadamer, in his quest to establish the validity of *Einverständnis*, engaged with the transcendental question concerning the possibility of our *a priori* knowledge of objects.

Let me take this opportunity to return to that Kantian parallel, which can now be treated with greater precision. I should stress, however, my aim, which is to discover in the Kantian project an illuminating *methodological*, and not a *doctrinal*, analogue to the Gadamerian. Yet, while the question of the *a priori* concerns the latter, and not the former – not the *inquiry* into ground, but the ground itself – there remain instructive parallels to be extracted in this regard between Kant and Gadamer. I showed that both Gadamer and Kant ask the question of the possibility of some cognitive domain – understanding for Gadamer, experience for Kant – and answer it by exhibiting the structure of that domain. In Kant, this is a matter of showing how experience, understood as empirical knowledge, is related to the objects of experience by way of certain fundamental conditions – such as time and space – and certain *a priori* concepts and principles. Experience, thus, is grounded in the pure (*a priori*) forms of intuition, and the categories, which are also *a priori*, or independent of all experience. While there remains considerable debate over the precise meaning of apriority that is at issue for Kant in the first *Critique*, one indisputable characteristic of *a priori* knowledge is that it does not *originate* in

experience (A1-2), nor is it *justified* by experience *per se*. For this reason, Kant takes *a priori* knowledge to be universal and necessary.<sup>112</sup>

Gadamer, on the other hand, discloses the structure of the domain in question, not as a set of *a priori* concepts and principles, but as a fore-structure of understanding, which I have explicated in terms of *Einverständnis* and *Übereinkunft*. To return to the Kantian parallel: does *Einverständnis* constitute *a priori* knowledge of the objects of interpretation? I argued (see 4.5.1) that *Einverständnis* is *prior* to particular instances of understanding, and thus cannot be justified by derivation from such instances. Our legitimate prejudices enable our understanding not because they are “confirmed” when we understand. Additionally, I showed that *Einverständnis* is necessary for the possibility of understanding, and yet, if it is to have any determinate content, must, in a certain sense, emerge from an ongoing *process* of interaction – initially practical – insofar as that process leads to (some) understanding. Yet the sense in which it thus emerges is not to be confused with the way in which a deliberate agreement is met. For, *Einverständnis* owes no homage to any *particular* event of coming-to-an-agreement. In terms of the conditions for apriority, *Einverständnis* is necessary, independent of experience in the sense that it cannot receive empirical confirmation, *and* in the sense that it does not originate in experience. That is so, because what is original, on the Gadamerian picture, is the *unhintergehbare* structure of dialogue, which illustrates the reciprocity between *Einverständnis* and the experience of understanding, a relation that has a primary, ontological, significance. This reciprocity, of course, is none other than the structure of hermeneutical circularity.

Perhaps the most significant difference between what Gadamer and Kant pinpoint as “ground” is that, in Gadamer's case, the ground of understanding is *historical*. For this reason, while *Einverständnis* constitutes a pre-understanding, a knowledge of the *interpretandum* which constitutes the object of interpretation, and which allows it to come into the interpreter's

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<sup>112</sup> Kant may even conflate the necessary and the *a priori*; see Stang (2011).

view as the object that it is, it cannot be labelled *a priori* if that is understood to require independence from the interpreter's historical situation. Thus, if we wish to locate an engagement with the *a priori* in Gadamer, we must forgo the Kantian condition of universality. This may not be incongruous with the Gadamerian picture. For, while Gadamer often associates the *a priori* with the ahistorical, he does not always shun talk of apriority, such as when discussing Apel's work, whom he takes to '[argue] with circumspection and great acuity in defense of the a priori of language that the community of communication is to be claimed the true a priori of linguisticality' (Gadamer 1992:437fn23; transl. Gadamer 2000b:172fn23). Indeed, Gadamer's objections to Apel's perspective have nothing to do with Apel's appeal to the *a priori* within a historical, hermeneutical context, but with his incomplete conception of rationality, which, for Gadamer, does not reduce to theoretical argumentation, *pace* Apel (see 4.5.2).

For all such disparities of doctrine between Kant and Gadamer, when our attention turns to the methodological core of the two projects, illuminating convergences begin to emerge. For, neither project sets out from a sure, unquestionable foundation, but from the very domain that is in question. Indeed, we can now see that Gadamer's appeal to the 'factuality' of coming to an agreement – and the inference to the conclusion that coming to an agreement requires a prior, sustaining agreement – proceeds along lines analogous to the Kantian Deduction. The Deduction too was set in motion by reference to what was in question. The kind of 'referring' that was at issue there, similarly, directed us to a structure that is not the structure of particular experiences, but the structure of *possible experience*. In the Gadamerian, as well as the Kantian case, as we saw above, the inquiry into ground looks to accomplish a *Zergliederung* of what is in question into its interdependent component parts with the aim of making explicit the relation between ground and what is grounded. For both, this philosophical conclusion is established by a distinctive kind of reasoning, from a contingent epistemic starting point – the factuality of

understanding, and the *factum* of experience – to necessary conclusions. Both projects elucidate the conditions of the possibility of what is in question by highlighting the way in which – to put it in a way that straddles the Gadamerian and Kantian perspectives – our cognition is always already given over to its objects, and thus by highlighting the unity – or belongingness, in Gadamer – of the two.

## 7.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, my goal has been to draw a parallel between what I identified as a form of transcendental grounding in Crusius' and Gadamer's hermeneutics and Kant's understanding of the transcendental. To this aim, I examined the proof-structure of Kant's Transcendental Deduction in order to illuminate the self-referentiality characteristic of that argument, and transcendental reflection in general. Finally, I argued that there are substantial, and significant, similarities between the Gadamerian and Kantian project, understood as inquiries into ground.

# Conclusions

In this dissertation, my aim has been to provide (1) the reconstruction of a line of response to the problem of the criterion for interpretation – and the problem of grounding understanding; (2) the general formulation of this line of argument as one that involves a transcendental modality, and (3) its defense.

I began, in chapter 1, by mapping some of the philosophical undercurrents that propelled hermeneutics, a heretofore ancillary discipline, to assert its scientific, and philosophical, independence. There, I retrieved “exegetical skepticism”, an argument about the uncertainty of interpretation rooted in its underdetermination by evidence, which I briefly compared to more recent views in analytic philosophy of language. The upshot of my analysis, however, was the discovery of a weightier challenge, a version of the Pyrrhonian problem of the criterion applied to interpretation. I argued there that this problem poses a unique set of philosophical challenges and raises doubts not only about the possibility of securing interpretive normativity, but about the legitimacy – and thus possibility – of hermeneutical theorizing itself.

In chapter 2, I was concerned to lay the groundwork for my analysis of Crusius' reply to the problem of the criterion by examining the theory of hermeneutical probability, a doctrine which first emerged in the work of Christian Thomasius and which Crusius, at least in outline, inherited. My aim was to assess, by taking some 18<sup>th</sup> century critiques seriously, whether that doctrine is a surrogate of exegetical skepticism and, if not, whether it is viable as a reply to it.

I argued that the Thomasian view is not a skeptical view, but that, despite even promisingly permitting an anti-skeptical application, it ultimately cannot answer the problem of the criterion. Such negative results notwithstanding, the profit of my analysis there has been the restoration of the Thomasian view as a tenable non-skeptical position, more importantly an enhanced understanding of the skeptic's challenge, and an appreciation of the difficulties that would have to be overcome in order to respond to it.

In chapter 3, my investigation of Enlightenment skepticism and anti-skepticism reached its apex with an analysis of Crusius' reply to the problem of the criterion. After an initial survey of Crusian epistemology in which I identified the conceptual devices by which it bypasses the shortcomings of the Thomasian, I proceeded with an examination of Crusius' anti-skeptical hermeneutics. I argued that what is philosophically noteworthy about Crusius' hermeneutics is that his response to the skeptic is coordinated with a concern to ground the possibility of interpretation. Thus, Crusius replies to the problem of the criterion by providing criteria of correctness for interpretation which embody the necessary conditions for the possibility of interpretation. What characterizes this line of reply, I argued, was its reliance on a distinctive sort of argumentative maneuvering, one which proceeded by laying out the structure of what the skeptic questioned, and which essentially depended on the thesis epitomized in “the Copernican Revolution in hermeneutics”, namely that the conditions for the possibility of an experience of meaning coincided with the conditions for the objects of such an experience. For these reasons, I associated this line of reply to a “transcendental grounding”.

In chapter 4, I leveraged the apparent similarity between the Crusian and the Gadamerian points of view into an opportunity to clarify the idea of transcendental grounding as an approach to understanding. This was achieved via a reinterpretation of the Gadamerian position along lines that converge more directly than is customarily thought with Kant's critical project. Thus, I argued that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics can and should be understood as a

form of transcendental inquiry which poses none other than the quintessential transcendental question, framed by Kant in terms of the possibility of *a priori* knowledge of objects. In terms of the aims of this dissertation, the benefit of my re-reading of Gadamer was an enriched characterization of “transcendental grounding” in relation to the hermeneutical. I argued that this is an approach which proceeds by explicating the web of normative commitments in the grips of which interpretation always already stands, and which tackles the normative question by making explicit the principles implicit in the normative structure of understanding.

The deeper understanding of this strategy afforded me the opportunity, in chapter 5, to press the Crusian line of response to the problem of the criterion further and to consider in more detail its ability to face the skeptic. There, I argued that, on a Gadamerian reply to that problem, the discovery of normative commitments implicit in the fore-structure of understanding is what secures the connection between the conditions for the possibility of understanding and the correctness of what is understood. What puts an *end* to the skeptic's interrogation is, ultimately, the ineluctable hermeneutic circularity encapsulated in the structure of dialogue, wherein the interpreter is anticipatorily joined with their *interpretandum*. Any skeptical interrogation that aims to obviate this relationship is illegitimate.

In the final two chapters, I relocated my focus from the hermeneutical to the transcendental in order to substantiate better one of the core claims of this dissertation, namely that the line of argument I have been reconstructing and defending as a response to the problem of the criterion and the ground of understanding involves a *transcendental* methodology. To achieve that aim, in chapter 6, I argued that Kant not only meaningfully engages with the problem of the criterion for metaphysical cognition, but even takes himself to have solved it in the Transcendental Deduction. In chapter 7, I drew a parallel between the structure of the Transcendental Deduction, itself a reply to a version of the problem of the criterion, and the transcendental grounding approach that has been my focus in these pages. My conclusion has

been that there exist illuminating methodological convergences between the former and the latter. Both the Crusian / Gadamerian grounding approach reconstructed and defended in this dissertation and Kant's project look to exhibit the structure of what is in question into its interdependent component parts with the aim of making explicit the reciprocal relation that obtains between ground and what is grounded.

The argument of this dissertation developed through sustained dialogue with several figures in the history of hermeneutical thought which scholarship has treated inattentively and sporadically at best. Mostly, these figures have been entirely overlooked. In the historiography of philosophy, as I argued in chapter 1, the neglect of the Thomasian tradition perpetuates a post-Kantian bias against it. In the historiography of hermeneutics, on the other hand, that disregard contraposes the high esteem in which the Diltheyan view of hermeneutics – according to which distinctly philosophical contributions to the theory of interpretation begin only with Schleiermacher – is still held.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, it was Schleiermacher's own contention that 'hermeneutics as *the art of understanding* does not yet exist *in a general manner*, there are instead only several forms of *specific hermeneutics*' (Schleiermacher 1977:75; transl. Schleiermacher 1998:5). I believe that my work supports a reassessment of the history of hermeneutics, and of the history of Enlightenment skepticism in general. Regarding the latter, I hope to have shown that tracing the history of hermeneutics' engagement with Pyrrhonian themes in the 18th century is philosophically illuminating and has contemporary relevance. Regarding the former, I hope to have shown that reaching behind the Schleiermacher *caesura* retrieves a tradition of thought – the Thomasian – which not only merits the interest of the historian of philosophy/hermeneutics, but positively *rewards* close philosophical scrutiny.

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<sup>113</sup> See, e.g., Inwood 1998; Jung 2001; Schmidt 2006; Ramberg & Gjesdal 2014; Zimmermann 2015; George 2021.

One way in which it does so, but which could not be thoroughly pursued in the preceding investigation, is in connection to a new direction in recent scholarship: Early Modern Social Epistemology. This growing field is steadily challenging the alleged solipsism and individualism of Early Modern epistemologies by revealing the extent to which philosophers in this period upheld an intersubjective picture of the human mind (see Lenz 2022). I hinted, in chapters 2 and 3, at a connection between interpretation and testimonial knowledge acquisition in Thomasiaus and Crusius, respectively. Moreover, I also showed how Crusius grounds interpretation in a structured set of presuppositions that speaker and hearer alike must make. This is true, indeed, for the skeptic too, who 'in innumerable cases ... understands the words of others according to the rules of interpretation, and must act in accordance with them, and is not deceived in doing so' (W:§635). Thus, based on my reconstruction of the Crusian position, there is an account to be developed of Crusius' consensual and social conception of interpretive normativity.

Another bridge that can be cast from the present investigation aims to make contact with the region of inquiry where the hermeneutical and transcendental intersect. We can distinguish here between two broad sectors of research. One way of mapping out this region has developed, in Anglophone academia at least, in the wake of Makkreel's influential book *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant* (1990). This branch of scholarship centers on Kant's own relationship to hermeneutical thought, or even on Kant's potential role in the development of a hermeneutical mode of inquiry (see Ruthrof 2023). Another strand of inquiry, on the other hand, seeks to identify a transcendental tendency at the heart of the hermeneutical. (See especially Malpas' work on the transcendental and the topological in Heidegger and Davidson: Malpas 1997; 1999; 2012.) Perhaps the philosophically most significant repercussions of this dissertation affect this region of inquiry. Indeed, there is implicit in these pages an argument to the effect that the hermeneutical mode of philosophical inquiry, if it is to be foundational, *must* be

transcendental. For, if the problem of the criterion is indeed a problem on which the possibility of hermeneutics depends, and the Crusian / Gadamerian transcendental line of response to that problem is successful – as I have argued in the present dissertation – then it appears that a transcendental approach to the ground of understanding, being the only possible approach (see 5.4.2.c), belongs essentially to hermeneutical theorizing.

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