

# DILTHEY, GADAMER AND FACEBOOK: TOWARDS A NEW HERMENEUTICS OF THE SOCIAL NETWORK

On 4 February 2014, the world's biggest social networking site celebrated its tenth birthday. While CEO Mark Zuckerberg declared once more how proud he was to be putting everyone in touch with everyone else,<sup>1</sup> international press commentary ranged from arch speculation on where Facebook might go next, to outright pessimism about the culture of surveillance it had already helped to create.<sup>2</sup> Integral to the discussion surrounding Facebook's undisputed cultural impact, however, was the hotly debated topic of the relationship between our on- and offline identities in the context of social media more generally. As one psychological study of 2010 showed, a mounting volume of retrievable data is making our online personas ever more precise copies of our supposedly 'real-life' ones.<sup>3</sup> For all the appeal of bringing our real and virtual worlds into synergy, our social networking sites are in the business of having us create and share texts which distil with unprecedented accuracy who we are and what we will buy.

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<sup>1</sup> See Mark Zuckerberg, 'Today is Facebook's 10th anniversary', *Facebook*, 4 February 2014 <<https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10101250930776491>> [accessed 11 May 2014].

<sup>2</sup> See John Naughton, 'Facebook's First 10 Years: Is it now in Danger of Swallowing the Web?', *The Guardian*, 1 February 2014: Technology <<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/feb/01/facebook-first-10-years-mark-zuckerberg>> [accessed 11 May 2014]; see also Claudius Seidl, 'Zehn Jahre Facebook: Das totale Wissen', *FAZ.NET*, 2 April 2014: Feuilleton <<http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien/zehn-jahre-facebook-das-totale-wissen-12780530.html>> [accessed 4 February 2014].

<sup>3</sup> Mitja D. Back et al., 'Facebook Profiles Reflect Actual Personality, Not Self-Idealization', *Psychological Science*, 21 (2010), 372-74 (pp. 373-74).

It is this inherently textual dimension to the social network, though, that has made it a uniquely fertile soil for interdisciplinary research in the social and behavioural sciences, and it is my contention that it also reveals the striking contemporary relevance of the German tradition in philosophical hermeneutics.<sup>4</sup> Rather than entirely changing the structure of our presentations and communications of identity, social media have largely served to extend and intensify our embodied offline tendencies.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, as José Marichal has argued in his recent study, a social networking site like Facebook mirrors and complements the aestheticized mediation between disclosure and concealment integral to self-performance in our offline lives,<sup>6</sup> a performance whose texts nonetheless invite objectification, interpretation, and appropriation. On the other, Facebook opens up a de-centred and inter-subjective space in which mutually accountable (because mutually recognizable) subjects might – and do – cultivate multiple channels of dialogue.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the research questions at stake, see danah m. boyd [sic] and Nicole B. Ellison, ‘Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship’, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13 (2007), 210-30. Rafael Capurro has recently highlighted the need comprehensively to re-think philosophical hermeneutics in relation to internet technologies in general (see ‘Digital hermeneutics: an outline’, *AI & Society*, 25 (2010), 35-42). With its specific focus on the inherent *textuality* of online social networks, however, my article aims to highlight the fresh usefulness of established hermeneutic theories.

<sup>5</sup> See Dominic Abrams et al., *Future Identities: Changing Identities in the UK* (London: Government Office for Science, 2013), p. 25 <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-identities-changing-identities-in-the-uk>> [accessed 4 May 2014].

<sup>6</sup> José Marichal, *Facebook Democracy: The Architecture of Disclosure and the Threat to Public Life* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 106-07.

<sup>7</sup> danah m. boyd and Nicole B. Ellison, ‘Sociality Through Social Network Sites’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Internet Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 151-72 (pp. 158-59).

In this article I hope to show that the respective hermeneutic theories of Wilhelm Dilthey and Hans-Georg Gadamer can help us to understand the significance of these socio-technological problems and potentialities. Dilthey's work acutely reflects what I suggest is the 'subject-object aporia' characteristic of the online network: the paradox that our self-aestheticizing performance *as* subjects always feeds into our ever more precise (self-)identification as knowable and predictable human-digital objects. Dilthey's insistence on the irreducibility of 'lived' subjectivity draws strongly upon the notion of autonomy that is central to Kant's aesthetics; but this is offset by his career-long attempt to establish a firm scientific basis for the *Geisteswissenschaften*.<sup>8</sup> In a departure from recent defences of the integrity of Dilthey's aesthetic and historical subject,<sup>9</sup> it is my contention that this project carries with it problematic social and ethical implications. A linguistically grounded movement between the psychological and the hermeneutic, such as comes particularly to the fore in his late *Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* (1910), marks humanity's capacity for an increasingly transparent constitution and comprehension of itself. Dilthey's human sciences aim towards 'die ganze Objektivation des Geistes',<sup>10</sup> that is, a

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<sup>8</sup> See Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies*, 3rd edn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 234-44.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Kristin Gjesdal, *Gadamer and the Legacy of German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Frederick C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Bernhard Groethuysen et al. (Leipzig & Berlin: B.G. Teubner, 1914–), VII: *Der Aufbau der Geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, ed. by Groethuysen (1926), p. 131. In this article I also refer to *Gesammelte Schriften*, I: *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften: Versuch einer Grundlegung für das Studium der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte – Erster Band*, ed. by Groethuysen (1966); and *Gesammelte Schriften*, V: *Die Geistige Welt: Einleitung in die Philosophie des Lebens – Erste Hälfte: Abhandlungen zur Grundlegung der*

systematic identification of the individual subject and her contexts on the basis of historical traces. I argue that this objectivist understanding of understanding finds its shadow-side in the atrophy of a meaningful conception of subjectivity, and that it unsettlingly illuminates aspects of what Alex Lambert has diagnosed as the socially networked subject's 'loss of self'.<sup>11</sup>

That loss of self is a danger to which Gadamer draws attention in his *magnum opus* *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960). 'Indem man den anderen verstehen, ihn zu kennen beansprucht, nimmt man ihm jede Legitimation seiner eigenen Ansprüche',<sup>12</sup> he claims, proposing – in express contrast to Dilthey – a way of thinking about 'understanding' that is grounded in our listening attentively to what the Other has to say (*WM*, p. 367). By affirming the finite subject's inextricability from language, Gadamer adumbrates a radically inter-subjective community of dialogue. It is in this phenomenon of dialogue that we might find a powerful philosophical correlate to contemporary calls for a social-networking culture more attuned to the value of alterity;<sup>13</sup> and it may be that Gadamer's hermeneutics also open up new avenues for thinking human identity in an intensively networked world.

Before developing a critique, however, it is important first to reflect upon what Dilthey on his own assessment was trying to achieve. His bid to set human sciences on a firm

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*Geisteswissenschaften*, ed. by Georg Misch (1990). Subsequent references to all three volumes are abbreviated to 'D', followed by volume and page number(s); Dilthey's own emphases have been retained.

<sup>11</sup> Alex Lambert, *Intimacy and Friendship on Facebook* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2013), p. 126.

<sup>12</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, 10 vols (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr 1986-95), I: *Wahrheit und Methode* (1986), p. 366. Subsequent references to *Wahrheit und Methode* are abbreviated to *WM*, followed by page number(s); Gadamer's own emphases have been retained.

<sup>13</sup> See Marichal, *Facebook Democracy*, pp. 147-59; see also Lambert, *Intimacy and Friendship on Facebook*, pp. 176-78.

footing revealed an affinity with Kant's transcendental interrogation of the conditions for the possibility of scientific knowledge of the world. Such a 'Kritik der historischen Vernunft' (D, I, 116), his work's perennial touchstone, was in turn grounded in an orientation towards an objective and empirical investigation of historical reality as 'given' in experience, as distinct from the elements of *Geschichtstheologie* that he saw as residual in the work of the Historical School.<sup>14</sup> But in his conviction of the radically historical and temporal nature of life, he also positioned itself against the Neo-Kantians' abstractly ahistorical conceptions of subjectivity (D, I, xviii).<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the externally oriented natural sciences, Dilthey's *Aufbau* is oriented towards our inner *Erlebnisse* as subjects-in-history, and the corresponding objectifications of these experiences in the historical world (D, VII, 85-86 and 148).

In a bid to avoid both the trap of psychologism and the mechanistic reductiveness of explanatory psychology,<sup>16</sup> this concept of *Erlebnis*, a late developer in Dilthey's career, allows for a segue between the irreducibility of the individual psyche on the one hand and the possibility of a universal hermeneutics on the other. Not that this definitively solves the conundrum of a human *science*, though: none other than Dilthey himself concedes that there seems to be no logical bridge between our inherently limited subjective knowledge 'von einem Einmaligen' in the form of our lived experience, and the understanding that broadens

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<sup>14</sup> See Charles R. Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey and the Crisis of Historicism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 13; see also Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present*, rev. edn (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), pp. 137-38.

<sup>15</sup> See Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey and the Crisis of Historicism*, pp. 145-50.

<sup>16</sup> See Makkreel, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies*, pp. 39-40, and Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*, pp. 332-33.

out into a supposedly scientific and universal knowledge of what it means to be human (D, VII, 141 and 146).

I want to argue here that it is most essentially in the – often implicit – conceptualization of language in *Der Aufbau* that we encounter both the possibility of this transition and the problems inherent in it, problems that reveal themselves to be both theoretical and ethical. The human subject's capacity for transparent self-reflection, coupled with her ability to understand a broader historical context, depends for Dilthey on an irreducible link between cognition and language. The point of departure for both the natural and the human sciences, he claims, remains 'die Strukturlehre des gegenständlichen Auffassens im allgemeinen' (D, VII, 121). What he means by this is that external (physical) *Erfahrungen* and internal (psychical) *Erlebnisse*, for all their apparent immediacy, are always already mediated through the sorting and categorizing functions of discursive thought (D, VII, 122-23). There is, to put it differently, a direct link between the immediacy of intuition on the one hand, and discursive representation and reflection in thought and language on the other. The given and the discursive are fundamentally 'vertauschbar', and Dilthey is disarmingly frank in pointing out that his human sciences need to train their focus not on dry abstractions, but rather on 'die ganze Frische' of actual lived experience (D, VII, 125). While this insight seems straightforward enough, its implication is that discursive representation, and the language that is inextricable from it, insists on nothing less than its immediate presence, sufficiency, and appropriateness.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this has considerable significance for the subject's understanding of both self and Other. Alongside the logical functions characterizing *Erfahrungen*, our *Erlebnisse* are immediately structured by the 'real' categories of *Wert*, *Bedeutung*, and *Zweck*, which underpin the subjective purposiveness and meaningfulness integral to our sense of personal identity. Dilthey provides a case study at this point,

reflecting on his own (unfortunately rather prescient) worry at the prospect of not completing his manuscripts, and linking this into a kind of teleological continuum with both personal sadness, and a purposeful striving to finish (D, VII, 139). What characterizes these meaningfully linked *Erlebnisse* is their immediate significance for the subject, their being understood ‘as’ something that is always already meaningful.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, as Dilthey argues, ‘[d]as Bewußtsein von einem Erlebnis und seine Beschaffenheit, sein Fürmichdasein und was in ihm für mich da ist, sind eins’ (D, VII, 139). But it is only our self-reflective, and so in a sense self-objectifying, examination of these lived experiences which allows us to posit the existence within us of a ‘struktureller Bewußtseinszusammenhang’ (D, VII, 139): a kind of psychological nexus which, as Dilthey explains in his *Entwürfe zur Kritik der historischen Vernunft*, is the structure that allows life to appear to us in its innate unity, and every experience to be related to its encompassing whole (D, VII, 195). As Gillian Rose contends, Dilthey has to bring this ‘nexus’ into the equation in order to explain how it is that we have any knowledge whatever of self and world.<sup>18</sup> It is what permits an epistemological movement from the immediacy of the subjective into the objective, and from re-presentations of our subjective lived experience into the discursive order of fixed concepts (D, VII, 139).

An innate human tendency towards self-reflection serves as a kind of lowest-level switchboard between lived experience and objective understanding. Our own *Erlebnisse*, indeed, are fleshed out and expanded through our listening to and reading about people’s experiences, just as ‘anderseits die andern [sic] Personen verstanden werden vermittelt der eigenen Erlebnisse’ (D, VII, 145). Implicit here is a bidirectional hermeneutical process, one which leads cumulatively to an ever greater self-understanding. In one direction there is a

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<sup>17</sup> For the more explicitly phenomenological development of this idea, see Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 15th edn (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2006), p. 149.

<sup>18</sup> Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 3rd edn (London: Athlone, 2009), p. 24.

movement from our mundane, instinctual life-concerns into ‘gegenständlich[e] [...] Aussagen, die diese Verhaltensweisen als Tatbestände feststellen’ (D, VII, 134). In the opposite direction, we are told that language, as an objectification of life, ‘repräsentiert im Reich dieses objektiven Geistes ein Gemeinsames’ (D, VII, 146); and in turn, it is the shared linguistic-symbolic creations of these networks of affinity and commonality which feed back into both the subject’s experience of the world and knowledge of herself as part of it. The upshot of this is that the ever widening social and cultural commonalities integral to understanding prepare the ground for a continual fine-tuning of the signs and languages in which we both articulate and expand it (D, VII, 141). In the development of Dilthey’s reasoning, I suggest, it is this conception of language – as a continual circulation between the subjective and the objective – that enables his subject to achieve increasingly transparent self-presence and self-knowledge. Language becomes ever fitter for its descriptive purposes, and just as our interpretation of the objectifications of life is only possible on the basis of subjective lived experience, so our knowledge of the givens of subjective life ‘vollzieht sich durch die Auslegung der Objektivationen des Lebens’ (D, VII, 152).

What is at stake here for Dilthey’s hermeneutic theory, and what are the problems inherent in it? I want to suggest that language’s immediate significance contributes towards a supposedly ever strengthening understanding between individuals, and between times, cultures, and contexts. It is language that might illuminate his famous maxim that ‘Leben erfaßt [...] Leben’ (D, VII, 136). Paul Ricoeur’s suggestion, that for Dilthey man is ‘not radically alien to man, because he offers signs of his own existence’,<sup>19</sup> can be supplemented with: ‘and then he says and writes things about it’. Dilthey’s subject, in other words, seems inherently capable of progressing from the instinctual forms of everyday, elementary

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<sup>19</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, trans. by John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 49.

understanding (D, VII, 208-10), through the mutual (if not explicitly articulated) understanding integral to a shared community, ultimately ‘zum Allgemeinen’ of an objective science of human life. This is a strikingly bold claim, and one which represents nothing less than a comprehensive subject-object continuum, that is, the ultimately unquestioned progression from my own personal sense of a unitary self to a more general knowledge ‘der Gleichartigkeit mit den Anderen, Selbigkeit der Menschennatur und Individualität’ (D, VII, 141).

These intimations of a kind of ‘Nivellierung’ through objectification take on a particular contemporary relevance when considered within the context of a transcultural social networking site now counting more than 1.28 billion active members.<sup>20</sup> Hermeneutics can be understood here as a science of man’s objectifications, of which Facebook, with its constant stream of self-expressions and excretions, has now perhaps become the location *par excellence*. Indeed, as both the subject and object of Dilthey’s *Geisteswissenschaften*, life reflexively grasps and identifies itself ‘auf dem Umweg des Verstehens’, a methodology of understanding emerging precisely because humans come to recognize themselves ‘in Lebensäußerungen’ (D, VII, 87 and 86). The contemporary use of statistical modelling in computational sociology and social network analysis certainly brackets out any disciplinary applicability of the ‘hermeneutic’ in relation to systematic data mining.<sup>21</sup> But as was shown in a landmark psychometric study of March 2013, it has become possible statistically to predict details of demography, personality, and personal orientation with remarkably reliability on the basis of the textual self-expressions and objectifications of Facebook

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<sup>20</sup> See ‘Company Info’, *Facebook Newsroom*, 31 March 2014 <<http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>> [accessed 28 May 2014]. It should nonetheless be noted that Facebook’s global market penetration remains unevenly distributed (see Marichal, *Facebook Democracy*, pp. 151-52).

<sup>21</sup> See Marichal, *Facebook Democracy*, pp. 127-29.

‘Likes’;<sup>22</sup> and the study’s acknowledgement of the cultural discernibility of such correlations highlights the historically unprecedented capacity of networked individuals increasingly to ‘know’ and ‘objectify’ both themselves and their fellow users on the basis of folk-psychological (and always tacitly hermeneutical) inferences. As Mitja Back and others empirically show, the intricacy of our interpretable traces make it ever more difficult for us individually to construct a hermeneutically dissimulative subjectivity, or rather, an ‘idealized virtual identity’.<sup>23</sup> The observational economy of online social networking provides a vivid illustration of ‘life grasping life’ inasmuch as the individual is always simultaneously a self-projecting aesthetic subject and an aestheticized, yet ever more completely determined, object.

The union of subject and object, as I have suggested, is integral to this hermeneutics inasmuch it brings the individual subject to an understanding of human cultural systems, and, in extension, of the whole of humanity (D, VII, 135). In his explicit call to distinguish a hermeneutic methodology from the explanative models of the natural sciences,<sup>24</sup> however, Dilthey recognizes that his *Geisteswissenschaften* transcend purely logical processes of analysis (D, VII, 134); and it is here that the hermeneutic circle, developed from Schleiermacher’s circular interplay between ‘psychological’ (intuitive) and ‘grammatical’ (historical-contextual) interpretation takes centre-stage.<sup>25</sup> It represents a perennially

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<sup>22</sup> Michal Kosinski et al., ‘Private Traits and Attributes Are Predictable from Digital Records of Human Behavior’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 110 (2013), 5802-05 (p. 5804). The study was based on the Facebook use of 58,466 volunteers resident in the USA (see p. 5803).

<sup>23</sup> See Back et al., ‘Facebook Profiles’, p. 374.

<sup>24</sup> See Makkreel, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies*, pp. 134-35.

<sup>25</sup> Gjesdal, *Gadamer and the Legacy of German Idealism*, pp. 161-62.

incomplete negotiation between the subjective and the objective,<sup>26</sup> and, as such, it is shaped by an aporetic relationship between intuitive and discursive forms of knowledge which, in foreclosing the possibility of exhaustive explanation, attempts to leave room for the mysterious subject.

Dilthey's subjects collectively make up what he calls 'Subjekte ideeller Art' (D, VII, 135). These communities, institutions, and cultural contexts, the furniture and infrastructure of our historical world, provide perhaps the best illustration of the circulation between part and whole integral to the hermeneutic circle. Such *Zusammenhänge* represent macrocosmic versions of human individuals, characterized as they are by collective motivations, values, and purposes. Ideal subjects are shaped by, but also exert a powerful ideological influence on, their individual constituent subjects: commonly comprehensible 'Aussagen über den Verlauf des Lebens, Werturteile, [...] Bestimmungen von Zwecken und Gütern' are certainly the products of myriad individuals; but in a reciprocal movement, customs and purposes come through sheer weight of numbers both to mould and to circumscribe individual identities and behaviours (D, VII, 133). The reciprocity fundamental to Dilthey's historical world finds, I suggest, a current instantiation in the ever evolving form of civil society integral to Facebook – namely, in its users' creations of properly 'ideal' networks whose aims, values, and assumptions both draw upon and feed back into personal performances of identity. As José Marichal points out, online social networking has shifted political engagement in particular in the direction of the personal,<sup>27</sup> and a proliferation of political Facebook groups is a testament to the power of 'imagined' communities in shaping identities.<sup>28</sup> The much-debated role of

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<sup>26</sup> See Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey and the Crisis of Historicism*, pp. 15-21.

<sup>27</sup> See Marichal, *Facebook Democracy*, pp. 120 and 154-55.

<sup>28</sup> See Charles Tilly, *Stories, Identities, and Political Change* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), p. 10.

Facebook in the ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011 reflects the social network’s real capacity for moulding both collective and personal narratives,<sup>29</sup> while also underlining that these ‘ideal’ configurations in essence embody ‘nothing other than the historical uses to which [they are] put by individuals’.<sup>30</sup> What is significant in both theory and practice is that individual subjects, and the ideal subjects of which they are a part, supposedly transcend each other in such a way that neither exhausts the full being of the other. The individual remains able to express herself in ways that are in keeping with a particular group context, without being fundamentally reducible to the group purpose and identity.<sup>31</sup> As Dilthey argues of the relationship between part and whole with regard to *both* individual *and* ideal subjects:

Wie stark auch jeder psychischer Vorgang, der einem [...] Ganzen angehört, durch die Intention des Wirkungszusammenhangs bestimmt sein mag, immer ist dieser Vorgang nicht von dieser Intention ausschließlich bestimmt. (D, VII, 159)

It is the ‘excess’ of subjectivity implied here which is supposedly preserved within the circular structure of understanding. The hermeneutic process, Dilthey claims, involves an inexorable back-and-forth movement in which knowledge of the part is indispensable to knowledge of a whole context and vice versa (D, VII, 146). The fact of ‘eine Zirkulation von Erleben, Verstehen und Repräsentation der geistigen Welt in allgemeinen Begriffen’ (D, VII, 145) complements his explicit exposition, in the *Entwürfe*, of the mutual contribution of discursive ‘Verstehen’, and a more immediately intuitive and subjective ‘Erleben’ and

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<sup>29</sup> See Marichal, *Facebook Democracy*, pp. 122-26.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Hamilton, *Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 76.

<sup>31</sup> Rudolf Makkreel, ‘Wilhelm Dilthey’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2012

<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/dilthey/>> [accessed 18 January 2014].

‘Nacherleben’, to any interpretative reconstruction of a culture’s underpinning ‘objektiver Geist’ (D, VII, 214).

Helmut Johach has argued that the irreducible remnant of the subjective positively distinguishes Dilthey’s early work from the statistical-mathematical developments in twentieth-century systems theory and social network analysis, inasmuch as it resists these later models’ ‘Anspruch auf totale Planung und Beherrschung des Gesellschafts- und Geschichtsprozesses’.<sup>32</sup> In his *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* of 1884, Dilthey had rightly taken pains to distinguish the ‘descriptive’ human sciences from their ‘explanative’ natural counterparts (D, I, 32). The former, he made clear, found their *sine qua non* in the recognition of man’s existence as an irreducible unity, a being whose complexity could only ever be understood in the context of society and history (D, I, 28-29 and 31-32).

Nonetheless, in my view Dilthey’s persistent attachment to the categories of ‘subject’ and ‘object’<sup>33</sup> – integral as it is to the later hermeneutics of *Der Aufbau* – limits his ability to find a conceptual vocabulary that will go *beyond* the basic conviction that ‘individuum est ineffabile’ (D, I, 29). In making the human subject an object of the human sciences, that is, he allows for a procedure of identification that undermines the meaningful recognition of uniqueness. Gadamer for his part bemoans precisely this subjectivity’s atrophy in the face of the encroachment of claims to objective understanding: insofar as the hermeneutic circle enables the location of the individual at the point of intersection of her native productive systems (D, VII, 135), the subject is circumscribed as a locatable object, and the subject-

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<sup>32</sup> Helmuth Johach, ‘Dilthey’s Philosophie des Subjekts und die Grundlegung der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften. Zur Aktualität der “Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften”’, *Dilthey-Jahrbuch für Philosophie und Geschichte der Geisteswissenschaften*, 2 (1984), 92-127 (p. 127).

<sup>33</sup> Bambach considers this aporia to be central to Historicism’s failure to reconcile the scientific and the human (see *Heidegger, Dilthey and the Crisis of Historicism*, pp. 15, 128-29 and 183-85).

object continuum dissolves into ‘völlige Selbstdurchsichtigkeit, völlige Tilgung aller Fremdheit und alles Andersseins’ (WM, p. 233). Key to Gadamer’s critique here is his recognition that a supposedly desirable hermeneutic transparency might flatten out the historicity, and with this the constitutive *difference*, of its subject matter. Part and parcel of this is the effacement of difference, otherness, and non-identifiability within both the individual and ideal subject. We see emerging a post-Hegelian concept of ‘objective spirit’ as the objectifiable historical context of individual and ideal subjects; and it is in this context that Dilthey’s hermeneutic circle represents a perfective epistemological process, building up as it does an ever more exhaustive picture of individuals and their historical situations. For Dilthey, the examination of increasing numbers of structurally interconnected ‘Lebensäußerungen’ permits the scientific establishment of generalizations through induction (D, VII, 147). He points out in turn that the variety of human life manifests itself in numerous different forms of expression, invoking the tellingly geometrical analogy of ‘viele Linien’ which ‘Kreise verwandten Lebens unter irgendeinem Gesichtspunkt abgrenzen, durchziehen die Welt des objektiven Geistes und kreuzen sich in ihr’ (D, VII, 147). It seems inevitable that the landscape he is laying out must be ever more meticulously charted, and it comes as no surprise when Dilthey suggests the possibility of understanding ‘die Fülle des Lebens’ in its countless nuances through the recurrence (and, *mutatis mutandis*, the classification and statistical measurability) of these differences (D, VII, 147-48).

What is striking in this light is Dilthey’s emphasis on the subject’s immediate self-historicization. He argues that every one of today’s self-objectifications and projections will become tomorrow’s history (D, VII, 147). This is dispiritingly familiar enough to the Facebook user inured to having every item on their ‘timeline’ chronologically catalogued for every ‘Friend’ to see; but Dilthey goes on to suggest that every thought, action, and creation draws its meaningfulness from its belonging to the whole of a particular period or context (D,

VII, 155). On a personal level, the continual ‘background’ operation of social and cultural systems and relations in the individual human ‘Kreuzungspunkt’ ensure that every human *Ausdruck* – along with its sedimented assumptions, purposes, and ways of thinking – can be interpreted and defined in terms of the cultures and ideologies which have shaped it (D, VII, 155). As Dilthey argues in underlining the possibility of an ever more complete understanding: ‘jede geistige Einheit [ist] *in sich selbst zentriert*’ (D, VII, 154). Since every human system has its own centre of gravity, it becomes possible for the hermeneutician structurally to determine every indeterminate aspect through its place in the whole (D, VII, 200).<sup>34</sup> In a less methodical vein – as in the observational economy of the social network – the individual’s supposed capacity to identify herself with ever increasing self-transparency is paralleled by an apparently ever more complete impression and knowledge of the Other. Yet more problematically, the two-way interaction between Dilthey’s individual and ideal subjects may enact what scholars have recognized to be the progressive balkanization and narcissism of online self-presentation. A desire for self-identification can feed, that is, into a solidification of identities and ideologies on the basis of narrowly shared, reinforced, and internalized interests and values.<sup>35</sup> What emerges in turn is a reciprocal relationship of compartmentalization and objectification, a kind of feedback loop which Facebook Inc. has

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<sup>34</sup> See Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, who emphasizes the primacy of the written word in Dilthey's conception of hermeneutics, in ‘Introduction: Language, Mind, and Artifact: An Outline of Hermeneutic Theory Since the Enlightenment’, in *The Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. by Mueller-Vollmer (New York: Continuum, 1992), pp. 1-53 (p. 27).

<sup>35</sup> For brief reflections on this much-discussed problem, see Abrams et al., *Future Identities*, p. 28; and Patrick Walters and Rita Kop, ‘Heidegger, Digital Technology, and Postmodern Education’, *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 29 (2009), 278-86 (p. 285).

learned algorithmically to encourage and exploit in its role as a personally tailored advertisement and news aggregator.<sup>36</sup>

Through an intensification of what is always already the case ‘offline’, then, subjects are urged to construct, understand, and disclose themselves in the languages of identity and ideology; and the correlate of this is that their interpretable texts and traces add to online narratives as soon as they are projected. In his essay ‘Ideen über eine beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie’ of 1894, Dilthey had argued that psychosocial categorization and control was in theory possible only ‘weil Gleichförmigkeit und Regelmäßigkeit im Seelenleben besteht und eine gleiche Ordnung für die vielen Lebenseinheiten ermöglicht’ (D, V, 148); and if we reconsider such a thesis in the later terms of his hermeneutics, we can see how far an objectifying *Verstehen* must necessarily encroach on its inexchangeably subjective counterpart of *Erleben*. The very argument that the autonomous individual is determined by her position in time and space, and ‘im Zusammenwirken der Kultursysteme’ (D, VII, 135), finds a compelling digital parallel in the determinative and predictive power of what Kosinski and others concede amounts to the ‘relatively basic’ electronic record of a ‘Like’.<sup>37</sup>

Reflecting on these unprecedented information-gathering potentialities, Marichal invokes the phenomenon of the ‘fully specified self’, the theoretically (if never practically) achievable statistical identification of every causal variable within an individual with a view to establishing a perfectly predictive econometric model of behaviour.<sup>38</sup> Turning by contrast to the question of *interpersonal* interaction, Alex Lambert highlights a sense among his sample of Facebook users of their online self-relinquishment as ‘text[s] which can be re-

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<sup>36</sup> See Lambert, *Intimacy and Friendship on Facebook*, p. 178.

<sup>37</sup> Kosinski et al., ‘Private Traits’, p. 5802.

<sup>38</sup> Marichal, *Facebook Democracy*, p. 129.

signified, re-possessed, in the hands of others'.<sup>39</sup> Considering these two approaches in tandem we arrive, I suggest, at a suture in the Facebook phenomenon between scientific explanation and hermeneutic understanding. Lambert speaks of a 'socio-ontological insecurity' tied up with our uncanny sense of becoming an ever more transparent, and 'panoptic' object in an online social network;<sup>40</sup> and making possible as it does determinate knowledge claims about the Other, this very logic of objectification threatens to undermine the networked self's legitimacy as a recognized and acknowledged subject.

Gadamer for his part challenges Dilthey's attachment to a human-scientific 'method' by restoring a radical sense of the temporal to hermeneutic understanding. The impulse behind this restoration is, in essence, a conviction that the endless shifts and evolutions within historical contexts rule out any objective reconstruction and understanding of human life (*WM*, p. 235). Underpinning his trademark demarcation of the scientific from the hermeneutic is a recognition of the relativity inherent in scientific models themselves, claiming as he does that their very 'Ansichsein' remains relative to the way in which 'being' is posited within those models (*WM*, p. 456). The insight that 'es [...] keinen Standort außerhalb der sprachlichen Welterfahrung [gibt], von dem her sie selber zum Gegenstand zu werden vermöchte' (*WM*, p. 456), refuses any claim to absolute objectivity in the face of the radically historical nature of *Sprachlichkeit*. Gadamer's critique here of the objectifying application of natural-scientific methodologies to the human sciences<sup>41</sup> should be read in the relation to his own revaluation of the ontological, in contradistinction to the subject-object

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<sup>39</sup> Lambert, *Intimacy and Friendship on Facebook*, p. 126.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 131-35.

<sup>41</sup> According to Gadamer, Dilthey thus neglects 'die eigene, wesenhafte Geschichtlichkeit der Geisteswissenschaften' (*WM*, p. 244).

demarcations characteristic of the nineteenth-century tradition of reflective philosophy.<sup>42</sup> It is against the backdrop of this shift that we can discern a powerful theoretical re-validation of understanding as a process that safeguards the dignity of the subject by respecting the integrity and dignity of the Other. But in order to appreciate the significance of this ‘turn’, we must first turn to consider the concept of the ‘aesthetic’ as the paradox which undermines Dilthey’s sense of subjectivity as something both understanding and understood at the same time.

His concept of subjective purposefulness is notable for its combination of structuredness on the one hand, and open-endedness on the other (D, VII, 140). In other words, the fixed unity underpinning our ‘selves’ gives rise to the aesthetic phenomenon of life as something inexhaustibly mutable and adaptable; and Fichte’s identification of the *Ich* as ‘ein Tun und absolut nichts weiter’<sup>43</sup> finds a performative counterpart in Dilthey’s recognition of the human subject not as a substantive entity, but rather as ‘Leben, Tätigkeit, Energie’ (D, VII, 157). As Rudolf Makkreel argues, we can also discern substantial elements of Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft* in the purposiveness integral to Dilthey’s subject-in-history.<sup>44</sup> There are certainly clear echoes, for example, of the apparently purposeful, beauty-

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<sup>42</sup> On the path-breaking significance of the Heideggerian ‘Ontological Turn’ in hermeneutics, see Bjørn Ramberg and Kristin Gjesdal, ‘Hermeneutics’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2013 <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hermeneutics/>> [accessed 5 May 2014].

<sup>43</sup> Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre: Vorerinnerung, Erste und Zweite Einleitung, Erstes Kapitel*, ed. by Peter Baumanns (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1975), p. 23.

<sup>44</sup> In this connection, Makkreel highlights Kant’s link between an ‘immanent subjective purposiveness’ on the one hand, and the ‘objective description of immanent purposiveness in organic life’ on the other (*Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies*, p. 243). On these two interacting elements, see Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften – Akademie Ausgabe*, ed. by Wilhelm Dilthey et

oriented aesthetic play of Kant's mental faculties in Dilthey's celebration of our sense of the transcendent unity inherent to a piece of music (D, VII, pp. 123-24). But while Gadamer acknowledges the possibility of a fleeting aesthetic reconciliation between 'Ideal' and 'Leben', he also highlights an ultimately unbridgeable gap between art and nature, between appearance and reality (WM, p. 88). Kant's judgments of taste are characterized by an inherent subjectivity, their claims to universality limited to an interplay between *Einbildungskraft* and *Verstand* that can never find grounding in a determinate concept.<sup>45</sup> The Kantian aesthetic therefore remains incapable of any definitive truth-claim because epistemology (and, with this, phenomenally verifiable truth itself) is inevitably reduced to a scientific methodology (WM, p. 90). However, this indeterminacy, as the hallmark of the kind of 'aesthetic consciousness' that Gadamer critiques here, is in fact utterly integral to the progressive objectification and scientization undermining Dilthey's hermeneutics. By setting the limit to our determinate knowledge at the edge of the phenomenal world, Kant arguably claims a kind of negative knowledge of the indeterminate realm beyond that limit (WM, p. 348).<sup>46</sup> It is in an analogous move that the *Geisteswissenschaften*, by delineating the mystery of subjectivity, paradoxically end up incorporating that mystery ever more completely into a descriptive and increasingly predictive science of *Verstehen*: a process which is all the more

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al. (Berlin: Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1900– ), V: *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft, Kritik der Urteilskraft*, ed. by Wilhelm Windelband (1908), pp. 353; 356 and 369-72.

<sup>45</sup> See Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, esp. V, 286-87.

<sup>46</sup> For an example of Hegel's dialectical response to the relativity of all reflective (subject-object) philosophical stances, see Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. on behalf of the Rheinisch-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1968– ), IX: *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. by Wolfgang Bonsiepen and Reinhard Heede (1980), pp. 58-62.

insidious for what remains an illusion of the aesthetic as a ‘safe-house of the self’, a final yet deceptive refuge for my sense of autonomy and individuality.

Dilthey himself implicitly recognizes the tension in his human sciences between what he calls ‘[das] größte[n] Geheimnis des Lebens’ (D, VII, 213), and his commitment – even in the face of his aesthetic subject – to a universally valid method (D, VII, 151-52). Makkreel has outlined the methodological proximity of the hermeneutic circle to the hypothetical procedures of experimental science.<sup>47</sup> My suggestion is that this reveals something similar to what Lambert suggests to be an ‘I-It’ relationship between an observing and an objectified subject on Facebook.<sup>48</sup> The user’s sense of a consciously aestheticized self-performance, grounded as it is in a playful process of ‘*reveal* and *conceal*’,<sup>49</sup> is predicated on a tacit assumption of her own indeterminacy *as* a subject; and yet its shadow-side, as I have tried to show here, lies in the increasingly knowing objectification that this performance invites from its spectating audience.

This is certainly not to deny the qualified advantages to aspects of objectification: indeed, the possibility of the large-scale statistical analysis of Facebook traces would seem to promise significant advances in both sociology and experimental psychology.<sup>50</sup> But the reduction of the online individual to a system of predictable – rather than simply comprehensible – tendencies, also offers unsettling answers to questions of personal identity, dignity, and privacy in a digital age. While bound to a social network they can no longer plausibly leave, its inhabitants could be forgiven for asking whether Facebook’s aesthetic game is necessarily worth the candle after all.

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<sup>47</sup> See Makkreel, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies*, pp. 333-37.

<sup>48</sup> Lambert, *Intimacy and Friendship on Facebook*, p. 140.

<sup>49</sup> Marichal, *Facebook Democracy*, p. 107.

<sup>50</sup> See Kosinski et al., ‘Private Traits’, p. 5805.

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A close reading of Gadamer's hermeneutics can suggest a possible response to this dilemma in reframing the concept of understanding. If understanding can be understood not in terms of epistemological mastery, but rather in terms of a dialogue between subjects, then we may in turn be able to sketch out a space in which the networked individual can be re-thought.

Underpinning Gadamer's notion of dialogue is his basic definition of language as tied up in an irreducibly mysterious co-dependence with our every private thought and social interaction. His invocation of 'die ursprüngliche Sprachlichkeit des menschlichen In-der-Welt-Seins' (*WM*, p. 447) reveals a profound intellectual debt to Heidegger. The significance of *Sein und Zeit*'s central thesis, that being itself is time (*WM*, p. 261), had been rooted in its orienting philosophy away from an epistemological conception of 'life' in terms of structured subjective experience, and towards a recognition of the pre-subjective thisness of our being-in-the-world (*WM*, pp. 258-60). Understanding here takes on an immediate existential significance.<sup>51</sup> It embodies a primarily practical orientation towards the world, manifest in *Dasein*'s always already pushing forward in time, on the basis of its ineluctable embeddedness in history (*Geworfenheit*), into its various existential possibilities. The link between language and comprehension is correspondingly phenomenological rather than psychological: language, to put it the other way around, is grounded in our often sub-reflective yet comprehending 'Umgang' with a world full of practical points and relations of reference.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> See Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, p. 143.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

Gadamer defines understanding as ‘*die ursprüngliche Vollzugsform des Daseins, das In-der- Weltsein*’ (*WM*, p. 264), hence on his own account aligning it explicitly with language. In keeping with his move away from a subject-object axis, language cannot be instrumentalized or objectified as an artificial and unambiguous system of symbols, but remains ineffably and uncannily close to our everyday being (*WM*, pp. 418 and 383). Dilthey’s *Verstehen* had implicitly drawn on a movement towards increased self-knowledge, as well as towards an ever greater epistemological mastery of the Other, through an individually *and* communally appropriate language. What Gadamer proposes is a subtly different argument: having offered us the arresting insight that understanding is always the achievement of language itself (*WM*, pp. 383 and 447), he suggests that language actually finds its essence ‘erst im Gespräch’ (*WM*, p. 449).

This implication that language always in some sense *is* conversation invites, I submit, the ontological re-thinking of a human individual forever implicated in dialogue. A conversation’s orientation towards understanding (*WM*, p. 449) is particularly significant here because it visualizes both language’s spontaneously processual element, and its drawn-out and dialectical arrival at the appropriate word or words. In describing something, that is, we must seek out the word that ‘wirklich zur Sache gehört, so daß sie selbst darin zu Worte kommt’ (*WM*, p. 421); and this search is couched in the form of a kind of inner-dialogical movement towards the right expression. Gadamer accordingly stresses the inseparability of the language from thought (*WM*, p. 428), understanding becoming so inextricably tied up with language as to constitute an ‘inner speaking’ (*WM*, p. 166). This metaphor of on-going conversation is worth dwelling upon because it moves us *away* from an understanding of language and expression that is concerned with the possibility of knowledge and identification of an Other. Language instead becomes the dialogical medium by which we explore, if never exhaust, the myriad quotidian – and less quotidian – subject matters among

which our attention is always distributed. In short, Gadamer's word 'drückt gar nicht den Geist, sondern die gemeinte Sache aus' (WM, p. 430).

It is in the dialogical concept of the 'inner word' that we find most clearly embodied both the finitude of the subject on the one hand, and her capacities for meaningfulness on the other. The analogy, drawn from Augustine, is used to illustrate the inner process of thinking that is the seedbed of *Sprachlichkeit*. Unlike its divine counterpart, 'das menschliche Wort' is never a single, self-sufficient utterance (WM, p. 429), embodying as it does the very possibility of 'saying something more' that is latent in the constitutive finitude of human expression. Its ontological status 'auf seine mögliche Äußerung bezogen' (WM, p. 426) foregrounds a dialectical interplay of absence and presence at the heart of language, one which offers a cogent alternative to Derrida's *différance*.<sup>53</sup> The subject never possesses 'die vollständige Selbstgegenwart', but rather is dispersed among an unmasterable to-and-fro of thoughts (WM, p. 429). A process of identical-yet-non-identical 'understanding-as' thus comes to characterize this on-going dialogical process of thoughtfulness and consideration integral to the search for the right word (WM, p. 429). Our intellect's failure ever to attain complete self-presence compels a mediating search for supplementary words; and it is this tantalizing proximity, yet insuperable non-identity, of our language and our being which makes Gadamer's notion of subjectivity inherently 'meaningful', yet irrevocably decentred and mysterious.

Understanding for Gadamer, then, is not a means to epistemological reconstruction, but rather the underlying principle of our meaningfully being-with-ourselves and our being-with-others in dialogue: it is our ability to interpret and articulate our own *inneres Wort* to

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<sup>53</sup> For a discussion of the 'inner word's' defence against Derrida's charges of logocentrism, see James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-Reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997), pp. 176-78.

ourselves and, by extension, to allow in dialogue ‘das Zur-Sprache-kommen der Sache selbst [eines Gesprächs]’ (WM, p. 384). This openness to language’s capacities for disclosure is what accounts for Gadamer’s analogy between a hermeneutic encounter with a text, and a conversation, in both of which the matter under consideration is what binds together the parties-in-dialogue (WM, p. 391). In contrast to Dilthey:

[Es] handelt [...] sich im Verstehen ganz gewiß nicht um ein “historisches Verständnis”, das die Entsprechung des Textes rekonstruierte. Vielmehr meint man *den Text selbst* zu verstehen. Das bedeutet aber, daß die eigenen Gedanken des Interpreten in die Wiedererweckung des Textsinnes immer schon mit eingegangen sind. (WM, p. 392)

The interpreter’s goal here is not to efface her subjectivity with the aim of an objective knowledge of context, text, or individual. After all, she is always personally invested, being ‘mit der Sache, die mit der Überlieferung zur Sprache kommt, verbunden’ (WM, p. 300). Much like textual interpreters, in turn, interlocutors are always already committed to a ‘Sache’, a subject matter which is meaningfully shaped by their respective dialogical habits, their particular ‘ways of speaking about things’. Central to this account is the recognition that we belong to history rather than the other way round, and that there is an ultimately indeterminate two-way relationship between individuals and their situations, such as precludes Dilthey’s progression from the self-reflectively autobiographical to an understanding of communal and historical realities. Even our explicit self-identification as subjects is always preceded by our understanding ourselves ‘auf selbstverständliche Weise in Familie, Gesellschaft und Staat, in denen wir leben’; and so any suggestion of a self-transparent subjectivity artificially distorts what is always already the case (WM, p. 281).

From understanding's (re-)definition *as* language we can glean two interdependent insights, which taken together may invite a reconsideration of the digital-dialogical spaces in which social network users in some sense now find themselves 'thrown'. Firstly, while we are unable to reconstruct a context of utterance and to locate and define an Other (*WM*, p. 266), we are nonetheless always already understanding *and* interpreting in the in-between space of the *Sache* (*WM*, p. 478; p. 387); and secondly, this ontological account of understanding and interpretation can help us more clearly to delineate the networked subject's ethical and existential possibilities.

The first insight in particular draws attention to our embeddedness in history, and our beholdenness to *Vorurteile*, as the preconditions of possible interpretation. Gadamer argues that the historicity of human *Dasein*, in its imperfection, expectancy, and forgetfulness, remains the condition for the fact that we 'Gewesenes überhaupt vergegenwärtigen' (*WM*, p. 266). Whether in a textual or an oral context, our human finitude becomes the precondition for any kind of understanding whatever. It is certainly our willed and unwilled blindness to our pre-existing historical and contextual prejudices which prevents us from being able to listen to an Other; but these 'Vorurteile' just as surely remain inextricable from our radically historical existence (*WM*, p. 274; p. 281). Pre-judgments, in other words, are mediated through a personal context for which we have never fully accounted, and never will.

A form of understanding grounded in *Vorurteile* necessitates a re-conception of the hermeneutic circle shaped by Heidegger's heuristic process – in respect of the thing to be interpreted – of *Vorhabe*, *Vorsicht*, and *Vorbegriff*.<sup>54</sup> Gadamer discusses our approach to a text or an interlocutor as involving our bringing our *Vorurteile* into anticipatory play, before interrogating them on the basis of the posited wholeness of the text or Other. It is our being brought up short by the otherness, even the strangeness, of what is said that encourages us to

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<sup>54</sup> See Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, pp. 150-53.

re-examine our own linguistic usage in asking what it is that resists our comprehension and confounds our assumptions (*WM*, pp. 272-73). Emergent in this act of interpretation is a ‘*sachliche Fragestellung*’, a logic of question and answer which takes the agency of the Other into account (*WM*, p. 375). In genuinely asking, we allow *ourselves* to have them tell us something; we become increasingly aware of our own nexus of ‘*Vormeinungen und Vorurteile*’ (*WM*, p. 274); and yet our arrival at understanding, something which Gadamer can describe only as a ‘*Geschehen*’ (*WM*, p. 387), happens only if the Other’s opinions and presuppositions are placed in relation to the totality of our own (*WM*, p. 273).

As Toni Tholen argues, the encounter in conversation – *contra* Derridean deconstruction – remains a truth event in which one gradually uncovers what has been hidden in both self and Other.<sup>55</sup> In meeting the Other, we are invited to uncover and delineate the ever shifting aspects, prospects, and possibilities latent in ourselves. The interpreter’s act of bringing her own ‘*Meinung und Möglichkeit [...] ins Spiel*’ contributes towards a ‘*Horizontverschmelzung*’ which, as the discovery of a common language and subject matter, transcends the historicity of both horizons and at the same time affirms it (*WM*, pp. 392 and 311). Inasmuch as this horizon represents a dialogical creation, it provides a marked contrast to Dilthey’s ever more circumscribed ‘*abgeschlossenen Horizont*’ of individual situations and contexts (*D*, VII, 155). What we encounter here instead is a reflection, in dialogue, of the radical de-centricity and self-obscurity of the subject; and an illumination of the uncharted alterity within the self is mirrored in a recognition of the alterity, unknowability, and truthfulness, of the ‘*Du [...] als Person*’ (*WM*, p. 366).

The dialogical to-and-fro of Facebook ‘chats’, threads, and hyperlinks are of broad cultural significance, as boyd and Ellison remind us, because they are totemic of the ever

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<sup>55</sup> See Toni Tholen, *Erfahrung und Interpretation: Der Streit zwischen Hermeneutik und Dekonstruktion* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1999), pp. 123-24.

more user-oriented and constitutively ‘conversational’ interfaces of what many commentators have over the past decade termed ‘Web 2.0’.<sup>56</sup> Proposing Gadamer’s hermeneutics as a means of re-thinking our interactions and ourselves within this kind of public space, however, carries a substantial practical caveat. His recognition of alterity and inter-subjectivity certainly invites a keener awareness of the inherently ethical dimensions to the concept of dialogue, and so suggests itself as an ideal candidate here. But as Dilthey unwittingly shows and Jürgen Habermas explicitly argues, Gadamer’s truth-event of ‘understanding’ is in practice always susceptible either to distortion or to *Verflachung* through the variously coercive, appropriative, and self-limiting languages of identity, self-interest, and ideology.<sup>57</sup> And the pervasiveness of this *fact* seems to leave very little incentive to subscribe to the high-minded *value* of dialogue. Why, in short, should we care about what Gadamer might have to say?

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By way of conclusion, I would like to propose an answer that is both ethical and hermeneutical. The objectifying risks of Facebook certainly illuminate a deep rift between questions of ‘is’ and ‘ought’ in relation to our behaviour as networked subjects. A provisional ethics of dialogue might nonetheless find a *factual* impetus in the gradual development of the social networking site away from a static, user-profile-based platform, and towards a de-centred web of relations, contacts, and contents.<sup>58</sup> The emergence of more open-endedly

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<sup>56</sup> See boyd and Ellison, ‘Sociality through Social Network Sites’, pp. 158-64.

<sup>57</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, ‘Der Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik’, in *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik*, ed. by Habermas et al. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), pp. 120-59 (pp. 150-59).

<sup>58</sup> See boyd and Ellison, ‘Sociality Through Social Network Sites’, pp. 154-60

responsive forms of social media, to name Twitter as perhaps the most prominent current example, has certainly amplified the scope for misinterpretation and misappropriation of ‘what other people are saying and doing’. However, it has also provided a cultural backdrop for broader arguments about the ethical value of a robust recognition of alterity in our online public spheres. Marichal contends that Facebook’s potential as a forum for political discussion remains dependent on the friction involved in our listening to those with very different backgrounds, opinions, and prejudices. His practical call for us to use our online networks to cultivate ‘habits of *listening* to a wide range of groups [and individuals]’, for the sake of ‘addressing collective problems’,<sup>59</sup> finds resonance in Gadamer’s own conceptualization of a dialogue’s *Sache* as its ‘Weg und Ziel’ (*WM*, p. 184). As I have tried to show, the profoundly personal dimension to this ethic is the recognition that we delineate our subjective horizons – and so develop a more variegated sense of who we are and what we might think – only by forming dialogical ones (*WM*, p. 311). In contrast to the aestheticizing and objectifying ‘I-It’ illustrated by Dilthey’s hermeneutics, our dignity *as* subjects finds its full measure only in the in-between space of the conversation.<sup>60</sup>

Having to think about otherness, instead of toying with attention-seeking status updates, or considering how best to decant a memorable craft beer into a tweet, would take the fun out of social networking. Regardless of the manifest risks, we thoroughly enjoy

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<sup>59</sup> Marichal, *Facebook Democracy*, p. 156. See also Richard Coyne and Dorian Wiszniewski, ‘Technical Deceits: Critical Theory, Hermeneutics and the Ethics of Information Technology’, *International Journal of Design Sciences and Technology*, 8 (2000), 9–18 (esp. pp. 13–17). This contribution shows more generally how the conversational (and so ethical) orientation of post-Gadamerian hermeneutics might provide a complement to critical theory’s relentlessly suspicious analyses of (pre-‘Web 2.0’) information and internet technologies.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Lambert, *Intimacy and Friendship on Facebook*, p. 141.

making ourselves the aesthetic objects of the Other's gaze. But far from being a humanistic platitude, the deep personal value of alterity may well take on clear personal relevance if we try to re-cast our networks *as* hermeneutic spaces. As what boyd and Ellison call 'socio-technical' entities, they represent a unique hybrid of the online and the offline, the real and the virtual, and the human and technological;<sup>61</sup> and yet to the extent that they have transformed the space in which information technology is employed for-the-sake-of presentation and communication by co-existing *Daseins*, they also embody an infinitely ramifying extension of what Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit* calls 'world'.<sup>62</sup> His hermeneutic insight, we recall, is that our primordial way of being-in-the-world as *Dasein* lies in a continual orientation towards undetermined possibilities,<sup>63</sup> an idea which Gadamer for his part sets firmly in the context of linguistic interpretation. It is in thinking about such 'possibilities' that we return finally to the '*Logik der Frage und Antwort*' integral to our interpretatively bringing to light the 'in der Schweben befindliche Möglichkeiten' within a matter under discussion (*WM*, p. 380). Through our questioning encounters with an Other, we are always brought to an 'interpretation' which – if it is to be worthwhile – mediates what is other in a language that remain ineluctably our own (*WM*, pp. 392 and 401). Questioning may involve an exploration, in ways that make sense to us but are uncannily beyond our subjective control, of unfamiliar possibilities of orientation, opinion, and lifestyle;<sup>64</sup> and to a socially

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<sup>61</sup> boyd and Ellison, 'Sociality through Social Network Sites', pp. 160 and 165-67.

<sup>62</sup> See Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, pp. 69 and 117-25; cf. Joohan Kim, 'Phenomenology of Digital-Being', *Human Studies*, 24 (2001), 87-111.

<sup>63</sup> See Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, pp. 143 and 153.

<sup>64</sup> See Coyne and Wiszeniowski, 'Technical Deceits', esp. pp. 15-17. See also Capurro who, in a related vein, advocates a 'digital ontology' grounded in a radically decentred conception of our human-digital interactions ('Digital Hermeneutics', esp. pp. 36-41).

and technologically unprecedented degree, Gadamer's hermeneutics thus offers a philosophical underpinning to the truths latent '*für uns*' in the myriad possible encounters on our extensible, permeable, and often contingent networks (*WM*, p. 445).<sup>65</sup> On the condition that we let it, 'understanding' will unpredictably transgress and expand precisely the closed horizons within which we feel unquestioningly at home.

My conclusion, then, is a paradoxical and necessarily provisional one. Our social-networking culture is in many respects structured towards our digital self-identification, balkanization, and marketization, and this article has tried to show how the German hermeneutic tradition illuminates the risks posed to the subject. But a re-consideration of Gadamer's hermeneutics can help us in two ways: firstly, in marking out the space for an ethics of online dialogue; and secondly, in illuminating the avenues along which, as networked subjects, we might enter into meaningful, and personally *truthful*, encounters with other ways of thinking and being. If we can credibly affirm identity as something that is positively shaped by alterity, whether online, offline, or in the hybrid spaces of the social network, then we will unquestionably be the richer for it.

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<sup>65</sup> Space precludes an exploration here of the phenomenological affinities between the infinitely extensible structures of online networks and Gadamer's meditations on the inherently extensible, speculative nature of *Sprachlichkeit* (*WM*, pp. 460-80). For a concise discussion of his debt to Hegel in this connection, see Robert Pippin, 'Gadamer's Hegel', in R.J. Dostal (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 225-46.