

## (C) THE HERMENEUTIC PRIORITY OF THE QUESTION

*(i) The Model of Platonic Dialectic*

This indicates the direction our inquiry must take. We will now examine the *logical structure of openness* that characterizes hermeneutical consciousness, recalling the importance of the concept of the *question* to our analysis of the hermeneutical situation. It is clear that the structure of the question is implicit in all experience. We cannot have experiences without asking questions. Recognizing that an object is different, and not as we first thought, obviously presupposes the question whether it was this or that. From a logical point of view, the openness essential to experience is precisely the openness of being either this or that. It has the structure of a question. And just as the dialectical negativity of experience culminates in the idea of being perfectly experienced—i.e., being aware of our finitude and limitedness—so also the logical form of the question and the negativity that is part of it culminate in a radical negativity: the knowledge of not knowing. This is the famous Socratic *docta ignorantia* which, amid the most extreme negativity of doubt, opens up the way to the true superiority of questioning. We will have to consider *the essence of the question* in greater depth if we are to clarify the particular nature of hermeneutical experience.

The essence of the question is to have sense. Now sense involves a sense of direction. Hence the sense of the question is the only direction from which the answer can be given if it is to make sense. A question places what is questioned in a particular perspective. When a question arises, it breaks open the being of the object, as it were. Hence the *logos* that explicates this opened-up being is an answer. Its sense lies in the sense of the question.

Among the greatest insights that Plato's account of Socrates affords us is that, contrary to the general opinion, it is more difficult to ask questions than to answer them. When the partners in the Socratic dialogue are unable to answer Socrates' awkward questions and try to turn the tables by assuming what they suppose is the preferable role of the questioner, they come to grief.<sup>124</sup> Behind this comic motif in the Platonic dialogues there is the critical distinction between authentic and inauthentic dialogue. To someone who engages in dialogue only to prove himself right and not to gain insight, asking questions will indeed seem easier than answering them. There is no risk that he will be unable to answer a question. In fact, however, the continual failure of the interlocutor shows that people who

think they know better cannot even ask the right questions. In order to be able to ask, one must want to know, and that means knowing that one does not know. In the comic confusion between question and answer, knowledge and ignorance that Plato describes, there is a profound recognition of the *priority of the question* in all knowledge and discourse that really reveals something of an object. Discourse that is intended to reveal something requires that that thing be broken open by the question.

For this reason, dialectic proceeds by way of question and answer or, rather, the path of all knowledge leads through the question. To ask a question means to bring into the open. The openness of what is in question consists in the fact that the answer is not settled. It must still be undetermined, awaiting a decisive answer. The significance of questioning consists in revealing the questionability of what is questioned. It has to be brought into this state of indeterminacy, so that there is an equilibrium between pro and contra. The sense of every question is realized in passing through this state of indeterminacy, in which it becomes an open question. Every true question requires this openness. Without it, it is basically no more than an apparent question. We are familiar with this from the example of the pedagogical question, whose paradoxical difficulty consists in the fact that it is a question without a questioner. Or from the rhetorical question, which not only has no questioner but no object.

The openness of a question is not boundless. It is limited by the horizon of the question. A question that lacks this horizon is, so to speak, floating. It becomes a question only when its fluid indeterminacy is concretized in a specific "this or that." In other words, the question has to be posed. Posing a question implies openness but also limitation. It implies the explicit establishing of presuppositions, in terms of which can be seen what still remains open. Hence a question can be asked rightly or wrongly, according as it reaches into the sphere of the truly open or fails to do so. We say that a question has been put wrongly when it does not reach the state of openness but precludes reaching it by retaining false presuppositions. It pretends to an openness and susceptibility to decision that it does not have. But if what is in question is not foregrounded, or not correctly foregrounded, from those presuppositions that are really held, then it is not brought into the open and nothing can be decided.

This is shown clearly in the case of the slanted question that we are so familiar with in everyday life. There can be no answer to a slanted question because it leads us only apparently, and not really, through the open state of indeterminacy in which a decision is made. We call it slanted rather than

wrongly put because there is a question behind it—i.e., there is an openness intended, but it does not lie in the direction in which the slanted question is pointing. The word “slanted” refers to something that has deviated from the right direction. The slant of a question consists in the fact that it does not give any real direction, and hence no answer to it is possible. Similarly, we say that statements which are not exactly wrong but also not right are “slanted.” This too is determined by their sense—i.e., by their relation to the question. We cannot call them wrong, since we detect something true about them, but neither can we properly call them right because they do not correspond to any meaningful question and hence have no correct meaning unless they are themselves corrected. Sense is always sense of direction for a possible question. Correct sense must accord with the direction in which a question points.

Insofar as a question remains open, it always includes both negative and positive judgments. This is the basis of the essential relation between question and knowledge. For it is the essence of knowledge not only to judge something correctly but, at the same time and for the same reason, to exclude what is wrong. Deciding the question is the path to knowledge. What decides a question is the preponderance of reasons for the one and against the other possibility. But this is still not full knowledge. The thing itself is known only when the counterinstances are dissolved, only when the counterarguments are seen to be incorrect.

We are familiar with this especially from medieval dialectic, which lists not only the pro and contra and then its own decision, but finally sets out all the arguments. This form of medieval dialectic is not simply the consequence of an educational system emphasizing disputation, but on the contrary, it depends on the inner connection between knowledge and dialectic—i.e., between answer and question. There is a famous passage in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*<sup>125</sup> that has attracted a great deal of attention and can be explained in terms of what we have been saying. Aristotle says that dialectic is the power to investigate contraries independently of the object, and to see whether one and the same science can be concerned with contraries. Here it seems that a general account of dialectic (which corresponds exactly to what we find, for example, in Plato’s *Parmenides*) is linked to a highly specialized “logical” problem which is familiar to us from the *Topics*.<sup>126</sup> It does indeed seem a very curious question whether the same science can be concerned with contraries. Hence the attempt has been made to dismiss this as a gloss.<sup>127</sup> The connection between the two questions becomes clear, however, as soon as we accept the priority of the

question over the answer, which is the basis of the concept of knowledge. Knowledge always means, precisely, considering opposites. Its superiority over preconceived opinion consists in the fact that it is able to conceive of possibilities as possibilities. Knowledge is dialectical from the ground up. Only a person who has questions can have knowledge, but questions include the antithesis of yes and no, of being like this and being like that. Only because knowledge is dialectical in this comprehensive sense can there be a "dialectic" that explicitly makes its object the antithesis of yes and no. Thus the apparently over-specialized question of whether or not it is possible to have one and the same science of contraries contains, in fact, the ground of the very possibility of dialectic.

Even Aristotle's views on proof and argument—which, in fact, make dialectic a subordinate element in knowledge—accord the same priority to the question, as has been demonstrated by Ernst Kapp's brilliant work on the origin of Aristotle's syllogistic.<sup>128</sup> The priority of the question in knowledge shows how fundamentally the idea of method is limited for knowledge, which has been the starting point for our argument as a whole. There is no such thing as a method of learning to ask questions, of learning to see what is questionable. On the contrary, the example of Socrates teaches that the important thing is the knowledge that one does not know. Hence the Socratic dialectic—which leads, through its art of confusing the interlocutor, to this knowledge—creates the conditions for the question. All questioning and desire to know presuppose a knowledge that one does not know; so much so, indeed, that a particular lack of knowledge leads to a particular question.

Plato shows in an unforgettable way where the difficulty lies in knowing what one does not know. It is the power of opinion against which it is so hard to obtain an admission of ignorance. It is opinion that suppresses questions. Opinion has a curious tendency to propagate itself. It would always like to be the general opinion, just as the word that the Greeks have for opinion, *doxa*, also means the decision made by the majority in the council assembly. How, then, can ignorance be admitted and questions arise?

Let us say first of all that it can occur only in the way any idea occurs to us. It is true that we do speak of ideas occurring to us less in regard to questions than to answers—e.g., the solution of problems; and by this we mean to say that there is no methodical way to arrive at the solution. But we also know that such ideas do not occur to us entirely unexpectedly. They always presuppose an orientation toward an area of openness from

which the idea can occur—i.e., they presuppose questions. The real nature of the sudden idea is perhaps less that a solution occurs to us like an answer to a riddle than that a question occurs to us that breaks through into the open and thereby makes an answer possible. Every sudden idea has the structure of a question. But the sudden occurrence of the question is already a breach in the smooth front of popular opinion. Hence we say that a question too “occurs” to us, that it “arises” or “presents itself” more than that we raise it or present it.

We have already seen that, logically considered, the negativity of experience implies a question. In fact we have experiences when we are shocked by things that do not accord with our expectations. Thus questioning too is more a passion than an action. A question presses itself on us; we can no longer avoid it and persist in our accustomed opinion.

It seems to conflict with these conclusions, however, that the Socratic-Platonic dialectic raises the art of questioning to a conscious art; but there is something peculiar about this art. We have seen that it is reserved to the person who wants to know—i.e., who already has questions. The art of questioning is not the art of resisting the pressure of opinion; it already presupposes this freedom. It is not an art in the sense that the Greeks speak of *techne*, not a craft that can be taught or by means of which we could master the discovery of truth. The so-called epistemological digression of the *Seventh Letter* is directed, rather, to distinguishing the unique art of dialectic from everything that can be taught and learned. The art of dialectic is not the art of being able to win every argument. On the contrary, it is possible that someone practicing the art of dialectic—i.e., the art of questioning and of seeking truth—comes off worse in the argument in the eyes of those listening to it. As the art of asking questions, dialectic proves its value because only the person who knows how to ask questions is able to persist in his questioning, which involves being able to preserve his orientation toward openness. The art of questioning is the art of questioning ever further—i.e., the art of thinking. It is called dialectic because it is the art of conducting a real dialogue.

To conduct a dialogue requires first of all that the partners do not talk at cross purposes. Hence it necessarily has the structure of question and answer. The first condition of the art of conversation is ensuring that the other person is with us. We know this only too well from the reiterated ‘yes’ of the interlocutors in the Platonic dialogues. The positive side of this monotony is the inner logic with which the subject matter is developed in the conversation. To conduct a conversation means to allow oneself to be

conducted by the subject matter to which the partners in the dialogue are oriented. It requires that one does not try to argue the other person down but that one really considers the weight of the other's opinion. Hence it is an art of testing.<sup>129</sup> But the art of testing is the art of questioning. For we have seen that to question means to lay open, to place in the open. As against the fixity of opinions, questioning makes the object and all its possibilities fluid. A person skilled in the "art" of questioning is a person who can prevent questions from being suppressed by the dominant opinion. A person who possesses this art will himself search for everything in favor of an opinion. Dialectic consists not in trying to discover the weakness of what is said, but in bringing out its real strength. It is not the art of arguing (which can make a strong case out of a weak one) but the art of thinking (which can strengthen objections by referring to the subject matter).

The unique and continuing relevance of the Platonic dialogues is due to this art of strengthening, for in this process what is said is continually transformed into the uttermost possibilities of its rightness and truth, and overcomes all opposition that tries to limit its validity. Here again it is not simply a matter of leaving the subject undecided. Someone who wants to know something cannot just leave it a matter of mere opinion, which is to say that he cannot hold himself aloof from the opinions that are in question.<sup>130</sup> The speaker (*der Redende*) is put to the question (*zur Rede gestellt*) until the truth of what is under discussion (*wovon der Rede ist*) finally emerges. The maieutic productivity of the Socratic dialogue, the art of using words as a midwife, is certainly directed toward the people who are the partners in the dialogue, but it is concerned merely with the opinions they express, the immanent logic of the subject matter that is unfolded in the dialogue. What emerges in its truth is the *logos*, which is neither mine nor yours and hence so far transcends the interlocutors' subjective opinions that even the person leading the conversation knows that he does not know. As the art of conducting a conversation, dialectic is also the art of seeing things in the unity of an aspect (*sunoran eis hen eidos*)—i.e., it is the art of forming concepts through working out the common meaning. What characterizes a dialogue, in contrast with the rigid form of statements that demand to be set down in writing, is precisely this: that in dialogue spoken language—in the process of question and answer, giving and taking, talking at cross purposes and seeing each other's point—performs the communication of meaning that, with respect to the written tradition, is the task of hermeneutics. Hence it is more than a

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metaphor; it is a memory of what originally was the case, to describe the task of hermeneutics as entering into dialogue with the text. That this interpretation is performed by spoken language does not mean that it is transposed into a foreign medium; rather, being transformed into spoken language represents the restoration of the original communication of meaning. When it is interpreted, written tradition is brought back out of the alienation in which it finds itself and into the living present of conversation, which is always fundamentally realized in question and answer.

Thus we can appeal to Plato if we want to foreground the place of the question in hermeneutics. We can do this all the more readily since Plato himself manifests the hermeneutical phenomenon in a specific way. It would be worth investigating his critique of the written word as evidence that the poetic and philosophical tradition was becoming a literature in Athens. In Plato's dialogues we see how the kind of textual "interpretation" cultivated by the sophists, especially the interpretation of poetry for didactic ends, elicited Plato's opposition. We can see, further, how Plato tries to overcome the weakness of the logoi, especially the written logoi, through his own dialogues. The literary form of the dialogue places language and concept back within the original movement of the conversation. This protects words from all dogmatic abuse.

The primacy of conversation can also be seen in derivative forms in which the relation between question and answer is obscured. Letters, for example, are an interesting intermediate phenomenon: a kind of written conversation that, as it were, stretches out the movement of talking at cross purposes and seeing each other's point. The art of writing letters consists in not letting what one says become a treatise on the subject but in making it acceptable to the correspondent. But on the other hand it also consists in preserving and fulfilling the standard of finality that everything stated in writing has. The time lapse between sending a letter and receiving an answer is not just an external factor, but gives this form of communication its special nature as a particular form of writing. So we note that speeding up the post has not improved this form of communication but, on the contrary, has led to a decline in the art of letter writing.

The primacy of dialogue, the relation of question and answer, can be seen in even so extreme a case as that of Hegel's dialectic as a philosophical method. To elaborate the totality of the determinations of thought, which was the aim of Hegel's logic, is as it were the attempt to comprehend within the great monologue of modern "method" the continuum of

meaning that is realized in every particular instance of dialogue. When Hegel sets himself the task of making the abstract determinations of thought fluid and subtle, this means dissolving and remolding logic into concrete language, and transforming the concept into the meaningful power of the word that questions and answers—a magnificent reminder, even if unsuccessful, of what dialectic really was and is. Hegel's dialectic is a monologue of thinking that tries to carry out in advance what matures little by little in every genuine dialogue.

(ii) *The Logic of Question and Answer*

Thus we return to the conclusion that the hermeneutic phenomenon too implies the primacy of dialogue and the structure of question and answer. That a historical text is made the object of interpretation means that it puts a question to the interpreter. Thus interpretation always involves a relation to the question that is asked of the interpreter. To understand a text means to understand this question. But this takes place, as we showed, by our attaining the hermeneutical horizon. We now recognize this as the *horizon of the question* within which the sense of the text is determined.

Thus a person who wants to understand must question what lies behind what is said. He must understand it as an answer to a question. If we go back *behind* what is said, then we inevitably ask questions *beyond* what is said. We understand the sense of the text only by acquiring the horizon of the question—a horizon that, as such, necessarily includes other possible answers. Thus the meaning of a sentence is relative to the question to which it is a reply, but that implies that its meaning necessarily exceeds what is said in it. As these considerations show, then, the logic of the human sciences is a logic of the question.

Despite Plato we are not very ready for such a logic. Almost the only person I find a link with here is R. G. Collingwood. In a brilliant and telling critique of the Oxford "realist" school, he developed the idea of a logic of question and answer, but unfortunately never elaborated it systematically.<sup>131</sup> He clearly saw what was missing in naive hermeneutics founded on the prevailing philosophical critique. In particular the practice that Collingwood found in English universities of discussing "statements," though perhaps good practice for sharpening one's intelligence, obviously failed to take account of the historicity that is part of all understanding. Collingwood argues thus: We can understand a text only when we have understood the question to which it is an answer. But since this question



can be derived solely from the text and accordingly the appropriateness of the reply is the methodological presupposition for the reconstruction of the question, any criticism of this reply from some other quarter is pure shadow boxing. It is like understanding works of art. A work of art can be understood only if we assume its adequacy as an expression of the artistic idea. Here too we have to discover the question which it answers, if we are to understand it as an answer. This is, in fact, an axiom of all hermeneutics: we described it above as the "fore-conception of completeness."<sup>132</sup>

For Collingwood, this is the nerve of all historical knowledge. The historical method requires that the logic of question and answer be applied to historical tradition. We will understand historical events only if we reconstruct the question to which the historical actions of the persons involved were the answer. As an example Collingwood cites the Battle of Trafalgar and Nelson's plan on which it was based. The example is intended to show that the course of the battle helps us to understand Nelson's real plan, because it was successfully carried out. Because his opponent's plan failed, however, it cannot be reconstructed from the events. Thus, understanding the course of the battle and understanding the plan that Nelson carried out in it are one and the same process.<sup>133</sup>

But yet one cannot conceal the fact that the logic of question and answer has to reconstruct two different questions that have two different answers: the question of the meaning of a great event and the question of whether this event went according to plan. Clearly, the two questions coincide only when the plan coincides with the course of events. But we cannot suppose such coincidence as a methodological principle when we are concerned with a historical tradition which deals with men, like ourselves, in history. Tolstoy's celebrated description of the council of war before the battle—in which all the strategic possibilities are calculated and all the plans considered, thoroughly and perceptively, while the general sits there and sleeps, but in the night before the battle goes round all the sentry posts—is obviously a more accurate account of what we call history. Kutusov gets nearer to the reality and the forces that determine it than the strategists of the war council. The conclusion to be drawn from this example is that the interpreter of history always runs the risk of hypostasizing the connectedness of events when he regards their significance as that intended by the actual actors and planners.<sup>134</sup>

This is a legitimate undertaking only if Hegel's conditions hold good—i.e., the philosophy of history is made party to the plans of the world spirit and on the basis of this esoteric knowledge is able to mark out

certain individuals as having world-historical importance, since there is a real correlation between their particular ideas and the world-historical meaning of events. But it is impossible to derive a hermeneutical principle for the knowledge of history from such conjunctions of the subjective and objective in history. In regard to historical tradition Hegel's theory clearly has only a limited truth. The infinite web of motivations that constitutes history only occasionally and briefly acquires the clarity of what a single individual has planned. Thus what Hegel describes as an exception proves the rule that there is a disproportion between an individual's subjective thoughts and the meaning of the whole course of history. As a rule we experience the course of events as something that continually changes our plans and expectations. Someone who tries to stick to his plans discovers precisely how powerless his reason is. There are rare occasions when everything happens, as it were, of its own accord—i.e., events seem to be automatically in accord with our plans and wishes. On these occasions we can say that everything is going according to plan. But to apply this experience to the whole of history is to make a great extrapolation that completely contradicts our experience.

Collingwood's use of the logic of question and answer in hermeneutical theory is made ambiguous by this extrapolation. Our understanding of written tradition *per se* is not such that we can simply presuppose that the meaning we discover in it agrees with what its author intended. Just as the events of history do not in general manifest any agreement with the subjective ideas of the person who stands and acts within history, so the sense of a text in general reaches far beyond what its author originally intended.<sup>135</sup> The task of understanding is concerned above all with the meaning of the text itself.

This is clearly what Collingwood had in mind when he denied that there is any difference between the historical question and the philosophical question to which the text is supposed to be an answer. Nevertheless, we must remember that the question we are concerned to reconstruct has to do not with the mental experiences of the author but simply with the meaning of the text itself. Thus if we have understood the meaning of a sentence—i.e., have reconstructed the question to which it really is the answer—it must be possible to inquire also about the questioner and his intended question, to which the text is perhaps only an imagined answer. Collingwood is wrong when he finds it methodologically unsound to differentiate between the question which the text is intended to answer and the question to which it really is an answer. He is right only insofar as

understanding a text does not generally involve such a distinction, if we are concerned with the subject matter of which the text speaks. Reconstructing the author's ideas is quite a different task.

We will have to ask what conditions apply to this different task. For it is undoubtedly true that, compared with the genuine hermeneutical experience that understands the meaning of the text, reconstructing what the author really had in mind is a limited undertaking. Historicism tempts us to regard such reduction as a scientific virtue and to regard understanding as a kind of reconstruction which in effect repeats the process whereby the text came into being. Hence it follows the cognitive ideal familiar to us from the knowledge of nature, where we understand a process only when we are able to reproduce it artificially.

I have shown above<sup>136</sup> how questionable is Vico's statement that this ideal finds its purest culmination in history because there man encounters his own human-historical reality. I have asserted, on the contrary, that every historian and philologist must reckon with the fundamental non-definitiveness of the horizon in which his understanding moves. Historical tradition can be understood only as something always in the process of being defined by the course of events. Similarly, the philologist dealing with poetic or philosophical texts knows that they are inexhaustible. In both cases it is the course of events that brings out new aspects of meaning in historical material. By being re-actualized in understanding, texts are drawn into a genuine course of events in exactly the same way as are events themselves. This is what we described as the history of effect as an element in hermeneutical experience. Every actualization in understanding can be regarded as a historical potential of what is understood. It is part of the historical finitude of our being that we are aware that others after us will understand in a different way. And yet it is equally indubitable that it remains the same work whose fullness of meaning is realized in the changing process of understanding, just as it is the same history whose meaning is constantly in the process of being defined. The hermeneutical reduction to the author's meaning is just as inappropriate as the reduction of historical events to the intentions of their protagonists.

However, we cannot take the reconstruction of the question to which a given text is an answer simply as an achievement of historical method. The most important thing is the question that the text puts to us, our being perplexed by the traditionary word, so that understanding it must already include the task of the historical self-mediation between the present and tradition. Thus the relation of question and answer is, in fact, reversed. The

voice that speaks to us from the past—whether text, work, trace—itself poses a question and places our meaning in openness. In order to answer the question put to us, we the interrogated must ourselves begin to ask questions. We must attempt to reconstruct the question to which the traditional text is the answer. But we will be unable to do so without going beyond the historical horizon it presents us. Reconstructing the question to which the text is presumed to be the answer itself takes place within a process of questioning through which we try to answer the question that the text asks us. A reconstructed question can never stand within its original horizon: for the historical horizon that circumscribed the reconstruction is not a truly comprehensive one. It is, rather, included within the horizon that embraces us as the questioners who have been encountered by the traditional word.

Hence it is a hermeneutical necessity always to go beyond mere reconstruction. We cannot avoid thinking about what the author accepted unquestioningly and hence did not consider, and bringing it into the openness of the question. This is not to open the door to arbitrariness in interpretation but to reveal what always takes place. Understanding the word of tradition always requires that the reconstructed question be set within the openness of its questionableness—i.e., that it merge with the question that tradition is for us. If the “historical” question emerges by itself, this means that it no longer arises as a question. It results from the cessation of understanding—a detour in which we get stuck.<sup>137</sup> Part of real understanding, however, is that we regain the concepts of a historical past in such a way that they also include our own comprehension of them. Above I called this “the fusion of horizons.”<sup>138</sup> With Collingwood, we can say that we understand only when we understand the question to which something is the answer, but the intention of what is understood in this way does not remain foregrounded against our own intention. Rather, reconstructing the question to which the meaning of a text is understood as an answer merges with our own questioning. For the text must be understood as an answer to a real question.

The close relation between questioning and understanding is what gives the hermeneutic experience its true dimension. However much a person trying to understand may leave open the truth of what is said, however much he may dismiss the immediate meaning of the object and consider its deeper significance instead, and take the latter not as true but merely as meaningful, so that the possibility of its truth remains unsettled, this is the real and fundamental nature of a question: namely to make things

indeterminate. Questions always bring out the undetermined possibilities of a thing. That is why we cannot understand the questionableness of something without asking real questions, though we can understand a meaning without meaning it. *To understand the questionableness of something is already to be questioning.* There can be no tentative or potential attitude to questioning, for questioning is not the positing but the testing of possibilities. Here the nature of questioning indicates what is demonstrated by the actual operation of the Platonic dialogue.<sup>139</sup> A person who thinks must ask himself questions. Even when a person says that such and such a question might arise, this is already a real questioning that simply masks itself, out of either caution or politeness.

This is the reason why understanding is always more than merely re-creating someone else's meaning. Questioning opens up possibilities of meaning, and thus what is meaningful passes into one's own thinking on the subject. Only in an inauthentic sense can we talk about understanding questions that one does not pose oneself—e.g., questions that are outdated or empty. We understand how certain questions came to be asked in particular historical circumstances. Understanding such questions means, then, understanding the particular presuppositions whose demise makes such questions "dead." An example is perpetual motion. The horizon of meaning of such questions is only apparently still open. They are no longer understood as questions. For what we understand, in such cases, is precisely that there is no question.

To understand a question means to ask it. To understand meaning is to understand it as the answer to a question.

The logic of question and answer that Collingwood elaborated puts an end to talk about permanent *problems*, as in the way the "Oxford realists" approach to the classics of philosophy, and hence also an end to the concept of *history of problems* developed by neo-Kantianism. History of problems would truly be history only if it acknowledged that the identity of the problem is an empty abstraction and permitted itself to be transformed into questioning. There is no such thing, in fact, as a point outside history from which the identity of a problem can be conceived within the vicissitudes of the history of attempts to solve it. The fact is that understanding philosophical texts always requires re-cognizing what is cognized in them. Without this we would understand nothing at all. But this in no way means that we step outside the historical conditions in which we are situated and in which we understand. The problem that we re-cognize is not in fact simply the same if it is to be understood in a genuine act of

questioning. We can regard it as the same only because of our historical short-sightedness. The standpoint that is beyond any standpoint, a standpoint from which we could conceive its true identity, is a pure illusion.

We can understand the reason for this now. The concept of the problem is clearly an abstraction, namely the detachment of the content of the question from the question that in fact first reveals it. It refers to the abstract schema to which real and really motivated questions can be reduced and under which they can be subsumed. Such a "problem" has fallen out of the motivated context of questioning, from which it receives the clarity of its sense. Hence it is insoluble, like every question that has no clear, unambiguous sense, because it is not really motivated and asked.

This also confirms the origin of the concept of the problem. It does not belong in the sphere of those "honestly motivated refutations"<sup>140</sup> in which the truth of the subject matter is advanced, but in the sphere of dialectic as a weapon to amaze or make a fool of one's opponent. In Aristotle, the word "problema" refers to those questions that present themselves as open alternatives because there is evidence for both views and we think that they cannot be decided by reasons, since the questions involved are too great.<sup>141</sup> Problems are not real questions that arise of themselves and hence acquire the pattern of their answer from the genesis of their meaning, but are alternatives that can only be accepted as themselves and thus can be treated only in a dialectical way. This dialectical sense of the "problem" has its proper place in rhetoric, not in philosophy. Part of the concept of the problem is that there can be no clear decision on the basis of reasons. That is why Kant sees the rise of the concept of the problem as limited to the dialectic of pure reason. Problems are "tasks that emerge entirely from its own womb"—i.e., products of reason itself, the complete solution of which it cannot hope to achieve.<sup>142</sup> It is interesting that in the nineteenth century, with the collapse of the unbroken tradition of philosophical questioning and the rise of historicism, the concept of the problem acquires a universal validity—a sign of the fact that an immediate relation to the questions of philosophy no longer exists. It is typical of the embarrassment of philosophical consciousness when faced with historicism that it took flight into an abstraction, the concept of the "problem," and saw no problem about the manner in which problems actually "exist." Neo-Kantian history of problems is a bastard of historicism. Critiquing the concept of the problem by appealing to a logic of question and answer must destroy the illusion that problems exist like stars in the sky.<sup>143</sup>

## TRUTH AND METHOD

Reflection on the hermeneutical experience transforms problems back to questions that arise and that derive their sense from their motivation.

The dialectic of question and answer disclosed in the structure of hermeneutical experience now permits us to state more exactly what kind of consciousness historically effected consciousness is. For the dialectic of question and answer that we demonstrated makes understanding appear to be a reciprocal relationship of the same kind as conversation. It is true that a text does not speak to us in the same way as does a Thou. We who are attempting to understand must ourselves make it speak. But we found that this kind of understanding, "making the text speak," is not an arbitrary procedure that we undertake on our own initiative but that, as a question, it is related to the answer that is expected in the text. Anticipating an answer itself presupposes that the questioner is part of the tradition and regards himself as addressed by it. This is the truth of historically effected consciousness. It is the historically experienced consciousness that, by renouncing the chimera of perfect enlightenment, is open to the experience of history. We described its realization as the fusion of the horizons of understanding, which is what mediates between the text and its interpreter.

The guiding idea of the following discussion is *that the fusion of horizons that takes place in understanding is actually the achievement of language*. Admittedly, what language is belongs among the most mysterious questions that man ponders. Language is so uncannily near our thinking, and when it functions it is so little an object, that it seems to conceal its own being from us. In our analysis of the thinking of the human sciences, however, we came so close to this universal mystery of language that is prior to everything else, that we can entrust ourselves to what we are investigating to guide us safely in the quest. In other words we are endeavoring to approach the mystery of language from the conversation that we ourselves are.

When we try to examine the hermeneutical phenomenon through the model of conversation between two persons, the chief thing that these apparently so different situations—understanding a text and reaching an understanding in a conversation—have in common is that both are concerned with a subject matter that is placed before them. Just as each interlocutor is trying to reach agreement on some subject with his partner, so also the interpreter is trying to understand what the text is saying. This understanding of the subject matter must take the form of language. It is not that the understanding is subsequently put into words; rather, the way

understanding occurs—whether in the case of a text or a dialogue with another person who raises an issue with us—is the coming-into-language of the thing itself. Thus we will first consider the structure of dialogue proper, in order to specify the character of that other form of dialogue that is the understanding of texts. Whereas up to now we have framed the constitutive significance of the *question* for the hermeneutical phenomenon in terms of conversation, we must now demonstrate the linguisticity of dialogue, which is the basis of the question, as an element of hermeneutics.

Our first point is that the language in which something comes to speak is not a possession at the disposal of one or the other of the interlocutors. Every conversation presupposes a common language, or better, creates a common language. Something is placed in the center, as the Greeks say, which the partners in dialogue both share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one another. Hence reaching an understanding on the subject matter of a conversation necessarily means that a common language must first be worked out in the conversation. This is not an external matter of simply adjusting our tools; nor is it even right to say that the partners adapt themselves to one another but, rather, in a successful conversation they both come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were.<sup>144</sup>