The concept of tradition plays a central role within the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, but that role is considerably confused by his expectation that tradition can function in two quite different ways. This paper will outline the two different tasks Gadamer assigns to tradition within the wider framework of his approach to the hermeneutical problem, and will conclude with some brief observations on the difficulties which arise from his account.

Hermeneutics has traditionally been concerned with the problem of the interpretation of historical texts, so that contemporary readers can properly understand the meaning of ancient writings. The earliest concern of hermeneutics centred upon the interpretation of the Bible and how the claims of the sacred text could be applied to believers living in a later age. In the nineteenth century, the scope of hermeneutics was broadened and its purpose changed. As the concern for the discipline of history developed, a concern which Gadamer has described as "the noble and slowly perfected art of holding ourselves at a critical distance in dealing with witnesses to past life", the goal of a disinterested attitude to the past emerged. Hermeneutics as a discipline changed and much greater emphasis came to be placed upon the recovery of the past, in particular of the mind or intention of the original writer. Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey stand out as the main figures identified with this development.

Benjamin Jowett captures something of this change in his essay 'On the Interpretation of Scripture' which appeared as one of the notorious Essays and Reviews published in 1860. The office of the interpreter, Jowett maintains, is to recover the original meaning, not add to it. An awareness of the developments towards a more critical approach to history and the reading of texts, led Jowett to distinguish between what scripture does mean and what it can be made to mean. Any accommodation of the text to present day

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1 I am extremely grateful to Bernadette Lawrence and Mary Anne Perkins for their helpful comments when writing this paper.
concerns, Jowett asserts, must be laid aside by the interpreter, whose business it is to place himself as nearly as possible in the position of the sacred writer. Jowett sums up his position as follows:

"It has been a principle aim . . . to distinguish interpretation from application of Scripture. Many . . . errors . . . arise out of a confusion of the two. The present is nearer to us than the past, the circumstances which surround us pre-occupy our thoughts; it is only by an effort that we reproduce the ideas or events, or persons of other ages. And thus, quite naturally, almost by law of the human mind, the application of Scripture takes the place of its original meaning."\(^3\)

This is a fascinating passage because of Jowett’s concern to differentiate between interpretation and application. His recognition of the tension between our predisposition to apply the meaning to our present concerns and the need to attend to the text's original meaning, bears comparison with Gadamer's concern to preserve a tension between the subject matter of a text and our understanding of it. There is a crucial difference, however, in how that tension is conceived and described, which I hope will become clearer in the course of this paper.

In this century, Gadamer's work has been the most important contribution to hermeneutical theory. In his account of how we are able to achieve understanding of texts from the past, he has radically changed the understanding of the scope and task of hermeneutics. In *Truth and Method*\(^4\) Gadamer addresses the traditional hermeneutical question of how it is we can understand texts written in an earlier age, but he extends the concern of hermeneutics beyond the recovery of the original meaning of historical texts to a position which requires the interpreter to understand his or her own historical nature. The concept of tradition is intended by Gadamer to serve as the facilitating agent which unites these two aspects of his philosophical hermeneutics.

Both Schleiermacher and Dilthey recognised the historical nature of the text and set out to recover the authorial intention that lay behind any

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historical statement. A crucial step in fulfilling that goal was to place each particular text within its wider context. This was referred to as the hermeneutical circle. The circular nature of such activity was due to the recognition that the part could only be understood in terms of the whole, and yet the whole was only accessible through its parts. Although both Schleiermacher and Dilthey place great emphasis on the need to recover the authorial intention of historical works, they do not recognise that the act of reading is itself an historical act which will affect any reading of a text. This point, which is at the heart of Gadamer's work, is derived from Martin Heidegger's notion of the fore-structure of all understanding.

Heidegger rejects the model of understanding or knowledge which assumes that in knowing we are merely mirroring the external world, or passively receiving the meaning of a text. All understanding and reading involves an act of interpretation in which the object to be known or read is brought within the comprehension of the knower or reader. The act of interpretation is always dependent upon what the knower or reader brings to it. Heidegger, however, is anxious to avoid any suggestion that the necessary presence of the fore-structure within all understanding be thought to provide a justification for arbitrary interpretations. So, as well as drawing attention to the necessary structures inherent in all our understanding, he emphasises the need to be attentive to the "things themselves":

"... in our interpretation, ... our first, last and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves."

Gadamer quotes this passage from Heidegger at the beginning of his section in *Truth and Method* entitled 'Foundations of a Theory of Hermeneutical Experience'. His whole approach to the hermeneutical problem is a "working through" of these apparently contradictory themes, in a way that focuses more directly on the traditional concern of how we can achieve understanding of texts from the past.

Following Heidegger's lead in recognising that all understanding or reading is itself historical, because of the fore-structure of understanding,

Gadamer argues for the rehabilitation of 'prejudices'. But in his desire to attend to the 'things themselves', he is anxious that we become self-conscious of those terms or prejudices which enable us to achieve understanding. It is this concern which leads Gadamer to a radical reformulation and extension of the hermeneutical problem, as well as a re-definition of the ultimate purpose of history as the realisation of our own historicity.

In line with his re-definition of the terms in which the task of hermeneutics is considered, we find a redrawing of the hermeneutical circle so that the interplay is seen not simply as being between the particular text and its historical context but, more importantly, as involving a dialogue between the text and its reader.

It is not just in recognising that the act of reading itself is historical that Gadamer moves away from Dilthey and Schleiermacher. Despite the title of his major work, Gadamer is not concerned to provide a method to enable us to make the leap over the historical gap to reach a text, rather he offers a description of how understanding of texts from the past is made possible. Gadamer describes this understanding as an encounter between the historical text and the historical reader which takes place in the act of reading. All understanding inevitably takes place in the present, and is described by Gadamer as a fusion of horizons, which is achieved through the merging of what has come to us from the past with our present. This fusion of horizons is not due to any effort on the part of an individual but happens through his belonging to a tradition:

"Understanding is not to be thought of so much as an action of one's subjectivity, but as the placing of oneself within a process of tradition, in which past and present are constantly fused. This is what must be expressed in hermeneutical theory, which is far too dominated by the idea of a process, a method."^{6}

The reference to tradition in this passage is central to Gadamer's approach to hermeneutics, but before dealing with this, we should look further at the emphasis he places upon the fore-structure of understanding. This fore-structure, or prejudice, enables understanding to occur. Although, as we will see later, prejudices might sometimes be personal or individual,

the significant point shaping Gadamer's thought is that our understanding is made possible by inherited and shared prejudices which form the tradition in which we live.

I have already mentioned that one of Gadamer's major criticisms of both Schleiermacher and Dilthey refers to their inability to recognise the historical nature of understanding and reading. Following Heidegger, Gadamer emphasises fore-structure or prejudice as the precondition of all understanding and reading, and adds that these prejudices "constitute the historical reality of . . . (our) being". Gadamer understands prejudice, not solely in the purely negative sense in which it is commonly understood in English. He does not deny that there are such prejudices, but he is concerned to stress the need for pre-j judgements or prejudices as a pre-condition of all understanding and reading. To imagine a reader who simply reads what is before him without any presuppositions is impossible. It is those presuppositions or prejudices which make a reading possible, allowing the reader to attend to what is before him. In focussing our attention on texts, we bring to our reading a set of assumptions which in turn give rise to questions we wish to ask of the text. We shall see later that Gadamer recognises both a positive and negative understanding of prejudice and stresses that distinguishing between them is the central task of hermeneutics.

The point about the inescapable presence of prejudice in all understanding and reading is linked by Gadamer to his wish to restore the idea of application as an integral aspect of all understanding. In the early tradition of biblical hermeneutics, the act of understanding was thought to include understanding, interpretation and application. Applicatio, to give it its Latin term, was considered to be one of three distinct moments in properly understanding the text. The seventeenth century divine John Wilkins, for example, writes "the chief parts of a Sermon are these three; Explication, Confirmation, Application." In contrast to this division, Gadamer wants to stress the integrated nature of these three aspects in all understanding. In seeking to understand any text or thing, we are bound to interpret it in terms with which we are currently working. It is not possible for any reader to

7 Ibid., p.245.
8 Ecclesiastes, or a Discourse Concerning the Gift of Preaching as it falls under the rules of Art (London 1646), p.5.
"simply read what is there". What we bring to the text is a statement of where we are at present, our present historical nature:

"... application is neither a subsequent nor a merely occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but co-determines it as a whole from the beginning. ... The interpreter dealing with a traditional text seeks to apply it to himself. But this does not mean the text is for him as something universal, that he understands it as such and only afterwards uses it for particular applications. Rather, the interpreter seeks no more than to understand this universal thing, the text; i.e. to understand what this piece of tradition says, what constitutes the meaning and importance of the text. In order to understand that, he must not seek to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation, if he wants to understand at all."9

The restoration of application is one of the central claims that Gadamer makes in *Truth and Method*. It is regarded as contentious by critics such as Betti10 and Hirsch11 because they take it to compromise the desire for objective understanding. Such criticism, however, misses the point which Gadamer wishes to make. He certainly attempts to retain the concern for understanding the things themselves with his suggestion that biblical and legal hermeneutics provides a model for all interpretation:

"In both legal and theological hermeneutics there is the essential tension between the text set down — of the law or of the proclamation — on the one hand, and, on the other, the sense arrived at by its application in the particular moment of interpretation, either in judgement or preaching. A law is not there to be understood historically but to be made concretely valid through being interpreted. Similarly, a religious proclamation is not there to be understood as a merely historical document, but to be taken in a way in which it exercises its saving effect. This includes the fact that the text, whether the law or the gospel, if it is to be understood properly, i.e. according to the claims it makes, must be understood

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9 Ibid., p.289.
at every moment, in every particular situation, in a new and different way. Understanding here is always application."  

Gadamer’s suggestion that biblical and legal hermeneutics provide the model for all understanding because of the acknowledged presence of application needs some further clarification. While stressing that all understanding is inescapably performed in the present, and hence involves application, Gadamer is also concerned to preserve the identity of that which is understood or read. In understanding we seek to grasp something that is other, but there is the possibility that we might distort what we seek to know in the appropriation which occurs in knowing it. We therefore need to preserve a tension between that act of appropriation which is made possible by our fore-judgements or prejudices, and the essential otherness of that which we seek to grasp.

The suggestion that biblical and legal hermeneutics should serve as a model for all hermeneutics is intended by Gadamer to draw attention to the need to respect the authority of the text in interpretation and the restraints imposed upon the reader in working with the text. This point helps us to see something of the problem Gadamer is grappling with, and is a key to understanding his expectation that tradition can play a dual role.

We have noted how Gadamer stresses the historical or contingent nature of our understanding by drawing attention to prejudices. But, as we have also seen, Gadamer is wary of over-emphasising the inescapable presence of such prejudices at the expense of the things themselves. The concern to pay attention to the things themselves or the text itself leads Gadamer to pose what for him becomes the crucial problem of hermeneutics: viz, how to distinguish legitimate prejudices from the countless others which we employ.

If we are serious in our desire to pay attention to the things themselves, whilst at the same time recognising the historical, and therefore questionable, nature of that understanding, this question has to be addressed. But Gadamer recognises that this cannot be done in advance but rather it becomes open to us through the passage of time. In contrast to those who see temporal distance as a hurdle to be overcome, Gadamer regards it as the means by which this important question can be resolved. At times he seems

to suggest that a text possesses an essential meaning which will, in time, emerge. It becomes clear, however, that what Gadamer is suggesting is the idea that the real meaning of a text will emerge in time through the activity of future readers. Temporal distance has a positive role:

"It is not a yawning abyss, but it is filled with continuity and tradition, in the light of which all that is handed down presents itself to us. Here it is not too much to speak of a genuine productivity of process."^13

Gadamer initially suggests that temporal distance allows us to separate out the false from the true prejudices by which we understand a text. At times he seems to indicate that there is an essential subject which will gradually emerge as it is distanced from the original time of its composition. But a closer reading of Gadamer leads to the recognition that he finds a creative activity within this temporal distance. He suggests that the several acts of reading that take place in the time between its original composition and the present are productive, creating the terms or prejudices by which a work is to be understood. Gadamer states these apparently conflicting views in the following passage:

"Temporal distance has obviously another meaning than that of the quenching of our interest in the object. It lets the true meaning of the object emerge fully. But the discovery of the true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process. Not only are fresh sources of error constantly excluded, so that the true meaning has filtered out of it all kinds of things that obscure it, but there emerge continually new sources of understanding, which reveal unsuspected elements of meaning. The temporal distance which performs the filtering process is not a closed dimension, but is itself undergoing constant movement and extension. And with the negative side of the filtering process brought about by temporal distance there is also the positive side, namely the value it has for understanding. It not only lets those prejudices that are particular and limited die away, but causes those that bring about genuine understanding to emerge clearly as such.

It is only this temporal distance that can solve the really critical question of hermeneutics, namely of distinguishing the true

^13 Ibid., pp.264-5.
prejudices, by which we understand, from the false ones by which we misunderstand."\[14\]

Whatever we make of this seeming conflict of views, it is clear that Gadamer is not concerned with the historical text written by an author, but only the text as it is subsequently understood. He speaks of the historical nature of the text, not to refer to the fact that its origin was in an earlier age, but to the effect the text has had on the way in which it has been subsequently interpreted. The text that we read is no longer the text as it was written by the original author, rather it is a text interpreted by a succession of readers. The text is brought to us by a tradition of interpretations which provide the terms or prejudices by means of which we are to read it. This, Gadamer refers to, as the principle of effective history:

"Historical consciousness must become aware that in the apparent immediacy with which it approaches a work of art or tradition, there is also contained, albeit unrecognised and hence not allowed for, this other element. If we are trying to understand a historical phenomenon from the historical distance that is characteristic of our hermeneutical situation, we are always subject to the effects of effective-history. It determines in advance both what seems to us worth enquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation, and we more or less forget half of what is really there — in fact, we miss the whole truth of the phenomenon, when we take its immediate appearance as the whole truth."\[15\]

We have observed how Gadamer is concerned to distinguish between prejudices, but even more important is his refusal to absolutise any of the particular prejudices by which we understand. These prejudices constitute the historical nature of our understanding and it is important that we come to realise that historicity. We can lay ourselves open to this level of questioning, Gadamer teaches, only if tradition is that which challenges us, thereby enabling us to realise the contingent nature of our own historical being.

It is here that we see Gadamer beginning to confuse the role of tradition. In the first instance he has suggested that tradition is that which supplies the

\[14\] Ibid., p.266.
\[15\] Ibid., pp.267-8.
prejudices which enable us to understand texts from the past, but now we
find him stating that it can also serve to draw attention to the historical
nature of those prejudices: 'The voice that speaks to us from the past — be it
text, work, trace — itself poses a question and places our meaning in
openness.'16 Gadamer here extends the concepts of text to mean the 'text of
history' or tradition. For a text to function in the critical role whereby it can
pose a question and place our meaning in openness, we have to recognise a
tension between our present and what is other:

"Every encounter that takes place within historical consciousness
involves the experience of the tension between text and the present.
The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by
attempting a naive assimilation but consciously bringing it out."17

The reason for this tension arises from Gadamer's theory of
understanding as a fusion of horizons, which he makes more explicit, as we
have already seen, in his emphasis on the presence of application in all
understanding. However much we recognise the otherness of that which we
seek to understand, we will always reduce that otherness:

"The projecting of the historical horizon, then, is only a phase in
the process of understanding, and does not become solidified into
the self-alienation of a past consciousness, but is overtaken by our
own present horizon of understanding. In the process of
understanding there takes place a real fusing of horizons, which
means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is
simultaneously removed."18

Gadamer argues that we must allow ourselves to be challenged by
tradition if we are serious in our desire to restrict the unwelcome effects of
the appropriation which occurs whenever we seek to understand something.
He suggests that the proper relationship with tradition is analogous to what
happens in a certain kind of inter-personal relationship. There are, he says,
three possible approaches to tradition, roughly corresponding to three
different ways in which relationships between persons occur.

16 Ibid., p.337.
17 Ibid., p.273.
18 Ibid., p.273.
First, we can approach other people as objects, seeking to discover what is typical and predictable about them. The analogous view of tradition is to regard it as an object which we confront in an uninvolved way, our aim being to deny any trace of our own subjectivity. This approach may well enable us to discern what is contained within the tradition, but we hold it at arms length and deny that it has any claim upon us.

An alternative approach in relationships occurs when we encounter another person whom we recognise as an individual, but whom we always see from a privileged and personally distanced viewpoint. This, Gadamer suggests, is analogous to 'historical consciousness' which knows about the otherness of the past and regards it as something unique, but always approaches the past in a way that seeks to control it. The failure of this approach, in Gadamer's view, is its inability to acknowledge that what is other, has some claim upon us. We can forget the presence of ourself in this sort of enquiry, a presence which needs to become self-conscious. The defect of this approach can be seen more clearly when we contrast it with the type of relationship which he regards as the appropriate model for a hermeneutical understanding of the past.

In human relations, Gadamer claims, the important thing is to experience the 'thou', the other person, truly as a 'thou', i.e. not to overlook the claim of the other one, not refusing to listen to what he or she has to say to us. To achieve a reciprocal relationship, openness is necessary, not only towards the person to whom the other listens, but equally by the other towards the one who listens. Without this kind of openness to one another, there can be no genuine human relationship. Belonging together means being able to listen to one another. When we say two people understand each other, we do not mean that one person "understands" the other, in the sense of surveying him. Openness to the other includes the acknowledgement that we must also accept some things that tell against ourselves.

Genuine human relationships, Gadamer suggests, are parallel to the true hermeneutical experience. We must allow the validity of the claim made by tradition, not in the sense of simply acknowledging the past in its otherness, but in such a way that it has something to say to us, making us realise the historicity or questionableness of our own being.

Gadamer emphasises tradition as that by which our historical nature is both created and brought to self-consciousness. In making this point, we find
Gadamer asserting that the ultimate purpose of history is to make us realise the historical nature of our own reality, rather than to involve us in the mere recovery of the past. Gadamer is extremely critical of what he calls 'historical consciousness' because it does not proceed far enough in its search for understanding. Someone who is really open to tradition, in the manner just outlined, will realise that 'historical consciousness', as it is traditionally conceived, is not really open at all. He suggests that 'historical consciousness', when it reads its texts 'historically', has always thoroughly smoothed them out beforehand, so that the criteria of our own knowledge can never be put in question by tradition:

"The naivete of so called historicism consists in the fact that it does not undertake this reflection, and in trusting to its own methodological approach forgets its own historicity. We must here appeal from a badly understood historical thinking to one that can better perform the task of understanding. True historical thinking must take account of its own historicality. Only then will it not chase the phantom of an historical object which is the object of progressive research, but learn to see in the object the counterpart of itself and hence understand both. The true historical object is not an object at all, but the unity of the one and the other, a relationship in which exist both the reality of history and the reality of historical understanding."  

Gadamer's criticism of historical consciousness is a reflection of the importance given to the role of tradition. Historical consciousness does not face up to the historical nature of its own understanding and, in attempting to recover the past, it pursues a chimera because tradition, which makes understanding possible, has removed any possibility of recovering that past. What we understand is a 'past' that has been successively understood and interpreted and made 'present' to us.

Gadamer's approach to the traditional problem of hermeneutics is to offer a description of how we manage to understand texts from the past, but in showing how such understanding is possible, he extends the concern of hermeneutics to include the realisation of our own historicity. Throughout his work, he emphasises the dialogical nature of understanding, consciously working through Heidegger's concern to recognise the fore-structure of understanding and the need to attend to the things themselves. Things

themselves are to be respected by attempting to bring to self-consciousness the presence and nature of those prejudices by which we understand.

Gadamer expects tradition, which provides the prejudices by which understanding is made possible and, therefore, is the ground of the historical nature of our being, to be at the same time that which enables us to realise our historicity. But in so far as tradition does manage to make understanding possible for us, bringing the past to us and providing the terms by which we can understand it, it weakens its role as the source of the critique by which our prejudices are to be judged.

Gadamer requires tradition to be the 'Thou' or 'Other' by which we are questioned, but he has been strenuous in showing that the past is not 'Other', because the prejudices by which we understand the past are largely supplied by tradition. Perhaps tradition might be the means whereby our little local and personal prejudices are revealed as just that, when they are held up against the weight of the 'text of the past', but if we are to realise our own historicity, it is not only those personal and local prejudices which must be revealed but also those which have created our tradition. Our own historicity is the product of tradition and that tradition too is historical and therefore needs to be questioned. If tradition enables us to distinguish between our local personal prejudices and those which come from that tradition which shapes us, what is going to serve as the 'Thou' for the tradition in which we stand?