Journal of Applied Hermeneutics
ISSN: 1927-4416
December 1, 2020

Dialogical Breakdown and Covid-19: Solidarity and Disagreement in a Shared World

Cynthia R. Nielsen & David Liakos

Abstract

This article considers the limitations, but also the insights, of Gadamerian hermeneutics for understanding and responding to the crisis precipitated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Our point of departure is the experience of deep disagreements amid the pandemic, and our primary example is ongoing debates in the United States about wearing masks. We argue that, during this dire situation, interpersonal mutual understanding is insufficient for resolving such bitter disputes. Rather, following Gadamer's account of our dialogical experience with an artwork, we suggest that our encounter with the virus gives rise to new ways of seeing and experiencing ourselves and the world. Further, we draw on Gadamer's account of the fusion of horizons to show how even competing perspectives on wearing masks arise within a shared space of meaning created by the virus. These insights provide hope for an improved model of political dialogue in the world of Covid-19.

Keywords

Covid-19, Dialogue, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Pandemic, Polarization, Political Disagreement

> *In the last analysis, Goethe's statement 'Everything is a symbol' is the most comprehensive formulation of the hermeneutical idea. It means that everything points to some other thing. This 'everything' is not an assertion about each being, indicating what it is, but an assertion as to how it is to encounter man's understanding. There is nothing that cannot mean something to it. But the statement implies something else as well: nothing comes forth just in the one meaning that is offered to us.*
>
> *Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics," (pp. 130–131)*

Corresponding Author:
Cynthia Nielsen, PhD
Email: cynthia.nielsen@gmail.com

Like many others, our present experience is the challenging, straining, monotonous, and altogether unnatural situation of sheltering-in-place due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In America, this already bleak experience is further exacerbated by the politicization of the pandemic. For example, in the United States to wear a mask is frequently perceived as supporting one political party, whereas deciding not to wear one may signal support for another. Dialogue between both sides has become nearly impossible with each seeing the other as enemies. The situation is even worse, however, because public sources of knowledge—whether news articles or scientific studies—are increasingly viewed by each side as merely distorted interpretations or even outright falsehoods offered to bolster or further a social, cultural, or political agenda. The power of proclaiming something "fake news" and then utterly dismissing it seems to have won the day, whether such proclamations come from the highest political office in the country or from one's family member. If neither of the opposing sides trusts the other, and each side fears that the other has an agenda that radically conflicts with his or her own way of being in, inhabiting, and understanding the world, is anything like genuine dialogue possible? If each side believes that the other's view involves, is motivated by, or is built upon ethically or morally problematic principles and values, can true dialogue and compromise occur? If the other refuses to listen to you, and you refuse to listen to him because you both believe that the other is lying, does not value truth, or wants to bring about a world in which you cannot see yourself being at home, dialogue becomes, so it seems, impossible.

In situations of dialogical breakdown, does the hermeneutical tradition—that is, the philosophy of understanding and interpretation which emphasizes how, as the poet Friedrich Hölderlin famously put it, we are a conversation—have anything to offer? In particular, what if one listens attentively and expects to learn something from the other, but at the end of the day finds the other's view reprehensible? No matter how eloquently a white supremacist presents his position, for example, he will not convince us to accept it. Of course, we may gain a clearer understanding of his position and perhaps why he is convinced by the teachings of white supremacy; however, his way of seeing the world and others is one that we fundamentally reject. According to Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics, a successful dialogue need not result in one accepting or agreeing with the other's position, but rather what counts is a greater understanding of the subject matter at issue in that conversation.[1] Given these parameters, we can say that our dialogue with the white supremacist was at least in part "successful" to the extent that we now have a better understanding of his position. But if the white supremacist has a political agenda, and worse, the political power to carry it out, then what? A "successful" or "partially successful" dialogue in this instance seems utterly insufficient. Something more than an expanded understanding is needed when dialogical breakdown occurs. In what follows, we attempt to dwell with and take seriously the difficulty, frustration, and dead-end experience of dialogical breakdown. Then, we will turn to dialogue with an unlikely (and certainly unwelcome) dialogue partner—namely, Covid-19. Perhaps surprisingly, such a dialogue not only manifests similarities with and connections to Gadamer's reflections on our dialogical engagement with art and on the phenomenon he calls the "fusion of horizons," but also discloses, we shall argue, hermeneutical insights that are relevant for understanding and also moving forward in response to our situation.

Let us return to the example mentioned earlier of wearing masks in public. Here we have Sabrina, who, having listened to various medical experts and educated herself through reading articles issued from nationally and even globally recognized science-based organizations, chooses to

wear a mask in public in order to mitigate as much as possible the spread of the virus and, of course, to protect herself. Sabrina's colleague, Jeremy, on the other hand, sees mask-wearing as a fundamental violation of his rights and as one of many incremental steps devised by the government to more fully control its citizens. Jeremy also both distrusts the "mainstream" media sources reporting on Covid-19 and believes that the number of cases and fatalities have been inflated.[2] He is likewise suspicious of the medical experts and their claims regarding the need for everyone—whether symptomatic or asymptomatic—to wear masks. Sabrina and Jeremy have tried to engage one another in dialogue; however, their attempts have been fruitless. Jeremy, in fact, has said that he will not wear his mask in public or at his workplace, which, of course, concerns Sabrina since the two work together. Jeremy's employer may require that he wear his mask or be fired, which solves the workplace issue. But it may also be the case that Jeremy's employer looks the other way and does not enforce the "recommended" mask-wearing policy, since the governing authorities in his region have not officially mandated wearing masks for those who work in this particular field. When science-based recommendations and the advice of medical experts trained in virology and other medical sciences become politicized and opposing sides fundamentally distrust one another, dialogue with the other on how to live together in shared spaces in the midst of a pandemic seems to go nowhere.[3]

Given our crisis, where so many lives are at stake and dialogue among opposing parties—both at the existential and grassroots level and among politicians with the power to make policy decisions—has either failed or resulted in no significant changes in perspectives or behaviors, how should we proceed? What do we do when expanding one's understanding of the other's position is not enough? Lastly, is the type of scenario sketched above a fundamental threat to Gadamer's insights on dialogical interactions?

While Gadamerian hermeneutics certainly entails an ethical dimension and has implications for social and political practice, it has its limits and cannot be expected to provide answers to all of our political problems. Our remarks about the shortcomings of dialogue at our present moment of crisis should in no way be taken, however, to suggest that dialogue is futile or should not be pursued, a point to which we will return later. Healthy dialogue is absolutely crucial for thriving personal relationships as well as our civic well-being. If an individual or communal bond has so deteriorated that trust and the other's credibility are strained to the point of practical non-existence, though, something more than or in addition to dialogue is needed—or perhaps an expanded view of dialogue is needed. Furthermore, if one party's words, actions, and policies are putting others in grave danger, action motivated and informed by knowledge and the relevant expertise and experience must be taken to mitigate and prevent such harm. With the United States having as of November 18 surpassed 250,000 deaths, we can hope for and commit ourselves to civic and interpersonal dialogue that results in changed ways of seeing and being; but given the extremely dire circumstances and the lives at stake, we must also listen to medical experts and take immediate actions such as wearing masks, avoiding large indoor gatherings, and engaging in appropriate "social distancing" (Almasy, Hanna, & Holcombe, 2020; MacFarquhar, 2020). Such actions signal and affirm our shared human condition—namely, a condition of vulnerability and a recognition of our interdependence. We are in this together whether we like it or not (and whether we like each other or not). Our decision whether to wear masks in public spaces affects you; your decision whether to engage in appropriate social distancing affects us.

The virus exposes the fragility of life and discloses our interconnectedness, irrespective of our political convictions.

The suggested action-points mentioned above are not radical, but rather count as reasonable actions based on the advice of scholars, physicians, and scientists with the relevant expertise and experience to recommend them. For example, the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security recently published a study entitled, "Resetting Our Response: Changes Needed in the US Approach to COVID-19," which articulates ten policy recommendations needed for the US to get back on track in its attempts to control the virus. The recommendations require actions from federal, state, and local agents and emphasize the need for collective action. "It is only our collective action that will generate the change necessary to regain control of this epidemic, avoid cascading crises in our healthcare system and economy, and save great numbers of lives throughout the United States" (Rivers et al., 2020, p. 4). The first policy recommendation suggests, where appropriate, the follow actions: "The foundation for the response in every community should be what it has been for so many successful countries in the world: universal masking, individual physical distancing, hand hygiene, and avoiding large gatherings, particularly indoors. Without having these measures in place, it will be difficult to maintain control of outbreaks or turn the corner on an outbreak that is accelerating" (p. 4).[4]

To politicize the virus and ignore or downplay scientific understandings of how such viruses spread will not change the nature of the virus or its ability to harm and even destroy our bodies. What the virus is and how it operates—its reality—will not bend to our will by any speech act, tweet, or social media campaign. Words have amazing, creative, almost magical power to transform the social world, but there are some realities that push back, having a power of their own to resist any magical incantations we might cast upon them. The virus is, in some sense, pushing back, disclosing what it is and what it does, and we must listen to what it says and respond appropriately. This responsive and sensitive listening is, of course, hermeneutical; perhaps here we can apply some of Gadamer's most important insights—namely, first, to listen to the other as other and as one having something to say, perhaps even something true, from which we might learn. What, then, is Covid-19 saying? Granted, it seems to be saying and doing different things to different people. That is, in some cases, the virus results in severe lung damage, while in others it feels more like a case of the flu, and in yet others it causes death, to say nothing of those carriers who remain asymptomatic (see Galiatsatos, 2020). Given that scientific study has confirmed that the virus is highly contagious, that it can spread even when one is asymptomatic, and that it is unclear why some people—even those with no underlying health conditions—contract more severe cases than others, a reasonable interpretation of the virus's varied speech (so to speak) is to act, until the virus is under control and the curve "truly flattened," as if the most severe cases are the norm and to follow the recommended medical advice.

Our dialogue with Covid-19 not only expands our understanding of the virus, but it requires an immediate response. That is, our dialogue with Covid-19 calls us to *radically* and immediately change our lives and ways of being with others. Instead of grabbing dinner and drinks with a group of friends, going to the gym, celebrating a birthday or other special event with a large group, we forgo these activities or transform them into virtual or masked, socially-distanced events which feel utterly unnatural and make us long for what we took for granted—namely, embodied presence with others. A simple handshake among colleagues or a hug among close

friends and extended family members must for now be resisted given the potential consequences. This is not an easy ask, nor is it natural. We are embodied, social beings, who need human contact and physical presence in order to flourish, and we certainly cannot sacrifice such interactions indefinitely. In one of his controversial but poignant recent philosophical reflections on the current coronavirus crisis, Giorgio Agamben presses this point: "Other human beings […] are now seen solely as possible spreaders of the plague whom one must avoid at all costs and from whom one needs to keep oneself at a distance of at least a meter" (Agamben, 2020, n.d.). Agamben disturbingly suggests that mask-wearing and social distancing will increasingly alienate us from the other. In line with his well-known analysis of the "state of exception" characteristic of modern politics in general, Agamben is concerned that extreme measures will persist even after the emergency to which they ostensibly are meant to respond ends, thus solidifying the political powers that instituted those changes. Agamben's claim admirably alerts us to the possible long-term social and political consequences of passively accepting or even embracing the various forms of distancing to which we are rapidly becoming habituated. Agamben's interpretation of social distancing, however, can only count as one possible view, or at least one certain delimited range of views, of the meaning and significance of the measures we have collectively undertaken in response to the virus. Wearing a mask, our central example, does not, by any means, only or even primarily signify that one considers the other as a threat, as we will soon explain.

On this score, we discover certain similarities between the current crisis and Gadamer's account of our dialogical experience with an artwork. We are not suggesting that the coronavirus is a work of art; however, our encounter with the virus, as in the case of an artwork, can give rise to a new way of seeing and experiencing ourselves and the world. In his essay "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics," Gadamer offers an account of how great works of art speak to us in profound, life-changing ways. Commenting on art's ability to arrest us and potentially alter our way of seeing ourselves, the world, and others, Gadamer writes:

> The work of art that says something confronts us with ourselves. That is, it expresses something in such a way that what is said is like a discovery, a disclosure of something previously concealed. The element of being struck is based on this. […] Everything familiar is eclipsed. To understand what the work of art says to us is therefore a self-encounter. (Gadamer, 2007, p. 129)

Thus, for Gadamer, a dialogical engagement with a work of art, wherein we listen to and contemplate what the work has to say to us, brings about a disclosure of something unexpected, something previously hidden that has come to light. We now have not only new insights about ourselves but also others, the human condition, and our shared world. Gadamer goes on to state that our dialogical experience of the work of art "is *experience* in a real sense and must master ever anew the task that experience involves: the task of integrating it into the whole of one's own orientation to the world and one's own self-understanding" (p. 129). Our collective and personal encounters with Covid-19 accord with Gadamer's definition of genuine hermeneutical experience as altering and shaping our orientation to things.

Having considered Gadamer's claims regarding the transformative power of a dialogical encounter with great works of art, let us return to our dialogue with Covid-19. What we have learned from scientific studies of the coronavirus, as well as reports from other countries—and especially

from those countries like New Zealand, whose actions early on in the pandemic have been described as "crushing the curve"—is that we must take decisive, collective actions now (World Health Organization, 2020).[5] That is, we must listen to the virus and to those who have studied it and respond in a timely manner that takes seriously the reality of the virus and the transformed world in which we now live; failure to do so may result in losing our lives or inadvertently infecting others, which could cause them severe, lasting harm and even death. The virus has disclosed both the fragility of our shared human condition and, albeit hidden—and in our polarized, dis-eased American body politic, denied and largely unrecognized—solidarity and interconnectedness. We are in this together whether we like it or not, and we need each other's help, resolve, and collective action to stop or at least significantly slow the spread of the virus. Recall, in this context, Agamben's despairing conclusion that during the current pandemic we too often view our fellow human beings as a threat to our own health. While understandable in light of the incredible changes our social interactions have undergone in so short a time, and cautionary in terms of guarding against the dangers of authoritarian politics, Agamben's view importantly ignores, however, the way these measures testify also to our feelings of solidarity with the other, particularly with the vulnerable other. The mask signifies not only our own desire not to be infected, but also our attempt to avoid unwittingly endangering others.

Toward the end of Gadamer's essay on aesthetics, he reiterates one of the central points of his argument—namely, that the artwork comes to presence and speaks meaningfully to us from within a larger relational field of meaning. Stated otherwise, the artwork's particular meanings are connected to and in part dependent upon a relational network of meanings; thus, the artwork's meanings always exceed what the artwork itself immediately presents. Gadamer likens our "universal hermeneutical standpoint" to Goethe's characterization of the symbolic character of our experience of the world—that is, things always point beyond themselves and present themselves differently depending upon the larger field of meaning in which they are encountered (Gadamer, 2007, pp. 130-131). In other words, we should not forget that hermeneutical phenomena—including socially and politically meaningful phenomena like wearing masks—always contain a multitude of interpretative possibilities and imperatives, and never only a single possible significance.

To further illustrate this point, we turn to insights from another of Gadamer's formulations of human understanding—namely, what he calls the "fusion of horizons." Each of us approaches something we want to understand—an artwork, text, historical event, natural phenomenon, another person—from a particular contextualized vantage point. That standpoint, or "horizon," is shaped by such factors as, above all, language and history but also location, race, gender, age, and personal experience. But, for Gadamer, we are not thereby condemned to occupy one rigid, static, unmoving horizon that is incommensurable with anyone else's: "*understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves*" (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 305). That is, genuine understanding happens only by placing one's own horizon in dynamic interplay with that of the other whom we want to understand. In dialogue with the horizon that the other occupies, we each find our horizons transformed in turn by our encounter with the perspective of the other. For Gadamer, this fusion of horizons fundamentally occurs in and as language, which for him means in conversation: "*the fusion of horizons that takes place in understanding is actually the achievement of language*" ((Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 370). A genuine Gadamerian dialogue takes place as an encounter between two standpoints of meaning that emerge altered in

light of their mutual confrontation with and by a common subject matter under discussion: "I have described this above as a 'fusion of horizons.' We can see now that this is what takes place in conversation, in which something is expressed that is not only mine or my author's, but common" (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 390). Thus, we can describe the fusion of horizons that takes place in genuine conversation as, following an image belonging to Donald Davidson that is deeply consonant with Gadamer's view on this issue, a triangulation between self, other, and world (Davidson, 2001, pp. 205–220). In matters of understanding, no one of these three can stand on its own; to understand any one of these three things requires contact with the other two. The fusion of horizons includes not only the two horizons that find themselves in dialogue, but also whatever else is held in common between those horizons. This triangular conception of understanding has, as we will explain, profound implications for our presently shared social and epidemiological experience.

Earlier, we mentioned how masks have been variously interpreted by opposing political ideologies. To one group, a mask symbolizes our solidarity and points to our shared human condition and consequent need to act for the common good; to another, the mask symbolizes our loss of freedom and the encroachment of governmental power or our willingness to give ourselves over to ever-increasing governmental control of our lives.[6] This politicized contemporary phenomenon becomes more comprehensible in light of Gadamer's analysis. Like works of art, what masks symbolize and how they are understood at this moment in our history—that is, how they are embedded within a relational field of meaning, which certainly includes the wider context of a polarized body politic—will differ even as the reality of the virus and its ability to infect, harm, and destroy remains the same. Symbols, whether great works of art or mass-produced masks, are historically indexed and thus always influenced by and intertwined with larger fields of meaning. Consequently, they yield various meanings and interpretations, not only owing to the complexity of what they present—as in an artwork—but also—as in a mask—owing to the relational field of meanings in which they are embedded and the significances that individuals and groups attach to the subject matter at issue.

The fusion of horizons or triangulation further complements the Gadamerian view of our encounter with artworks and can in turn contribute to our hermeneutical analysis of masks. The mask-wearer and the mask-skeptic occupy different horizons, of course, since they represent competing political perspectives and, perhaps, cultural standpoints. On the basis of seemingly dire situations such as this one, are we thereby compelled to accept the skeptical assessment of interpersonal understanding by thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, for whom "There is no world, there are only islands"? (Derrida, 2011, p. 9)[7]. That pessimistic conclusion is seemingly motivated by the genuine epistemic, ideological, and cultural gaps between perspectives such that they appear, as they do to many today who observe our deteriorating contemporary political situation, as only so many disparate islands without any true point of contact. But such a negative assessment would be premature. The perspectives of the mask-wearer and the mask-skeptic are, despite their real differences, at the same time both horizons on a common, shared world—namely, in the present instance, the physical, epidemiological, emotional and psychical, as well as social and political experience of the coronavirus crisis. The way the crisis affects each of us is, of course, not equal. Far from completely distinct, atomized-subjective individuals or islands who are cut off from one another by our diverse ideological points of view or personal backgrounds, our different horizons all count as perspectives on the same common subject matter—that is, our

occupation of what we should not hesitate to call a world: the world as currently shaped by the effects of Covid-19. The mask-wearer, mask-skeptic, and the virus itself all form a hermeneutical triangle, each one necessarily shaping and affecting one's understanding of the other. Not only, then, are we in dialogue with Covid-19 as if it were a work of art that transforms the way we see reality and ourselves, but the virus also acts as the meeting point between otherwise disparate horizons or points of view.

It is crucial to emphasize in this context that it is only in light of our collectively shared experience of Covid-19 that we can even arrive, in the first place, at competing interpretations of and responses to the virus. As Gadamer puts this point, "every misunderstanding presupposes 'a deep common accord'" (Gadamer, 2007, p. 81). This reference to a common accord does not mean, as some of Gadamer's critics have suggested, that his view entails that agreement is violently or artificially imposed upon dialogue participants who find themselves overwhelmed by the weight of the truth of historical tradition.[8] This emptily optimistic view of interpersonal agreement that some critics have imputed to Gadamer would indeed be especially problematic and false when put to work as an interpretation of Covid-19 in particular. Despite its seismic impact on all of human beings, those effects have been inequitably and unevenly distributed along racial and socioeconomic lines, affecting most acutely many of the most vulnerable and marginalized members of our society.[9] Rather, Gadamer's claim is that genuine disagreement must take place against the background of certain fundamental aspects of reality upon which we can and must agree, acknowledging the respective places from which our understanding emerges. In other words, only conversation partners occupying a common physical or discursive space can subsequently disagree on the meaning of what takes place within that space. To return to Derrida's challenge to hermeneutics, even islands distant from one another must also be, so to speak, points on the same common map.[10] As Gadamer expresses his subtle view of the agreement that functions as the necessary background of all understanding, which does not mean the imposition of any homogenous uniformity, "*The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between*" (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 295).

The different interpretations of mask-wearing are a case in point of Gadamer's observation that disagreement takes place in the context of agreement. For example, the rival horizons on mask-wearing represented by our characters Sabrina and Jeremy may in fact still be put into contact with each other in virtue of their convergence upon a common space of meaningfulness and experiences of the world in virtue of the fact that they both count as competing responses to Covid-19. The practical and political dispute between a mask-wearer and a mask-skeptic, while undoubtedly real and contentious, nonetheless presupposes the experience held in common by both of these horizons as points of view on living in the world of Covid-19. The philosophical denial that there is a common world would dangerously obviate this essential practical and political truth.

None of us, we think it would be fair to say as of this writing, can at present fully escape a pandemic that, as the etymology of the term suggests, affects all of humanity in some way, although not, to be sure, in an equal or uniform fashion. All of us live in what Gadamer called the in-between, which the coronavirus has only crystallized. Covid-19, paradoxically, brings to light not only what separates us from each other (as Agamben emphasizes), but also what unites us all. Jeremy and Sabrina are disagreeing about a subject matter they hold in common, one that

has acutely and dramatically affected both of them and indeed all of us. Further, since any fusion of horizons occurs paradigmatically in language, we may remain hopeful that productive conversations develop on the different perspectives regarding wearing masks and other aspects of the crisis—that is, conversations that take seriously both what is held in common as well as the differing perspectives and lived experiences of the virus. Such hope is consistent with our earlier point that dialogue will not always successfully or rationally resolve every political dispute and must, in this case at least, be complemented by concrete action as well.

Although in our current situation in the U.S., divergent fields of meaning among opposing political points of view may initially seem fixed and rigid, in reality they can be altered and reconfigured, as the fusion of horizons convincingly illustrates. Such changes in larger hermeneutical fields of meaning influence, in turn, how the subject matter presented comes forth and consequently introduces new interpretative possibilities. Recall how Gadamer claims that a genuine dialogue with a work of art involves the task of integrating our newly discovered insights about ourselves with our understanding of others and our shared world. Those convinced by science-based findings of the medical community can, in their own various spheres of influence, help to reshape the relational fields of meaning in which masks are interpreted in ways that productively emphasize our interdependence, shared humanity, and need for collaborative cooperation in the midst of this crisis. Reshaping meaning through active dialogue need not take the form of rigidly rational debates among competing ideological perspectives, an option that is unlikely to produce genuine consensus or progress, as our contemporary political situation makes painfully evident.[11] Conversation, as Gadamer understands that phenomenon, is far more dynamic and unpredictable than argumentative discussions framed by rational and communicative norms. In this respect, Gadamerian dialogue may yet prove a flexible and workable model of politically and socially salient change during our current crisis.

At this juncture, Gadamer's critical reflections on the role of experts in our modern and technological culture could prove prescient and useful as a complement to listening to and acting upon the advice of medical experts. In a 1967 essay called "The Limitations of the Expert," Gadamer cautions against abdicating our individual and collective responsibility by dangerously leaving social and political decision-making in the hands of scientific and technical experts. Instead, Gadamer urges us to conscientiously cultivate and vigorously apply our own power of judgment that certain technocratic and politicized employments of the natural sciences attempt to take away from ordinary citizens (Gadamer, 1992, pp. 181-192). We have argued here for the importance today of listening to and following the input of health and medical experts as we forge our own responses to the coronavirus crisis and attempt to build upon existing solidarities and strengthen further solidarities in turn. Another way of putting our point, then, which is consonant with Gadamer's critique of our expert culture, is as follows. We have opted to follow medical and public health guidelines and recommendations precisely as a result of our own informed and careful judgment and not at all on the basis of some existing political ideology, fixed cultural position, or servile scientism. We should stress this point in dialogue with critics of mask-wearing—not merely as a way of argumentatively persuading those who currently disagree with us, but as an invitation to them to continue developing and applying their own judgment in conversation with our point of view. Mask-skeptics have indeed arrived at different, competing judgments about these matters. It is our task now to convince and persuade them to adjust and reformulate their judgments for themselves, taking our collectively shared experience of Covid-

19 and the crisis it has precipitated as a starting point for what may be a painful and difficult conversation. To enter into a dialogue of this kind must also mean opening ourselves to the surprising twists and turns that genuine conversation involves, which means putting our own considered judgments into play in the interest of mutual engagement.

No matter our political ideology, we are all social beings whose flourishing requires regular physical contact with and the embodied presence of others; this fact is a perfect example of those fundamental realities that compel our collective agreement and that form the necessary background of any subsequent disagreement that the fusion of horizons or triangulation emphasizes. This embodied mode of being-with-others is not only necessary but is also something we desire and in which we take pleasure and satisfaction. The mask-wearer and mask-skeptic may in fact find that they are both experiencing fundamentally similar fears, anxieties, and confusions regarding the rapid changes to our collective form of life that lie at the root of their political and practical dispute. Our task in following those recommendations that have so profoundly altered our lives and behavior involves a genuine and unavoidably painful sacrifice, but one that it is our belief we must take if we ever hope to regain some semblance of the way things were. Such a line of reasoning would, at least, serve as our opening thought or gesture in an ongoing dialogue with alternative points of view on wearing masks amid the Covid-19 crisis. We cannot afford to refuse to listen to others—especially those with relevant scientific and medical understanding. Nor can we afford to act as if we are isolated, radically autonomous individuals hermetically sealed from one another. As we have emphasized, we live in a shared world of dynamic horizons that are always intersecting and overlapping. In light of the conversation that we are, to refuse to listen and properly respond would signal dialogical failure and a body politic whose members and most vital organs have indeed been infected—a body politic perhaps in the late stages of a potentially deadly disease.

Notes

1. For Gadamer's discussion of three types of hermeneutical dialogical encounters that have analogues in three types of I/Thou encounters and what characterizes each, see Gadamer, 1960/2004, pp. 358–362.
2. For an actual example of a high-profile individual who holds this position, see Blake, 2020.
3. We are not, of course, advocating an uncritical acceptance of scientific discourse but rather a careful, responsible engagement with current scientific studies on Covid-19 and medical advice based on empirical experience with this virus and those like it. We shall develop this point later in the main body of our essay.
4. On the mask-wearing and state mandates, Lyu, W. & Wehby, G., 2020, pp. 1-7.
5. It is worth mentioning that New Zealand's success is attributed in part to decisive, timely actions and listening and learning from reports received from China and organizations such as the World Health Organization. "Three days after WHO declared the coronavirus outbreak a public health emergency of international concern on 30 January 2020, New Zealand began introducing disease prevention measures and continued strengthening them in the weeks that followed." Dr. Ashley Bloomfield, New Zealand's Director-General of Health, went on to say that "their strategy was influenced by a report from the WHO–China joint mission in February" (World Health Organization, 2020).

6. These are just two interpretations of masks that have been prevalent in recent U.S. news reports and noted in scholarly studies. No doubt, there are other interpretations and possible meanings of masks in our present moment.
7. On numerous other topics, we find Derrida's insights to be extremely valuable and fruitful. Our criticism of this particular point should not be taken as a wholesale rejection of Derrida's thought.
8. Versions of this critique were developed by commentators on Gadamerian hermeneutics who were influenced by Derrida's deconstruction. For example, see Caputo, 1987, pp. 108-115.
9. There has been much discussion of this deeply problematic situation in the United States. See, for example, Eligon, J., Burch, A., Searcey, D., & Oppel, R., 2020.
10. Our employment of the language and concepts of space and place in connection with hermeneutical thinking owes much to research by Jeff Malpas. See Malpas, 2017, pp. 379-391.
11. This model of rational debate is the object of a recent insightful critique by Raymond Geuss, principally aimed at the model of communicative rationality developed by Jürgen Habermas. Geuss argues that Habermasian discourse would prove highly incapable of bridging ideological gaps such as those involved in the debates concerning Brexit in the United Kingdom. See Geuss, 2019.

References

Agamben, G. (2020). "Clarifications." (A. Kotsko, Trans.). *An und für sich.* https://itself.blog/2020/03/17/giorgio-agamben-clarifications/. Originally published in Italian as "Chiarimenti" by *Quodlibet*. (2020). https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-chiarimenti.

Almasy, S., Hanna, J., & Holcombe, M. (2020). As US passes 150,000 coronavirus deaths, experts at Johns Hopkins call for reset in national response. *CNN.com.* https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/29/health/us-coronavirus-wednesday/index.html

Blake, A. (2020). Rush Limbaugh: Americans should adapt to coronavirus like Donner Party members took to cannibalism. *Washington Times*. https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/jul/15/rush-limbaugh-americans-should-adapt-to-coronaviru/

Caputo, J. (1987). *Radical hermeneutics: Repetition, deconstruction, and the hermeneutic project*. Indiana University Press.

Davidson, D. (2001). Three varieties of knowledge. In *Subjective, intersubjective, objective* (pp. 205–220). Clarendon Press.

Derrida, J. (2011). *The beast and the sovereign*, Volume II (G. Bennington, Trans.; M. Lisse, M-L. Mallet, & G. Michaud, Eds.). University of Chicago Press.

Eligon, J., Burch, A., Searcey, D., & Oppel, R. (April 7, 2020). Black Americans face alarming rates of coronavirus infection in some states. *New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/us/coronavirus-race.html.

Gadamer, H-G. (1992). The limitations of the expert (L. Schmidt & M. Reuss, Trans.). In D. Misgeld & G. Nicholson (Eds.), *Hans-Georg Gadamer on education, poetry, and history: Applied hermeneutics* (pp. 181–92). SUNY Press.

Gadamer, H-G. (2004). *Truth and method*. (J. Weinsheimer & D.G. Marshal, Trans.; 2nd rev. ed.). Continuum. (Original work published 1960).

Gadamer, H-G. (2007). *The Gadamer reader: A bouquet of the later writings* (D. Linge, Trans.; R. Palmer, Ed.). Northwestern University Press.

Galiatsatos, P. (2020). What coronavirus does to the lungs. *Johns Hopkins Medicine.* https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/what-coronavirus-does-to-the-lungs.

Geuss, R. (2019). A republic of discussion: Habermas at ninety. *The Point*. https://thepointmag.com/politics/a-republic-of-discussion-habermas-at-ninety/.

MacFarquhar, N. (2020). The coronavirus has now killed more than 250,000 people in the U.S. *New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/live/2020/11/18/world/covid-19-coronavirus#a-quarter-of-a-million-people-have-died-in-the-us-from-covid-19.

Malpas, J. (2017). Placing understanding/understanding place. *Sophia, 56*(3), 379–391. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-016-0546-9

National Public Radio. (2020). *Why covid-19 disproportionately impacts Latino communities.* https://www.npr.org/2020/07/01/885878571/why-covid-19-disproportionately-impacts-latino-communities.

Rivers, C., Martin, E., Watson, C., Schoch-Spana, M., Cicero, A., & Inglesby, T. (2020). Resetting our response: Changes needed in the US approach to covid-19. *Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security*. https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-work/pubs_archive/pubs-pdfs/2020/200729-resetting-our-response.pdf.

Lyu, W., & Wehby, G. (2020). Community use of face masks and covid-19: Evidence from a natural experiment of state mandates in the US. *Health Affairs 39*(8), 1-7. https://doi: 10.1377/hlthaff.2020.00818

World Health Organization. (2020). *New Zealand takes early and hard action to tackle covid-19.* https://www.who.int/westernpacific/news/feature-stories/detail/new-zealand-takes-early-and-hard-action-to-tackle-covid-19.