OXFORD JOURNAL
OF STUDENT
SCHOLARSHIP

# How Conversations Change Us: Supplying a Hermeneutic Mechanism for Dover's Conversational Self

Weizhong Li
liweizhong2024@126.com

## ABSTRACT

Daniela Dover argues that interpersonal inquiry is governed by an ethic of "taking one another seriously." One of its conditions is abdication of interpretive sovereignty—giving up the privilege to have a last word on oneself. Committing to an ethics-first and phenomenological approach, Dover sets aside the question of how the changes to one's self-understanding she attributes to this kind of conversation take place. I first argue that her account of the abdication condition rests on a false assumption of interpretive process: that a conscious vetting process stands between understanding an utterance and being changed by it, and can be suspended by will. Second, drawing on Gadamerian hermeneutics, I supply the hermeneutic mechanism by which the interlocutor's utterance alters one's self-understanding, and recover abdication as the foregrounding of prejudices and the turning of fore-structure toward oneself. Finally, I test this account by using it to explain what Dover asserts yet does not support: that changes to one's self-understanding are unpredictable and untraceable in interpersonal inquiry.

**Keywords:** *Conversational Self, Interpersonal Inquiry, Hermeneutics, Self-understanding, Interpretive Sovereignty, Self-Knowledge*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Do people have privileged access to knowledge of themselves? Building on his famous statement "Ego cogito, ergo sum," Descartes argues that a thinking subject can have privileged and infallible access to her thoughts through introspection, while others' access is merely inferential.[1] Other philosophers relocate this privilege: on Gareth Evans's transparency account, privileged access to self-knowledge is grounded in looking outward at the world rather than inspecting an inner state.[2] In contrast, a deflationary view of self-knowledge denies such privilege outright, since any self-ascriptions are themselves interpretations, as revisable and fallible as any interpretations from others.[3] Daniela Dover, however, steps out of this metaphysical and epistemological debate about self-knowledge. Rather than arguing about whether

[1]. René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, pt. 1, art. 7, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[2]. Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, ed. John McDowell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 225.

[3]. Peter Carruthers, *The Opacity of Mind: An Integrative Theory of Self-Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

introspection in fact grants privilege, she takes up a normative question: in our daily practices of interpersonal relationships, should one insist on such privilege?

Dover examines this question through what she calls interpersonal inquiry, conversations that are "animated by mutual curiosity,"[4] which she argues is governed by an ethic of "taking one another seriously."[5] Normally, we, the interlocutors, insist on the presumed privilege of "having the last word when it comes to the subject of oneself," based on our perceived direct access to our own mental states. Dover calls this privilege *interpretive sovereignty*. In the ideal circumstance, we give up this privilege, fulfilling a condition Dover names *abdication of interpretive sovereignty*.[6]

Dover is explicit that her focus on interpersonal inquiry is ethical. She is committed to an "ethics-first approach" in which she derives an ethics for conceiving selfhood and understanding from a phenomenological investigation into how we aspire to relate. She rejects deducing ethical concepts from metaphysical or epistemological theories and calls such methods a reversal of "both our explanatory and our ethical priorities," arguing that we "have a much firmer grasp" on the phenomenology of these experiences than on those theories.[7] In her paper, she characterizes a way of conversing and presents the phenomenology of it in an attempt to show that it is worth wanting. Although she mentions that changes in one's self-understanding are likely results of this activity, she sets aside the specific hermeneutic process of how these changes happen. My aim is to explain this process. To achieve this purpose, I will borrow Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic theories and show how they can supplement and enhance our understanding of Dover's account.

One might object that Gadamerian hermeneutics emerges downstream of an ontological conception of understanding, which Dover's ethics-first approach avoids. However, Gadamer similarly derives his hermeneutics from an examination of shared human interpretive practices.[8] Additionally, investigating the hermeneutic aspect of conversation—how the interlocutors' utterances are interpreted and how they influence our understandings—can tell us whether a proposed ethical ideal is compatible with how interpretation actually works and therefore achievable.

Following Dover, I focus on self-understanding instead of self-knowledge. My aim is to present how one's interpretation of oneself might be altered during conversation, so whether that interpretation is correct is set aside. Knowledge, as suggested by Francey Russell,[9] implies mastery and closure—inquiry pursuing knowledge is consummated when knowledge is obtained. This, in turn, can obscure the *autotelic* nature of interpersonal inquiry. Dover describes one's self-understanding as one's "working theory" of

[4]. Daniela Dover, "The Conversational Self," *Mind* 131, no. 521 (2022): 193.
[5]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 200.
[6]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 202.
[7]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 196.
[8]. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 270.
[9]. Francey Russell, "I Want to Know More About You: On Knowing and Acknowledging in *Chinatown*," in *Stanley Cavell on Aesthetic Understanding*, ed. Garry L. Hagberg (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

oneself and "the accumulated result" of one's efforts to understand oneself. Dover prefers it because it captures one's simultaneously "epistemic, ethical and aesthetic" relation with oneself, with a thicker sense than mere self-knowledge.[10]

In section II, I will start by reconstructing Dover's account of interpersonal inquiry to situate the abdication condition in her theoretical framework. Section III will argue that Dover is committed to a dubious interpretive apparatus of "a conscious, reflective vetting process," leaving how abdication can be achieved unexplained. Section IV will argue that abdication can be recovered through Gadamerian hermeneutics as the foregrounding of *prejudice* and the turning of *fore-sight* toward oneself. Section V will argue that based on Gadamerian hermeneutics, changes to one's self-understanding cannot be predicted or traced, which Dover asserts but does not explain.

## II. DOVER'S ACCOUNT OF INTERPERSONAL INQUIRY

Dover uses *interpersonal inquiry* to refer to conversations "animated by mutual curiosity." Notably, the inquiry should not aim at satisfaction of curiosity—it is *autotelic*, "pursued and valued for its own sake," not as a means to an end.[11]

She distinguishes between two approaches to this kind of conversation. The first is what she calls the *revelation picture*, where the interlocutors take turns to disclose information about themselves. It reaches its purpose when both interlocutors "have not deceived" each other and have "succeeded in accurately perceiving what [each other has] revealed."[12]

Dover points out that the revelation picture is mistaken in two ways. First, its account of self-revelation is too narrow, limited to "heart-to-heart confessions" of what was once concealed. However, in actual practice, mundane conversations about "gardening or food or dogs" can be as revealing, in the sense that "when I talk about myself, I am also talking about the world, and when I talk about the world, I give my interlocutor a sense of who I am."[13] Second, the revelation picture fails to capture the intersubjective nature of interpersonal inquiry. Ideal conversations should not be interspersed monologues, in which "one is cast as autobiographical narrator, the other as audience." Rather, the interlocutors' attempts to understand each other are "constitutively bound up" and "comprehensively intermingled." They do not take turns performing an activity but engage in one activity together.[14]

Dover's alternative to the revelation picture involves "taking one another seriously." It requires both interlocutors to satisfy three conditions: input-seeking, abdication, and reciprocity.[15]

---

[10]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 197.
[11]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 194.
[12]. Bonnie M. Talbert, "Knowing Other People: A Second-Person Framework," *Ratio* 28, no. 2 (2015): 194, quoted in Dover, "Conversational Self," 199.
[13]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 199.
[14]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 200.
[15]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 201.

The input-seeking condition is fulfilled when I take your self-understanding as relevant to my understanding of you. Simply accepting your point of view through mere observation from the outside is not enough, since it cannot answer "the questions that I will have in response to them." To meet this condition, "I have to actively interrogate your point of view from my point of view."[16]

The abdication condition means that I should take your understanding of me as relevant to my self-understanding. This requires the abdication of one's interpretive sovereignty, which is to give up "the privilege of having the last word when it comes to the subject of oneself." Abdication does not mean transferring the privilege of the last word to the interlocutor and granting her the last word instead; nor does it demand merely outward politeness while I privately hold your words against "a conscious, reflective vetting process" before letting influence happen. That would be to treat your understanding of me as "mere evidence, or as mere suggestions to 'take or leave' depending on how they fare with respect to my own antecedent commitments, values and self-conceptions." In order to abdicate one's interpretive sovereignty in the full sense, one has to open oneself to the "unpredictable and perhaps even untraceable" changes provoked by the conversation.[17] As Dover summarizes, the abdication condition consists not in "the actual occurrence or course of such changes, but in the attitude to conversation that makes them possible in the first place, namely, a willingness to loosen my grip on myself by loosening my grip on my antecedent self-understanding."[18]

Lastly, the reciprocity condition is met if I want and encourage my interlocutor to adopt the above two stances toward me: to take my self-understanding into account when she tries to understand me, and to let my understanding of her inform her self-understanding.[19]

Dover holds that the reciprocity and input-seeking conditions are often easily satisfied for conversations between genuinely curious interlocutors.[20] In contrast, the abdication condition is the most demanding one: we are often reluctant to give up our authority over a subject—ourselves—in which we have invested so much, since it's tempting to "control the stories people tell about us."[21]

## III. THE VETTING PROCESS AND ITS DIFFICULTIES

In this section, I focus on the abdication condition because it directly addresses how one should treat the interlocutor's interpretation of oneself. I present the presumed interpretive apparatus it presupposes and argue that this presumption is untenable. To avoid confusion, Dover frames abdication as an ethical attitude that one should adopt in conversations rather than a commitment to a cognitive process. Instead of

[16]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 201.
[17]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 203.
[18]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 204.
[19]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 204.
[20]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 205.
[21]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 206.

refuting her ethical picture, I argue that her ideal requires a different interpretive mechanism than the one she proposes to be realizable.

Dover uses interpretive sovereignty to refer to one's privilege to have the last word when talking about self-related topics that are "broadly humanistic, ethically 'thick,'" such as one's "antecedent commitments, values and self-conceptions." I will call the interlocutor's utterances about these topics the *ingredients of self-understanding*, abbreviated as *ingredients* for convenience. When describing how interpretive sovereignty can be abdicated, Dover discusses the existence of "a conscious, reflective vetting process" that should be suspended for the condition to be fulfilled.[22] Its work is to preclude any influence from the interlocutor by rejecting the *ingredients* she provides when they do not correspond with my current self-understanding and only accepting them when they do. When the conscious vetting is not suspended, the utterances are treated as "mere evidence, or as mere suggestions to 'take or leave'" with little influence on one's self-understanding. In contrast, after the vetting is suspended, *ingredients* can influence self-understanding directly.

The vetting is described as a structure that the interlocutor's utterance engages after its meaning is settled but before it can influence one's self-understanding. In other words, Dover's description implies that there are three steps for us to interpret an utterance during the conversation: (1) make sense of the utterance/work out its meaning, (2) check it against our existing understanding, i.e., upholding the vetting, and (3) revise one's self-understanding. She implies that it is only possible for one's self-understanding to be changed if the vetting process is suspended. In this way, she also presupposes that it is possible for the vetting process to be suspended.

However, the existence of such a "vetting process" is questionable. Dover's description attributes two properties—deliberate and conservative—to this process; I will argue that neither holds for how we actually interpret an utterance about ourselves.

***(1) Deliberate.*** Dover considers the vetting process as not "a fully passive surrender" but a display of the "trumping authority of conscious reflection and deliberation."[23] In calling on people to suspend the vetting, Dover suggests that this could be achieved through individual deliberation, or it makes no sense to convince them to withhold the vetting. To summarize, Dover's abdication condition presupposes that through efforts of deliberation, people can suspend the cognitive process that evaluates interlocutors' utterances against their current self-understandings so that all *ingredients* are treated as important.
It is questionable whether this is possible. For a sentence about a topic to make sense and be understood, one must relate it to something one already knows. Since *ingredients* are about oneself, it is impossible to understand them without relating them to one's current self-understanding. Imagine a conversation between Dick and his mother. Dick's mother says to Dick, "You are too lazy. You never helped me wash dishes after lunch." This is an *ingredient of self-understanding* for Dick, since it makes a claim about what kind of person he is. As Dover's account implies, if Dick is willing to abdicate his interpretive

[22]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 202–3.
[23]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 203n14.

sovereignty, he can understand this claim without being aware of its correspondence with his existing self-understanding.

Settling this requires knowing what Dick must already be able to do to understand what his mother said. Evans's account of how subject-predicate ascription is understood gives us a place to start. According to Evans, understanding "a is F" requires two components: an idea of the subject and a concept of the property. That is, if one can think "a is F," one must be able to think "a is G" for any G one grasps, and "b is F" for any b one can think of.[24] For Dick to understand "You are lazy," two processes are proceeding simultaneously: First, he needs to understand that the claim is addressing *himself*, which requires a capacity to raise other self-ascriptions, in other words, a capacity to deploy his existing self-understanding. Second, he needs to be able to attribute the property "lazy" to other subjects, which is to comprehend the concept of laziness as a behavioral disposition involving the avoidance of work and effort. Nevertheless, this only fixes a category of behaviors, and the extent of the disposition remains unsettled. "Lazy" is, in the language of Graff, a gradable adjective whose predicative use attributes not a context-invariant property, but a property related to norms that are interest-relative.[25] In the case of Dick, the norm is an expectation that his mother placed on him. It consists of what is typical of a household member like Dick. More importantly, it is composed of his own commitment to the practice through his ordinary conduct. In this way, to identify the exact property he was attributed by his mother, Dick needs to at least have a sense of his "laziness-related" behaviors. Therefore, Dick cannot be totally unaware of how lazy he was in order to understand the utterance of his mother. To clarify, this means that Dick should be aware of the degree to which his mother's claim corresponds with his self-concept, so it does not matter if he and his mother might have different understandings of the semantic meaning of the word "lazy."

One might object that this conclusion might only apply to utterances about gradable properties. If Dick's mother makes a claim about a categorical character of his, such as "you are a high school student," then understanding this utterance does not entail an awareness of its correspondence to Dick's self-understanding. However, this utterance might not be regarded as an *ingredient of self-understanding* because it is a part of "workaday facts" that "can be settled with reference to public records." It only becomes an *ingredient* when it can be interpreted as "ethically 'thick,'" while these interpretations often connect the categorical character with gradable ones. For example, "you are a high school student" becomes ethically significant when it is interpreted as talking about whether Dick is hardworking enough as high school students are expected to be, or whether Dick loves doing sports as high school students typically do. Categorical properties start to gain ethical thickness when they are interpreted as referring to gradable ones.

Recall that Dover's account implies that a sense of how an utterance corresponds to one's existing self-understanding arises after one comprehends it. This step-by-step conception of interpretation is an

[24]. Evans, *Varieties of Reference*, 104–6.

[25]. Delia Graff, "Shifting Sands: An Interest-Relative Theory of Vagueness," *Philosophical Topics* 28, no. 1 (2000): 64.

oversimplification because evaluation and understanding are actually interwoven during our cognitive processing of an external claim. A sense of how consistent the *ingredients* are with one's current self-understanding arises together with the meaning of the utterance. Therefore, it is difficult for the evaluation, i.e., the vetting process, to be suspended by deliberation if one attempts to understand an utterance.

Some may refute that deliberation can help people escape the influence of the vetting process in another way: not by suspending the process itself, but by redirecting our attention elsewhere so that the process would stop automatically. This is feasible, but it cannot achieve the effect that Dover claims the abdication of sovereignty achieves. Dover argues that abdication of sovereignty "[opens] the door" for *ingredients* to let further influence happen that "takes place under the radar of *conscious* introspection."[26] Since the process of evaluation is a part of the process of understanding, to redirect attention away from assessing *ingredients* would simultaneously terminate the process of understanding them. As a result, the *ingredients* would be ignored, kept off "the radar of *conscious* introspection."

Nevertheless, that the method that Dover provides for abdication fails does not mean that abdication itself is unachievable. Although the vetting process itself cannot be suspended by deliberative effort, influence of *ingredients* can still reach us. This is going to be demonstrated in the following examination of the vetting process's second property, its conservative nature.

***(2) Conservative.*** In Dover's description, the purpose of the vetting process is to "[hold] out against any influence from you." This is achieved through checking the *ingredients* regarding "how they fare with respect to my own antecedent commitments, values and self-conceptions." It operates like a filter that allows only what is in accord with one's antecedent self-conception or perspective to pass through. The function of vetting is to prevent one's current self-understanding from being changed by blocking anything that might conflict with or challenge it.

In the examination of the first property, I have demonstrated that the function of such a vetting process cannot be isolated from understanding. To show that this second property fails, I will assume that vetting is an independent process as Dover suggests. I will demonstrate that even though the vetting process is not suspended, self-understanding can change regardless. I argue for this claim in three cases: (1) the *ingredient* is in harmony with one's existing self-understanding, (2) the *ingredient* is not in harmony with one's existing self-understanding, and (3) the *ingredient* is about an aspect that one's existing self-understanding does not cover. I will continue to use the case in which Dick's mother told him he was lazy because he never helped her wash dishes. Assume that he is not willing to abdicate his interpretive sovereignty and suspend his conscious vetting.

*Case 1.* Dick is aware of the fact that he was lazy and admits that as a part of his self-understanding. Then his mother's utterance passes his vetting filter frictionlessly and comes to him as a restatement of a fact he already knows. To determine that his mother's claim is in harmony with his self-conception, he needs to consciously think about his existing self-conception to serve as a benchmark for comparison. According

[26]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 203.

to Anderson and Schooler's model of memory, human minds do not make everything instantaneously available at the same time to optimize the use of cognitive resources. The availability of stored information is determined by losses of holding it, gains from successful retrieval, and the probability of a demand for retrieval.[27] Applied to Dick, he does not think about his self-conception all the time. Instead, it is stored in his memory most of the time and is only retrieved if cognitive tasks require it. This time, it is raised into consciousness because processing his mother's utterance needs it. This retrieval process can increase the availability of this self-conception by increasing the probability that the mind regards this information as being demanded. Therefore, although the content of Dick's belief that he is lazy hasn't changed, that self-conception becomes more salient.

*Case 2*. Dick does not think that he was lazy, so his mother's claim does not pass the vetting filter he upholds. Like *Case 1*, to reject his mother's claim, Dick first needs to establish that he is not lazy and decide that this claim does not align with his current self-understanding. In this process, he retrieves his existing self-conception, brings it to the level of conscious awareness, and in doing so reinforces it.

Moreover, since Dick's mother provides evidence for her claim that he was lazy—he never helped her wash dishes—he needs to offer alternative interpretations of the evidence she pointed out, or it contradicts the self-understanding he wants to preserve. Maybe he is not lazy but too tired to help her. Maybe he thinks it is wiser to be selective in choosing an activity to spend his time on. Maybe he helps her do laundry every day and thinks that his mother was too demanding in asking him to also wash dishes. Whatever his reinterpretation is, it becomes a modification to his current self-conception, which is also a type of change.

*Case 3*. Dick never thinks about whether he was lazy. Hence, to preserve his self-understanding, he may bring up relevant but not identical categories that already exist in his self-conception and check his mother's claim against them, such as whether he was responsible or whether he was productive. But no matter what benchmark he brings up, he eventually reaches some sort of conclusion on the topic of whether he was lazy. In this way, his mother's claim changes his self-understanding by making available a new category of self-evaluation to him.

To conclude, suspending the vetting process is therefore not a necessary condition for one's self-understanding to be changed by *ingredients* during conversations.

Recall that Dover locates the "conscious, reflective vetting process" as occurring after the meaning of *ingredients* is settled and before they can reach one's self-understanding to cause changes. In the above section, I demonstrated that evaluation of a claim's correspondence is intertwined with the process of understanding it. Then, I showed that alteration to one's self-understanding, similarly, is not separate but happens alongside the process of interpretation. As a result, there isn't such a structure as the vetting process between making sense of an utterance and changing one's self-understanding. One does evaluate

[27]. John R. Anderson and Lael J. Schooler, "Reflections of the Environment in Memory," *Psychological Science* 2, no. 6 (1991), https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.1991.tb00174.x.

the correspondence of an *ingredient*, but that process is entangled with one's interpretation of it and its alteration to one's self-understanding. In short, Dover suggests that these three processes are separate, and that one of them can be eliminated, and I have argued against this possibility.

This does not mean, however, that abdication of sovereignty is unethical or unachievable. According to Dover, "[t]he abdication of interpretive sovereignty consists, not in the actual occurrence or course of such changes, but in the attitude to conversation that makes them possible in the first place." The changes to one's self-understanding seem to occur regardless of one's attitude or whether interpretive sovereignty is abdicated. However, as Dover said, abdication is not defined by merely the existence of changes. It is defined by one giving up one's privilege to have the last word on oneself when encountering the *ingredients* provided by an interlocutor. At the same time, attitudes that Dover proposes as a part of abdication, such as "an openness to being changed,"[28] are not meaningless or inconsequential. Although they are not necessary for changes to happen, they can still influence the range of changes that could occur and continue to be a vital part of Dover's ethical ideal of "taking one another seriously."

If abdication cannot be achieved by suspending the vetting process, then it must work by some other route to preserve Dover's ethical picture. Identifying that route requires an account of interpretation on which comprehension and evaluation are interwoven rather than sequential, and on which one's self-understanding changes regardless. The next section will show that Gadamer's hermeneutic circle supplies the interpretive mechanism behind Dover's ideal conversation.

## IV. RECOVERING ABDICATION IN THE HERMENEUTIC CIRCLE

In this section, I will first argue that Gadamerian hermeneutics can be used to supply the mechanism of how one's self-understanding can be changed in Dover's "taking one another seriously." Then, I will recover abdication in this framework and explain how abdication can enable more thorough changes to one's self-understanding.

### (1) Gadamerian Hermeneutics Applied to Dover

Dover argues that abdication of interpretive sovereignty is ethical by illustrating its phenomenological appeal through the case of Hannah Upp, who exemplifies it. Upp is a woman with dissociative fugues, a pathological condition that makes her forget who she is episodically, yet she "knew she was loving and openhearted."[29] This makes giving up interpretive sovereignty especially easy for her and grants her extreme openness to changes in interpersonal interaction. She was an evangelical Christian when she met her friend Bhattacharya, who was raised Hindu. When Bhattacharya asked whether Upp believed Bhattacharya was going to Hell, Upp wept. Later, Upp was found to be a Quaker and dating a woman. She clearly underwent significant changes to her self-understanding. How did this change happen? Dover argues that Upp had abdicated her interpretive sovereignty since she "did not treat Bhattacharya's

[28]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 203.

[29]. Rachel Aviv, "How a Young Woman Lost Her Identity," *New Yorker*, April 2, 2018, quoted in Dover, "Conversational Self," 210.

question merely as a first-order theological question to be answered by reporting on her antecedent beliefs, nor merely as a challenge to be met by defending them." Rather, Upp realized that answering "yes" to the question might imply "Upp herself as (for example) callous, arrogant or parochial" and recognized the question as relevant not only to her theology but also to her self-understanding.[30] However, Dover's account of Upp's interpretive process is incomplete: she does not explain how a question about Bhattacharya's fate becomes a question about Upp herself, nor why Upp's religious belief, rather than her openheartedness, gives way.

This gap can be filled by an account of interpretation that explains the relationship between understanding the interlocutor's claim and changing one's self-understanding. Gadamerian hermeneutics, specifically Gadamer's concept of the *hermeneutic circle* and Heidegger's *fore-structure*, are suitable for this purpose for three reasons. First, despite explaining his theory through the interpretation of texts, Gadamer's hermeneutics is developed on a conception of interpretation that also takes conversation as a model of understanding.[31] Second, Heidegger's distinction between *fore-sight* and *fore-having* is especially apt to show how the meaning of an utterance can change without the arrival of new information. Third, Gadamerian hermeneutics fulfills the requirement in section III, that is, understanding the utterance, evaluating its fit with one's understanding, and changing one's self-understanding are intertwined together.

According to Gadamer's account of interpretation, understanding of a text begins with engaging with the text with "particular expectations" that lead to the emergence of the "initial meaning." Then, as this "initial meaning" is projected to the whole text, *fore-projection* is created and is then "constantly revised" according to the meaning that further emerges as one continues to read the text. The revision in turn reshapes the expectations that determine how meanings emerge. And this circular process of forming and refining *fore-projection* is understanding, which he calls the *hermeneutic circle* following Heidegger.[32] Readers often approach the texts with an expectation that there's "an immanent unity of meaning,"[33] which partly explains why the purpose of understanding is to reach "the harmony of all the details with the whole."[34]

The "expectations" that Gadamer mentions are the concretization of Heidegger's *fore-structure*.[35] Heidegger argues that interpretation is "never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us," and the *fore-structure* is what understanding rests upon.[36] It has three aspects: *fore-having* is the background "totality of involvements" and prior familiarity with the subject matter that one already brings in; *fore-sight* is the prior perspective that fixes the respect in which the thing is interpreted and makes one

[30]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 211.
[31]. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 387.
[32]. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 269.
[33]. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 294.
[34]. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 291.
[35]. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 298.
[36]. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 191–92.

more attentive to certain aspects rather than others; *fore-conception* is the conceptual vocabulary already held in place for the interpretation.[37] Gadamer argues that during interpretation, one is always going to expect that all the meanings are compatible with each other to form a coherent whole, which he called the *fore-conception* of completeness.[38] Therefore, as further meaning emerges, *fore-structure* and *fore-projection* are revised continually until they reach inner coherence and cohere with each other.

In interpersonal inquiry, the object of understanding is the utterance one hears from the interlocutor. In this context, *fore-having* includes one's understanding of oneself, the interlocutor, and the world. *Fore-sight* is an anticipation of what the interlocutor's utterance is about, including its scope and illocution, which fixes how it relates to one's *fore-having*. These two aspects matter most for my purpose since fore-having holds self-understanding, while fore-sight determines whether an utterance is taken to be about oneself. Since self-understanding is part of *fore-having*, from which the projected meaning is formed, understanding an utterance about oneself already evaluates it against one's self-understanding; and when the projection fails to fit, self-understanding can be revised. Understanding, evaluation and change are therefore interwoven parts of one circle instead of three separate steps, fulfilling the requirements raised in section III.

The same process is demonstrated in how Upp understood Bhattacharya's question "Do you think I'm going to Hell?" Based on an inference about her *fore-structure*, she considered herself to be "loving and openhearted" characteristic, recognized that Bhattacharya was her beloved friend, and had a worldview that's typical of evangelical Christians. Initially, her *fore-sight* anticipated that the question was about her first-order theological belief. She reached the new understanding that "I believe my friend should go to Hell," since, due to her religious commitment, those who aren't devoted to Jesus, including her Hindu friend, would go to Hell after death. Projecting this meaning to the whole conversation, she noticed the contradiction between her new self-understanding and her recognition of Bhattacharya as her friend. A new *fore-sight* then formed—the question isn't about her religious belief but about her evaluation of friendship. So she began to understand Bhattacharya as asking, "Am I more important to you than your religious belief?" She wanted to answer yes, since she couldn't regard herself as "loving and openhearted" if she answered no. She then "turned the question in on herself" and treated it as related to her self-understanding.[39] The question's meaning then becomes "Do I want to be a loving person at the cost of giving up my lifelong belief?" Her later changes indicated that she answered yes, recognizing "loving and openhearted" as more crucial to her self-understanding than her religious belief.

As a methodological clarification, Upp is a limit case: her pathological condition gives her a heightened openness that makes abdication especially easy. I use this case because her extreme openness makes the hermeneutic circle easy to see. Yet her condition does not change how interpretation works. The Gadamerian fore-structure model is widely applicable to all understandings, whether Upp's conversation

[37]. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 191.
[38]. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 294.
[39]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 211.

with Bhattacharya or ordinary, everyday dialogues. What differs in non-pathological cases is the degree of openness, not the mechanism.

### (2) Abdication as Foregrounding of Prejudice

So far, I have used Gadamer to describe how self-understanding changes. The same framework also yields a more precise account of what the abdication requires. Dover describes the abdication of interpretive sovereignty positively as an attitude—"an openness to being changed." In an ordinary reading of "openness," it requires one to empty oneself of prejudices one antecedently holds to accept the interlocutor's utterance in an unfiltered manner. However, in the hermeneutic circle, a comprehensive understanding of the interlocutor arises only through *fore-projection*, which is generated from one's prior involvement with the subject matter. Gadamer's name for the historically formed content of the *fore-structure* is *prejudice* (*Vorurteil*). Gadamer argues that it shouldn't be treated as the enemy of understanding, since "the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself"; instead, prejudice is necessarily involved in all understanding as the very condition for it to happen. Gadamer defines prejudice as "a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined."[40] Therefore, prejudice is not necessarily a false judgment but a judgment that's made at an early stage.

Then, if Dover's openness does not mean an absence of prejudice, what does it mean? According to Gadamer, openness "involves neither 'neutrality' with respect to content nor the extinction of one's self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one's own . . . prejudices." Foregrounding of a prejudice means that it is brought from operative-but-invisible to visible, while appropriation of it requires one to own one's own prejudice rather than dismiss its existence. Appropriation prevents foregrounding from being idle, since realizing one's assumption does not mean that one treats it as a prejudice instead of a plain fact. In other words, openness requires one "to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own [prejudices]."[41] For interpersonal inquiry, an operative but unnoticed prejudice provokes an interpretation of an utterance that is in harmony with itself, impeding any revision to itself. In contrast, once a prejudice is foregrounded and appropriated, it can stand in tension with the interlocutor's utterance: confirming, qualifying, contradicting, etc. As Gadamer claims, ideal interpretation is "not covering up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation" but "consciously bringing it out."[42] Therefore, even if "a conscious, reflective vetting process" exists, suspension of it would not help reach the purpose of abdication—enable more thorough changes to one's self-understandings—because it hides one's self-understanding and reduces its visibility. Instead, the open attitude stipulated by the abdication condition should put one's self-understanding at a stage where it becomes more obvious and thus susceptible to challenges.

[40]. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 273.
[41]. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 271–72.
[42]. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305.

## (3) How Abdication Makes a Difference

As the openness in abdication is redefined as the foregrounding of one's prejudices, it requires an explanation of why this openness is what "makes [changes to self-understanding] possible in the first place." Gadamer's hermeneutics can supply two routes through which abdication of interpretive sovereignty can make one's self-understanding more prone to change, depending on the kind of contradiction that drives the revision.

When an utterance contradicts one's self-understanding, the contradiction can be resolved in two directions: either to modify one's self-understanding or to reinterpret the utterance, i.e., either revise one's *fore-structure* or one's *fore-projection*. If one doesn't abdicate one's interpretive sovereignty and foreground one's prejudice, one's self-understanding is not put into question and remains invisible, so the contradiction is resolved largely by reinterpreting the utterance. Therefore, abdication makes self-understanding more available as what might be wrong and need revision.

When the utterance points out a contradiction between different existing self-understandings, as Bhattacharya's question did for Upp, the influence of abdication through the abovementioned route is not significant. At this point, reinterpreting the utterance cannot remove the contradiction within oneself, so self-understanding must be revised. Abdication influences this process by affecting whether the contradiction would be noticed.

If an utterance has the potential to expose a contradiction between multiple existing self-understandings, abdication mainly exerts influence via the *fore-sight*. Among the three components of one's *fore-structure*, *fore-having* and *fore-conception* are things that I possess—neither is under deliberative control, and neither would be changed when one adopts a different attitude. In contrast, *fore-sight* fixes the respect in which things are examined and directs attention to certain aspects rather than others. It is a selection from different directions that the interpretation can lead toward. Therefore, even though the *fore-structure* is necessary for understanding and cannot be suspended, *fore-sight* opens possibilities for one's attention and attitudes to influence how things get interpreted.

One would inevitably change one's self-understanding during the conversation only when the interlocutor's utterance is understood as saying something about oneself. Therefore, one can prevent one's self-understanding from being changed by not relating an utterance to oneself. Although this avoidance is not possible when a claim has "you" as its grammatical subject, this mechanism can work when the interlocutor speaks about herself or other things. As a result, some utterances, despite being *ingredients of self-understanding*, might not get the chance to influence one's self-understanding because the person does not abdicate her interpretive sovereignty and directs her *fore-sight* away from herself.

For Upp, her friend Bhattacharya's question didn't address her directly—its direct subject is Bhattacharya's fate. Yet she "turned the question in on herself" and treated the answer to this question as related to what kind of person she is. With a willingness to be changed by her friend, her *fore-sight* gradually directed the focus of the question from other subjects to herself, eventually exposing a

contradiction within her self-understanding. If Upp didn't abdicate her interpretive sovereignty, she would interpret Bhattacharya's question as revealing something else, maybe about mere theology, maybe about Bhattacharya's own insecurity, anything but her self-understanding.

In conclusion, abdication works in two ways: letting self-understanding, rather than the utterance's meaning, to bear revision when an utterance contradicts it, and affecting whether contradictions within one's self-understanding are exposed at all.

## V. UNPREDICTABILITY AND UNTRACEABILITY OF CHANGES

Gadamer's framework can explain how the abdication condition can be achieved and why it has its intended effect. A further test of its adequacy is whether it can also explain the phenomena that Dover describes as likely to happen after interpretive sovereignty is abdicated. In this section, I will focus on how changes to one's self-understanding remain unpredictable and untraceable.

Dover describes the ideal effect of abdication of interpretive sovereignty as "allowing myself to change in response to you in unpredictable and perhaps even untraceable ways."[43] She understood unpredictability and untraceability as separate traits. Unpredictability is prospective: no participant can foresee how their understandings would change, let alone control the direction of that change during conversations. In contrast, untraceability is retrospective: one cannot reconstruct how she is changed or know what elements contribute to that change. Nevertheless, Dover does not provide a rationale for the two properties she attributes to changes of one's self-understanding in interpersonal inquiry. I argue that these two traits are explainable in Gadamerian hermeneutics.

### (1) Unpredictability

Suppose one's understanding is at stage $n$. If one wants to successfully predict what one's understanding would be like at stage $n + 1$, one should know (1) what utterance from the interlocutor is the trigger of changes and (2) how one's own understanding would change in response to it. However, both conditions are difficult to satisfy—one cannot know when one would change from stage $n$ to stage $n + 1$, nor can one know what stage $n + 1$ would be like.

The first condition is hard to fulfill for two reasons. First, the more obvious one, we are generally incapable of predicting what the interlocutor will say, especially in a conversation where their understanding is changing in response to our words. If one can't know what the interlocutor is going to say, then one can't know how oneself will be changed in response. Secondly, one cannot know which utterance delivered by the interlocutor would trigger changes. As interpretation is governed by *fore-conception of completeness*, revision to one's understanding is triggered when the projected whole cannot cohere with the new meaning that arrives, in other words, when what is said by the interlocutor deviates from one's expectation. However, one cannot anticipate whether a revision would happen because if one can foresee a revision happening, an utterance cannot go against one's expectation; then

[43]. Dover, "Conversational Self," 203.

what the interlocutor says must fit within one's expectation, and no revision would happen. Therefore, knowing that an utterance would cause changes beforehand would cancel the necessary condition for the change to happen, so it is impossible for one to predict when a change would occur.

The second condition fails for a different reason. Note that this does not follow from the failure of the first condition: one can have a sense of how change will proceed without knowing when it will do so. Suppose, counterfactually, I could know that an utterance would force a revision. I would still not know what revision would come to, because the same utterance would cause different changes depending on which question I heard it answering. The content of changes is determined by the question that orients it. However, the question is not raised by the hearer—in Gadamer's language, it simply "occurs," "arises," or "presents itself" based on which gap of the hearer's understanding is made visible by the interlocutor. One cannot locate the gap herself before it is exposed by an utterance, since it is a part of what determines how things are present to us and thus conceals itself. In this respect, questioning is a "passion rather than action,"[44] where "passion" denotes what one undergoes passively rather than pursues actively. As a result, prior to experiencing the change itself, it is also impossible for one to predict the direction in which the change would proceed.

The unpredictability of changes to one's self-understanding is especially meaningful for Dover's abdication condition. If one can predict how one's self-understanding might change, then it opens the door for steering the conversation to achieve the kind of change one wants, which is exactly the retention of interpretive sovereignty that Dover objects to. Therefore, unpredictability is not an accidental property; it is a precondition for the abdication of interpretive sovereignty to be possible.

### (2) Untraceability

That the changes are unpredictable does not entail that they are also untraceable. One might not know a person's destination beforehand but can know how she reached there afterwards by tracing her footprints.

The untraceability of changes to one's self-understanding follows from the opacity of *fore-structure*, which is the situation from which interpretation happens. According to Gadamer, "[t]he illumination of this situation—reflection on effective history—can never be completely achieved. . . . To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete."[45] Tracing how an utterance changed one's self-understanding requires one to compare one's *fore-structure* before and after. In other words, to trace the changes of one's *fore-structure* between $t_1$ and $t_2$, one would need to know, at $t_2$ or later at $t_3$, the exact content of one's *fore-structure* at both $t_1$ and $t_2$. Gadamer does not consider this possible: "[i]t is impossible to make ourselves aware of a prejudice while it is constantly operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, provoked."[46] At $t_2$, one can know the particular prejudice that the interlocutor's utterance has called into question. But the revision is not confined to that prejudice. Under the influence of the *fore-conception of completeness*, one's *fore-structure* is always expected to maintain inner

[44]. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 360.
[45]. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 301.
[46]. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 298.

coherence, so a revision at one site reorganizes regions that were not provoked and thus did not come into view. What one can register at $t_2$ is therefore only the starting site of the change, not its whole extent, and the remainder of one's *fore-structure* at $t_1$ and at $t_2$ continues to operate unnoticed. Nor can the deficit be made up at $t_3$. The comparison between $t_1$ and $t_2$ is itself an act of understanding, carried out from a *fore-structure* at $t_3$ that is again operative yet unnoticed. Worse, that *fore-structure* at $t_3$ is partly the product of the very change one is attempting to reconstruct. The instrument of the tracing cannot be a part of what it is supposed to trace, which, according to Gadamer, is "due not to a deficiency in reflection but to the essence of the historical being that we are."[47]

## VI. CONCLUSION

Dover develops a phenomenological account to show that the kind of interpersonal inquiry she calls "taking one another seriously" is worth wanting and notes that it tends to change the self-understanding of the interlocutors. However, she does not provide an account for the hermeneutic mechanism behind these changes. My argument fills this gap.

When describing the abdication of interpretive sovereignty, Dover mentions that "a conscious, reflective vetting process" must be suspended. In this way, she presupposes a threefold interpretive architecture where comprehension of an utterance, conscious vetting, and changing one's understanding are treated as three separate steps. I showed that this structure cannot be sustained: evaluating an utterance's fit with one's self-understanding is a part of the comprehension process itself, so the evaluation is neither separable nor able to be suspended voluntarily by deliberation; self-understanding is altered no matter whether the vetting process is upheld, so its suspension is not necessary either. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Dover's ideal is problematic. Dover is wrong about how the ideal could be achieved, not in proposing it.

By drawing on Gadamerian hermeneutics, I explain the interpretive mechanism of how one's self-understanding could be changed during interpersonal inquiry, taking Hannah Upp as an example. I also provide an alternative account of how the abdication of interpretive sovereignty can be achieved and explain why one's self-understanding is more prone to change when the abdication is fulfilled. Lastly, I use Gadamer's hermeneutics to explain Dover's assertion that changes to one's self-understanding are unpredictable and untraceable in interpersonal inquiry.

Dover commits to an ethics-first approach, where she argues that instead of being guided primarily by the norms derived from metaphysical and epistemological theories, our normative aspirations for human relationships should shape our representational choices of the self. However, "ethics-first" does not license "ethics-only": an ethical ideal can be phenomenologically attractive yet rest on a mistaken assumption of how interpretation works during conversation. I supply the hermeneutic aspect of her ideal and show that it is hermeneutically viable, though not in the way she describes. What abdication asks of us is not the suspension of a reflective vetting process, which is not something one can do, but the

[47]. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 301.

foregrounding of one's own prejudices and the direction of the *fore-sight* toward oneself. Hermeneutics does not generate ethical ideals, but it constrains which approaches are feasible, and an ideal whose demand cannot be met is therefore a worse ideal however appealing its phenomenology.

## REFERENCES

Anderson, John R., and Lael J. Schooler. "Reflections of the Environment in Memory." *Psychological Science* 2, no. 6 (1991): 396–408. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.1991.tb00174.x.

Aviv, Rachel. "How a Young Woman Lost Her Identity." *New Yorker*, April 2, 2018. Quoted in Daniela Dover, "The Conversational Self," *Mind* 131, no. 521 (2022): 210.

Carruthers, Peter. *The Opacity of Mind: An Integrative Theory of Self-Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Descartes, René. *Principles of Philosophy*. In *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. Originally published 1644.

Dover, Daniela. "The Conversational Self." *Mind* 131, no. 521 (2022): 193–230.

Evans, Gareth. *The Varieties of Reference*. Edited by John McDowell. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. 2nd rev. ed. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. London: Continuum, 2004. Originally published 1960.

Graff, Delia. "Shifting Sands: An Interest-Relative Theory of Vagueness." *Philosophical Topics* 28, no. 1 (2000): 45–81.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell, 1962. Originally published 1927.

Russell, Francey. "I Want to Know More About You: On Knowing and Acknowledging in *Chinatown*." In *Stanley Cavell on Aesthetic Understanding*, edited by Garry L. Hagberg, 3–35. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Talbert, Bonnie M. "Knowing Other People: A Second-Person Framework." *Ratio* 28, no. 2 (2015): 194. Quoted in Daniela Dover, "The Conversational Self," *Mind* 131, no. 521 (2022): 199.