

# **Philosophical Hermeneutics and Policy Analysis: Theory and Effectuations**

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## **Introduction: Dialogical meaning in Policy Analysis.**

### **1. Variety in Interpretive Policy Analysis.<sup>1</sup>**

The last three decades saw the increasing popularity of interpretive approaches in policy analysis. Policy hermeneutics, narrative analysis, analysis of policy discourse, and the analytics of government, can now all be found in mainstream policy journals (Rose and Miller 1992; Fischer and Forester 1993; Roe 1994; Hajer 1995; Yanow 1996; Wagenaar 1997; Bevir and Rhodes 2003; Wagenaar 2007). Methods books, always a sign of professional self-confidence, are being published in ever larger numbers (Yanow 2000; Clarke 2005; Torfing 2005; Charmaz 2006). Professional conferences now regularly schedule panels on policy interpretation. Various summer schools offer instruction in interpretive policy analysis to graduate students.

Interpretive policy analysis self-consciously positioned itself as an alternative to rational, empiricist policy analysis. Empiricist political inquiry operates on two strong assumptions: methodological monism, the belief that the methods appropriate to the study of social reality are the same as those used for the study of the natural world, and philosophical realism, the assumption that the objects of study exist independently of the methods used to observe them (Gibbons 1987).<sup>2</sup> From these two assumptions follow the well-known empiricist desiderata that empirical data are independent from theoretical frameworks, that the knowledge obtained by social science research must be objective, and that events are explained when the researcher has established a causal relationship between them (Bohman, Hiley et al. 1991). In terms of

research doctrine, objectivity is interpreted as being uncontaminated by values, ideals and conceptions of human needs (Fay 1975). In practice objectivity leads to a strong emphasis on methods of data collection and sampling that aim for replicability (researcher X should obtain the same outcomes, at least in principle, when measuring a variable as researcher Y).<sup>3</sup> Empiricism neatly fitted the technocratic model of policy analysis in which policy problems were isolated from their political context and treated as “dependent variables” in an input-output model in which distinct aspects of social reality were considered the dependent “variables” (Torgerson 1995).

Interpretive policy analysis challenged empiricism on ontological, epistemological, methodological and ethical grounds. Ontologically it claimed that empiricist social science is incommensurate with the subject matter of the social sciences. The building blocks of social reality are not brute, isolated facts, but actions-in-context which have a more or less well established meaning to social actors. Actions mean something to someone because, as Fay says, they ‘fall under some description which is socially recognizable as the description of that action because it involves reference to certain social rules’ (Fay, 1975, 75). These ‘rules’ can best be understood as shared understandings, shared conceptions and ways of doing, that structure and articulate the world in an attuned, recognizable way. These shared understandings are sedimented in the linguistic structures and habits which enable actors to communicate with each other and grasp the world. The goal of interpretive policy analysis is therefore, broadly speaking, understanding. Methodologically, this implies that some form of hermeneutical analysis of policy phenomena is called for. In practice this usually means that a policy text (either an existing text or self-generated interviews), the meaning of which is opaque, is systematically and methodically subjected to some form of exegesis to reveal its underlying meaning. Ethically, interpretive policy analysis presents itself as a progressive alternative to the rational, instrumental stance of traditional, empiricist analysis. Instead of aiming for technical control of social reality, interpretive analysis strives for enhanced communication and professes respect for the life world of the subjects of inquiry (Fay 1975; Schwandt 2000; Yanow 2000).

As the listing in the first paragraph makes clear, a variety of approaches to interpretation march under the banner of “interpretive policy analysis”. Although all of them are in search of the meaning of their object of inquiry, they show large differences in how they conceive of meaning, their selection of methods, their choice of what they consider interesting research questions, and their epistemological and ontological assumptions. With regard to the latter, while some approaches have their roots in phenomenology, others derive from French post-structuralist linguistic analysis or American pragmatism. One of my key arguments in this Introduction is that the philosophical grounding of the interpretive approach of choice – particularly its methods-in-use, as opposed to its professed methods - has large consequences for the analyst’s *de facto* conception of the relation between policy analysis and public life.<sup>4</sup> I do not mean to say of course that policy analysts must be full-fledged philosophers for them to be good researchers. That would be as nonsensical as to require that chefs must be fully credentialed chemists to be good chefs.<sup>5</sup> Rather I want to make a different point: while most interpretive researchers straddle different approaches in their daily research practice (a large

dose of exegesis, a distinct preference for language analysis, some leftover empiricism, a hint of poststructuralist radical pluralism, perhaps a bit of *phronèsis*), whatever it is they do, does have epistemological and ontological consequences. And those consequences in turn determine the kind of knowledge they generate, the relation to their subject of inquiry, and the ethical theory-in-use they adhere to. Epistemology is intimately related to our political understanding of the world, as Maarten Hajer and I argued on another occasion (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003). So, for example, if I treat my object of inquiry as just that, an ‘object’, a priori distinct from the larger context, and at analytical arms-length (no matter how much I sympathize with my research subjects, and no matter if the ‘object’ is a sample of voters or a policy text), than the knowledge I produce ‘about’ that ‘object’ will by way of consequence, have a somewhat instrumental, detached quality. If I emphasize, both in the process of inquiry and in the presentation of my results, the methodological purity of the research process, I will inadvertently privilege *my* expert knowledge over *their* subjective, lived experience. This in turn will have consequences for the motivation and possibilities of change (Gaventa and Cornwall 2001).<sup>6</sup> The surprise result, as I will show, is that “arms-length” interpretivism has a lot of things in common with the empiricism that it purports to have overcome.

The purpose of this Introduction is twofold. First, to unpack some of the philosophical assumptions that shape different interpretive approaches in policy analysis. To this end, I contrast hermeneutics as exegesis, and philosophical hermeneutics.<sup>7</sup> Although both share the noun ‘hermeneutics’ (and both are a reaction to German neo-Kantian philosophy), they are based on radically different epistemological and ontological assumptions, and have widely different analytical and ethical implications. I choose policy exegesis as my contrast because in daily practice much interpretive work has an exegetical character, despite it often being branded differently. Much everyday interpretive policy analysis, as it is practiced in university departments or governmental agencies is of the exegetical, meaning-realist kind. Institutional pressures, but also the conceptual development of interpretive policy analysis out of the philosophy of language and phenomenology (see below), compel analysts to organize their interpretive project in ways that it guarantees, well-arranged, and acceptable results. The effects of this are projects in which an analyst, who has positioned himself outside the problem at hand, looks for original meaning in a unilaterally collected set of data by systematically applying scientific method.

Second, and more importantly, in elucidating the principles of philosophical hermeneutics, and highlighting its implications for policy analysis, I want to show the possibilities that a dialogical approach to interpretation holds to the discipline of policy analysis. Such approaches have been around in policy and planning for most of the last century, but always in a parallel, minor role (Torgerson, 1995); more an echo in the discipline of policy analysis than a coherent tradition. Although excellent theoretical treatises have been around for many decades (Dewey 1927; Lasswell 1951; Schön 1983; Forester 1989; Gadamer 1989; Taylor 1993) few analysts were willing to draw the full methodological and ethical consequences from an approach to policy interpretation that emphasizes practice, participation, democratic inclusion, and dialogue. In this introduction, and in the other articles in this special issue, we will show some of the

practical possibilities of a dialogical approach to meaning. In fact, as I will argue, it is dialogical policy analysis that furthers the democratic potential that Harold Lasswell optimistically ascribed to the policy sciences.

## **2. The limitations of monological meaning.**

With hindsight it has become clear that interpretive policy analysis of the exegetic kind, despite its self-declared opposition to empiricism, has more things in common with it than it might seem at first blush. In philosophical terms interpretivism in social science has its roots in Wittgensteinian language analysis and the phenomenology of Husserl and Schütz (Dallmayr and McCarthy 1977; Bernstein 1978).<sup>8</sup> Language analysis situates understanding in the shared linguistic structures of signification. Particular social actions are intelligible only within a language community and in terms of the rules of conduct and language use operative in that community” (Dallmayr & McCarthy, 1977, 8). Phenomenology, instead of postulating social reality as made up of objective objects which can unproblematically be observed and manipulated by an external observer, situates the world in individual acts of consciousness. Consciousness is directly associated with the objects of which it is conscious through *intentionality*. The key concept of intentionality means that the mind projects itself outwards to grasp objects by ascribing meaning to them. The mind is not passively imprinted by the world, but instead actively reaches out and “constructs” the world. In this sense, self-conscious awareness is considered the ultimate foundation of knowledge.

Both of these philosophical predecessors to policy interpretation are deeply ambivalent about individualism and intersubjectivity. On the one hand there was the liberating effect that the human sciences were no longer dependent on the disinterested observation of ‘objective’ social objects. Instead individual statements about the way that someone perceived or experienced a particular slice of reality, differently put, the *meaning* that an actor, through language, ascribed to the world, could function as the ‘data’ of the scientific study of society. However, a theory of knowledge based on linguistically expressed, individual self-understandings as its foundation, risks, despite the assumption of intentionality, to dissolve into philosophical idealism. Several solutions have therefore been suggested to prevent this from happening. They all have in common that they project some form of transcendental meaning that informs subjective acts of consciousness and that takes us beyond individual experience.<sup>9</sup> Language analysts simply assumed that individual statements pointed to large intersubjective linguistic structures which functioned as “rules” to be followed by knowledgeable actors.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Alfred Schütz, solved the idealist dilemma by postulating large structures of intersubjective meaning from which individual statements derive their particular meaning (Gorman 1976; Dallmayr and McCarthy 1977). In this way, immediate, subjective experience can serve as the epistemological basis of knowledge because it is seen to reflect essential structures of social reality (Gorman 1976).

But the recourse to intersubjective, linguistically mediated social rules does not offer a way out of the idealist trap. First, the epistemological status of the intersubjective structures is caught in a dilemma between invariance and contingency (Dallmayr & McCarthy, 1977, 10).

Are they to be seen as invariant social-cognitive constructs or are they shaped by the actions of individual agents? Are they “structure without agency or agency without structure” as Jean Lave once aphoristically put it (Lave 1988). Second, the adherents of the concept of social rules leave unclear how actors are able at all to follow such rules in a meaningful, consistent manner (Taylor 1993). In practice, many interpretive policy analysts simply postulate that the individual expressions of meaning they record from their subjects consistently and validly reflect these intersubjective social rules, thereby having their interpretive cake and eat the objective epistemological icing too. Differently put, by postulating that individual expressions of meaning are expressive of stable intersubjective meanings, interpretive social science has transplanted one form of foundationalism with another.

Also, to have any claim on scientific validity, interpretivism has to distance itself from the critique that it is subjectivist. It does this by an emphasis on method. As we saw, the assumption is that “objective”, intersubjective meaning is embedded in individual acts of consciousness. By registering the latter analysts gain access to basic, underlying structures of meaning that make up society. Thus, the meaning that the analyst reconstructs is considered to be the ‘original’ meaning of the action (Schwandt, 2000, 193). However, it is imperative then that the analyst does not ascribe his own subjective meaning to the other. He must be able to purge himself from all prejudices and biases that might contaminate his observation and analysis. A disinterested attitude towards the object of analysis and a rigorous adherence to methods are required to guarantee that the meaning that is reproduced in the research is the actual meaning of the subjects studied.<sup>11</sup> In epistemological terms, this position is called “meaning realism”.

Meaning realism is the position that “meanings are fixed entities that can be discovered and that exist independent of the interpreter” (Schwandt 2000). Meaning realism is a theory-in-use. One infers it from the way that interpretive analysts actually engage in their task of understanding social reality. Meaning realism is a common feature of those versions of hermeneutic, interpretive analysis that aim at exegesis: the elucidation of the meaning of texts. The method of exegesis revolves around two related premises: 1) that the interpreter and the object of interpretation are distinct, and 2) that the first is not involved with the latter. The second premise must be taken in an epistemological way. The analyst is not necessarily emotionally uninvolved, but he remains at arms length from the act of interpretation: “Thus, in interpretive traditions, the interpreter objectifies (i.e. stands over and against) that which is to be interpreted. And, in that sense, the interpreter remains unaffected by and external to the interpretive process” (Schwandt 2000). This epistemological distance is as much a matter of principle (to get involved would compromise the validity of the analysis) as of convenience (desk research is easier than spending months and months in the field). To get the interpretive analysis started, the analyst not only has to project an *a priori*, and in practice more or less distinct and monolithic, “meaning” in the world, the exact nature of which is to be discerned by the analyst, but simultaneously, the analyst has to place himself outside the process of meaning-making (despite rather noncommittal statements that the analyst is part of the world that he analyzes) to function as an Archimedean point.

Although departing from widely different philosophical assumptions, by adhering to a hermeneutic strategy of meaning realism interpretive policy analysts, similar to empiricists, in fact hold on to a model of knowing that the philosopher Charles Taylor calls that of the “scientific grasp” (Taylor 2002). Obtaining a scientific grasp of an object or social phenomenon can be characterized as follows: knowing is unilateral. I know the object of analysis (a policy program, the behavior of policy subjects). It is nonsensical or irrelevant to talk of the program or the subjects knowing me. Second, the goal of knowing aspires to a certain finality. It is to arrive at “some finally adequate explanatory language, which can make sense of the object, and will exclude all future surprises” (op. cit., 127). Third, the goal of knowing is “to attain full intellectual control over the object, such that it can no longer ‘talk back’ and surprise me” (op. cit., 127) Intellectual control means that, although I may revise my theories, I do not change my intellectual or personal aims throughout. Schwandt adds a number of other features of the scientific grasp model of knowing. For example the object of analysis is assumed to be bounded or delineated. It is assumed to exist out there with a particular stable shape, properties and characteristics. Also, methodological procedure, to demarcate false, inaccurate, and invalid, from true, accurate and valid knowledge, becomes key to the aim of intellectual mastery. And finally, moral issues, “questions about the ends or goods we ought to pursue; the kinds of human beings we ought to be; our ‘being’ in the world as moral-political, social agents and so on”, are kept out of the operation of knowing, for fear that they contaminate the reconstruction of “objective” meaning (Schwandt 2004)

To summarize, although interpretive policy analysis (of the everyday exegetic stripe) presents itself as an alternative to empiricist policy analysis, it shares with the latter several epistemological features that it claims to have overcome. In particular, a reliance on ultimate foundations, a belief in scientific method as the royal road to valid knowledge, with the concomitant privileging of science as a superior form of analysis, and a stance towards knowing that aims at an intellectual grasp of, and precludes involvement of the analysts with, the object of inquiry. In the remainder of this article, I will sketch an alternative, *philosophical hermeneutics*, an approach to interpretation and understanding that is most closely associated with the German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer, but that resonates strongly with the work of John Dewey and Charles Taylor. Philosophical hermeneutics, instead of aiming at intellectual control, conceives of knowing as a form of dialogue; in Gadamer’s famous words, as an ongoing, gradual “coming-to-an-understanding”. Philosophical hermeneutics, while faithful to the interpretive program, avoids the limitations of an interpretivism that is based on individual self-understandings. A dialogical form of understanding also seems particularly pertinent to a discipline that aims to aid and understand the possibilities and effects of concerted intervention in social reality.

The papers in this special issue all use or comment on a dialogical approach to meaning and interpretation. In this Introduction I will describe the theoretical foundations of dialogical meaning as exemplified in the writings on philosophical hermeneutics of the great German sage Hans-Georg Gadamer.

### 3. Taking Ordinary Experience Seriously.

Although *philosophical hermeneutics* shares the epithet ‘hermeneutics’ with the exegetic model of hermeneutics of the preceding section, it differs from this in a radical manner. In summary form philosophical hermeneutics can be said to embrace the following principles:

- 1) The activity of understanding is grounded in an everyday experience that exceeds our full understanding;
- 2) Understanding is not a one-shot affair that kicks in when something is obscure or puzzling. Instead understanding is a condition of being-in-the-world.
- 3) Understanding proceeds through acting on the situation at hand.
- 4) Understanding/practice takes place in emergent time,
- 5) As a result of 1 and 4, understanding is always imperfect, provisional, and incomplete, and eludes the application of systematic method.

Perhaps the most puzzling principle is 2. Socialized as we are in conceiving of understanding as, *au fond*, an epistemic operation, something we do with our rational minds, and over which we exert full intellectual control, how can it be an expression of human existence? In fact, Gadamer ups the ante by speaking of understanding as an “event”, as something that happens to us, “outside our wishes and acts” when we move about in the world (in, Grondin 2003). But how can that be? How can knowing happen outside our wishes and acts? Knowing as we know it, knowing as we are used to understand it from the traditional perspective of science or reason, is hard to imagine as happening outside our volition. After all, the whole point of knowing or explaining something is to deliberately turn the power of our mental faculties and our tried and proven procedures of inquiry and logical reasoning to the situation to pin it down, as it were, in an unassailable explanation or theory. For the traditional perspective, to know is the equivalent of the will to know, an imperative that is closely allied with the will to master a particular situation. How then, can understanding be partly outside our control?

One way into this conundrum is suggested by principle 3. A common form of understanding is know-how instead of know-that (Grondin 2002). A skilled cyclist, cook, or machine operator “knows” how to ride a bike, make a soufflé, or operate a lathe, without necessarily being able to fully explicate how he does it. We say that his knowledge of bike riding, cooking, or operating a lathe is *tacit*. You can’t learn know-how from a book. You gradually acquire it by continued participation in the activity. But “acquiring” is already putting too much of an epistemological, instrumental gloss over this process. What happens in the course of getting skilled in a certain activity is much more complex than acquiring a particular skill. First, it is unclear initially what elements of the situation and which activities will be relevant to the general goal of learning how to ride a bike or operate a lathe.<sup>12</sup> We know good bike riding, soufflé making and lathe operating when we see it, but we can’t fully specify the operations by which we attain it. We have to engage in the experience of it to grasp what is relevant to the situation at hand, and to be able to bring the situation to some sort of conclusion. This active engagement contains an element of risk. We not only have to open ourselves up to the experience of bike

riding, cooking or lathe operating, thereby making ourselves vulnerable, but we run a decided risk to fail at our activity. There is always something at stake in acquiring know how. To put this differently, by acquiring a complex skill, we change as a person. One day we realize that we have mastered a particular activity, but where it came from, how exactly we did it, we don't know. But we realize that we are no longer the same person than we were. We have gained self-confidence, perhaps even authority. We see ourselves differently, and are seen differently by others. We are, for example, able to teach apprentices. And in the case of mastering complex skills such as parenting, managing an organization, or implementing a public policy, it is said that we have acquired practical wisdom.

What we discern in this short description of becoming proficient in a complex skill, is that everyday understanding is seamlessly embedded in the ongoing flow of events - to the point that it can hardly be disentangled from it. Everyday understanding is part of being engaged with the world, of acting upon it – part, in fact, of life itself. To be part of being forms the conditions of possibility for understanding. We are able to understand at all because the activity of understanding issues forth from, and is embedded in, the ordinary situations, the everyday experiences, which make up our life.<sup>13</sup> Understanding happens. But, one could argue, granted that understanding is a more or less continuous, unreflective activity, there surely are situations where I might want to intensify and enrich my understanding by applying systematic method to it. Think of the psychotherapist who mobilizes his professional technique to arrive at a deep understanding of the patient's predicament. Or the interpretive policy analyst who applies systematic methods of data collection and data analysis to reveal the meaning that a particular policy has for those who are affected by it. In itself there is nothing wrong with this argument. Using systematic method to build upon what we already know about a topic is a sensible way to come to a better understanding. The problem is the implicit, or not so implicit, claim that the application of systematic method leads to more certainty, more stability, compared to ordinary understanding. The claim that the method puts a foundation under the understanding thus derived. Or, as often seems to be the implication, that the understanding that is produced by method is somehow removed from the reach of the warrants and standards that we apply to ordinary understanding. In a particularly happy phrase Taylor calls this process of epistemic colonization the "ontologizing of rational procedure" (Taylor 1995).<sup>14</sup> All these claims are highly dubious because methodical understanding cannot be uncoupled from ordinary understanding and from the context which gives rise to the latter. The work of ordinary understanding, and the challenges that it responds to, keep resonating loudly through methodical understanding. There's no escaping from it. Why would this be?

The answer is that understanding, all understanding, even the kind that through the application of systematic method wraps itself in the mantle of knowledge, swims in the ocean of Being.<sup>15</sup> Here we have principle 2 in full colors. (And 4 for that matter.) Understanding is not a separate activity, to be switched on when we need it, it is Life itself; simultaneously emerging from life and always answerable to its challenges and demands. This kind of understanding always operates from and within a particular setting. The setting - and I use the word here in a more general sense than a concrete location as an only partially perceived set of cultural understandings

- functions as the background to our acting and understanding. Our acting and understanding is, thus, always confined. In the first instance it speaks to the situation at hand. It couldn't be otherwise as it originates in a particular circumscribed cultural situation. It also emerges from us having a particular involvement with that situation as agents. The situation provides the reason for us to care sufficiently so that we feel compelled to understand. Understanding, in this more universal sense, is, thus, finite and engaged (Taylor 1995). Yet, while understanding is in this sense local, its implications are not. When we act in the world, and when we try to understand the effects of our actions, a lot goes on over and above our overt intentions and actions that we simply are not aware of. There is always a surfeit of meaning in what we do, a plenitude that we can never hope to grasp in its entirety. "With Gadamer, *being* designates what goes beyond the simple thought of subjectivity: what is produced over and above our actions and our knowledge" (Grondin, 2003, 44). In other words, our actions have origins and consequences that we have not foreseen and cannot fully control. Understanding always involves more than a focusing of intentions.

If I were to summarize the gist of the rupture with traditional interpretation (and of course traditional empiricist approaches to policy analysis), I would say: philosophical hermeneutics takes the grounding of interpretation in everyday experience serious – in an epistemological, an ontological, and also, but this is almost by way of implication, an ethical way. It takes it so serious in fact, that I should add a sixth principle here:

- 6) No method, theory, special training or prodigious amount of self-reflection, useful as these may be in many situations, will provide us with the kind of certainty or foundation that scientists or professionals routinely claim to be able to attain.

*This* is the radical break: to relinquish the aspiration, or perhaps more precisely, the claim that social science puts forward evidently better, more authoritative insights - better, more authoritative that is, in comparison to the insights of lay people – and live with the consequences. And these consequences – for the pursuit of inquiry, for our ethics, for our professional identity, for our understanding of what a society is, for the very notion of what constitutes knowledge - are wide and deep indeed. Regarding the authority of scientific method, philosophical hermeneutics turns things on its head here. Whatever authority policy analysis may have derives not from superseding everyday experience, but from taking it seriously. Philosophical hermeneutics considers everyday experience, and the processes by which it emerges in interaction with the world and by which it gets recognized and accepted as right or doubtful, as both the source and the standard of insight into the structure and functioning of the social world. Policy analysts are perhaps able to improve upon everyday experience, for example by processing it in more systematic ways, but what constitutes an improvement is not the self-evident outcome of these systematic processings, but will itself have to be assessed and warranted by the criteria and standards of everyday experience. Philosophical hermeneutics has abandoned the pretension that there is a firm foundation. Understanding is not a method, but an intrinsic element of human existence.

In one of his essays Charles Taylor admonishes us to “overcome epistemology”, and to develop “a self-understanding about the limits and conditions of our knowing” (Taylor 1995). In a similar vein I want to argue for overcoming our fixation on method in interpretive policy analysis. Obviously I don’t intend to throw out all methodical analysis and intellectual rigor. I only argue to abandon the institutionalized fixation on scientific method in the hope to arrive at “an impossible foundational justification of knowledge” (ibid.). Instead I would argue for analytical heuristics that honor the messiness, situatedness and complexity of the world of public policy (Law 2004; Wagenaar 2007). The adoption of analytical tactics that acknowledge that policy situations are not given, but develop in emerging time (Adam 1990). And, that, above all, do justice to the actionable, interactive character of all policy situations (Wagenaar and Cook 2003; Wagenaar 2004).

#### **4. Dialogical Meaning**

A good way to grasp philosophical hermeneutics is to approach it as an ontology of understanding. I take this ontology of understanding to have three different aims: 1) to describe the way that the original situation of understanding presents itself to an actor, 2) to fashion this description in such a way that it counteracts the “scientific grasp” model of knowledge with all its epistemological, institutional and anthropological ramifications,<sup>16</sup> and 3) to lay out the “categorical and existential preconditions of understanding” (Glynos and Howarth 2007). In the preceding section we saw that philosophical hermeneutics projects a notion of understanding that is not rooted in objective facts external to the observer, nor in individual consciousness, but in everyday experience. Understanding and interpreting are not willful acts which we switch on at certain occasions, but states of being, conditions for our existence as moral-political beings. (Even if we do deliberately engage in systematic interpretation because we are faced with a puzzling situation, this act is made possible, and is fashioned, by the everyday understanding that philosophical hermeneutics describes.) In this section I will address the question how, given the existential nature of understanding, we arrive at sound, acceptable judgments. To this end I introduce another notion of understanding put forward by Gadamer: understanding as (interpersonal) agreement. This also brings in the all important concepts of *tradition* and *dialogue* as aides in understanding.

How do we understand a text or phenomenon? According to classical hermeneutics, we clean our minds from all prejudice and bias and reconstruct as faithfully and methodically as we can the original meaning the text had for the author at the time of its conception.<sup>17</sup> This is the exegetic approach to understanding that we characterized in section 1 as “scientific grasp” and that assumes that the interpreter and the object of interpretation are distinct, and that the first is not involved with the latter. Gadamer’s radical break with the exegetic model revolves around his challenging of these assumptions. In fact he redefines the two poles of the interpretive nexus: the object of interpretation and the person of the interpreter. Contrary to the exegetic model of hermeneutics, the object of interpretation is not distinct from the observer. Also, the interpreter is never unaffected by the act of interpretation. Let’s unpack what these statements entail.

All understanding involves prior understanding: a set of anticipations, assumptions, and expectations that, no matter how inarticulate, gives direction to our interpretive project. Apart from the fact that we simply cannot step outside our pre-understandings, their importance is that they infuse our interpretive effort with relevance and urgency. Why would we be interested in something at all, unless we have some ideas and feelings about it in the first place? Pre-understandings form the investment we have in the thing we want to understand.

It is important to let the full implication of this reframing of the act of understanding sink in. Gadamer shifts attention from the interpreting person (and his attitude and special training) to the whole configuration of object and observer, making its outcome dependent upon the *relation* between the two. The object of interpretation never just sits in space unaffected, impervious, but *presents* itself to the actor. Reversely, we understand because we feel an urge to understand. We are aware of the object of understanding because it speaks to something that is important to us now. So instead of observation being the activity of a detached agent who takes in a sovereign object, Gadamer presents it as a mutual rapprochement. In the act of observing, object and observer accost each other. This is why Grondin summarizes the idea that the object of interpretation presents itself to the interpreting agent by saying that it is “simultaneously dialogue and address” (Grondin 2003). The revolutionary epistemic insight is that an object is perceived because it somehow *implicates* the observer. Instead of observation hinging on detachment, it implies, on the contrary, an object which already addresses the agent, an involved, participating agent.

Gadamer has packed a number of important insights in this reframing of understanding as a relational configuration of an understanding agent and object that presents itself to be understood. First, what binds agent and object together is “tradition”. As so often with Gadamer the concept of tradition is meant to do different kinds of work. It expresses that both the impulse to understand and the way understanding evolves emerge from a situation in which the actor is immersed. It is meant to counteract the objectifying tendency in historical research, in which the historical object is placed at a distance by an analyst who sees himself as somehow outside any historical or cultural context. At the same time, the concept of tradition conveys the intrinsic finitude of our situation; the fact that we always approach whatever it is we want to understand from a limited perspective, but, that this limited perspective or horizon, does not constrain our potential for understanding, but, on the contrary, forms a precondition for it to succeed in the first place. So one meaning of tradition in philosophical hermeneutics is that of a lived, rich, meaningful world that we inhabit, and from which the situations which we do or do not grasp, plus the impulse to grasp them, derive. All this is expressed in Gadamer’s key concept of *horizon*.

Gadamer seems to have been very keen on this concept, and according to Taylor it has an inner complexity that we should not lose sight of (Grondin, 2003, 73; Taylor, 2002, 136). It expressed for him not a rigid border, clearly visible from our subjective vantage point, but more of a sphere in which we live and breathe, which constrains us but also suggests possibilities, that are “always with us and invite(s) us to go further” (Ibid.). In fact, the concept of horizon goes flatly against the idea of an autonomous, independent subjectivity. It is at this point that

Gadamer leans on the idea of projection (*Geworfenheit*; literally “being thrown into the world”) of his teacher Heidegger. We find ourselves in a particular configuration of reality, a certain moment in time, a particular state of being, without being fully aware of it and without having full control over it. We are shaped as much by our environment and by our history as we shape it. This is where Gadamer’s famous dictum “history does not belong to us; we belong to it” applies (Gadamer 1989).<sup>18</sup>

This is all very reminiscent of the related notion of background and what it means to be an engaged agent that we encountered earlier.<sup>19</sup> As we saw, background functioned as a “context of intelligibility.” We are made possible as agents because we feel at home in a particular background which enables and limits us. For a particular agent his particular experiences arise within a background and are not intelligible outside it (Taylor 2005, 68). Background functions as “unexplicit horizon” (ibid.) and through engaging in practical tasks, it becomes partly articulated. We could say that by trying to understand something or someone we not only become aware of the object or person but also of the slice of background – the horizon – that we inhabit. But, and this is essential, our awareness, of the other and ourselves, is only partial and provisional. It couldn’t be otherwise, because we always need a vantage point from which to articulate what we attend to and what we attend from (Taylor 2005, 69). All this is expressed in Gadamer’s key concept of *horizon*.

Clearly, being immersed in an unarticulated background, being part of a tradition constrains us to a certain perspective. Gadamer even uses the word “prejudice” here: we approach understanding with certain prejudices. Prejudice must be seen as pre-assumption; a certain anticipation as to what we expect to find when we try to understand the object. Prejudices are those aspects of the unarticulated background that we become aware of by engaging in the activity of understanding something. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this concept in Gadamer’s philosophy of interpretation. It not only makes the activity of understanding possible, but, and this may sound paradoxical, the notion of prejudice also furnishes us with the means to take a critical stance towards our interpretations while being locked inside a particular perspective. It is precisely because we have certain assumptions about the object of interpretation that enables the object to present itself in all its otherness, and “thus assert its own truth against one’s fore-meanings” (Gadamer, 1989, 269). In other words, by projecting certain presuppositions upon the object, both the object of interpretation and the direction in which our effort to understand takes us emerge, mostly because the object doesn’t live up to our expectations of it. Now, because the object asserts itself against our presuppositions we not only feel compelled to try to grasp it in its otherness, but it also exerts a certain agency over us. With agency I mean that the object, whether it is a person or a material object, has an influence over us that is outside our control (or at least not completely within our control) and that cannot be reduced to our personal realm, such as our consciousness or beliefs about it (Pickering 1995). Agency denotes a world in which various agents are continuously doing things; things that bear upon us, that have an impact, and with which we as humans have to grapple and to cope. The agency of the object makes the interpretive situation fundamentally open-ended. It can always go in unexpected directions, but the important point is that in its

agency the object always functions as a corrective to our pre-assumptions about it. Commenting on what it means to understand a text, Risser describes the project as follows: “These initial anticipations of meaning that direct the reader into the text give way to a meaning for the text as a whole, a meaning that is constantly revised in terms of what emerges (what the text comes to say). The movement of understanding is this working out of the fore-projections, which are constantly being revised in terms of the emergence of (new) meaning” (Risser 1997).

So what does understanding entail in a situation in which we cannot overcome our cultural embeddedness? Gadamer introduces at this point the idea of a “fusion of horizons”. The concept carefully balances intending and happening. We do not understand by extending our horizon and incorporate another agent’s point of view. This is important but it is not the full story. It would assume that we have a clear idea of where the line that delineates our horizon is drawn, and that we already possess the vocabulary to take in the other’s perspective. Framing understanding in this way still betrays the influence of knowledge as the “scientific grasp of an object”. Fusion of horizons challenges both of these assumptions. It does this by stressing the *dialogical* character of understanding. Understanding is better seen as coming-to-an-understanding: ongoing, provisional, fallible, always open to revision. We understand when we allow ourselves to be “interpellated” by the other (Taylor, 2002, 141); whether the other be a person, an historical event, a text, or the effects of a policy program. The result of such understanding is a reframing of our categories, a refashioning of the language we have at our disposal to grasp our world. This has at least two effects which are intimately connected to one another. We become aware that what we initially thought was the object of our confusion or misunderstanding needs to be reformulated. We attempted to clarify *our* problem, but the confusion was that we didn’t grasp the way that *they* saw the problem. We become aware that different parties define problems in different ways.<sup>20</sup> But such insight is not without effect for ourselves. Coming-to-an-understanding in a dialogical manner changes our beliefs about the object, our attitudes and moral allegiances towards it. These, in turn, are connected to our professional and personal identity; with all the material and immaterial rewards that go with it. Our stance towards an object represents ways of mastery; often arrived at with great effort, which we are therefore loath to give up for an uncertain alternative. Understanding, thus, implies risk. It introduces a measure of vulnerability into our professional and personal life (Schwandt, 2004, 39). It inevitably comes, as Taylor puts, with “identity costs”; the sometimes painful realization of the limitedness of our earlier identity, the letting go of long-cherished beliefs and the subsequent slow process of working through the many, often unexpected, implications this has for our being in the world. Dialogical understanding always entails a precarious balance between identity and self-transformation.

Finally, and eminently pertinent to policy analysis, framing understanding this way reintroduces an ethical moment in hermeneutics that was effectively dispelled by the Cartesian, objectivist aims of classical hermeneutics (and of empiricism). Understanding as fusion of horizons, a concept of understanding that is based on our being-in-the world as engaged agents, collapses the fact-value dichotomy. The corroding agent here is the abandoning of the pursuit of control over knowledge and, by implication, the object of our understanding. A

dialogical notion of understanding implies that we can never have full control over that which we try to understand. This works in two ways. First, because I am not fully transparent to myself and, second, because I must be willing to open myself up to the other. I always understand the other, the object of my understanding, from the perspective of my horizon, but the latter has itself been formed by my cultural and historical background. Understanding is therefore ontologically fallible:

*“What in understanding really comes from “me”, and what is taken up from the “past”? Can we really know, with complete assurance? Can understanding be completely transparent to itself? This is why it appears more prudent in Gadamer’s eyes to speak of a melting of horizons, of an encounter which mysteriously succeeds. The understanding is more event and effects meaning more than historical or methodological consciousness is prepared to admit” (Grondin, 2003, 59).*

We experience and we agree that we understand something better than we did before, but we don’t quite know how we did it. At the same time, coming-to-an-understanding requires that I am willing to change my assumptions. The dialogical aspect implies that the other and I are willing to “function together” (Taylor, 2002, 128), and that requires mutual openness and respect. The openness that is intrinsic to coming-to-an-understanding implies a moral stance. It is moral because we see the other – again the other can be a person, a text, an historical event or a policy that is being implemented – not in an instrumental way but as someone who has something to say to me, something to teach me. The other possesses autonomy and an “independence and voice we must address and by which we ourselves are addressed” (Warnke 2002). In dialogical meaning ethics is not an add-on; we have no discretionary power over this. It is not something which we can either decide to leave out of the act of understanding or to include as the situation demands. The ethical dimension of understanding is intrinsic to it. This is so because we cannot separate means and ends. I cannot decide to be open to the other and then interpret everything he says from within my own prejudices. The act contradicts the purpose and in such cases I am simply not the person I want to be. The acts necessary to realize the end define both the end and the person engaged in the act. But also, the understanding that I arrive at through pseudo-openness is of a different kind than when I have truly opened myself up to the other. As Thomas Schwandt puts it: the process (of understanding HW) itself is implicated in what can be understood, and the process actually transforms one’s way of seeing the world in relation to one’s self’ (2004, 37). Openness and the possibility of self-transformation are constitutive of understanding. That is where the ethical infuses the epistemic.

## **5. Dialogical Meaning in Policy Analysis.**

Dialogical meaning is not new to policy analysis. With language analysis, phenomenology and poststructuralism, it is one of the tributaries which feed interpretative policy analysis. As we saw earlier, Torgerson sees a minor tradition of *phronèsis* in policy analysis that runs from

Dewey's practical problem solving, via Merriam's plea for a marriage of "scientific politics" and "political prudence", Lasswell's "contextual" policy sciences, Lindblom's incrementalism to Wildavsky's ideas of policy-relevant social learning through interaction instead of "cogitation" (1995). Practical policy analysis, which never severed the connection between science, politics and democracy has always been around as an alternative to mainstream policy analysis, and elements of it have infused other approaches to interpretation.

Dewey was not only a major influence on the older pragmatic tradition in policy and planning, but also on the scholars who inaugurated the interpretive, critical turn of the 1980s. He advocated an actionable approach to inquiry in which all inquiry emanated from acting upon the world at hand. Action, rooted in everyday experience, gives the agent both the urge and the direction for his inquiries. Acting with Dewey *is* knowing. By acting on problems as they present themselves in concrete, everyday situations, the analyst enters into a dialogue with the world. "Back talk", as Don Schön famously called it, indicating a process in which our actions always generate different effects than we anticipated, forcing us "to apprehend unanticipated problems and potentials" (Schön 1983).<sup>21</sup> Especially pertinent to this special issue is that Dewey never failed to relate his conception of inquiry to democracy and governance. He saw democracy as collective problem solving. His conception of society is that of a world of diversity. The unavoidable conflict between groups with different customs, needs, beliefs, and experiences that results from this is an opportunity for collective learning. But this requires that the institutional preconditions for dealing with conflict in a constructive manner are in place; preconditions which he framed in a democratically inclusive, participative manner. The work of Don Schön on dispersed problem solving and reflective practice is heavily indebted to Dewey (Schön 1983). So is Martin Rein's work on frame reflection (Rein 1983), and John Forester and other critical planners' work on collaborative planning (Forester 1989; Healy 1997; Forester 1999; Innes and Booher 2003). Fischer and Forester's famous book *The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning* was a deliberate attempt to marry phenomenology and critical pragmatism (Fischer and Forester 1993).<sup>22</sup> And Hajer and Wagenaar's plea for a deliberative policy analysis self-consciously harked back to Dewey's blend of practice, participation and democracy (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003).

However, the point is not to write a history of dialogical approaches to policy interpretation, but to indicate a few avenues of dialogical policy inquiry which so far have been underrepresented in policy analysis. For, although the above intellectual trends are well known, they represent a minority perspective. And while the pragmatic tradition in policy analysis is vibrant, and the philosophical ideas of Dewey, Wittgenstein, Taylor, Heidegger and Gadamer are enthusiastically and approvingly discussed in political theory and critical policy analysis, few practitioners have drawn their consequences in terms of the organization and practice of policy analysis. There is a gap between analytic theory and analytic practice.<sup>23</sup> Much everyday interpretive policy analysis, as it is practiced in university departments or governmental agencies is, as we have seen, of the exegetical, meaning-realist kind. The upshot is, what one could call, a domestication of policy interpretation. A form of policy interpretation which takes the political angle out of public policy. Which avoids the long, uncertain, and risky labor of working, on the

ground, with actors who are party to the policy issue, in understanding and changing social reality. The unintended consequence of everyday exegetic policy interpretation is that it pays insufficient attention to vital aspects of all policy problems, such as structural power differentials, inequality and conflict - aspects which are integral to the very constitution of the problem. The result is that the transformative potential of interpretive policy analysis remains largely unfulfilled.

The approaches I want to briefly indicate in the remainder of this paper are action research, deliberative and collaborative policy making, and public policy mediation and conflict resolution. What they have in common is that they all take dialogue as the road to understanding seriously. They operate on the assumption that meaning is constructed in an open-ended, reciprocal, performative conversation with other parties in a policy situation. That it is essential that this dialogue not only includes the full range of stakeholders, but that the stakeholders are sufficiently empowered to have control over both its content and organization. These analysts' approach to inquiry is actionable in that they see knowledge emerging out of a process of jointly working on the situation at hand - a process that necessarily includes the analyst. They also reject the dualism between transforming and understanding, living by the famous dictum that the best way to understand something is to try to change it.<sup>24</sup> They are acutely aware of the differences in power and influence that characterize all policy problems. They know that knowledge is a key dimension in these power differentials, and that therefore, analysts who are in the business of knowledge production, are by definition implicated in these power differentials - if they are aware of it or not. They do not shy away from conflict, but instead try to see it as an opportunity for learning and growth. All these approaches have in common that they are open-ended, collaborative, participative, inclusive, non-hierarchical and non-instrumental. They refuse to separate thinking from acting, and see inquiry as a collective problem solving effort. All attempt to effectuate Lasswell's call for a policy science of democracy.

### **Action Research,**

Similar to pragmatist policy analysis, action research is a vibrant but peripheral tradition in the policy sciences. Starting with Kurt Lewin in the 1930s who coined the term 'action research', his ideas spread towards the Tavistock Institute and the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project (Greenwood and Levin 1998). In a different setting Paolo Freire advocated action research as a means for combining inquiry, education and empowerment of the poor in Latin America (Fischer 2000). These ideas have in turn influenced critical planners and the appreciation of the importance of local, layman's knowledge (as opposed to expert knowledge) in policy analysis (Fischer 2000). Strong action research traditions can be found in education (Zeichner 2001), development studies (Fischer 2000; Hall 2001), and planning (Forester 1999; Reardon 2000; Lawson 2005). In policy analysis in the western world, action research is exceedingly rare. Although publications such as the *Handbook of Action Research*, or Greenwood and Levin's *Introduction to Action Research*, give various examples of participatory policy analysis, these are the exceptions to the rule. The latter authors even call the place of action research in social science and policy analysis "marginal" (1998, 89).

Action research combines research, transformative action and participation. Its goal, as Greenwood and Levin describe it, is “to increase the ability of the involved community or organization members to control their own destinies more effectively and to keep improving their capacity to do so” (1998, 6). The dearth of participatory action research in policy analysis is surprising as one of the key characteristics of action research is that it deals with messy problems. For example, the situation in East St. Louis, as described in the paper by Harwood and Zapata in this issue, was a tangle of physical decay, failing city government, corruption, racial discrimination, structural unemployment because of fatal industrial decline, environmental pollution, crime and poverty (Lawson, 2005, Harwood & Zapata, this issue). The willingness of action researchers to take on wicked problems and their refusal to apply reductionist strategies of inquiry, follows from some of action research’s other characteristics. In a nutshell, action research is 1) always situated in real world contexts in which social problems are experienced and acted upon. 2) It is a form of inquiry where participants and researchers collaborate in an open, reciprocal manner on defining problems, analyzing its background conditions, suggesting possible courses of action, reflecting upon the results, and reanalyzing the problem. 3) It is a form of inquiry in which the urge to know is intimately tied to the desire to effectuate change. 4) Success is measured in terms of “workability” and credibility. Results are workable when they lead to a general agreement among participants and researchers that the initial problem is solved or attenuated. Credibility means that the analysis and the outcomes make sense, both to the participants and to outsiders. (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, 75-76).

Finally, action research has a transformative potential, both on a personal and societal level. Participating in an action research project gives citizens the opportunity to practice democratic skills such as organizing, acquiring knowledge of a specialized topic, presenting ideas and results in public, and resolving conflicts and turning them into possibilities for shared learning. Action research thus has an intrinsic democratic value (Warren 1992). On a societal level, once citizens have experienced the possibility for self-government that empowerment brings, their relationship to the traditional institutions of government will have changed. As Greenwood and Levin summarize it: “In our perspective, Action Research lies at the very center of human life. It is constituted by a series of communicative actions that take place in dialogical environments created by communities or other organizations for the purpose of the cogeneration of new knowledge, the development and implementation of plans of action and the democratization of society” (1998, 90).

### **Deliberative Policy Analysis: Collaborative Policy Making, Public Policy Mediation, and Empowered Participatory Governance.**

Under the heading *deliberative policy analysis* I group a number of approaches to collective problem solving which are characterized by 1) their conscious effort to organize dialogue in situations of policy controversy and prolonged conflict, 2) their practical, hands-on approach to problem solving, and 3) the interpenetration between analysis of and acting on the problem at hand. In our book with the same title, Hajer and I argued for a sociological fit between the changing world of governance and a type of policy analysis that would be relevant to such a

world. The world of governance we characterized as decentred, radically uncertain, deeply pluralist, and lacking in trust between ruler and ruled (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003). Policy is often made in between established organizations by civil society actors who define problems in their own way, who do not wait for the state to take the initiative in resolving collective problems, and who do not hesitate to use their legally established powers of obstruction when they feel that their interests are threatened. In a world of decentred governance effectiveness depends upon the ability to establish and maintain constructive working relationships with a large variety of actors (Pierre and Peters 2000). We then asked ourselves what kind of policy analysis would fit decentred governance. Our answer, not surprisingly, was that it should be interpretive, practice-oriented and deliberative.

Several contributions to the Hajer and Wagenaar book flesh out what deliberative policy analysis might look like in a more practical sense. Drawing on a rich tradition of communicative planning theory and practice, both Patsy Healey and Judy Innes argue for “collaborative policy making”. Healy formulates the challenge that planners and policy makers face in a landscape of decentred governance as follows: “As many now articulate, the challenge is to develop relations between the spheres of civil society, the economy and the state which are less hierarchical and less paternalist, which are sensitive to the needs and aspirations of diverse groups (and especially those who tend to get marginalized) and which have a capacity to learn from diverse knowledge resources” (Healy, Magalhaes et al. 2003).

For Innes this means an approach to solving intractable, contentious problems through collaborative dialogue. She frames collaborative dialogue as a more effective mode of policy making than the more traditional and institutionalized bureaucratic, political influence or social movement models. All of these approaches have their moment in the sun when certain conditions hold, but in situations where interests are diverse and conflicting but actors need each other to succeed, collaborative dialogue is the model of choice (2003, 51). Collaborative dialogue is a process of cooperation for which the following conditions hold: “1) inclusion of a full range of stakeholders, 2) a task that is meaningful to the participants and that has promise of having a timely impact, 3) participants who set their own ground rules for behavior, agenda setting, making decisions and many other topics, 4) a process that begins with mutual understanding of interests and avoids positional bargaining, 5) a dialogue where all are heard and respected and equally able to participate, 6) a self-organizing process unconstrained by conveners in its time or content and which permits the status quo and all assumptions to be questioned, 7) information that is accessible and fully shared among participants, 8) an understanding that ‘consensus’ is only reached when all interests have been explored and every effort has been made to satisfy these concerns” (Innes 2004). Innes stresses at all times that these are not abstract conditions but instead the articulation of many years of practical experience with collaborative dialogue. Drawing on her own experience with the Sacramento Water Forum and citing research on consensus building, she concludes that “when a process meeting these conditions is implemented, it can produce joint learning, intellectual, social and political capital, feasible actions, innovative problem solving, shared understanding of issues and other players, capacity to work together, skills in dialogue, (and) shared heuristics for action” (Innes and

Booher 2003; Innes 2004). Particularly intriguing, in the light of Gadamer's argument about understanding as departing from a particular perspective, as involving a fusion of horizons, and as bearing some personal risk, is her observation that the effect of engaging in a process of collaborative dialogue can include "new ways for players to understand and reframe their identities in relation to a larger picture and in a way contingent on others' identities" (2004, 8).

Healey frames her view of collaborative planning as a "relational view of institutional capacity" (Healy, Magalhaes et al. 2003). The attractiveness of Healey's position is her sensitivity to the wider institutional forces that impact on local activity, while at the same time preserving the attention to the "fine grain of interaction" that is characteristic of the collaborative planning tradition. She squarely situates the work of the planner in "complex and dynamic institutional environments, shaped by wider economic, social and environmental forces that structure, but do not determine, specific interactions" (Healy 2003). Drawing among others on Giddens' structuration theory, she develops a relational perspective on institutions, in which institutional designs and deep value systems shape local practices, while the latter continuously instantiate the former. Healey sees it as a central task for planners to aid and develop institutional capacity. Institutional capacity "represents a force which is continually emergent, produced in the interactive contexts of its use" (Healy, Magalhaes et al. 2003). With this analytic concept Healey summarizes the planner's challenge as developing the quality of social relations ("the nature of bonds of trust and norms in the networks of which link people together") and of the knowledge resources which flow around and through these relations (*ibid.*).

The notion of social and institutional capital also informs the work on public policy mediation. Susan Podziba, an experienced mediator, describes, for example, how she used a public mediation approach to assist the citizens of Chelsea to create a city charter. Chelsea is a small town in the vicinity of Boston with a large minority population mostly made up of Hispanics and Asians. In 1990 the city was placed into receivership by the state because of chronic financial mismanagement and rampant corruption among its officials. Most citizens had effectively given up on the city government. The mood in the city was one of profound distrust and almost complete disengagement from government. The goal of the Charter formulation process was to give the city back to its residents. The case is interesting as an example of public policy mediation because it shows the importance of institutional design as a means of facilitating productive citizen participation in situations of distrust and deep pluralism. The case is too complex to describe here in any detail, but the aim of the mediators was to strengthen democracy by building a public and enhancing social capital. One of the key insights in public policy mediation, and in the other approaches grouped under the heading of deliberative policy analysis, is that dialogue and participation do not necessarily happen spontaneously – particularly not in situations of distrust and antagonism. They can, however, be stimulated by smart, custom-made design of the communicative situation. As Podziba says: "Under conditions of conflict or breakdown of government, a public consensus-building process can be custom designed to fit the existing common public problem and the level of participation required to make a consensual solution implementable" (Podziba 1998).

Finally, a literature is emerging on empowered participatory governance. Empowered participatory governance is a movement of administrative reform that emphasizes *participation* (ordinary individuals take part in important governance decisions), a *practical orientation* (participatory governance is organized around concrete issues, such as public safety, urban renewal, or land planning), *empowerment* (decisions that follow from participatory processes have real impact on the actions of officials and agencies), and *democratic deliberation* (decisions are made through a “process of structured reasoning in which (actors) offer proposals and arguments to one another”) (Fung, 2004, 4; Fung & Wright, 16-17). The introduction of empowered participatory governance in situations of traditional hierarchical or market-based governance is fraught with pitfalls and dangers. Often those groups that would benefit most from active inclusion in the governance process are excluded on the basis of ethnicity, language, education or social skills participating citizens need to be informed and to acquire the skills necessary to participate in governance processes citizens need to maintain sufficient motivation to participate, and it is exceedingly difficult for citizens to effectively counteract the formidable agenda-setting power of officials and agencies (Fung 2004; Wagenaar 2007). In addition participatory governance raises issues of accountability, legitimacy and efficiency (Stoker 2006). Similar to public policy mediation, case studies of the introduction of empowered participatory governance emphasize therefore the importance of careful institutional design. However, as such design can hardly be imposed top-down, but has to emerge from the evolving transformation of a traditional administrative configuration into a participatory one, analysts who are involved almost by definition follow principles of action research, working with those involved in reflecting on and designing the situation at hand.

## **6. The Essays in this Issue: Reframing Rationality in Terms of Democracy.**

All three essays in this special issue describe examples of professional practice in real world settings. They show how the conceptual framework of philosophical hermeneutics, with its emphasis on dialogue and practice, is able to throw new light on ordinary policy settings in which professional planners and policy analysts work in situations that are characterized by conflict, complexity, uncertainty, and an overriding imperative to act on the situation at hand. In their paper David Laws and John Forester focus on the thorny issue of contested ‘facts’ in policy controversies, and the role that scientific knowledge plays. The authors distinguish between two kinds of situations here. One is where the scientific knowledge is not disputed but the disagreement is about the interpretation of the knowledge or the particular way that it should be interpreted in the case at hand. The second case, more and more common in policy controversies, is where the scientific knowledge itself is incomplete and unsettled. In this case, as the authors argue, uncertainty is a central feature of the policy domain. One of the many strengths of this paper is the chilling description of the pathologies of the common ways of dealing with this kind of deep uncertainty in policy conflicts. They show how parties in the conflict engage in all sorts of strategic behavior, dig deeper and deeper into their own positions, escalate the conflict almost against their own will, and run circles within their own self-fulfilling

expectations. How to escape from this vicious circle of “warring expertise and escalating skepticism”?

Laws and Forester propose a strategy of “joint fact-finding”. Joint fact-finding, they argue, takes place within a broader effort to negotiate commitments to act on shared practical problems, guided by the “procedural commitments of mediation practice”. The authors present two cases to develop their argument. The first case concerns the expected disruption of sensitive MRI equipment by the construction of a metropolitan light rail system near a hospital. The controversy centered on the issue if the rail system should go underground or not. A mediator was called in who was able to move the parties from epistemological questions about what we don’t know to performative problems of recognizing one’s mutual dependence and inquiring about the world together. Quickly the parties discovered that the original question of above or below ground wouldn’t make a difference to the expected disruption, and they were able to jointly explore better and less expensive options.

Their second case, the design and siting of a low-level radioactive waste facility, concerns a controversy in which the scientific facts themselves are disputed. Similar to the first case, the participants managed to shape their relationship in such a way that it enables them to inquire and act together in the face of uncertainty. The story follows a citizen advisory group’s efforts to understand the scientific consensus on the health effects of exposure to consistent doses of low-level radiation. By engaging experts it gradually became clear that not only were there gaps in the scientific knowledge, but that the relationship between science and regulations was exceedingly fallible. In the end the CAG moved away from epistemological questions of what science didn’t know to the practical problem of how to store the waste. They were able to draw lessons about waste storage in the concrete setting of a Canadian waste storage facility that had to struggle with a nuclear accident, enabling them to reframe the issue of static waste storage to a more active approach of constant monitoring of waste levels and the health of the environment.

Stacy Anne Harwood and Marisa Zapata describe the subtle connections between collaborative planning in disadvantaged communities and the teaching of such planning approaches. Their paper describes two cases (East St Louis, Illinois and Monteverde, Costa Rica) in which local community organizations requested assistance from professional planners from the University of Illinois because local planning capacity was weak. In both cases university planners organized long standing community-based projects (The East St Louis Action Research project and the Sustainable Futures Program in Monteverde). The programs provided technical assistance to community organizations in the area of planning and design and served as training grounds for student planners. Harwood and Zapata emphasize that in both cases a considerable distance exists between the backgrounds of the residents who had experienced a long history of marginalization and exploitation and the privileged background of the students and professors. The paper describes how an action research approach enables planners, students and community members to deal with this challenge.

The paper describes how students and community members used “constructed interactions” to unpack the latter’s narratives of the future shape of their neighborhood or village and jointly

repackage them in graphically expressed development scenarios. Instead of departing from well-defined studio problems, the student planners drew upon the interactions with the residents to observe, analyze, and develop interventions in slowly evolving partnerships. The graphical models helped residents and students to draw out the implications for community values in the local setting of the village or neighborhood in its wider environment. Yet, despite the careful dialogical approach, in which the students-planners iteratively put the scenarios together in close collaboration with the residents, the students were repeatedly confronted with the fact that their assumptions about what constituted a good neighborhood or rural community, esthetic and life-style assumptions that were developed and fine-tuned in years of professional training, did not match the lived reality of the residents. For many students this experience challenged their notion of what it is to be an expert, and demonstrated to them how their initial positioning of themselves as experts created powerful barriers to mutual understanding with the residents.

Anne Loeber's paper describes a similar dialogical encounter of an evaluation researcher with the practitioners who are the subjects of her research. Loeber describes how she was commissioned to evaluate the Dutch National Initiative for Sustainable Development (NIDO), in which policy makers and corporate actors were to formulate policy suggestions towards a more sustainable society. NIDO was unique in that it adopted a deliberative, interactive approach in which it invited stakeholders to describe their experiences with transforming everyday organizational routines towards a more environmentally conscious production process. Loeber describes how initially she approached the evaluation study in traditional manner. She reconstructed NIDO's development on the basis of documents, interviews and participant observation. She drew up a report in which she merged her empirical data with theoretical notions of change management, formulated recommendations, and organized meetings to present her findings and recommendations. To her surprise the NIDO staff didn't recognize her findings. Somehow the concepts that she thought "leaped from the pages" of the interviews and documents didn't make sense to the participants of NIDO. Loeber decided to change course.

In a series of meetings in smaller settings she became aware that what was presented to the outside world by the NIDO staff as a more or less finished, unified approach to planning for sustainable development, actually covered up a considerable amount of repressed conflict, diversity and uncertainty about how to organize a national effort to promote sustainable development. After a series of open-ended conversations, Loeber then designed a search heuristic which enabled NIDO participants and herself to capitalize on the divergent views in a creative manner. She describes among other things how difficult it was for her to let go of the notion of "system" that was so central in almost all theories of social change and public governance, but which hardly played a role in the work of the NIDO participants. Reflecting on her experience Loeber frames both the activities of the NIDO participants and her own work as an evaluator in terms of *phronèsis* and political judgment. In her essay she formulates three central principles of *phronèsis*/ political judgment: 1) The human faculty for judging is not necessarily a private but a collective virtue. 2) Judgment mirrors the interface between the reflective and the practical order; *phronèsis* entails a context-specific understanding of what

is “good for men”. 3). The human faculty for judging is a principally transformative capacity; *phronèsis* is oriented towards transformation and action.

All three empirical papers have a number of elements in common. They demonstrate the changing relationship between knowledge and action in a practice-oriented discipline such as policy analysis. Traditional approaches to analysis turn out to be either ineffective or irrelevant. The traditional model of the expert who is called in to shed his light on the case on the basis of general scientific knowledge, either didn't resonate with the participants in the case or was unable to move the controversy towards a resolution. Yet, as these authors make clear, the problem cannot be solved by striving for better science. The problem is not epistemological but ontological. It has to do with the relation between knowing and acting, and with the place of science in a world of contesting parties, with the agency of people and things, and with a fundamental uncertainty about the future. It is here that Gadamer's epistemic move to frame knowledge in relational terms, as the emergent product of the way that contesting parties manage to work and live together in practical, everyday settings, proves its value. What these papers show is that a deep and fundamental continuity exists between knowing and acting. Obtaining knowledge cannot be seen apart, both from the concrete settings in which the need for that knowledge arises, as from the particular relationships between the actors involved. Knowledge is always judged by those involved as to what it contributes to the solution of their practical problems. Knowledge doesn't make sense outside a context of acting. This ontological reality might sometimes be forgotten in academia, but is quickly driven home, as these papers show, when scientific knowledge is asked to arbitrate in real-world policy controversies. It has been the invaluable contribution of Gadamer, and before him, the pragmatist thinkers, Dewey foremost, to have restored this intrinsic continuity between knowing and acting.

Finally, to anchor knowledge in human relations accentuates the close relationship between science and democracy. If effective and relevant knowledge emerges from human relationships, then the quality of such relationships becomes a central issue. This raises questions such as: Who is involved and who is excluded? Or: How can we assure that as broad a spectrum of relevant experiences will inform this particular issue? And also the difficult issue, as Gadamer argued of how to overcome the limitations of the beliefs, affinities and understandings that one brings to the encounter. Laws and Forester cite the philosopher Hilary Putnam who makes the similar point. Inquiry, he argues, is by nature cooperative. This implies that communities should organize themselves according to democratic standards and ideals. Not because they are good in themselves but “because they are the prerequisites for the application of intelligence to inquiry”. This is perhaps the most profound lesson of philosophical hermeneutics: to reframe the ideal of rationality in terms of democracy.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This essay has benefited greatly from the sympathetic and critical commentary on earlier versions by Barbara Prainsack, John Forester and Thomas Schwandt. I am also indebted to the perceptive questions and remarks of the audience in the panel “Philosophical Hermeneutics and Policy Analysis: Theory and Effectuation” at the conference *Interpretation in Policy Analysis: research and Practice*, Amsterdam, May 31-June 2, 2007.
- <sup>2</sup> Strictly speaking the term naturalism is reserved for the first assumption. It indicates the belief that the methodology of the social sciences should emulate that of the natural sciences. Empiricism stands for the second assumption, it points to the belief that observation statements stand in an immediate relationship to the world, that is, without any intervening linguistic or theoretical filters (Thomas, 1979).

Such brute observations can then function as the ultimate arbiters in the verification of theoretical statements. Naturalism logically follows from empiricism. They are part of the same epistemological and ontological belief system. So when I use the latter term it includes the first. Only when necessary for the drift of the argument do I distinguish between the two.
- <sup>3</sup> The observation that very few scholars actually engage in replicating other people’s research won’t do here. Replicability is a core ideal of empiricism. It derives from an “ethics of cognition” that privileges cognition over emotion or value-preferences. Genuine cognitive content can only be assured (that is distinguished from common sense, value-preference, authority, tradition, or affect) by public and repeatable testing (Smith, 1997).

In other words, the cognitive content that is the outcome of such testing must be universally applicable; or, in negative terms, be independent from specific social or cultural domains. It must be obvious for everyone, in different places and at different times. When something has passed this rigorous test we call it true. Something can have a cognitive content within a particular tradition or value-position, but for it to be true, it must transcend these particularities.
- <sup>4</sup> This is a key issue in policy analysis, as Torgerson (1995) rightly argues. Throughout history the relationship between politics/government, civil society and science has been conceptualized in different ways. Torgerson observes that it is characteristic of the postwar era of technocratic policy analysis to assume a strict distinction between politics and policy analysis. Scientific policy analysis should be quarantined from the irrationality and passions of politics. The interpretive turn is an attempt to reconnect policy, science and society.
- <sup>5</sup> Although, to extend the metaphor, a certain grasp of the chemistry of cooking certainly helps to arrive in a reliable and predictable manner at well-cooked dishes.
- <sup>6</sup> The relationship between ontology and the social-institutional order is as complex and ill understood as it is important. Ontology operates – insidiously, behind the scenes, as it where - via language and practice, by setting the conditions for what is possible and thinkable in the everyday world. The relation is a dialectical one though. Once certain political, organizational, or social practices are in place, they in turn reinforce certain ontological and epistemological commitments as self-evident (Wagenaer and Cook, 2003). The reciprocity

of ontology and social order, as well as its roots in practice makes the ontology-social order nexus inescapable. One can neither walk away from the ontological consequences of one's social practices, as the social consequences of one's ontology-in-use. A landmark discussion of this relationship is Taylor, 1995.

- 7 These are not the only "flavors" in interpretive policy analysis. I leave out the large and important family of approaches that base themselves on poststructuralist language analysis. These comprise among others: narrative analysis, (critical) discourse analysis, Foucaultian genealogy (and, derived from this, governmentality or the analytics of government), and the radical pluralism of Laclau and Mouffe with its roots in neo-Marxism. See my upcoming book *Interpretation and Dialogue in Policy Analysis* for an extended discussion of these various approaches.
- 8 In section 4 I will argue that *phronèsis* is the fourth tradition which has influenced interpretive policy analysis (in addition to early language analysis, phenomenology, and post-structuralism). But as I argue, for institutional and conceptual reasons, *phronèsis*, while it lies at the root of dialogical approaches to policy analysis, has always been a minority position.
- 9 As Dallmayer & McCarthy put it: "The phenomenological method of "bracketing" or *epoché*, in (Husserl's) treatment basically signified an attempt to unravel the meaningful core, or "essence", of phenomena as disclosed in (or "constituted" by) a purified consciousness. At least in this respect his approach replicated the solipsistic dilemma of early language analysis and of much of traditional philosophy: to the extent that consciousness was presented as "transcendental limit" of the world, the domain of intersubjective understanding and clarification of meaning was obliterated. In his later writings Husserl sought to overcome this dilemma by introducing the notion of the "life-world", or world of mundane experience, but the relationship between mundanity and consciousness was never fully clarified" (1977, 9).
- 10 See for example, Brian Fay: "Intentional explanations, for example, make sense of a person's actions by fitting them into a purposeful pattern which reveals how the act was warranted, given the actor, his social and physical situation and his beliefs and wants." But how can acts be warranted in this explanatory scheme? By fitting them in "the context of a certain set of social rules which provide the criteria in terms of which an actor can be said to be performing that action". "These rules" – and here comes the transcendental move to help phenomenology/ interpretivism escape from solipsism, and provide it with an objective basis – "logically constitute the very possibility of a particular action" (1975: 73-75).
- 11 "Disinterested" does not mean of course that the analyst is without value commitments or feelings towards his topic of inquiry. It only means that these value commitments or feelings are not allowed to interfere with the analysis.
- 12 In fact, with complex skills such as parenting, managing an organization, or implementing public policy, not even the goals and the criteria of rightness are defined. We discover these in the course of obtaining experience in these activities.

- <sup>13</sup> Taylor calls this argument concerning possibilities for understanding “the argument for transcendental conditions”. With that he means that critics of the primacy of epistemology all argue for “their being anything like experience or awareness of the world” as an indispensable condition for understanding or knowing. Different critics have construed this awareness, in different ways. Heidegger calls it *Dasein*, Dilthey “lived experience”, Dewey “experience”, Wittgenstein “forms of life”, and Gadamer “being” and “*Vorverständnis*“. What these thinkers have in common is an urge to break free of the hermetic space of interlocked assumptions that firmly link instrumental notions of knowledge to modernistic conceptions of society and individuality. Taylor in particular has stressed how the traditional understanding of knowledge as disembodied, atomistic, and neutral, the result of formal method, and monological, is entrenched in the institutions and practices of modernity: “science, technology, rationalized forms of production, bureaucratic administration, a civilization committed to growth, and the like”. (Taylor, 2005, 76.) The quest for instrumental, methodical knowledge has attained the status of a moral ideal. It is part of how we see and understand ourselves. (Taylor, 2005, 6) It needs no comment that policy analysis – and the traditional, expert-driven form of policy making that is characteristic of modern liberal democracies – are vanguards of the disembodied approach to knowledge. What all the thinkers mentioned above share is that they attempt to break out of this space of interlocked assumptions and institutions by positing a tacit, taken-for-granted, only partly conscious, partly explicable realm of experience which precedes, makes possible and limits processes of knowing and understanding.
- <sup>14</sup> “What were seen as the proper procedures of rational thought were read into the very constitution of the mind, made part of its very structure” (Taylor, 2005, 61).
- <sup>15</sup> The move towards *Life* as an analytic category represents an important trend in twentieth century philosophy: “Since Feuerbach and Nietzsche there is a movement in philosophy which prioritizes the category of life over reflection and reason, taking cognitive qualities to be an integral part of life and not uniquely separate qualities. Philosophical attempts to make sense of man and the world from a theoretical and rational standpoint are criticized because philosophical reflection ignores the pre-philosophical thought of the ‘life world’ and hence does violence to our everyday relationships in the world. We are involved in the world and find our way around in it long before we start to philosophize. In fact the philosophical perspective on life is a distortion depending on forms of thought unrelated to the real character of human relationships in the world” (Law, 2006, 52).
- <sup>16</sup> See Taylor: “(T)he epistemological tradition is connected with some of the most important moral and spiritual ideas of our civilization – and also with some of the most controversial and questionable. To challenge them is sooner or later to run up against the force of this tradition, which stands with them in a complex relation of mutual support” (1995, 8).
- <sup>17</sup> This is also what the originators of Grounded Theory admonish us to do when we infer explanations from qualitative data (Glaser & Strauss, 1973). This is also the approach that Yanow takes in her influential book on interpretive policy analysis, when she reconstructs the meaning that a community center program in Israel had for the designers of the program (Yanow, 1996).

- <sup>18</sup> To express this idea Gadamer introduces the term “Wirkungsgeschichte”, or “the work of history”. What he wants to express is that history acts on us in not completely understood ways: “The notion of work gives us a better idea that history is active in us. Works in us or penetrates us, to a greater extent that knowledge can penetrate or suspect. . . . With this concept, Gadamer perhaps best realized his project of going beyond the epistemological and instrumental approach in hermeneutics. The work of history revealed a working of history that is active over and above the historical knowledge we can have“(Grondin, 2003, 92). In other words, history is part of the excess of reality, the only partly transparent background, which conditions our practical understanding of the world.
- <sup>19</sup> Gadamer builds here on the important but somewhat obscure, concept of “facticity” of his mentor Heidegger. With this Heidegger expresses the peculiar ontological condition of our being as self-interpreting human beings who derive their sense of self from their being part of a vast cultural-social structure of meaning. Facticity is not fact. To borrow an example from Dreyfus, while it may be a fact that we are male or female, facticity refers to the complex of meanings and practices that make up our gender as masculine or feminine (Dreyfus, 1991, 24). The point is 1) that we can never hope to fully grasp the implications of this complex of facts, meaning and practice which makes up our being-in-the-world, and 2) we can never hope to overcome it or extract ourselves from it. Facticity forms the condition of our being-in-the-world. It is always there. It forms the background, the reference point, of all acts of understanding. Understanding only makes sense in the context of this facticity. The importance of the concept is that Heidegger – and following him on this point, Gadamer – tried to escape from the dualism of Hegelian universalism versus phenomenology’s subjectivism (Dreyfus, 1991).
- <sup>20</sup> This insight contains a powerful critique of the popular text analogue in interpretive social science. The argument is actually simple. The metaphor of a text implies that the object of interpretation is delimited. It has a clearly identifiable beginning and end. But that is never the case in history – and also not in policymaking. Whatever boundaries we observe are imposed by the interpreter, and spring from his “horizon”. The assumption of a bounded a priori object inserts a measure of objectivity into the process of interpretation that is wholly unwarranted (Grondin, 2003, 62). Gadamer speaks in this respect of the philologization of history (Grondin, 2003, 65). It is yet another attempt to obtain an epistemic foundation where there is none.
- <sup>21</sup> Schön uses the notion of back talk to describe the continuity between knowing and acting in the process of design: “In a good process of design, this conversation with the situation is reflective. In answer to the situation’s back talk, the designer reflects-in-action on the construction of the problem, the strategies of action, or the model of the phenomena, which have been implicit in his moves (1983, 79). It goes without saying that this depiction of design applies verbatim to policy making and policy analysis.
- <sup>22</sup> John Forester, personal communication.

- <sup>23</sup> Healey makes a similar observation in planning practice: “What had seemed a distant prospect in the late 1980s was beginning to look like a dominant rhetoric 10 years later. The practice, though, was often far from reflecting the inclusionary qualities of a potential collaborative process” (Healey, 2003, 108).
- <sup>24</sup> The dictum is, of course, from Kurt Lewin (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, 19).

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