In my comments on Jean Grondin’s carefully conceived and seminal paper I wish to fuse the commentator’s two functions of restatement and examination: rather than first tracing the entire argument and then testing it, I will put the individual stages of the argument to the test as I elaborate my understanding of each of them. Here is why: the paper, I suggest, asks exactly the right questions, but early on it starts to go wrong in answering them, and I want to show this where and when I think it happens. To be sure, I make it sound as if I will disagree with the paper’s results, but in fact I do not. I heartily concur with them. But this, I would claim, is because towards the end of the paper the argument turns back from the course it had been implicitly pursuing. That may mean that some logical consistency is forfeited, but with highly felicitous consequences, in my view. The paper seems to me to divide nicely into three sections, each of which addresses a particular question. My comments here will be arranged accordingly.

I. Are the origins of hermeneutics as we know it today traceable to Ancient Greek philosophy?

If we ask, says Grondin, how the Ancient philosophers understood hermeneutics and what they took to be its task, we are immediately confronted with a problem. For despite its Greek sounding name, hermeneutics, as we understand it, is a peculiarly modern phenomenon, the origins of which—say, in Dannhauer’s Biblical exegesis—are not Greek but Protestant, Northern European. On this point Grondin is surely right and I
would only add that it follows that if there is a paradigm for hermeneutics in the Ancient world, it might better be sought in Rabbinical exposition of scripture as demonstrated, for instance, in the New Testament by the Jesus of the synoptic Gospels and St. Paul. Still, philosophy being the Greek thing that it is, few philosophers have taken that route, (Kierkegaard, Buber and Levinas would be exceptions; Heidegger and Gadamer, with their highly selective excursions from the optical Greek into the acoustical Hebrew tradition—in the plays on Hören, Zuhören, Gehören, Zugehörigkeit—, have only flirted with it.)

If, however, hermeneutics is not itself the practice of interpretation but theoretical reflection on what interpretation is, then Grondin finds, there is a solution to the problem. For not Luther, but a later reflective thinker, Mathias Flacius Illyricus, must then be considered its originator. Flacius, and after him Dannhauer in the 17th century, counters the Catholic hermeneutics of "authority and tradition" and sustains Luther's principle of sola scriptura in going back to the Church Fathers and, in particular, Augustine's De doctrina Christiana. And since these drew on Greek philosophy, it is reasonable, Grondin asserts, to seek the origin of hermeneutics in Greek philosophy.

Now in my view things start to go wrong at this point. First, I would submit that the aforementioned Rabbinical tradition is at least as important to Augustine in developing his homiletic hermeneutics as are the Greeks. Second, and most important, hermeneutics, at least as Gadamer has defined that for us, is decidedly Catholic in its rehabilitation of authority and tradition. The point, to which I will come back later, is that hermeneutics requires the return of the autonomous speaker and listener to the traditional community of not, his or her, but "our" inherited language and speech (Sprache). Language is the traditional authority here to which the individual submits. Grondin, I think, is already moving in a quite opposed direction. Be this as it may, we have now arrived at his second question.

II. What is the Greek understanding of hermeneutics?

There are three places, he suggests, to look for the answer: the