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INTRODUCTION

Since its publication in 1960, Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* has come to redefine the meaning of hermeneutics. In Gadamer's work, hermeneutics is no longer a methodological tool for classicists, theologians, or legal scholars but a fully fledged philosophical account of truth, meaning, and rationality. The reception of *Truth and Method* traverses the traditional distinction between Anglo-American and European philosophy. Over the past forty years or so, *Truth and Method* has been critiqued, discussed, and adopted in the work of Jürgen Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel, Ernst Tugendhat, Jacques Derrida, Charles Taylor, Paul Ricoeur, Donald Davidson, Richard Rorty, John McDowell, and Robert Brandom. Yet, in the reception of Gadamer's work, diverse and wide-spanning as it is, one aspect of his thinking is systematically left out: the relationship between hermeneutics and German Idealism. There are, to be sure, a number of studies of Gadamer's relation to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. There is also no shortage of works that examine Gadamer's indebtedness to his teacher, Martin Heidegger, or even his relation to Habermas and critical theory. His reading of Kant, Fichte, Schleiermacher, the romantics, and Hegel, however, has for the most part been left unvisited.

The present study argues that Gadamer's critique of German Idealism is integral to his hermeneutics. At the center of this critique is the idea that reason ought reflectively to investigate the epistemic, moral, political, and aesthetic norms with which it identifies. While Gadamer takes over from German Idealism the emphasis on the self-reflection of reason, he also claims that its idea of self-reflection is guilty of overlooking the situatedness of reason in history. In spite of promising insights, German Idealism, in its Kantian, Fichtean, and

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Hegelian permutations, ends up being locked into what Gadamer speaks of as a Cartesian model of absolute self-reflection.

Under the influence of Heidegger's ontological turn, Gadamer sets out to overcome the shortcomings of German Idealism by exploring the idea of understanding as a "truth-happening" or "an event of being." He wishes to correct the picture of an autonomous, self-reflective subjectivity by presenting the interpreter's relation to tradition in light of a play into which he or she is passively drawn, and by committing to a notion of understanding as the experience of a world-disclosive truth that is ontologically prior to the critical-reflective capacities of the individual interpreter. In Gadamer's work, hermeneutics is no longer about the objective reconstruction of the meaning of the works of the past; tradition is instead seen, at a normative as well as a descriptive level, as a process of taking over (*aneignen*) and understanding oneself in light of the truths and insights conveyed by eminent texts.

As such, Gadamer's hermeneutics is not, as it has been perceived, primarily a critique of Cartesian epistemology or an attempt to carve out a notion of normativity that steers clear of the equally problematic alternatives of foundationalism and relativism. At stake, rather, is an endeavor to overcome the drift, in modern philosophy, towards an ahistorical understanding of ourselves and our cultural-intellectual surroundings, the tendency to see ourselves as cut off from tradition and to view tradition as irrelevant to the concerns and self-understanding of the present. To the extent that his philosophy criticizes the idea, espoused in the tradition from Schleiermacher to Dilthey, of a method in the humanities, this is not in order to develop an alternative epistemology for the humanities, but to leave behind the narrow epistemological approaches to the past and win back the thick, experiential richness that he associates with a truthful historical existence. According to Gadamer, this involves rehabilitating the notion of *Bildung* and taking seriously the possibility of self-understanding opened up by the eminent texts of tradition. This is why he takes the experience of world-disclosive art to be paradigmatic for the hermeneutic experience as such, and why *Truth and Method* begins with a discussion of the subjectivization of taste in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and ends with a plea, developed through a discussion of classical art and the play-like structure of the hermeneutic experience, for stepping beyond the framework of German Idealism and its legacy.

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However, by viewing the experience of art as paradigmatic for the hermeneutic situation, Gadamer ends up espousing an aestheticizing model of understanding. Even though the reader of *Truth and Method* might well endorse Gadamer's emphasis on the historicity of understanding and his wish to critique a naïve, Cartesian model of self-reflection, it is problematic to assume, as he does, that the experience of eminent texts can serve as the basis for an account of what it means to engage with tradition. Furthermore, no matter how sympathetic one is to the overall cause of Gadamer's work, the reader of *Truth and Method* is left wondering whether his notion of a hermeneutic truth-happening, taking the form of a demand, captured in the words of Rilke's famous poem, that the interpreter must change his or her life, really allows for the reflective-dialogical model of rationality that Gadamer posits as an alternative to the idea of rationality ensuing from the tradition of German Idealism. Gadamer's *Bildungs*-oriented account underestimates, downplays, and sometimes even masks the fact that tradition is not only a background against which the interpreter questions his or her prejudices, deepens self-understanding, and expands his or her experiential horizon, but is also a field where unwanted prejudices are segmented and sometimes even reinforced. Although Gadamer would not deny that tradition may shelter illegitimate prejudices and beliefs, his over-generalizing critique of method and reflective standards in interpretation prevents him from developing an adequate notion of normative issues in hermeneutics. His wish to keep tradition alive as a process of continuous application of the insights of the great works of the past makes him overlook the philological and philosophical difficulties of dealing with expressions from culturally or temporally distant eras – works that may be expressive of a set of questions or concerns that fundamentally differ from those of the interpreter and hence do not trigger existential-ontological self-understanding along the lines of Gadamer's thinking. In order to engage with texts from historically or culturally distant communities, these works must be recognized in their potential otherness. This process of recognition cannot be vouched for by a model which, like Gadamer's, places the main emphasis on the self-transformation that happens in the moment of applying the insights of the past within the horizon of the present. As it develops in the wake of Heidegger's critique of modern philosophy, Gadamer's hermeneutics addresses one particular prejudice, the modern tendency to abstract from the fundamental historicity of human

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existence, at the cost of overlooking a larger specter of hermeneutic problems and issues, including those of critique, reflection, and normativity in understanding.

To mend this situation, I recommend a return to the early nineteenth-century theory of interpretation. Within this tradition, as it develops in relative continuity with the philosophy of the Enlightenment, the hermeneutic experience is not viewed as a truth-happening that initiates a more authentic existence, but deals with the epistemological, ethical, and political challenges of understanding and interpreting the symbolic expressions that derive from temporally or culturally distant communities. In the philosophies of Herder, Schleiermacher, the Schlegels, Hegel, and the von Humboldts, we find, for the first time, the systematic articulation of the idea that languages and cultures are expressive of forms of life, so that an expansion of the field of understanding and interpretation is at the same time an expansion of the field of thinking, action, and self-reflection. Within the scope of early nineteenth-century hermeneutics, however, this expansion of horizons is not seen as the result of a happening of truth (*Wahrheitsgeschehen*) into which the interpreter is drawn, but as a process that requires philological and historical labor, as well as critical reflection on the prejudices that limit the interpreter's outlook.

Among the many representatives of early nineteenth-century hermeneutics, I have chosen to focus on the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, whose philosophy of interpretation is given considerable attention in *Truth and Method*. In its sensitivity to cultural diversity, the plurality of historical cultures, and the problem of the individuality of the text (its being a unique expression of a given, linguistically mediated life-form), Schleiermacher's philosophy points the way towards an intellectually sound and philologically responsible theory of understanding and interpretation. The rationale of his hermeneutics rests not with its appeal to an immediate, self-transforming truth-happening in the encounter with tradition, but with the effort to overcome the obstacles of historical and cultural distance through working out a sustainable notion of normativity in interpretation. However, in Schleiermacher's work, such a notion of validity in understanding is not perceived as contrary to but, rather, emerges as a condition of possibility for a sustainable notion of *Bildung* and the enhanced self-understanding of the interpreter, as expounded in his *Dialektik* as well as his practical philosophy. If

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Schleiermacher distinguishes between interpretation and application, this is not because he overlooks the way in which an interpreter may learn from, reject, or understand him- or herself in terms of the past, but because he finds that in order for something to be accepted or rejected it should first be understood.

My discussion of Gadamer's critique of German Idealism is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 examines Gadamer's reading of Kant, focusing in particular on the relation between the *Critique of Judgment* and the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Gadamer's reading of Kant is more complex than it is often assumed to be. In *Truth and Method*, he argues that Kant's notion of knowledge leads to a subjectivization of art and beauty. However, even though Gadamer is critical of the subjectivization of taste in the *Critique of Judgment*, he finds that Kant's turn from taste and reflective judgment to the relationship between art and morality evokes a promising notion of the experience of art as a dialogical, hermeneutic encounter. According to Gadamer, however, Kant is not primarily interested in art but in natural beauty, and natural beauty entails no hermeneutic experience of this kind. Hence he ends up leaving behind the promising hermeneutic insights that he had been hinting at in the beginning of the third Critique. However, Gadamer's critique of Kant misses its target. Because Gadamer approaches Kant's treatment of natural beauty through the lens of artistic beauty, he overlooks how Kant's notion of natural beauty is intrinsically related to his notion of knowledge and empirical research within the natural sciences.

Even if Gadamer misunderstands Kant's third Critique, his reading paves the way for an important criticism of the romantic appeal to immediacy and pure aesthetic presence – or aesthetic consciousness, as Gadamer calls it. This criticism, as it grows out of Gadamer's review of the treatment of epistemological skepticism in post-Cartesian philosophy, is the subject of Chapter 2. Gadamer views aesthetic consciousness as a failed attempt to overcome the scientific orientations of modern philosophy. Aesthetic consciousness, he claims, celebrates art and aesthetic expression as the domains of subjectivity proper but fails to ask, as Gadamer himself wishes to, whether it is right to reserve the notion of truth to the procedures of scientific reason in the first place. Gadamer's critique of aesthetic consciousness entails an apt analysis of a drift in post-Kantian philosophy towards a model of immediacy and pure aesthetic presence. Yet his objections to romantic aesthetics are too

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coarse and sweeping. In his eagerness to expel every orientation towards immediacy and pure aesthetic presence, Gadamer fails to acknowledge that the romantics, in drawing on (Kantian) notions such as autonomy, individuality, and feeling, respond to the situation of art in modernity rather than hypostatizing a set of ahistorical and faulty aesthetic ideals.

Leaving behind the critique of Kant and aesthetic consciousness, Chapter 3 turns to Gadamer's own, hermeneutic conception of art and the relationship between aesthetic experience and hermeneutic reason. I discuss Gadamer's attempt to criticize the tradition of modern epistemology by completing the notion of truth as correspondence with the idea of truth as world disclosure. Gadamer, however, goes too far in his universalizing of the world-disclosive truth that he ascribes to art in particular. This hampers the historical as well as the systematic relevance of his model. From a historical point of view, Gadamer's notion of the world-disclosive truth of art leaves him ill-equipped to deal with practical, interpretative challenges within the tradition of modern as well as of pre-modern art. From a systematic point of view, his notion of a truth that is prior to critical judgment and reflection, a sublime and sudden event of being, represents a return to the old paradigm of immediacy that he himself had criticized so aptly throughout his reading of aesthetic consciousness.

Chapter 4 addresses the ramifications of Gadamer's failure to overcome aesthetic consciousness by going over his relation to the Enlightenment. Gadamer worries that the enlightenment paradigm in philosophy represses the historicity of reason and understanding, and thus falls prey to a prejudice against prejudice. However, even though Gadamer is critical of the putative ahistoricity of enlightenment thinking, he does not want to let go of the commitment to self-reflection and self-understanding. Rather, he wishes to rescue a notion of reflection, albeit one that is historically mediated. He finds such a notion in the work of Hegel. Yet Gadamer's appropriation of Hegel is not without problems. Whereas Hegel identifies with the Enlightenment and its focus on norms and questions of legitimacy, Gadamer, with his entire Heideggerian luggage, fails to distinguish between an epistemic and an existentialist notion of self-understanding. Art is taken to be paradigmatic for the hermeneutic experience precisely because the experience of the great works of tradition, with their world-disclosive authority, is ascribed a self-transformative

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dimension. Hence the right question with regard to Gadamer's hermeneutics is not, as Habermas, Apel, and Tugendhat suggest, whether it ends up simply rejecting the enlightenment commitment to a critical use of reason. Rather, the real question is to what extent his commitment to critical reflection can be squared with the way in which he takes the sublime and existentially challenging experience of art to be expressive of hermeneutic truth as such.

In Chapter 5, I discuss how Gadamer's failure to distinguish between epistemic and existential self-understanding influences his own work on historical texts. I address this issue by looking at Gadamer's account of Schleiermacher's theory of interpretation. Gadamer focuses on Schleiermacher's notion of individuality and his appeal to a method in interpretation. He argues that Schleiermacher offers an early version of hermeneutic positivism combined with a problematic aesthetic turn in the theory of interpretation. However, in his critique of early nineteenth-century hermeneutics, Gadamer fails to acknowledge that the fundamental difference between Schleiermacher's theory and his own is not that Schleiermacher is a hermeneutic positivist and Gadamer is not, but that Schleiermacher takes hermeneutics to be all about correct understanding of the symbolic expressions of the past, whereas Gadamer, modeling understanding on the paradigmatic case of art, takes it to be about a self-transformative, world-disclosive truth in the encounter with the great works of the tradition.

Chapter 6 sketches an alternative reading of early nineteenth-century hermeneutics and advocates a retrieval of post-Kantian hermeneutics and its concern for critical-normative standards in interpretation. I argue that although Schleiermacher is attentive to the need for such standards, he does not abstract from the interpreter's situatedness within a given, historical context. Instead, it is precisely because the interpreter is historically situated that a dimension of normativity is called for. Furthermore, Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, in being closely related to his theory of translation as well as his practical philosophy, allows for a notion of *Bildung* as well as the idea of the interpreter engaging in an ongoing expansion of his or her horizon. And if Schleiermacher does not believe in the idea of a dialogue between work and interpreter, he nonetheless emphasizes, in his dialectics, the intersubjective dimension of understanding. Rather than the discussion of the world-disclosive and sublime happening of the classical work, this – the tradition of early nineteenth-century

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philosophy – is where we need to look for a hermeneutics that may give rise to a philosophically relevant humanism. With its effort to combine a notion of historicity with a notion of normativity in understanding, it is this tradition, rather than Gadamer's ontologically oriented appeal to understanding as truth-happening, that deserves a renaissance within contemporary philosophy, be it in a European or Anglo-American vein.

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1

ART, DIALOGUE, AND HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE: APPROPRIATING KANT'S *CRITIQUE OF JUDGMENT*

Any study of Gadamer's critique of German Idealism must begin with a discussion of his reading of Kant. The relationship between Gadamer's own tradition, that of twentieth-century phenomenology, and Kant's program for a transcendental philosophy is itself a complex issue. First there is Edmund Husserl, who was both attracted to and critical of Kant's first Critique.[1] Then there is Heidegger and his ambition to survey the entire field of the three Critiques. However, most important in this context is Heidegger's reading of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (1929).[2] Faithful to his notion of a salvaging destruction of the philosophical tradition,[3] Heidegger argues that the earliest version of the first Critique, the so-called A-deduction of pure reason, is radically different from the epistemological position that had been eagerly promoted by the neo-Kantians.[4] According to Heidegger, Kant was initially not interested in epistemology in the narrow meaning of the term. Rather, Kant was verging upon a genuine ontology of Being, but then felt forced to leave this path behind in order to pursue the transcendental conditions of knowledge. As for the second Critique, Heidegger approaches

1 See Iso Kern, *Husserl und Kant. Eine Untersuchung über Husserls Verhältnis zu Kant und zum Neukantianismus* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964) and Paul Ricoeur, "Kant and Husserl," in Rudolf Bernet, Donn Welton, and Gina Zavota (eds.), *Edmund Husserl: Critical Assessments* (London: Routledge, 2005), vol. I, 320–344.

2 *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1991).

3 I return to Heidegger's program for a phenomenological destruction of the works of the tradition in Chapter 5.

4 For a discussion of Heidegger's relation to the neo-Kantians, see Michael Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways: Carnap, Cassirer, and Heidegger* (Chicago: Open Court, 2000).

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this work through a discussion of the Kantian notions of freedom and causality. What, then, of the third Critique, that is, Kant's aesthetics? There are scattered remarks about the *Critique of Judgment* throughout Heidegger's work from the early 1930s onward (especially in the late 1930s Nietzsche lectures, to which I return in Chapter 3). A lengthy, systematic account of the relevance of the third Critique, however, is lacking in the work of Heidegger. This leaves Gadamer fertile ground on which to carve out his own philosophical niche, which is precisely what he does in the first part of *Truth and Method*: He sets out to rescue the hermeneutically important insights of Kant's aesthetics from the dominant nineteenth- and twentieth-century reception of this work.

When Gadamer published *Truth and Method*, his work on Plato's *Philebus*, the *Habilitationsschrift* of 1931, was already well known in Germany. Arguing that Plato's dialogical form is not merely a stylistic or rhetorical device, but an intrinsic part of his conception of rationality – rationality rests with the dialogical activity itself – Gadamer worries that the Socratic–Platonic notion of philosophizing gets substantially weakened with Aristotle's more academic form and, even more so, with the development of post-Aristotelian philosophy. However, while turning to the *Critique of Judgment*, Gadamer discovers the traces of a dialogical spirit akin to the one in Plato's work, yet in Kant's case, it is not played out performatively. Strictly speaking, this dialogical spirit is not part of Kant's discussion of pure, aesthetic judgment, but occurs in his analysis of the relationship between art and morality in §§16 and 17 of the *Critique of Judgment*. Gadamer, in other words, traces the hermeneutic insights of the third Critique to the parts of the work where Kant deviates from his main objective of providing an a priori justification of the pure judgment of taste.[5] According to Gadamer, Kant, in these sections, suggests that art, while expressing the ideals of reason, must be ascribed a cognitive dimension, only that this dimension, being dialogically constituted, differs from the cognitive comportments of the physical sciences. In Gadamer's reading, this, rather than Kant's better-known doctrine of pure aesthetic judgment, is the place to look for the contemporary relevance of the third Critique. In this part of the Critique, Gadamer claims, Kant connects art with the

5 A more elaborate reading of the hermeneutic impact of Kant's third Critique, and in particular of the transcendental imagination, cannot be found in Gadamer's work. Rudolf Makkreel offers such a reading in *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant: The Hermeneutical Import of the "Critique of Judgment"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

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