Introduction

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GADAMER'S PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

In 1960 Hans-Georg Gadamer, then a sixty-year-old German philosophy professor at Heidelberg, published *Truth and Method* (*Wahrheit und Methode*). Although he had authored many essays, articles, and reviews, to this point Gadamer had published only one other book, his habilitation on Plato in 1931: *Plato's Dialectical Ethics.* As a title for this work on a theory of interpretation, he first proposed to his publisher, Mohr Siebeck, "Philosophical Hermeneutics." The publisher responded that "hermeneutics" was too obscure a term. Gadamer then proposed "Truth and Method" for a work that found, over time, great resonance and made "hermeneutics" and Gadamer's name commonplace in intellectual circles worldwide. *Truth and Method* has been translated into many languages, including Chinese and Japanese. It found and still finds a receptive readership, in part, because, as the title suggests, it addresses large and central philosophical issues in an attempt to find a way between or beyond objectivism and relativism, and scientism and irrationalism. He accomplishes this by developing an account of what he takes to be the universal hermeneutic experience of understanding. Understanding, for Gadamer, is itself always a matter of interpretation. Understanding is also always a matter of language. "Being that can be understood is language," writes Gadamer in the culminating section of the work in which he proposes a "hermeneutical ontology" (TM 432). For his concept of the understanding and the task of ontology, Gadamer relies importantly on Martin Heidegger's treatment of these concepts in *Being and Time* (1927). He follows the later Heidegger's turn to language with the centrality of language and linguisticality

(*Sprachlichkeit*). At the same time, he develops these notions in original ways, free of Heideggerian jargon and, arguably, in ways that depart significantly from Heidegger's thought.

Hermeneutics has a long history with roots in Greek and Hellenistic philosophy as well as in the Church fathers. Until Heidegger in the 1920s characterized his project of fundamental ontology as hermeneutical, hermeneutics had, for the most part, been considered narrowly as pertaining to the interpretation of texts. In the nineteenth century in Germany, hermeneutics was taken out of what had been a largely theological context and developed as a methodology for interpreting texts generally, especially those texts at some historical distance. August Boeckh importantly contributed to this development and to the systematization of hermeneutics as the basis for a scientific philology that, in turn, was central to the historical and human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) and their claim on the title, "science." Wilhelm Dilthey in his masterful attempt to establish a critique of historical reason provided a hermeneutics in the context of his life-philosophy (*Lebensphilosophie*). Gadamer, whose training was in classical philosophy and philology and who took refuge in philology in the Nazi period of the 1930s, explains that in the late 1950s he wrote *Truth and Method* to present in writing to his students what he had been doing throughout his life in the lecture and seminar room, that is, the careful reading and interpretation of texts (EPH 63). In spite of this overly modest understatement of the project of *Truth and Method*, this characterization is in one aspect fitting, because the work affirms the primacy of the spoken over the written, the primacy of *Rede* over *Schriftlichkeit*. This characterization might be considered misleading inasmuch as the work does not directly address how Gadamer or anyone ought to approach and read a text; that is, the work is not at all a "how to" treatment of reading texts. In fact, Gadamer attacks the narrow reliance on methodology in approaches such as that of Boeckh. Gadamer sees the methodologism of "scientific" hermeneutics to be a version of scientism. The word "method" in the title is ambiguous and ironic, for Gadamer would have us give up the notion that truth is

to be understood primarily as the function of rigorous method. The *wissen* (knowing) in *Wissenschaft* (science) is, on his account, not simply a function of methodology. As he famously writes in the second foreword to *Truth and Method*:

> My revival of the expression "hermeneutics," with its long tradition, has apparently led to some misunderstandings. I did not intend to produce an art or technique of understanding, in the manner of earlier hermeneutics. I did not wish to elaborate a system of rules to describe, let alone direct, the methodical procedure of the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). Nor was it my aim to investigate the theoretical foundation of work in these fields in order to put my findings to practical ends. If there is any practical consequence of the present investigation, it certainly has nothing to do with an unscientific "commitment": instead, it is concerned with the "scientific" integrity of acknowledging the commitment involved in all understanding. My real concern was and is philosophic: not what we do or what what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing.
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> Hence the methods of the human sciences are not at issue here. (TM xxviii)

Accordingly, *Truth and Method* is a descriptive or "phenomenological" account of "all understanding" (*Verstehen*). This phenomenological effort is, at the same time, ontological inasmuch as the work attempts to answer the question, "What is understanding?" As we have already noted, on this account all understanding is interpretive, hermeneutical. To show this Gadamer importantly utilizes Edmund Husserl's phenomenological concept of the "horizon." And he relies on Heidegger's account of the radical historicity of the human situation and the human understanding. Understanding is, according to Gadamer, linguistic and dialogical. He characterizes the dialogic event of understanding as a "fusion of horizons," which is led by a concern for whatever is at stake, the matter of concern, *die*

Sache selbst. To show how the individual's understanding occurs in a larger historical and hermeneutical context, Gadamer develops the notion, difficult to translate, of "effective historical consciousness" (*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*) and accords great importance to the role of tradition and prejudice (*Vorurteil*) in any interpretation. What one understands makes a difference in what one does. The practical application of knowledge is inherent in the very understanding of something. Practical application is not, on Gadamer's account, an external, after the fact, use of understanding that is somehow independent of the understanding. All understanding is practical.

THE RECEPTION OF TRUTH AND METHOD

The response to *Truth and Method* has been extensive, rich, and varied. The reception in the English-speaking world was slowed and complicated by the fact that the work was first published in English translation in 1975 and that this first English edition was marred by numerous errors and omissions. An improved English translation appeared in 1989. At the risk of oversimplification, one can identify four waves of critique and discussion of this work.

The first wave of criticism and discussion concerned charges that Gadamer's hermeneutical theory is historicist (Leo Strauss), relativist (E. D. Hirsch, Emilio Betti), and linguistically idealist (Thomas Seebohm).[1] The seeming identification of Being and language leads to the idealist charge. The seeming reliance on Heidegger's thought, which gives priority to the futural aspect of the understanding together with Gadamer's insistence on the importance of the historical situation of the interpreter and the applied character of any understanding, are important aspects of the debate about historicism and relativism. Gadamer's attempt to undermine the traditional hermeneutic distinction between meaning (*Sinn*) and significance (*Bedeutung*) plays an important role in this discussion.

The second wave follows from the appropriation and critique of Gadamer's hermeneutics by a young and then relatively unknown philosopher, Jürgen Habermas. In his inaugural lecture, "Knowledge

and Human Interests," of 1965 (published as an appendix to the book of the same title), Habermas explicitly adopts Gadamer's hermeneutics for what he called the "historical-hermeneutical sciences." At the same time, however, he criticizes Gadamer's thought for being insufficiently "critical" and too reliant upon and subordinate to tradition; that is, it is inadequate for a critique of ideology and, hence, for critical theory. This set off an exchange with Gadamer that received much attention and comment.[2] Not only is the relation of Gadamer's hermeneutical theory to phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger) and to critical theory (Adorno, Horkheimer, Habermas) controverted, but there has also been consideration of the relation of Gadamer's interpretive theory to the more recent modes of interpreting texts and the philosophical tradition that has been developed particularly in France and has been identified as poststructuralist, postmodern, and deconstructionist (Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard among others).

The third wave follows from the first direct meeting and exchange between Gadamer and Derrida in Paris in 1981 under the auspices of the Goethe Institute. The papers from this meeting ("exchange" overstates what actually transpired), which eventually appeared in French, German, and English, elicited much response from the philosophical community.[3] Relevant for situating Gadamer in the landscape of the contemporary philosophical scene, especially in relation to Habermas and Derrida, is the consideration of his views on modernity and the Enlightenment. It is worth noting that Habermas, who criticizes Gadamer as a traditionalist, embraces the Enlightenment project and modernity more closely than Gadamer, who keeps a critical distance.[4] This aspect might seem to place Gadamer in proximity with the postmodernists, but the very definition of his project as an ontology of the universal experience of understanding distinguishes his project from postmodernism and deconstructionism. A specifically American aspect of this third wave was Richard Rorty's misdirected appeal to Gadamer as an existentialist and edifying philosopher in the conclusion of his much discussed *Philosophy and the*

Mirror of Nature (1979) and his consideration of Gadamer in *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982) as a "weak textualist" – this, by way of contrast, to the strong textualism of Derrida and himself. Later (2000) Rorty casts Gadamer as a nominalist whose lead would end the "epistemic wars."[5]

In the wake of Gadamer's death in 2002 came a spate of publications evaluating his work and its impact (the fourth wave – see the extensive bibliography at the end of this volume). The first edition of this Cambridge Companion appeared in that year but had been written and prepared prior to Gadamer's death. Amidst the publications after his death were some voices questioning Gadamer's politics. In this regard see my short biographical chapter that begins this volume (Chapter 1). Darren Walhof's chapter (Chapter 5, new to this second edition) considers the political philosophy inherent in Gadamer's hermeneutics. Other voices have questioned Gadamer's criticisms of nineteenth-century hermeneutics and have reclaimed that tradition. Prominent among these voices are Thomas Seebohm, Kristin Gjesdal, and Michael Forster. Georgia Warnke considers these criticisms in Chapter 6 (new to this second edition).

Gadamer's hermeneutics has had a much broader impact than these significant debates in philosophical circles about truth, interpretive method, tradition, and modernity. "Hermeneutics," resulting largely but not solely from Gadamer's work, became a commonplace part of titles or subtitles especially in literary theory, sociology, and social theory, as well as in theology and biblical commentary. In literary theory, Gadamer's work was particularly invoked in the development of reception and reader-response theory, for example in the work of Hans-Robert Jauss. Gadamer's work importantly assisted social theory in taking the "interpretive turn." In 1979, Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan published *Interpretive Social Science*, which announces this "turn" and makes a case against both naively realistic and positivistic human science. Gadamer has been a frequently invoked figure in the debates about the human sciences and the philosophy of social science.

Though Gadamer is not a religious thinker, his work has found enormous resonance in theology and biblical criticism. This area, to be sure, has a stronger and livelier hermeneutic tradition than other areas of inquiry. In the twentieth century, among others, Rudolf Bultmann, with whom Gadamer studied in Marburg in the 1920s, made hermeneutics a central theme for theology. In the late 1950s, just prior to the publication of *Truth and Method*, Ernst Fuchs and Hans Ebeling published important work on the significance of hermeneutics for theology.[6] The appearance of *Truth and Method* importantly shaped the ensuing and wide-ranging discussion of hermeneutics in religious and theological thought. An example of the practical impact of Gadamer's thought in this area is the publication (December 1999) of a theological study commissioned by the Vatican on the faults of the Roman Catholic Church in the past: *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past.* To establish a theoretical basis for its work, the study asks: "What are the conditions for a correct interpretation of the past from the point of view of historical knowledge?" Its answer relies explicitly and almost entirely on *Truth and Method*.[7] This document provided the theoretical and theological background for Pope John Paul II's pronouncements in 2000 about the faults and sins of the Church, especially with regard to the Jewish people.

Finally, it should be observed that Gadamer's work importantly contributed to the hermeneutic turn in philosophy and the human sciences that goes beyond his own accomplishment. Other philosophers, especially in Europe and more or less independent of Gadamer, have attempted their hand at developing a philosophical hermeneutics. Work in France by Paul Ricoeur, in Italy by Emilio Betti and Gianni Vattimo, and in Germany by Hans Albert, Manfred Frank, and Thomas Seebohm, among others, come to mind. We find, in addition, many scholars in other fields invoking hermeneutics with little or no explicit invocation of the work of Gadamer. This is particularly so in America where an intellectual divide between Anglo-American "analytical" philosophy and so-called Continental thought

has played a decisive role in philosophy. Thomas Kuhn, the historian and philosopher of science, whose book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) has had a such a profound impact on the history and philosophy of science and beyond, came to understand his own efforts as hermeneutical and articulates well the situation of many American intellectuals in this regard:

> What I as a physicist had to discover for myself, most historians learn by example in the course of professional training. Consciously or not, they are all practitioners of the hermeneutic method. In my case, however, the discovery of hermeneutics did more than make history seem consequential. Its most immediate decisive effect was instead on my view of science. . . . The early models of the sort of history that has influenced me and my *historical* colleagues is the product of a post-Kantian European tradition which I and my *philosophical* colleagues continue to find opaque. In my own case, for example, even the term "hermeneutic," to which I resorted briefly above was no part of my vocabulary as recently as five years ago. Increasingly, I suspect that anyone who believes that history may have deep philosophical import will have to learn to bridge the longstanding divide between the Continental and English-language philosophical traditions.[8]

The translation of Gadamer's work into English and his teaching and lecturing presence in North America for over twenty years surely contributed to building this bridge.

GADAMER'S OTHER WORK

As suggested above, Gadamer not only developed a theory of hermeneutics, but he practiced it in his teaching and writing. He spent his scholarly life engaged with philosophical and literary texts. Gadamer understood his own particular strengths to be in the lecture hall or seminar room and in the written essay. As Gadamer himself noted, he wrote only three books in his lifetime, even though a published bibliography of his work is over 300 pages.[9] With the exception of *Plato's*

Dialectical Ethics (his habilitation), *Truth and Method*, and *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, each of his many published books is either a collection of essays, the reworking of a lecture series, or an extended essay published as a small monograph. On the literary side, he wrote primarily about poetry, especially Goethe, Hölderlin, Immerman, George, Rilke, Celan, and Domin. In a small number of essays, he gave attention to painting. On the philosophical side he wrote about classical Greek thinkers such as Democritus, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Aristotle, and Plotinus as well as modern philosophers such as Herder, Schleiermacher, and Dilthey. Most importantly, however, he wrote about Plato, Hegel, and Heidegger. These three thinkers provide for Gadamer more than a number of interesting and important philosophical issues; they are the grindstone on which Gadamer sharpened his own interpretive theory. Gadamer opened the second volume of his collected works, a volume that collects numerous essays that develop or explain aspects of *Truth and Method*, with a 1985 retrospective essay that was written as the introduction to the volume and is entitled "Between Phenomenology and Dialectic – An Attempt at a Self-Critique." As the title suggests, Gadamer locates his hermeneutical theory between phenomenology and dialectic. The phenomenology here is primarily, though not solely, that of Heidegger. The dialectic is the dialectic of Hegel and, even more importantly, the dialectic of Plato.

Gadamer's dissertation and habilitation both concerned Plato. Most of Gadamer's teaching and writing in the 1930s and 1940s was devoted to Greek philosophy. He continued to give classical Greek philosophy much of his attention throughout his scholarly career. Three of the ten volumes of his collected works are dedicated to classical philosophy; this represents as much space in the collection as the three volumes dedicated to hermeneutics. He is particularly interested in the concept of the good in Plato and Aristotle, in the relation of theory and practice, and in the relation of the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle more

generally. He provides a reading of Plato and Aristotle that shows a deep proximity of their thought. Although Gadamer's work on classical philosophy stands in its own right and has had an important impact in this field, his reading of the Greeks is not unrelated to his hermeneutical theory. The Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* (practical reasoning) is central to his development of hermeneutical understanding in *Truth and Method*. In Plato he finds a paradigm of the logic of question and answer that underlies his account of dialogue in the hermeneutic experience. The concluding section of *Truth and Method* relies importantly on Plato, especially the Plato of the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*, for establishing the priority of speech to writing and for the treatment of truth in relation to beauty. Gadamer explicitly, if somewhat ambiguously, ties his own effort in hermeneutics to the Platonic tradition:

> The fact that we have been able to refer several times to Plato, despite the fact that Greek logos philosophy revealed the ground of the hermeneutical experience only in a very fragmentary way, is due to this feature of the Platonic view of beauty, which is like an undercurrent in the history of Aristotelian and scholastic metaphysics, sometimes rising to the surface, as in neoplatonic and Christian mysticism and theological and philosophical spiritualism. It was in this tradition of Platonism that the conceptual vocabulary required for thought about the finiteness of human life was developed. The continuity of this Platonic tradition is attested by the affinity between the Platonic theory of beauty and the idea of a universal hermeneutics. (TM 486–487)

Truth and Method begins importantly with a critique of the subjectification of aesthetic consciousness in Kantian aesthetics and much of subsequent philosophical aesthetics. It concludes with a discussion that relies importantly on Plato and that argues for the proximity of truth and beauty.