

BETWEEN TRADITION AND CRITIQUE: THE GADAMER-HABERMAS DEBATE

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I

With the publication of Hans-Georg Gadamer's Wahrheit und Methode in 1960, and Jurgen Habermas' "Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften" in the Philosophische Rundschau in 1965, German philosophy appeared to have once again entered into the age old debate between mythos and logos, tradition and critique, romanticism and enlightenment. Gadamer, a descendent of Marburg neo-Kantianism and the phenomenologies of Husserl and Heidegger, is usually portrayed as a defender of romanticism and what might be called 'philosophies of reminiscence', given his emphasis on 'legitimate' prejudices and the power of tradition. Habermas, on the other hand, coming out of the neo-Marxian Frankfurt school in the tradition of Herbert Marcuse, is characterized by his emphasis on critical philosophy, the enlightened use of reason, and the critique of ideology (motivated by an interest in emancipation). The stage would seem to be set, then, for a debate that would be exemplary in its radicality and would unearth the deep-seated antinomies between reminiscence and critique in philosophy.

So it seems. However, to characterize the debate between Gadamer and Habermas in these terms is a bit too simplistic; the debate is far more complicated. For instance, Gadamer and Habermas show a great deal of respect for each other's work. Indeed, Gadamer's critique of objectivism and emphasis on hermeneutical consciousness are an important part of Habermas' attempt to develop self-conscious methodologies in the sciences, particularly social sciences.² Gadamer, for his part, has commented on "Habermas' lucid analysis of social-scientific logic" and his working out the epistemological interest of "true sociologists".³ Clearly, Gadamer and Habermas are in accord on some fundamental points; the battlelines cannot simply be drawn along the lines of romanticism vs. enlightenment.

Another factor that complicates this debate is the disparity between Gadamer and Habermas with respect to their goals. Gadamer's interests are primarily philosophical; he is not concerned with the methods of a particular (cultural) science. Habermas' interest, on the other hand, is in developing a critical social science; his thought therefore is often more restricted in its scope and slanted more toward 'practical' aspects. As we will see, this difference concerning goals is a prominent feature of the debate; it tends to cause some confusion, because the debate is often carried out on two different levels.

All of this makes for a complicated and sometimes confusing debate that touches on many important issues concerning truth and method in the cultural and social sciences. The purpose of this essay is to clarify some of these issues and the arguments put forth by Gadamer and Habermas, focusing, for the most part, on how these affect Gadamer's project of philosophical hermeneutics. (We will therefore not be so concerned with analyzing and evaluating Habermas' thought, which goes well beyond the confines of this debate, except as it applies to philosophical hermeneutics.)

To facilitate our analysis of the debate, we will concentrate on three interrelated issues: (1) the question of the relation between truth and method; (2) the relation between authority and reason, i.e., the central issue concerning the place of critique in hermeneutics; and (3) the absolutization of language and the resultant universality of hermeneutics. It is important to realize that this division is somewhat arbitrary; the issues and arguments tend to overlap at a number of points. Nevertheless, focusing on these three issues should help us grasp the real differences that exist between Gadamer and Habermas, and what that entails for philosophical hermeneutics.

II

In examining the foundations of hermeneutical experience in Truth and Method, Gadamer undertakes an analysis of effective-historical consciousness (wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein), which is operative in all understanding. Very briefly, effective-historical consciousness, we are told, has the structure of experience, therefore making it a necessary condition of science (experience of the world precedes scientific analysis of it), not a science

itself (we do not control experiences). Experience, as Hegel has taught us, has the character of a reversal of consciousness, i.e. it is essentially experience of negation, of knowing that one does not know. This not knowing leads to questions; questions are said to come to us, to present themselves to us. There is therefore no method of learning to ask questions; questioning is not some sort of art or techne, as the example of Socrates illustrates. What questioning ultimately involves is openness, openness to the claim to truth of the other, to the 'happening' of tradition. In short, then, at the heart of hermeneutical experience is an "experience of truth that transcends the sphere of the control of scientific method."⁵

Habermas adamantly rejects this disjunction between truth and method. Gadamer, Habermas claims, has made the unwarranted jump from a proper critique of the false objectivistic self-understanding of the cultural sciences, as embodied in historicism, to a suspension of methodological distanciation of the object of inquiry, "which distinguishes a self-reflective understanding from everyday communication."⁶ In placing hermeneutical experience beyond method, then, Gadamer has unnecessarily obliged the positivists (who would evidently take this as valueless subjectivism) and devalued the hermeneutical experience.

In addition, Habermas points out, this opposition between truth and method is unfeasible for sciences of action (e.g. critical social sciences), even if it were feasible in the humanities; "a controlled distanciation (Verfremdung)" is the only way 'pre-scientific' experience (i.e. hermeneutical experience) can rise to a reflective procedure (i.e. method) which insures objectivity. Through method, one can grasp the totality of universal history (one is always in the place of the last historian), which then allows one to orient oneself and society toward future action. Thus, in the case of Habermas, grasping universal history as a field of systematically distorted communication (ideology) implies a truth, the idea of true living, whereby idealized discourse is a way of life.⁹ Truth and method are therefore intimately bound up with one another for Habermas.

A number of things need to be pointed out in reply to this criticism. First of all, from the beginning, Gadamer's stated purpose was to "attempt to understand what the human sciences truly are, beyond their methodological self-consciousness, and what connects them with the totality of our experience of the

world."¹⁰ In other words, Gadamer is attempting to lay bare the 'existential' roots of all methods, the being-in-the-world that underlies all our wanting and doing. This is not to deny the necessity of method in the Geisteswissenschaften or to affirm the mutual exclusiveness of truth and method.¹¹ It is, however, to deny that there is one method for all time that will give us the truth. In a sense, Gadamer is giving us a foundation for explaining why two different methods can be said to have a "grain of truth", so to speak, i.e. a claim to truth, by showing how all methods are grounded in what is "beyond" them, our being-in-the-world.

Secondly, it is surely not Gadamer, but Habermas, who 'devalues' hermeneutic experience by labeling it 'pre-scientific' and 'everyday communication' (in contrast to Gadamer, who is concerned with showing the legitimacy of experience within science). And by what standard of judgment is 'controlled distanciation' of greater value? Will not such controlled alienation lead to alienated understanding, which can have dire consequences in human sciences? Indeed, it would appear that the good for man, what may be called the 'true life', can only be encountered in concrete situations, in experience; as a general idea, the 'true life' would appear to be empty.¹² Methodology, science, can and does guide us in perceiving what we call 'objective' truth, and that 'objective' truth is tied up with the method. Ultimately, however, methodology is undercut by questioning, by openness, by experience, by the hermeneutical experience that founds methodology.

Habermas does not explicitly pursue the criticism concerning truth and method after "Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften", but the issue continues to haunt the debate throughout. Putting aside, then, a final conclusion, we should note the disparity between Gadamer and Habermas with respect to their interests that this first problem illustrates. Gadamer is concerned with what happens behind all methodology, what the 'existential' or experiential foundation of the cultural sciences (indeed, all sciences) is. Habermas, however, starts his endeavors at a 'later' stage, where the subject-object distinction is prevalent and a method for proceeding to study the object is necessary. This disparity, we will see, is important, and should be kept in mind.

III

Perhaps the best known aspect of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is his attempt to give prejudice (Vorurteil) a positive connotation and, in so doing, to 'rehabilitate' authority and tradition.¹³ It is this aspect of his philosophy that could lead one, on a superficial reading, to suppose that Gadamer is some sort of romantic. It comes as no surprise, then, that Habermas criticizes Gadamer's formulations along these lines. These criticisms are important, for they help to illuminate the not always clear place of critique in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.

Sketched briefly, Gadamer's thesis is this: if we realize our own historicity and finitude, we see that we always stand within a tradition, our prejudices determining our being far more than our judgments. The prejudice against prejudices that characterizes the enlightenment blinded it to the fact that prejudices are necessary in order for us to understand at all. From all this it follows that reason, too, is a part of history, dependent upon the situation in which it operates. As for authority, it

is based ultimately, not on the subjection and abdication of reason, but on recognition and knowledge . . . It rests on recognition and hence on an act of reason itself . . . Authority in this sense, properly understood, has nothing to do with blind obedience to command.¹⁴

As Habermas sees it, this claim that authority and knowledge converge, i.e. that authority is based on recognition, means that the legitimation of prejudices is, after reflection, still a matter of authority, because reflection still moves within the facticity of tradition. Recognition does not alter the fact that tradition remains the only ground of the validity of prejudices. This means that tradition cannot be put into question, given the prejudgmental character of understanding; such questioning is made to appear meaningless. One is obliged to¹⁵ refer back to the argument pre-given in socialization.

All of this, however, says Habermas, denies the power of reflection, a power that is proven by reason's ability to reject the claim of tradition. Reflection can go beyond tradition; it makes the prejudices of tradition transparent, whereby they can no longer function as prejudices. A framework based on self-reflection,¹⁶ that goes beyond tradition is therefore necessary. Such a framework is provided by depth

hermeneutics, in which reason, as the principle of communication without force, takes precedence over "the experienced reality of communication distorted by force."¹⁷ Gadamer's framework, according to Habermas, needs to assume that recognition and consensus which confirm authority become customary without force in order to work. The experience of systematically distorted communication by depth hermeneutics shows that assumption to be wrong; depth hermeneutics, unlike philosophical hermeneutics, is therefore,¹⁸ able to differentiate between insight and delusion.

Gadamer vehemently rejects this reading of Truth and Method and Habermas' conception of reflection. Though there is a 'conservative' emphasis in Gadamer on the assimilation of tradition, this seems to have been an overcompensation for philosophers' tendencies to 'deify' themselves through reason; there was never any intent on Gadamer's part to say that understanding is merely assimilation and acknowledgement of the opinions valued in tradition.¹⁹ This sort of understanding of Gadamer ignores his admonishments to be open to the claim to truth of the text, and the thesis that authority is rooted in insight as a hermeneutical process.

The first point Gadamer makes in reply to Habermas centers around the fact that reflection cannot question everything at once. The finitude of existence and the particularity of reflection show that every act of reflection is still an 'extension' of tradition. Gadamer puts it this way:

Reflection on a given preunderstanding brings before me something that otherwise happens behind my back. Something--but not everything [my emphasis]--for what I have called effective-historical consciousness is inescapably more being than consciousness, and being is never fully manifest.²⁰

Reflection, then, is granted a false power when it is abstractly opposed to authority, because it gives the impression that the knowing subject can objectify the whole of tradition and stand apart from it. But we cannot do that; reason and authority stand in a "basically ambivalent relation", reason being manifest in and through history and tradition, and therefore 'dependent' upon them, while at the same time dissolving part of that tradition and rebuilding it. Tradition, on this view, is not a mass of conventions,

but a path on which understanding, powered by reason, "the untiring power of experience", moves, whereby "in the process of being instructed, man is ceaselessly forming a new preunderstanding."²¹

This brings us to Gadamer's second point, which is that reflection does not always dissolve authority or tradition, as Habermas seems to think; tradition may be right. This, it seems, is what Gadamer means when he speaks of 'legitimate' prejudices, and of authority and knowledge converging. Prejudices may be legitimated, authority may be justified, after we go to a text, for instance, openly asking questions. One is constantly engaged in self-reflection and self-awareness, to prevent the hypostatization of tradition into blind ideology, but tradition may still, in the end, be correct. We must, at least, be open to that possibility.²²

This possibility is what ultimately limits Habermas' depth hermeneutics, for depth hermeneutics seems to presuppose that that is not a possibility, and that we only understand when we are unmasking false pretensions and dissolving ideologies. But that is only part of hermeneutics. Depth hermeneutics (critique of ideology) is ultimately a special rather than a general type of hermeneutical reflection, a reflection with an eye toward unmasking ideology.²³

What should be clear from this analysis is that there is a place for critique in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. The key is experience and its 'untiring power', through which we are given reasons for criticizing (or affirming) tradition. Our openness to the claim to truth of the partner in dialogue, which is a necessary part of experience, allows us to either overhaul the prejudices of tradition, or legitimize them. The process is unceasing; one never becomes transparent to oneself nor to others (as depth hermeneutics seems to imply). The hermeneutic experience, then, reigns supreme, in its ability to both criticize and assimilate tradition, rather than merely criticize. This absolute claim of hermeneutics is the final issue in the debate which we must now investigate.

IV

The issue of the absolutization of language and the universality of hermeneutics is closely related to the issue concerning critique in hermeneutics, though the issue now shifts to the ontological status of language.

Habermas rejects the ontologizing of language as the experience of the world, and the subsequent thesis that hermeneutics is a universal aspect of philosophy. His critique of Gadamer along these lines is essentially summarized in the following:

An interpretive [verstehende] sociology that hypostasizes language to the subject of forms of life and of tradition ties itself to the idealist presupposition that linguistically articulated consciousness determines the material practice of life. But the objective framework of social action is not exhausted by the dimension of intersubjectively and symbolically transmitted meaning. The linguistic infrastructure of a society is part of a complex that, however symbolically mediated, is also constituted by the constraints of reality--by constraint of outer nature that enters into procedures for technical mastery and by the constraint of inner nature reflected in the repressive character of social power relations.²⁴

Labor and domination are thus constraints that work 'behind the back' of language and change it, as well as objects of interpretation. For example, changes in modes of production change the linguistic world view; coercion changes language into ideology. Language, labor, and domination (power) thus form, for Habermas, a constantly interacting, tripartite framework that cannot be handled by the natural language philosophy of philosophical hermeneutics. The failure of philosophical hermeneutics can best be seen, Habermas tells us, in relation to science, where hermeneutical reflection is no longer within natural language, but between natural language and monological (i.e., scientific) systems of language, necessitating a hermeneutical process of translation that transcends Gadamer's hermeneutical reflection.²⁵

We should take note at this point of the way this objection about language parallels that objection leveled against Gadamer concerning tradition and reason. If, as Habermas says, language is 'hypostasized', i.e., becomes an object to the knowing subject, hermeneutics gets trapped within the confines of the linguistic tradition, banging up against its walls from the inside, so to speak. Thus the absolutization of language comes under the same critique as tradition; reason is able to break the

bonds of hypostasized language, indicating that there is a framework, based on reason, beyond hermeneutical experience.

These criticisms of Gadamer's absolutization of language, however, miss the point entirely. Gadamer in no way denies the material being of life-practice and so-called 'pre-linguistic' experience (e.g. language of gesture, movement, facial expression, laughter, tears), nor does he claim that linguistic consciousness determines all the material being of life-practice. What he says is that

there is no societal reality, with all its concrete forces, that does not bring itself to representation in a consciousness that is linguistically articulated. Reality does not happen "behind the back" of language.²⁶ . . . reality happens precisely within language.

Language is our mode of being-in-the-world; we know of no other way of orienting ourselves or ordering our experience than through language. What is more, language is "the single word whose virtuality opens up the infinity of discourse, of discourse with others, and of the freedom of speaking oneself, and allowing one to be spoken"; it is a "generative and creative power", a finite Hegelian Geist, as it were.²⁷ Strictly speaking, then, there is no 'reality' beyond language; everything comes to language (contra Habermas' interpretation of Gadamer, which is that everything is in language). Linguistic experience of the world is then precisely that, experience of the world, not language, and a world without walls to be banged into, but a world of expanding horizons that are ever open to experience and fusion with the horizons of others.²⁸

Thus we see that language, like traditions (indeed, the two concepts tend to merge for Gadamer), is a medium that frees man to understand and experience the world, and to think (thinking merely being the infinite dialogue with oneself).

V

The impasse between Gadamer and Habermas would seem to be due primarily to their different approaches to the problems in the cultural and social sciences. These two approaches betray two fundamentally different ontological frameworks. Habermas is firmly committed

to the emphasis of 19th century German philosophy, in the tradition of Hegel and Marx, on the knowing subject and its active appropriation of knowledge. Thus, in his criticisms of Gadamer, Habermas stresses 'controlled alienation' (a method which the subject uses to gain knowledge about the world), normative standards (the true or just life, imposed by the subject to insure that he is acknowledged by others), critique of ideology (whereby the subject freed himself from oppression), and the characterization of language in instrumentalist terms (languages as a tool used by the subject to gain recognition, or to deny other recognition [ideology]).

Gadamer's task, however, burrows under the methodological level of understanding by examining the existential/experiential roots of all understanding, our being-in-the-world that is the basis for understanding. The ultimate autonomy of the knowing subject is put into question by Gadamer's stress on the finitude and historicity of human being. The key to Gadamer's philosophy is experience; normative standards must be rooted in concrete experience to avoid being empty abstractions of an autonomous will; critique is based on the untiring power of experience and our openness to it, whereby questions are given to us (we are given reason to criticize) and science (method) is born. Language, 'the record of finitude', is the basis for these experiences of the world, for our understanding, and for our thinking; it is our mode of being-in-the-world, that to which everything comes to be for us. It is the medium whereby we are opened up to experience and can expand our horizons of understanding.

Thus, despite some of the similarities that exist between Gadamer and Habermas,²⁹ they remain essentially unlike. Habermas, on the one hand, retains the knowing subject of the idealist tradition who actively appropriates the world and judges it, freeing himself from coercion through the power of reason. Gadamer, on the other hand, grants us the active, knowing subject, but then grounds him in language, tradition and experience, and his openness to experience, whereby he is receptive to the claim to truth of tradition and the partner in dialogue. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics stands or falls on this Heideggerian idea of openness, of 'letting be'. He is ultimately successful in this debate because this idea allows him to account for both our sense of autonomy in

criticizing tradition and our experience of our finitude.

NOTES

¹Such is Paul Ricoeur's view. Cf. "Ethics and Culture: Habermas and Gadamer in Dialogue," Philosophy Today, vol. XVIII, pp. 155-56.

²Habermas' positive statements about Gadamer and his hermeneutics are numerous. Cf. Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), pp. 252-67, 275 (hereafter LSW); pp. 252-90 of Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften is translated as "A Review of Gadamer's Truth and Method" in Understanding and Social Inquiry, ed. Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas A. McCarthy (South Bend: Notre Dame, 1977), pp. 335-63 (hereafter USI). Also Cf., "Der Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik" in Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971), pp. 121-28; part II of this essay (pp. 134-49) is translated as "On Systematically Distorted Communication," Inquiry vol. 13 (1970), pp. 207-16, while Part III (pp. 151-58) is translated by Martha Matesich as part of "Summation and Response," Continuum, vol. 8 (1970), pp. 124-28.

³"Rhetorik, Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik: Metakritische Erörterungen zu (Wahrheit und Methode)" in Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik, p. 80. Translated and edited by G. B. Hers and R. E. Palmer as "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutics" in Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics, ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California, 1976), p. 40.

⁴Truth and Method (New York: Seabury, 1975), pp. 305ff.

⁵Ibid., p. xii.

⁶LSW, p. 281; USI, pp. 355-56.

⁷LSW., p. 280; USI., p. 355.

⁸LSW., pp. 273-78; USI., pp. 350-53.

⁹"Universalitätsanspruch," pp. 154-55; "Summation," p. 126. Note that universal history is grasped in this way (as ideology) because the knowledge-constitutive interest of critical social science is emancipation. Cf. Knowledge and Human Interests, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), pp. 214-30 and passim.

¹⁰Truth and Method, p. xiii (my emphasis).

¹¹Ibid., p. xvii. Cf. "Rhetorik," p. 66; "Scope and Function," p. 26.

¹²Gadamer, "Replik" in Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik, pp. 315-16. Cf. "Rhetorik", p. 66; "Scope and Function," p. 27.

¹³The German word used by Gadamer for tradition is uberlieferung, the nominative of uberliefern, which means to deliver up, hand down, pass on, transmit; the nominative thus carries with it a sense of activity. Gadamer, following Heidegger, uses this word in distinction from Tradition which carries with it more static, ideological connotations. Habermas, perhaps showing his bias, tends to use the two German terms interchangeably.

¹⁴Truth and Method, p. 248.

¹⁵LSW., p. 284; USI., p. 358, and "Universalitätsanspruch," p. 152; "Summation", pp. 124-25.

¹⁶LSW., pp. 284-85; USI., p. 358.

¹⁷"Universalitätsanspruch," p. 153; "Summation", p. 125. Depth hermeneutics is the name given by Habermas to the self-reflective technique of Freudian psychoanalysis suitably reworked for application in the social sciences. Cf. Knowledge and Human Interests, pp. 214-30: "Universalitätsanspruch," pp. 133-50; "Systematically Distorted," passim.

¹⁸"Universalitätsanspruch," pp. 156-57; "Summation," pp. 127-28.

¹⁹Truth and Method, p. xxv. It should be noted here, in all fairness to Habermas, that Gadamer's discussion of prejudice, authority and reason is far from clear in its formulation as to how reason and critique can be coherently understood as converging with authority, and it has only become clearer as Gadamer has responded to his critics.

²⁰"Rhetorik," p. 78; "Scope and Function," p. 38.

²¹"Rhetorik," p. 78, Cf. "Rhetorik," p. 68; "Scope and Function," p. 38, Cf. p. 28.

²²"Rhetorik," pp. 71, 73-74; "Scope and Function," pp. 31, 33-34.

²³"Rhetorik," pp. 71-72, 80-82; "Scope and Function," pp. 31-32, 40-42. We should note that, by Habermas' account, tradition could, theoretically, be correct, if it conformed to the subjectively imposed norm of ideal discourse (i.e. communication without force).

²⁴LSW, p. 289; USI, p. 361.

²⁵"Universalitätsanspruch," pp. 129-30.

²⁶"Rhetorik," p. 76; "Scope and Function," p. 35.

²⁷"To What Extent Does Language Preform Thought?," Supplement II in Truth and Method, p. 498.

²⁸Habermas' critique of Gadamer's language philosophy seems more appropriately applied to Wittgenstein, whose unhistorical, undialectical conception of language games suggests a hypostasization of language games into closed off monads. Ironically, Habermas undertook an extensive criticism of Wittgenstein, comparing him unfavorably with Gadamer. Cf. LSW, pp. 252ff; USI, pp. 335ff.

²⁹The knowledge-constitutive interests unfolded in Knowledge and Human Interests are a parallel conception to Gadamer's prejudices, insofar as they are operative in all understanding. These interests therefore can be seen as Haberman's attempt to uncover the 'existential' roots behind methodology.