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THE SCIENCE OF PHILOLOGY AND THE DISCIPLINE OF HERMENEUTICS: GADAMER'S UNDERSTANDING

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It is notable that nowhere in his major work on hermeneutics, *Wahrheit und Methode*, does Gadamer consider the question of knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) or the conditions and/or limits of knowing (*Erkennen*). Gadamer is not concerned with knowledge but with understanding (*Verstehen*). He only discusses knowledge in the context of his critique of neo-Kantian *Erkenntnistheorie*, epistemology. Gadamer draws a direct line from neo-Kantian *Erkenntnistheorie* of the late 19th and early 20th century to the epistemology of positivism in the early and middle 20th century, the positivism of Carnap and Hempel, among others. In the context of the historical and social sciences Gadamer aligns his hermeneutics with the *Verstehenssoziologie* of Weber that has its roots in Dilthey and which contrasts with the *Erklärenswissenschaften* of the Neo-Kantians and positivists. At the same time, Gadamer is critical of Dilthey for insufficiently breaking with the Neo-Kantian epistemology. As we know quite well, Gadamer relies importantly on the account of *Verstehen* in the early Heidegger, the Heidegger of *Sein und Zeit*.

For Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit* the understanding (*Verstehen*) may provide an experience of originary truth. This “originary” (*ursprünglichen*) truth is prior to and more fundamental than the truth of assertion. The truth of assertion is secondary and derivative (*abkünftig*). Heidegger writes in *Sein und Zeit* that *Erklären* (explanation) is a “*existential Derivat*”, that is, an “existential derivative.”¹ *Sein und Zeit* is a phenomenological work and its descriptive account of *Verstehen* is importantly

dependent on the work of Husserl and Dilthey. Though both Heidegger and Gadamer are highly critical of Husserlian phenomenology, they both consider their treatment of *Verstehen* to be phenomenological.

Thus Gadamer insists repeatedly that he is not attempting to lay out how we ought to understand something—a text, another person, an object—but that he merely attempts to describe how we do understand something. In the first wave of reviews of *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960) came a set that criticized Gadamer’s hermeneutics for not making adequate sense of the possibility of the correctness or falsity of interpretations.

In the “Forward to the second edition” (1965) Gadamer responds to this criticism by explicitly calling his work “phenomenological”—something that he had not done in the first edition. And, more importantly, he writes the oft-cited sentence:

My real concern was and is philosophic; not what we do or ought to do,
but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing.²

Similarly, in a letter to Betti which Gadamer cites in the essay “Hermeneutik und Historismus” (from the same year, 1965) Gadamer writes “Fundamentally I am not proposing a method; I am describing what is the case.” He goes on: “That it is as I describe it cannot, I think, be seriously questioned.” (TM 512; GW 2, 394)

Gadamer’s description of what happens in interpretation, in experience which is hermeneutical, includes the important role of tradition and prejudice (*Vorurteil*). In the same essay (and from the same letter) Gadamer writes that

Even a master of the historical method is not able to keep himself entirely free from the prejudices of his time, his social environment, and his national situation, etc. Is this a failing? And even if it were, I regard it as a

necessary philosophical task to consider why this failure always occurs wherever anything is achieved. In other words, I consider the only scientific thing is to recognize what is, instead of starting from what ought to be or could be. (TM 512; GW II, 394)

Gadamer's "prejudice" (*Vorurteil*) is Heidegger's "pre-understanding" (*Vor-verstehen*) which he treats as *Vorgriff*, *Vorsicht*, and *Vorhaben* (fore-conception, foresight, and fore-having). (SZ §32).

Gadamer's position in relation to prejudice and tradition is that we should not consider the ineluctability of prejudice and tradition as a lack or deficiency. Rather he argues that we should see them as enabling insight and truth. From the perspective of philology and the dominant modes of understanding in the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) this endorsement of prejudice might appear to be an endorsement of subjectivism and the rejection of the scientific attitude which calls for objectivity. Of course, Gadamer, well-trained in philology and conversant with the methodological discussions in the philosophy of science, understands how outlandish his view is to many. Yet Gadamer refuses to accept the call to, or the claims for, objectivity (*Objektivität*). Rather than call for a methodological objectivity (*Objektivität*) in the interpretation of a text, he calls for a discipline of *Sachlichkeit*.³ Knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) concerns the object (*Objekt*); understanding concerns the matter at hand (*Sache*). The object is considered scientifically and methodologically. We find ourselves involved with the matter at hand and approach it through a discipline. This discipline, he writes in concluding *Truth and Method*, guarantees truth: "What the tool of method does not

achieve must—and really can—be achieved by a discipline of questioning and inquiring, a discipline that guarantees truth.”(TM 491; GW I, 494)

Gadamer conceives his project as overcoming the subjectivism that is present in modern scientific thought. In this he is like Heidegger and follows Heidegger. It may seem paradoxical that the objectivism of modern scientific thought be considered a form of subjectivism. Here, to speak in a kind of shorthand, Heidegger and Gadamer follow Husserl who shows us how the representationalism of modern thought sees the human subject as capable of knowing only its own ideas, the contents of its consciousness. This representationalism culminates in the subjective idealism of Kant for whom we cannot know things in themselves but only appearances as we represent them to ourselves. This latter claim was an embarrassment to the neo-Kantians but it is fundamental to the Kantian position. Another somewhat more contemporary expression of this subjectivism is that of Sartrean existentialism which Heidegger criticizes in his *Letter on Humanism*. Gadamer, like Heidegger, wishes to escape the bad dialectic of objectivism and subjectivism—hence the abandonment of the talk of subjects and objects, of subjectivity and objectivity.

For the critics of Gadamerian hermeneutics it seems, at best, paradoxical for Gadamer to embrace prejudice and tradition and to claim *Sachlichkeit* and truth. The key to undoing this paradox on Gadamerian grounds is the recognition of the centrality of the *Sache*, the matter at hand—whatever it is that is at stake—and the affirmation of a kind of perspectivism of a Husserlian phenomenological sort. Though any adequate account of a text requires an account of the author, the reader, and the mode of speech—its structure, style, form of presentation, linguistic usage, and so on, what provides the most significant

aspect of any text (or any speech, for that matter) for Gadamer (as it is for Plato) is the text's claim to truth. Any speech makes claims about something and makes claims on the listener or reader in regard to that something, the *Sache*. The truth claim is not merely theoretical, it is also practical. Accordingly, Gadamer's *Sache* is not Carnap's *Sachverhalt*—state of affairs—in which the question merely concerns the facts of the matter. Hence the exemplary texts for Gadamer in this regard are legal and religious.

In addition to keeping the *Sache* at the center of the account of the hermeneutical experience, Gadamer embraces a kind of perspectivism. Any account of a matter inevitably addresses the matter from a particular point of view, from a certain perspective, from a determinate situation. Interpretations are situated. It is foolish to think we can assume the “view from nowhere” as Tom Nagel puts it which is, equivalently, a God's eye point of view. This perspectivism, however, is not the perspectivism of Nietzsche or radical subjectivism. It is rather the perspectivism of Husserlian phenomenology. In *Wahrheit und Methode* Gadamer explicitly appeals to Husserl's account of the experience of a thing. This account relies on the concept of the profiles (*Abschattungen*) that the thing presents as we examine it.

Three things in this account are extremely important. Though we can never overcome perspective, we can vary our perspective, i.e., we can take several perspectives, though not at the same time. Secondly, though you and I cannot assume the same perspective at any given time, I can move out of the way and you can take my position. That is, in a certain sense, perspective can be shared. In *Wahrheit und Methode* Gadamer writes: “The multiplicity of these worldviews does not involve any relativization of the ‘world.’ Rather, what the world is, is not different from the views in

which it presents itself. ... Seen phenomenologically, the ‘thing-in-itself’ is, as Husserl has shown, nothing but the continuity with which the various perceptual perspectives on objects (*perspektivischen Abschattungen*) shade into one another.” (TM 447; GW 1, 451) Gadamer at this important juncture in his argument cites *Ideen I*, §41.

Important to his argument here is the rejection of the distinction of scheme/content or world and worldview. Gadamer is importantly in agreement with Donald Davidson’s critique of this distinction. Hence, the third thing important to this perspectivism, is the necessary assumption that we share the same world. For us to fruitfully discuss something, we have to have a prior agreement that we are talking about the same thing. Of course, this is not always the case, and in discussion we can sometimes discover that this is the point of disagreement—that we are not talking about the same thing at all.

At this very point in *Wahrheit und Methode* Gadamer remarks that the Husserlian account of perception holds as well for linguistic matters. He writes: “In the same way as with perception we can speak of the ‘linguistic shadings’ that the world undergoes in different language-worlds.” (TM 448; GW 1, 451-452) Gadamer agrees with Davidson, who writes: “The argument against conceptual relativism shows rather that language is not a screen or filter through which our knowledge of the world must pass.”⁴ In his essay, “Text and Interpretation,” Gadamer asks the question as to whether language is a bridge or a barrier—*Brücke oder Schranke*.⁵ His answer, of course, is that language is a bridge, not a barrier. It enables us to understand and to converse with others about our shared world. He writes in *Wahrheit und Methode*: “...what really opens up the whole of our

world orientation is language. ... In language the reality beyond every individual consciousness becomes visible.”(TM 449; GW 1, 453)

Thus Gadamer argues that the language-bound character of our understanding, does not lead to relativism. We can learn more than one language, for example. Also languages are not fixed and static. They change and develop. For this change and development, human experiences of the world and the encounter with other languages are decisive. Although he explicitly rejects relativism, he does make the much-noted assertion that “Being that can be understood is language.” (TM 474) [*Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache*. (GW 1, 478)] This has led to a charge related to the relativism charge, the charge of lingualism, or linguistic idealism. Without the qualifier in the sentence, the proposition reads simply: Being is language [*Sein ist Sprache*]. In response to this criticism, Gadamer does three things. First, he points to the qualifier “that can be understood” and says that all the statement means is that understanding is linguistic. We understand in language through concepts. It does not mean that being as such is linguistic. He reiterates this many times in his writings after the publication of *Wahrheit und Methode*. In a late interview with Jean Grondin, who asks somewhat vaguely whether the universe of language is “without borders” [*grenzenlos*], Gadamer responds:

“No, no, I never meant and also have never said that everything is language. Being that can be understood is language. In this is hidden a limitation. So what cannot be understood can become an infinite task, the task of finding the word that at least comes near to this ‘thing,’—*Sache*.⁶

In an implicit rejection of a concept of language that is at work in structuralism and much of post-structuralism, Gadamer writes in a late essay that “language intends the other person and the other thing, and not itself.”⁷ This can be taken to reject the structuralist approach to language which sees language as closed system of relations and the word as a function within this web of relations. However much Derrida is a critic of structuralism, he carries forward this understanding of language and the text when he claims that there is nothing outside the text and when he dismisses any concern for truth.⁸ Thus, secondly, Gadamer insists on the intentionality of language, that it is about something and not merely about itself. However enigmatic his treatment of the theme may be, he insists, as we have seen, that in language truth is always at stake.⁹

Thirdly, and in close relation to these first two responses to the charge of linguistic idealism, he acknowledges what he calls the pre-linguistic. In his later writings he likes to refer to the experience of a child first coming to speak. In an essay from 1985, “The Boundaries of Language,” [“*Die Grenzen der Sprache*”] he writes about the “pre-linguistic” (*das Vorsprachliche*), the “co-linguistic” (*das Nebensprachliche*), and the “trans-linguistic” (*das Übersprachliche*).¹⁰ When, in the interview I just mentioned, Jean Grondin presses Gadamer about this with the question as to whether language has boundaries, Gadamer acknowledges that there is “nonlinguistic understanding” (*nichtsprachliches Verstehen*). Grondin asks whether he, Gadamer, would call such nonlinguistic understanding linguistic or an aspect of linguisticity (*Sprachlichkeit*). And Gadamer replies, “But yes.” (“*Aber ja.*”) And he goes on to say that “language in words is only a special concretion of linguisticity.”¹¹ Gestures, laughter, dance, ritual, and non-verbal art are all important instances of non-verbal understanding for Gadamer.

This may be only a terminological matter, but Gadamer does seem to stretch language too far when he asserts that non-verbal understanding is a form of linguisticity (*Sprachlichkeit*). The non-linguistic is, on this account, a form of language. He thereby counts linguisticity (*Sprachlichkeit*) and understanding (*Verstehen*) as equivalent. By definition any understanding is linguistic, even the nonlinguistic. Gadamer's example of the child learning to speak reminds one of the work of Merleau-Ponty. We might recall that Merleau-Ponty's first professorship was a chair in child psychology. Much of his work, closely related to the work of Husserl in then unpublished manuscripts, develops these themes of the pre-linguistic and pre-conceptual in a depth that Gadamer does not provide.

A related complaint and objection to Gadamerian hermeneutics is that it does not provide an account of the correctness or incorrectness of interpretation. The relativism that many see in Gadamer's hermeneutics seems to lead us to a hermeneutics of "anything goes." Indeed, there is little discussion of correctness in Gadamer. If we look at the Heideggerian context of Gadamer's account of truth and interpretation, we see that "correctness" (*Richtigkeit*) is a matter of propositions (*Aussagen*), the secondary and derivative sort of truth. In the very word "derivative" is the suggestion that a full phenomenological account of the experience of truth would show how, at least in principle, the truth might be derived. Of course, it would not be a 'logical' derivation since it is not a derivation from propositions but from experience. Heidegger, however, never pursues this. He only gestures in this direction. Gadamer follows Heidegger in this regard. But, unlike Heidegger, Gadamer does explicitly provide a criterion for the correctness of interpretation. Many readers of *Wahrheit und Methode* seemed to have

missed this. The index is no help; “correctness” [*Richtigkeit*] is not to be found in either index, the English or the German.

Yet Gadamer explicitly states that every interpretation claims ‘correctness.’ (TM 397; GW 1, 401) The criterion for the correctness of an interpretation is the disappearance (*das Verschwinden*) of the interpretation in the face of the text. The “correct” interpretation takes us back to the text of which it is an interpretation. Put in less textual terms, in the hermeneutic experience the “correct” speech about something, reveals something about the thing. As we have noted, language is other-directed. The focus of the good speech or interpretation is not about itself but about the thing or what is being interpreted. As I have discussed in other contexts, fundamental to the task or practice of interpretation are the qualities of humility and charity.¹² In addition, we might say, as I have already suggested, that Gadamerian hermeneutics require “*Sachlichkeit*.” This marker of “correctness”—the disappearance of the interpretation and the revelation of the thing interpreted—provides no clear external criterion of the correctness of an interpretation.

So one might ask how this principle of disappearance provides the basis for the derivation of those practices of interpretation, i.e., the discipline of hermeneutics, that will satisfy the claim to correctness (*das Anspruch auf Richtigkeit*) which Gadamer asserts is an aspect of every interpretation. Are there not a set of well-established practices that we expect interpreters of texts to engage in? Cannot these practices be expressed through rules (in the sense of a guideline) or heuristics?

Let me raise this question in another way. Gadamer often acknowledged that any interpretation of a text would have to adhere to good philological practice. He liked to point out that he too was philologist. He had been trained in philology. One can look to his interpretations of Greek philosophy, especially Plato, or to his interpretations of German poetry for examples of Gadamer's interpretive practice. Is there any principled reason within Gadamer's phenomenological hermeneutics why it would be inappropriate to attempt to provide a phenomenological account of such practices. Could one develop a richer phenomenological account of the experience of "correctness"? Does this return us to a phenomenological account of "method"?

Thomas Seebohm has attempted to do this very thing in his recent book, Hermeneutics: Method and Methodology.¹³ Seebohm shares with Gadamer and 19th century hermeneutics (Schleiermacher, Boeckh, and Dilthey for example) the so-called first canon that states that any text and any part of a text be understood in context—a context that is indefinitely expandable. According to this first canon, the reading of a text is a process of going back and forth between the whole and part, i.e., between each part of the text and the whole of the text as well as between text and context. We can refer to this first canon as the hermeneutical circle. This circle is an open and indefinite one. It can be expanded but not closed. Here Seebohm and Gadamer agree.

Unlike Gadamer, however, Seebohm defends his version of the second canon for which the distinction of meaning and application is important, while Gadamer importantly challenges this distinction. Seebohm acknowledges that there is no simple severance of meaning and application. One cannot render a meaning with no regard for how it might be applied. But Seebohm suggests a specific kind of *Sachlichkeit* that we

do not find Gadamer acknowledging. Consider the difference between the two following propositions:

- 1) to understand is to apply; and
- 2) to understand, consider how it would be applied.

The latter is the case of the scholar for whom there is no personal stake in the meaning of the text. Gadamer seems to disallow this case. The example that Seebohm gives is the example of a contemporary legal scholar of Roman law. The scholar does not live in a society which follows Roman law; there is nothing at stake immediately for the scholar in his study of Roman law. Now one could argue that, since our legal systems presumably have some relation to Roman law, we all have something at stake in the study of Roman law, if not immediately then indirectly. Perhaps a better example might be the study of the law of Mayan culture--so far as we know it.

The Gadamerian would appeal to our common world and would make the case that the studies of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, the humanities and the social sciences, only are meaningful inasmuch as they illuminate our common humanity. The practices of other cultures in time and place (and hence also ancient cultures) show us possibilities that we might, in some sense, make our own. Yes, but notice how much this is a matter of possibility written in the subjunctive. It is importantly not like a judge reading the law in a case before him or the Christian reading her Bible. These last two examples are the ones that Gadamer repeatedly points to when he makes the case that all understanding is an application.

But there is a larger question here. Can one develop a phenomenology of practices, that is, of method without falling into the methodologism that Gadamer decries? Another way to ask this question, is whether Gadamer consistently provides us with a too narrowly and simply defined set of options: either methodologism or no talk of method. Under methodologism he lumps together Cartesianism, Neo-Kantianism, 19th century philology, and positivism. Rhetorically Gadamer often seems to offer only a simple alternative: machine-like interpretation that follows an algorithmic method or interpretation that is not methodological. Did Gadamer get too much caught up in his own rhetoric against the positivists, that he neglected to consider the conditions of the possibility of his own philological practice beyond the single criterion of disappearance?

Following Gadamer, we may wish to avoid methodologism, but we may also wish to explore further the concept of ‘discipline’ that Gadamer appeals to in the provocative last line of *Wahrheit und Methode*: “what the tool of method does not achieve must—and really can—be achieved by a discipline of questioning and inquiring, a discipline that guarantees truth.” (TM 491; GW 1, 494) Such a discipline is constituted by well established practices which call for critical reflection and elucidation.

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1957), p. 143. Hereafter I will cite this text as “SZ.”

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1999), p. xxviii. For the German see *Gesammelte Werke 2* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), p. 438: Mein eigentlicher Anspruch aber war

and ist ein philosophischer: Nicht, was wir tun, nicht, was wir tun sollten, sondern was über unser Wollen und Tun hinaus mit uns geschieht, steht in Frage.

I will cite the English translation in the text as “TM” and the German as “GW”.

³ This is difficult to translate into English because the standard translation of *Sachlichkeit* is “objectivity,” and this loses the distinction between “*Objektivität*” and “*Sachlichkeit*.” Weinsheimer and Marshall render *Sachlichkeit* as “factualness.” *Sachlichkeit* is paired with *Sache*, just as ‘objectivity’ (*Objektivität*) is with ‘object’ (*Objekt*). What any interpretation is always about, for Gadamer, is the ‘*Sache*,’—the matter at hand, whatever is at stake in the conversation or text. For Gadamer, the word has philosophical roots both in Husserl (*die Sache selbst*) and Hegel.

⁴ Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. xviii.

⁵ “Text and Interpretation,” *The Gadamer Reader*, edited and translated by Richard E. Palmer (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), p. 164; for the German, see GW 2, 336.

⁶ “A Look Back over the Collected Works and Their Effective History,” [An Interview with Jean Grondin], *The Gadamer Reader*, p. 417. This interview was first published in German in *Gadamers Lesebuch*, edited by Jean Grondin, p 286.

⁷ "Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language," Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer's Hermeneutics, ed. Lawrence Schmidt (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2000), p. 44; GW 8, 432.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, translated by Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 158.

⁹ "The Experience of Truth for Gadamer and Heidegger: Taking Time and Sudden Lightning" Hermeneutics and Truth, ed. Brice Wachterhauser (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1994). pp. 47-67.

¹⁰ "The Boundaries of Language," Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer's Hermeneutics, edited and translated by Lawrence K. Schmidt (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2000), pp. 9-17; for the German, see GW 8, 350-361.

¹¹ Gadamer Reader, p.420; Gadamers Lesebuch, p. 289: "*Wortsprache ist doch jeweils nur eine besondere Konkretion von Sprachlichkeit.*"

¹² Robert Dostal, "Philosophical Discourse and the Ethics of Hermeneutics," Festivals of Interpretation, edited by Kathleen Wright (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), pp. 63-88; see also, my "The World Never Lost: The Hermeneutics of Trust," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 47 (1987), pp. 413-434.

¹³ Thomas Seebohm, Hermeneutics: Method and Methodology (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2004).