HANS-GEORG GADAMER

Nicholas H. Smith

Hans-Georg Gadamer (b.1900) was raised in Breslau, Silesia, then on the prosperous eastern fringe of the German Empire. His father was an accomplished professor of pharmaceutical chemistry, and while Hans-Georg would also go on to lead the life of learning, from an early age his passion was for the 'human' rather than the 'natural' sciences. In 1919 Gadamer went to Marburg University to study philosophy and philology. After completing his doctorate on Plato's concept of desire, in 1923 he went to study under Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger at the University of Freiburg. Gadamer was spellbound by Heidegger and continued to work with him after Heidegger's move to Marburg later that year. When Heidegger returned to Freiburg in 1927, Gadamer was just completing his *Habilitationshrift,* a phenomenological reading of Plato eventually published as *Plato's Dialectical Ethics* (1931). Gadamer was caught off guard by Hitler's rise to power, but unlike his Jewish friends and colleagues, such as Karl L✱with, he was able to adapt to the new regime and would even prosper under it professionally. In January 1939 Gadamer was appointed professor of philosophy at the University of Leipzig, where he remained until his resignation in 1947, soon to be succeeded by the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch. After a brief stay in Frankfurt, in 1949 Gadamer took up the chair vacated by Karl Jaspers at Heidelberg, a position he would occupy until his retirement twenty years later. Although Gadamer wrote continuously throughout his career, it was not until 1960, with the publication of his magnum opus *Truth and Method*, that he made a decisive contribution to the broad tradition of critical theory. In this work, Gadamer outlined the essential features of what he called 'philosophical hermeneutics'. Gadamer has also written many essays (most of them transcriptions of

lectures) in which he draws out the implications of his hermeneutics for philosophical ethics, literary criticism, religion, and public affairs.

PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

Gadamer's central idea is indicated obliquely in the title of his major work. There is a standing tendency in modern thought, Gadamer believes, to construe truth in terms of objectivity, where objectivity is secured by adopting the correct scientific method. The success of modern physics, chemistry, biology and so forth suggests that these sciences have indeed hit upon the right method for ascertaining the truths of nature. As Gadamer observes, the modern natural sciences now enjoy an 'unassailable and anonymous authority'.[1] According to one outlook – often referred to as 'naturalism' – the general method employed in modern natural science is capable of telling us all there is to know about reality. But according to another – the dominant one in Germany during the time of Gadamer's training – knowledge of the human world must take a different path. For Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), whose formulation of this view was particularly influential, this is because the human sciences succeed by reaching an *understanding* of their object domain. Since the method of physics, chemistry and so forth is geared towards causal explanation rather than understanding, it is mistaken to hold that the natural sciences provide a model for all knowledge. Naturalism is mistaken not because the human sciences do not *themselves* properly aspire to objectivity. Dilthey's point is rather that understanding and interpretation is a science in its own right, a form of objective enquiry with its own legitimate rules and procedures.

The name given to the science of interpretation is hermeneutics. Gadamer agrees with Dilthey that the human sciences are essentially concerned with understanding, or the

interpretation of meanings, on account of which they have a different structure to the natural sciences. However, in Gadamer's view Dilthey's critique of naturalism was insufficiently radical. This is because Dilthey, indeed the whole tradition of hermeneutic theory going back to Schleiermacher (1768-1834), still saw the problem of the *truth* of hermeneutics as equivalent to the problem of the objectivity of the hermeneutic *method*. The limitations of this epistemologically centred approach, Gadamer believes, were first brought out by Heidegger. Heidegger convinced Gadamer that hermeneutics is much more than a method of knowing; in its original structure, understanding is a feature of *Existenz* or 'being-in-the-world'. Being-in-the-world is essentially characterised by a pre-theoretical, pre-reflective form of engaged understanding, and it is this, rather than any reflexive 'interpretative method' or 'science' of interpretation, that provides the point of departure of Gadamer's philosophical or 'ontological' hermeneutics.

Philosophical hermeneutics is an important task for our times, Gadamer thinks, because the link between truth and method insisted upon by modern epistemology tends to bury, distort or truncate the *experience* of understanding. To the extent to which we are under the sway of this epistemology, we need to *recover* the experience through philosophical re-articulation. Gadamer identifies two cases where the need for such retrieval is most palpable: the encounter with art and the encounter with history.

AESTHETIC CONSCIOUSNESS

How does modern epistemology give rise to a truncated model of the experience of art? Gadamer's answer to this question is long and complex, but his account hinges on the emergence of the idea of the 'aesthetic'. It is a commonplace, Gadamer observes, to encounter a work of art as if it were the locus of a distinct kind of value; namely, 'aesthetic' value. The aesthetic value of an artwork is the worth it possesses simply *as* an artwork; a worth that is

distinct, say, from whatever practical utility or moral merit the work may have. Now Gadamer observes that this way of thinking about art is significantly motivated by developments in epistemology that can be traced back to Kant. In his critical philosophy, Kant sought to determine the basis of the validity of modern science and morality. This could only be achieved, in Kant's view, by carefully differentiating the realm of application of scientific concepts and principles from that of moral concepts and principles. And just as science and morality had to be kept distinct in order to secure their validity, so art had to be allocated its own sphere of value. The legitimacy of aesthetic judgements, according to Kant, was neither the kind of validity that scientific claims enjoyed – works of art, unlike propositions and theories, were not conveyors of truth -- nor was it like the legitimacy of a moral demand, which is unconditionally and universally binding. Rather, the validity of an aesthetic judgement had its basis in the capacity of beautiful objects to elicit a pleasurable but disinterested feeling – an 'aesthetic pleasure' -- in the subject of the judgement, which Kant attributed to the free interplay of the human mental faculties. Thus, whereas the basis of the validity of science and morality was objective, 'aesthetic' validity had a merely subjective source.

But in Gadamer's view, the 'subjectivisation' of art that results from considering works of art as the locus of a distinct aesthetic value is untrue to the phenomenology of art. Or better, it reflects an alienated and impoverished form in which works of art 'appear'. For it blinds us to a potential that is in fact inherent in all great works of art: their capacity to *reveal*. Instead of distancing ourselves from an artwork and assessing its 'aesthetic merit', we can open ourselves to the world the artwork discloses, and in doing so, have our own experienceable world transformed. Gadamer uses the term '*Erfahrung*' to designate this kind of self-transformative experience, an experience he contrasts with the subjectivistically foreshortened '*Erlebnis*' experience of aesthetic consciousness. In Gadamer's view, we can

only make sense of *Erfahrung* experience if we construe it as a form of understanding, and for this reason 'aesthetics has to be absorbed into hermeneutics'.[2]

In Gadamer's view, the absorption of aesthetics into hermeneutics forces us to rethink the very nature of the artwork. Under the influence of modern epistemology, we are accustomed to thinking of an artwork as a created object that confronts a subject, a subject whose experience of the object is contained in his or her consciousness. On this account, to the extent to which we are able to say that the work has a meaning, it must be something fixed by a 'state of mind'. For Gadamer, however, consciousness cannot be the locus of the meaning; be it that of the artist / author or the spectator / reader. For just as, when we are at play, we are in a sense taken over by the game – and so constituted by something that, so to speak, has a life of its own – so the work of art exceeds the contents of any particular consciousness: it has an existence or 'mode of being' that goes beyond the realm of mental representations. Furthermore, just as play is a natural, rudimentary form of self-presentation, so art essentially has the character of 'being addressed': an artwork exists inherently, if more or less directly, 'for' someone. The proximity between play and art suggests to Gadamer that the work of art has the ontology of an *event*: 'the event of being that occurs in presentation'.[3] In Gadamer's view, it is fundamentally mistaken to construe the temporal endurance of a work of art as anything like the permanence of a substantial object. Rather, art is play -- as Gadamer calls it -- 'transformed into structure'.[4] Transformation into structure ensures the artwork's iterability; that is, its ability to be made manifest in multiple ways. It also enables the artwork to make a claim on an addressee. But the validity of the claim is not independent of the involvement and concerns of the addressees themselves. It follows that while no artwork is ever fully complete, it always invites completion through its various modes of manifestation and reception.

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics questions the 'subjectivism' of aesthetic consciousness by alerting us to the fact that artworks have the power to disclose a world and therefore to express a claim on the recipient of the work. As an appropriate response to this claim, the *Erfahrung* experience of art is essentially a form of understanding. But crucially, the understanding that is embodied in the experience of art is not understanding in the sense recognised by modern epistemology. We do not overcome aesthetic consciousness with our original notion of understanding intact. On the contrary, the absorption of aesthetics into hermeneutics forces us to revise our idea of what it is to understand something as much as it challenges us to rethink our model of what it is to experience a work of art. If our notion of what it is to understand something is to include the experience of art – and anything less, in Gadamer's view, would be arbitrary and dogmatic – then it must be comprehensive enough to be able to articulate the fundamentally dialogical, context-related, and incomplete character of *Erfahrung* experience.

MEANING IN HISTORY

The predicament of the historian also points to the need for a more expansive notion of human understanding. Gadamer distinguishes two ways in which the historian can orient herself in relation to her subject matter. On the one hand, she can regard it as containing a meaning that is already there -- mummified so to speak, in the historical past -- waiting to be found and resurrected. She can then gear her interpretative activity towards the *reconstruction* of the antecedently given meaning. Gadamer observes that the meaning of particular historical documents, as well as history as a whole, can be understood this way, and he tries to show that such an understanding helped shape the German hermeneutic tradition from Schleiermacher, through the 'historical' school of the nineteenth century, up to Dilthey. In

Gadamer's view, Schleiermacher introduced the idea that the temporal distance that separates the interpreter from classical literary and theological texts makes the avoidance of *mis*understanding imperative. And the avoidance of misunderstanding can be secured by way of a procedure that reproduces the meaning-creating act expressed in the text. According to this model, successful interpretations manage to divine, if not the intention of the author, then the idea that originally motivated the author's productive activity. The goal of interpretation is thus a kind of restoration of the original meaning. While the leading figures of the German historical school, the historians Ranke and Droyson, did not suppose that the meaning of texts or actions could be located in the psychology of the authors or agents, and while they also rejected the Hegelian notion that history had some *a priori* meaning -- a *telos* directing history 'behind its back', so to speak -- they too, according to Gadamer, were committed to a version of the restorative model. For although the historical school sought to replace a priori philosophical speculation about the meaning of history with piecemeal empirical historical research, it remained bound to the project of *universal* history, which in turn presupposed the point of view of an ideal historical spectator who impartially observes the historical truth. So long as historical research aims 'to reconstruct the great text of history from the fragments of tradition',[5] it remains essentially restorative.

Gadamer by no means simply rejects the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher, the historical school, and Dilthey (who, according to Gadamer, synthesised these two approaches). And he certainly does not deny the importance of impartial scholarship in the study of history. But he does think there is something questionable about the reconstructive, restorative model of historical understanding. As Gadamer insists, it is futile to try to capture the meaning of the past as it was in the past. And even if such restoration were possible, it would hardly matter unless it were in some way connected with a live concern in the present. Furthermore, the thought that the historian should find orientation and legitimation in relation

to an impartial, 'God's eye view' on history is quite misconceived, for it confounds a fundamental structure of human understanding: its finitude. For Gadamer, the finitude of human understanding, and the non-recuperability of temporal distance, can be acknowledged if we can think of the historian's task not as the reconstruction of self-contained totalities of past meaning but as a kind of *integration* of the past and present. To think of the historian's relation to her subject matter in this way -- to think of it, as Gadamer writes, as 'thoughtful mediation with contemporary life'--[6] is to transform a merely external relation to the past into an internal relation of involvement and participation: we move from mere *consciousness* of something from the past to an historical experience (*Erfahrung*) of our emplacement in *tradition*. This is the crux of Gadamer's key notion of 'historically effected consciousness'.

In Gadamer's view, the integration of past and present signalled by the principle of historical effect describes the historian's actual predicament. After all, the historian pursues her research with a particular set of problems, and a particular set of interests, that must already possess significance. In possessing significance, the historian's work points forwards as well as backwards in time. Historical research is always undertaken from a contemporary, context-specific standpoint, which must somehow be integrated with that of the texts or text-analogues under investigation. For this reason, 'the abstract antithesis between tradition and historical research, between history and the knowledge of it, must be discarded'.[7] Gadamer does not consider himself here to be prescribing a particular method for discovering truths *about* history. His ambition is rather to reclaim the *historicity* of historical truth itself.

REASON AND TRADITION

Gadamer grants that, in a certain sense, the historicity of human understanding had already been demonstrated by Heidegger. The 'hermeneutics of facticity' elaborated in *Being and*

Time satisfied Gadamer that understanding is conditioned by existential structures of 'throwness' and 'projection': it is by finding our way about a world that is historically given to us, and by anticipating its unfolding, that we first come to understand, and all theoretical modes of understanding are derived from this primordial engagement. Gadamer then draws on Heidegger's account to elucidate the situation of an interpreter in relation to a text. The process of reaching an understanding of the text, Gadamer submits, has its own 'background' conditions that are comparable to those identified by Heidegger in his hermeneutics of facticity. However, in Gadamer's view the Enlightenment ideals of reason and truth prevent us from seeing this background, for they discredit the very concepts that are needed to articulate it. The concepts in question are prejudice, authority and tradition, and one of the central chapters of *Truth and Method* is provocatively dedicated to their rehabilitation.

Gadamer's proposal is much less shocking than it might appear at first sight. In current usage, the term 'prejudice' means an unfounded judgement, one that expresses a false but dogmatically held pre-conception about something. Gadamer points out, however, that this negative connotation is an invention of the Enlightenment. Originally, the term was used in a legal context to designate a provisional judgement, that is, a verdict reached on the basis of the available evidence, pending a final verdict. A prejudice is literally something that precedes judgement: it is a 'pre-judgement' (in German, *Vor-Urteil*). If we think of a prejudice in accordance with the original usage, it does not carry a connotation of unfairness, irrationality and erroneousness. Naturally, it is prejudice in its original sense that Gadamer wants to rehabilitate. We need to rehabilitate it, Gadamer argues, because it articulates a crucial background condition of interpretation and understanding. Prior to formulating an interpretative judgement, the interpreter has to work with pre-judgements (prejudices) about what the text or test-analogue might mean. Far from being obstacles to understanding, such anticipations of meaning are indispensable for any understanding whatsoever: without *some*

prejudice or other the interpreter would have no access to the subject matter of the text. Moreover, there is something universal about this feature of the hermeneutic situation: 'the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience'.[8]

With the rehabilitation of prejudice, authority and tradition win back some of the dignity stripped from them by the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment presented authority and tradition, like prejudice, as hindrances to the individual's free pursuit of truth and self-understanding. But if Gadamer's account of prejudices is correct, this cannot be the right view. For the prejudices that give me access to a world are not simply mine. They exceed my particular consciousness and should therefore be considered as expressions of something larger than myself; namely, the tradition in which I stand. For this reason, tradition cannot but exercise some authority over the individual. Of course, this is not to say that the authority of tradition can never be rationally questioned or criticised. Gadamer's point is rather that the rigid *opposition* set up by the Enlightenment between reason and authority makes us misunderstand what goes on when rational reflection happens. The Enlightenment model suggests that in adopting a rational point of view we are transported from the space of historical tradition altogether; when in fact, Gadamer argues, reason refines, loosens, and extends that space. The hermeneutic acknowledgement that understanding is 'always already' historically situated only entails a subordination of reason to authority and tradition if we remain within the false Enlightenment paradigm.

PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

In Gadamer's view, a better paradigm is to be found in Aristotle's practical philosophy. In the *Nicomachian Ethics*, Aristotle argued that human existence is not just a matter of survival but

of living well by rational standards: human beings have the capacity for 'good' life as well as 'mere' life. But how can we know what the good life consists in? Aristotle saw that it is easy to be mislead by the form of this question. For it can lead us into thinking that we can have knowledge of the good in the same way in which, say, a geometrician has knowledge of space, or a craftsperson knows how to perform some skill. We can suppose, in other words, that acquiring knowledge of the good is like learning a theory or mastering a technique. But as Aristotle observed, this is to miss the distinctiveness of ethical knowledge. The person who excels in ethical knowledge – or as Aristotle put it, the person who possesses practical wisdom -- attends in the right way to what a particular situation demands. The aim of practical deliberation is to determine the action that 'befits' the situation, that is, the 'proper' action or the 'right' thing to do in the circumstances. Unlike scientific problem-solving, such determination is not a matter of applying a general theory to a particular case. And unlike the skilled craftsperson, the person with practical wisdom does not have a pre-given conception of what the right outcome will be. On the Aristotelian model, as Gadamer influentially interprets it, knowledge of the good is not independent of the process of *becoming* good through one's education, choices and actions. In being socialised into the ethos of a culture, individuals acquire an ethical 'character' or 'comportment' that in the normal case makes them responsive to particular ethical demands. But to be so moulded is by no means to receive a blueprint of how to live. The rationally favoured response to a situation does not come pre-packaged, as if the right thing to do could be read off the situation by applying some general theory. Similarly, it is misguided to think that reason should be able to justify ethical demands independently of a socialised, and so historically situated, concerned point of view on them.

Gadamer thus turns to Aristotle's ethics to show how the universal and the particular are inter-dependent. It also provides Gadamer with a model for dealing with the basic problem

of hermeneutics. With Aristotle as his guide, Gadamer maintains that the task of understanding a historical text is inseparable from the task of bringing out its contemporaneity. Just as in practical reason we do not first justify the general rule and then apply it to the particular case, so interpretation is not a two stage process involving first, an understanding of the text's objective or universal meaning, and second, an application of this meaning to the interpreter's subjective position. Rather the universal and the particular, the meaning and the application, are brought together in the *one* act of understanding. As Gadamer puts it: 'application is neither a subsequent nor merely occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but codetermines it as a whole from the beginning'.[9] The *truth* of an interpretation therefore has the character of practical insight in Aristotle's sense rather than the character of an objective, scientific statement.

LANGUAGE AND DIALOGUE

For Gadamer, understanding brings about a mediation of the universal and the particular as well as the past and the present. But even more important, it mediates the self and the other. Gadamer emphasises that understanding is impossible without some initial apprehension of the alterity of the text to be understood. The process of reaching an understanding requires that the interpreter is open to the questions addressed by the text itself, and it proceeds by working with the text about the subject matter. In other words, understanding has an essentially dialogical structure, and the truth it aims at is nothing more or less than the outcome of a successful conversation. And just as it is absurd to suppose that human conversation has some pre-determined terminus, so understanding is an on-going, never completed task. This is an important point to grasp, in Gadamer's view, because again under pressure from modern epistemology, we are inclined to think that successful understanding

issues in some once and for all grasp of a self-contained meaning, the meaning objectively contained in the statements or propositions that make up the text. But such a monological model is not only misplaced as an ideal: it misdescribes the experience of arriving at an understanding, which at its best involves a self-transformative encounter with the alterity, not simply the externality, of the text. Gadamer uses the term 'fusion of horizons' to describe this structure: in the 'event' of understanding, the horizon of the self's experienceable world is transformed through contact with another. As we have seen, this occurs in a particularly vivid way in the experience of art.

For Gadamer, dialogue provides the model not just for textual interpretation but for language in general. Departing from mainstream modern theories of language, Gadamer denies that the basic unit of linguistic meaning is the word, statement or proposition. Rather, it is the conversation. It is in the course of conversational interaction, by expressing desires and purposes, forming social relations, and so forth, that humans become the linguistic beings they are. Even solitary reflection is a kind of dialogue of the soul with itself. And just as Aristotle provides a corrective to modern theory-centric notions of reason and truth, so, as Gadamer reads them, Plato's dialogues offer a compelling reminder of the importance of conversation for philosophy. For it was his engagement in the practice of philosophical conversation that enabled Socrates to reach the abiding insight of hermeneutics: since the other person may be right, and the conversation that we are is unending, human wisdom is 'a knowledge of our own ignorance'.[10]

GADAMER AND CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL THEORY

Many of today's most influential critical theorists owe a debt to Gadamer's work. Jürgen Habermas quickly saw the relevance of Gadamer's hermeneutics for the Frankfurt School's

critique of positivism and instrumental reason, and the 'communicative turn' in critical theory urged by Habermas was impelled by his reading of *Truth and Method*.[11] *Truth and Method* also helped to inspire the so-called 'post-analytic' philosophy of Richard Rorty, and more recently of John McDowell.[12] Of course not all contemporary philosophers and critical theorists read Gadamer so sympathetically: notably, Jacques Derrida has contested Gadamer's basic approach,[13] and Manfred Frank has sought to retrieve the heritage of 'Romantic' hermeneutics from what he takes to be Gadamer's Heideggerian misrepresentation of it.[14] Even Habermas, together with his successor at Frankfurt, Axel Honneth, has grave reservations about philosophical hermeneutics, both as a theory of language and as a resource for legitimating and sustaining social criticism. Since the contemporary reception of Gadamer's work is still very much shaped by Habermas's critique, let me begin my concluding remarks there.

Above all, Habermas is impressed by the dialogical, intersubjective model of reason that emerges from Gadamer's hermeneutics. Gadamer rightly saw that the Enlightenment's monological ideal of rationality – roughly, reason as the mastery of an object by a sovereign, self-contained subject – was both false and oppressive; and in Habermas's view, Gadamer took the right direction by seeking to replace it with a dialogical conception, one that took the process of reaching an understanding between subjects as paradigmatic for rationality. None the less, Gadamer's hermeneutics is flawed, Habermas argues, because it fails to show how radical critical reflection is possible; that is to say, reflection with a critical power that exceeds all traditionally legitimated norms and social relations. In the 1960s, Habermas used the Marxist model of ideology critique – recast in communication-theoretic terms – to expose the limited scope of hermeneutic reflection. Later, and with more conviction, he would draw on the liberal ideal of universal justice. For Habermas, the justice of a norm is scrutible only from a point of view that abstracts from pre-given traditions. By failing to recognise this,

Habermas argues, Gadamer's hermeneutics falls victim to a crippling moral relativism and it illicitly endorses a fundamentally conservative attitude towards tradition.

Whether or not there is any truth to the widely held view that philosophical hermeneutics is *inherently* conservative – I believe that careful consideration of the matter will show that there is probably very little [15]– there is no doubt that Gadamer does not see himself as a radical. Gadamer's philosophy, unlike the critical theories of Habermas and other members of the Frankfurt School, is not intended to provide a basis for the critique of 'false consciousness' or systematic injustice in the modern world. Gadamer's overriding concern is the fragmentation of tradition and the implications this has for historical experience. Unlike the so-called 'masters of suspicion' -- Marx, Nietzsche and Freud – Gadamer is not in the business of *demystifying* tradition: it is rather the *retrieval* of tradition, and the critique of alienated forms of historical consciousness, that guides him. Admittedly, Gadamer's pre-occupation with the problem of historical experience puts him in close proximity to another thinker of the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin. But while Benjamin's diagnosis of the impoverishment of historicism bears striking resemblances to Gadamer's, he has no remedial use for the concept of tradition in Gadamer's sense.

There are also certain similarities between Gadamer's hermeneutics and Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction. Gadamer and Derrida both owe a lot to Heidegger's dismantling (*Destruktion*) of the Western philosophical tradition. However, Gadamer and Derrida have very different ideas of what that project amounted to and where it fell short. Roughly speaking, Derrida attempted to correct Heidegger by turning to structuralist semiotics – or the theory of signs -- as well as Nietzschean perspectivism. Gadamer, by contrast, was never drawn to Nietzscheanism, and his approach to language side-steps the structuralist problematic. The resulting tension between deconstruction and hermeneutics is highlighted in a skirmish that took place between Derrida and Gadamer in 1981.[16] Derrida

suggested that in having recourse to the will of the interpreter, Gadamer's hermeneutics remains ensnared in a pre-Heideggerian metaphysics of subjectivity. However convincing one finds Derrida's objection – and Gadamer himself offered a careful and elaborate response – it does raise an issue about the role of meaning-generating structures that operate 'behind the back' of the interpreter. Arguably, Gadamer's overriding concern with the *experience* of understanding leaves him ill-equipped to deal with the anonymous structures of signification that bring so much grist to the mill for deconstructive theory. It could also be maintained that Gadamer's worries about modern subjectivism lead him to over-correct it by placing too much weight on the norm of truth. But if, from a deconstructive point of view, philosophical hermeneutics is therefore normalising and insufficiently distanced from logocentrism, for Gadamer the Nietzschean abandonment of the ideality of truth, and the structuralist reduction of meaning to content-independent structures of signification, reflect a *formalism* that has its roots in the very form of thinking deconstruction seeks to attack.

Rorty's take on *Truth and Method* is different again. Rorty embraces Gadamer's hermeneutics because it helps liberate philosophy from the shackles of *foundationalism*. Instead of viewing philosophy as a kind of master discourse that lays down the foundations of knowledge and arbitrates between the claims of different disciplines and cultures, Gadamer shows how philosophy can get by with a more modest self-image, one that is content to serve reminders of the open-endedness and diversity of human inquiry. If we follow Gadamer's lead and view human inquiry as nothing more or less than an ongoing conversation, Rorty argues, we are less likely to be bewitched by the metaphysical thoughts that there is one true theory of things and one true goal of human life. Gadamer's hermeneutics thus provides a kind of model for what philosophy would be like in a liberal utopia. However, while such a minimalist spirit of openness does define what Gadamer calls the 'soul of hermeneutics', it is questionable that *Truth and Method* is most profitably read as a manifesto for philosophical

relativism. For to read it that way is to risk losing from view the core phenomenological problem that motivates Gadamer's work: recovery of the experience of understanding.

Major Works by Gadamer

Truth and Method, 2nd edition, Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (trans.), (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989 [1960]).

Philosophical Hermeneutics, David E. Linge (trans. and ed.) (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1976). Contains lucid recapitulations of *Truth and Method*.

Philosophical Apprenticeships, Robert R. Sullivan (trans.), (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985 [1977]. A highly readable intellectual autobiography.

Hermeneutics, Religion and Ethics, Joel Weinsheimer (trans.) (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999). Contains the important essay 'On the Possibility of a Philosophical Ethics'.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Grondin, Jean, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Joel Weinsheimer (trans.), (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994 [1991]). An accessible brief history of the hermeneutic tradition sympathetic to Gadamer.

Michelfelder, Diane P., and Richard E. Palmer (eds.), *Dialogue and Deconstruction. The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1989). Texts by Gadamer and Derrida with extensive commentary. Advanced.

Smith, Nicholas H. *Strong Hermeneutics: Contingency and Moral Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997). Situates hermeneutics in contemporary debates about ethics.

Warnke, Georgia, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987). A clear exposition of *Truth and Method*, good on Habermas's and Rorty's responses to it.

---

[1] Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics, p. 3.

[2] Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 164.

[3] Ibid., p. 116.

[4] Ibid., p. 110.

[5] Ibid., p. 218.

[6] Ibid., p. 169.

[7] Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 282.

[8] Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics, p. 9.

[9] Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 324.

[10] Gadamer, Philosophical Apprenticeships, p. 185.

[11] See Habermas, 'A Review of Gadamer's Truth and Method', in Fred Dallmayr and Thomas McCarthy eds., Understanding and Social Inquiry (Notre Dame University Press, Notre

Dame, 1977), and 'The Hermeneutic Claim to Universlity', in Joseph Bleicher ed.,

Contemporary Hermeneutics (Routledge, London, 1980).

[12] See Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton: Princeton University

Press, 1979); John McDowell, Mind and World (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press,

1994).

[13] See Derrida, 'Three Questions to Hans-Georg Gadamer', in Diane P. Michelfelder and

Richard E. Palmer eds., Dialogue and Deconstruction (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), pp. 52-

54.

[14] See Manfred Frank and Andrew Bowie ed., The Subject and the Text (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[15] See Nicholas H. Smith, Strong Hermeneutics (London: Routledge, 1997).

[16] See the texts collected in Dialogue and Deconstruction.