

Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Contemporaneity of Classical Greek Philosophy

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Abstract: This paper examines Philosophical Hermeneutics – in the way it was established by Hans-Georg Gadamer – as an original philosophical current of the 20th century which on the one hand relies on the preexisting practice of interpretation in the humanities as well as in nearly all fields of social interaction but on the other hand has a specifically philosophical significance as it emerged out of an attempt to solve in a synthetic manner a crucial problem already posed by the antecedent Neo-Kantian School(s), namely the problem of the specificity and the autonomy of philosophy towards exact sciences. After outlining the main traits of Philosophical Hermeneutics we try to highlight an important dimension of its relevance in today's world by focusing on the way it develops an essentially dialogical approach to truth through an updated understanding of key elements of Plato's dialectics and Aristotle's ethics.

Keywords: philosophical hermeneutics; method; classical Greek philosophy; tradition; dialogue; dialectics; phronesis; contemporaneity

Hans-Georg Gadamer has gone down in the history of philosophy – beyond any doubt – as the founder and the key figure in the development of twentieth century philosophical hermeneutics. Initially trained in neo-Kantian scholarship and a little later in classical philology but also decisively and profoundly influenced by the fundamental ontology of Martin Heidegger,¹ he developed a distinctively and

¹ Noteworthy is also that in the introduction to his *Truth and Method* Gadamer seems obliged to state his indebtedness towards major philosophical

thoroughly dialogical approach to certain philosophical issues, grounded in Platonic-Aristotelian thinking as well as in central elements of major currents of the German philosophical tradition. We will attempt to give a brief account of the main traits of his philosophical standpoint in order to subsequently examine, in connection with its strongly present ancient Greek origins, its relevance for a necessarily open-minded approach to contemporaneous problems and challenges.

I. Origin and orientation of Gadamer's hermeneutics

Hermeneutics in general existed already before Gadamer and can be *grosso modo* defined as a discipline of implemented theory which aims to interpret certain notions, concepts and ideas or even whole texts considered as parts of a broad written tradition. This kind of intellectual activity is essentially proper to the science of jurisprudence, to the Biblical exegesis or to the reception and understanding of classical literature.² What eminently distinguishes Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics from other currents and tendencies which deal with older texts is his proclaimed

figures of his time as regards certain aspects of his own approach: Husserl is thus praised for the conscientiousness of his phenomenological description, Dilthey for his conception of the historicity of all philosophizing and finally Heidegger for the deep interconnection of both impulses. Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Second Revised Edition, trans. Joel Weinsheimer, and Donald G. Marshall (London and New York: Continuum 2004), xxiv; German original: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode, Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr – Paul Siebeck, 1990), 5. For a concrete account of the differences between the similar programs of Heidegger and Gadamer cf. Jean Grondin, *Von Heidegger zu Gadamer, Unterwegs zur Hermeneutik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001), 81-99. As regards the older and – at least for him – more influential figures of the philosophical tradition, Gadamer mentions Greek antiquity, Kant and Hegel; cf. Kai Hammermeister, *Hans-Georg Gadamer* (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2006), 93.

² Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xx-xxi; Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 1-2; Chris Lawn, *Gadamer. A Guide for the Perplexed* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), 44-46; Grondin, *Von Heidegger zu Gadamer*, 17.

intention to actualize the valuable elements of written tradition³ in connection with the historically determined self-consciousness of the interpreter;⁴ in other words, hermeneutics is constantly striving to make the implicit sense of the texts explicit and even, as Gadamer puts it, to let the language of the texts speak to us as contemporary interpreters.⁵

In order to achieve this goal Gadamer does not just declare solemnly and superficially the importance of the highly praised classical texts – with which he is at any rate accustomed as a professional – but he posits and develops at various levels certain presuppositions from a systematic point of view. We will attempt to outline these presuppositions while trying to show the main ways in which they are mutually interconnected.

First of all, we should keep in mind that Gadamer was concerned with the question of the autonomy of philosophy and the human sciences in general. Apart from the plausible biographical background of this concern – the author himself hints in his *Philosophische Lehrjahre* (*Philosophical Apprenticeships*) that his interests had been shaped partly out of his quest for emancipation from his father's legacy, who was a Professor of Pharmaceutical Chemistry and considered his colleagues in the humanities to be idly talking professors (*Schwätzprofessoren*)⁶ – it has been on

³ “Even the most genuine and pure tradition does not persist because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 282; Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 286.

⁴ Gadamer sees historical tradition in general as a “forum (...) to which we all belong.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxiv; Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 5.

⁵ Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Der Anfang der Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1996), 143, 169.

⁶ Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophische Lehrjahre* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1995), 9-10, 15. “Isaiah Berlin's notion that all seminal thinkers essentially effect parricide by seeking to kill the ideas of a symbolic or actual father may be a helpful thought” when we seek to determine the profound motivation of Gadamer's orientation, although on the other hand it would be “an oversimplistic judgment” to accuse him

the other hand of decisive importance that at about the same time, i.e. in the first decades of the 20th century, this very issue stood in the epicenter of theoretical discussions within the German academia: It was at that time that the Neo-Kantians tried to gain support for their position that the philosophy should be concerned with a differentiated range of functions and activities that were taken to be quite distinguishable from the main job of the (natural) sciences, with special emphasis upon the determination of the values necessary for the sustainability of culture as a whole. This means that within the spectrum of Neo-Kantianism most of its representatives sought for the philosophy a role substantially complementary to the equivalent one of the sciences.⁷ A certain turn – which essentially pointed to the limits of this current – was brought about by Wilhelm Dilthey, who dealt systematically with the issue of the autonomy of human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) and made some further distinctions in this direction, to the extent that he introduced the element of understanding (*Verstehen*) as the key interest of the humanities.⁸

as a philosopher “of being anti-science.” Lawn, *Gadamer. A Guide for the Perplexed*, 18.

⁷ This failure to secure an autonomous position for philosophy concerns in different ways both Neo-Kantian schools: On the one hand most representatives of the Marburg School considered the methods of the exact sciences to be the source of inspiration for philosophy as well, which obviously meant a degradation of philosophy. On the other hand, the Southwest (Baden) School tried to develop a philosophy of culture along the notion of values (*Werte*) that would encompass all particular fields and disciplines of knowledge; this step at first sight opened the way for a peaceful and respectful coexistence between philosophy and science. The problem lay in the fact that the main notions and distinctions of this School did not substantially include the dimension of time and temporality in the development of thought. This meant in fact that they remained attached to a point of view common among most scientists in their habitual practice but unproductive for philosophy. Cf. Hans-Ludwig Ollig, “Einleitung,” in *Neukantianismus. Texte der Marburger und der Südwestdeutschen Schule, ihrer Vorläufer und Kritiker*, ed. Hans-Ludwig Ollig, 46-51 (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam Jun., 1982).

⁸ Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 225-226; Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*,

Gadamer on his part recognizes Dilthey's approach as valuable but he sees its main weakness in its failure to eliminate the dependence of the humanities on requirements of external origin, for when Dilthey talks about the necessity of establishing a sound method for the humanities, as a prerequisite which would enable them to secure the status of sciences deserving this name, this amounts – according to Gadamer – to the fact that he quits prematurely the struggle for the autonomy of his own field inasmuch as he tries to solve a problem posed outside the scope of the humanities themselves.⁹

Gadamer's own approach consists in mainly showing that humanities and especially philosophy do actually operate on the basis of their own way to conceive the truth without having previously solved all their methodological problems *in abstracto* and in advance. He insists that in reality the point of departure – inherent in any philosophy worth talking of – is a conception of truth not always finely elaborated but nonetheless actual, practically relevant and historically effective, without which the immediately visible function of philosophy – and in consequence of the whole culture in general – would be practically unimaginable. This is par excellence the case with three special fields where mental activity is somehow involved:

- a. firstly, with the work of art, whose initial and final perception relies decisively upon individually differentiated capacities and subjective points of view, but on the other hand it does not lose its main “objectively” existing characteristics over the diversity of its reception. Gadamer argues against the Kantian “subjectivization of aesthetics”¹⁰ in the sense that in the long run it confines our relation to works of art to the attainment

235-236.

⁹ Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 232-235; Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 243-246.

¹⁰ Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 37ff; Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 48ff.

of a “heightened state of individual feeling”¹¹ while overseeing that art is actually a special field of human creativity that enables a distinct relation of humans to truth, revealing and concealing at the same time.¹²

- b. secondly, Gadamer considers history to be a constitutive source of hermeneutic experience. The historicity of understanding is an important viewpoint of the philosophical hermeneutics and consists in the double insight that any act of understanding has a necessarily historical dimension as it refers to preceding forms of thought and secondly through its very externalization becomes a part of history in itself.¹³ The singularity of any act and any form of understanding constitutes a specific horizon, a modus of seeing reality within distinctive and unavoidable limits which nevertheless are themselves movable¹⁴ and thus subject to influences from external factors and from history as a whole. The constant and though dynamic relations between the subject and the object of interpretation constitute the pragmatic condition of what Gadamer calls history of effect or effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) and lead to his demand of the development of the appropriate consciousness.¹⁵ The diversity of several forms of understanding on the other hand is the primordial condition for transcending them and bringing about

¹¹ Lawn, *Gadamer. A Guide for the Perplexed*, 87.

¹² Cf. *ibid.*, 90.

¹³ “If we are trying to understand a historical phenomenon from the historical distance that is characteristic to our hermeneutical situation, we are always already affected by history.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300; Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 305.

¹⁴ This refers back to important insights Husserl’s and Nietzsche’s. Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 237-238, 301; Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 250, 307.

¹⁵ Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 299ff.; Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 305ff.; effective history means in any case an enlargement of the initial horizon of the interpreted text – cf. Hammermeister, *Gadamer*, 66.

their convergence – at least through intersubjective and at the same time substantial communication and exchange.

- c. the third major pillar of Gadamer's hermeneutics is his stance towards language. Herein lies an essential part of Gadamer's philosophical standpoint; he actually deals with language as a central factor of understanding inasmuch as every interpretive practice is by necessity linguistically articulated and mediated (a dimension termed as linguisticity or *Sprachlichkeit*). This opens up possibilities of concrete considerations of the philosophical and cultural phenomena and goes along with Gadamer's detachment from any inclination to abstract methodology. Gadamer's manifest intention consists in developing a theoretical stance aiming at the concrete examination of any particular case as such without on the other hand leaving the way open to subjectivism and relativism. He has a strong and proclaimed sense for intersubjectivity instead as he puts forward his notion of the fusion of horizons (*Horizontenverschmelzung*) as the outcome or the flexible result of the interdependence of the singularity and the diversity of the many possible and actual acts of understanding.¹⁶

In general terms, Gadamer develops his philosophy upon the fundamental tendency of humans to understand their own world or the world they live in (i.e. their *Lebenswelt*) by steadily forming and transforming their proper conception(s). This process takes place from the starting point of certain judgments which generally prove to be of vital importance regarding the orientation in life. This kind of judgments was also considered as indispensable by Immanuel Kant in his third "Critique" in terms of a special encounter of theoretical and practical philosophy and this is a crucial stance that Gadamer also takes up in the perspective of

¹⁶ Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 385ff.; Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 387ff.

substantially pursuing his main goal of a major project of philosophical autonomy, so to say. The internationally acknowledged German philosopher analyzes critically and systematically the conditions and presuppositions of the judgments which form our understanding – that is our way of grasping the truth and coming to terms with the surrounding world – in its concrete function. An obviously important role in this process is played according to our philosopher by early or preliminary forms of judgment (termed as pre-judgments [*Vor-urteile*], not necessarily constituting prejudices, i.e. ways of conception that are impeding our understanding) which on the one hand are deeply rooted in the dominant views and on the other they serve as the initial stages of what in the further course of the process of understanding tends to become an elaborate form of our mental relationship to reality – on the condition that we make use of our ability to reflect upon them. It should be noted that the apparent partial acceptance of uncritical and immature points of view according to Gadamer is connected with a positive stance towards philosophical tradition as a whole; this stance has nothing to do with an undifferentiated syncretism or eclecticism and as such it remains essential for the activation of our thinking on the basis of the fundamental insight that we are part(s) of the tradition we live in whether we are conscious of it or not.¹⁷ Other approaches, for instance “a purely theoretical attitude to the world, in the manner of Descartes and subsequent philosophers, may well be possible but it must not be taken to be fundamental,” because “it depends upon a more basic relationship to the world.”¹⁸ This more ba-

¹⁷ A possibly negative consequence of this stance could be a certain conservatism towards cultural authorities (not only) of the past. For Chris Lawn “Gadamer’s work is conservative in a literal sense of ‘keeping’, but what is kept, the tradition, is not unchanging and frozen in the past but constantly making its claim upon the present and the future.” Lawn, *Gadamer. A Guide for the Perplexed*, 25.

¹⁸ Ibid., 56-57. From the hermeneutical point of view the critical stance to classical rationalism results from the insight that “the transparency of consciousness is anything but a certain and incontestable point of departure.” Jean Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, trans. K. Plant (Chesham:

sic relationship is the “hermeneutical circle,” i.e. the unavoidable shift of understanding from the parts to the whole and vice versa, a process that can also be reconstructed as “the interpretive projection of Dasein upon the world in the form of individual projects and activities and the background fore-structure that informs the projects and is in constant movement with them.”¹⁹

II. The constructively dialogical search for truth and its significance

After having outlined these basic assumptions of Gadamer’s hermeneutics and having reached the intermediate conclusion that for the German philosopher the inherited culture is firmly and concretely inscribed into his *Weltanschauung* we are now able to focus on a certain conception which may result from the philosopher’s attitude to the past – especially to classical Greek philosophy – but on the other hand it connects past and present in an essentially practical manner. If the task of hermeneutics is to revive tradition within present discourse independently of the constraints of a strict implementation of scientific method, it might seem at first sight that its adherents do not have to be particularly selective while studying what has come down in written form to them. This is actually to some extent the case because hermeneutics, due to its distanced relationship to habitual methodological exigencies, must in fact show an open-minded stance towards various currents and schools of thought without scholastically dealing with their content and without subjecting them to exhaustive formal controls. But apart from this fundamental openness, hermeneutics has indeed some privileged partners in its deeply dialogical understanding of philosophizing and

Acumen, 2003), 2. For Gadamer, accordingly, it is tradition that plays a fundamental role in shaping our worldview for it “has a justification that lies beyond rational grounding and in large measure determines our institutions and attitudes.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 282; Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 285.

¹⁹ Lawn, *Gadamer. A Guide for the Perplexed*, 57.

the classical Greek and especially the Athenian Philosophy is for certain reasons one of the most important among them – in Gadamer’s interpretation – due to its very approach to the role of dialogue in unfolding and manifesting the essence of philosophy or – in a less traditionalist terminology – in focusing on the originality of concrete intersubjective achievements.

As the philosopher points out in his *Der Anfang der Philosophie* (*The Beginning of Philosophy*) and in other writings related to Ancient Greek Philosophy, the Greeks did not know some key conceptual distinctions and oppositions of Modern Philosophy – such as the distinction between spirit and matter or, more importantly, the difference between the knowing subject and the known or knowable object²⁰: therefore it is exactly along these traits that Greek Philosophy proves to be essentially compatible with crucial attempts to surpass the narrowness or even the deadlocks of modernity – and hereby Gadamer has mainly the Hegelian²¹ and the Heideggerian Philosophy in mind. But what is mostly important on the route of discovering and bringing to the forefront the rather neglected treasures of the Greek legacy is the way Gadamer develops his conception of constructive and historically effective discourse.²²

²⁰ Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Der Anfang der Philosophie*, 89; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Der Anfang des Wissens* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1999), 154-156; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Beginning of Knowledge*, trans. Rod Coltman (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), 121-122.

²¹ Such an approach is also facilitated by the viewpoint that even the complex and elaborate Hegelian conceptual constructions have an intrinsically dialogical character – considering both the context that led to their emergence as well as their concrete inner connections. Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 362-363; Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 375.

²² Gadamer succeeded with his mature work in delivering original interpretations of the Platonic (and subsequently of the Aristotelian) philosophy by focusing on the importance of the dialogues as such. “The standard view that Plato’s work defends a universalist account of truth is challenged by Gadamer’s stress upon the provisional, tentative and fallible nature of human knowledge and that the dialogue makes this position apparent.” Lawn, *Gadamer. A Guide for the Perplexed*, 26. Far from any dogmatism and

Such positions underscore indirectly the importance of the principle $\beta\omicron\eta\theta\epsilon\iota\nu\ \tau\tilde{\omega}\ \lambda\omicron\gamma\omega$, upon which Plato insists a lot, while considering it as an important guideline.²³ By this principle – literally translated it means to support, to enhance or to promote the (strength of the) argument – it is implied that the partner of the dialogue must overcome any selfish and short-sighted intentions and, instead of that, intensify his efforts to grasp the strong points of the argument and consequently concentrate on what can bring the whole procedure some steps further. So in the end the stated principle comes to bring about not only a stronger argument as an achievement of one or the other interlocutor but in general an upgrade of the discourse as a whole.²⁴ It is clear that

any antiquarian interest, Greek Antiquity as a whole lives on through the persisting dialogue it initiated through the ages; cf. Hammermeister, *Gadamer*, 93, 105 – especially on the significance of Plato’s dialogues cf. James Risser, “Gadamer’s Plato and the Task of Philosophy,” in *Gadamer verstehen / Understanding Gadamer*, eds. Mirko Wischke, and Michael Hofer, 87-100 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2003).

²³ Cf. Thomas Alexander Szlezák, *Platon lesen* (Stuttgart: frommann-holzboog, 1993), 85.

²⁴ “A person who possesses” the art of questioning “will himself search for everything in favor of an opinion. Dialectic consists not in trying to discover the weakness of what is said, but in bringing out its real strength. It is not the art of arguing (which can make a strong case out of a weak one) but the art of thinking (which can strengthen objections by referring to the subject matter. The unique and continuing relevance is due to this art of strengthening, for in this process what is said is continually transformed into the uttermost possibilities of its rightness and truth, and overcomes all opposition that tries to limit its validity.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 361; Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 373. Dialectic thus emerges as a process of critical and self-critical truth-oriented dialogical exchange. These traits stay also in accordance with the criticism against the written speech in *Phaedrus* (274 c 5 – 276 a 9) and in the *Seventh Letter* (344 a 2-d 2), where Plato attributes to dialectic the task to “come to the aid” of written speech, in order to contribute, as far as possible, to the elimination of misunderstandings coming from poorly educated or malevolent readers. Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 394; Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 396-397.

by doing this the dialogue partner adopts a genuinely hermeneutical stance, the more so as what plays a dominant role is not the determination of a (supposedly) objectively valid knowledge but the application of meaningful and practically relevant principles.²⁵

The connection between theory and practice becomes also evident as regards the significance of the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* (φρόνησις / *prudentia*) in the determination of the issues and contents that according to Gadamer mostly characterize the specificity of philosophical thinking. The agents possessing *phronesis* are at the same time the ones who play a dominant role in the productive and solution-seeking discourse and practicing *phronesis* is an essential precondition for gaining social recognition. Hermeneutics has to pay special attention to principal concepts of the Aristotelian ethics (notably *phronesis* and *techne*) because in both cases the issues at stake can be summed up as the right connection between theoretical knowledge in general and its application(s) to properly understood particular cases.²⁶

On top of all this it should be noted that the theoretical approach to the dialogically articulated Platonic philosophy is also supported by biographical evidence with exemplary significance, for it has been trustworthily testified that Gadamer as a person lived according to his own principles inasmuch as he showed “friendliness and attentiveness in the discussions,” an “ability to follow other people’s ideas as if he were always ready to learn something from them,” and a “constant willingness to question

²⁵ Cf. Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, 104.

²⁶ “Admittedly, hermeneutical consciousness is involved neither with technical nor moral knowledge, but these two types of knowledge still include *the same task of application* that we have recognized as the central problem of hermeneutics.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 313; Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 320. In fact, the application Gadamer has in mind is not external to the content that takes up a special form, for this is the case with the production of artifacts or works of art, appertaining to the realm of *poiesis* and not to that of *praxis*. Cf. Michael Hofer, “Hermeneutische Reflexion? Zur Auffassung von Reflexion und deren Stellenwert bei Hans-Georg Gadamer,” in *Gadamer verstehen / Understanding Gadamer*, 60.

himself and his own opinions.”²⁷ Therefore, Gadamer’s hermeneutics can also be seen as a “self-questioning openness,” as “resistance against dogmatism” and as “a form of ethical life” based on the relations to others.²⁸

In conclusion, Gadamer’s philosophy is distinguished by its steady concern to develop hermeneutics as an organic part of a virtually universal dialogical rationality which is *prima facie* intersubjectively structured and linguistically mediated and at the same time, in its core assumptions, it remains in principle committed to the necessity of acquiring and demonstrating reliable theoretical knowledge. Along these lines it is in my view evident that such aspects indicate both its relevance for our present universal dialogically proceeding and oriented multi-faceted culture as well as its capability to shed new light on the most fertile and productive parts of the Ancient Greek legacy – mainly the Platonic and the Aristotelian.²⁹

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²⁷ Cf. Riccardo Dottori, “Introduction,” in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy. A Conversation with Riccardo Dottori*, trans. Rod Coltman, and Sigrid Koepke (New York and London: Continuum, 2006), 3.

²⁸ Cf. Dennis J. Schmidt, “Sokrates mit Gehstock,” trans. Matthias Luettekehrmoelle, in *Begegnungen mit Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Günther Figal (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 2000), 143.

²⁹ About the relevance of a fresh look at the Ancient Greek culture for the sake of the self-awareness of European culture in the contemporary world cf. Gadamer, *Der Anfang der Philosophie*, 13.

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