

Proceedings of the Kent State University May 4th Philosophy Graduate Student Conference

No. 005019 (2008) | ISSN: 1546-6663

Gadamer's Hermeneutics: An Insight to Understanding

Levente Szentkirlyi

Bowling Green State University

This author's parents, both natives of Hungary, created a home in which the uniqueness of their heritage and ancestry was cherished and celebrated. Their children were taught the Hungarian language even before they learned to speak English. The family commemorated Hungary's Independence Day, and celebrated *n?vnapokat* (name's days) and holidays full of Hungarian customs. This author learned about his extended family and its past, and heard stories of his parents' experiences living in the country. Through language, family gatherings, literature, photographs, music, and foods, he became familiar with his family's culture and its traditions. And while it often seemed that his nationality, which is easily apparent from his first and last name, preceded him, he grew to appreciate this because he began to realize at a very young age the importance of embracing his heritage, as it constitutes a great deal of who he is. But is who this author is restricted to this history and the traditions of his immediate family that have been so prominent throughout his life? How about that of his extended family? How *is* it that he has come to be who he is? Can one ever truly understand who she is? What factors influence one's development and understanding of her self? What is the individual's role in this process of knowledge and understanding? And how does one's history and understanding of her self affect her perception and knowledge of the world? Such questions are provoked, and may be addressed, by considering Hans-Georg Gadamer's conception of the hermeneutical circle and the hermeneutical self. This essay shall attempt to reconstruct the basic arguments that Gadamer presents in this theory of knowledge and explain some of the implications of his positions.

Hermeneutic philosophy's fundamental concept is the interpretation of the

meaning of being. In essence, by giving oneself to proper methods of interpretation of texts and traditions, an individual can come to understand and appreciate his ontology (or reality) and his relation to others, and become exposed to the destiny and meaning of his being. Michael Foucault was among the first to argue the limitations of reason and self-reflection in this process of hermeneutics. He claimed that an individual is unable to know her mind by mere reason and self-reflection; that knowledge of the self requires a range of special interpretive disciplines and institutions, such as and especially history. Attracted by this reasoning, Gadamer further develops this idea by asserting that a hermeneutical individual's self-understanding, and her understanding of others and of reality, are largely dependent upon extensive interpretation and inquiry, which extend far beyond what can be comprehended from reflection on immediate experiences. This interpretation and inquiry of which he speaks ultimately leads to greater knowledge and truer understanding. As Gadamer believes that the hermeneutical self is the direct consequence of the hermeneutical circle (which he argues is the ontological structure, or foundation of reality, of human beings—who are bound together over time and by the traditions to which they belong?), he wants to provide a historical account that supports his theory. Thus, by incorporating a historical model of hermeneutics, which concentrates on the interpretation of texts and the common threads that human beings share with each other, he attempts to show that this philosophical hermeneutics is necessary to unveil true understanding of human existence and what exactly it means to be a human being. [1]

Gadamer's theory of hermeneutics begins with the interpretation of texts. He states plainly that, "Hermeneutics must start from the position that a person seeking to understand something has a relation to the object that comes into language in the transmitted text and has, or acquires, a connection with the tradition out of which the text speaks." This relationship between the individual and the object can be understood even as simply as one's interest in a subject matter or in an object of inquiry, and incorporates the former preconceptions, biases, and understanding regarding the subject matter or object of inquiry that one may possess prior to attempting to interpret and understand a text. Gadamer refers to such preconceptions of, biases toward, and existing understanding of a subject matter as "fore-understandings," "fore-meanings," or "prejudices." His ideas of *traditions* and their implications will be addressed in greater detail further in this essay. For now, let it suffice to understand that Gadamer believes that human beings are communally bound to traditions, and that these traditions determine how one anticipates the meaning of a text—thus, making the claim that interpretation is not subjective to the individual—and ultimately dictate one's understanding of the text. In other words, traditions establish one's fore-meanings, which govern how one will interpret a text that she engages. [2]

Gadamer believes that when a hermeneutically sensitive person approaches a text, he expects to have his fore-understandings challenged because he realizes that everyone is a different historical being and can conceive of the same subject differently. He elaborates that, "A person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained individual must be, from the start, sensitive to the text's quality of newness." However, he clarifies that achieving this sensitivity does not entail disregarding or suspending one's own biases toward the matter of the object. Instead, what is expected and necessary is for an individual to be aware of her own biases, and to consciously and concertedly integrate these fore-meanings with her interpretation of a text. Until this is accomplished, a text will be unable to present itself in all its "newness." In other words, it will not be able to pronounce its own truth in the shadow of one's prejudices, and thus the potential for the individual to acquire fuller knowledge and better understanding is undermined. [3]

Before this interpretive process can proceed and before a text can be understood, however, one must understand the words within the text. This is also accomplished by the fore-meanings one has. These prejudices are necessary to identify and determine, for example, a text's topic and what the text wants to accomplish. Gadamer states that we project our fore-understandings to confront the text before us as we read; and throughout the interpretative process, an individual's fore-understandings will prove to be supported, unchallenged, or contradicted. If challenged, a hermeneutical individual will determine whether the contradiction warrants the complete abandonment of her fore-meanings in question and whether the understanding offered in the text should be adopted, or she will refine her fore-understandings with the knowledge she discovers within the text. As a consequence of this process, we are left to believe that some of our fore-understandings are arbitrary. However, in anticipation of this, Gadamer warns against directly approaching a text by relying solely on the fore-meanings at once available to the interpreter. As he trusts that, "Understanding achieves its full potentiality only when the fore-meanings that it uses are not arbitrary," a hermeneutically sensitive interpreter should "examine explicitly the legitimacy (that is, the origin and validity) of the fore-meanings present within him" when engaging a text. Additionally, Gadamer emphasizes that individuals must strive to remain open to the meanings of other persons and of texts; and that this openness requires objective evaluation and interpretation of other meanings in relation to the entirety of one's understandings—or in other words, in relation to her reality. He claims that after certain prejudices are confirmed, adjusted, or abandoned, the interpretive process starts over again. The crucial point to remember is that since the hermeneutical circle is perpetual, achieving true understanding of a text is never possible. Rather, every

occasion that a hermeneutical individual engages herself with a text (new or familiar), she can only gain new and different interpretations of the text?each new interpretation bridging a new *horizon* of knowledge (a concept which will be addressed further in the essay). One can never fully understand a text, or achieve true understanding for that matter, for this would mean that the individual has forgotten the cycle.

As implicitly stated above, there are some issues concerning the interpretation of texts, including the origin and legitimacy of fore-understandings, the open-mindedness and objectivity of the interpreter, and the subjectivity of language. The first shall be explained in greater breadth shortly. The second has been adequately addressed. In regard to the latter, Gadamer elaborates that since our ordinary use of language?and its most basic structure of individual words?comes naturally to most human beings, it is used without conscious realization. Thus, words are often used without consideration of their meanings, contexts, connotations, implications, etcetera. He continues to explain that one person?s understanding of a word may well be quite different from that of another?s, and that one may intend something entirely different than the meaning that one?s words may explain. ?When we try to understand a text,? states he, ?we do not try to recapture the author?s attitude of mind but?we try to recapture the perspective within which he has formed his views.? What Gadamer means by this is that when a hermeneutical individual approaches a text, she attempts to objectively comprehend what the author is stating. Moreover, if one truly wishes to understand an author?s text, she will strive not only to comprehend the author?s perspectives, but also to make the author?s arguments even more coherent. What is most significant about language, written or oral, is that it brings out the presuppositions of meaning?which is crucial to the hermeneutical process?and offers an avenue to the reflection upon ends and the projection of ends into the future, thus enabling an individual to incorporate future generations into his conception of the human community, an element of Gadamer?s argument that will prove to create significant implications.

With the foundation of this hermeneutical process constructed, Gadamer concisely presents and clarifies a series of requisites to prove that the hermeneutical circle is the ontological structure of human being?which, if satisfied, he believes should stand as testimony to the integrity of his argument, and would also prove that the self is indeed hermeneutical. To reveal that the hermeneutical circle is the ontological structure of human being, he believes it must be determined that human beings exist only by acting on belief in the authority of their traditions. Gadamer

argues that it can be shown that human beings exist only by acting on belief in the authority of their traditions by proving that one's understanding of her self and her reality are predominantly determined by the influence of her beliefs based on the authority of traditions or legitimate prejudices rather than by rational argument. It is necessary here to note that this account of Gadamer's perspective of prejudices requires the renouncing of prejudice against prejudice and entails proving that fore-understandings can be legitimate despite the absence of rational argument. If these criteria can be satisfied, Gadamer asserts that the hermeneutical circle is a historical circle and the basis of human being—the structure of the essentially historical understanding of an essentially historical being. [4]

Before it is appropriate to discuss the first point of Gadamer's requisites (which is concerned with proving that human beings exist only by acting on beliefs in the authority of their traditions), it is necessary to consider the second requisite of his theory—thus, returning to the aforementioned issue concerned with the origin and legitimacy of fore-understandings in regard to the interpretation of texts—and show that legitimate understanding of one's self and one's world is disclosed primarily by the legitimate prejudices an individual has. In other words, upon establishing that legitimate prejudices do in fact exist, it is necessary to prove that understanding is primarily achieved by the influence of beliefs that are based upon these prejudices rather than by rational argument. Enlightenment thinkers are among those in strong opposition to this perspective. By attempting to explain the world in terms of rational argument, they claim that the human mind is able to come to know itself through reason and self-reflection on experiences alone, and thus contend that there is no need for further disciplines. Consequently, they also maintain that an individual should conduct a constant struggle against the influences of prejudices since prejudices are composed of unfounded beliefs. As such, they assert that prejudices cannot enter into knowledge because knowledge requires reason, which is the only legitimate foundation for true understanding and knowledge.

While confronting such challenges to his theory, and the matter of the legitimacy of prejudices, Gadamer first distinguishes between acting on two different types of beliefs: those based on authority and those based on tradition. When an individual acts on his beliefs on the basis of an authority, in essence, he concedes that that authority has greater understanding than he. Authority figures can be thought of as any individuals with considerable knowledge of and/or extensive experience with particular subject matters or objects of inquiry. For example, when one is ill and visits the hospital, she tends to put faith in and give particular

consideration to the doctor's assessment of the ailment and his remedy because the doctor is a professional—an authority in this sense—and it is understood that he has greater knowledge of the workings of the human body than those lacking his authority. When a person does not employ the knowledge and experience of an authority to guide his actions, he will act on his beliefs in the authority of traditions—which, for Gadamer, are the most prevalent and significant forms of prejudice. For example, a young political activist may be motivated to petition a proposed piece of legislation or organize a public demonstration and may reason to do so because of her conceptions of freedom based on the social, political, cultural, economic, and so forth traditions of her society. Correspondingly, one may reason not to physically harm another based on the moral norms that he acknowledges and with which he complies—which, similarly, are based on the traditions of his society. But based on such beliefs, what makes prejudices legitimate? [5]

In the former case, there are those who consider that acting on beliefs based on authority is illegitimate because it is not rational or reflective since it implies not questioning the respective authority and the reasons for requiring certain forms of behavior over others. And while insisting that this is merely blind belief and thus contrary to reason, this perspective makes the allegation that acting on beliefs on the basis of authority is a form of subjection and imposes a hindrance on personal freedom. However, as Gadamer maintains, since acting on beliefs based on authority rests on the recognition that an authority has superior knowledge, it is reasonable to rely on such an authority's knowledge, experience, and perspective to influence one's actions. He continues to explain that the decision to base one's action on authority involves reason to make a conscious and free judgment and that, "Authority in this sense, properly understood, has nothing to do with blind obedience to a command." He does caution that individuals should not accept traditional authority as such for the basis of belief, however. For to do so, would be to build a life on the basis of prejudice, which Gadamer insists is merely a matter of illusion, not knowledge. He concludes that the only appropriate basis for knowledge and belief is one's own reason, and to do otherwise would be to allow one's beliefs to be erected on prejudice. While at first glance this may seem contradictory to his previous explanations, Gadamer simply wishes to make the distinction between incorporating such legitimate prejudices into the way one lives his life versus allowing one's self to be over-influenced by prejudices that are accepted without adequate and necessary reflection and reasoning. So this is not to say that when one's actions are influenced by these prejudices that his decisions are not determined by his reasoning. Rather, his reasoning is guided by his legitimate prejudices. [6]

Similarly to acting on the basis of authority, some argue that basing actions on the authority of traditions is also illegitimate because in promoting compliance with norms of appropriate behavior, traditions simply condition individuals not to question the reasons for requiring certain forms of conduct over others. Gadamer refutes this reasoning by explaining that traditions are constant and inescapable elements not only of freedom, but also of free self-determination. Since the authority of tradition is nameless, that is no one passing on knowledge can be the same that is looked to for justification of the acceptance of that knowledge, no person can be identified as having the necessary justification for accepting an authority of tradition. Nevertheless, one's basing her belief in tradition is neither contrary to freedom nor reason because, however subtle this form of reasoning may be, one chooses whether or not to preserve a tradition. Gadamer believes that, "Even the most genuine and solid tradition does not persist by nature because of the inertia of what once existed." Hence, since every tradition must be "affirmed, embraced, and cultivated" by individuals if it is able to persist through generations, the preservation of traditions is a direct act of reason and, thus, legitimizes the influence of such prejudices.

An additional concern with one's acting on the basis of tradition regards the validity of morals based on traditions. For, what happens when immoral behavior survives through generations? What if, for example, a child is brought up believing that stealing or slavery is moral and bases her actions on such beliefs? While contemplating this problem (yet, not offering a concrete solution to it), Gadamer claims that when actions based on rational argument and tradition come into conflict with each other, eventually one will have to choose between reason and the truth of a tradition. Ultimately, he believes that individuals will trust tradition more than reason. Having confirmed that legitimate prejudices do exist, although they have the potential to communicate to one truth and to help an individual in new ways to achieve better understanding, there still remains the concern of discerning between legitimate and illegitimate prejudices. [7]

In order to better develop and clarify his position regarding this distinction of prejudices, Gadamer introduces here notions of temporal distance, horizons of knowledge, and effective historical consciousness. In regard to the first, he explains that fore-meanings in the mind of a hermeneutical interpreter are not at her free disposal. Thus, claiming that individuals, prior to their engagements of texts, are unable to distinguish between the productive prejudices—that is, those that allow for understanding—and the misguided fore-meanings that impede understanding and lead to misunderstandings. Instead, Gadamer believes that this differentiation is made during the actual processes of interpretation and understanding. This is a strong and an innovative claim for him to make because, unlike former hermeneutic theories, it implies that hermeneutics must place temporal distance into its direct sphere of focus and consider its significance for understanding. [8]

It is temporal distance which allows one to make the distinctions between and discriminate against legitimate (or true) and illegitimate (or false) prejudices of a tradition and time period. Consequently, it is necessary for traditions and their respective prejudices of the past to be evaluated and compared to those of present-day, requiring that hermeneutically sensitive individuals incorporate a historical consciousness into their pursuits of knowledge and understanding—an idea which shall be elaborated shortly. Temporal distance makes one cognizant of the prejudices that govern her own understanding and allows her to isolate a text as the meaning of another and value it on its own. This makes it possible for the text's true meaning to be revealed fully. Moreover, as there simply exists too large an array of events and consequences to consider when one is immersed in the time, temporality also produces a self-contained context in which relative consequences and events are clear to judge. This critique and the passing of time allows for better interpretation and truer understanding of prejudices, as it filters out and, thus, eliminates illegitimate prejudices and understandings. In addition to making it possible for erroneous prejudices to die away, temporality also causes true prejudices that create genuine understanding to surface clearly as such; and as a result, the legitimacy of certain prejudices emerges. However, one must be hermeneutically sensitive for this continuous shedding of illegitimate prejudices to occur. And yet, regardless of how effectively one may and the extent to which one does shed illegitimate and gain legitimate prejudices, as has been stated previously, discovering true meaning can never be fully accomplished since Gadamer's process of hermeneutics is infinitely perpetual. As he explains, "Not only are fresh sources of error constantly excluded, so that the true meaning has filtered out of it all kinds of things that obscure it, but there emerge continually new sources of understanding, which reveal unsuspected elements of meaning." [9]

In arguing that the separation of productive and hindering prejudices in fact must and does take place during the process of understanding a text, Gadamer implies that the contexts, environments, ideas, traditions, and languages of the time from which the text speaks must be taken into account when striving to interpret the text; that engaging and interpreting a text (and consequently coming to better understand the traditions of the time from which the text speaks), thus, is no longer merely about acquiring new and more proper interpretations and prejudices and shedding misguided and unproductive ones. This notion is one of the unique perspectives in Gadamer's hermeneutical theory that requires individuals—in order to understand what the author intended to say in her texts—to bring the author's words and meanings to the foreground, and not only to become familiar with the realities

about which the text speaks, but also to understand the grammatical rules, stylistic devices, etcetera upon which the text is based. For, as Gadamer exclaims, as soon as one acknowledges that her perspectives are different from those of an author and the meanings of previous texts, it becomes necessary to undertake a "unique effort to avoid misunderstanding the meaning of the old texts and yet to comprehend them in their persuasive force"[because] the description of the inner structure and coherence of a given text and the mere repetition of what the author says is not yet real understanding. [10]

Secondly, Gadamer expresses limits on what can be understood and experienced in any given finite present moment. He claims that every finite present (or given hermeneutical situation) represents a particular vantage point that limits one's possibility of vision (or understanding). Therefore, an essential aspect in regard to this idea of a restrictive situation is the idea of a *horizon*—a conception he believes is necessary to understand understanding. A horizon is the range of understanding that includes everything that can be comprehended from a particular position of knowledge and experience. Horizons are intricately related to one's prejudices and are constantly evolving simultaneously with and correspondingly to the changes in one's fore-meanings and understanding. Achieving new horizons is what makes it possible for one to escape these restrictive hermeneutical situations and gain truer understanding. "The concept of the horizon suggests itself because it expresses the wide, superior vision that the person who is seeking to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it, but to see it better within a larger whole and in truer proportion." Accordingly, for an individual to have a horizon means that she is able to understand more than what can possibly be comprehended from reflection on immediate and contemporary experiences. Moreover, she will know the relative significance of everything within the horizon she acquires. It should be noted that escaping, or working out of, a hermeneutical situation requires an individual to achieve the proper horizon in relation to the tradition that she encounters. In other words, the right horizon in any given situation is that which can adequately and appropriately address the questions that are evoked by the specific tradition involved with the particular hermeneutical situation. [11]

Since hermeneutical individuals continually must test and modify their prejudices, the horizons of their present are also constantly undergoing adjustments and being newly formed. Thus, no horizon can ever be restricted to any single standpoint of knowledge and experience, which makes the idea of a closed horizon a

complete abstraction for Gadamer. Analogous to the inherent communal nature of human beings, a horizon is never simply a horizon, as it is always interrelated to and interacting with other horizons. As he explains, "The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never utterly bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is rather, something into which we move and that moves with us." Moreover, as this aforementioned testing of prejudices that form one's horizons of his present involve encounters with the past and the understanding of the traditions from which an individual comes, horizons of the present cannot be established without the past. [12]

With each new inquiry and successful interpretation of a text—each new achievement of greater knowledge—a hermeneutical individual bridges or fuses a new horizon. Gadamer believes that this fusion of horizons approaches objectivity, for as greater numbers of horizons are fused between individuals, fewer and fewer points of disagreements exist. In other words, as fewer numbers of conflicting prejudices subsist, truer understanding can be achieved. For example, when a hermeneutically sensitive individual reads and interprets this essay, she will gain a new interpretation of Gadamer's hermeneutical theory—more specifically, this author's interpretation of Gadamer's writings. When she accomplishes this task, she can be said to have fused her previous horizon regarding this subject matter with this author's, and, thus, has achieved a truer or more comprehensive understanding of Gadamer's hermeneutics. It should be noted that the elimination of points of disagreements of which Gadamer writes does not entail one's accepting and conforming to the different interpretations of subject matters and objects of inquiry that she encounters. A hermeneutically sensitive individual can achieve greater knowledge and truer understanding even when she does not agree with the perspectives of the individual whose texts she interprets. What is significant is that an individual come to understand and appreciate as many different perspectives and interpretations as possible in order to more fully comprehend a subject matter or object of inquiry. However, the notion of fusing of horizons carries greater importance than one's coming to better understand and appreciate a text, an author's perspective, or a subject matter. Rather, for Gadamer, the fusing of horizons is the objective of the entire hermeneutical process, and it implies achieving not only greater knowledge of one's self and one's reality, but also understanding of one's relation to his human community and what exactly it means to be a human being.

Thirdly, as stated above, one's present horizons cannot be formed without the past; thus, requiring that a hermeneutical individual achieve what Gadamer

refers to and has been previously noted as a historical consciousness. This means that a hermeneutical individual must not only be able to view his present in such a way that recognizes the influence that the past has had and does have on the present, but also be able to view the past as its own unique entity, separate of its connection to the present. To explain in another fashion, a truly historical consciousness sees itself as the creation of the past, but neglects to focus on, and directly incorporate into its pursuits of understanding, immediate experiences and concerns of the present. Instead, by realizing and valuing the significance of the past's own meanings, a truly historical consciousness can understand and appreciate the past's meanings unrelated to and isolated from the present. Gadamer concedes that, "We are always affected, in hope and fear, by what is nearest to us, and hence approach, under its influence, the testimony of the past." However and consequently, he urges that individuals who pursue achievements of greater knowledge and truer understanding concertedly avoid impetuously assimilating the past to their presents and their expectations of meaning. Only when this objective interpretation of the horizons of the past is accomplished will an individual be able to discern and understand the past's own meanings and acquire a true (or effective) historical consciousness. [13]

An effective historical consciousness essentially is an awareness of a hermeneutical situation. Recall that a hermeneutical situation refers to any finite present and represents a particular vantage point that hinders the possibility of understanding. To become cognizant of a restrictive hermeneutical situation is not an endeavor of great ease. As Gadamer explains, "The very idea of a [hermeneutic] situation means that we are not standing outside it and hence are unable to have any objective knowledge of it. We are always within the situation, and to throw light on it is a task that is never entirely complete." Adequate and effective reflection of the past is essential to enable one to recognize his given hermeneutical situation and offers the potential to acquire greater and truer knowledge of the situation. Still, its complete understanding is never possible, as Gadamer's theory of hermeneutics, once again, is infinitely perpetual. He asserts that this is not due to any lack of effective historical reflection. Instead, since Gadamer believes that the human society is a collective entity that is characterized by its shared history, the inability of achieving complete understanding is the consequence of this historical nature and existence of human being. When a hermeneutical individual achieves a historical consciousness and places it within historical horizons—in other words, isolates events and meanings of the past and comes to understand them objectively—she does not disconnect her self, her present, or her own past from the foreign realms of history.

Rather, these worlds are always connected, and together they constitute the one great horizon that moves from within and, beyond the frontiers of the present, embraces the historical depths of our self-consciousness. It is, in fact, a single horizon that embraces everything contained in historical consciousness. Moreover, one's own past and the other past toward which his historical consciousness is directed help shape this evolving horizon out of which Gadamer believes human life always lives. [14]

In summary, Gadamer asserts that prejudices are legitimated insofar as they have an effective history, which means that they are legitimate only as long as temporal distance continues to support extensions of the horizons of one's understanding and critically challenges and progressively exposes one's illegitimate prejudices. Effective history entails openness to different possibilities, reflection on experiences, and accounting for historical thinking's own *historicality*—put another way, objectively coming to understand a particular matter of object as a counterpart of itself. History is not meant to be understood, nor should one attempt to understand it, as a system of facts. It becomes effective only once it is objectively interpreted so that an encountered tradition may appropriately speak to one's own concerns and experiences. As Gadamer states, "A true historical object is not an object at all, but the unity of one and the other, a relationship in which exist both the reality of history and the reality of historical understanding. A proper hermeneutics would have to demonstrate the effectivity of history within understanding itself." [15]

Having confirmed that legitimate prejudices do in fact exist despite the absence of rational argument, let us return to the initial requisite of Gadamer's theory: proving that the hermeneutical circle is the ontological structure of human being by determining that human beings exist only by acting on beliefs in the authority of their traditions. Recall that Gadamer argues that it can be shown that human beings exist only by acting on beliefs in the authority of their traditions by proving that one's understanding of her self and her reality are predominantly determined by the influence of her beliefs based on legitimate prejudices rather than by rational argument. We have exhausted the idea that human beings are inescapably and communally bound to and set within various traditions, and that these traditions directly and significantly influence not only the outcome of every interpretive endeavor a hermeneutically sensitive individual undertakes, but also determines one's understanding of his self, reality, relation to other human beings, and what exactly human existence means. However, to further instill these ideas, Gadamer asserts that since the society of human beings cannot be thought of in terms of

individuals who associate with one another, it should rather be thought of as a collective entity characterized by its history; that people are only what they are in virtue of sharing traditions; and that "the prejudices of the individual" constitute the historical reality of his being. [16]

While he certainly believes that rational argument has its place and significance in the hermeneutical process, Gadamer contends that it is less influential than an individual's commitment to and trust in her traditions. Let us remember that he stresses that when actions based on rational argument and tradition come into conflict with each other, an individual will have to choose between reason and the truth of a tradition, and will ultimately trust tradition more than reason. Furthermore, he believes that the role of rational argument is limited to providing an individual with an avenue to reflect on, reason, and justify which prejudices she will adopt and incorporate into her life, and enables her to evaluate the legitimacy of those prejudices. As has been previously explained, in regard to acting on beliefs based on authority, one will use her reasoning to recognize the superior knowledge of an authority and make a conscious and free judgment to decide to base her actions on that authority. Similarly, when one bases his actions on traditions, he will utilize his reasoning to consider and freely choose whether or not to "affirm, embrace, and cultivate" and, thus, preserve specific traditions evoked by particular situations.

To further substantiate his perspective that individuals act solely on beliefs based on tradition, or legitimate prejudices, Gadamer claims that a perfect or ideal knowledge—that is, one in which all beliefs are justified and founded on rational argument without any appeal to prejudice—is unrealistic and implausible to even try to approach. As he believes that, "the human intellect is too weak to manage without prejudices," that human beings are strictly constituted by their traditions and the shared history to which they belong, and that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice, he explains that our history closes us in in such a way that to shed prejudices or to even approach this, one would have to escape history. And while he maintains that an individual can extend herself to a degree, Gadamer does not believe that it would be possible for a person to escape her history and its entailing limitations on her points of view. Legitimate prejudices, thus, make understanding and knowledge possible and should be welcomed. For, without them, Gadamer believes that we could not understand a thing. [17]

Before it is possible to give adequate consideration to Gadamer's theory of hermeneutics, it is necessary to examine some of the possible and most contentious implications of his positions. First, in emphasizing the importance of the idea of

community, his theory argues that human beings are separable, but not distinct individuals; that their identities are bound up essentially with the identity of other persons through traditions that constitute them as belonging to a shared history. Moreover, Gadamer's theory claims that we must bring future generations into our conception of human community; that we need common ends (which should be pursued collectively); and that one's goals should be to better the human community, its understanding, and the understanding of traditions. Further discussion of this implication should be prefaced with the fact that Gadamer does not consider himself a utilitarian, nor does he believe that this aspect of his theory requires or can be solved by a utilitarian concept. He believes that we do not think in terms of solidarity anymore though, it is difficult for this author to identify a time in which human beings ever have and that other than, perhaps, ecological crises and growing issues related to the increasing interdependence in international economy, the good for all is not taken into consideration. If Gadamer's reasoning is accepted, significant entailments for social and moral philosophy are created. As these concerns are too numerous and complex to appropriately address for the purposes of this essay, let it suffice to realize that Gadamer's ideas that a society is not made up of individuals who associate themselves with one another through contracts and conventions, and that the common good(s) of the community should take precedence over all individual ambitions and desires, contradict not only rights-based principles of moral philosophies, but also social contract and convention- and rights-based political theories; and create serious issues regarding individual rights, systems of justice and distribution, and the legitimacy and extent of justifiable state control and intervention.

Secondly, Gadamer's theory of hermeneutics requires the moving away from scientific reasoning. He argues that science and scientific reasoning has taken over the pursuit of questions once undertaken by philosophy more specifically, questions concerning practical reasoning. He believes that this has estranged humans from their historical being because humans have transposed practical consciousness into technical expertise that is based on scientific knowledge. Gadamer explains that scientific reasoning seeks to control phenomena, such as causal relations, and provide rational reasoning for their occurrences, and that science claims that it can provide an adequate account for practical reasoning. However, he asserts that practical reasoning is concerned with the ends one should pursue and the means by which an individual pursues them. And since science is unable to accomplish the self-reflection (which philosophy can) that is necessary to determine the ends one should pursue, its reasoning is inadequate. Gadamer argues that one can account for

the right ends only by properly coming to know himself by way of hermeneutics?in other words, by taking into account his history and traditions.

Thirdly, and in relation to the first implication, his theory entails that practical reasoning must take priority over personal interests. Practical reasoning provides an individual with a model of a whole range of phenomena in which she has to avoid and renounce her personal interests. To reason practically, believes Gadamer, the common good?in broad variety of ways?must be taken into consideration. The end, or ultimate, goal should be the good for the world; the good of all human beings (including future generations), as individuals belong to something larger and greater than themselves. Consequently, by adopting and incorporating his theory of the hermeneutical circle, an individual weighs possible choices in regard to the outcomes of those choices. Gadamer explains that there is a dialectical and an analytical element to the choices that one makes. The dialectical element involves balancing the good?or in other words, bringing about the greatest good?and implies harmonizing the goods involved (for which, the analytic step is necessary). The analytical element requires considering what would be involved in realizing the particular goods in question. While this approach may seem to some as a form of utilitarianism, Gadamer argues it is not, since utilitarianism presupposes that each human being is a separate and individual actor in a larger community. Therefore, its calculation will not work because the common good is not considered over the individual interests of the majority.

In addition to the aforementioned Enlightenment thinkers? objection to Gadamer?s hermeneutics, there exist other arguments that deserve explanation. There are those who doubt Gadamer?s theory of hermeneutics on the grounds that the hermeneutical circle is simply a vicious circle. They offer a claim that attempts to question the soundness of the theory by charging that in order to come to know a text, one must already have understood the text that she engages. And that if this is the case, how can a hermeneutically sensitive individual strive to further understand a text if she already knows it? Gadamer does not believe that this counter is adequate to refute his thinking, as it presupposes the existence of absolute knowledge and understanding, which he clearly admits is not possible. As he elaborates, what his theory claims, rather, is that the hermeneutical circle allows for an individual to acquire new and different interpretations of the texts that she engages, and in doing so can progress toward fuller, or a more comprehensive, knowledge and understanding.

Another opposition to Gadamer?s hermeneutical theory suggests that history

is constituted by power relations rather than by traditions. Furthermore, such thinkers claim that power distorts the potential for communication and creates conflicts, as this hindrance to communication results in disagreements of understanding and ideology. In response, Gadamer explains that he simply disagrees with the initial contention that history is not constituted by shared traditions. And in regard to the concern of power's distortion of communication, he defends his theory by insisting that ideology is just another form of prejudice, and to deal with prejudice one need not to resort to revolution. Instead, by confronting conflict with the hermeneutical circle and incorporating traditions to address disagreements of understanding, Gadamer believes that human beings can come to communicate more effectively with one another and bring about necessary social change.

The French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, has criticized Gadamer's theory on the basis of its improper and impossible goal of understanding and closure of meaning. However, while Gadamer does have the ultimate goal of closure of meaning—that is, the merging of horizons and the dissolution of alternative and conflicting perspectives, or in other words, the achievement of true understanding—he admits that this ideal and perfect limit is not realistically possible. Nonetheless, it offers reason and possibility for individuals to improve their understanding and uncover the deceptions of their selves, realities, and society. Additionally, Derrida argues that Gadamer's hermeneutical circle is lacking because Gadamer believes that there are certain texts—identified and specific to seek—to be found and interpreted; texts to question existing preconceptions. However, Derrida believes that there is no proof or certainty of where to begin the interpretative process.

Despite the potential shortcomings of his theory and the implications for which he may not be able to fully provide solutions, Gadamer concludes that his proposal is a viable one and should be seriously considered. "The [hermeneutical] circle," he states, "describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter. The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text, is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the communality that binds us to the tradition. But this is contained in our relation to the tradition, in the constant process of education. Tradition is not simply a precondition into which we come, but we produce it ourselves, inasmuch as we understand, and participate in the evolution of tradition and hence further determine it ourselves. Thus, the circle of understanding is not a methodological circle, but describes an ontological structural element in understanding." While Gadamer's perspective that human beings are intimately related to and influenced by the traditions of their shared history is quite compelling and certainly has its truth, it is

this author's contention that the identities of individuals are not solely determined by their shared histories. This author's strongest reservation with Gadamer's theory of hermeneutics is this lack of adequate focus on the individual in the society to which he belongs. It is difficult for this author to forfeit the importance and idea of individualism and seems unacceptable to allow the common goods of the community to supersede the interests and, thus, potentially threaten the rights of its individuals. However, regardless of one's attitudes toward and endorsement of his theory, Gadamer should be duly credited for provoking a great deal of genuine thought regarding understanding of knowledge, the human self and its reality, and the common misconceptions and deceptions of understanding that human beings misguidedly harbor. In the spirit of Gadamer's thinking, this author leaves his readers with the responsibility to objectively read, interpret, question, re-read, and re-interpret writings on this subject matter (especially Gadamer's own), and determine for themselves the soundness of this theory of hermeneutics. Even further, in consideration of and appeal to the broader scope which motivated Gadamer's thinking, this author encourages his readers to nurture a mature and necessary open-minded attitude; to approach all matters with a healthy degree of doubt and scrutiny; to question even themselves and what they perceive to believe and understand; and to take the initiative to thoroughly investigate these queries if for no other reason than to gain a new and richer appreciation for their existence. [18]

[1] Donald Callen, *Gadamer's Argument of the Hermeneutical Self* Handout (October 13, 2004), P1.

[2] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason In the Age of Science* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1981), P261-262.

[3] Gadamer's *Reason In the Age of Science*, P238.

[4] Callen's *Gadamer's Argument of the Hermeneutical Self* Handout, P1.

[5] Gadamer's *Reason In the Age of Science*, P248, 250.

[6] Gadamer's *Reason In the Age of Science*, P248.

[7] Gadamer's *Reason In the Age of Science*, P250.

Callen's *Gadamer's Argument of the Hermeneutical Self* Handout, P1.

[8] Gadamer's *Reason In the Age of Science*, P263.

[9] Gadamer's *Reason In the Age of Science*, P265-66.

- [10] Gadamer's *Reason In the Age of Science*, P98, 245.
- [11] Gadamer's *Reason In the Age of Science*, P269, 272.
- [12] Gadamer's *Reason In the Age of Science*, P271, 273.
- [13] Gadamer's *Reason In the Age of Science*, P272-73.
- [14] Gadamer's *Reason In the Age of Science*, P269, 271.
- [15] Gadamer's *Reason In the Age of Science*, P267.
- [16] Gadamer's *Reason In the Age of Science*, P242, 245-46.
- [17] Gadamer's *Reason In the Age of Science*, P239-40.
- [18] Gadamer's *Reason In the Age of Science*, 261.

§§§

Proceedings of the Kent State University
May 4th Philosophy Graduate Student Conference
No. 005019 (2008)

<http://philosophy.kent.edu/journal/>

© 2008 Levente Szentkirlyi

© 2008 Kent State University Department of Philosophy