

HERMENEUTICS IN GADAMER THE QUEST FOR UNDERSTANDING IN PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

Hans-Georg Gadamer represents one of the most influential figures in the development of 20th century hermeneutics. Gadamer in his work developed a distinctive and thorough dialogical approach grounded in platonic thinking. Hermeneutics as an authentic discipline has developed over the period to become a more encompassing theory of textual interpretation in gospel, a set of rules that provide the basis for good interpretation practice no matter the Subject matter. Understanding on the other hand, operates on the grounds of such anticipatory structures that allow what is to interpreted or understood to be grasped preliminarily. In this paper, Gadamer is seen to maintain that hermeneutics is not a method of understanding but an attempt to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place.

Keywords: Gadamer, Philosophy, Hermeneutics, Plato

Introduction

Hans-Georg Gadamer is a decisive figure in the development of twentieth century hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is also a wide field of different approaches associated with scholars such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey and Martin Heidegger. It was Gadamer who developed a distinctive and thorough dialogical approach grounded in Platonic-Aristotelian as well as Heideggerian thinking. that rejects subjectivism and relativism, abjures any simple notion of interpretative method and grounds understanding in the linguistically mediated happenings of tradition Gadamer's work can be seen as Concentrated in four main areas. The first is the development and elaboration of philosophical hermeneutics. The second is the dialogue within philosophy and within the history of philosophy. The third is the engagement with literature particularly poetry and with art. The fourth is what Gadamer (2001: 78-85) terms "practical philosophy", encompassing contemporary political and ethical issues.

Based on the above, the context of this paper will make clear how hermeneutics leads to pure understanding in philosophy, Philosophy represents an unending yearning for wisdom. It is the curiosity to know. And this is exactly where hermeneutics comes in. Before one is able to know something, he will first and foremost understand that which he wants to know, and this can be achieved through hermeneutics.

The Hermeneutical Foundations

The way in which Gadamer conceives of understanding and interpretation is as a practically oriented mode of insight: a mode of insight that has its own rationality irreducible to any simple rule or set of rules that cannot be directly taught and that is always oriented to the particular case at hand.

Traditionally, hermeneutics is taken to have to origin in problems of biblical exegesis and in the development of theoretical framework to govern and direct such exegetical practice, In the hands of eighteenth and early nineteenth century theorists, writers such as Chladenius and Meier Ast and Schleiermacher, hermeneutics was developed into a more encompassing theory of textual interpretation in general, a set of rules that provide the basis for good interpretative practice no matter what the subject matter. For Wilhelm Dilthey, he broadened hermeneutics still further, taking it as the methodology for the recovery of meaning that is essential to understanding within the human or historical sciences In the light of Martin Heidegger, he redeployed hermeneutics to a very different purpose and within a very different frame. In his early thinking, particularly the lectures from the early 1920s (*The Hermeneutics of Facticity*), hermeneutics is presented as that by means of which the investigation of the basic structures of factual existence is to be pursued not as that which constitutes a theory of textual interpretation nor a method of 'scientific' understanding, but rather as that which allows the self disclosure of the structure of understanding as such.

It is hermeneutics, in this Heideggerian phenomenological sense that is taken up in Gadamer's work. Gadamer described his philosophical hermeneutics as precisely an attempt to take up and elaborate this line of thinking from the later Heidegger (Gadamer. 1997b: 47)

In this respect, Gadamer's work, in conjunction with that of Heidegger represents a radical reworking of the idea of hermeneutics. Gadamer thus develops a philosophical hermeneutics that provides an account of the proper grounds for understanding

Philosophical Hermeneutics

One might respond to Gadamer's emphasis on our prior hermeneutic involvement, whether in the experience of art or elsewhere. According to him, such involvement cannot but remain subjective simply on the grounds that it is always determined by our particular disposition to experience things in certain ways rather than others. Our involvement, one might say is thus always based on subjective prejudice. Gadamer also takes issues directly with this view of prejudice and the negative connotations often associated with the notion, arguing that, rather than closing us off, our prejudices are themselves what opens us up to what is to be understood. In this way therefore Gadamer can be seen as attempting to retrieve a positive conception of prejudice as pre-judgement. (Pre-judicium).

One consequence of Gadamer's rehabilitation of prejudice is a positive evaluation of the role of authority and tradition as legitimate sources of knowledge. In truth and method. Gadamer redeploys the notion of our prior hermeneutical situatedness as it is worked out in one particular fashion in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, in terms of the 'fore structure' of understanding, that is in terms of the anticipatory structures that allow what is to be interpreted or understood to be grasped in a preliminary fashion. The fact that understanding operates by means of such anticipatory structures means that understanding always involves what involves the revisable presupposition that what is to be understood constitutes something that is understandable, that is, something that is constituted as a coherent and therefore meaningful whole.

In as much as understanding always occurs against the background of our prior involvement, so it always occurs on the basis of our history. Understanding for Gadamer is thus always an 'effect of history, while hermeneutical 'consciousness is itself that mode of being that is conscious of its own historical 'being effected'. Then, awareness of the historically effected character of understanding is, according to Gadamer identical with an awareness of the hermeneutical situation and he also refers to that situation by means of the phenomenological concept of 'horizon (Horizont), Understanding and interpretation thus always occurs from within a particular "horizon that is determined by our historically-determined situatedness. For Gadamer, (1975: 267), understanding is essentially an effective -historical relation. Understanding is not imprisoned within the horizon of its situation. Indeed, the horizon of understanding is neither static nor unchanging. Just as our prejudices are themselves brought into question in the process of understanding. so in the encounter with another is the horizon of our own understanding susceptible to change. Gadamer views understanding as a matter negotiation between oneself and one's partner in the hermeneutical dialogue such that the process of

understanding can be as matter of coming to an 'agreement' about the matter at issue. Coming to an agreement means establishing a common framework or 'horizon' and Gadamer takes understanding to be a process of the 'fusion of horizons' (horizontverschmelzung).

The basic model of understanding what Gadamer finally arrives at in truth and method is that of conversation. A conversation involves an exchange between conversational partners that seek agreement about some matter at issue. Conversation always takes place in language and according to Gadamer, understanding is always linguistically mediated since both conversation and understanding involve coming to an agreement, so he argues that all understanding involves something like a common language. In this sense, all understanding is Interpretative and insofar as all interpretation involves the exchange between the familiar and the alien, so all interpretation is also translative.

Gadamer's commitment to the linguisticity of understanding also commits him to a view of understanding as essentially a matter of conceptual articulation. This does not rule out the possibility of other modes of understanding, but it does give primacy to language and conceptuality in hermeneutic experience. Here, language is taken to be not merely some instrument by means of which we are able to engage with the world, but as instead the very medium for such engagement. We are 'in the world through being 'in' language. Just as we are not held inescapably captive within the circle of our prejudices, or within the effects of our history, neither are we held captive within language is that within which anything that is intelligible can be comprehended. It is also that within which we encounter ourselves and others. In this respect, language is itself understood as essentially a dialogue or conversation.

Like Wittgenstein, as well as Davidson, Gadamer thus rejects the idea of such a thing as a private language because language always involves others just as it always involves the world. He further claims that language is the universal horizon of the hermeneutic experience.

Literature and Art in Gadamer

The engagement with literature and art was a continuing feature throughout Gadamer's life and works. His engagement with art is strongly influenced by his dialogue with the history of philosophy. Also, his hermeneutic approach to art itself constituted a rethinking of aesthetics through the integration of aesthetics into hermeneutics. Gadamer takes the experience of beauty to be central to an understanding of the nature of art and in the *Truth and Method*, he discusses the beautiful as that which is self-evidently present to us as radiant exploring also the close relationship between the beautiful and the true.

Gadamer's emphasis on application in understanding already implies that all understanding has a practical orientation in the sense of being determined by our Contemporary situation. He has himself engaged in more direct reflection on a range of contemporary issues. (see Krajewski, 2003).

Understanding as Interpretation with a Temporal Distance

Gadamer (1975: 283). has made it abundantly clear that hermeneutics is not a method for understanding but a attempt "to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place". Temporal distance obviously means something other than the extinction of our interest in the object. it lets the true meaning of the object emerge fully. It can solve the question of critique in hermeneutics which is how to distinguish the true prejudices by which we understand from the truth from the false.

Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged because it separates but it is actually the supportive ground or process in which the present is rooted. Hence, temporal distance is not something that must be overcome. This was rather, the naive assumption of historicism, namely that we must set ourselves within the spirit of the age, and to think with its ideas and its thoughts, not with our own and thus advance towards historical objectivity.

In fact, the important thing is to recognize the distance in time as a positive and productive possibility of understanding. It is not a yawning abyss, but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which all that is handed down present themselves to us (Gadamer 1975: 264).

Conclusion

The most basic of all hermeneutical pre-conditions remain ones fore-understanding which come from being concerned with the same subject. Its work is not to develop a procedure of understanding but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place. So, the task of hermeneutics is to clarify this "miracle" of understanding. We have seen also that the goal of all attempts to reach an understanding is agreement concerning the subject matter.

Hermeneutics thus, turns out to be universal, not merely with regard to knowledge whether in the 'human sciences' or elsewhere, but to all understanding and indeed to philosophy itself.

Philosophy is, in its essence hermeneutics. According to Ludwig Wittgenstein, philosophy is the uncovering of one or another of plain nonsense and of bumps that the

understanding has got by running its head up the limits of language. These bumps make unseen the value of the discovery. It is concerned with examining our naive beliefs and conviction. So the fore conception of completeness that guides all our understanding is then always determined by the specific content: not only does the reader assume an immanent unity of meaning, but his understanding it is like being guided by the constant transcendental expectation of meaning that proceed from the relation to the truth of what is being said. Just as the recipient of a letter understands the news that it contains and first sees things with the eyes of the person who wrote the letter, for example, he or she considers what the author writes as true and is not trying to understand the writer's peculiar opinions as such

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