

RESEARCH

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GADAMER'S HERMENEUTICS AND SOCIAL THEORY

Recent years have seen a great upsurge of interest in Hans-Georg Gadamer and his "philosophical hermeneutics," coming after decades of relative obscurity among English-speaking philosophers. The philosophical establishment of the English-speaking world has, at least since the time of Russell and Whitehead, denigrated metaphysics, even more so since the Second World War, perhaps partly guided by the hidden suspicion that the search for the Absolute is precisely what got the hapless Germans into so much trouble. How much better to deal in simple common sense and the astringent beauty of logic than to get tangled up in a bunch of pre-scientific word games searching after "the meaning of being"!

The inescapability of metaphysical questions is rapidly overcoming the prejudice against this mode of inquiry, while the growing interest in the German phenomenologists Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl has increased awareness of and interest in other contributors to this tradition. These factors, plus the many new translations of works of German philosophy and criticism being published in the United States, have brought Gadamer's work to a growing audience.

The Positivistic Dead End

The once reigning monarch in the English-speaking world, positivism, is in headlong retreat, even if not all of its loyal retainers are aware of the rout. Within the sciences of nature, the search for algorithms (or mechanical procedures) of theory choice has been virtually called to a halt as philosophers and

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historians of science have repeatedly shown the nonalgorithmic nature of the scientific search for truth. Among the sciences of man, positivism still exerts a shaky suzerainty over certain areas, most notably economics, which often prides itself on its scientific and hard-headed character. But even here, rumblings of revolt are being heard, as more and more humanistic sciences take the "interpretive turn." Even within the citadels of economics, positivism's rivals are vigorously pressing their claims, with the banners of the rhetorical movement, the market process (Austrian) movement, institutionalism, and other upstarts appearing from this turret and that. Positivism's arch rivals, the Austrians, are not merely asserting a rival claim to the throne, in the form of a different method, but more: the claim that positivism is an usurper that has sought to suppress the inescapably interpretive nature of the study of man by man and has misled social scientists about the nature of their own enterprise.

Gadamer's *Truth and Method* appeared in 1960, before much of this revolt was apparent. Its message is all the more powerful now. One of its central aims was to affirm the truth claims of inquiries that are not reducible to the model of science widely assumed at the time to govern the natural sciences along with the quantifiable sciences of man, such as economics and modern political science. Thus, Gadamer was concerned to legitimate talk of the truth of a work of art, as well as of the truth of tradition, of history, and of the various *Geisteswissenschaften* (variously translated as "moral sciences," "human sciences," etc.). His claims were in some ways too modest; rather than simply asserting the truth claims of nonscientific enterprises, we can now see an interpretive element in even the most "scientific" (in the positivistic sense) of the "hard" sciences.

Interpretation

Gadamer's ideas bear many similarities to those of recent philosophers of science, but they have far broader applications as well. Consequently, it is worthwhile to examine just what Gadamer means by "interpretation." Interpretation is a moment (a non-independent part) of the event of understanding, along with the oft-neglected but all-important moment of application. Furthermore, it is not simply an activity of an acting subject, on the same level as eating, reading, or walking. As Heidegger points out in *Being and Time*, understanding is a *mode of Being of Dasein*.

A few paragraphs of unpacking are in order. First, *Dasein* roughly translates as "existence." The prefix *Da* means "there," but it is actually the meaning common to "there" and "here." *Sein*, which is usually translated as "Being" (with a capital "B") is the infinitive form of the verb "to be." Thus, *Dasein* means "to-be-there-(or here)." *Dasein* is distinguished from "man," the object of anthropology, psychology, etc.; it refers to the special kind of human existing, to the very core of what allows people to be human, as opposed to a lamp or a stone. *Dasein* is a more primordial level than man-as-

object-of-study. Heidegger is interested, to be sure, in questions like "What is it to be a Man?" but he seeks first an understanding of what it is to be.

In thus addressing the question of "What is it to be?" (the *Seinsfrage*) Heidegger proceeds phenomenologically, i.e., descriptively, not reducing the phenomenon to fit within some preset mold, but allowing it to show itself simply as it is in itself. He describes the condition of *Dasein* as "To-be-in-the-world." Through his analysis of *Dasein's* temporality Heidegger reveals the way in which understanding is a constitutive element of the Being (the *Sein*, the "to be") of *Dasein*. Heidegger's major work is not simply *Sein*, but *Sein und Zeit* (*To Be and Time*). While traditional metaphysics takes Being to be timeless, Heidegger shows that it is temporality that provides the key to the understanding of the question of Being.

What is Heidegger getting at? For one thing, he is challenging a number of fundamental prejudices of modernity. In his discussion of time, Heidegger shows that what is primary is not the present, the now; the present is in fact derivative. The traditional approach is to see the present as primary, with the past consisting of presents-that-are-no-longer and the future consisting of presents-that-are-not-yet. Heidegger reverses this relationship, with very significant consequences for the understanding of history, of tradition, of language, and more. It is the present that is derivative; it emerges as the interface between past and future, and it does so in a continuous manner, with future slipping into present into past in a three-fold unity.¹

A look at how we relate to the world around us may provide some illumination of what Heidegger is attempting. Traditional philosophical thought holds that we find ourselves in a world full of *objects*, of things that can be approached and described through the senses and understood through science. Thus, the piece of common quartz I am now holding in my hand has a mass; it is attracted to other masses with a force inversely proportional to the square of the distances; it has a hexagonal crystalline structure; it is composed principally of silicon dioxide; and so forth. This is the mode of being called "present-at-hand" (*Vorhandenheit*) by Heidegger. If this mode is primordial, we face the problem of how this inert piece of quartz can come to be valuable, or acquire usefulness. Does the mind place it in some relationship to other things? Does the mind add on something called "value"? Where do categories like "good," "valuable," "beautiful," and so on come from? And how can I know something so alienated from myself, something that stands over-against-me as object to my subjectivity?

Heidegger argues that these questions are misleading, for the mode of being present-at-hand is derivative from a more primordial mode of Being which he calls "ready-to-hand" (*Zuhandenheit*). In his famous analysis of tools Heidegger shows how we relate to our world as a world of *significance*. When I approach a door and place my hand on the doorknob to enter, I do not first encounter a brass object with a certain shape, mass, weight, and so forth, reflect on how these properties relate to my purpose, and then take the idea of door opener out of a mental bag and affix it to the otherwise inert object.

Rather, I put my hand on a *doorknob*, open the door, and walk in. My primordial mode of relating to the world is by relating to things which are useful, things among which I am "at home." The ready-to-hand is more primordial than the present-at-hand, which is a derivative mode of the former. The latter emerges out of the former through a change of attitude on my part; the thing is looked at in a new light, as an object of contemplation. Another way of seeing this difference is by reflecting on how one first encounters things in the world: One encounters them *as* this or that useful item (on which one might sit or walk, or with which one might hit or move something, or whatever) and it is only by means of a change in one's attitude toward them that they can be taken up *objectively*; the "hermeneutic as" of everyday and unreflective Being-in-the-world precedes and provides the foundation for the "apophantical as," the "as" of the assertion or judgment.²

What does this have to do with temporality? When I approach a doorknob (or a hammer, or a stone, or a word processor) in this most primordial mode, I have projected (*entwerfen*) a possibility of my own Being (my "to-be") on to the ready-to-hand. Its to-be, its what-it-is- to-be, shows something about my own to-be. I exist futurally, stretched along, as it were. I do not simply exist in a succession of nows, like beads on a string, but the now takes its place within my own futurity, in a context set by that futurity. I never have a now without a future surrounding it. And similarly for the past. I am "thrown" into a situation; I always find myself inescapably where and as I am, and I project possibilities of my own Being out of this thrownness. The present emerges out of this intersection of thrownness and projection, of pastness and futurity. *Dasein* exists as a "thrown project."

Such projection is understanding. It is not simply something I do, like hammering a nail; it is constitutive of what it means to be a subject in the first place. Understanding is constitutive of the primordial unity of the world prior to its cleavage into alienated subjects and objects.

Overcoming Alienation

The foregoing reveals a rather different relationship between man and his past than obtains in other approaches. Man's past is no longer alienated from him as something set over against him; it is constitutive of what he is. The past is not simply a present-that-is-no-longer, but that out of which the present emerges. As Gadamer states in *Truth and Method*, "the hermeneutic importance of temporal distance could be understood only as a result of the ontological direction that Heidegger gave to understanding as an 'existential'"—i.e., a kind of "category" applicable to *Dasein* but preceding the categories traditionally applicable to objects, such as substance, extension, causality, and so forth—"and of his temporal interpretation of the mode of to-be of *Dasein*. Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged because it separates, but it is actually the supportive ground of the process in which the present is rooted."³

If understanding is a mode of the Being of *Dasein*, then trying to understand understanding will prove to be not merely a search for methods to improve our understanding, but a science universal and all-encompassing in scope. Hermeneutics, the understanding of understanding, derives from the Greek verb *hermeneuein*, meaning to interpret or translate. (The name of the Greek divine messenger, Hermes, who brings to us and interprets the messages of the Gods, stems from the same root.) The discipline of hermeneutics has traditionally consisted of rules for the appropriate interpretation of garbled, foreign, or otherwise misunderstood texts.

Gadamer takes hermeneutics much farther than it had been taken by its other expositors. For him, hermeneutics is not simply a set of rules or methods for the understanding of texts alienated from the interpreter by temporal or cultural distantiation, but an attempt to ferret out just what happens when we understand. As he writes in *Truth and Method*, "these studies on hermeneutics, which start from the experience of art and of historical tradition, seek to present the hermeneutic phenomenon in its full extent. It is a question of recognizing in it an experience of truth that must not only be justified philosophically, but which is itself a mode of philosophizing. The hermeneutics developed here is not, therefore, a methodology of the human sciences, but an attempt to understand what the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) truly are, beyond their methodological self-consciousness, and what connects them with the totality of our experience of the world."⁴

Within understanding is found a threefold unity of understanding, interpretation, and application. No one element can be purely isolated from the others. Every understanding is more than a simple repetition of something past; it is an interpretation of it by an interpreter. And each interpretation is an application of what is understood in the context of the "thrown-projection" of the interpreter. This is seen most clearly in the case of legal hermeneutics, where to understand the law is to apply it to a concrete situation. When a judge makes a ruling in a case he or she is interpreting a law, but always in a way that fits it to a concrete situation and *develops* the law in its application. Similarly, a play comes to its full existence only when it is staged, or at least read, and in both cases it is interpreted. There is no *Othello* apart from its presentation and interpretation; this is the only way for it to enjoy objectivity. Gadamer shows that this structure is universal; tradition, for example, also exists only in its interpretation and application, and that means in its progressive development.

A Richer Notion of Rationality

One of Gadamer's main aims in *Truth and Method* is to enlarge the scope accorded to rationality, which has for centuries been confined by philosophers to the instrumental use of reason. To take one example, David Hume remarked that "reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them," and that "actions

may be laudable or blameable; but they cannot be reasonable or unreasonable."⁵ Hume is certainly not the only philosopher to reduce reason to a mere instrument of the passions, and is equally not the only one with whom Gadamer takes issue.

Against this kind of limited conception of reason, Gadamer seeks to expand the scope of rationality. In doing so he draws on the distinction between theoretical and practical wisdom elaborated by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and elsewhere. An examination of several Gadamerian themes will serve to bring out this richer understanding of rationality.

First, Gadamer challenges the "prejudice against prejudices" inherited from the Enlightenment. Prejudice is associated with authority and slavish obedience to the views, whimsies, or conceits of others. Gadamer devotes a good deal of *Truth and Method* to rehabilitating authority and tradition as sources of truth, and with them the concept of prejudice, which he situates within a more expansive notion of rationality. As Gadamer notes,

within the enlightenment, the very concept of authority becomes deformed. On the basis of its concept of reason and freedom, the concept of authority could be seen as diametrically opposed to reason and freedom: to be, in fact, blind obedience. This is the meaning that we know, from the usage of their critics, within modern dictatorships.

But this is not the essence of authority. It is true that it is primarily persons that have authority; but the authority of persons is based ultimately, not on the subjection and abdication of reason, but on recognition and knowledge—knowledge, namely, that the other is superior to oneself in judgment and insight and that for this reason his judgment takes precedence, i.e., it has priority over one's own. This is connected with the fact that authority cannot actually be bestowed, but is acquired and must be acquired, if someone is to lay claim to it. It rests on recognition and hence on an act of reason itself which, aware of its own limitations, accepts that others have better understanding. Authority in this sense, properly understood, has nothing to do with blind obedience to a command. Indeed, authority has nothing to do with obedience, but rather with knowledge.⁶

The alleged antithesis between tradition and authority, on the one hand, and reason, on the other, does not exist. In this respect, as in many others, Gadamer's thinking closely parallels that of F. A. Hayek. As Gadamer points out,

there is no such unconditional antithesis between tradition and reason. . . . Tradition is constantly an element of freedom and of history itself. Even the most genuine and solid tradition does not persist by nature because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated. It is, essentially, preservation, such as is active in all historical change. But preservation is an act of reason, though an in-

conspicuous one. For this reason, only what is new, or what is planned, appears as the result of reason. But this is an illusion.⁷

Thus, institutions such as moral customs and language can embody a kind of rationality that stands in contradiction to the constricted scope accorded to reason by what Hayek calls "constructivist rationalism."

In fact, prejudice, in the sense of the *praejudicium*, or the preliminary and provisional judgment of the law courts, is not only *not* an obstacle to understanding; it is its necessary condition. In light of Heidegger's ontological analysis of understanding, Gadamer sees prejudice as that out of which we project our understanding. It is constitutive of our Being in the world; without it, there could be no understanding whatsoever.

Just as F. A. Hayek has shown that explicitly articulated planning could never substitute for the "unplanned" workings of the free society, the prejudices that make us up can never be made fully transparent to us. We can never rise above our thrownness to a position that is outside of history, as Hegel thought he had. (This limitation is what Gadamer refers to as our "finitude.") Just as for Hayek the mores, customs, and traditions which unconsciously but ineluctably shape our actions are liberating rather than stifling, in that they allow us to take advantage of the experiences of generations upon generations of our predecessors without actually having to undergo those experiences anew and on our own, so for Gadamer we enjoy the freedom and possibilities of reason that we do enjoy because of the tradition within which we live and the language that we speak.

This lack of self-transparency, or inability to rise above a position that is unprejudiced or (in terms more common in discussing such matters) "theory neutral," points toward the role of tacit, or unarticulated, knowledge in human life. Gadamer draws here upon the distinction Aristotle makes between theoretical and practical wisdom.

Phronesis, or practical wisdom, differs from theoretical wisdom by the sphere over which it is exercised: theoretical wisdom is knowledge of the unchanging, of being, while practical wisdom is knowledge of the changeable, of the contingent, of *what is for the most part*.⁸ Thus, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle speaks of the "mean" as the aim of human action; and, in an approach to difficult problems that is typical of Aristotle, he displays this structure of human action against an appropriate foil, in this case, the mathematical mean. The mathematical mean between 2 and 8 is 4 (2:4::4:8), but that does not mean that the appropriate amount of food to eat when offered between 2 pounds and 8 pounds is always 4 pounds.⁹ As Aristotle points out, the mathematical mean for quantities of food might be too small a portion for Milo, a famous wrestler of the time, but "a large one for a man just beginning to go in for athletics."¹⁰ In one of the most beautiful literary sweeps in the history of philosophical thought about human life, Aristotle displays the changeable and contextual "mean relative to us" against this foil of the mathematical mean,

which is eternal and unchanging. He is thus able to define virtue as "a disposition of choice determining the choice of actions and emotions, consisting essentially in the observance of the mean relative to us, this being determined by principle (*logos*), that is, as the prudent man [*phronimos*, or the one who has *phronesis*] would determine it."¹¹

Aristotle does not provide us with any clear and unambiguous rules of conduct; there is no algorithm of right action. What he can and does do is to display the structure of moral action and show the way in which it points to the *phronimos* (the prudent man); he cannot make the knowledge, or the Being, of the *phronimos* fully transparent to consciousness. But he does not leave the determination of right action, of deliberative choice, to a non-rational faculty of desiring, or to the passions. Choice (*prohairesis*) is governed by a *logos*, that is, by a principle or reason, but a reason that is embodied in a human agent. And that governance does not extend merely over the "means" by which the ends are to be attained, but to the recognition of the ends as well. Indeed, for Aristotle the strict separation between means and ends does not exist. They are moments to each other, as the concave is to the convex. What is commonly translated in Aristotle as "the means" is actually better translated as "the toward"; the end shows up in, and cannot be separated from, the "means," or that which is "toward" it. (Notice how strongly redolent this is of the earlier discussion of the "ready-to-hand" of Heidegger's existential analytic of *Da-sein*; prior to the cleavage of the world into alienated subjects and objects, there is a primordial unity, encompassing what are only later [ontologically, not necessarily temporally] reflectively distinguished as "means" and "ends.")

Aristotle thus sees rationality as governing much more of life than most modern philosophers are willing to allow. Gadamer follows Aristotle in showing that it is fallacious to hold that since our prejudices cannot be made fully explicit and transparent they must be denied any status as sources of truth and understanding.

Two other Gadamerian themes deserve consideration. They are (1) experience and its dialectical structure and (2) the "fusion of horizons" which makes it possible for us to understand each other. While we are all of us inescapably *historical* beings, formed by our histories and the traditions within which we live (and which live through us), we are nevertheless not simply locked into our separate minds (or worlds); we are capable, if not of complete self-transcendence, of something else: we can "fuse our horizons" with those of our interlocutors. In conversation, for example, we can put our prejudices "at risk" through an openness to the perspective, or world-horizon, or another. We can come to a fusion of horizons with others, to true understanding, without having to ascend together to the ahistorical standpoint of the Hegelian Absolute.

Consciousness is incapable of raising itself to the status of absolute consciousness, or consciousness without presuppositions: it is always within a given horizon. It is in the very nature of the process of learning and experience that the horizon of experiencing consciousness changes. From such

changes arise tradition. The history of such change leaves an ineliminable residue within consciousness. It is this residue which constitutes what Gadamer calls "effective-historical consciousness" or "consciousness exposed to history" (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*), and it is the awareness of this ineliminable residue which caps the hermeneutical experience.

The Structure of Experience

Gadamer's discussion of hermeneutical experience leads him to an examination of experience in general, in which he appropriates the horizons of Aristotle and Hegel and brings out the truth of both.

An experience of any kind has a certain kind of structure. As Aristotle elaborates in his *Metaphysics* and in his book on science, the *Posterior Analytics*, the unity of experience emerges out of the manifold of perceptions. In the *Metaphysics*, he says that "it is from memory that men acquire experience (*empeiria*), because the numerous memories of the same thing eventually produce the ability (*dunamis*) of a single experience. Experience seems very similar to science and art, but actually it is through experience that men acquire science and art. . . ." ¹² Aristotle does not denigrate experience, but does show how it is in some ways superior to *logos*: "It would seem that for practical purposes experience is in no way inferior to art; indeed we see men of experience succeeding more than those who have *logos* without experience. The reason of this is that experience is knowledge of particulars, but art of universals; and actions and the effects produced are all concerned with the particular. For it is not man that the physician cures, except incidentally, but Callias or Socrates or some other man similarly named, who is incidentally a man as well. So if a man has *logos* without experience, and knows the universal, but does not know the particular contained in it, he will often fail in his treatment; for it is the particular that must be treated." ¹³ (Nevertheless, Aristotle places the man of art and science above the man of mere experience because the former knows the cause, while the latter does not.)

The unity of an experience which emerges out of the multiplicity of perception stands, one might say, halfway between the universality of theory, of science (*episteme*), and the particularity of perception. Out of perception and through memory the unity of experience is formed. But how? Aristotle offers us a remarkable metaphor in the last chapter of his *Posterior Analytics*. (He is searching for the origin of the principles of a science, the principles which are assumed as true by its practitioners and which allow them to arrange truths in the syllogistic form of the demonstration (*apodeixis*), which demonstration brings forth or displays the causal dimension of the Being of the subject of the science. Since for Aristotle scientific knowledge is knowledge of causes and scientific knowledge cannot be acquired by sense perception, it must be acquired through a special kind of scientific inquiry, namely, through demonstrative syllogisms.)

"Thus," Aristotle explains, "sense perception gives rise to memory, as we hold: and repeated memories of the same thing give rise to experience: because the memories, though numerically many, constitute a single experience. And experience, that is the universal when come to rest as a whole in the soul—the One that corresponds to the Many, the unity that is identically present in them all—provides the starting-point of art and science: art in that which concerns becoming and science in that which concerns being. Thus, these faculties are neither innate as determinate and fully developed, nor derived from other developed faculties on a higher plane of knowledge; they arise from sense-perception, just as, when a retreat has occurred in battle, if one man halts so does another, and then another, until the original position is restored."¹⁴ This "coming to a halt" is the process of induction, and it provides the grounds for art and science through the unity which it brings forth out of the multiplicitous perception of particulars.

But this structure of experience, while it allows us to understand the emergence of unity out of multiplicity, is incomplete. As Gadamer remarks, Aristotle's "image describes this process, but it describes it under over-simplified conditions. As if one could automatically give a straightforward account of experience that contained no contradictions! Aristotle here presupposes that what persists in the flight of observations and emerges as a universal is, in fact, something common to them: the universality of the concept is, for him, ontologically prior. What concerns Aristotle about experience is merely its contribution to the formation of concepts."¹⁵

It is to Hegel, Gadamer affirms, that we must look for a corrective to this one-sided concern with confirmation. Experience is dialectical, proceeding (like dialogue) by way of contradiction and what Hegel calls "determinate negation." In negating a concept, a new concept emerges. Negation is more than a mere "not," but is positively productive of something new. As Gadamer remarks, "Whether the movement of experience is realized as an expansion into the manifoldness of the contents or as the emergence of continually new forms of mind, the necessity of which is understood by philosophical science, in any case it is a reversal of consciousness. Hegel's dialectical description of experience has some truth."¹⁶

In this way, the importance of the temporality and historicity of man is emphasized by Gadamer. Truth emerges in time; it is not static and eternal, but dynamic and emergent. Here he uses Hegel's own insights against Hegel. Contrary to Hegel's assertions in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that "the True is the whole"—i.e., that what something *is* is known only after history has run its course and the philosopher, who stands in the position of the Absolute, can see its relation to the whole of history—Gadamer insists on the finitude of human existence. While for Hegel "the true shape in which truth exists can only be the scientific system of such truth," because just as the meaning of the whole is dependent on the meaning of the part, so is the meaning of the part dependent on the meaning of the whole, for Gadamer *that whole is never completed*; history never comes to an end.

The hermeneutic insight that the part derives its meaning from the whole and the whole from the part (as, for example, with respect to the parts and the whole of this sentence, and of this sentence in the paragraph) is fulfilled for Hegel in the closure of the whole of history through its attainment of the Absolute. But Gadamer takes the theme of temporality further than Hegel; Being and truth emerge temporally and exist in no other form. Thus, the meaning of an historical event, rather than being fixed by the closure of the whole of history, is subject to change as history continues. There is no closure to historical process.

This provides a powerful rebuke to those totalitarian theorists who claim to enjoy the privilege of having attained to the Absolute and seen the fixed meaning of history, with which they are determined to strangle the rest of us. But more, it is intimately connected with Gadamer's notion of experience, adumbrated in the preceding paragraphs. The truly experienced man is not the one who "knows it all," but the one who retains "that openness to experience that is encouraged by experience itself."¹⁷

Conversation as Model

Here, in his examination of the structure of the hermeneutical experience, Gadamer brings forth its essential characteristic: it is an experience of a "Thou," of another person. In our relationship to tradition, to the texts, words, and deeds of the past, we do not simply seek to understand them in the sense of re-creating the mental processes that were undergone by others in the past. To do so degrades that which we seek to understand to the status of a mere object, of a thing. Rather, we properly seek to understand the *truth* of what tradition tells us.

Gadamer holds up as an archetype for this understanding the model of the conversation. In a true conversation I do not simply seek to find out what you think (perhaps to use it against you, as in a police interrogation), but to understand the truth you are uttering and to place my own prejudices at risk through my openness to what you have to say. Gadamer uses this relationship of the 'I' and the 'Thou' to illustrate the highest form of hermeneutical experience, the openness to the truth of tradition, of "allowing the validity of the claim made by tradition, not in the sense of simply acknowledging the past in its otherness, but in such a way that it has something to say to me."¹⁸

We do not say that two people are in a dialogue when one is beating another insensate, i.e., when one is treating the other as a mere thing:

In human relations the important thing is, as we have seen, to experience the 'Thou' truly as a 'Thou,' i.e., not to overlook his claim and to listen to what he has to say to us. To this end, openness is necessary. But this openness exists ultimately not only for the person to whom one listens, but rather anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without this kind

of openness to one another there is no genuine human relationship. Belonging together always means being able to listen to one another. When two people understand each other, this does not mean that one person "understands" the other, in the sense of surveying him. Similarly, to hear and obey someone does not mean simply that we do blindly what the other desires. We call such a person a slave."

Social Implications

Thus, the model of conversation provides a norm for social intercourse. It is persuasion, not coercion and manipulation, that characterizes the proper relationship of one life to another. What consequences can we glean from this for political theory?

We have already seen that Gadamer effectively legitimates kinds of knowledge that are not susceptible to reduction to consciously articulated plans. This resembles Hayek's defense of the market economy against the common criticism that it is irrational because it is "unplanned." Advocates of the free market point out that the market incorporates the plans of billions of separate individuals. But it remains the case that the overall outcome is not the consciously intended result of any plan. It is the "result of human action, but not of human design." Such is also the case with language, with cultural traditions and mores, indeed, with most of human life. But that does not make these forms of life irrational. What is revealed in this charge is not the irrationality of the market economy or of natural language, but the impoverished notion of rationality exhibited by critics of these social institutions.

The unplanned price system of the market is, indeed, far *more* rational than the decrees of bureaucrats, planning ministries, regulatory commissions, or dictators. A single price incorporates billions of knowledge contributions more effectively and usefully than any large-scale computer model. If, for example, a spate of forest fires diminishes the supply of timber in some remote area, the resulting bidding up of the price by entrepreneurs will convey more information about supply conditions (meaning, along with fires, weather conditions, disease, and every other factor affecting the supply of timber) to the relevant decision-makers in the furniture, toothpick, paper, and construction industries than any central planning system ever could.

But there is more here than simply a defense of the rationality of unarticulated forms of life. For the model of conversation upheld by Gadamer as the norm for human intercourse is *exemplified* in the free market economy.

While Gadamer does not mention Adam Smith, his views mesh neatly with those of the Scottish philosopher. Smith's concerns went far beyond the kinds of technical questions often associated with economics in the twentieth century and embraced the whole of man's moral life. In a famous passage in his *An*

Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations. Smith discusses the origin of the division of labor. In the process he brings out both of the elements we have discussed above: the “unplanned” nature of social organization and the normative status of persuasion:

This division of labour, from which so many advantages are derived, is not originally the effect of any human wisdom, which foresees and intends that general opulence to which it gives occasion. It is the necessary, though very slow and gradual consequence of a certain propensity in human nature which has in view no such extensive utility; the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another.

Whether this propensity be one of those original principles in human nature, of which no further account can be given; or whether, as seems more probable, it be the necessary consequence of the faculties of reason and speech, it belongs not to our present subject to enquire.²⁰

In *The Wealth of Nations* Smith was reluctant for reasons of space to explore the foundations of the “propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another,” but he was more forthcoming on this topic in his lectures. In his lecture of Wednesday, March 30, 1763, Smith stated, “If we should enquire into the principle in the human mind on which this disposition of trucking is founded, it is clearly on the natural inclination every one has to persuade. The offering of a shilling, which to us appears to have so plain and simple a meaning, is in reality offering an argument to persuade one to do so and so as it is for his interest. Men always endeavour to persuade others to be of their opinion even when the matter is of no consequence to them.”²¹

A free market economy is a kind of grand conversation, made possible by man’s faculties of reason and speech. The market is not, however, merely a very efficient device for integrating disparate bits of economic data, as many neo-classical economists consider it. It is not simply an information collating system. Rather, it is a forum for *persuasion*. Persuasion is an essential element in our understanding of the market process because the preferences of suppliers and consumers are not merely *data* (simply the Latin term for “givens”) to be input into a vast calculating mechanism, thereby yielding a fully determinate result that was implicit initially. Instead, the market exchange process is better illumined by the light cast by rhetoric, the art of persuasion (and one of Gadamer’s favorite examples of a process not reducible to explicitly articulated rules). There was no “given” demand for portable computers, video games, genetic engineering, or CD players, to take four recent examples, before they were developed by inventor/entrepreneurs who “created” (i.e., persuaded) the demand for them. In such cases, the end result could not have been implicit in the “initial” conditions, which did not include *any* demand for these items.

As the Nobel laureate economist and pioneer of public choice theory James Buchanan remarks,

the "order" of the market emerges *only* from the *process* of voluntary exchange among the participating individuals. The "order" is, itself, defined as the outcome of the *process* that defines it. The "it," the allocation-distribution result, does not, and cannot, exist independently of the trading process. Absent this process, there is and can be no "order."

What, then, [is meant] when the order generated by market interaction is made comparable to that order which might emerge from an omniscient, designing single mind? If pushed on this question, economists would say that if the designer could somehow know the utility functions of all participants, along with the constraints, such a mind could, by fiat, duplicate precisely the results that would emerge from the process of market adjustment. By implication, individuals are presumed to carry around with them fully-determined utility functions, and, in the market, they act always to maximize utilities subject to the constraints they confront. As I have noted elsewhere, however, in this presumed setting, there is no genuine choice behavior on the part of anyone. In this model of market process, the relative efficiency of institutional arrangements allowing for spontaneous adjustment stems solely from the *informational* aspects.

This emphasis is misleading. Individuals do not act so as to maximize utilities described in *independently-existing functions*. They confront genuine choices, and the sequence of decisions taken may be conceptualized, *ex post* (after the choices), in terms of "as if" functions that are maximized. But these "as if" functions are, themselves, generated in the choosing process, not separately from such process. If viewed in this perspective, there is no means by which even the most idealized omniscient designer could duplicate the results of voluntary interchange. The potential participants *do not know until they enter the process* what their own choices will be. From this it follows that it is *logically impossible* for an omniscient designer to know, unless, of course, we are to preclude individual freedom of the will. . . . In economics, even among many of those who remain strong advocates of market and market-like organization, the "efficiency" that such market arrangements produce is independently conceptualized. Market arrangements then become "means," which may or may not be relatively best. Until and unless this teleological element is fully exorcised from basic economic theory, economists are likely to remain confused and their discourse confusing.²²

Thus, a dynamic focus on persuasion provides a far more faithful account of the market *process* than the static model of information collation embraced by many neo-classical economists.

Such a focus also illuminates the relationship between liberty and tradition. Those who assail liberty for being destructive of venerable and long-standing traditions, on account of the constant change which liberty allows, fail to

understand Gadamer's point about the moment of application as a part of understanding. A tradition is alive only when it is *freely applied* to new situations. Tradition must constantly be reaffirmed, and in its reaffirmation, it changes. To freeze a tradition through coercion is to kill it. The position most consistent with keeping tradition alive is liberty, not coercion.

Even more is at stake than a *defense* of liberty. The critical element within hermeneutics poses a challenge: to systematically seek out and destroy relationships among humans that are coercive and oppressive. Tradition can contain within itself not only forms of liberation but also forms of slavery, of the perpetuated and legitimated oppression of one group by another. As Gadamer never tires of pointing out, however, the perpetuation of tradition is not merely a matter of dogmatic or rote repetition. For in the openness to tradition, as to another person, the critical function of reason is not anesthetized. It remains functional in the activity of human agency, in that all-important moment of *application* whereby the changing life of tradition is maintained.

Criticism proceeds according to standards, whether explicitly articulated or not. Within the exemplary model of the experience of another person—the experience in which we learn from and not simply about another—is a normative claim which can guide criticism in its appropriation/application of tradition. Not all traditions are to be maintained simply because they are old, but only those forged in the crucible of freedom. It is from this crucible that man as rational being emerges at his best. It is this standard of liberty which provides the touchstone for criticism.

Thus, exploitation can and should be rooted out by means of a criticism which both recognizes the legitimacy of tradition and its power of transmitting the truth of experience, and at the same time distinguishes between experiences of freedom and experiences of slavery and exploitation. Within the hermeneutic enterprise we find the necessity of criticism as a moment of understanding; within that same enterprise can emerge a standard of free intercourse among rational beings to guide that criticism.²³

NOTES

1. This is, essentially, Husserl's much celebrated phenomenology of internal time consciousness, his attempt to work out the way in which transcendental subjectivity—the ultimate substrate which constitutes objectivity—is itself constituted as a unity out of the multiplicitous flow of the contents of consciousness. For a clear and non-jargonistic account of internal time consciousness, see Robert Sokolowski, *Husserlian Meditations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1975), ch. 6.
2. "The primordial 'as' of an interpretation (*hermeneia*) which understands circumspectively we call the 'existential-hermeneutical "as"' in distinction from the 'apophantical "as"' of the assertion." Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 201. See also Edmund Husserl's

Formal and Transcendental Logic (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1978), especially ch. 5, for an examination of the derivative nature of the judgment.

3. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Co., 1982), 264. I have made a few minor changes in the translation, as I will occasionally do with other passages from Gadamer.

The only edition of this work currently available in English is a mess. Key word families are translated into English with no sense that they are related and are intended to be evocative of each other (e.g., *Wirkungsgeschichte*, effective history, and *Wirklichkeit*, reality, or *zuhören*, to listen, and *Zugehörigkeit*, belongingness). Critically important words are not distinguished: *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* are both translated simply as "experience," with no sense of their subtle and important differences. Not only is the translation a problem: typographical errors crop up throughout the book, including missing lines of type which render whole paragraphs unintelligible.

For these reasons it is most useful to have a good commentary when reading the English translation. Fortunately, Joel C. Weinsheimer's recent book, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) nicely fills that role. Not only does he explicate a difficult text, but his chapter on "Hermeneutics and the Natural Sciences" provides a useful comparison to work in the philosophy of science which appeared after Gadamer's work.

4. *Ibid.*, xiii.
5. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised edition by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 415, 458.
6. *Truth and Method*, 248.
7. *Ibid.*, 250.
8. When Aristotle considers the topic of choice and deliberation, he remarks, "The deliberated-about presumably must not be taken to include things about which a fool or a madman might deliberate, but to mean what a sensible person would deliberate about. Well, then, nobody deliberates about things eternal, such as the order of the universe, or the incommensurability of the diagonal and the side of a square. . . . We deliberate about things that are in us [or, 'in our control'] and are doable." *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1112a20-31.
9. I have used the example of what we would call a mathematical mean, while Aristotle uses an arithmetical progression in his example; the principle is the same, however.
10. 1106b4.
11. 1107b36-1108a3. This is an appropriate place to mention the false charge of relativism—or at least of providing the slippery slope toward nihilism—often hurled at Gadamer. This charge is simply evidence of the effects of the post-Cartesian heritage on ethical thought; Descartes's re-

liance on the evidence of "clear and distinct," and therefore more fully articulated, thoughts has poisoned ethics ever since by making such distinctness a requirement for truth. For Aristotle there is no algorithm of choice, but there undeniably *are* the prudent man and the excellent or good man, toward whose standard right action is oriented. So for Gadamer, while the understanding of the law requires interpretation by the judge and its application to a concrete case (as discussed above), there is still *a law* which is interpreted and applied. His view is as distant from nihilism as can be imagined.

It is common to hear the charge that Gadamer dissolves the text completely into its application; the plain fact is, however, that while Gadamer's *corrective stress* has been on the moment of application, the *identity* of the text in its presentations and interpretations is no less important for him. The influence of Husserl's work on ideal objectivity on Gadamer is clear, but a full threshing-out of that issue must await another essay. For now, I refer the reader to the section of *Truth and Method* on legal hermeneutics (especially pp. 293–294, where it is clearly stated that the application of the law is certainly not arbitrary *where there is a law*, as opposed to under conditions of absolute despotism, where the capricious will of the despot is the final say; under such despotic conditions, there is no role for legal hermeneutics.) For an illuminating discussion of this issue, see the confrontation between Gadamer and Jacques Derrida in Philippe Forget (ed.), *Text und Interpretation: Deutsch-französische Debatte* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1984).

12. 980b28–981a1.
13. 981a13–24.
14. 100a4–13.
15. *Truth and Method*, 316.
16. *Ibid.*, 318.
17. *Ibid.*, 319.
18. *Ibid.*, 324. It is this principle which serves as the source of Gadamerian criticism. Those (the German neo-Marxist Jürgen Habermas foremost among them) who declare that Gadamer's thought, while useful, contains no foundation for criticism and that it is fundamentally conservative and uncritical toward the inheritance from the past, are mistaken. The normative foundation for criticism provided by Gadamer is enormously powerful, as we shall see.
19. *Ibid.*, 324.
20. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. Glasgow Edition, 1976), 25.
21. Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. Glasgow Edition, 1978), 352.
22. James M. Buchanan, "Order Defined in the Process of its Emergence," *Literature of Liberty* 5, no. 4 (Winter, 1982): 5.
23. An example of such a critical enterprise is found in Alexander Rüstow's

major work, *Freedom and Domination: A Historical Critique of Civilization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). Rüstow seeks to expose to critical reason those inherited traditions of domination which provide the foundations for totalitarianism: "Those arrested by the Gestapo were not manacled merely by actual handcuffs; long before, invisible chains had prevented them from resisting what they thought of as divinely ordained authority." For Rüstow, this presents a serious challenge, one which can only be carried out through history: "All of us, without exception, carry this inherited poison within us, in the most varied and unexpected places and in the most diverse forms, often defying perception. All of us, collectively and individually, are accessories to this great sin of all time, this real original sin, a hereditary fault that can be excised and erased only with great difficulty and slowly by an insight into pathology, by a will to recover, by the active remorse of all."