

THE ENLIGHTENING PERSPECTIVE:
A HERMENEUTIC TRUTH CRITERION

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I first encountered Gadamer's hermeneutics during Werner Marx's Hermeneutik Seminar in Freiburg. The first reading left me with the belief that Gadamer's project was doomed. His arguments against absolute truth and the scientific method and for a linguistic-historic, perspectival truth seemed to imply that truth could not be justified. I added my small voice to those of Betti, Hirsch, Apel, and Habermas, among others, who argue that Gadamer's epistemology leads finally to complete relativism where truth and falsity are indistinguishable in any meaningful sense or that truth is reduced to a dogmatic assertion.

Several years later when I returned to seriously question Gadamer's theory, I could not rid myself of the feeling that I had missed something. Gadamer's central concern was to provide a philosophical account for truth claims in the humanities. Furthermore, he concludes *Truth and Method* asserting:

What the tool of method does not achieve must--and actually can--be achieved by a discipline of questioning and investigating, a discipline that attests to [*verbüergen*] truth.¹

'*Verbüergen*' means to warrant something's truth, accuracy or certainty; to guarantee it or attest to it.

If one is to be able to attest to or guarantee truth and this is not accomplished by means of following a method, it would seem likely that there would need to be a mark or sign to indicate the true from the false, i.e. a truth criterion.

Sympathetic commentators, such as David Hoy and Jean Grondin, contend that Gadamer can identify a historical, non-absolute truth while avoiding the pitfall of complete relativism. Hoy may be identifying a truth criterion, although this is not asserted, when he writes:

The only judge of the appropriateness of the context of one interpretation may be another interpretation, and perhaps 'truth' in these matters is closely connected to (although it can never entirely be reduced to) 'success'--that is, intersubjective agreement on the usefulness of the interpretations and their assumptions.²

Grondin argues that Gadamer relinquishes any claim to a hermeneutic truth criterion.³ As the epigraph of his work, Grondin cites the following passage from Gadamer's "Replik zu 'Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik:'"

Hermeneutic reflective consciousness [*hermeneutische Reflexion*] is limited to laying open possibilities of cognition which, without this reflection, would not be perceived. It does not itself provide a truth criterion.⁴

With such evidence it would appear difficult to argue for a hermeneutic truth criterion. However, I will try to demonstrate that there is an implicit truth criterion. I will first discuss the legitimization of *Vorurteile* (prejudgments) which is central to my interpretation of Gadamer. Then I will discuss the relationship between prejudgments and language. In the final part, the element which permits the legitimization of prejudgments will be identified as the hermeneutic truth criterion and a reading of the above passage will be suggested.

The Legitimization of Prejudgments

Basic to Gadamer's and Heidegger's hermeneutics is the idea that all cognitive acts begin in a pre-understanding. Whatever is to be examined is initially grasped by one's pre-understanding. The ever-present effect of the pre-understanding prohibits any possible direct or immediate cognition. Gadamer terms the elements of the pre-understanding *Vorurteile* (prejudgments).⁵

To begin his theoretic discussion of hermeneutic experience (WM 251; TM 236), Gadamer quotes Heidegger's statement that a vicious circularity within understanding can only be avoided when the prejudgments are founded upon the things themselves, *die Sachen selbst*, and not upon fancies or popular conceptions.⁶ Gadamer's task, therefore, is to explain the legitimization of the prejudgments during the process of understanding by demonstrating how they are grounded in the things themselves or subject matter.⁷ That which permits such a grounding, I will argue, is the hermeneutic truth criterion.

Prejudgments are inherited during acculturation and especially in learning a language. They form one's horizon of possible meaning. To be able to criticize or legitimize prejudgments one must be able to call them into question. This occurs when one prejudgment is faced with an opposing prejudgment.

Take an elementary example. Suppose one sees the marks, 'S,' 'i,' 'e,' 'n.' How is it that one almost immediately understands them to constitute a word 'Sein?' Can one claim that one is somehow directly reading what is there? Why should these marks

constitute a word? This is surely what we expect. Is it not the case, however, that we expect this just because we have used a prejudgment to the effect that we are reading? Clearly something else could have been the case. In Wittgenstein's terminology, there could have been another language game. Perhaps these are different orders to bring different building materials. What of the further interpretation that these marks are supposed to be the German word 'Sein,' but that there is a misspelling here. This surely depends on prejudgments that in fact the German language is the proper one to consider and on many other prejudgments about German syntax. This illustrates that all understanding begins with some set of prejudgments.

For Gadamer, the primary way in which one is confronted by opposing prejudgments is through the examination of past texts. In interpreting a text, one must project (that is, infer) the meaning or prejudgments of a text. Every projecting of a text's meaning is relative to a particular question horizon and set of prejudgments contained in the interpreter's linguistic and historic horizon. Further, Gadamer argues that reflective consciousness cannot transcend its own position in history. It is unable to escape from the influence of its horizon of prejudgments to some absolute horizon of meaning. Therefore one is unable to discover and justify a historically independent truth.

What Gadamer does conclude from the experience of interpretive understanding is that the projecting and comparing of prejudgments is a dialectic of question and answer. It is a dialogue between the interpreter and the inherited text. He argues that all understanding occurs in the medium of language. Prejudgments are linguistic.

In as much as every correct understanding of a text consists in the process of bringing the meaning of the text into the interpreter's language, and in as much as the language of different interpreters at different times can be significantly different, and since there is no absolute position, Gadamer concludes:

There cannot therefore be a correct interpretation 'in itself' precisely because every interpretation concerns the text itself. The historical life of tradition consists in its dependency on ever new appropriations and interpretations (WM 375; TM 358).

To illustrate, consider the following example. Heidegger writes in "What is Metaphysics:"

What rather happens is that Nothing shows itself as essentially belonging to what-is while this is slipping away in totality.⁸

Suppose a reader who is having trouble understanding what to

make of the passage: "Nothing shows itself as essentially belonging to what-is." Suppose further that this reader has the conscious prejudgments that 'Nothing' means the same thing as 'What-is-not' and that means the same thing as the negation of 'What-is.' Since this reader further understands 'essentially belonging to' to mean 'is essentially' his initial interpretation of the phrase is that Heidegger writes 'what-is-not is essentially what-is.' To the well-trained analytic mind of our reader this is clearly a contradiction of the simplest sort. Perhaps our admittedly naive reader holds his head in a moment of thought and then decides that there is nothing to be gained by a further pondering of the enigmatic German. The book is set aside. Has Heidegger had a fair hearing? In projecting the meaning of a text the interpreter should try to make sense of the text. In this case, the prejudgment could be made that 'nothing' does not mean the negation of what is, but rather it means something which is prior to and the foundation of all negation. This would, at least, avoid the contradiction.

Language and Prejudgments

How can the interpreter claim one prejudgment to be correct or true as opposed to the other? In order to answer this question the relationship between language and the *Sachen selbst* (things themselves) must be understood. It must be remembered that Heidegger and Gadamer claimed that a vicious circularity in understanding can be avoided only if the prejudgments can be grounded upon the things themselves and not upon opinions.

Concerning the word and the object referred to, Gadamer claims that the subject does not already know the truth (that is, the referent of the word) and then search for the correct word to express this truth either in the sense of agreeing upon a sign or in the sense of discovering its natural image or copy in language. The subject does not discover some existing thing and give it meaning. Gadamer asserts:

Rather the ideality of meaning lies in the word itself. It is always already meaning (WM 394; TM 377).

The connection between the word and its object occurs in experiencing the object. Gadamer continues:

Experience is not at first wordless and then becomes an object of reflection by being named, perhaps by being subsumed under the universal of the word. Rather it belongs to experience itself that it seeks and finds the words that express it. One

seeks the correct word, that is, the word that truly belongs to the thing [*Sache*], so that thereby the thing itself comes into language (WM 394; TM 377).

Gadamer claims further that it is primarily an *act* of the thing itself to present itself in language. It is the speculative act of self-presentation by the thing itself--it's coming-to-be-in-language (WM 450; TM 432). This is what is experienced by the cognizer.

In order to understand the extent to which a thing can come into language, it is necessary to briefly examine Gadamer's discussions of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Edmund Husserl. Humboldt's thesis which Gadamer incorporates is that differences among different languages cause different world views or perspectives of the world (*Weltansichten*) to be experienced by those speaking that language (See WM 419; TM 401).

Each individual language, that is linguistic perspective (*Sprachansicht*), presents a specific perspective of the world, *Weltansicht*. In as much as there is a common language, the speakers already have a common perspective. It is their linguistic inheritance. If at any particular time language were to be frozen, then one's language would limit what could be known, but since language is potentially changeable, one's knowledge as expressed in language is not bounded. Gadamer states:

One's own linguistic world [*Sprachwelt*], in which one lives, is not a barrier which hinders the cognition of the being-in-itself [*Ansichsein*], rather it encompasses all to which our insight [*Einsicht*] can be enlarged and deepened (WM 423; TM 405).

The relationship between the cognizer and the thing itself is accomplished in the medium of language. Any particular language is only a particular perspective of the world, and although it may be expanded to include any other, it cannot completely express the thing itself in totality. There is no perfect human language. However, the possibility of comparing linguistic perspectives and thereby constituting a new perspective in dialogue, permits language to express any development in knowledge. But there is no world in itself able to be experienced by humans which could function as a criterion for truth and objectivity. The interpreter cannot cognize the thing itself in totality but only that aspect of it which comes to be expressed in that language (*Sprachansicht*).

In order to clarify the meaning of the perspective of the world in relation to the world in itself, Gadamer turns from Humboldt to draw an analogy to Husserl's discussion of the perception of objects. In the passage referred to, Husserl describes the sense

perceptions of a table as one walks around it.⁹ Each sense perception is different, if ever so slightly. One sees different sides, color shadings, etc. These differing sense perceptions are termed *Abschattungen* (shadings or perspectives). Analogous for Gadamer is that just as one can speak of the perceptual perspectives, one can speak of the linguistic perspectives which are expressions of the world as it is differently experienced (WM 424; TM 406).

This means that each particular linguistic perspective, that is *Sprachansicht*, presents a different and *incomplete* picture of the world in itself. It presents a perspective of the world in itself, just as the different sense perceptions present a different perspective of the transphenomenal thing-in-itself, e.g. the table.

Gadamer notes two essential differences to Husserl in this analogy. First, Husserl has a transcendental consciousness constituting the intentional object (table), while for Gadamer there is no such consciousness (analogous to an a-historical, absolute point of view) able to connect the differing perspectives of the thing to form the thing in itself. There is no absolute position.

Second, for Husserl the different perspectives in sense perception are distinct; one particular perspective cannot change to include others. The unification of the perspectives is an act of intentional consciousness. However, for Gadamer each perspective is linguistic, and it is a characteristic of language to be able to develop and include other perspectives. So any one perspective (*Sprachansicht*) may contain any other one potentially.

This discussion demonstrates that the 'complete' truth concerning a thing itself is only *partially* experienced and expressible. It is only a perspective of the thing itself, *Ansicht der Sache selbst*, which is expressible in the words of that linguistic perspective (*Sprachansicht*).

The ontological significance of language is that the thing itself presents itself and its truth in so far as it is realizable, as a perspective (*Ansicht*) of itself. What remains is to connect the prejudgments with this expression in language.

A Hermeneutic Truth Criterion

How does the cognizer come to recognize the correct expression of the thing itself which is the truth of that thing in his or her language? How is this expression as truth to be distinguished from other expressions which are false since they do not express this perspective (*Ansicht*) of the thing itself? And finally, how does the cognizer legitimize the prejudgments by founding them on the thing itself?

The essence of Gadamer's answers to these questions is that the *Ansicht der Sache selbst* (the perspective of the thing itself) is *einleuchtend* (enlightening). In other words, the self-presentation of the thing itself in the event of understanding is something

expressed by this concept, *Einleuchtende*, literally 'that which shines forth.' Gadamer writes:

The *eikos*, the *verisimile*, the *Wahrscheinlich*,¹⁰ the enlightening belong to a series that defends its own correctness against the truth and certainty of the proven and known (WM 460; TM 441).

For Gadamer, 'enlightening' refers to the metaphysical tradition of light in classical Greek philosophy. It is the power of light to illuminate. It allows the illuminated to be seen. Gadamer attributes this power to language. It is "the light of the word" (WM 458; TM 440). The word as light permits the thing to be seen in its self-presentation in language. In this sense the self-presentation of the thing is self-evident. It presents itself to the cognizer as it is. Therefore, the enlightening throws a new light upon what was thought to have been the case. "The enlightening is also clearly always something surprising, like the dawning of a new light" (WM 460; TM 441). Furthermore, the enlightening is more authentically true than what had been proven and thought to be true and certain.

Gadamer's conclusions that 1) the thing itself presents itself in every particular language as an *Ansicht der Sache selbst* (a perspective of the thing itself), 2) that this is the most complete expression of the thing itself possible in that particular language, and 3) that the *Ansicht* (perspective) of the thing itself is enlightening, allowing him to philosophically legitimize his conclusion that a discipline of questioning and investigating can attest to truth.

Within the discipline of questioning and investigating, differing and conflicting possibilities present themselves to the interpreter who has opened up a space for them. The inherited text may present prejudgments different from the interpreter's. Creative development of new prejudgments exists in this clearing. The different prejudgments are linguistic expressions concerning the *Sache selbst* (subject matter or thing itself). They are possible perspectives (*Ansichten*) of the *Sache*. Differing interpretations are probed. Finally, if there is an event of truth, one interpretation (one prejudgment, one perspective) will shine forth since it is the enlightening perspective. It is a partial truth, the hermeneutic truth, the perspective of the thing itself (*Ansicht der Sache selbst*), relative to that *Sprachansicht*. In this way the *Vorurteil* may be founded upon the *Sache* and one may attest to this truth. This is part of what I think Gadamer means when he writes:

As one who understands we are incorporated within an event of truth [*Wahrheitsgeschehen*] and come too late, if we wish to know what we should believe (WM 465; TM 447).

The enlightening is evident; it shines forth. If a prejudgment is enlightening and this is experienced in the event of truth, there is no possibility of wondering whether this is to be believed. If one questioned it, it would not be enlightening. Later, in another event, another perspective may appear in a different linguistic perspective.

Briefly, this allows a preliminary answer to Gadamer's statement that hermeneutic reflective consciousness does not provide itself with a truth criterion. The enlightening is not an element produced by reflective consciousness, rather it belongs to the very foundation of the experience of consciousness. It is experienced by consciousness philosophically prior to any content of consciousness just as the fallibility of consciousness is prior to the dialectic movement of consciousness.¹¹ The task of reflective consciousness is limited, as Gadamer states, to laying open possibilities of cognition. In this clearing the enlightening may be experienced.

Therefore, the *einleuchtend* (enlightening) quality of the perspective of the thing itself is the hermeneutic truth criterion, since it alone enables the cognizer to ground the prejudgments in the things themselves.

Further, the enlightening perspective of the thing itself permits the differentiation of truth from falsity within the linguistic perspective. This prevents such a total relativism where truth and falsity are indistinguishable. And yet, since the enlightening perspective is *only* a perspective of the thing itself, the truth realized in the event of understanding is not an absolute truth but a truth relative to the linguistic perspective, *Sprachansicht*, which forms our present horizon of meaning and knowledge. This preserves the possibility of new knowledge.

Hermeneutic truth is a human truth, but truth nevertheless. There is a mark or criterion for this truth; it is the enlightening quality of the perspective of the thing itself.

Notes

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Warheit und Methode* (Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1960), 465. Hereafter cited as WM. The translations are my own unless noted otherwise. TM refers to the English translation of WM: *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1975) 447.

² David Hoy, *The Hermeneutic Circle* (Berkeley: Univ. Press of California P, 1978) 115.

³ Jean Grondin, *Hermeneutische Wahrheit?* (Koenigstein/Ts.: Forum Academium, 1982) 176-80.

⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2 (Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1986) 263. First published in Habermas et. al., *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik* (Frankfurt

a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1971) 300.

⁵ *Vorurteil* usually translates as prejudice but historically comes from the preliminary judgment coming before the final judgment. Although Gadamer argues for positive prejudices, I will use prejudice to avoid just the negative sense of prejudice.

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tuebingen: Max Niemeyer, 1972) 153.

⁷ For Gadamer the things themselves may be thought of as whatever could be the 'object' of cognition or the subject matter of cognition. Although some translate '*Sache selbst*' as 'subject matter' to avoid the meaning of 'thing' as just a material object; I will use the more literal translation 'thing itself'.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?," in Kaufmann's *Existentialism* (New York: The New American Library, 1975) 250, which reprinted R.F.C. Hull's and Alan Crick's translation.

The original texts read: "Vielmehr bekundet sich das Nichts eigens mit und an dem Seienden als einem entgleitenden im Ganzen." Martin Heidegger, *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1967, 2nd ed. 1978) 113.

⁹ Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie* [1913] (Tuebingen: Max Niemeyer, 4th ed. 1980), sect. 41.

¹⁰ Literally the true shining; this is Gadamer's construction. 'Wahrscheinlich' without a hyphen, the usual word, means probable.

¹¹ Gadamer's discussion of the experience of consciousness (WM 324-44; TM 305-325) is to prove this priority and thereby overcome Hegel's dialectic of consciousness. See my discussion in L. Schmidt, *The Epistemology of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (Frankfurt; Bern; New York: Peter Lang, 1985), 114-26.