



GADAMER

Hermeneutics, Tradition
and Reason

GEORGIA WARNKE

Gadamer

Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason

Key Contemporary Thinkers

Published

Christopher Hookway, *Quine*

Forthcoming

Peter Burke, *The Annales School*

Jocelyn Dunphy, *Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics,
Philosophy and Social Theory*

David Frisby, *Walter Benjamin: An Introduction to his Social Theory*

John Hall, *Raymond Aron: A Study in French Intellectual Culture*

Philip Hansen, *Hannah Arendt: History, Politics and Citizenship*

Adrian Hayes, *Talcott Parsons and the Theory of Action*

Douglas Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism
to Post-modernism and Beyond*

Eileen Manion, *Mary Daly: Philosophy, Theology
and Radical Feminism*

Michael Moriarty, *Roland Barthes*

William Outhwaite, *Habermas*

Philip Pettit, *Rawls*

Simon Schaffer, *Kuhn*

Geoff Stokes, *Popper*

Gadamer

Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason

Georgia Warnke

Polity Press

Copyright © Georgia Warnke 1987

First published 1987 by Polity Press
in association with Basil Blackwell.

Transferred to Digital print 2003

Editorial Office:
Polity Press, Dales Brewery, Gwydir Street,
Cambridge CB1 2LJ, UK

Basil Blackwell Ltd
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purposes of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Except in the United States of America this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not by way of trade or otherwise be lent, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Warnke, Georgia

Gadamer : hermeneutics, tradition and
reason. — (Key contemporary thinkers).

1. Gadamer, Hans-Georg

I. Title II. Series

193 B3248.G34

ISBN 0-7456-0240-1

ISBN 0-7456-0511-7 Pbk

Typeset in Garamond
by Columns of Reading

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Marston Lindsay Ross International Ltd,
Oxfordshire

For My Parents

The ground on which the ball bounces
Is another bouncing ball.

The wheeling, whirling world
Makes no will glad.

Spinning in its spotlight darkness
It is too big for their hands.

A pitiless, purposeless Thing,
Arbitrary and unspent,

Made for no play, for no children,
But chasing only itself.

The innocent are overtaken,
They are not innocent.

They are their fathers' fathers
The past is inevitable.

Delmore Schwartz

Contents

Preface and acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	1
1 HERMENEUTICS AND HISTORY	5
<i>Critique of romantic hermeneutics</i>	7
<i>Schleiermacher's hermeneutics</i>	10
<i>The hermeneutic account of history</i>	15
<i>Hermeneutics and the Geisteswissenschaften</i>	26
<i>The phenomenological turn</i>	34
2 HERMENEUTICS AND AUTHORIAL INTENTION	42
<i>Hirsch's intentionalism</i>	43
<i>The structure of game-playing</i>	48
<i>Mimesis</i>	56
<i>Understanding as participation</i>	65
3 HERMENEUTICS AND THE PROBLEM OF SUBJECTIVISM	73
<i>The rehabilitation of prejudice and tradition</i>	75
<i>The anticipation of completeness</i>	82
<i>Understanding and application</i>	91
<i>The dialogic structure of understanding</i>	100
4 HERMENEUTICS AND THE CRITIQUE OF IDEOLOGY	107
<i>Habermas's review of Truth and Method</i>	108
<i>Apel's critique of hermeneutics</i>	117
<i>Habermas's second response to Gadamer</i>	124
<i>Unconstrained communication</i>	129
<i>Gadamer's conservatism</i>	134

5	HERMENEUTICS AND THE "NEW PRAGMATISM"	139
	<i>Rorty's new unity of science</i>	141
	<i>Rorty's critique of epistemology</i>	147
	<i>Rorty's irrationalism</i>	151
	<i>Bildung and practical reason</i>	157
6	CONCLUSION	167
	<i>The dialogic character of understanding</i>	168
	<i>Hermeneutic experience</i>	171
	<i>Bildung</i>	173
	Notes	175
	Index	198

Preface and acknowledgements

Since the publication in 1960 of Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode*, his hermeneutics has been the focus of a great deal of philosophical attention. His ideas on understanding and interpretation have been applied to a wide-ranging series of discussions: to questions of interpretation in the study of art and literature,¹ to issues of knowledge and objectivity in the social sciences;² to related debates in such disciplines as theology and jurisprudence;³ and even to re-evaluations of the project of philosophy itself.⁴ None the less, Gadamer's work has less often been itself the subject of systematic interpretation or assessment and it is this omission that the present book tries to redress.⁵ My concern is first to reconstruct the thread of argument that ties together Gadamer's disparate discussions of art, history and philosophy, and second to identify both its virtues and its difficulties. By doing so I hope to provide a reliable guide for the continued appropriation and discussion of his work.

Throughout the book my strategy has been to elucidate Gadamer's position by reconstructing a set of debates in which his work has participated – either actually or virtually. In the first chapter I consider his critique of the romantic hermeneutics of Schleiermacher, the Historical School and Dilthey. He argues that this tradition erred in restricting the problem of understanding to *methods* for ascertaining an agent's or author's intentions; rather, understanding remains primarily a historically situated understanding of the possible *validity* of texts or such "text-analogues" as actions, practices and social norms. In this critique of the hermeneutic tradition, Gadamer already introduces two of the important tenets of his own "philosophical hermeneutics": the possible "truth" of texts or text-analogues and the historically conditioned or prejudiced character of understanding. In chapter 2, I expand on

Gadamer's position by setting it against the intentionalist view Hirsch takes from Schleiermacher. Hirsch argues that in emphasizing the variability of textual understanding according to historical circumstances, Gadamer's position reduces to a subjectivistic glorification of an interpretive community's or tradition's prejudices. The notion of a tradition of interpretation is as central to Gadamer's view as are the ideas of truth and prejudice. The question is whether these need to be given the subjectivistic twist that Hirsch gives to them.

I take up this question in chapter 3, contrasting Gadamer's position here to a series of actual and possible criticisms. I argue that there are in fact two general objections with which Gadamer's hermeneutics must contend: not only that it is subjectivistic but that, in its attempt to avoid subjectivism, it becomes conservative. In order to provide a basis for deciding between different plausible interpretations, it takes as its standard the tradition to which it belongs and favors that interpretation which can illuminate its truth. This latter objection is similar to that which Habermas and Apel have raised and chapter 4 therefore examines their debate with Gadamer. As we shall see, Habermas and Apel stress the significance of his analysis as a critique of objectivistic positions such as Hirsch's; none the less they argue that in taking the tradition as the standard of correct interpretation, Gadamer destroys any basis upon which to assess its own rationality and that he therefore ignores the fact that traditional interpretations can be ideologically distorted. In chapter 5 I consider Richard Rorty's very different appropriation of Gadamer's work. Here the value of Gadamer's work is seen to lie in the scepticism it directs at the possibility of providing a proof for the rationality of our tradition and Rorty thus applauds Gadamer for precisely his disregard for Habermas's and Apel's "foundationalist" concerns.

In these final chapters of the book I evaluate both assessments of Gadamer's work. In my view the contrast between the two accounts suggests that Gadamer's hermeneutics might best be understood as a middle path. We are situated in history and historically conditioned. This means that our conception of rationality is subject to the limitations of the historical experiences we have inherited. At the same time, the rationality of our response to these experiences remains a constant question for us. No scepticism towards the idea of reason will permit us to avoid it; indeed, it may be that our hermeneutic understanding of others and our past can help us to a provisional answer.

I undertook the preliminary study to which this book is a distant relative

while on a fellowship in Germany granted by the Deutscher Akademische Austauschdienst. The book itself was written under the auspices of the Whitney Humanities Center at Yale University and the Bunting Institute of Radcliffe College. I would like to thank all three institutions for their support. I would also like to thank Thomas McCarthy and my editor, John Thompson, for their intelligent and valuable suggestions, Paul Stern for his criticism and encouragement and Anne Janowitz for both theoretical and practical assistance. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Dalia Fiore who took care of my son with a competence and love that made concentration on this book possible and who is therefore largely responsible for whatever merit it may have.

Cambridge, Massachusetts

Introduction

In recent years there has been a spate of philosophical books on the limits of various philosophical approaches. In this regard, Michael Sandel's *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*¹ and Bernard Williams's *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*² are only two of the more explicit examples. But from deconstructionist studies of the self-deception involved in claims to textual understanding to historicist accounts of scientific research, the emphasis has been on the limits of our knowledge of texts, nature, ourselves and our world. The claim is that we are always involved in interpretations and that we can have no access to anything like "the truth" about justice, the self, reality or the "moral law." Our notions of these "truths" are rather conditioned by the cultures to which we belong and the historical circumstances in which we find ourselves. Hence, we must face the fact of our finitude and the utterly contingent character of our efforts to understand.

Gadamer's work might be said to serve as the basis for this current focus on limits. For the whole of his philosophical career and culminating in his magnum opus, *Truth and Method*, his concern has been to overcome the positivistic hubris of assuming that we can develop an "objective" knowledge of the phenomena with which we are concerned. As a distinct discipline hermeneutics has its origins in nineteenth-century attempts to formulate a theory of interpretation. Questions of interpretation had been raised earlier, in particular in the Reformation's challenge to the Catholic reading of the Bible. Did an understanding of Scripture require a prior acceptance of the precepts of the Catholic faith or could it be understood on its own? If it could, was it to be read as a unified text or as a series of disparate narratives written at different times with different purposes? At the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, the philologist and theologian

F. D. E. Schleiermacher significantly expanded the scope of hermeneutic questions. The problem, as he saw it, was not just how the Bible or even classical texts were to be understood, but how meaning could be comprehended, what the methods were that would permit an objective understanding of texts and utterances of any kind. Following Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey asked even broader questions: what were the methods that would permit an objective reading of symbolic structures of any kind, including actions, social practices, norms and values? How could the understanding of meaning be raised to the same level of methodological clarity that characterized the natural sciences? How could it find as solid a basis for methodical progress?

By 1960, when Gadamer published *Truth and Method*, the consequences of this kind of question had become apparent. Dilthey had tried to establish the autonomy of the logic of the *Geisteswissenschaften* or of such studies as history, textual interpretation and the investigation of social norms, practices and institutions. That is, his desire had been to illuminate the difference between the structure of these sciences of *meaning* and the natural scientific explanation of events based on the formulation of theoretical frameworks and discovery of causal laws. Nevertheless he conceived of both kinds of study as *objective* sciences; the point of both was to develop a neutral understanding of social or human phenomena, an understanding that would be accessible to all interpreters or observers from whatever historical or cultural vantage point they might inhabit. The positivism of the mid-twentieth century differed only in denying any distinction in the logics of the natural sciences and *Geisteswissenschaften*. If both were to be objective sciences, this meant that the latter had to emulate the practices and standards of the former; what was required was an ability to explain and predict the occurrence of events by formulating and verifying causal hypotheses. Social scientific findings were to be repeatable in the same way as natural scientific experiments and in both cases objectivity was to mean an elimination of subjective intrusions: explanations were to be based on adherence to rigorous scientific methods so that the effects of differences in imagination, interpretive talent or individual perspective could be minimized. Disciplines in which the influence of talent, imagination and perspective could not be minimized, such as literary studies and art appreciation, were no longer to be viewed as cognitive disciplines at all.³

From Gadamer's point of view, this constellation of norms and premises is a disaster since it overlooks important differences between understanding meaning and explaining the occurrences of events,

differences that Dilthey was right to emphasize. Gadamer thus reverses the positivist response to Dilthey, criticizing him not for maintaining a distinction between natural and social science but for not realizing that this distinction runs right through to the standards of objectivity appropriate to each. In so far as positivism assumes that the natural sciences provide the model of an objective inquiry impervious to changes in historical vantage point and scientific perspective, it does not describe even them correctly. Gadamer maintains that the natural sciences are the product of a tradition of interpretation and that their norms and standards are simply the "prejudices" of this tradition. To hold them up as the muster of knowledge in general is thus to overlook the extent to which they are historically conditioned and, moreover, to refuse to recognize the existence of other historically constituted norms and standards. We shall examine the details of this argument in the substance of the book itself. The point here is that, for Gadamer, the question that Schleiermacher and Dilthey ask and positivism takes up is the wrong question. We cannot ask how the sciences of meaning are to attain the objectivity characteristic of the natural sciences because this standard of objectivity is one constituted within a certain tradition, appropriate, perhaps, for certain purposes, but not at all one that can be absolutized as a general demand.

Hermeneutics, as Gadamer conceives of it, then, is no longer to be seen as a discourse on methods of "objective" understanding as it was for the hermeneutic tradition of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. It no longer seeks to formulate a set of interpretive rules; rather, in referring to his analysis as "philosophical hermeneutics," Gadamer turns to an account of the conditions of the possibility of understanding in general, conditions that in his view undermine faith in the ideas of both method and objectivity. Methodological approaches to both natural and human phenomena are rooted in history; they accept certain historical assumptions as to both what is to be studied and how it is to be approached. Understanding is therefore rooted in prejudice and the way in which we understand is thoroughly conditioned by the past or by what Gadamer calls "effective history." This influence of the past obtains in our aesthetic understanding, in our social and psychological self-understanding and in all forms of scientific understanding. The objectivity of our knowledge is therefore significantly curtailed by its dependence on tradition and this dependence is not one that method can in any way transcend. Anticipating the trend I noted earlier Gadamer might therefore have titled his book *Objectivity and the Limits of Method*.

By now, this analysis may seem old-hat. The positivism that prevailed in the 1950s and 1960s no longer has the force it once had and few still deny the reliance of scientific approaches on a series of historically advanced assumptions or conventions. Such theorists as Richard Rorty, whose views I shall be discussing in chapter 5, go so far as first to reject the positivistic distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive disciplines, and second to argue that natural science is itself hermeneutic. The development of hermeneutics which began with Schleiermacher and Dilthey's attempt to erect a science of meaning on a par with the natural sciences thus culminates in the claim that the natural sciences are themselves sciences of meaning; in other words, that they are themselves historically conditioned, fallible interpretations. But if *Truth and Method* thus sets itself against a positivism that is no longer generally accepted, the question arises as to whether it has anything left to say to us, post-positivists as many of us are.

In my view it has a great deal to say to us. For, if the attention *Truth and Method* pays to prejudice and the influence of the past is important, no less important is its attempt to resuscitate a dialogic conception of knowledge. Understanding (*Verstehen*) for Gadamer is primarily coming to an understanding (*Verständigung*) with others. In confronting texts, different views and perspectives, alternative life forms and world-views, we can put our own prejudices in play and learn to enrich our own point of view. Against positivism, then, Gadamer argues that an objectivity attained through scientific method is no more adequate than the prejudices it presupposes; but he also suggests that our prejudices are as much thresholds as limits, that they form perspectives from which a gradual development of our knowledge becomes possible. To this extent, Gadamer's account of understanding retains a connection to the Enlightenment. To be sure, we can no longer hope to eradicate prejudice through method. Nor can we search for an objectivity that would lift us above historical variations and subjective interpretations. None the less, in coming to an understanding with others we can learn how to amend some of our assumptions and, indeed, how to move to a richer, more developed understanding of the issues in question.

It is significant, then, that Gadamer does not refer to limits in his title. In stressing the way in which our understanding is embedded in history, his point is not simply the degree to which our history limits our knowledge and not simply the extent to which notions of truth are historically various. His point is also that history can itself aid our development and help us to cultivate what we may still call "reason."

Hermeneutics and history

In “Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik” the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey characterizes the development of modern hermeneutics as a “liberation of interpretation from dogma.”¹ Textual interpretation has its origins in the Greek educational system but on Dilthey’s account advances in the formulation of methods of interpretation had to await the Reformation and the attack on the Church’s authority to interpret the Bible. At this time Matthias Flacius, a Lutheran, criticized the Catholic emphasis on tradition in the interpretation of supposedly obscure parts of the Bible and maintained that it could be understood on its own grounds as the word of God. This attack on the Tridentine Church already disclosed what Dilthey saw as the fundamental principle of modern hermeneutic theory: texts are to be understood in their own terms rather than those of doctrine so that understanding requires not dogma but the systematic application of interpretive rules. Dilthey further credited Flacius with the first formulation of the idea of a hermeneutic circle: since Catholic teaching was no longer to serve as a guide to the Bible’s meaning, the understanding of it was rather to be built up from an understanding of its individual parts. At the same time, however, it was clear that some guide was needed to the meaning of those individual parts, indeed, that they had themselves to be understood in light of the aims and composition of the Bible as a whole. Hence, it was claimed that Biblical interpretation necessarily moved in a circle, that its individual books and passages were to be understood in terms of the meaning of the whole, while the understanding of the whole was to be achieved in light of an understanding of these individual parts.

Despite the significance of Flacius’s break with the canons of Tridentine interpretation, Dilthey argued that his own procedure remained problematic in so far as he overlooked the different historical

circumstances under which various parts of the Bible were written. In fact, since the Protestant reading of the Bible simply assumed that it constituted a unified, self-consistent whole, what Dilthey referred to as a second “theological-hermeneutic” step criticized this reading itself as dogmatic. The importance of this step was to articulate another hermeneutic principle: the individual books of the Bible were now to be understood in light of differences in context and linguistic usage. This principle allowed G. F. Meier to extend the tenets of religious hermeneutics to the philological study of classical texts and ultimately permitted Schleiermacher to formulate the principles of a general theory of interpretation, applicable to all discourse (*Rede*). Not only classical texts and the Bible but all written works and spoken utterances could be subjected to the sophisticated scrutiny made possible by precisely formulated methods of understanding. In this way, according to Dilthey, hermeneutic theory became available as the basis for the human sciences or *Geisteswissenschaften*, as the mode of access to meaning in general – the meaning not only of texts but of signs and symbols of all sorts, social practices, historical actions and works of art.

In the second half of his major work *Truth and Method* and in related essays Hans-Georg Gadamer questions this account of the development of hermeneutics as one assisted by a successive overcoming of dogmatic prejudices and assumptions. What Dilthey sees as the liberation of interpretation from dogma signals instead a fateful “change in essence.”² Indeed, for Gadamer, the development of hermeneutics extending from Schleiermacher through the Historical School of Ludwig von Ranke and Johann Gustav Droysen to Dilthey himself unfolds a positivistic misconception that equates understanding with a methodologically secured, “Cartesian” certainty. This “Romantic hermeneutics,” as he refers to it, is therefore unable to grasp either the structure of understanding (*Verstehen*) or its role in the human sciences. In this initial chapter I want to examine Gadamer’s critique of romantic hermeneutics, showing what it reveals about his own concerns and how it reorients his hermeneutic philosophy. I shall first reconstruct an important distinction he suggests between two kinds of understanding and then turn to his interpretation of the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher, the Historical School and Dilthey. Finally, I shall look at the radical transformation of hermeneutics that he claims was effected by the work of Martin Heidegger.

CRITIQUE OF ROMANTIC HERMENEUTICS

It is common in the philosophy of history and of the social sciences to distinguish between explaining human actions and beliefs and understanding their meaning: between explaining why a given action or belief occurs or occurred and understanding what an agent is doing with a certain set of bodily movements or what belief is represented with certain words.³ These two approaches to the study of action have been differently weighted. Some so-called "positivists" have argued that the understanding of meaning (*Verstehen*) involves simply an imaginative reconstruction of actor's intentions or purposes; although such reconstruction can be helpful in formulating a hypothesis that tries to explain the causes of action, understanding cannot count as part of the logic of science itself. The scientific aspect of the study of action consists rather in constructing explanatory hypotheses that can be incorporated into general theories of human behavior and testing them through reliable methods of empirical observation.⁴ On this view the structure of science is identical in every field of research. It consists in identifying regular sequences of behavior, formulating universal laws and theories and, through them, predicting or explaining the occurrence of events. *Verstehende* or hermeneutic theorists, in contrast, have argued that history and social science cannot conform to the logic of the natural sciences because of the role an interpretive understanding plays in them. On this view, understanding *what* a given action or belief is, is itself a scientific task that necessarily precedes explaining *why* it occurs. This task involves "reading" a situation, placing bodily movements and words within the context to which they belong and hence understanding them in light of other actions and beliefs. Both the construction of explanatory hypotheses and their empirical testing thus turn out to be matters of interpretation: they rest on a specific presumption as to what the event to be explained is and therefore on an assessment of *meaning*.⁵

Gadamer's account of hermeneutic understanding is devoted to examining the conditions of this latter understanding of meaning. Throughout his work, however, he emphasizes the necessity of distinguishing between two forms of understanding: the understanding of truth-content and the understanding of intentions. The first form of understanding refers to the kind of substantive knowledge one has when one is justified in claiming that one understands Euclidean geometry or an ethical principle, for example. Here understanding means seeing the

“truth” of something, grasping that the sum of the squares of the two sides of a right triangle is equal to the square of the hypotenuse, that the validity of Euclidean geometry is relativized by the discovery of other forms of geometry or that murder is wrong. Understanding in this sense involves insight into a subject-matter or, as Gadamer puts it, an understanding of *die Sache*.⁶ The second sense of understanding, in contrast, involves a knowledge of conditions: the reasons why a particular person says that murder is wrong or the intentions behind someone’s claiming that a geometrical proposition is true. This kind of understanding thus involves an understanding of the psychological, biographical or historical conditions behind a claim or action as opposed to a substantive understanding of the claim or action itself. What is understood is not the truth-content of a claim or the point of an action but the motives behind a certain person’s making a certain claim or performing a given action.

In Gadamer’s view, understanding in its strongest sense involves the first form of understanding as a substantive understanding of truth. In contrast, the second, intentional, form of understanding becomes necessary when attempts to achieve an understanding of truth fail. In other words, it is when one cannot see the point of what someone else is saying or doing that one is forced to explore the conditions under which that person says or does it: what this person might mean, given who he or she is, the circumstances of the time and so on. Alasdair MacIntyre offers a good example of the difference to which Gadamer is pointing here in claiming that “we confront a blank wall” in trying to understand the aborigine practice of carrying about “a stick or stone which is treated as if it is or embodies the soul of the individual who carries it.”⁷ Since we cannot make sense out of this practice or see its point, we can understand it only to the extent that we understand the conditions under which the aborigine may have thought it had a point. As Gadamer puts this point:

The genetic formulation of the question, the goal of which is to explain a traditional opinion in terms of the historical situation, arises only where immediate insight into the truth of what is said cannot be attained because reason contradicts it.⁸

Yet we *can* be interested in genetic questions even when we accept the truth of a claim. Thus we are interested in the conditions that facilitated the Greeks’ discovery of the principles of geometry, for example, just because we accept these principles for certain purposes and want to know