

THE RETURN OF
GRAND THEORY
IN THE
HUMAN SCIENCES

Edited by
QUENTIN SKINNER



Canto

2

Hans-Georg Gadamer

by William Outhwaite

The 'grand theorists' discussed in this book are all very different from one another, yet most of them agree in attaching enormous importance to the idea of frameworks which give meaning and significance to individual phenomena: Kuhn's paradigms or disciplinary matrices, Althusser's *problématiques*, Foucault's discourses, *epistemes*, and 'regimes'.

All these frameworks are guides to understanding, but at the same time guides to action. The disciplinary matrix of particle physics makes it possible both to understand what the practitioners are up to, and to join in with them. Althusser's reconstruction of Marx's scientific problematic is intended to clarify the import of Marx's work (of which Marx was not fully aware) and to make possible the further development of more specialised 'regional' theories within Marxism. Foucault's frameworks seem at first sight to be more a matter of external historical description, yet even here we are brought to realise our inevitable complicity in the modern European regime of truth/power.

These two ideas – understanding seen firstly as a holistic process mediated by a complex framework and secondly as an active process of encounter and response – are also central to the work of the German hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. The framework notion of understanding is something he shares with the rest of the hermeneutic tradition; the stress on understanding as a matter of commitment is a theme he has taken from Heidegger, but made very much his own.

Hans-Georg Gadamer was born in 1900, studied under Heidegger and worked mainly at the universities of Marburg and Heidelberg. He retired officially in 1968 but remains extremely active. His main work, *Truth and Method*, was published in 1960, though not translated into English until 1975. Gadamer endorses the traditional conception of understanding an unfamiliar text or way of life as a holistic process, operating within a hermeneutic circle in which we move back and forth between specific parts of the 'text' and our conception of it as a totality. Understanding, in other words, is not a matter of simple addition of discrete elements. If, for example, I want to learn Serbo-Croat, one of the worst ways of doing so is to take an English-Serbo-Croat dictionary and work slowly through it. A more promising strategy is to build up a basis of simple sentences which are meaningful in themselves.

The traditional hermeneutic conception of understanding, as it developed in the Romantic period, is that it is something which is

not automatic; it requires a certain openness of mind, an ability to put oneself into the place of the author of the book or the participants in the way of life. This notion of projection tends to be misunderstood in the Anglo-Saxon world as a mysterious kind of empathy, but what Dilthey and others really had in mind was a much more cerebral process based on a common sphere of experience:

Every single human expression represents something which is common to many and therefore part of the realm of objective mind. Every word or sentence, every gesture or form of politeness, every work of art and every historical deed are only understandable because the person expressing himself and the person who understands him are connected by something they have in common; the individual always experiences, thinks, acts, and also understands, in this common sphere. (Dilthey 1958: 146f)

Gadamer would I think be happy with this formulation. Where he diverges from the nineteenth-century tradition is in rejecting its stress on method (hence the title of his book). In a sense, the basis of this disagreement can be pinned down to two different interpretations of the traditional principle of understanding that 'meaning is to be read out of, not into the text: *sensus non est inferendus, sed eferendus*' (Wach 1929: 9). The first interpretation of this principle points towards the construction of precise methods to capture the meaning as it is in itself, stripping away any 'modern' assumptions or prejudices, just as a natural scientific experiment tries to exclude extraneous effects. As Gadamer puts it, '... the methodology of the modern historical sciences ... makes what has grown historically and has been transmitted historically an object to be established like an experimental finding - as if tradition were as alien and, from the human point of view, as unintelligible, as an object of physics' (Gadamer 1975a: xxi).

But how can we conceive a text as it is in itself, independently of the complex process by which we get access to it? It is here that Gadamer's alternative conception becomes relevant. For him, understanding is not a matter of trained, methodical, unprejudiced technique, but an encounter in the existentialist sense, a confrontation with something radically different from ourselves. Understanding involves engagement in Jean-Paul Sartre's sense. Gadamer's book could almost have been called *Against Method* or *Beyond Method*: he is concerned with a 'pre-understanding' which

Has
disagreed
method

Key

Traditional
View

makes possible but at the same time sets limits to, any interpretative technique.

Traditional hermeneutic theory postulates a subject who aims to understand an object (a text, a social practice, or whatever) as it is in itself. This means that the subject must be as open-minded and unprejudiced as possible, approaching the object without preconceptions. For Gadamer, by contrast, preconceptions or prejudices are what make understanding possible in the first place. They are bound up with our awareness of the historical influence or effectivity of the text; and without this awareness we would not understand it. It is impossible to understand the Bible or the Communist Manifesto without a knowledge of the role they have played in our history.

Our understanding of a text arises out of our position in a historical tradition, and this is in fact our link with the historical influence or effectivity of the text itself (Gadamer 1975a: xxi). Understanding is not a matter of forgetting our own horizon of meanings and putting ourselves within that of the alien texts or the alien society; it means merging or fusing our own horizons with theirs. In Gadamer's view, hermeneutic theory has paid too much attention to the detached way in which we tend to interpret literary texts, and not enough to the more practical concerns of legal or theological interpretations, where the outcome is not just a better understanding of a text but its actual incorporation into our own lives,

As Gadamer puts it in his Foreword to the second edition of *Truth and Method* (1975a: xix),

... the purpose of my investigation is not to offer a general theory of interpretation and a differential account of its methods (which E. Betti has done so well) but to discover what is common to all modes of understanding and to show that understanding is never subjective behaviour towards a given 'object', but towards its effective history - the history of its influence; in other words, understanding belongs to the being of that which is understood.

One way of clarifying Gadamer's opposition to nineteenth-century hermeneutics is to unpack the concept of subjective behaviour in this passage. For the traditional conception of hermeneutics, 'subjective' means an approach which is individual, idiosyncratic and arbitrary; this is contrasted with an objective approach which is trained, disciplined and methodical. Gadamer however wishes to transcend the subject-object division, or at least to relativise it to an

old

True

Fusing

Let the
Text be
Contextual

objective context, that of the effective history of a text which is part of a tradition.

Here, he draws on Heidegger's account of understanding in *Being and Time*. 'Heidegger's temporal analytics of human existence (*Dasein*) has, I think, shown convincingly that understanding is not just one of the various possible behaviours of the subject, but the mode of being of [*Dasein*] itself' (1975a: xviii). In Heidegger's terms, interpretation is 'grounded existentially in understanding' (Heidegger 1962: 188):

In interpreting, we do not, so to speak, throw a 'signification' over some naked thing which is present-at-hand, we do not stick a value on it; but when something within-the-world is encountered as such, the thing in question already has an involvement which is disclosed in our understanding of the world, and this involvement is one which gets laid out by the interpretation. (Ibid.: 190-1)

Gadamer's conflict with traditional hermeneutics can also be elucidated in terms of his two central principles: the universality and the historicity of hermeneutics. The tradition which found its most systematic expression in Dilthey was universalistic in the sense that it aimed at a general methodology of the human sciences, grounded in the nature of human consciousness or Geist and in the concept of lived experience (Erlebnis). For Gadamer, as we have seen, the universality of hermeneutics means more than this; it is a fundamental dimension of all human consciousness as it is expressed in language; it encompasses human knowledge of nature as well as of human artefacts. For Gadamer, as for Heidegger, 'Being that can be understood is language.'

Historicity, too, was a fundamental theme of Romantic hermeneutics, but there it was understood in terms of historicism (Historismus); the historical diversity of human civilisations means that we must think ourselves into their categories in order to understand them. Here, historical distance is a methodological problem: for Gadamer, it is an ontological one since it affects the very nature of that which we try to understand. Our prejudices are not an obstacle to knowledge so much as a condition of knowledge, since they make up the fundamental structure of our relationship with our historical tradition.

The example of art which makes up the first part of *Truth and Method* illustrates these differences. The Romantic conception of understanding a work of art in its own (reconstructed) context is not

only impossible but pointless, given the fact of historical change and in particular our modern (and impoverished) conception of the aesthetic.

What is reconstructed, a life brought back from the lost past, is not the original. In its continuance in an estranged state it acquires only a secondary, cultural, existence... Even the painting taken from the museum and replaced in the church, or the building restored to its original condition are not what they once were - they become simply tourist attractions. Similarly, a hermeneutics that regarded understanding as the reconstruction of the original would be no more than the recovery of a dead meaning. (1975a: 149)

Hegel was right; these are 'beautiful fruits torn from the tree' (Hegel 1977: 455). Gadamer offers us a modified and sceptical Hegelian position: 'the essential nature of the historical spirit does not consist in the restoration of the past, but in thoughtful mediation with contemporary life' (1975a: 150).

As stated earlier, Gadamer's basic metaphor for this process of mediation is that of the (fusion of horizons) in which we approach what we wish to understand, not in a state of factitious (because impossible) virginity, but with the prejudices which 'constitute the historical reality of [our] being' (1975a: 245).

What is at stake between these two conceptions of interpretation? Gadamer's lengthy polemics with Emilio Betti have helped to clarify the issues: Betti, committed to a methodological hermeneutics based on canons of interpretation, reproaches Gadamer with abandoning the ideal of the objectivity of interpretation. Gadamer's positive evaluation of prejudices and his exaggeration of the dimension of application within hermeneutics, amount to a conception in which 'the object of historical understanding does not consist of events but of their significance (which is related to the present), i.e. their significance for today'. This is 'a presumptuous self-assertion of subjectivity that would demote the process of historical interpretation to a mere mediation of past and present' (Betti 1962, quoted in Bleicher 1980: 81, 82).

In sum, Gadamer ducks the epistemological question posed to hermeneutics, which

is not a *quaestio facti* but a *quaestio juris*: it is concerned with the problem of justification which does not aim at ascertaining what actually happens in the activity of thought apparent in interpretation but which aims at finding out what one should do - i.e. what one should aim for in the task of

Nice

1)

2)

Art

Key

Betti's Attack of Gadamer

interpretation, what methods to use and what guidelines to follow in the correct execution of this task. (Bleicher 1980: 84)

Betti's charge, then, is that Gadamer is not offering a theory of interpretation, but a mere descriptive phenomenology. Gadamer retorts that it is Betti who is deficient in offering nothing more than a methodology of hermeneutics. 'By being able to conceive the problem of hermeneutics only as a problem of method, he shows that he is profoundly involved in the subjectivism which we are endeavouring to overcome' (1975a: 466).

The easy way to resolve this dispute is to say that, whatever their different conceptions of the proper role of philosophy, Betti and Gadamer are simply talking about different aspects of the hermeneutic enterprise. One might say that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics aims to describe the basic starting-point of hermeneutics, which Betti is more inclined to take for granted in constructing his canons of interpretation. It is, in the end, not clear whether Gadamer's conception is in contradiction with the standard view, here represented by Betti, or complementary to it. What is clear is that the dispute bears on endemic controversies in the human sciences about the ways in which the meaning of texts is produced and reproduced. In American literary theory, for example, E. D. Hirsch (1967) upholds a standard conception based on determinate meanings of texts, whereas Stanley Fish (1980) stresses the production of meaning by 'interpretative communities'.

In the rest of this essay I shall confine myself to the implications of Gadamer's conception for social theory, as reflected notably in the work of Jürgen Habermas and Anthony Giddens. Gadamer is important on two fronts: first, in reinforcing the long-standing opposition to positivistic accounts of the unity of the natural and the social sciences, and, secondly, in showing that the traditional hermeneutic critique of positivism remains tied to a conception of method whose implications are themselves positivistic.

The concept of 'understanding' most forcefully advanced by Dilthey in the nineteenth century has formed the basis for a view of the social sciences which stresses their difference from the sciences of nature (Outhwaite 1975). Understanding or, in German, *Verstehen*, has come to be understood as a method alternative to the study of casual connections between phenomena. The German sociologist Max Weber argued in the first two decades of this century that explanations in the social or cultural sciences must be both causally and meaningfully adequate (Weber 1968: 9ff). It is not enough, for

example, to register the fact that Protestant merchants appeared to be more innovative than Catholics in early-modern Europe. The explanation of this correlation must be sought in the internal structure of Protestant and especially Calvinist religiosity: what it was like to be a Calvinist (Weber 1976). To give another example: Gresham's law that bad money drives out good is both empirically verifiable and rationally intelligible: people want to offload their dud currency as soon as possible and they hold on to the higher value coins. And we can understand why it makes sense for them to do so (Weber 1968: 18).

This traditional conception of understanding needs to be qualified in two ways, both of which are implicit in Gadamer's work. First, it is not enough to see understanding or *verstehen* as a method, for it is more than this: it is the way in which we get access to social reality in the first place. The (natural sciences), too, interpret the phenomena they have to deal with, but the phenomena studied by the social scientist are crucially bound up with (though not identical with) the interpretations of them given by the members of the society being studied. And there is even something odd about speaking, as I have just done, of getting access to social reality since, as hermeneutic theorists have always stressed, we are already in it as (social) human beings.

Secondly, Gadamer's notion of engagement helps us to understand the consequences of the fact that we are rooted in the social world. The fact that we are ourselves human beings makes it possible for us to understand what it is like to be another human being, what it is (probably) like to hold the beliefs which other human beings hold, and so on. But this also means that we cannot simply record, in an objective and value-free way, the practices and beliefs of other human beings. The social scientist does not go out into the field as a *tabula rasa* and return with an account of what it is like to be a European car-worker or an African peasant; it is precisely the encounter between the social scientist's own beliefs and practices and those of the people he or she is studying which makes up whatever understanding we can have of another social reality.

Let me now examine these issues in a rather more detailed way. First, it is essential to bear in mind Gadamer's principle of the universality of hermeneutics. Understanding is not a special feature of the human sciences, but the fundamental way in which human beings exist in the world. Understanding ... shows the universality of human language-use (*Sprachlichkeit*) as a limitless medium that

1) Social But not Nature

2)

Very Clean

carries everything, not only the culture that has been handed down through language, but absolutely everything, because everything is incorporated into the realm of understandability in which we interact' (Gadamer 1976: 25). The problem about the sciences, for Gadamer as for Husserl (1970) and Heidegger (1962), is how they link up with this realm of human understanding: ... the central question of the modern age ... is ... how our natural view of the world - the experience of the world that we have as we simply live out our lives - is related to the unassailable and anonymous authority that confronts us in the pronouncements of science' (Gadamer 1976: 25). Hermeneutic reflection, like Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, is supposed to mediate between science and the life-world, and in particular between their respective languages. It was 'the specific merit and the specific weakness' of Greek science that it 'originated in the linguistic experience of the world. In order to overcome this weakness, its naive anthropocentrism, modern science has also renounced its merit, namely its place in the natural attitude of man to the world' (Gadamer 1975a: 412). Hermeneutical reflection, then, forms a bridge between the special sciences and the life-world, making explicit the presuppositions of the sciences, their forms of abstraction, and, most of all, their guiding conception of method. Gadamer puts it in Wittgensteinian terms: 'The language games of science remain related to the metalanguage presented in the mother tongue' (1976: 39).

All this must I think be accepted. Despite the vagueness of Gadamer's concept of the natural attitude to the world, it marks out an important area of enquiry: that of world-pictures, ideas of natural order, and so forth (cf., e.g., Dijksterhuis 1961). But what about the social and human sciences? It is interesting to note that Gadamer does not assimilate the social sciences to the human sciences or *Geisteswissenschaften*: philology, literary criticism, aesthetics, cultural history, etc. Instead, he draws a fairly conventional distinction between the natural sciences and the *Geisteswissenschaften* (Gadamer 1975a: 5ff) and then locates the social sciences somewhere in the middle. The essay (Gadamer 1976) cited above continues with the argument that the separation or alienation of science from our natural experience of the world is

without importance for the natural sciences as such. The true natural scientist knows how very particular is the realm of knowledge of his science in relation to the whole of reality ... The so-called humanities (*Humaniora*)

still relate easily to the common consciousness, so far as they reach it at all, since their objects belong immediately to the cultural tradition and the traditional educational system. But the modern social sciences stand in a peculiarly tense relationship to their object, a relationship which especially requires hermeneutical reflection. For the methodical alienation to which the social sciences owe their progress is related here to the human-social world. (Gadamer 1976: 40)

Gadamer's view of the social sciences, so far as it can be disentangled from his more specific disagreements with Habermas,¹ is that they should indeed be conscious of the 'hermeneutic conditions' which apply to the 'verstehende Geisteswissenschaften' and their implications for the practice of social science. He notes that (some of the time?) the social sciences do not aim at understanding but rather 'incorporate linguistically sedimented truisms in their attempt to capture the real structure of society'. And even if they do aim at understanding, they are committed, *qua* sciences, to a methodically alienated form of understanding, which therefore requires further hermeneutic reflection.²

What then are the hermeneutic conditions which govern the *Geisteswissenschaften* and, whether or not they heed them, the social sciences as well? Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy is concerned with the sort of understanding which is at work in our encounter with and participation in a cultural tradition - something which is prior to any systematic hermeneutic investigation. As noted above, this process of coming-to-understand is not a matter of unprejudiced appropriation of an object such as a text, but a 'fusion' of one's own 'horizon' of meanings and expectations ('prejudices') with that of the text, the other person, the alien culture.

Gadamer is therefore not offering a different methodology of understanding; nor is he 'against method' in Feyerabend's sense. Rather, he is concerned with processes which precede and underlie interpretative methods: 'The hermeneutics developed here is not, therefore, a methodology of the human sciences, but an attempt to understand what the human sciences truly are, beyond their method-

¹ The essay (Gadamer 1976) from which I have been quoting is a response to Habermas's 1967 critique *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften* (Habermas 1971b). Habermas continued the exchange in his contribution to Gadamer's Festschrift, *Hermeneutik und Dialektik I* 1970. This essay, entitled 'The hermeneutic claim to universality', is translated in Bleicher 1980. See also Gadamer's reply in *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik* 1971.

² *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik* 1971: 66-7; Gadamer 1976: 27. This is an extremely obscure passage, and the translation, which Gadamer is said to have corrected (p.vii), diverges a good deal from the original.

Science is not free

Different realms?

Nature

Social Sciences

Social Sciences - It is possible that not all Natural Sciences

what comes before

Explains
Not
Method

32 Hans-Georg Gadamer

Describe
not
Prescription

ological self-consciousness, and what connects them with the totality of our experience of the world' (Gadamer 1975a: xiii).

Does this mean that Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy leaves the human sciences as they are? Gadamer distinguishes between those sciences or research topics which are concerned with the meticulous investigation of a given area of reality, and those which are more a matter of reinterpreting a partially known reality in terms of current concerns. The latter description might fit, say, environmental science as well as the social sciences, parts of which seem to correspond more closely to Gadamer's conception of natural science. In the end, though, Gadamer is right that, if hermeneutics is universal, it impinges more strongly on the social sciences.

Why should this be so? One answer might be in terms of the nature of our interest in social phenomena. This is the dominant theme in the passage quoted above; it is developed further in Habermas's differentiation of three cognitive interests: control, communication and emancipation (Habermas 1971b). But any such conception must itself be grounded in the different nature of the domains of the sciences: in Gadamer's case the emphasis is generally on cultural traditions as the locus of understanding (*Verständigung*), whereas Habermas tends to refer directly to notions of communication and communicative action.

This is the point at which Gadamer's general thesis spills over into a set of special theses about the place of hermeneutics in the social sciences. These have been developed less by Gadamer himself than by social theorists, notably Habermas and Giddens, as well as by philosophers like Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor.

At the same time, however, Habermas has drawn heavily on Gadamer from the time of his early work on the logic of the social sciences (1971), through his critique of Dilthey's 'objectivism' to his recent 'Theory of communicative action' (1984). Giddens, too, has made significant use of Gadamer in his conception of the 'double hermeneutic' at the basis of the social sciences; as Giddens puts it (1976: 55): 'Dilthey's views, in modified form, are not without defenders today; but the main thrust of hermeneutic thinking, following the appearance of Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960), has been in a different direction.'

Earlier traditions of hermeneutic thinking in the social sciences centred on the concept of meaning as a *datum*. In Max Weber's classic formulation, 'the course of human action and human expressions of every sort are open to an interpretation in terms of meaning

[*sinnvolle Deutung*] which in the case of other objects would have an analogy only on the level of metaphysics' (1975: 217-18). Weber attempted to incorporate this concept of interpretation into his account of social-scientific explanation, and thus to bridge the chasm which Dilthey and others had dug between 'explanation' and 'understanding'. That story does not need to be re-told here. What matters in the present context is that, in terms of a broader hermeneutic such as Gadamer's, this conception of understanding retains a dichotomy between subject and object and an objectivistic conception of interpretative method. It therefore neglects the element of existential encounter in communication which is prior to any systematic social theory. As Giddens put it in *New Rules of Sociological Method*, '*verstehen* must be regarded, not as a special method of entry to the social world peculiar to the social sciences, but as the ontological condition of human society as it is produced and reproduced by its members'.³ This Heideggerian insight converges with some major traditions in social theory: first and most generally, the symbolic interactionist approach, with its stress on actors' definitions of the situation; secondly, Alfred Schutz's insistence, *contra* Weber, that typification is a process carried out by actors within the 'life-world' as well as by social scientists, and that the social scientist's data 'are the already constituted meanings of active participants in the social world' (Schutz 1972: 10); thirdly, Wittgenstein's notion, developed by Peter Winch, of language games embedded in forms of life.

These variants of *verstehende* sociology are often loosely described as 'hermeneutics', and they certainly seem at first sight to correspond to the requirements of a hermeneutically oriented approach to the social world. They are however vulnerable to broadly based hermeneutic critique which argues, in essence, that their conception of meaning is too restricted and that they do not do justice to the hermeneutic basis of social theory. They confine themselves largely to the study of the subjective meanings actually or supposedly present in the actors' heads, at the expense of the more general underlying structures of meaning which the hermeneutic tradition considers equally important (Bleicher 1982).

Symbolic interactionism, for example, focuses as its name implies on interaction; structural aspects of social life are reduced in a social-psychological manner to socialisation, role-taking and

³ Giddens 1976: 151. This passage is quoted with approval in Habermas's most recent book, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (1984: I, 162).

3/ keep
to
Assumption
class
Refined

↑
Critique
of
the
3

①

related phenomena. Conversely, in the phenomenological tradition, the focus is on cognitive phenomena, the relation between different typifications, such that the whole enterprise comes to resemble a sociology of knowledge and, in Berger and Luckmann's *Social Construction of Reality* (1967), is explicitly presented as such. The related approach recommended by Wittgenstein and Winch brings out more sharply one of the problems which arise here: a language-game and its associated view of the world is not a cab which one can get in and out of at will. The hermeneutic process, to repeat Gadamer's metaphor, is not the replacement of the interpreter's 'horizon' by that of the object of study, but a dialogical process in which the two horizons are fused together.

Winch's *Idea of a Social Science* (1958) has had a deservedly powerful impact on discussion of these issues within the English-speaking world. His Wittgensteinian conception of discrete forms of life suffers however from both theoretical problems of relativism (which Winch does not consider a problem - see his introductory quotation from Lessing) and the practical problem that there are relatively few (and increasingly few) societies whose world-views are hermetic to the degree which he presupposes (cf. Gellner 1974). Habermas's Gadamerian critique of Winch is helpful here: 'Winch seems to have in mind a linguistic version of Dilthey. From his free-floating position the language analyst can slip into and reproduce the grammar of any language-game, without himself being tied to the dogmatism of his own language-game, which would govern the language analysis as such' (Habermas 1971b: 243-4).

This upshot of the hermeneutic critique of *verstehende* sociology is that it must broaden its concept of meaning and recognise the interactive or dialogical dimension to the clashes between alternative frameworks of meaning. In other words, hermeneutic theorists object to the restriction to subjective meaning and to an exclusively subject-object conception of science. As Giddens puts it at the end of *New Rules of Sociological Method*

The mediation of paradigms or widely discrepant theoretical schemes in science is a hermeneutic matter like that involved in the contacts between other types of meaning-frames. But sociology, unlike natural science, deals with a pre-interpreted world, where the creation and reproduction of meaning-frames is a very condition of that which it seeks to analyse, namely human social conduct: this is why there is a double hermeneutic in the social sciences ... the observing social scientist has to be able first to grasp

what it is!
key

key

Geert!
Double interpret
w/ S.S.

That they are interpreted
an interpretation

those by concepts, i.e. penetrate hermeneutically the form of life whose features he wishes to analyse or explain. (1976: 158-9)

This need not of course involve a dialogue in the literal sense; the point is that there is a virtual dialogue in which insiders and observers' conceptions interact. Even when the interpreter feels constrained to reject the actors' view as totally illusory, it remains relevant that the actors have that view and that the interpreter be able to describe it accurately. Much of the time, of course, social science (like any other science) appears as a critique of common-sense conceptions, but it is important to recognise the way in which common sense is also constitutive of the social reality which the members of society produce and reproduce. This is the basis of Giddens's distinction between 'practical consciousness, as tacit stocks of knowledge which actors draw upon in the constitution of social activity, and ... "discursive consciousness", involving knowledge which actors are able to express on the level of discourse' (1979: 5).

Here Giddens takes on board, but also modifies, the ethnomethodological principle that members of society should not be treated as 'cultural dopes' but as knowledgeable and skilled performers who 'bring off' society as a practical accomplishment. However, where ethnomethodology conflates practical and discursive consciousness and all too often treats them as invulnerable to sociological critique, Giddens insists on the distinction:

The logical status of the knowledge applied by social actors in the production and reproduction of social systems ... has to be considered on two levels. On the methodological level, what I label 'mutual knowledge' is a non-correctible resource which the social analyst necessarily depends upon, as the medium of generating 'valid' descriptions of social life. As Wittgenstein shows, to know a form of life is to be able in principle to participate in it. But the validity of description or characterisations of social activity is a distinct issue from the validity of 'knowledge' as belief-claims constituted in the discourse of social actors. (1979: 5-6)

So far, I have argued for the acceptance of the hermeneutic approach to social theory and the associated critique of various forms of *verstehende* sociology. In the rest of this essay I shall indicate some limitations of the hermeneutic programme, as it has been reformulated by Gadamer.

The natural starting-point for this discussion is again the concept of critique. I shall suggest that, while it is wrong to reject hermeneutics as uncritical *per se*, it does have problems in handling what

what is
quasi-philosophic

Wise

what we
don't guess

what
we do

dopes

only

in the
time

critique

for the rest of
the chapter

Habermas calls systematically distorted communication. This points us beyond hermeneutics to more structuralist and materialist conceptions of social theory – themselves of course hermeneutically grounded.

It is easy to see how the impression has arisen that hermeneutic theory is uncritical. In its association with theological apologetics and with aesthetics it has traditionally been concerned to find meaning, truth and beauty even in the most unpromising locations. As Paul Ricoeur put it at the beginning of *Freud and Philosophy*, hermeneutics is polarized between two projects: the 'recollection of meaning' and the 'exercise of suspicion': 'According to the one pole, hermeneutics is understood as the manifestation and restoration of a meaning addressed to me in the manner of a message, a proclamation, or as is sometimes said, a kerygma; according to the other pole, it is understood as a demystification, as a reduction of illusion.'⁴

Gadamer's conception of hermeneutics is well towards the former pole; this emerges most starkly in his opposition to Habermas's stress on emancipation: the purpose of sociological method 'as emancipating one from tradition places it at the outset very far from the traditional 'purpose and starting point of the hermeneutical problematic with all its bridge building and recovery of the best in the past' (Gadamer 1976: 26).

Gadamer goes on to reject the critique of authority which Habermas takes over from the Enlightenment (ibid.: 33); he concludes severely:

The unavoidable consequence to which all these observations lead is that the basically emancipatory consciousness must have in mind the dissolution of all authority and obedience. This means that unconsciously the ultimate guiding image of emancipatory reflection in the social sciences must be an anarchistic utopia. Such an image, however, seems to me to select a hermeneutically false consciousness... (ibid.: 42)

Passages like these, however, say more about Gadamer's personal conservatism than about the intrinsic nature of his hermeneutic philosophy. The real problem is that, as Habermas puts it, 'Hermeneutic consciousness remains incomplete as long as it does not include a reflection upon the limits of hermeneutic understanding' (1980: 190). In other words, the problem for hermeneutic theory is not just

⁴ Ricoeur 1970: 26. The latter approach, Ricoeur argues, is dominated by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.

that communication may be systematically distorted by extraneous causal influences (Bleicher 1982: Conclusion), but that linguistic communication is in any case part of more general social processes, which should not be reduced to communication alone. The thesis of hermeneutic universality commits, once again, the epistemic fallacy: from the fact that interpretative processes are a significant part of what goes on in the social world, and that our access to the social world is necessarily via our understanding of these interpretative processes (Giddens's double hermeneutic), it does not follow that this is all that exists, or can be known to exist. The production and reproduction of social structures is partly a matter of the interpretations given to them by actors, but also of what Durkheim called 'deeper causes which are opaque to consciousness' (see Lukes 1971: 231).

Despite these problems in adopting Gadamer's hermeneutics wholesale, it is clear that his radicalisation of the hermeneutic approach has had and is having a powerful influence in Anglo-Saxon social theory. It has become increasingly clear that social scientists can no longer pass over the hermeneutic foundations of their practice, nor consign them to the domain of an optional *verstehende* sociology. This is no less true of those like Roy Bhaskar and myself who are arguing for the relevance, even to the social sciences, of a realist philosophy of science and whose main interests are in structural macrosociology (Bhaskar 1979; Outhwaite 1983).

Habermas has summarised, with exemplary clarity, four aspects in which a philosophical hermeneutic is relevant to the sciences and the interpretation of their results:

① Hermeneutic consciousness destroys the objectivist self-understanding of the traditional *Geisteswissenschaften*. It follows from the hermeneutic situatedness of the interpreting scientist that objectivity in understanding cannot be secured by an abstraction from preconceived ideas, but only by reflecting upon the context of effective-history which connects perceiving subjects and their object. ② Hermeneutic consciousness furthermore reminds the social sciences of problems which arise from the symbolic restructuring of their object. If the access to data is no longer mediated through controlled observation but through communication in everyday language, then theoretical concepts can no longer be operationalised within the framework of the pre-scientifically developed language-game of physical measuring... ③ Hermeneutic consciousness also affects the scientific self-understanding of the natural sciences... The legitimization of decisions which direct the choice of research strategies, the construction of

Not
critical
no
emancipation

Wow!
Nice
try

yes

Power
Control

he needs
to look
at Power

yes,
right?

Very nice 4 points

theories and the methods for testing them, and which thereby determine the 'progress of science', is dependent on discussions within the community of scientists... A philosophical hermeneutic can show the reason why it is possible to arrive at a rationally motivated but not at a peremptory consensus on this theoretic level. Hermeneutic consciousness is, finally, called upon in ... the translation of important scientific information into the language of the social life-world. (Bleicher 1980: 186-7)

once again, split in SS. 13 N.S.

Perhaps the most important consequence of all this is the recognition that the results of the social sciences are even more open-ended and open to question than those of the natural sciences, even when the latter are understood in a post-Kuhnian manner (cf. Bhaskar 1979: 62). All science is implicitly committed to a distinction between its concepts, theories and descriptions and the facts of the matter. To give a realist interpretation of scientific theories does not require us, indeed it forbids us, to assume that we have attained some ultimately valid description of the world. As Bhaskar puts it (1978: 250): 'Things exist and act independently of our descriptions, but we can only know them under particular descriptions. Descriptions belong to the world of society and of men; objects belong to the world of nature. We express [our understanding of] nature in thought.' In the case of the social sciences, however, there is a peculiarly intimate connection between scientific theorising and other human projects and practices. Social theory is both value-impregnated and value-generating. Gadamer's notion of dialogue has a peculiar poignancy here.

Gadamer's influence on Anglo-Saxon social theory has been slow to develop, for reasons of language and disciplinary specialisation, and it remains largely indirect. And yet it has, in a lasting way, reshaped our thinking about the nature of social theory.

FURTHER READING

There is a certain irony in proposing a 'method' for understanding Gadamer, but the following suggestions may be helpful. A gentle way into Gadamer's own writings is via his essays in Gadamer 1981 and Gadamer 1976. *Truth and Method* (1975a) itself, though long, is not as fearsome as it appears. Another way to approach Gadamer's work would be through a more general discussion of the hermeneutic tradition such as Palmer 1969 or Bleicher 1980. The latter work is more difficult, but also more rewarding; it contains a quite helpful glossary and texts by Betti, Gadamer, Habermas and Ricoeur.

Ricoeur's view of Gadamer can be found in Ricoeur 1981; see also Thompson 1981. Gadamer's exchanges with Habermas are only partly available in English; in Gadamer 1976, Dallmayr and McCarthy 1977 and Bleicher 1980; the last of these contains Habermas's important essay, 'The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality'. See also Gadamer 1975b. These and the other texts are in the German reader, *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik*. (Other useful German sources include Gadamer's Festschrift, *Hermeneutik und Dialektik* (1970), and the historical anthology by Gadamer and Boehm (1976) which includes an introductory essay by Gadamer.) The Gadamer-Habermas debate has been an important reference point for discussions of the relationship between hermeneutics and modern social theory, such as Outhwaite 1975, Dallmayr and McCarthy 1977, Bauman 1978 and Bleicher 1982. Gadamer's hermeneutics is important for the work of Anthony Giddens; see, in particular, Giddens 1976 and the first essay in Giddens 1982. Another impressive attempt to deal with issues raised by Gadamer's work is Bernstein 1983, which contains an interesting letter from Gadamer to Bernstein. Wolff 1975 concentrates on the implications of philosophical hermeneutics for the sociology of art.