

THE RETURN OF
GRAND THEORY
IN THE
HUMAN SCIENCES

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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

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

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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

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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

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