

Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d ed. transl. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London : Sheed & Ward, 1989), pp. 266-307 [1960].

266 : “[W]e can inquire into the consequences for the hermeneutics of the human sciences of the fact that Heidegger derives the circular structure of understanding from the temporality of Dasein”.

266-67 : “All correct interpretation must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought, and it must direct its gaze ‘on the things themselves’ (which, in the case of the literary critic, are meaningful texts, which themselves are again concerned with objects). For the interpreter to let himself be guided by the things themselves is obviously not a matter of a single, ‘conscientious’ decision, but is ‘the first, last, and constant task’. For it is necessary to keep one’s gaze fixed on the thing throughout all the constant distractions that originate in the interpreter himself. A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there”.

267 : “[I]nterpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones. [...] Working out appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed ‘by the things’ themselves, is the constant task of understanding. The only ‘objectivity’ here is the confirmation of a fore-meaning in its being worked out. [...] Every text presents the task of not simply leaving our own linguistic usage unexamined [...]. Rather, we regard our task as deriving our understanding of the text from the linguistic usage of the time or of the author”.

268 : “[T]he fore-meanings that determine my own understanding can go entirely unnoticed. [...] All that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text. But this openness always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it”.

269 : “[A] person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text’s alterity. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither ‘neutrality’ with respect to content nor the extinction of one’s self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings”.

269-70 : “It is not at all a matter of securing ourselves against the tradition that speaks out of the text then, but, on the contrary, of excluding everything that could hinder us from understanding it in terms of the subject matter. It is the

tyranny of hidden prejudices that makes us deaf to what speaks to us in tradition”.

270: “[T]he fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power”.

276: “The overcoming of all prejudices, this global demand of the Enlightenment, will itself prove to be a prejudice, and removing it opens the way to an appropriate understanding of the finitude which dominates not only our humanity but also our historical consciousness”.

276-77: “[T]he idea of an absolute reason is not a possibility for historical humanity. Reason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms—i.e., it is not its own master but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates. [...] In fact history does not belong to us ; we belong to it. [...] The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being*”.

277: “If we want to do justice to man’s finite, historical mode of being, it is necessary to fundamentally rehabilitate the concept of prejudice and acknowledge the fact that there are legitimate prejudices”.

280: “That which has been sanctioned by tradition and custom has an authority that is nameless, and our finite historical being is marked by the fact that the authority of what has been handed down to us—and not just what is clearly grounded—always has power over our attitudes and behavior. [...] The real force of morals, for example, is based on tradition”.

282: “[W]e are always situated within traditions, and this is no objectifying process—i.e., we do not conceive of what tradition says as something other, something alien. It is always part of us”.

283: “[W]e have to recognize the element of tradition in historical research and inquire into its hermeneutic productivity”.

284-85: “Modern historical research itself is not only research, but the handing down of tradition. [...] [H]istorical research [...] cannot be understood teleologically in terms of the object into which it is inquiring. Such an ‘object in itself’ does not exist at all”.

285: “Of course it is a lot to ask that the self-understanding of the human sciences detach itself, in the whole of its activity, from the model of the natural sciences and regard the historical movement of the things they are concerned with not simply as an impairment of their objectivity, but as something of positive value. [...] But a hermeneutical consciousness is gradually growing that is infusing research with a spirit of self-reflection”.

290: “[U]nderstanding [...] will always involve *more* than merely reconstructing the past ‘world’ to which the work belongs. Our

understanding will always retain the consciousness that we too belong to that world, and correlatively, that the work too belongs to our world”.

290 : “*Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated. This is what must be validated by hermeneutic theory, which is far too dominated by the idea of a procedure, a method*”.

292 : “The task of hermeneutics is to clarify this miracle of understanding, which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning”.

293 : “The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition. But this commonality is constantly being formed in our relation to tradition. Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves. Thus the circle of understanding is not a ‘methodological’ circle, but describes an element of the ontological structure of understanding”.

295 : “[I]t follows that [hermeneutics’] work is not to develop a procedure of understanding, but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place. But these conditions do not amount to a ‘procedure’ or method which the interpreter must of himself bring to bear on the text; rather, they must be given. The prejudices and fore-meanings that occupy the interpreter’s consciousness are not at his free disposal”.

296-97 : “Every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text belongs to the whole tradition whose content interests the age and in which it seeks to understand itself. The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original audience. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter [...]. Not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well. Perhaps it is not correct to refer to this productive element in understanding as ‘better understanding’. [...] Understanding is not, in fact, understanding better, either in the sense of superior knowledge of the subject because of clearer ideas or in the sense of fundamental superiority of conscious over unconscious production. It is enough to say that we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all*”.

297 : “Since we are now concerned not with individuality and what it thinks but with the truth of what is said, a text [...] is taken seriously in its claim to truth. [T]he hermeneutic productivity of temporal distance could be understood only when Heidegger gave understanding an ontological orientation by interpreting it as an ‘existential’ and when he interpreted Dasein’s mode of being in terms of time. Time is no longer a gulf to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the

course of events in which the present is rooted. Hence temporal distance is not something that must be overcome. [...] In fact the important thing is to recognize temporal distance as a positive and productive condition enabling understanding. It is not a yawning abyss but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which everything handed down presents itself to us”.

298 : “The implicit presupposition of historical method [...] is that the permanent significance of something can first be known objectively only when it belongs to a closed context—in other words, when it is dead enough to have only historical interest. Only then does it seem possible to exclude the subjective involvement of the observer. [...] [A]long with the negative side of the filtering process brought about by temporal distance there is also the positive side, namely the value it has for understanding. It not only lets local and limited prejudices die away, but allows those that bring about genuine understanding to emerge clearly as such”.

299 : “[T]he hermeneutically trained mind [...] will make conscious the prejudices governing our own understanding, so that the text, as another’s meaning, can be isolated and valued on its own”.

299 : “The essence of the *question* is to open up possibilities and keep them open. If a prejudice becomes questionable in view of what another person or text says to us, this does not mean that it is simply set aside and the text or the other person accepted as valid in its place. Rather, historical objectivism shows its naivete in accepting this disregarding of ourselves as what actually happens. In fact our own prejudice is properly brought into play by being put at risk. Only by being given full play is it able to experience the other’s claim to truth and make it possible for him to have full play himself. The naivete of so-called historicism consists in the fact that it does not undertake this reflection, and in trusting to the fact that its procedure is methodical, it forgets its own historicity. [...] The true historical object is not an object at all, but the unity of the one and the other, a relationship that constitutes both the reality of history and the reality of historical understanding”.²³⁰

300 : “*Understanding is, essentially, a historically effected event*”.

300-01 : “Historical consciousness must become conscious that in the apparent immediacy with which it approaches a work of art or a traditional text, there is also another kind of inquiry in play, albeit unrecognized and unregulated. If we are trying to understand a historical phenomenon from the historical distance that is characteristic of our hermeneutical situation, we are always already affected by history. It determines in advance both what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation, and we more or less forget half of what is really there—in fact, we miss the whole truth of the phenomenon—when we take its immediate appearance as the whole truth. In our understanding, which we imagine is so innocent because its results seem so self-evident, the other presents itself so much in terms of

²³⁰[Here constantly arises the danger of “appropriating” the other person in one’s own understanding and thereby failing to recognize his or her otherness.]

our own selves that there is no longer a question of self and other. In relying on its critical method, historical objectivism conceals the fact that historical consciousness is itself situated in the web of historical effects. By means of methodical critique it does away with the arbitrariness of 'relevant' appropriations of the past, but it preserves its good conscience by failing to recognize the presuppositions—certainly not arbitrary, but still fundamental—that govern its own understanding, and hence falls short of reaching that truth which, despite the finite nature of our understanding, could be reached. In this respect, historical objectivism resembles statistics, which are such excellent means of propaganda because they let the 'facts' speak and hence simulate an objectivity that in reality depends on the legitimacy of the questions asked".

301 : "[W]e should learn to understand ourselves better and recognize that in all understanding, whether we are expressly aware of it or not, the efficacy of history is at work. When a naive faith in scientific method denies the existence of effective history, there can be an actual deformation of knowledge. [...] [T]he power of history over finite human consciousness [...] prevails even where faith in method leads one to deny one's own historicity. [...] [H]istorically effected consciousness ('wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein') is an element in the act of understanding itself and [...] is already effectual in *finding the right questions to ask*".

301-02 : "Consciousness of being affected by history ('wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein') is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical *situation*. To acquire an awareness of a situation is, however, always a task of peculiar difficulty. The very idea of a situation means that we are not standing outside it and hence are unable to have any objective knowledge of it. We always find ourselves within a situation, and throwing light on it is a task that is never entirely finished. This is also true of the hermeneutic situation—i.e., the situation in which we find ourselves with regard to the tradition that we are trying to understand. The illumination of this situation—reflection on effective history—can never be completely achieved ; yet the fact that it cannot be completed is due not to a deficiency in reflection but to the essence of the historical being that we are. *To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete*. All self-knowledge arises from what is historically pregiven [...] because it underlies all subjective intentions and actions, and hence both prescribes and limits every possibility for understanding any tradition whatsoever in its historical alterity".

302 : "Every finite present has its limitations. We define the concept of 'situation' by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence essential to the concept of situation is the concept of '*horizon*'. The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point".

304 : "Just as the individual is never simply an individual because he is always in understanding with others, so too the closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction. The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one

standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving”.

304: “When our historical consciousness transposes itself into historical horizons, this does not entail passing into alien worlds unconnected in any way with our own; instead, they together constitute the one great horizon that moves from within and that, beyond the frontiers of the present, embraces the historical depths of our self-consciousness”.

304-05: “Understanding tradition undoubtedly requires a historical horizon, then. But it is not the case that we acquire this horizon by transposing ourselves into a historical situation. Rather, we must always already have a horizon in order to be able to transpose ourselves into a situation. For what do we mean by ‘transposing ourselves’? Certainly not just disregarding ourselves. This is necessary, of course, insofar as we must imagine the other situation. But into this other situation we must bring, precisely, ourselves. Only this is the full meaning of ‘transposing ourselves’. If we put ourselves in someone else’s shoes, for example, then we will understand him—i.e., become aware of the otherness, the indissoluble individuality of the other person—by putting *ourselves* in his position”.

305: “Transposing ourselves consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another person to our own standards; rather, it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other. The concept of ‘horizon’ suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion”.

306: “[T]he horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. *Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves*”.

307: “In the process of understanding, a real fusing of horizons occurs—which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded”.