

## THE PHILOSOPHY OF HANS-GEORG GADAMER

A Review of *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer. The Library of Living Philosophers*, vol. XXIV. Lewis Edwin Hahn, ed. Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1997.<sup>1</sup>

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*The form of the proposition ... is not suited to express speculative truths. Even the model proposition ... – “snow is white” – seems strange to me from this viewpoint. Who uttered this, even if it is true? I am only interested in asking about the precondition of human communication; namely, that one really tries to understand what the other thinks about something.*

Hans-Georg Gadamer (129–130)

Perhaps the most prestigious English-language book series for a philosopher in which to be included, *The Library of Living Philosophers*, founded in 1938 by the late Paul Arthur Schilpp and currently edited by Lewis Edwin Hahn, combines in each volume an autobiographical account, “a series of expository and critical essays written by the leading exponents and opponents of the philosopher’s thought” (Hahn vii [all page references without a year are to the volume under review]), and a comprehensive bibliography. Philosophers who “were Schilpped”, as the colloquial term goes, include Dewey, Santayana, Whitehead, Moore, Russell, Cassirer, Jaspers, Carnap, Popper, Sartre, Quine, von Wright, and Ayer. As Hans-Georg Gadamer himself remarked (in conversation), he is the first non-

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<sup>1</sup> xviii, 619 pp. Cloth: ISBN 0-8126-9341-8, US\$ 59.95; paper: ISBN 0-8126-9342-6, US\$ 32.95. The book is altogether well-made, preserving the impression of an American 1940s scholarly tome, but unfortunately, even in the cloth version it is not genuinely bound. Other minor drawbacks include that the portrait chosen for inclusion and cover is one of the worst of Gadamer I have ever seen; that the index is deficient; and that there are just a few too many printing mistakes. Most of the essays were completed during the first half of 1992; a production time of over half a decade is too long, even under the difficult circumstances of such a series.

émigré German philosopher being so honored. The following volumes will be on Chisholm and Davidson; one on Habermas is also scheduled.

Even for one who is so fortunate as to be counted among his students, it is certainly appropriate to call Hans-Georg Gadamer one of the great and most influential philosophers of this century. Over 35 years ago, with his seminal *Wahrheit und Methode* (1990), he established with his kind of hermeneutics a genuinely paradigm-changing philosophic framework that has had, and still has, a hardly overestimable effect on the humanities and social sciences.

Gadamer is now 98 years old and still an active scholar tackling new topics, trying hard to avoid too many public engagements so that he can pursue his truly important tasks. He has just published a new consideration and translation of Book VI of the *Nikomachian Ethics*. (Aristoteles, 1998) The meritorious Gadamerian Richard E. Palmer's remark that some of the recent aesthetic writings of Gadamer's can be seen "as something of a 'swan song,' undertaking one last time ... to restate and carry forward certain guiding themes in his thought" (536–537), is therefore fortunately false.

This is a very important, useful, excellent book which everyone even remotely interested in Gadamer, hermeneutics, Greek philosophy, aesthetics, and Heidegger should read. It will play an important part in making Gadamer (even) more accessible to the Anglo-American world. (See also 57) This is perhaps called for because Gadamer is a quintessentially Continental philosopher, in spite of the fact that, as he says, "As I learned to speak English a little better, ... it became quite apparent to me that there were also quite viable bridges from analytic philosophy to hermeneutics." (19; see 346) Yet, this is not an introductory book; *Wahrheit und Methode* should be read first (the new English translation is quite acceptable), and familiarity with several other works is almost as necessary.

The first part of the book, Gadamer's autobiography, "Reflections on my Philosophical Journey" (3–63), is based on previously published accounts, especially on the excellent *Selbstdarstellung* originally written for the *Meiner* series. (1977b) The translation by Palmer is quite good, but as Gadamer himself revised it, one wonders whether the tedious inclusion of German terms in brackets, inevitable as it usually is, was necessary here. Still, in spite of the fact that "in the English-speaking world as well as in German phenomenology, what we call the '*Lebenswelt*' has become such a basic orientation in philosophy that now every effort at translation provokes mistrust" (57), an alternative during times when English has become the *lingua franca* of science and scholarship is not apparent.

Unfortunately, the book includes only three essays by philosophical 'heavyweights', i.e. by authors who themselves are at least in a similar league as Gadamer: Karl-Otto Apel, Roderick M. Chisholm, and Donald Davidson. Many, indeed most of the other essays are excellent or at least good, but they are – to use a somewhat Heideggerian distinction – by professors of philosophy, not by philosophers. Gadamer's most interesting conversation partners whom one would have liked to see in this volume are first of all Jürgen Habermas and Jacques

Derrida, with whom he has had well-noted debates or at least indirect interchange;<sup>2</sup> then Quentin Skinner, G. H. von Wright, Paul Ricoeur, and Richard Rorty; as well as the late Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn, who were still alive and active when most of the essays for this volume were written.<sup>3</sup>

Among the authors of the present volume, Gadamer's areas of interest are well-covered; what is missing are essays, not by philosophers, but by scholars from the fields which Gadamerian hermeneutics has influenced so much: science theory, theology, law, history, economics, and political science. But perhaps this omission was intentional.

Of the 29 essays, I would single out as excellent those by Chisholm, Rosen, Davidson, Madison, and Sokolowski, and as very good and/or very interesting those by Apel, Verene, Grondin, Sullivan, Dostal, Michelfelder, Schmidt, and Smith. (This list does not coincide with Gadamer's own judgement.) This is not to say that the other ones are bad;<sup>4</sup> if anything, they mostly suffer from a certain pedestrianness, if this is a word. In general, and not surprisingly, Gadamer's replies make the most interesting and profound reading in the book, although their translation from the German is occasionally too close to the words.

Of those essays dealing with Greek philosophy – and also in other respects –, the highlight is Donald Davidson's. Davidson revisits Gadamer's habilitation thesis, *Platos dialektische Ethik*, all the more interesting because Davidson's Ph.D. thesis at Harvard under Werner Jaeger (whom he, unlike Gadamer, does not mention; 422, 433) was on a very similar topic. Davidson begins by saying that "I by chance started in somewhat the same place (but without the clear goal) and have, by what seems to me a largely accidental but *commodius vicus* of recirculation, arrived in Gadamer's intellectual neighborhood." (421)<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> On Derrida, see Gadamer's comments to James Risser (403-404), as well as the discussion of Sokolowski's essay below.

<sup>3</sup> Even this list is somewhat disconcerting if one compares it with one which would enumerate those who Gadamer outlived, but who – partially because of his attaining academic competence at a very young age, say around 1920 – were colleagues, rather than (only) teachers: Nicolai Hartmann, Rudolf Bultmann, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Karl Löwith, Hannah Arendt, R.G. Collingwood, Theodor W. Adorno, Hans Jonas, Leo Strauss, Werner Jaeger, Paul Celan, and of course Martin Heidegger.

<sup>4</sup> Only one contribution is outright bad, that by Robin May Schott. Faced with her remark, "Is my admittedly angry recounting of Gadamer's virtual silence about women in his personal and professional life merely the ranting of a latter-day American feminist, tasteless and out of place in these austere circles, and reflective of an American empiricist penchant to count up women?" (502), one might be tempted to answer thrice in the affirmative, but this would do grave injustice to both American feminism and empiricism. One wonders why the editor included this diatribe at all.

<sup>5</sup> Davidson's essay is also interesting because his concept of understanding seems very similar to that of intermediate stations of the thinking-process of the Heidegger of the immediate post-*Sein und Zeit* period, viz. of the 1928/29 Freiburg "Introduction to Philosophy" lecture (cf. Davidson 430-432 with Heidegger, 1996, 68-122). – On Gadamer and Davidson, see also David C. Hoy's essay, "Post-Cartesian Interpretation: Hans-Georg Gadamer and Donald Davidson" (111-128), as well as that by the Davidson expert Bjørn T. Ramberg (459-471) and Tietz 1994.

The basis of Gadamer's account is Plato's *Philebus*, a grossly understudied and undercommented work. (422) Davidson traces the difference between *Politeia* and *Philebus* (427–428), addresses the development of Plato as “a matter of emphasis, of ‘highlighting’” (429) and arrives at the idea of Plato's development, which he very nicely phrases thus:

*If I have been emphasizing the differences, it is not for the sake of airing my particular vision, but because there seems to me some discrepancy between Gadamer's own idea of understanding, and his resistance to finding real development in Plato's attitudes and methods. To put this positively: I think a Platonic dialectic seen as more open to serious revision would cohabit more happily with Gadamer's own conception of dialogue and conversation.* (430)

Gadamer disagrees, but with interest – the late Gadamer is after all more interested in Plato than in himself: “I cannot see that the development of the image of Socrates in the early dialogues through the middle period up to the later one has a different meaning than merely a dramatological one. ... I cannot really admit that I deprive myself of an interlocutor when I try to understand the Platonic dialogues as a unity.” (434)

Robert J. Dostal, in “Gadamer's Continuous Challenge: Heidegger's Plato Interpretation” (289–307), deals with both figures, and in a very competent way (although, again, eclipsed by Gadamer's reply). Dostal points out that Gadamer's Plato is not Heidegger's, but that the latter opened the door for the former. (289) This brilliant essay almost succeeds in arguing that Gadamer “has shown us how we might, in our contemporary context, recover [Plato's and Aristotle's] work and how we might respect the philosophical accomplishment of Heidegger without accepting his dogmatism with respect to Plato”. (302) Indeed, as Gadamer says, “in the end, I did not follow Heidegger's insistence upon the superiority of Aristotle over the Platonic model.” (308) He even calls this “my own strongest deviation from Heidegger's philosophical thoughts”: “Heidegger always viewed Plato through the lens of Aristotle” (458), compared to “my orientation to Plato and to an Aristotle seen with the eyes of Plato.” (97; see also 274, 308, 553; Dostal 296, 302; cf. 293–296)

Jean Grondin is certainly one of the most meritorious Gadamerians, in English, French, and in German. He has just about completed the first full biography of Gadamer, which will appear with Mohr/Siebeck some time soon. For him, too, however, Gadamer is first a Heideggerian and second only a Platonist. (157) Yet, in his essay, “Gadamer on Humanism” (157–170), Grondin sets out to claim a fundamental difference between Heidegger and Gadamer: “To put the thesis bluntly, Gadamer is a humanist and Heidegger isn't.” (157) The essay is very lucid and shows once again Grondin's great gift for introducing complex matters simply without becoming too inaccurate.

Grondin points out that, “[e]ven if Gadamer does not wish to exclude method entirely from the realm of the humanities, it is his conviction that methods alone are not that which make up the scientificity and relevance of the human sciences.”

(161–162) “Hence, Gadamer’s account of humanism is not only a defense of the human sciences, it is also a defense of the utter humanity of our knowledge. What is meant by this, is that we can never hope to obtain any godlike wisdom, that is a bird’s-eye view that would enable us to transcend our finitude.” (166)

We now come to an essay that I find illuminating in spite of its shortcomings, and that Gadamer does not: Diane P. Michelfelder’s on “Gadamer on Heidegger on Art.” (437–456) Gadamer says that it “is not surprising that my text ... is ... taken up for the sake ... of the question how Heidegger’s involvement with National Socialism is reflected in my eyes.” He also thinks that the text Michelfelder chose as her basis is the worst possible one. (457) But the question of the Heidegger-Gadamer relationship is very interesting, and Michelfelder’s project to find out the personal and philosophical ties on the basis of a small preface (438) is not without merit.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, what is Gadamer’s attitude to Heidegger? As he says,

*It is indeed clear that for someone like me—who from the beginning observed Heidegger’s entire political adventure, if only from a distance, from Marburg, entirely without preparation and surely not without terror—the task presents itself under very different presuppositions than for the contemporary reader. For us in 1960 the task was to see how we could keep alive the philosophical impetus that issued and that, despite everything, continued to issue from Heidegger. That was the task presented to all of us.* (457)

Gadamer insists that “Heidegger’s interest in modern art, as well as his turn to Hölderlin, grew less out of his erroneous political paths than out of his tireless search for God, a goal which he could never attain.” He concludes by saying, “Today I wish more than ever that one does what I attempted to do: to seek to utilize for one’s own paths even Heidegger’s later thought efforts.” (458)

The final important essay of the volume deals once again with Heidegger: “The I-Thou Encounter (*Begegnung*) in Gadamer’s Reception of Heidegger” by P. Christopher Smith. (509–525)<sup>7</sup> Although the essay contains too much (of Smith’s) autobiography, it has its merits when it argues “that Gadamer’s own reception of Heidegger, however dedicated and loyal it was to the man to whom he owed so much, was not at all uncritical in the uses it made of his thought”. (510) Smith’s theory is that Gadamer reacted against and overcame Heidegger’s latent Gnosticism. (510, 514, 519, 521) The point could well be made, indeed, that Gadamer is most interesting when he is not a Heideggerian, and that one does not need to know Heidegger to understand him (one *does* need Plato and Aristotle!). There are good observations by Smith on the Heidegger segment in *Wahrheit und Methode* (511–514); Heidegger’s role for Gadamer’s Plato and Aristotle is also

<sup>6</sup> Michelfelder’s work is a bit marred, amongst other things, by her obvious lack of proper command of German, apparent in many misspellings.

<sup>7</sup> Smith’s points on the Biblical dimension and on Gadamer’s Lutheranism (519) are forced and unconvincing (see also Gadamer 527); the facet of Gadamer as an urban thinker (Smith 524, n. 10), however, is quite well-taken.

well-treated. (514) Indeed, the opening of φρόνησις by Heidegger is a key for Gadamer. (See 526) But contrary to Heidegger, Smith is correct, “in Gadamer ..., *phronesis* remains the *social* phenomenon that it is in Aristotle.” (514)

Akin to Grondin, Smith stresses the completely un-Heideggerian *Menschenbild* of Gadamer’s, the emphasis on *Bildung* or παιδεία that with Gadamer is “learning to rise above our initially individuated and private existences and to participate in the communities of language and culture to which we have always already belonged from time out of mind.” (517) And this is true: hermeneutics is dialogical in nature, and this means that interaction dominates. In that sense, the concept of the ιδιότης as someone not dealing with the πόλις is something Gadamer could support – quite in line the *VIIth Letter*, whose policy resolve Plato himself did not heed either, or at least not in the sense as it is commonly understood. (See Drechsler 1998b)<sup>8</sup>

As Gadamer says in a pivotal passage, “as a child of the modern Enlightenment, I have been led to my path via the great humanistic heritage. I owe my early formative impulses to it insofar as I could never entirely follow Heidegger in the search for God with full devotion.” (526) This brings us to something that very strongly emerges from several of his replies, and perhaps surprisingly for some: the immense influence on Gadamer of Immanuel Kant. In a serious sense, Gadamer, one of the editors of *Kant-Studien*, claims to be, and is, a Kantian. (97, 109–110, 274, 287, 385, 472)

The single but thus all the more important essay touching on this, however, makes a claim almost to the contrary: Roderick M. Chisholm’s, who engages in a project of bridge-building (see also Gadamer’s reply, 109–110) in his “Gadamer and Realism: Reaching an Understanding.” (99–108) Comparing Gadamer to Alexius Meinong (101), Chisholm says that Gadamer claims that “there is more to the world than what is sometimes called ‘objective reality.’” (100) The heart of the essay is the segment entitled, “Must Hermeneutics be Kantian?” (103–105), to which the answer is no; one “need not be a Kantian in order to accept and to appreciate the philosophical significance of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. A realist can work together with Gadamer in this philosophical enterprise.” (106)

Gadamer, in his reply (108–110), focuses on his first philosophical teacher, Richard Höningwald, with whom he studied in Breslau, as well as on Nicolai Hartmann, who when Gadamer came to Marburg “was already in the process of distancing himself from the transcendental idealism in which he had been educated in Marburg.” (109) He makes clear that “in moral philosophy I had to play the role of a defender of Kant ... but otherwise ..., I remained closer to Greek philosophy than to transcendental idealism.” (109) As he later remarks (dare I say: rightly?), Kant’s “real persisting presence lies in practical philosophy, that is in

<sup>8</sup> In the present book, the vital importance of the *VIIth Letter* for Gadamer becomes particularly obvious. (49, 434: “the chief testimony”, 552: “in which Plato communicated his thought.”)

the concept of freedom which cannot be understood as fact of cognition but only as fact of reason – with all its far-reaching metaphysical consequences.” (472)

Moving on to aesthetics, actually the weakest cluster in the book, Joan Stambaugh has a friendly essay on “Gadamer on the Beautiful”, which almost entirely deals with his famous *Die Aktualität des Schönen* (1977; this work was also dealt with by Michelfelder, 449–453). It is surprising that Stambaugh, who is well-known for her Heidegger translations, refers exclusively to the English translation. Many of the Gadamer translations are not very good, and it is necessary to translate his texts anew when writing about them. While references to the standard translation are helpful for a book like this, whose main task is perhaps to make Gadamer (more) accessible in English, this should be done by a reference *additional* to one’s own version.<sup>9</sup>

Opening the stage to Gadamerian hermeneutics proper, Stanley Rosen, a Straussian, presents with his critical essay “Horizontverschmelzung” (207–218) one of the indubitable highlights of this book. He talks about “Gadamer’s insistence that to understand a work in its own time ... is to deny its claim to be true for *me*, i.e., for the tradition”. (209) As Rosen puts it, “Understanding is interpretation; the work is understood, not in its own terms, but as appropriated to my terms.” (210) After having stated what he thinks is Gadamer’s case, he continues: “At this point in my reflections, I take leave of Gadamer’s text in order to carry through the exercise of philosophizing under his guidance.” (210) And that is a most fruitful approach: “I want to suggest that there is a difference between understanding and interpretation, although the two are unquestionably related. *In order to interpret something, we must first understand it.*” (211) To this, Gadamer replies:

*The reverse seems to me to be convincing too: that the interpretation is precisely supposed to help to finally understand the unintelligible. What then is correct? Both statements? None of them? In the end, the answer must be that understanding is always already interpretation, and that an interpretation is only a ‘correct’ interpretation if it emerges out of the performance of understanding. Thus, Schleiermacher is finally right in regarding the relation of understanding and interpretation as fluid.* (221)

Gadamer insists on his interpretation and indeed critique of Strauss in a most convincing way: to try to understand the author in the way he understood himself is “untenable”, because otherwise, “we would have to be told by the artist what was meant, but was not brought out, in the work of art.” (219) The reader who understands a text is, in the final analysis, in a situation hardly different from that of the musician who presents a convincing interpretation of a musical piece. (220)

However, as Gadamer states elsewhere,

<sup>9</sup> On the issue of translation, see Drechsler 1997, esp.70–71 n. 9, and – specifically on Gadamer – 1998a. A model for the combination of new translation and reference to a standard edition is the work by Quentin Skinner (e.g., 1996, see xvi, and 1998, see xiii).

*there are certainly also simply false interpretations. I would say that here we have a trait in common with research into nature which has to relativize its final pieces of knowledge from the viewpoint of the progress of research. I think that this applies to hermeneutics in the same sense, although not on the basis of scientific progress. Our understanding always expects that our understanding of the world changes. That ... does mean that our present understanding of the world will be changed by new points of view. (472–473)*

Rosen's essay is followed by Robert Sokolowski's "Gadamer's Theory of Hermeneutics" (223–234), which is as fine an introduction to Gadamer's thought as we have, if such an introduction be necessary. Sokolowski details the difference between Derridaian deconstructivism and Gadamerian hermeneutics, which the uninitiated occasionally see as similar. (228–231) The difference is that "Deconstruction and relativism collapse the object into its appearances and profiles, they reduce it to the way it appears here and now ...; they take the judicial application of a law to be like the writing of a new law (more accurately, perhaps, they abolish the distinction between legislation and application)." (229; see also Alexander 326)

Carl Page, in "Historical Finitude and Philosophical Hermeneutics" (370–384), an essay which Gadamer calls "quite solid and very interesting" (385), postulates that silence is as much a part of conversation as words. But Gadamer never denied that:

*not only dealing with linguistic words is meant. The exchange between human beings consists of silent language, gestures and gesticulation, inflections of the voice, too, and also of eloquent silence. That it creates true comments in the first place holds especially for laughing with one another. — In the end, all of this can find its linguistic expression in the exchange of words although it will always be limited and imperfect. (386)*

Finally, we arrive at Gadamer's practical, i.e. political and economic, thought. In the case of Gadamer, we should differentiate between (1) his personal politics,<sup>10</sup> (2) his explicitly political writings, and (3) the political or political-philosophical implications of his work in general.

<sup>10</sup> As regards the matter of Gadamer's personal politics, especially the construction of affinities or complicities with Nazism, see Richard Palmer's excellent footnote on the subject. (588-589, n. 1) I generally agree with Gadamer's view "that direct reply to such preposterous allegations only gives them undeserved attention." (589) However, in the present context it might not be out of place to note that Jean Grondin rightly calls the depiction of Herder in the, in this respect, most (in)famous publication of Gadamer's (1941), courageous. (162; see also 168–169 n.s 15–16; Palmer 589) Grondin also emphasizes Gadamer's association with the Leipzig Mayor Gördele, one of the leaders of a resistance group, who was executed by the Nazis. (169 n. 16) Palmer notes that Gadamer was "elected Rektor of Leipzig University immediately after the end of the war because his noncomplicity with the Nazis was well known." ([588-]589, n. 1) I would add the testimony of the continuously friendly attitude towards Gadamer, even during and immediately after the Nazi era, of Leo Strauss, Hans Jonas, and Karl Löwith. All three of them had read and could judge his theoretical writings; they also knew his everyday behavior during this time. And finally, Gadamer's action in the Werner Krauss case, where he effectively and – this was in the



For the last one, Karl-Otto Apel's essay, "Regulative Ideas or Truth-Happening?": An Attempt to Answer the Question of the Conditions of the Possibility of Valid Understanding" (67-94) is of interest. It is the only contribution by a German (or indeed Continental) in this volume; it is also the only one which originally was not written in English. It is mainly noteworthy, perhaps, for a passage in which Apel modifies for himself his and Habermas' early 1970s *Idelogiekritik*-based critique of hermeneutics, or better, of its universality. (79-89)

Regarding the Habermasian critique, G.B. Madison correctly lines out in his essay that this is a matter of the claim to universalism. (350-351) However, "the Frankfurter crowd appear to believe that Gadamerian hermeneutics is limited merely to explicating the *self-understanding* that authors and agents have of themselves. However, this is most decidedly not the case. For hermeneutics it is not the intention of the author (or agent) but the meaning of the text (or action) that is the proper object of interpretation." (351) Madison also points out in a very helpful way that hermeneutics is not necessarily conservative (356; see also Page 374-375) – even if this were a criticism. Contrary e.g. to logical positivism, in its worst manifestation represented by Hempel, hermeneutics is universal not in an "imperialistic" sense. (357; 360; see 364 n. 40)

With Robert R. Sullivan's "Gadamer's Early and Distinctively Political Hermeneutics", the highly intriguing part of Gadamer as an explicitly political philosopher opens. Gadamer expresses unease towards Sullivan's attempts at styling him into one (256-258, esp. 257; 508); yet I, too, would argue that this is legitimate.

But Sullivan's approach is problematic, because he does not realize the differentiation made above. A main insight of Gadamer's is the restoration of the use of Plato's political philosophy through the categorization of the latter's three main political works:<sup>11</sup> The *Politeia* as a heuristic utopia with heavy ironic undertones, rather than a guidebook, which leads to the realization of what the Good State is (and should be) like (see Gadamer, 1934 and 1991; Drechsler, 1998b); the *Nomoi* as a classical utopia – if an "immense" one (Gadamer 1991, 288), an "educational state" (1991, 289) –; and the *Politikos* as something akin to a hand- or even a guide-book, highly theoretical, but with direct hints as to how to perform as a Statesman.

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1940s – under more than considerable danger to himself, contributed to the saving the life of the Marxist Romanist who was already in Gestapo gaol in Berlin and sentenced to death, is a demonstration of civil courage *par excellence* that should make further discussion pointless. (On this episode, see most recently Jehle 1996, 145-149, 245 n. 61, a particularly impeccable source because the series in which the book appeared is the organ, and its author part, of a group at the Free University of Berlin that has developed a cottage industry in the construction of Nazi ties of German philosophers.)

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the discussion of Davidson's essay above.

The measuring-excursus in the *Politikos* (283e – 285c) forms thus the essence of Aristotle's φρόνησις, the establishment of the difference between *meßbar* and *angemessen*. (Cf. Gadamer in Aristoteles 1998, 62, 66; Dostal 297) What becomes clear through Gadamer is Plato's focus on πρᾶξις as the highest θεωρία, just like Aristotle's, especially in matters concerning human living together.<sup>12</sup> With this restoration of the 'possibility' and therefore immediacy and relevance of the *Politeia*, which Gadamer admits is otherwise a police state, he opens up the option of taking Plato very seriously for our times – still something that even among professional political philosophers is far from clear, courtesy to a good part of the late Sir Karl Popper's well-known indictment of Plato in vol. 1 of *The Open Society and Its Enemies: The Spell of Plato* (Popper, 1966; see Gadamer, 1991, and Drechsler, 1998b, for further discussion of this point).

The main account of this restoration is Gadamer's famous 1934 essay, *Plato and the Poets*. It is Gadamer's first independent publication, excepting his dissertation and habilitation thesis, which Davidson dealt with. Via the example of Plato's notorious treatment of the poets in the πόλις of the *Politeia*, Gadamer makes the heuristic character of the latter amply clear. Sullivan, regrettably, misses this completely. He also misses Gadamer's comparatively recent essay, first published in 1983, "Platos Denken in Utopien" (1991), in which the continuity of Gadamer's thinking in this matter, and the argument itself, become powerfully apparent.

Sullivan uses the 1934 essay very differently. He claims that "'Plato and the Poets' was conceived, written, presented, and finally published in Nazi Germany." (239; see 243) But this is already simply false. As Gadamer explicitly states in the first paragraph of the "Anmerkungen", the lecture upon which the essay was based was delivered (to a kind of alumni association of the Marburg humanist *Gymnasium*) on 24 January 1934, and he also states that there were "prepared annotations and references", which imply a longer genesis of this – after all quite iconoclastic – essay. (1934, 35) "One assumes that what was published in 1934 had to have been written in 1934. But we are not journalists." (256) Gadamer even points at the fact that – in spite of the famous Goethe quote he used as a motto, which is frequently seen as a sign of resistance – "in 1934 the political planning and supervision of censorship was not yet in effect in German publishing... In those days before the Röhm-Putsch one still hoped for the return of the constitutional state. ... The situation only changed after June 30, 1934". (256)

Inasmuch as Sullivan's thesis more or less rests on his wrong assumption (242; 243), we might already withdraw our attention, but we should not do so yet, because Sullivan is perfectly right when he says, "In my words: Plato's critique of poetry is ultimately about politics and not about art, or poetry. The point of education is now decisively political." (243)

<sup>12</sup> Dostal phrases this too timidly as "the recovery of Aristotle's *phronesis* with its antecedent in Plato". (298)

Whether there is a political sub-text in *Plato und die Dichter*, however (239), is again another question.<sup>13</sup> As a matter of fact, there is something very intriguing to this thesis: if one reads Gadamer after Sullivan, it is easy to imagine that the emphasized passages really do represent a “thinly disguised subtext.” (244) However, as it is clear that this was not intended (can one subconsciously create such a sub-text?), then the views attributed to Gadamer (244–251) are not of too much interest anymore (but see Gadamer 257; cf. Eco, 1988). *A fortiori*, to derive from this alleged previous thought of Gadamer’s, a critique of *Wahrheit und Methode*, which Sullivan depicts as a kind of de-politicized shopping-bag of ideas and somewhat inferior to the earlier writings (251; 253), is certainly absurd.

Graeme Nicholson, in “Truth in Metaphysics and in Hermeneutics” (309–320), an otherwise not particularly profound essay, finally mentions one of the explicitly political writings of Gadamer’s “Die Grenzen des Experten” (1989); too bad he does not take it any further. As he says (rather simply), Gadamer sees it as “a weakness to rely too heavily upon science, administration, and planning. ... We must learn to understand ‘the limitations of the expert,’ preserve a Socratic awareness of our own ignorance, comprehend that practical decisions stem from the *phronesis* of the citizen rather than any speciality.” (309–310)

Or, as Madison remarks, “Thus, the practical task of hermeneutic theory is precisely ... that of fostering ‘the type of dialogical communities in which *phronesis* becomes a living reality and where citizens can actually assume what Gadamer tells us is their “noblest task”—decision-making according to one’s own responsibility—instead of conceding that task to the expert.’ In its application to politics, hermeneutics functions as the legitimating theory of democratic *praxis*.” (357)<sup>14</sup>

Of great importance is Madison’s attempt at Gadamerian economics. He claims that the “central problem of market economics is that of accounting for market *coordination* ... In an attempt to explore these ‘webs of significance’ and to deal with the ‘coordination problem,’ hermeneutic economists focus on the role that *prices* play in communicating to economic agents the information that is necessary if they are to interact in an orderly way.” (354) Valid as this Hayekian-Lotmanian perspective – *viz.* to treat prices as a secondary modelling system – is, and valid as the use of hermeneutics in interpreting that text is (354–355), it only presents a narrow, and in its claim to universality problematic, perspective of

<sup>13</sup> Sullivan states that “if one pays attention to Gadamer’s *italicized* words wherever they occur, they speak for themselves as a subtext. ... Gadamer’s *italicized* sentences stick out like sore thumbs, ... because they all trumpet the political subtext.” (243) Actually, in the 1934 original, emphasis is denoted by *i n t e r s p a c i n g* and not *italicization*. This is perhaps a minor point (although not completely insignificant if one thinks, e.g., of G. B. Shaw’s avoidance of italics and preferment of interspacing), but it demonstrates that Sullivan has not deemed it necessary to consult the original, the layout of which, for instance, might be significant in matters such as these.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander (esp. 343) also details the relation of hermeneutics and democracy; Gadamer’s reply (347) is however quite pessimistic.

hermeneutic economics, limited to a small group of interpretive economists in the United States.<sup>15</sup> It is true that the “‘slavish imitation of the method and language of [physical] science,’ in the words of Hayek, is being contested today by those economists who have renounced the positivism that still tends to prevail in the discipline and who have turned to hermeneutics.” (354; see 363 n. 29)<sup>16</sup> Madison is also correct when he says that “human agency in the context of a market economy should be treated under the rubric not of *techne* but of *praxis* (i.e., practical reason). ... Hermeneutic theory ... believes that the ultimate justification of theory (as, precisely, a theory of practice) is its significance for practice.” (355) This is indeed a given – and a Kantian point.

But then comes what in my view is something of a misunderstanding on the part of Madison: his claim that Gadamerian hermeneutics *supersedes* the old dichotomy of *Erklären* and *Verstehen*, explaining and understanding. Madison thinks that hermeneutics, on the basis of phenomenology, “*emphatically rejects any absolute dualism in its understanding of human understanding.*” (358)

*Human agents are self-interpreting beings, but it is not the task of an interpretive social science simply to ‘describe’ these interpretations. The function of interpretation is not that of Verstehen in the classical sense of the term, i.e., that of articulating the self-understanding of human agents in such a way as to achieve an emphatic understanding of them. The self-interpretation of human agents must themselves be interpreted by the social scientist (this is one of the reasons why hermeneutic analysis is necessarily critical). (359; see also 360)*

The great achievement of Gadamerian hermeneutics for the social sciences is actually implied in Madison’s own final paragraph: “the universality of hermeneutics is based solely on the hermeneutical *fact* that ... what makes human beings ‘human’ is their ‘linguisticity’.” (360) On the basis of this fact, the dichotomy of *Verstehen* and *Erklären*, of natural sciences on the one side and the humanities and social sciences on the other, is ameliorated by *Aufhebung* (not *Überwindung*) in *Wahrheit und Methode* (the central passage is Gadamer, 1990, 455–456). Yet, looking at, say, the Younger Historical School (of economics), what should be stressed is not so much the discontinuity but the continuity. I would wonder whether, with all his naiveté and simplicity, for instance Werner Sombart’s approach is then not quite close to the thrust of *Wahrheit und Methode*. (See Sombart, 1930; Drechsler, 1996, 293–294; 1999)

Indeed, the natural sciences are in some sense subsidiary to (areas covered by) the humanities, and thus there is no ‘Diltheyian’ dichotomy anymore. But to

<sup>15</sup> For an interesting recent attempt to read Gadamer on behalf of economic theory, see Peukert 1998, esp. 408–415.

<sup>16</sup> Of course, this insight is much older than Hayek; it is the perspective of most members of the Younger Historical School, but also that of scholars active in the United States: Joseph A. Schumpeter (the only economist, incidentally, that Gadamer dealt with himself), Frank H. Knight and Ludwig v. Mises, to name but a few. (See Drechsler, 1999)

which question is this the answer? For the social scientist, the main question here is how social sciences can be, or whether positivist, objectivist-empirical social science is at all possible. Gadamer's answer to the second question is that it is not: "Linguisticity comprises the use and application of science, too, which is the whole of our world orientation; it is on this that the claim to universality in hermeneutics is based." (386) Try as we might, "The experience of the societal-historical world cannot be lifted up to science by the inductive process of the natural sciences." (1990, 10) To Madison he replies, which answers the first version of the question: "In those days Habermas objected that hermeneutics could have a future only if *phronesis*, Aristotle's practical knowledge to which I appealed, became science. I responded with the reverse claim: only if science were to be subordinated to *phronesis* could it fulfill the task of the future." (366)

Gadamer by and large accepts Madison's argument, but in a way that makes clear where Madison went askance (which should not distract us from the importance of the essay):

*With delight I note that in this hermeneutic extension science itself apparently took the path which I had in view when I criticized the dominance of the concept of method as it determines the natural sciences, and likewise what I had in mind with my own hermeneutic ideas regarding the understanding of the science of the so-called humanities. ... I myself do not have the slightest competence in economics. (366–367)*

*Madison seems to me to go a little too far in discussing the opposition of understanding and explaining in Dilthey ... But with regard to the main points I concur with him. Wherever methods are being employed their correct application is not specified by a method but demands our own judgement. This is a profound commonality of reason itself. It testifies to the depth in which linguisticity is rooted in human life. All methods require judgement and linguistic instruction. (367)*

The book finishes with a good selective bibliography by Richard E. Palmer, mainly based on Etsuro Makita's indispensable work. (1996) The list of secondary sources (599–602) is probably too cryptic and unfocused to be of much use, but it, too, can serve as a point of departure. Particularly helpful is the list of audio- and video-tapes (590–599), because Gadamer is, as he once remarked (in conversation), just like Heidegger "*im Grunde doch auch mehr ein Sprecher, nicht primär ein Schriftsteller.*"

To conclude, a quote from one of Gadamer's replies might be appropriate, one that typically – as the entire book – opens the door to further reflection: "Do others not have the same experience that ... they gain less from what is taking place in philosophy than from *The Brothers Karamazov* or Kafka's *The Trial*? I cannot help it, but in such cases it seems that literature simply says more. Of course, it does not give us an answer. But I suppose all of us are aware that in truth we are the ones being questioned." (191)

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