Hermeneutics and Dialectics: (Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger and) Hans-Georg Gadamer

Khan, Haider

GSIS

2008

Hermeneutics and Dialectics: (Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger and)

Hans-Georg Gadamer

Haider A. Khan

Graduate School of International Studies

University of Denver

Denver, CO 80208

hkhan@du.edu

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore briefly the role that a more phenomenological conception of dialectical development of consciousness plays in Hans-Georg Gadamer's work on hermeneutics. This is done with both an implicit understanding of the dialectical development of consciousness and self-consciousness in Gadamer and some explicit references to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit and his Science of Logic in connection with Gadamer's work. However, the twentieth century departures from Hegelian logic by the phenomenological and existential philosophers are given crucial importance for the work of Gadamer which builds on both Heidegger's essays on art in particular and the much earlier Husserlian explorations of consciousness and intentionality. Special emphasis is given to Gadamer's concept of *Spiel*(play)* along with his ideas of *Erfahrung*("lived experience" as opposed to *Erlebnis* or abstract experience),*Geschehen* (event) and *Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* (Effectively historicized consciousness).

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Method, Truth, Dialectics, Dialogue, Play, History, Effectively Historicized Consciousness, Event, Lived Experience, Phenomenology.

* Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from German and Greek in Gadamer in the text are mine as are all the errors.

1. Introduction

Towards the end of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer characterizes Hegel as being in dialogue with the Greek dialectical tradition and insists upon going back to Hegel in order to recover the dialogical element of the Greek dialectics for ourselves if we are to understand the purpose of hermeneutics correctly . As is well known now through recent essays by Pippin and Taylor among others and Gadamer's own work on Hegel, Gadamer himself followed his own advice.[1] But it can be argued that he departs from Hegel in ways that are significant for his development of a phenomenological and dialectical hermeneutics. The purpose of this paper is to is   to illustrate in a plausible manner how Gadamer's own philosophical strategy both follows from Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger and overcomes them in order to move beyond the limits of traditional hermeneutics. In other words, I argue that the key problem that Gadamer sets for himself is the *interpretation/understanding* of the world including---and perhaps especially---the social world. The solution of this problem of understanding (*Verstehen*) requires at the same time using the dialectical categories of Hegel but also of overcoming these categories by following and developing dialectically the philosophical strategies of understanding the role of *situated consciousness* as articulated by Husserl and Heidegger.[2]

In the first part of this essay, I clarify certain ideas in Hegel---of dialectics in particular--- as exemplified by his discussions in his classic Phenomenology of Spirit (PS) and Science of Logic (SL). This is done in light of Gadamer's idea of the classics as those works that always play a mediating role in the contemporary conversations .

---

[1] See in particular, Gadamer(1985-1995,1967-1979,1976a,b; 1980,1981,1985,1986a,b;1989,1997), Code(2003), Dostal(2002), Grondin(2003), Malpas et. al.(2002), Wright(1990).

[2] It should be mentioned that I have no intention of defending Gadamer's silences and opportunistic moves during the 1930s and 40s as some have tried to do. I share Richard Wolin's(2000,2004) criticisms of Gadamer's opportunism without subscribing to the view that his or Heidegger's philosophies somehow cohere with a Nazi worldview.   However, I agree with the view expressed in an essay appearing in the recent collection *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer,* by Robin May Schott that questions just how open-ended and inclusive Gadamer's notion of "conversation" really is. "When one's conversational partners are drawn from an exclusive club of like-minded men," she writes, "it is easier to display the hermeneutic generosity of spirit that assumes the openness to one's opponents' positions and the probability that they are right."

The purpose of this part is to explore briefly the role that a dialectical development of logical understanding and consciousness plays in Hegel.[3] The emphasis will be on PS, with only some remarks on SL when relevant.[4]It is clear from extensive references throughout *Truth and Method* (but especially parts two and three---see in particular the references in notes 57 and 59 to PS in part 2) that Gadamer takes Hegelian dialectics seriously and is himself in dialogue with Hegel.

I then focus on Gadamer's use of certain Husserlian and Heideggerian constructions and a way of *sublating* these which is specific to Gadamer's own particular philosophical strategy. At the end I raise the question of how much damage a phenomenological interpretation of the Gadamerian hermeneutics does to the conception of scientific method and what Gadamer's approach can contribute to our further understanding of the human sciences.The line of thinking that Gadamer develops in *Truth and Method* has serious consequences for the human sciences.To some, the implications for phenomenological social science research are clear enough. For these writers, if Gadamer is right, then real understanding is impossible through the ordinary methods of positivist---or even realist---philosophy of science. However, a deeper understanding of Gadamer can allow us to see the phenomenological hermeneutics and scientific realism as complementary modes of inquiry. One must then engage in a lively dialogical play in order to let "truth" emerge in a way that I will call Gadamer's dialectics of play (S*piel)* in contradistinction with the Hegelian dialectics. With these preliminary remarks I now turn to a brief discussion of Hegelian dialectics to prepare the way towards Gadamer's hermeneutics.

---

[3] There are, of course, many interpretations and exegetical pieces on PS. Jean Wahl's discussion of the unhappy consciousness and its subsequent influence on French thinking is a prominent case in point. There are also works by Hyppolite, Westphal, Kojeve, Pippin and others each with its distinctive viewpoint. Mine is, in a sense, closest to that of Westphal but without his theism. In terms of dialectical logic, I have been influenced by Ilyenkov's book by the same title.

[4] Hegel's earlier work *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy* is also of some importance. But a historical exegesis of the evolution of Hegel's thought in this manner would take us too far afield.

2. Hegel's Dialectics contra Kant and Gadamer's Critique of Kant

It is important to see both Gadamer and Hegel in a post-Kantian philosophical context.. In this particular context, among other things, Hegel was wrestling with Kant's particular solution to Humean skepticism which challenged the ideas of causality, necessity and universality, ultimately negating the possibilities of deriving certain knowledge of the world through rational reflection. Hegel found Kant's solution through a critique of pure reason to be a partial one only. In his view, Kant conceded too much to Hume by restricting the possibility of knowledge only to the realm of phenomena and thus making it seemingly impossible to gain knowledge of the ultimate reality. For his part, Gadamer starts off by criticizing Kantian aesthetics as overly abstract and unable to capture the real experience of beauty--- a theme to which he returns in several places.[5] In his writings on Hegel, Gadamer makes clear that he is much more sympathetic to the liveliness of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit (PS) than to Kant's transcendental categories.[6] In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer engages in a dialogue with Hegel in this post-Kantian spirit.

 PS can be seen as Hegel's early and preliminary investigation of the development of a reflective consciousness through using a kind of dialectical logic. More specifically, Hegel attempts to establish clearly the stages that an ordinary consciousness needs to go through in order to reach the necessary epistemological and ontological conditions for embarking on further speculative thought that rejects Kant's epistemological and ontological claims regarding the inability of pure reason to know the thing-in-itself. In this sense, his later SL pursues the logical and ontological

---

[5] See also Heidegger, Martin. "*Der Ursprung der Kunstwerkes*." Translated as "The Origin of the Work of Art," by Albert Hofstadter, in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), and in *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977, 1993).

[6] It is interesting to note that the Bangalee poet Rabindranath Tagore had a similar reaction to Kantian aesthetics. He describes in a beautiful lyrical poem in one of his earlier books(*Chitra)* how he was able to simply experience the moonlit night when he turned away from the Kantian aesthetic abstractions.

structure of speculative thought in depth by starting where PS leaves off. SL starts with the idea of pure, indeterminate, immediate "being" whereas PS ends--- after consciousness has become fully critical and aware of itself--- with the dissolution of subject/object dichotomy in thought. Only then can consciousness finally embark upon discovering speculative or absolute knowledge as such. Gadamer will later dispute the possibility of completeness or transparency of such absolute knowledge.

In SL, Hegel wants to begin without any presuppositions by suspending all assumptions about thought and being. His philosophical strategy here is to let the indeterminate thought of being unfold through a dialectical movement of self-generated contradictions that are sublated through the use of a more developed form of dialectical logic. PS is a preliminary necessity only for those who are not convinced that this is possible or desirable.

The ordinary, non-philosophical consciousness is not moved by the spirit of self-criticism. It is this possibility---and indeed the necessity as well--- of self-criticism of thought by itself that Hegel wishes to bring out. But the ordinary consciousness is fixated upon everyday experiences of objects, processes and practices. It does not see the point of challenging these already settled habits of the ordinary mind.

Hegel wants to help the ordinary consciousness by offering a ladder to the inquiring mind in order to finally arrive at the standpoint of speculative logic. Hegel believes that the "individual" has the right to demand such a ladder since the ordinary mode of consciousness is certain only of its ordinary modes of grasping sense data, perception, understanding etc.

Hegel shows that starting with immediate *sense – certainty*, a dialectical movement of thought can be traced through the work of many mediations which lead ultimately to a *perceptual* stage of cognition. A similar dialectical exercise with perceptions leads to the category of *understanding*. A further process of mediation and sublation takes the consciousness to the next stage of self-consciousness

illustrated through the famous master-slave figure[7]. In what follows, I will emphasize the complexities of this figure. In particular, the role of the laboring process in creating self-consciousness will be a central aspect. It may be helpful to elaborate a bit upon these preliminary stages of passing from the ordinary consciousness to self-consciousness.

Sence-certainty experiences itself (i.e. in its *Erfahrung*) as being aware of the pure empirical particularity of things. At this point, the consciousness is naïve and experiences seemingly no mediation through concepts or language. It looks at what it has before itself simply as "this", "here", "now". However, through its own experience (*Erfahrung*), it realizes that the object (*Gegenstand*) is much more complex than the initial appearances. For example, "this" turns out to be not just a pure and simple "this". A complex unity and continuity of many moments are found to be involved when we try to think through the idea of a simple 'this'.In particular, the idea of 'this' also involves the idea of its dialectical negation 'not-this'. Likewise Hegel speaks of "now" as a now which is an absolute plurality of nows and a 'here' that turns out to be a complex of many 'heres' involving also "… a Before and Behind, an Above and Below, a Right and Left" as Hegel reminds us using remarkably simple everyday German locutions. Ultimately, this dialectical movement of what is now a reflective consciousness at its early stages takes it to the category of perception which overlays sense-certainty.

Similar dialectical critical reflection[8] on the part of the perceiving consciousness

---

[7] There is a large literature on this already. From a literary perspective, the rhetorical figure can be seen as an elaborate conceit that draws out and emphasizes certain aspects of this figure in order to elucidate how self-consciousness develops. The complexities of this process will be highlighted here.

[8] Here the idea of sublation(*aufhebung*) is important. Contrary to the popular bowdlerized version of dialectics as the *thesis-antithesis-synthesis* triad, Hegelian dialectics is the self-movement of thought where both negation and preservation take place continually. In SL(§ 184-187), Hegel gives a very clear exposition of this:

> *To sublate,* and the *sublated* (that which exists ideally as a moment), constitute one of the most important notions in philosophy. It is a fundamental determination which repeatedly occurs throughout the whole of philosophy, the meaning of which is to be clearly grasped and especially distinguished from *nothing*. What is sublated is not thereby reduced to nothing. Nothing is *immediate*; what is sublated, on the other hand, is the result of *mediation*; it is a non-being but as a *result* which had its origin in a being. It still has, therefore, *in itself* the *determinate from which it originates*.

results in a further discovery. Perception finds that its object is not just a thing with particular proportions and apparent color etc. Rather, it is a concrete expression of a force within the object. This is clearly a post-Newtonian and a post-Kantian development. Here Hegel is trying to push the Newtonian idea of a mechanistic force further and to find its limits.To grasp the nature of this force with the mind requires

---

Furthermore, Hegel adds:

'*To sublate*' has a twofold meaning in the language: on the one hand it means to preserve, to maintain, and equally it also means to cause to cease, to put an end to. Even 'to preserve' includes a negative element, namely, that something is removed from its influences, in order to preserve it. Thus what is sublated is at the same time preserved; it has only lost its immediacy but is not on that account annihilated.

The two definitions of 'to sublate' which we have given can be quoted as two dictionary *meanings* of this word. But it is certainly remarkable to find that a language has come to use one and the same word for two opposite meanings. It is a delight to speculative thought to find in the language words which have in themselves a speculative meaning; the German language has a number of such. The double meaning of the Latin *tollere* (which has become famous through the Ciceronian pun: *tollendum est Octavium*) does not go so far; its affirmative determination signifies only a lifting-up. Something is sublated only in so far as it has entered into unity with its opposite; in this more particular signification as something reflected, it may fittingly be called a *moment.* In the case of the lever, weight and distance from a point are called its mechanical moments on account of the sameness of their effect, in spite of the contrast otherwise between something real, such as a weight, and something ideal, such as a mere spatial determination, a line.' We shall often have occasion to notice that the technical language of philosophy employs Latin terms for reflected determinations, either because the mother tongue has no words for them or if it has, as here, because its expression calls to mind more what is immediate, whereas the foreign language suggests more what is reflected.

The more precise meaning and expression which being and nothing receive, now that they are *moments,* is to be ascertained from the consideration of determinate being as the unity in which they are preserved. Being is being, and nothing is nothing, only in their contradistinction from each other; but in their truth, in their unity, they have vanished as these determinations and are now something else. Being and nothing are the same; *but just because they are the same they are no longer being and nothing,* but now have a different significance. In becoming they were coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be; in determinate being, a differently determined unity, they are again differently determined moments. This unity now remains their base from which they do not again emerge in the abstract significance of being and nothing.

(Kantian) understanding (*Verstand*). The lawful nature of the realm of inner force is described further by the Kantian categories of universality, necessity, causality etc. Thus it is through this dialectical motion of understanding the inner force that consciousness finally finds a dimension of itself in the things outside. It has now begun to turn into self-consciousness; but it is still at an early stage of development.

A crucial further step in the development of self-consciousness occurs when consciousness discovers other living, self-conscious beings. These beings validate our own awareness of ourselves by recognizing us. We, in our turn, must recognize them as well and thus validate their awareness of themselves .

Most importantly, at this stage through this mutual recognition, self-consciousness realizes that individual identity is not really that of an atomistic, isolated person. Individuals are formed by their interactions with others. These social interactions give self-consciousness a social character.[9] Therefore self-consciousness can think of itself as one aspect of a "unit of…different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their oppositions, enjoy perfect freedom and independence." This is the point where a reflective self can say:

"I that is We and We that is I."

There is some danger of misconstruing Hegel as a collectivist. It needs to be emphasized, therefore, that Hegel is endorsing a genuine individual self-consciousness, but it is a self-consciousness that is rooted in a reciprocal sociality at the same time. In §177 of PS, Hegel clarifies further:

Only so and only then *is* it self-consciousness in actual fact; for here first of all it comes to have the unity of itself in its otherness. Ego which is the object of its notion, is in point of fact not *"object"*. The object of desire, however, is only independent, for it is the universal, ineradicable substance, the fluent self-identical essential reality. When a self-consciousness is the object, the object is just as much ego as object.

---

[9] Gadamer criticizes the idea of an atomistic individual also. Like Wittgenstein, he rejects the idea of a private language. See in particular the sections on language in part 3 of *Truth and Method*.

With this we already have before us the notion of Mind or Spirit. What consciousness has further to become aware of, is the experience of what mind is — this absolute substance, which is the unity of the different self-related and self-existent self-consciousnesses in the perfect freedom and independence of their opposition as component elements of that substance: Ego that is "we", a plurality of Egos, and "we" that is a single Ego. Consciousness first finds in self-consciousness — the notion of mind — its turning-point, where it leaves the parti-coloured show of the sensuous immediate, passes from the dark void of the transcendent and remote super-sensuous, and steps into the spiritual daylight of the present. (My Italics)

The socio-historical unity of 'We and I' is what Hegel calls *Geist* or spirit, Ontologically, Hegel understands *Geist* to be the 'absolute substance' of individuals who belong to Geist".

This brings us to a concrete elucidation of the mutual recognition problem through a consideration of the relation between the "master" and "slave" (lordship and bondage in J. B. Baillie's translation from which the quotes below are taken).The whole problem is set in the context of mutual recognition because without such reciprocal recognition consciousness can not ground itself ontologically.   As Hegel puts it:

Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that, it exists for another self-consciousness that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or recognized …self-consciousness has before it another self-consciousness … it must cancel this its other. To do so is the sublation… it must set itself to sublate the other independent being… secondly, it therefore proceeds to sublate its own self. (B-229)

One who becomes the master "…is the consciousnesss that exists for itself; but no longer merely the general notion of existence for self." (B-239)   In   this social-spiritual metaphor, the master "… is the power dominating existence." (B-235) However, it is the bondsman who labors and is thus related to the world of things in nature. Therefore, Hegel concludes:

"The truth of the independent consciousness is … the consciousness of the bondsman …bondage

will, when completed, pass into the opposite of what it immediately is: being a consciousness within itself. It will enter into itself, and change round into real and true independence." (B-237)

Hegel is quite explicit with regards to the role that labor plays in this transformation.

"Though work and labour … the consciousness of the bondsman comes to itself…Labor is desire restrained and checked…labor shapes and fashions the thing…The consciousness that toils and serves accordingly attains by this means the direct apprehension of that independent being as its self." (B-238)

One important aspect of Hegel's illustration here is that the fundamental asymmetry of power prevents the above relations from being a fully spiritual one. Only the emergence of a shared recognition, albeit through a life and death struggle, can lead to a common ideality. This is objectified in the laws and institutions that are the products of historic struggles. Indeed this can be called the dialectics of the spirit working through history. Hegel refers to the Greek world described in Sophocles' Antigone to illustrate the limits of the ancient world and the possibilities of further movements of consciousness and self-consciousness. In the SL and in his lectures on philosophy of history Hegel develops these themes further.

We have finally arrived at the point in the PS where the unhappy consciousness begins to glimpse spiritual consciousness. This more developed form of consciousness understands itself not only as historical and social but also as ontologically grounded as well because of this historicity and sociality. Thus the self-consciousness of 'Being' itself – "substance" or the "absolute" – now is revealed abstractly as socio-historical . From this perspective, Hegel's later work from SL onwards through his lectures on the philosophy of right and philosophy of history are attempts attempt to make this characterization of consciousness more concrete.

However, at this point in PS religion – spiritual consciousness posits the divine being – infinite reason, logos, etc. – can still remain the object of consciousness. There is still alienation. God is conceived as "the deed of an alien satisfaction." The divine power is separated from human power and the human self "does not find it in its own action as such." (PS 477)

At the ultimate stage, according to Hegel, *contra* Kant, this type of religious

consciousness develops into absolute knowing. This step comes with the realization that the power attributed to an outside God is actually the power of dialectical reason. This   is summed up in *Begriff* or Concept. *Begriff* is always and everywhere at work in both ontological being and human consciousness. Only at this point of development into absolute knowing through dialectical reason, does consciousness dissolve qua consciousness. It is finally able to transform itself into speculative thought. It is no longer just 'consciousness – of" with its object 'out there.' It is now universal dialectical reason and presages Hegel's later thought in SL. In this sense, as claimed at the beginning of this essay, SL does indeed begin where PS leaves off. Together, the two works develop systematically the ontological unfolding of consciousness by using dialectical logic in its full rigor and encompassing scope.

Gadamer's own preliminary arguments in *Truth and Method* and elsewhere depend in crucial ways   on some Hegelian categories. I will discuss just two aspects that are mentioned in the previous exposition of Hegelian phenomenology and dialectics. Gadamer distinguishes between *Erfahrung*---a Hegelian category of experience in PS-- and *Erlebnis*. The former for Gadamer is "lived", concrete experience. Hence, I have translated the Gadamerian *Erfahrung* as "lived experience". The latter is a frozen, abstract and academic description alien to life as well as genuinely moving art and literature. Gadamer usually writes of *Erfahrung*   with tacit approval and of *Erlebnis* with some degree of disapproval. The second important Hegelian concept is dialectics itself, particularly the idea of *aufhebung*. As the extended discussion on *aufhebung* which includes direct textual evidence from SL in this paper has shown, Hegel's subtle conception requires both preservation and overcoming through a movement of thought. While Gadamer accepts this part of *aufhebung*, it can be argued that he extends it further, in line with twentieth century developments in phenomenology in an entirely original direction. In doing so, he is able to offer a much deeper phenomenological account of hermeneutics at the same time. Showing the plausibility of these claims and drawing out their implications for understanding social phenomena is the task of the rest of the paper.

3. Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer: A Phenomenological Hermeneutics ?

Gadamer himself has acknowledged his intellectual debts to Heidegger. Although Gadamer wrote that Heidegger was not impressed by his (Gadamer's) habilitation research on "Plato's Dialectical Ethics", his own later work can be read as combining both a Husserian and Heideggerian concern with the immediacy of the "consciousness-of" the world at hand and Greek and Hegelian dialectics. The debt to Husserl for both Heidegger and Gadamer is fundamental. Husserl's attempt, following Brentano, to characterize intentionality fully by phenomenological reduction, is assessed critically by both the thinkers.[10] Both introduce a historicity and a critical approach to language in order to overcome some Husserlian philosophical traps and roadblocks stemming mainly from the methodology of phenomenological reduction. Thus both Heidegger and Gadamer show through their works the influence of and an *aufhebung* of Husserlian strategies of thinking. Unfortunately, a full discussion of this topic will take us far from the immediate concerns of moving to a characterization of Gadamer's dialectical approach to hermeneutics. In what follows, I discuss a minimum of Heideggerian influences that is necessary for us to get to this stage of Gadamer's thought.

Heidegger was crucial in turning Gadamer's thought about interpretation and understanding towards art. Furthermore,Heidegger's influence shows also in Gadamer's

---

[10] See in particular, Husserl, E. *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, trans. D. Cairns. The Hague: Nijhoff [1929], 1969.

------*The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy*, trans. D. Carr. Evanston: Northwestern University Press
[1936/54], 1970.

------*Experience and Judgement*, trans. J. S. Churchill and K. Ameriks, London: Routledge [1939], 1973.

------*Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy - Third Book: Phenomenology and the Foundations of the Sciences*, trans. T. E. Klein and W. E. Pohl, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1980.

adopting the idea of *phronesis* .[11] For both Heidegger and Gadamer this pivotal concept allows them to pinpoint the crucial role of "… our practical 'being-in-the world' over and against theoretical apprehension". Just as importantly, the practice of *phronesis* can also be seen as   cultivation of insight into our own concrete existential situation.

Thus Gadamer argues that understanding, and interpretation are just such   practically oriented cultivation of insight   with its own rationality. Furthermore such a rationality can not be reduced to a set of   abstract rules.Therefore, *phronesis* can be seen as a dialogical and dialectical type of understanding   that Gadamer had already found in Plato and Hegel. It is now plausible that   such an understanding of Plato and Hegel, refined through a phenomenological analysis is essential for the development of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics which is given ontological content through a precise dialectical process..

It is important to keep in mind that Gadamer's thinking began with and always remained in   dialectical tension with post-Socratic Greek thought,particularly that of Plato and Aristotle. Remembering this makes plausible what was said before about his early engagement with Plato in both his doctoral and habilitation dissertations. This was perhaps decisive in giving him a philosophical direction that he was able to develop further dialectically and dialogically by engaging with the thought of Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger in particular.

---

[11] 'practical wisdom'(can also be translated as wisdom developed through reflection and practice)--- Book VI of Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethic.*

Ultimately, in *Truth and Method* in particular,Gadamer developed his own distinctive and thoroughly dialogical and dialectical approach. Given his engagement with the Greek thought, Gadamer's own dialogical and dialectical hermeneutic approach is grounded in Platonic-Aristotelian   traditions. This is as to be expected. However, following Heideggerian thinking as well and overcoming it at the same time, Gadamer's hermeneutics rejects decisively subjectivism and relativism and any simple concept of the interpretive method. Gadamer conceptualizes understanding as "…the linguistically mediated happening of tradition."

4. Dialectical Phenomenological Hermeneutics: From Dilthey and Heidegger to Gadamer

As is well known, hermeneutics originated in problems of biblical exegesis and was developed as a methodological and theoretical framework   for exegetical purposes particularly by scholars such as Chladenius and Meier, Ast and Schleiermacher. In their hands, hermeneutics further developed into an overarching theory of textual interpretation in general. This meant--- among other things--- developing   a set of universal rules for producing valid interpretations.

Wilhelm Dilthey broadened the scope of hermeneutics still further. In his hands, hermeneutics became the methodology for producing meaning that is essential to understanding within the 'human' or 'historical' sciences. In this view, the basic problem of hermeneutics was how to provide a methodological and ontological foundation for the human sciences. Dilthey and his followers also claimed that the mathematical models and procedures from the natural sciences   could not be used in the human sciences. Therefore, one must find an alternative methodology proper to the human sciences as such. A similar desideratum was developed for the interpretation of religious texts earlier. For example, Schleiermacher's ambition was to develop a formal methodology for the strict   codification of interpretive practice.

Dilthey himself attempted to develop principles for properly arriving at interpretive understanding or *Verstehen.*

Heidegger's hermeneutics is conceived as that type of an interpretative approach which makes possible the investigation of the basic structures of facticity of our existence. Such hermeneutics can produce a "self-disclosure" of the structure of understanding as such. Thus,

The 'hermeneutic circle' that had been a central idea in previous hermeneutic thinking, and that had been viewed in terms of the interpretative interdependence, within any meaningful structure, between the parts of that structure and the whole, was transformed by Heidegger, so that it was now seen as expressing the way in which all understanding was 'always already' given over to that which is to be understood (to 'the things themselves' -- *'die Sachen selbst'*). Thus, to take a simple example, if we wish to understand some particular artwork, we already need to have some prior understanding of that work (even if only as a set of paintmarks on canvas), otherwise it cannot even be seen as something to be understood. To put the point more generally, and in more basic ontological terms, if we are to understand anything at all, we must already find ourselves 'in' the world 'along with' that which is to be understood. All understanding that is directed at the grasp of some particular subject matter is thus based in a prior 'ontological' understanding -- a prior hermeneutical situatedness. On this basis, hermeneutics can be understood as the attempt to 'make explicit' the structure of such situatedness. Yet since that situatedness is indeed prior to any specific event of understanding, so it must always be presupposed even in the attempt at its own explication. Consequently, the explication of this situatedness -- of this basic ontological mode of understanding -- is essentially a matter of exhibiting or 'laying-bare' a structure with which we are already familiar (the structure that is present in every event of understanding), and, in this respect, hermeneutics becomes one with phenomenology, itself understood, in Heidegger's thinking, as just such a 'laying bare'.

Hermeneutics--- in the above Heideggerian and phenomenological sense--- is further dialectically transformed by Gadamer's work.Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics encompasses the ontologically fundamental character of the hermeneutical situation and the omnipresence of hermeneutic practice. This can be seen as both a radical break

and reworking--as *aufhebung.* In this context, as *Truth and Method* makes clear, artistic interpretation and understanding can become the very model of truth in dialogue and disclosure.[12]

In keeping with the Heideggerian approach, for Gadamer, understanding always occurs against the background of our prior involvement or--- to put it in another way--- our *history.* Therefore, understanding, for Gadamer, is "… an 'effect' of history, while hermeneutical 'consciousness' is itself that mode of being that is conscious of its own historical 'being effected'. Thus the hermeneutically inclined consciousness is an "*effectively historicized consciousness*" (*Wirkungsgeschictliche Bewußtsein*). The consciousness of the historicized character of understanding is, according to Gadamer, the awareness of the *hermeneutical situation* and is the Husserlian phenomenological concept of 'horizon' ('*Horizont*'). That is to say, understanding and interpretation must inevitably occur within the shifting limits of a particular 'horizon' of our situatedness in actual history.

 A consequence of the above *Wirkungsgeschictliche Bewußtsein* is that   our historical and hermeneutic situation are never totally transparent. Here   Gadamer explicitly overcomes the Hegelian 'philosophy of reflection'. It may be recalled that in the Hegelian Logic such reflection is supposed to achieve both completion and transparency.

---

[12] There are other---perhaps lesspositive--- features of Gadamer's hermeneutics that can not be addressed here. The role of "prejudice" is a good example.
"The prejudicial character of understanding means that, whenever we understand, we are involved in a dialogue that encompasses both our own self-understanding and our understanding of the matter at issue. In the dialogue of understanding our prejudices come to the fore, both inasmuch as they play a crucial role in opening up what is to be understood, and inasmuch as they themselves become evident in that process. As our prejudices thereby become apparent to us, so they can also become the focus of questioning in their own turn. While Gadamer has claimed that 'temporal distance' can play a useful role in enabling us better to identify those prejudices that exercise a problematic influence on understanding (Gadamer acknowledges that prejudices can sometimes distort -- the point is that they do not always do so), it seems better to see the dialogical interplay that occurs in the process of understanding itself as the means by which such problematic elements are identified and worked through. One consequence of Gadamer's rehabilitation of prejudice is a positive evaluation of the role of authority and tradition as legitimate sources of knowledge, and this has often been seen, most famously by Jürgen Habermas, as indicative of Gadamer's ideological conservatism."

Incomplete as *Wirkungsgeschictliches Bewußtsein* is by necessity, this need not lead one to a subjectivist stance.For Gadamer, in contrast with the traditional hermeneutic account,understanding is not achieved through gaining access to some inner realm of subjective meaning. At the same time,there is no final determinacy to understanding. Therefore, Gadamer argues that there is no closed system or method for achieving understanding or arriving at truth. All such search for encompassing methods are thus fundamentally misguided.[13]

At the end of *Truth and Method* the basic paradigm for discovering "truth" is that of conversation. This means giving up control and playing a game*(spiel)* in which much is left to indeterminacy. Now, it is obvious for Gadamer that conversation always takes place in language and therefore, understanding is always linguistically mediated. If this is true then all understanding must already be based on a common language that is itself formed in the process of conversation leading to understanding .In this sense, like Wittgenstein, Gadamer rejects the idea of a 'private language'. Our conversations through language always engage others-in-the-world. Going back to the emphasis on *Erfahrung*, we can now say that this lived experience is experience-with-others that constitutes for Gadamer an event*(Geschehen)* of meaning.

5. Conclusions---Meaning and the Moral Sciences

[13]It is important to recognize that "…not only is there no methodology that describes the means by which to arrive at an understanding of the human or the historical, but neither is there any such methodology that is adequate to the understanding of the non-human or the natural. Gadamer's conception of understanding as not reducible to method or technique, along with his insistence of understanding as an ongoing process that has no final completion, not only invites comparison with ideas to be found in the work of the later Wittgenstein, but when applied to the philosophy of science, can also be seen as paralleling the work of T. S. Kuhn and others."

Gadamer himself draws attention to the irony involved in the untranslatibility into English of the German term *Geisteswissenschaften* which itself was once the result of the attempt to translate Mill's term "the moral sciences" into German. What we have seen in this brief discussion of a few aspects of Gadamer's thought and its relations with Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger is the irreducible and ineluctable modality of existence with at least a partial indeterminacy of interpretation. However, the other part of the message is at least the partial possibility of interpretation, albeit against a dynamic and evershifting but firm presence of the Husserlian horizon of meaning. The dialectics of play (*spiel)* presents the possibility of such fresh non-subjective interpretations.

At the end we must raise the question of how much damage the phenomenological Gadamerian hermeneutics does to the traditional conception of scientific method and what Gadamer's approach can contribute to our further understanding of the human sciences.Clearly, the line of thinking   that Gadamer develops in *Truth and Method* has serious consequences for the human sciences. A positivist science limited to sense data and a Humean conception of meaning is superficial at best.. However, is a realist, causal philosophy of science any better? From the above analysis and discussion it would seem that grand claims about realism must be given up. However, a more modest, topic-specific dialectical and dialogical realism is possible(Miller 1987, Khan(2008a,b,c). A deeper understanding of both realism and Gadamer can allow us to see the phenomenological hermeneutics and this type of scientific realism as complementary modes of inquiry. One must then engage in a lively dialogical play in order to let "truth" emerge in a way that I have called Gadamer's dialectics of play (S*piel)* in contradistinction with the Hegelian dialectics.

Therefore, while it is clear that the dialogical dialectics of Gadamer produces its own

non-subjective truth of disclosure through conversation, it does not necessarily point towards a rejection of science. What it does reject is a dogmatic codification of the scientific method. *Science itself is interpretation*. Like Hegel before him, but in a more nuanced and dialogical manner, Gadamer emphasizes the need for a non-subjectivist but fallible overcoming of past categories and interpretations. Although Gadamer's own cultural commitments were somewhat conservative, his approach leaves a great deal of room for a radically humanistic social science of changing ourselves and our view of the world through dialogue. This is a profoundly moral consequence of Gadamer's thought for the "moral (social) sciences".

References:

Lorraine Code, editor, *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (Penn State University Press, 2003)

Robert J. Dostal, editor, *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer* (Cambridge University Press, 2002)

Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 1985-1995, *Gesammelte Werke*, 10 vols., Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr; *Truth and Method* (*Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 5th edn, 1975), is included as v.1; a list of contents for all 10 vols. is included in vol.10.

1967-1979, *Kleine Schriften*, 4 vols, Tübingen: Mohr.

1976a, *Hegel's Dialectic: Five Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. by P. Christopher Smith (from Gadamer, 1971), New Haven: Yale University Press.

1976b, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. and trans. by David E. Linge, Berkeley: University of California Press.

1980, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. and ed. by P. Christopher Smith, New Haven: Yale University Press.

1981, *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. by Frederick G. Lawrence, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

1985, *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, trans. by Robert R. Sullivan, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

1986a, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. P. Christopher Smith, New Haven: Yale University Press.

1986b, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. by N. Walker, ed. by R. Bernasconi, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

1989, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. edn. (1st English edn, 1975), trans. by J. Weinsheimer and D.G.Marshall, New York: Crossroad.

1997, 'Reflections on my Philosophical Journey', trans. by Richard E. Palmer, in Hahn (ed.), 1997

Jean Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography,* translated by Joel Weisenheimer (Yale, 2003)

Hegel, G.W.F. *Gesammelte Werke*, Rheinisch-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, ed., (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1968-).

----------*The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, trans. H. S. Harris and W. Cerf, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977).

-------- (1807) *The Phenomenology of Mind,* Translated, with an introduction and notes, by J. B. Baillie, Harper's edition, 1967

----------(1816)*Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969).

Heidegger, Martin. "*Der Ursprung der Kunstwerkes.*" Translated as "The Origin of the Work of Art," by Albert Hofstadter, in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), and in *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977, 1993).

Husserl, E. *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, trans. D. Cairns. The Hague: Nijhoff [1929], 1969.
------*The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy*, trans. D. Carr. Evanston: Northwestern University Press
[1936/54], 1970.
------*Experience and Judgement*, trans. J. S. Churchill and K. Ameriks, London: Routledge [1939], 1973.
------*Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy - Third Book: Phenomenology and the Foundations of the Sciences*, trans. T. E. Klein and W. E. Pohl, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1980.

Hyppolite, Jean 1979. *Genesis and Structure of "Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit.*

Evanston: Northwestern University Press

Ilyenkov, E. (1977), *Dialectical Logic*, Moscow: Progress Publishers

Kojève, Alexander (1969) *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. New York, Basic

Books

Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnswald, and Jens Kertscher, editors, *Gadamer's Century:*

Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer (MIT Press, 2002)

Khan, H. A.(2008a) **"**Causal Depth contra Humean Empiricism: Aspects of a Scientific Realist Approach to Explanation", unpublished paper, GSIS, University of Denver, Denver, Co.80208 USA   http://ideas.repec.org/p/pra/mprapa/8293.html
---------(2008b)DialecticalLogicandSelf-consciousness:SomePreliminary Remarks on Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit and Science of Logic
http://ideas.repec.org/p/pra/mprapa/7456.html
---------(2008c) Friedman's Methodology: A Puzzle and A Proposal for Generating Useful Debates through Causal Comparisons (with a postscript on positive vs. normative theories)   http://ideas.repec.org/p/pra/mprapa/7458.html

Miller, R.(1987), *Fact and Method*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Pippin, Robert B. 1989. *Hegel's Idealism: the Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness.*
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Wahl, Jean(1929) *Le malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel*. Paris, Les
editions Rieder

Westphal, Merold(1979), *History and Truth in Hegel's Phenomenology*, Atlantic
Highlands, N.J.: The Humanities Press.

Wolin, Richard, 2000, 'Nazism and the Complicities of Hans-Georg Gadamer:
Untruth and Method', *New Republic*, pp.36-45, replied to by Palmer, 2002.

-------------*The Seductions of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance With Fascism From
Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton University Press, 2004)

Wright, Kathleen (ed.), 1990, *Festivals of Interpretation: Essays on Hans-Georg
Gadamer's Work*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press.