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# Political Hermeneutics

The Early Thinking  
of  
Hans-Georg Gadamer



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Robert R. Sullivan

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*To the Memory of My Father*

*Francis T. Sullivan*  
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## Preface

This book was written over several years and has incurred for the author numerous debts. Hans-Georg Gadamer was always generous with his time and kind in his treatment of initially tentative interpretations. He is certainly one of the finest conversationalists of our time, and I am in his debt for that experience. I am also grateful to Thomas McCarthy of Northwestern University and Hans Aarsleff of Princeton University for getting me started and keeping me going on this project. Two summer grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and equal number of City University of New York Professional Staff Congress grants were also helpful and are much appreciated. For incisive critical commentary, I am very much in the debt of Richard Palmer of MacMurray College and Fred Dallmayr of Notre Dame University.

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Mostly, however, I am in the debt of my wife, Karin. Not so much because she kept the children quiet and did the typing, neither of which was especially the case, but because as an artist she understood philosophical hermeneutics in a way that no academic intellectual in my experience ever has. She did not have to conceptualize philosophical hermeneutics in order to live it. Rather, she lived it on a daily basis in her art, thereby providing a source for my conceptualization.

Needless to say, the interpretation that knits the following pages into a book is my own and should not be held against any of the above-mentioned persons. Similarly, factual errors, which hopefully are few, are traceable to the author alone.

I would like to acknowledge and thank Yale University Press for permission to quote from *Dialogue and Dialectic* and J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) for permission to quote extensively from volume 5 of Gadamer's *Gesammelte Werke*.

# 1

## Introduction to the Early Gadamer

### I

Hans-Georg Gadamer is a contemporary German philosopher best known in Europe and the United States as the creator of philosophical hermeneutics, a direction of thought that raises a skeptical voice about knowledge claims in the modern world. This admittedly dry description of philosophical hermeneutics can easily be dramatized: If humans are historically situated beings, as Martin Heidegger taught, then it follows that certain knowledge of the human condition is neither possible nor desirable. As Gadamer puts it, our historical situatedness mandates that knowledge begin in something that became disreputable in the seventeenth-century scientific Enlightenment: our prejudices. To be sure, responsibility to our own selves and to each other also mandates that we not act on prejudices before we rigorously test and establish them as judgments. Yet even these outcomes, much as we prize them, are

not valid for all eternity. They are not certain knowledge. With the passage of time—that is to say, with the unfolding of our historical situatedness—every judgment once again becomes a prejudgment, or prejudice, and so the aging process invariably obligates our species to return to its humble non-epistemological origins. This argument, presented here in thumbnail sketch, is a direct challenge to the modern European Enlightenment.

Gadamer's major book is *Truth and Method*, first published in the German original in 1960, when the author was sixty years of age.<sup>1</sup> It laid out the case for philosophical hermeneutics. Since then, and since the American edition in 1975, other writings have been published and translated. They function mainly to elaborate the argument made in *Truth and Method*. The work called *Philosophical Hermeneutics* is not a book in any consistent sense but is rather a collection of smaller, previously published pieces that comment on one or another aspect of the title's theme.<sup>2</sup> *Dialogue and Dialectic* is a collection of Gadamerian writings, all dealing with Plato and Platonic thinking.<sup>3</sup> Some of the pieces collected here are from Gadamer's early career, but they are not treated as being distinct from the direction he carved out in his 1960 book. They are rather treated as illustrations of Gadamer's art, and hence are already subject to a distorting interpretation.

Similarly, *Hegel's Dialectic* is a collection of small, for the most part recent writings on Hegel's thought, and *Reason in the Age of Science* is yet another collection of recent and not so recent writings.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the work entitled *The Idea of the Good in Plato and Aristotle* is a long essay written by Gadamer late in life, and *Philosophical Apprenticeships* is a memoir-autobiography rather than a philosophical treatise.<sup>5</sup> The point, in brief, is that the Gadamer known to us in the United States has written only one real book, now translated into more than a dozen foreign languages, and the other books are compilations or marginal efforts dependent for their success on the reputation the author had already established for himself in his *magnum opus*.

Why then write a book on the early writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer? Will this not simply and inevitably be a commentary on the long gestation period of *Truth and Method*? Does Gadamer have anything to say in his early writings that is other than a premature formulation of his 1960 argument? The answer is suggested by the sketch already given of Gadamer's American reception history.<sup>6</sup> By publishing *Truth and Method* first and everything else thereafter, the makings of a distorted reception were created. And the distortion is not without significance for this volume: It creates one good reason for taking a hard look at Gadamer's early writings on their own terms. But first, let me establish what those early writings were.

Gadamer completed his doctoral dissertation, called *Das Wesen der Lust in den platonischen Dialogen* (The Essence of Desire in Plato's Dialogues), in 1922.<sup>7</sup> Five years later, in 1927, he published his first journal article,<sup>8</sup> an academic piece drawn from the research being done on his habilitation thesis. The habilitation is a German institution that might best be described as a second and more elaborate doctoral dissertation, needed to qualify for the German professoriat. Gadamer's habilitation thesis was called *Platos dialektische Ethik* (Plato's Dialectical Ethics), and it was completed in 1928 and published as a book in 1931.<sup>9</sup> It qualified Gadamer for the German professoriat, although he did not actually get the call until 1938. Meanwhile, in 1934, Gadamer published a long essay on Plato's problematic relation with the poets,<sup>10</sup> and in 1942 a somewhat shorter essay on Plato's concept of an educational state.<sup>11</sup> The latter piece, according to Gadamer, was written in conjunction with the 1934 piece, although publication was held off for several years.<sup>12</sup> In between and along the way, he also published a long list of short reviews and review articles, three or four of which dealt directly with Plato or writings on Plato by Gadamer's contemporaries.<sup>13</sup> One of these reviews, called "*Die neue Platoforschung*" ("Recent Plato Research"), is significant for this book.<sup>14</sup> Another unpublished work, called "*Praktisches Wissen*" ("Practical

Knowledge") is also important.<sup>15</sup> These are Gadamer's early writings.

The collapse of Germany in 1945 drove a wedge into Gadamer's academic life and served to set apart the period from 1922 to 1945 as an early period. The sustained thinking he did on Plato in this period was returned to later, but only after Gadamer had published *Truth and Method* in 1960. The period from the end of World War II to 1949 was one in which Gadamer worked as an academic administrator in Leipzig and then, in Frankfurt, as professor and editor for Vittorio Klostermann. In 1949, he was called to Heidelberg to replace the departing Karl Jaspers, and now once again he regained the leisure to think and write. It was during this period that he began the work that would lead to *Truth and Method*. This span of years, rather than what came before it, is the gestation period of Gadamer's major work.

Let me first lay to rest the most likely interpretation of Gadamer's early period. This is the very understandable commonsense notion that Gadamer was acting out the first stage of a German academic career. He was, in sum, amassing a collection of related but still unsystematic publications which were motivated by the desire to impress the academic establishment and induce one or another recruitment committee to put out the "call," as Germans say. This argument is undeniably correct: The young Gadamer was as intent as any of his contemporaries in securing a tenured professoriat. Indeed, I get the impression that he was more intent than most. He wrote the book reviews that every young German academic wrote, traveled to conferences to see and be seen, cultivated relationships with the notables, took substitute positions, and scraped along on starvation wages. At the point where normal humans would have given up, Gadamer persisted.

But conceding this rather prosaic claim about career ambitions does not exclude the possibility that there might in addition be something more to Gadamer's early writings. In my opinion, there is a compelling internal logic to the writings Gadamer did in the twenty-year period from the early 1920s to

the early 1940s. It is an elusive and incomplete logic, and as such it provides the materials for an interpretation that would complete it.

## II

Though I will argue that the early Gadamer was well on the way toward establishing a model of discourse rationality that would stand over against the model of founded rationality familiar to the natural sciences and *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences) of Gadamer's youth, this does not seem to me to be the most compelling thread of Gadamer's early writings. Rather, those writings gain in internal coherence when one grasps them in terms of the classical model of political thinking, familiar to modern readers in Aristotle's analytical breakdown of ethics and politics as interrelated microcosm and macrocosm, also familiar in Plato's more nuanced and poetic references to large and, by implication, small signboards on the road to an understanding of justice. Now if this claim is to be redeemed, it has to be understood correctly. So let me sketch it out.

The logic of the argument runs as follows: In the German academic world at the end of the 1920s, it was fashionable to accept the authenticity of Plato's letters and argue that Plato had taken up philosophy as an alternative way of engaging in politics. Gadamer subscribed to this way of looking at Plato, for it allowed him to deny the doctrine of objective ideas and root Plato's thinking in something more worldly, more situated, and hence more accommodating to the notion of discourse rationality that the early Gadamer was wont to develop. This move enabled Gadamer to cultivate the literary figure of the "Platonic Socrates" and use this figure to defend the charge of intellectualism in Plato's moral philosophy. Gadamer simultaneously adopted the Aristotelian format of

doing political philosophy and constructed his interpretation of Plato on its basis. For Aristotle, politics is a continuation of ethics, meaning in sum that desirable modes of acting at the individual level serve as reference points for the construction of the *polis*. The *polis* is the ethical individual writ large, in other words. In its turn, the *polis* then serves as reference point for the construction of the individual soul. Character is scribed, as it were, according to the ethical norms that body forth in the *polis*.

With this format in mind, Gadamer then wrote a book on Plato's ethics and followed it up with one unpublished paper and two major articles on Plato's treatment of the *polis*. Now although "Plato's Educational State" is obviously a treatment of politics, "Plato and the Poets" is not so clearly so. But it can be interpreted as such. It plays a pivotal role on the way to the vision of the educational state insofar as it clears the way or, differently stated, cleans up the transition between Plato's dialectical ethics and Plato's educational state. The early Gadamer was adopting an anti-establishment position on Plato's thinking and then reconstructing it in terms of the comfortable categories of Aristotelian ethics and politics. In this manner, Gadamer was a budding political thinker.

Was all of this done by the early Gadamer with tongue in cheek, in the Aesopian manner of someone who wanted to write about the collapse of established ethics in Weimar Germany and the rise of raw, unadorned power in Nazi Germany? The idea is an attractive one, and if for no other reason than to refute the suggestions that Gadamer might in some way have been accomplice to what was happening—through a relativistic philosophy, through an opportunistic careerism—I would like to be able to demonstrate that this was indeed the case. But my argument would be no more than speculation on the motivations of a young German academic.<sup>16</sup> I do not know what personally motivated Gadamer to concentrate for fifteen years on ethics and politics. I only know what is knowable, and that is the internal logic of a sequence of writings on Plato. If these shed light on the motivations of their author,

they suggest that he was anything but a political authoritarian in his personal thinking.

Well and good, but for philosophical purists an interpretation of the young Gadamer as budding political theorist may come as a more perverse distortion than that provided by a more conventional version of his reception history. It calls primary attention to a format that must at best be judged secondary. If the later Gadamer had become a conscious political theorist, then the line of political interpretation sketched above, even if far-fetched in the initial impression it makes, would be of real interest. Gadamer, however, did not become a political theorist but rather became the originator of a school of philosophy called *philosophical hermeneutics*. Whatever else philosophical hermeneutics is taken as, it is not political theory; and it has had limited impact on contemporary political theorists. Its main impact has been in philosophy itself, where it has given heart to the so-called continental school of philosophy against the analytical tradition, and in literary theory and the philosophy of science. It has had and continues to have growing influence in the art world. It has had some impact on the philosophy of law, but it has still to the best of my knowledge not significantly influenced contemporary political philosophy.<sup>17</sup> Hence there is reason for going back over the same ground, viewing the political thinking as incidental and at best implicit rather than primary. In this view, the correct approach is to look for the budding hermeneutic philosopher in the early writings.

This of course can be done, and with some profit, but the outcome of the exercise is to reduce the early writings to a preview of coming attractions. Moreover, the danger is that the early writings will be viewed from the perspective of the chief concepts of *Truth and Method*. If, for example, the term "aesthetic consciousness" appears in an early writing, this will be interpreted as significant solely because it is the first instance of the use of a now-famous term. If, furthermore, the use of the term "aesthetic consciousness" was slightly different in 1934 from what it became in 1960, then so much the worse for the

1934 usage. It will be said that Gadamer developed from a clumsy early beginning to the mature stage of thinking he reached in 1960. The problem is of course immediately apparent. The past (Gadamer's past) is being interpreted in terms of the present. The interpretation is highly prejudiced, and one may have to go through complicated mental gymnastics to sustain it.

Hence, the exegetical approach itself presents significant problems. But it does have a singular advantage: The more I tried it out, the more I was persuaded to revert to the model of seeing the early Gadamer as a political theorist. When I did this, I produced a simpler and, for me, far more elegant interpretation. For example, the term "aesthetic consciousness," as it is used in the 1934 piece called "Plato and the Poets," functions to describe the effect of beautiful poetic language on the thinking of the Athenian people. It distracts them from the really significant problems and aspects of community and thereby paves the way for the disintegration of communal norms. They thus lose their political edge. Functioning in this way, the concept of "aesthetic consciousness" provides a mainstay of Gadamer's defense of Plato's exiling of the poets. Plato is intent on reforming the *polis*, and this is a matter of returning language to a more prosaic form so that it might better come to grips with the Athenian everyday. Politics in this sense is a matter of reforming language and consciousness to make them adequate to deal with the everyday problems of real life. Such a conception of politics really is a continuation of the dialectical ethics Gadamer sketched out in his habilitation thesis.

In other words, the discrepancy between the use of identical terms in the early and the later Gadamer could be more effectively explained by the notion that Gadamer was a political thinker (but perhaps not a "theorist") than by the notion that he was merely the still underdeveloped creator of philosophical hermeneutics. I had similar experiences with other concepts—for example, the term "play" as it is used in the habilitation thesis and elsewhere. In *Truth and Method*, the term

"play" is very nearly developed into a concept that is usable as a tool wherever one chooses to employ it—in aesthetics, philosophy, law, or the like. In the early writings, it is always used more narrowly, which is to say that it is more situated and hence less of a concept. It describes a nonterminological quality of language which is desirable insofar as it is rooted in the need of the soul to sound itself out in its continuous effort to achieve *Gestalt*, or form. The notion of "play" in the early writings is virtually synonymous with the notion of "dialectical ethics" or an "educational state." It cannot easily be disengaged from its situatedness. So once again to the point: Gadamer's personal history, his life, as it were, was not simply a long preparation for the book he published in 1960. There was something different in the early Gadamer, and even if he had not continued it, I did not want to lose it.

My political interpretation of the early Gadamer in this book is also spelled out in terms of an academic conflict. It offers an interesting parallel to my political interpretation and is worth summarizing here. Classical philology (*Altphilologie*) in the Germany of Gadamer's youth was in a crisis. Over against an entrenched tradition of defining the field as a positivistic science there was a growing movement to return the field to its origins as an interpretive humanistic effort. *Altertumswissenschaft*, or the science of the ancient world, saw itself as a technical science equipped with powerful methods for establishing facts, which in turn would reveal patterns that would make sense of supposedly individual moments of genius. *Altertumswissenschaft* produced great works of scholarship, but it was increasingly ridiculed for forgetting just why it was that anyone would want to know Greece. The point was not to explain Plato but rather to present him in such a way that the full force of his thinking could live again. Schiller, the Schlegel brothers, and above all Hölderlin had understood this point one hundred and fifty years earlier, as had Nietzsche fifty years after Hölderlin. The point was to make Plato a model, or *Gestalt*, for young Germans. This direction laid the emphasis on interpretation at the cost of explanation, and the