The philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer

Review: *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

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Perhaps the most prestigious English-language book series for a philosopher in which to be included, *The Library of Living Philosophers* 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.[1] 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. The following volumes will be on Chisholm and Davidson; one on Habermas is also scheduled.

This is a very important, useful, excellent book which everyone even remotely interested in Gadamer, hermeneutics, Greek philosophy, aesthetics, and Heidegger should read. Yet, this is not an introductory book; Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* (1990) should be read first (the new English translation is quite acceptable), and familiarity with several other works is almost as necessary.

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, Frederick M. Chisholm, and Donald Davidson. Many, indeed most of the other essays are excellent or at least good, but they are — to use a Heideggerian distinction — by professors of philosophy, not by philosophers. Gadamer's most interesting conversation partners whom one would

[1] A longer, more social-science-focused version of this review will appear in *Trames* 2(52/47), 4 (Winter 1998).

have liked to see in this volumes are first of all Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, with whom he has had well-noted debates or at least indirect interchange;[2] 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.[3]

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; 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)[4]

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[2] On Derrida, see Gadamer's comments to James Risser (403–404), as well as the discussion of Sokolowski's essay below.

[3] Even this list is somewhat disconcerting if one compares it with that of those whom 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.

[4] 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

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)

Donald Davidson" (111–128), as well as that by the Davidson expert Bjørn T. Ramberg (459–471) and Tietz 1994.

Jean Grondin is certainly one of the most meritious Gadamerians, in English, French, and in German. He has just completed the first full biography of Gadamer, which will appear with Mohr/Siebeck some time in the future. 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.

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) 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 well-treated. (514) Indeed, the opening οϕ ϱϱόνησις by Heidegger is a key for Gadamer. (See 526) But contrary to Heidegger, Smith is correct, "in Gadamer ..., *phronēsis* 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 ἰδιότης as someone not dealing with the πόλις is someone 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 1998c)

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 the 'pre-phenomenologist' 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 Hönigswald, 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 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 of all people, who — 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 on 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.[5]

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,

> 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

[5] 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).

> 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, (2) his explicitly political writings, and (3) the political or political-philosophical implications of his work in general.

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. (Madison 357; 360; see 364 n. 40)

Although dealing with economics, Madison's is anyway a very interesting essay in its implications. Madison 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 hermeneutic economics, limited to a small group of interpretive economists in the United States.[6]

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)[7] 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 *techné* but of *praxis* (i.e., practical reason). ... Herme-

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[6] For an interesting recent attempt to read Gadamer on behalf of economic theory, see Peukert 1998, esp. 408–415.

[7] 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, 1998b)

neutic 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's: 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 of the hermeneutical *fact* that ... what makes human beings 'human' is their 'linguisticality'." (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 naivité 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; 1998b)

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 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: "Linguisticality 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 *phronēsis*, Aristotle's practical knowledge to which I appealed, became science. I responded with the reverse claim: only if science were to be subordinated to *phronēsis* 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 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 linguisticality 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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