

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002)

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Preview

Hans-Georg Gadamer [Obituary]

February 11, 1900 March 13, 2002

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With a profound sense of loss, we bid adieu to Professor Hans-Georg Gadamer, founding father of contemporary hermeneutics, interpreter par excellence, and honorary member of the International Institute for Hermeneutics. He is irreplaceable and will be dearly missed. We are filled with sorrow, but our sorrow is an expression of gratitude for the gift of his thinking, which in the endless conversation that we are, will never be lost.

Gadamer was born on February 11, 1900 in Marburg, the son of a professor of pharmaceutical chemistry. He began his studies at the University of Breslau in 1918 and then moved back to Marburg, where he received his doctorate at age 22. He then studied under Heidegger. Gadamer taught philosophy at Marburg and in 1939 began to teach at the University of Leipzig, where he served as rector from 1946 to 1947. In 1949, he was appointed to Chair of Philosophy at Heidelberg University, a chair that was formerly held by Karl Jaspers. He remained there until his retirement in 1968. On March 13, 2002, Gadamer died in Heidelberg.

Gadamer's hermeneutic openness and humility are rooted in his conviction that to understand a person means to take seriously one's viewpoints and truth claims. One of the basic principles of a dialogue which leads to reaching an agreement in understanding is willingness to learn from one's disagreements. By accepting the differences in the partners, a true dialogue brings a transformation in understanding both of oneself and of the topic. Gadamer makes us aware that we will always understand differently. This is the very condition of our finitude.

Undoubtedly, there are problems with interpreting some aspects of Gadamer's political life, especially with his taking advantage of the turmoil in German Academia during the Nazi and Soviet periods. Since no answer concerning his guilt can be definitive, the argument which speaks best for him is that his life was hermeneutics in action, a display of unprecedented love of dialogue and search for truth in the closed circuits of historical life. For Gadamer, "Being that can be understood is language." Therefore, hermeneutics offers the possibility of a dialogue in which we can overcome our own limitations and the limitations of our initial position and move toward a richer understanding of ourselves and the world in which we exist.

Gadamer's magnum opus, *Truth and Method* (1960), is an exploration of the foundations of the Humanities and Social Sciences as distinct forms of knowledge. He devoted his scholarly life to the exploration of human understanding and interpretation, and the ways in which humans interpret themselves and their activities. For him, our knowledge is grounded in tradition, in the languages we speak, and in

great works of art. Coming to understanding is a process of dialogue with the past, with the necessary fusion of horizons between the world embodied in the work and the contemporary world, between the contemporary interpreter and the cultural tradition. Gadamer's hermeneutic generosity was rooted in his natural openness to his interlocutor and his basic assumption that the opponent is probably right.

Following Heidegger's claim that "the essence of art is poetry," Gadamer fully articulates the importance of poetry in the history of philosophy. The poetic word, insofar as it is poetic, stands in itself; and yet as word it invokes something beyond itself. The hermeneutic task of interpreting a poem is not about finding a way to express the poem's meaning, but rather, finding our way into the meaning of the poem's own words.

According to Jürgen Habermas, Gadamer's critical development of Heidegger's notion of *Verstehen*, the self-interpretation and projective nature of Dasein, "urbanized the Heideggerian province." With his teacher's fidelity to *die Ursprung*, he developed his own unique readings of Greek and Latin thinking, complimenting the Heideggerian emphasis on the past with a sensitivity to the dialogic and social nature of understanding. Gadamer emphasizes that a dialogue between religions and cultures is humanity's last chance to preserve itself from the self-destructive forces unleashed by the technological age. As "we live always anew in a dialogue," hope becomes our *modus existendi*, our only way to a deeper understanding of ourselves and the other, and therefore, the only way to a civilization of tolerance and respect for alterity. The Gadamerian hermeneutic enterprise, therefore, extends to the profound transformation of the world. The call to interpret is ontological, ethical, and transcendental, for it points to our roots in other worlds, and demands a personal response, not only to be-there, but to be-grateful to Being.

When I wrote my Master's Thesis on the ontology of language in Gadamer's hermeneutics at the age of 23, I did not even think of the possibility of confronting my understanding of Gadamer with the thinker himself. However, a few years later, Professor Balduin Schwarz, with whom I was engaged in an intense conversation, interrupted me at seeing a tall man approaching us. "Hans-Georg, may I introduce to you my friend Andre." Balduin Schwarz disappeared, leaving me with a chance to discover a truly passionate conversationalist with astonishing energy, incomparable patience and natural sympathy for his interlocutors. His amazing ability of focussing on the conversation was grounded in his being a teacher who is always eager to learn something new without ever wanting to determine the way of his partner's thinking. I was happy to share with him a bottle of white wine. I was fortunate enough to meet with Gadamer frequently over the next years until I left for Canada. Some years later Gadamer expressed his support for the International Institute for Hermeneutics, but

unfortunately it was not granted to me to see him again. I am to this day very grateful that I had a chance to share some time with him.

There were also a few pragmatic reasons why I felt at home within his hermeneutic horizon. Gadamer was a night person, with a great passion for nightly debates over wine. When I came to Germany some decades later I did not have to choose between attending the late classes of Nicolai Hartmann and jumping out of bed early the next morning to sit in Martin Heidegger's seminars regularly beginning at seven o'clock. Passionate discussion late at night in the company of great thinkers and good wine is a great gift. At night we see differently. There is a deep sense of healing when the interlocutors turn toward one another. This is the beginning of hermeneutic friendship. The hermeneutic task is based on "the dialogue that we are" (*Das Gespräch das wir sind*). In this dialogue in which meaning is carried lies our interpretation of the world in which we live.

Gadamer's voice, which we have listened to attentively over the years, joins the chorus of tradition, and invites us to transmit and transform what we have received. We will continue to hearken to this voice. Nothing can replace the joy of his presence. But as Heidegger reminds us, absence is a mode of presence. We will miss him, very much, but in our fidelity to the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of his thinking, we will never be without him. *Requiescat in pace!*

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