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# Between Enlightenment and Romanticism: Some Problems and Challenges in Gadamer's Hermeneutics

KRISTIN GJESDAL\*

FOR POST-ANALYTICAL PHILOSOPHERS SUCH AS Richard Rorty and John McDowell, Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960) has played an important role in their battles against Cartesian epistemology.<sup>1</sup> In this context, it is little known that when Gadamer started working on *Truth and Method* in the early 1930s, he did not want only to criticize the framework of modern epistemology. Rather, the initial intention of his work was to “demonstrate that art can convey truth.”<sup>2</sup> In Gadamer's view, such a demonstration could not be of a merely systematic nature, but also had to engage with the historical development of aesthetics; it had to overcome the way in which Kant and the romantics had come to deny art any significance as knowledge.

Since the publication of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer's discussion of art and aesthetics—his critique of Kant, the romantics, and the general philosophical paradigm that he terms ‘aesthetic consciousness’—has received only scant attention.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, the second and third parts of the work—addressing, respectively,

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<sup>1</sup>For Rorty's reading of Gadamer, see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 357–95; and “Der Vorlesungsgast,” in *Begegnungen mit Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Günter Figal, trans. Joachim Schulte (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000), 87–92. For McDowell's application of Gadamerian insights and concepts, see John McDowell, *Mind and Nature* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1996), xi–xxiv and 108–26; and “Gadamer, Davidson, and the Ground of Understanding,” in *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer [Gadamer's Century]*, ed. Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnsward, and Jens Kertscher (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2002), 173–94.

<sup>2</sup>Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Writing and the Living Voice,” in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History*, ed. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 63.

<sup>3</sup>It is symptomatic that even a reader as charitable as Jean Grondin finds himself forced to characterize the first part of *Truth and Method* as “a detour” (*Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*

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\* Kristin Gjesdal is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Temple University.

the relevance of the human sciences and the linguistic foundation of hermeneutics—have been subject to much interest. Here Gadamer aims at transcending the way in which the Enlightenment conception of reason, truth, and knowledge, developing in the wake of Descartes, has had a tendency to evade the implications of our situatedness within tradition and history. Gadamer, however, has always insisted on the unity of his work. What he wanted, he explains, was not only to overcome the subjectivization of art by aesthetic consciousness, but also to “develop from this starting point a conception of knowledge and truth that corresponds to the whole of our experience.”<sup>4</sup>

This essay explores the relation between Gadamer’s understanding of art and his notion of hermeneutic reason, and argues that, while Gadamer’s critique of the Enlightenment is itself inadequate and biased, his hermeneutics should not be understood in strict opposition to the Enlightenment project as such. Against the criticisms launched by Habermas, Apel, and Tugendhat, I claim that Gadamer’s early notion of dialogue is itself fueled by enlightenment aspirations. The problem, however, is that Gadamer fails to live up to these aspirations. Modeling his notion of tradition on the sublime world-disclosure of art, his hermeneutics becomes entrenched in an unresolved tension between enlightenment and anti-enlightenment impulses.

The essay is divided into nine sections. Having first addressed Gadamer’s critique of the aesthetic consciousness (section 1) and his discussion of “the Cartesian basis” of the philosophical Enlightenment (section 2), I proceed to look at his attempt at carving out a philosophical middle ground between enlightenment objectivism and romantic subjectivism (section 3). The next part of the essay provides a more detailed analysis of Gadamer’s relation to the Enlightenment. I claim that Gadamer’s critique of the Enlightenment is inadequate (section 4). Yet Gadamer’s hermeneutics is not, as proposed by Habermas, Apel, and Tugendhat, a straightforward anti-Enlightenment philosophy (section 5). Against such a proposal, I claim that Gadamer’s notion of dialogical reason, as developed in the late 1920s, aspires to be a continuation of the enlightenment project (section 6). In the final sections I discuss Gadamer’s turn towards tradition and effective history. I claim that Gadamer’s understanding of tradition in *Truth and Method* fails to live up to the enlightenment aspirations of his work on dialogical reason (section 7), and that his notion of tradition moves too closely to the sublime self-forgetfulness that characterizes the experience of art (section 8). This, I conclude, leads to an unresolved tension in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, between enlightenment commit-

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[New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994], 110). It is also worth noting that to the extent that the Library of Living Philosophers’ volume on Gadamer deals with aesthetics, it is in the form of offering a discussion of the hermeneutic theory of art, not of the hermeneutic critique of aesthetic consciousness. See Lewis E. Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (Chicago: Open Court, 1997). Two recent publications on Gadamer—Robert J. Dostal, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer* [Cambridge Companion] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and *Gadamer’s Century*—almost evade Gadamer’s discussion of art and aesthetics.

<sup>4</sup>Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1994), xxiii; *Wahrheit und Methode, Gesammelte Werke*, 2 vols. (Tübingen: J. B. C. Mohr, 1993), 3. Subsequent references to this work will be to ‘*TM*’ (*Truth and Method*) and ‘*WM*’ (*Wahrheit und Methode*). Unless explicitly noted, all references to *Wahrheit und Methode* refer to volume one.

ments, on the one hand, and a romantic turn to the world-disclosive truth of art, on the other hand (section 9).

### I. OVERCOMING AESTHETIC CONSCIOUSNESS

In alignment with Hegel's critique in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* of the "beautiful soul," Gadamer's concept of aesthetic consciousness designates a tendency to consider our relation to art and beauty in terms of subjective feelings.<sup>5</sup> At stake is a set of post-Kantian positions in aesthetics—positions that, while drawing on the resources of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, articulate a romantic philosophy of art (Goethe, Schiller, Schlegel, Schelling, and Schleiermacher all figure in Gadamer's account).<sup>6</sup> Historically speaking, the shift from a focus on taste and the power of judgment to a focus on art is most decisive. Moreover, it is a shift that Gadamer in principle endorses.<sup>7</sup> In his view, however, the problem with aesthetic consciousness is that, while it moves from a (Kantian) focus on taste and judgment to a (romantic) focus on art, it fails to leave behind the Kantian subjectivization of beauty.<sup>8</sup>

The romantics were disappointed by the way in which, throughout the Enlightenment, science had come to monopolize our understanding of human existence. On Gadamer's reading, this disappointment triggers an interest in creative genius. Fuelled by Fichte's subjective idealism and his elevation of "genius

<sup>5</sup>The "beautiful soul" represents for Hegel a subjectivist turn within our understanding of moral and ethical life. It is driven by contempt for a society that is no longer beautiful, and can find consolation only in a withdrawal to the allegedly uncontaminated and pristine domain of the inner. Unable to realize its moral consciousness in the world of human practice, the "beautiful soul" ends up living "in dread of besmirching the splendor of its inner being [*seines Innern*] by action and an existence; and, in order to preserve the purity of its heart, it flees from contact with the actual world [*flieht es die Berührung der Wirklichkeit*]" (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. J. N. Finley [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977], 400; *Phenomenologie des Geistes: Werke in 20 Bänden*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986], vol. 3, 483).

<sup>6</sup>Among others, Richard Bernstein (*Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* [Beyond Objectivism and Relativism] [London: Basil Blackwell, 1983], 119) suggests that Gadamer's critique of aesthetic consciousness is a critique of Kant's subjectivization of judgment-power. "It is," he claims, Kant's "'radical subjectivization' of aesthetic judgment that Gadamer calls 'aesthetic consciousness.'" In the light of Gadamer's early discussion of aesthetic consciousness, in an essay entitled "Zur Fragwürdigkeit des ästhetischen Bewußtseins" (1958), such a claim might possibly be sustained. Here aesthetic consciousness is identified with our capacity for aesthetic judging, and as autonomous, this capacity is given its first, systematic justification in Kant's third *Critique*. As Gadamer puts it, *Das ästhetische Urteil ist eine Funktion des ästhetischen Bewußtseins* ("Zur Fragwürdigkeit des ästhetischen Bewußtseins," *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 8, 9). However, although such an understanding of aesthetic consciousness might prove sustainable by reference to this preliminary version of Gadamer's argument, it cannot, as such, be transferred to his later work. For in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer makes it clear that aesthetic consciousness belongs to (*gehört zu*) the standpoint of art (*dem Standpunkt der Kunst*), as opposed to the standpoint of taste (*TM*, 81; *WM*, 86–87). Even though Gadamer, in the next paragraph, asserts that the standpoint of art is itself "a product of aesthetic consciousness" (*eine Schöpfung des ästhetischen Bewußtseins*) (*TM*, 81; *WM*, 87), this statement only underlines the relation between aesthetic consciousness, on the one hand, and the standpoint of art, on the other. The standpoint of art is achieved only in the wake of (and not by) the third *Critique* (*TM*, 56; *WM*, 61).

<sup>7</sup>I discuss Gadamer's reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (and in particular the Kantian understanding of art) in "Reading Kant Hermeneutically: Gadamer and the *Critique of Judgment*," *Kant-Studien* 98 (2007): 351–71.

<sup>8</sup>I discuss Gadamer's critique of aesthetic consciousness in more detail in "Against The Myth of Aesthetic Presence: A Defense of Gadamer's Critique of Aesthetic Consciousness," *Journal for the British Society for Phenomenology* 36 (2005): 293–311.

and what genius creates . . . to a universal transcendental position" (*TM*, 60; *WM*, 65),<sup>9</sup> the romantics moved the idea of an unlimited, immediate spontaneity into the heart of philosophical thinking. Now the notion of genius emerged as "a universal concept of value" (*TM*, 59; *WM*, 65). Tradition, schooling, and craft were considered irrelevant. What mattered was the notion of art as distinguished "from the non-aesthetic relationship" in which it stands (*TM*, 89; *WM*, 95). Within this paradigm, the work of art was ascribed "aesthetic autonomy against the claims of the concept" (*TM*, 79; *WM*, 84).

Aesthetic consciousness emphasizes the immediacy and ineffability of aesthetic experience, and, by the same token, questions the primacy of scientific reason. Gadamer sympathizes with this concern. Yet he remains unconvinced that aesthetic consciousness, in its focus on immediacy and individual feeling, really manages to plot a route beyond a scientific understanding of reason. While affirming (rather than rejecting) Kant's subjectivization of beauty, aesthetic consciousness fails, in Gadamer's view, to challenge the concepts of truth, rationality, and knowledge which prevail within the Enlightenment. Rather, aesthetic consciousness has "its theoretical basis in the fact that the domination of the scientific model of epistemology leads to discrediting all the possibilities of knowing that lie outside this new methodology" (*TM*, 84; *WM*, 89–90).

The problem with aesthetic consciousness, in other words, is that it naively accepts the idea that the modern concept of a scientific reason exhausts our understanding of knowledge and rationality as such. Contrary to its own self-understanding, it remains bound up with the deepest presuppositions of the scientific paradigm that it initially set out to trump. There is no room within this model to ask whether it would be possible to conceive of truth and rationality in a way that would not *a priori* exclude art and beauty. As Gadamer summarizes this point, "Under the domination of nominalist prejudices [the idea that knowledge is identified with the activities of the 'pure natural sciences'] aesthetics can be only inadequately and imperfectly understood" (*TM*, 83; *WM*, 89). In order to overcome the subjectivization of art in aesthetic consciousness, what is needed is not only an effort to get beyond a problematic conception of aesthetics, but also a critique of the limitations pertaining to the Enlightenment understanding of rationality, knowledge, and truth.

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<sup>9</sup>Strictly speaking, Fichte's philosophy cannot be reduced to a single position. Throughout the course of Fichte's writing, his theory undergoes substantial alterations. Moreover, as part of the endeavor to overcome the dualisms of the Kantian system by unifying the theoretical and the practical aspects of reason, Fichte's philosophy entails a claim about the I's capacity for an absolute self-positing, but also the concept of a dialectics of recognition that anticipates Hegel's understanding of intersubjectivity (hence, arguably, also Gadamer's own concept of a dialogical, hermeneutic reason). Fichte develops this aspect of his theory in the *Foundations of Natural Right* (1976). Allen Wood (*Hegel's Ethical Thought* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], 78) emphasizes the influence of this work on Hegel and suggests that although "much in Hegel's discussion of recognition is novel and provocative . . . both the concept of recognition and its use as the basis of a theory of natural right are derived from Fichte's *Foundations of Natural Right*." Gadamer pays no attention to this latter aspect of Fichte's philosophy. On his account, as on Hegel's, Fichte represents little but a problematic, subjective idealism. For a more detailed account of Fichte's philosophical development, see Dieter Henrich, "Fichte's Original Insight," in *Contemporary German Philosophy*, ed. Darell E. Christensen (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982), vol. 1, 15–53, and *Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1967).

## 2. THE PREJUDICES OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

According to Gadamer, the modern notion of scientific reason has a “Cartesian basis” (*cartesischen Grundlegung*) (*TM*, 461; *WM*, 465), or, as he also puts it, it is the Cartesian concept of method that constitutes “the veritable manifesto [*eigentliche Manifest*] of modern science” (*TM*, 460; *WM*, 464). However, just like the concept of aesthetic consciousness, Gadamer’s reference to the Cartesian basis of modern science must be understood in terms of a philosophical “picture”—a general intellectual framework into which our reflection on issues such as truth, rationality, and knowledge has a tendency to be led.<sup>10</sup>

Understood as a general intellectual tendency—as a set of problems, metaphors, and questions—Gadamer’s approach to the Cartesian basis of modern science follows Heidegger’s critique of Cartesianism as the framework of modern thinking.<sup>11</sup> Heidegger argues that the Cartesian framework of modern thinking is determined by two closely related assertions. First, objectivity is established with reference to subjectivity itself. Second, it is understood in terms of a given set of rules or methodological guidelines. At stake is an understanding of truth, rationality, and knowledge that is grounded in the mutual dependence of an orientation towards the subject, on the one hand, and a certain kind of positivism, on the other. “Man becomes the referential center of beings as such,” as Heidegger puts it.<sup>12</sup> At the same time reason is identified with the adoption of a rational method, i.e., with a procedure that stands at the subject’s disposal.<sup>13</sup>

Although Cartesian philosophy cannot be reduced to the consideration of a rational method for the natural sciences—such a reduction would overlook how the *Meditations* carries on some central motives from Augustine<sup>14</sup> (who also exercised

<sup>10</sup>As Richard Bernstein points out, even though “few philosophers since Descartes have accepted his [Descartes’] substantive claims, . . . there can be little doubt that the problems, metaphors, and questions that he bequeathed to us have been at the very center of philosophy since Descartes” (*Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 17).

<sup>11</sup>In *Being and Time*, Heidegger claims that Cartesian ontology “in principle is still the usual one today” (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson [San Francisco: Harper, 1962]; *Sein und Zeit* [Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1993], §21, 100). Further references to this work will be to ‘BT’ (*Being and Time*) and ‘SZ’ (*Sein und Zeit*), referring to the standard German pagination.

<sup>12</sup>“The Age of the World Picture” (1938), in Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 67; “Die Zeit des Weltbildes,” in *Holzwege, Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1978–), I. Abteilung, vol. 5, 88.

<sup>13</sup>As Heidegger puts it in a quotation that may also shed some light on the title of Gadamer’s *magnum opus*, “Theoretical behavior is just looking, without circumspection [*umsichtiges Nur-hinsehen*]. But the fact that this looking is non-circumspective does not mean that it follows no rules, it constructs a canon for itself in the form of *method*” (*BT/SZ*, §15, 69).

<sup>14</sup>Stephen Menn argues that the move from *Rules* to *The Meditations* is Descartes’s step towards a retrieval of Augustinian and Plotinian Neo-Platonism (against the Aristotelian physics of matter and forms). As he puts it,

Augustine’s metaphysics of God and the soul is a possible candidate to be Descartes’ foundational discipline, because it does not depend on any doctrine of the physical world, and indeed results from a discipline of *aversio* from the senses. So Descartes can base his physics on this metaphysics without danger of circularity; this is important, not just because circles are bad in principle, but because Descartes cannot effectively challenge “our appetites and our teachers,” the Aristotelian physics and the prejudices of the senses, if this starting

a vast influence on Heidegger as well as Gadamer<sup>15</sup>) and how Descartes situates himself within the ancient genre of meditative philosophy and literature<sup>16</sup>—Gadamer assumes that the Enlightenment concept of reason, being based on the idea that reason authorizes its own activity in an act of “absolute self-construction” (*TM*, 277; *WM*, 281), may be illuminated by recounting its Cartesian origin.

While inquiring into the Cartesian origin of the Enlightenment, Gadamer adopts the perspective of an immanent critique. His aim is to measure the Enlightenment ideal of a fully autonomous reason against its own criteria of philosophical adequacy. The question he raises is this: Is the idea of a completely self-legislative reason really the best way to understand the nature of critical reflection and thinking? Or does this notion itself presuppose a set of prejudices whose legitimacy the Enlightenment systematically fails to address?

Gadamer follows Heidegger in arguing that our being in the world is the most deep-seated ontological condition of human life, and thus also of critical thinking. Given that our being in the world is ontologically prior to reflective reason, the world as such cannot be turned into an object of reflective inquiry. Critical thinking is simply not “standing outside” the world (*TM*, 301; *WM*, 307). This means that reason is conditioned by circumstances it cannot validate or assess from a neutral point of nowhere. Unlike what the Enlightenment philosophers took it to be, reason is not “its own master [*ihrer selbst Herr*] but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates” (*TM*, 276; *WM*, 280). There is no fully autonomous or self-authorizing reason, but only a reason that “consists for us . . . in concrete historical terms” (*Vernunft ist für uns nur als reale geschichtliche*) (*ibid.*).<sup>17</sup>

However, in his critique of the Enlightenment, Gadamer wants more than simply to emphasize that reason, *de facto*, is situated within a world it cannot reflectively master. On Gadamer’s understanding, the very desire for such mastery—the desire

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point is itself contaminated by Aristotle and the senses. Philosophically and sociologically, Augustine’s metaphysics gives Descartes an Archimedean point: both its intellectual justifications and its prestige within society are independent of Aristotelianism and can be used to subvert it. (Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 209)

See also Gareth B. Matthews, *Thought’s Ego in Augustine and Descartes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

<sup>15</sup>For a survey of Heidegger’s understanding of Augustine in the period leading up to *Being and Time*, see Theodore Kisiel, *The Genesis of Heidegger’s “Being and Time”* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 192. Gadamer draws on Augustine both in *Truth and Method* and in a number of subsequent essays. Jean Grondin expounds on the general importance of Augustine for Gadamer’s hermeneutics in *Sources of Hermeneutics* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), ch. 7.

<sup>16</sup>See Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, “The Structure of Descartes’s *Meditations*,” in *Essays on Descartes’s Meditations*, ed. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 1–20.

<sup>17</sup>Although Gadamer does not accept the Hegelian notion of absolute knowledge, he emphasizes that his insistence on the situatedness of reason is indebted to Hegel’s phenomenology:

All self-knowledge arises from what is historically pregiven, what with Hegel we call ‘substance’, because it underlines all subjective intentions and actions, and hence both prescribes and limits every possibility for understanding any tradition whatsoever in its historical alterity. This almost defines the aim of philosophical hermeneutics: its task is to retrace the path of Hegel’s phenomenology of mind until we discover in all that is subjective the substantiality that determines it. (*TM*, 302; *WM*, 307)

to transcend the worldliness of our existence—rests on the misguided assumption that the situatedness of reason is a problem that demands a (theoretical) solution. The situatedness of reason, Gadamer argues, is without alternatives—not only as an empirical matter of fact, but also as a normative structure.

### 3. BEYOND ENLIGHTENMENT OBJECTIVISM AND ROMANTIC SUBJECTIVISM

On a most fundamental level, Gadamer's critique of the Enlightenment is couched as a discussion of the philosophical status of prejudices. The Enlightenment, he argues, sees prejudices as the antithesis to critical reason, "the unambiguous polemical correlate of the very ambiguous word 'freedom'" (*TM*, 271; *WM*, 275 n.). Yet, according to Gadamer, this negative conception of prejudices—of an antagonistic relationship between reason and prejudices—is not the only one available. Initially, he claims, the term 'prejudice' simply "meant a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined" (*TM*, 270; *WM*, 275). As such, it did not carry a set of specifically negative connotations. Upon further investigation, some prejudices could prove right, and others prove false, but prejudices as such were not something that should be avoided.

Against what he takes to be the epistemic proceduralism of the Enlightenment—against its claim that "The only thing that gives a judgment dignity is its having a basis, a methodological justification" (*TM*, 271; *WM*, 275)<sup>18</sup>—Gadamer advocates a rehabilitation of the ontological importance of prejudices. In his opinion, the scope of methodological justification is itself of a rather limited kind. The field of prejudices, on the other hand, is indefinite. We can dispense neither with the situatedness of reason, nor with the prejudices by which reason orients itself. Prejudices are "biases of our openness to the world; they are simply conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us."<sup>19</sup> Consequently, it is "not so much our judgments as it is our prejudices that constitute our being."<sup>20</sup> Our prejudices make up an inherent part of our pre-reflective understanding of the world—the situation into which we are thrown, to put it in phenomenological terms.

However, the fact that *Dasein* is, constitutively, thrown into a given situation is not, as Gadamer takes the Enlightenment to claim, the antithesis to free thinking. It is rather a condition of possibility for freedom. According to Gadamer, this becomes even clearer on examining the ordinary use of the term 'situation'. In ordinary language, we "define the concept of 'situation' by saying that it represents

<sup>18</sup>It is worth noting in this context that according to Gadamer, his critique of the quasi-Cartesian concept of *method* does not restrict the relevance or scope of *science*. In the very last and concluding paragraph of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer claims that the fact that in striving for knowledge "the knower's own being comes into play certainly shows the limits of method, but *not* of science" (*Daß in ihrer Erkenntnis das eigene Sein des Erkennenden mit ins Spiel kommt, bezeichnet zwar wirklich die Grenze der 'Methode', aber nicht die der Wissenschaft*) (*TM*, 491; *WM*, 494; emphasis added).

<sup>19</sup>"The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem" (1966), *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. and trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), 9; "Die Universalität des hermeneutischen Problems," *Wahrheit und Methode, Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 2, 224.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*



a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision" (*TM*, 302; *WM*, 307). As such, it is intrinsically related to the notion of a horizon, the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage-point. But even if the horizon constitutes the limits of our vision, we speak of the "possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons, and so forth" (*ibid.*). In Gadamer's view, this is why the term 'horizon', at least since Nietzsche and Husserl, has been such an important part of our philosophical vocabulary: it allows us to ponder how "one's range of vision is gradually expanded" (*ibid.*), how situatedness and freedom are mutually co-determining. Hence the horizon enables as well as delimits human experience. On the one hand, the horizon is "that beyond which it is impossible to see" (*TM*, 306; *WM*, 311). On the other hand, this "beyond" is not a fixed limit. The horizon may gradually be expanded; it is, as Gadamer puts it, "always in motion" (*TM*, 304; *WM*, 309). Even more emphatically, he claims that the horizon essentially is "something in which we move and that moves with us" (*ibid.*).

Given this understanding of prejudices, Gadamer goes on to claim that the "global demand of the Enlightenment," the demand for the "overcoming of all prejudices," will itself "prove to be a prejudice" (*TM*, 276; *WM*, 280)—a prejudice against prejudice itself. This prejudice is particularly harmful because it prevents us from examining the influence of prejudices as such. As Gadamer puts it, "A person who believes he is free of prejudices, relying on the objectivity of his procedures and denying that he is himself conditioned by historical circumstances, experiences the power of the prejudices that unconsciously dominate him [*ihn unkontrolliert beherrschen*]" (*TM*, 360; *WM*, 366). Contrary to the Enlightenment dogma, it is not at all rational to deny the situatedness of reason. What is rational is to acknowledge "man's finite, historical mode of being" (*TM*, 277; *WM*, 281).

In Gadamer's opinion, the task of philosophy is therefore not, as the Enlightenment allegedly argued, to defend the idea of a completely autonomous and self-legislating reason. Rather, philosophy must ask what it implies, for our conception of truth and knowledge, that prejudices constitute a (quasi-)transcendental condition for experience, that they enable as well as restrict the scope of critical thinking and reflection. Gadamer's hermeneutics does not, as had been the case with nineteenth-century hermeneutics, lead to the articulation of a method.<sup>21</sup> Neither, however, does it exclude one. For, according to Gadamer, hermeneutics "seeks to discover and bring into consciousness something which [the] methodological dispute serves only to conceal or neglect, something that does not so much confine or limit modern science as precede it and make it possible" (*TM*, xxix; *WM*, vol. 2, 439). Spelling out these enabling conditions, Gadamer's hermeneutics reflects on the most fundamental preconditions of our being-in-the-world.

Only by shifting the focus of hermeneutics from being a tool for classicists, theologians, and historians, to being a full-fledged contribution to ontology, does Gadamer think that it is possible to provide an alternative to the positions offered, respectively, by aesthetic consciousness and the Enlightenment. Only thus is it

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<sup>21</sup>For a more detailed discussion of this point, see my "Hermeneutics and Philology: A Reconsideration of Gadamer's Critique of Schleiermacher," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 14 (2006): 133–56.

possible to get beyond the kind of thinking that assumes that *either* knowledge is grounded in methodological procedures, *or* we find ourselves in a position where we cannot really speak of knowledge at all. Gadamer wishes to explore a third way, thus undermining the very premise of both Enlightenment rationalism and romantic subjectivism. This, I take it, is the deepest, philosophical commitment of Gadamer's work, hence also the intrinsic, intellectual *Maßstab* against which the success of his hermeneutics must be measured.

#### 4. THE PROBLEMATIC NATURE OF GADAMER'S CRITIQUE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Now, it is one thing to assert, as Gadamer does, the finitude of human existence, and hence also of critical thinking and reflection. It is, however, something quite different to claim, as Gadamer also does, that the Enlightenment is "abstract and revolutionary" (*TM*, 281; *WM*, 285), and that it neglects the historical situatedness of human reason. Hence, one must ask how Gadamer could end up with such a picture of the Enlightenment in the first place.

Addressing the Enlightenment's "prejudices against prejudices," Gadamer, I have argued, takes as his starting point the Cartesian alignment of truth and method.<sup>22</sup> However, Descartes never offered meta-critical reflections on the nature of the Enlightenment as such. For that we need to go to Kant.<sup>23</sup> In Kant's view, the Enlightenment spirit answers to the Horacian *sapere aude*: dare to know! This, in turn, is contrasted with blind, dogmatic obedience. Enlightenment is the ability to think for oneself: "man's release from his self-incurred tutelage."<sup>24</sup> It is the freedom publicly to exercise one's reason and judgment, the opposite of every kind of "personal despotism or . . . avaricious or tyrannical oppression."<sup>25</sup> Hence, the Enlightenment is intrinsically committed to the liberty of public speech. Kant does not take this liberty to be simply an abstract possibility. On his account, the *sapere aude* appears as an ethical-political vocation, a task to which we must perpetually commit ourselves. In an enlightened society one does not only theoretically have the possibility of using one's reason freely—one actually makes use of this possibility in an active and uncompromising way. This, Kant claims, is citizenship proper: to take on the "propensity and vocation to free thinking"<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Ernst Cassirer offers an alternative interpretation of the notion of method and claims that "the whole eighteenth century understands reason in this sense; not as a sound body of knowledge, principles, and truths, but as a kind of energy [*eine Energie*], a force [*Kraft*] which is fully comprehensible only in its agency and effects. What reason is, and what it can do, can never be known by its results but only by its functions [*Ausübung und Auswirkung*]" (*The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979], 13; *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung* [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1932], 16).

<sup>23</sup>Standing at the peak of the Enlightenment, the "Century of Friedrich," as he puts it, Kant formulates its most fundamental principles ("What is Enlightenment?", in Immanuel Kant, *On History*, ed. and trans., Lewis White Beck [London: Macmillan, 1963], 9; "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?", *Was ist Aufklärung? Aufsätze zur Geschichte und Philosophie* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985], 60).

<sup>24</sup>"What is Enlightenment?", 3; "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?", 55.

<sup>25</sup>"What is Enlightenment?", 4; "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?", 56.

<sup>26</sup>"What is Enlightenment?", 10; "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?", 61.

Kant's understanding of the Enlightenment generates an important question with regard to Gadamer's critique. Does Kant's understanding of "prejudices"—of that against which a free and undogmatic use of reason is contrasted—overlap with the concept of prejudices that Gadamer wants to rehabilitate?

Reflecting upon the Enlightenment, Kant is mainly concerned with the problem of religious dogmatism. He has, he explains, "placed the main point of enlightenment . . . chiefly in matters of religion [*Religionssachen*] because . . . rulers have no interest in playing the guardian with respect to the arts and sciences and also because religious incompetence is the most harmful but also most degrading of all."<sup>27</sup> Gadamer, however, pursues a different agenda. He first introduces the term 'prejudice' in relation to the discussion of the fore-structure (*Vorstruktur*) of understanding (*TM*, 269; *WM*, 274). This discussion does not refer to the Enlightenment critique of our passive adopting of unquestioned and unjustified beliefs and assumptions, but to Heidegger's *Dasein*-analysis. Here the idea of the fore-structure of understanding—i.e., that our understanding of the world orients itself in terms of a fore-having (*Vorhabe*), a fore-sight (*Vorsicht*), and a fore-conception (*Vorgriff*) (*BT/SZ*, 150)—follows from *Dasein*'s circumspective relationship to its surroundings. It is a concept that accounts for the way in which the world is disclosed through our pre-reflective practices.

However, just a few pages after his (Heideggerian) discussion of prejudices, Gadamer uses the term 'prejudices' to address the philosophy of the Enlightenment. In this context, the terms 'fore-structure' and 'prejudices' appear to be more or less synonymous. But this turn from Heidegger's conception of the fore-structure of understanding to the Enlightenment's own notion of prejudices is problematic. As indicated by Kant's Enlightenment credo, his use of the notion of 'prejudices' refers not to the deepest foundation of our acting and thinking—the complex web of coping and circumspection that makes up our life-world—but to the vast amount of (religious) beliefs and opinions that we have more or less passively adopted, and whose validity we fail to call into question. These beliefs and opinions, one might argue, may well be criticized, altered, or replaced, but this does not necessarily affect the way the world is disclosed through our pre-reflective practices. An eighteenth-century person might, for example, criticize the unquestioned authority of the king, the pope, or the clergymen, claiming that authority must be based on rational grounds rather than dogmatically asserted, without this altering her pre-reflective "knowledge" of or "familiarity" with the world. It is precisely because the Enlightenment, criticizing the way in which prejudices curb the freedom of reason, did not address the most basic (pre-reflective) aspects of the life-world that it is implausible to think of it as "abstract and revolutionary" in Gadamer's meaning of the terms (*TM*, 281; *WM*, 285).

Arguably, Gadamer's claim in this context would be that one cannot categorically distinguish between the deep-structures of language, practice, and intersubjectivity and the ideas and structures that are handed down to us by tradition, history, and religion. But even though there may, admittedly, be a complex, dialectical relationship between these dimensions of our life-world, Gadamer is not right in

<sup>27</sup>"What is Enlightenment?"; 9; "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?"; 61.

playing down the difference between the Enlightenment's *epistemic* conception of uncritical beliefs and opinions and a much broader, *ontological* understanding of tradition and prejudices *à la* Heidegger.

The notion of prejudices that Gadamer wants to rehabilitate is not the notion of prejudices that the Enlightenment thinkers had in mind. By presenting his critique of Enlightenment in a largely Heideggerian language, Gadamer overlooks the distinction between an epistemic and an ontological understanding of prejudices. Hence he also fails to note how the continuing relevance of the Enlightenment tradition rests on the claim that the authority or the validity of our beliefs cannot be related to the fact that these beliefs *de facto* have been handed down by tradition.<sup>28</sup> Nor can it be grounded in a *de facto* public acceptance. According to Kant and his retrieval of the Enlightenment, the legitimacy of a claim or a belief rests on its being based on rational grounds. This is precisely why the Enlightenment is defined by Kant as "man's emergence from his self-incurred tutelage," where tutelage is understood as the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another.<sup>29</sup> By evading this most fundamental idea of the Enlightenment, Gadamer offers a picture of this period that is far more polemical than it would have had to be in order for him to make a case for the situatedness of reason.

The biased nature of Gadamer's criticism of the Enlightenment is not only a problem when it comes to the accountability of his retrieval of the history of modern philosophy. It has also occasioned a systematic misreading of his philosophy, leading a number of critics to reject Gadamer's hermeneutics on the grounds of its alleged anti-Enlightenment impulses.

##### 5. SITUATEDNESS, NORMATIVITY, AND THE RECEPTION OF GADAMER'S CRITIQUE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Since the publication of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer's critique of the Enlightenment has generated a wide-ranging debate within German philosophy. At stake is not only the Enlightenment commitment to questions of normativity, but also the general relevance of an ontologically-oriented hermeneutics—that is, the question as to what extent the validity of philosophical hermeneutics is weakened by the fact that Gadamer dismisses the distinction between the *de facto* and the *de jure* aspects of judgment and interpretation. In his review of *Truth and Method*, Habermas articulates this concern in an illuminating way.

According to Habermas, it is Gadamer's achievement to argue that language coexists with a given life-form, without thereby adopting the idea that different languages exist as closed or monadic units. (This is the view that Habermas at the time ascribes to the later Wittgenstein.<sup>30</sup>) Gadamer, he claims, "preserve[s]

<sup>28</sup>After the publication of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer acknowledges the greatness of the Enlightenment. He claims for example that "What Kant calls Enlightenment in truth corresponds to what hermeneutics has in view" ("Reply to David Detmer," in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, 286).

<sup>29</sup>"What is Enlightenment?," 3; "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?," 55.

<sup>30</sup>See Jürgen Habermas, "A Review of *Truth and Method*," in *The Hermeneutic Tradition. From Ast to Ricoeur*, ed. Gayle L. Orminston and Alan D. Schrift, trans. Fred. R. Dallmayr and Thomas McCarthy (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990), 216.; "Der hermeneutische Ansatz," in *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1979), 275.

the unity of reason in the pluralism of languages.”<sup>31</sup> Yet, he continues, this comes at a price. In Gadamer’s hermeneutics, the unity of reason is grounded in the normativity of a continuous and all-encompassing concept of tradition. Gadamer neglects the Enlightenment idea that a critical reason “proves itself in being able to reject the claim of tradition” (*daß sie den Anspruch von Traditionen auch abweisen kann*).<sup>32</sup> He focuses one-sidedly on the ontological conditionedness of critical thought, thus denying reason “the power of reflection.”<sup>33</sup>

Later on, Habermas modifies his criticism. In particular, he develops an interest in Gadamer’s conception of dialogue and practical reasoning. Nonetheless, he sticks to the point that Gadamer’s ontological turn in hermeneutics leaves him poorly equipped to account for the distinction between the *de facto* and the *de jure* aspects of understanding. In Habermas’s opinion, such a distinction is needed because our practices of communication may be systematically distorted as a result of asymmetric power-relations. Even though one may, in Habermas’s opinion, be sympathetic to Gadamer’s “hermeneutic reservations . . . against monological self-certainty which merely arrogates to itself the title of critique,”<sup>34</sup> one should not be seduced by his willingness to let go of the Enlightenment’s orientation towards validity in understanding.

Related concerns have been voiced by Karl-Otto Apel. While calling for a transcendental turn in hermeneutics, Apel argues that Gadamer’s ontological hermeneutics “made something like a normatively controlled progress in understanding totally inconceivable.”<sup>35</sup> Against a position which, on his view, dissolves the question of normativity in interpretation, Apel maintains that some beliefs or interpretations, on principled grounds, are more objectively valid than others. To insist on a dimension of validity in understanding is, on Apel’s view, to approach Gadamer’s hermeneutics with a set of “quasi-Kantian reservations.”<sup>36</sup>

While stressing the need for a dimension of normativity in understanding, Apel somewhat surprisingly refers to the later Heidegger. According to Apel, Heidegger significantly revises his concept of truth as world-disclosure throughout the 1960s. This, Apel argues, is evident for example in his 1964 lecture, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking.” Responding to Ernst Tugendhat’s criticism of the concept of a world-disclosive truth—Tugendhat had criticized Heidegger for dismissing the notion of truth as correspondence or adequacy<sup>37</sup>—Heidegger claims that, although a hermeneutic world-disclosure (T1) is a necessary condi-

<sup>31</sup>“A Review of *Truth and Method*,” 214; “Der hermeneutische Ansatz,” 273.

<sup>32</sup>“A Review of *Truth and Method*,” 237; “Der hermeneutische Ansatz,” 305.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup>Jürgen Habermas, “The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality,” in *The Hermeneutic Tradition*, trans. Joseph Bleicher, 270; “Der Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik,” in *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*, 366.

<sup>35</sup>Karl-Otto Apel, “Regulative Ideas or Truth-Happening? An Attempt to Answer the Question of the Conditions of Possibility of Valid Understanding” [“Regulative Ideas or Truth-Happening?”], in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, trans. Ralf Sommermeier, 67.

<sup>36</sup>“Regulative Ideas or Truth-Happening?”, 67.

<sup>37</sup>See Ernst Tugendhat, *Der Wahrheitsbegriff bei Husserl und Heidegger* (Berlin: Gruyter, 1984). For an English summary of this work, see Ernst Tugendhat, “Heidegger’s Idea of Truth,” in *Martin Heidegger: Critical Assessments*, 4 vols., ed. and trans., Christopher Macann, (London: Routledge, 1996), vol. 3, 79–92.

tion for truth as such, it is not, strictly speaking, a sufficient condition.<sup>38</sup> As Apel reads this, Heidegger here claims that, in addition to truth as world-disclosure, one needs a conception of validity, or, if one prefers, a conception of truth as adequation (T2). In Apel's view, Heidegger, in the 1964 lecture, "does nothing less than revoke that thesis which he had held with growing determination since *Sein und Zeit*; namely, that the more original and the only significant conception of truth is the unconcealment of beings on the ground of the *disclosedness of being-there*, that is, the *opening of Being*."<sup>39</sup> Gadamer, he continues, does not realize this.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, he fails to see how hermeneutics, to the extent that it conducts an ontological turn, must reflect the possibility of securing the validity of our beliefs and practices by appealing to a trans-historical principle.

However, if Apel traces what he takes to be Gadamer's lack of concern for the dimension of validity in understanding back to a misunderstanding of the later Heidegger—thereby also hinting that his transcendentially oriented hermeneutics (and not Gadamer's ontological hermeneutics) represents the true successor to Heidegger's philosophy—he does not ask why such a misunderstanding occurs in the first place. Tugendhat, by contrast, explicitly addresses this question. In his review of Gadamer's *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Tugendhat suggests that in order to arrive at a hermeneutic position like Gadamer's you simply "start with Heidegger's conception of truth, but disregard his ontology and replace both the existentialism of his earlier philosophy and the mysticism of his later writings by a profound sense for the humanist tradition."<sup>41</sup> According to Tugendhat, this move is problematic. Gadamer, he worries, does not see that the "understanding of the entire philosophical tradition since the pre-Socratics . . . was [for Heidegger] a necessary precondition for tackling the philosophical questions themselves."<sup>42</sup> With Gadamer, "what the master thought of as a means [namely, the study of tradition], soon became an end in itself."<sup>43</sup> The texts of the tradition are no longer critically assessed. Rather, we are to "expose ourselves to their 'truth', in analogy to a con-

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<sup>38</sup>In the 1964 lecture, Heidegger claims:

Insofar as truth is understood in the traditional "natural" sense as the correspondence of knowledge with beings demonstrated in beings, but also insofar truth is interpreted as the certainty of the knowledge of Being, *aletheia*, unconcealment in the sense of the opening may not be equated with truth. Rather, *aletheia*, unconcealment thought as opening, first grants the possibility of truth [*gewärt . . . erst die Möglichkeit von Wahrheit*]. For truth itself, just as Being and thinking, can only be what it is in the element of the opening. Evidence, certainty [*Gewißheit*] in every degree, every kind of verification of *veritas* already move with that *veritas* in the realm of the prevalent opening. *Aletheia*, unconcealment thought as the opening of presence, is not yet truth [*Unverborgenheit als Lichtung von Anwesenheit . . . ist noch nicht Wahrheit*]. ("The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," in *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002]; "Das Ende der Philosophie und die Aufgabe des Denkens," in *Zur Sache des Denkens* [Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1969], 76)

<sup>39</sup>"Regulative Ideas or Truth Happening?", 72.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Tugendhat, "The Fusion of Horizons," *Philosophische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), 426.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 429.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

frontation with a work of art.”<sup>44</sup> The idea of a reflective and critical relation to the past is overshadowed by the celebration of a historical self-appropriation. This, in Tugendhat’s view, is the anti-Enlightenment drift of Gadamer’s philosophy.

Since I have already argued that Gadamer’s understanding of the Enlightenment is inadequate, one would perhaps await a full affirmation of Apel’s, Habermas’s, and Tugendhat’s criticisms. However, in spite of valuable concerns and insights, these criticisms convey a problematic understanding of Gadamer’s relation to the Enlightenment. For the fact that Gadamer offers a one-sided portrait of the Enlightenment does not necessarily mean that his own hermeneutics is based on a rejection of the Enlightenment project—at least not if one follows Apel and Habermas’s more generous interpretation of what this project is all about in the first place. This misunderstanding of Gadamer’s relation to the Enlightenment has to do with an even more widespread misconception of Gadamer’s relation to Heidegger.

In contrast to Apel’s and Tugendhat’s idea of a fundamental break between Heidegger and Gadamer, I have emphasized the intellectual kinship between their respective positions.<sup>45</sup> Yet the fact that Gadamer works within a Heideggerian paradigm does not force him to take over each and every aspect of his teacher’s thinking. At what point, then, does Gadamer disagree with Heidegger, if not with regard to the relation between world-disclosure (T<sub>1</sub>) and certainty (T<sub>2</sub>) (as claimed by Apel), or with regard to the critical assessment of tradition (as claimed by Tugendhat)? Even though Gadamer follows Heidegger in criticizing the Cartesian reduction of truth to certainty, and even though he adds to the understanding of truth as adequation (T<sub>2</sub>) a notion of truth as hermeneutic world-disclosure (T<sub>1</sub>), Gadamer does not want to leave out the concept of reflection from his understanding of truth as such. Rather, it is his outspoken wish to reformulate the idea of a critical reflection in a manner that prevents it from falling prey to a problematic subjectivism. The idea of a reflective consciousness, he claims, cannot be understood in terms of an isolated epistemic *cogito*, but is intrinsically related to the historical unfolding of tradition itself. This is Gadamer’s concept of a *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*—an aspect of his hermeneutics that Heidegger

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Gadamer’s indebtedness to (and criticisms of) Heidegger is further elaborated in Ingrid Scheibler, *Gadamer: Between Heidegger and Habermas* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), chs. 4–5; and in Jean Grondin, *Hermeneutische Wahrheit?* (Königstein: Forum Academicum, 1982), ch. 3. To emphasize the relative continuity between Heidegger’s thinking and Gadamer’s hermeneutics does not necessarily involve downplaying the way in which he, in carving out his own position, also draws on other philosophers such as Plato and Hegel. Gadamer’s relation to Plato is thoroughly discussed in Giuseppe Cambiano, *Le retour des Anciens*, trans. Silvia Milanezi (Paris: Éditions Belin, 1994), ch. 2; Pierre Fruchon, *L’Herméneutique de Gadamer. Platonisme et modernité* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1994); Jean Grondin, *Hermeneutische Wahrheit?*, ch. 1; Brice R. Wachterhauser, *Beyond Being* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999). See also Francis J. Ambrosio, “The Figure of Socrates in Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics,” Donald Davidson, “Gadamer and Plato’s *Philebus*,” and Robert J. Dostal, “Gadamer’s Continuous Challenge: Heidegger’s Plato Interpretation,” all in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lewis E. Hahn, vol. 24 (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 259–73, 421–23, and 289–307, respectively. For Gadamer’s relation to Hegel, see Robert Pippin, “Gadamer’s Hegel,” in *Cambridge Companion*, 225, and Michael Forster, “Hegel and Hermeneutics” (manuscript).

could never accept.<sup>46</sup> At stake is the idea that, although consciousness finds itself situated within a comprehensive historical context, one on which it cannot fully reflect, it is not deprived of the possibility of critically approaching and interrogating the norms and principles that dominate in a given historical situation.

This aspect of Gadamer's thinking has some bearing on his relation to the Enlightenment impulse in philosophy. For if, like Habermas and Apel, one takes the Enlightenment project to entail the commitment to a self-critique of reason, then Gadamer, precisely by retaining a concept of reflective consciousness, does not stage philosophical hermeneutics in opposition to the Enlightenment spirit of modern thinking as such. Rather, Gadamer pushes this spirit to the point where it is forced to question its most fundamental presupposition: the idea of a completely autonomous and self-responsive reason. His point, in this context, is that any investigation into the validity of our prejudices must also question the uncritical faith in (or prejudice about) the reflective powers of an isolated, epistemic subjectivity. *Qua* enlightened and responsive, individual reason cannot perceive itself as completely autonomous. Reason must reflect its situatedness within a historical tradition whose movements it cannot fully control, but to which it contributes through critical investigation and query.

Gadamer's hermeneutics, then, should not (as proposed by Habermas, Apel, and Tugendhat) be viewed as a rejection of the Enlightenment as such. Rather, it seeks to continue the Enlightenment project in a historically informed and sensitive manner. As Gadamer himself puts it,

It is extremely astonishing that . . . philosophical hermeneutics . . . [is] being discussed under the title 'critique of enlightenment' and not with reference to the idealist concept of the 'completed enlightenment' which was coined by Fichte. For what matters to us can only be the question whether a completed enlightenment which would dissolve all human predisposition and societal prejudices is an intelligible claim.<sup>47</sup>

Or, as he formulates it in an even more sweeping claim, "philosophy is enlightenment, but precisely also enlightenment against its own dogmatism."<sup>48</sup>

## 6. DIALOGUE AND DIALECTICS IN HERMENEUTICAL REASON

If Gadamer's hermeneutics aspires to an enlightenment of the Enlightenment, then one ought to ask how the enlightenment ideals can be redeemed within the framework of an ontologically oriented hermeneutics. How can a reason that is, by definition, situated in a concrete, historical life-world transcend its own limitations? How can a reason that is conditioned by a set of prejudices that it does not itself master proceed to examine its own conditionedness?

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<sup>46</sup>In an interview of 1993, Gadamer claims that *man kann wohl sagen daß dies für Heidegger eine der größten Herausforderungen meiner ganzen Arbeit war, daß ich hier den Begriff des Bewußtseins gebrauchte* (Carsten Dutt, *Hermeneutik. Ästhetik. Praktische Philosophie. Hans-Georg Gadamer im Gespräch* [Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1993], 22).

<sup>47</sup>"Reply to David Detmer," *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, 287.

<sup>48</sup>"Reflections on my Philosophical Journey" (trans. Richard Palmer), in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, 16.



At this point, the concept of dialogue emerges as crucial. The capacity to conduct a genuine dialogue requires a willingness to keep one's beliefs and opinions open to criticism and objections, thus exposing one's knowledge-claims as fallible and non-conclusive by nature. Hence, to strive for knowledge is to be willing to dispense with illegitimate prejudices, and to do so through a discursive encounter with others. To consider the possibility that one's own views may be false or inadequate implies the readiness to acknowledge that the interlocutor's views and standpoints amount to genuine claims to rational acceptability.<sup>49</sup> This, in Gadamer's opinion, is an acknowledgment of the force of the better argument, which is inseparable from the to-and-fro movement of the dialogue itself.

Gadamer's interest in dialogue—and the claim that hermeneutic reason is itself dialogical—is the driving force behind not only his study of Plato's *Philebus*, written in the late 1920s under Heidegger's supervision, but also his magnum opus, *Truth and Method*. In the former work, *Plato's Dialectical Ethics* (1931), Gadamer claims that the spirit of dialogue is not embodied in the theses, propositions, or claims put forth, but in searching for the rational agreement of the other—or, as he puts it, “the other person's agreement or disagreement” (*der Zustimmung oder dem Widersprechen des Anderen*).<sup>50</sup> This other is needed in so far as “he is able and willing to listen to reasons and respond to reasons [*auf Gründe zu hören und mit Gründen zu antworten*].”<sup>51</sup> The stronger the reasons the other may possibly muster against one's own point of view, the more valuable she is as a partner of genuine, philosophical exchange. As Gadamer puts it, “the inherent tendency of the intention of coming to an understanding is to want to do this precisely with the person whose prior opinion contradicts one's own thesis most sharply [*gerade mit dem, dessen Vormeinung der These am schärfsten widerspricht*].”<sup>52</sup>

The orientation towards mutual understanding—reached at the moment where both interlocutors sublimate their own position into a more universal third—is not driven by the search for certainty, but by a Socratic acknowledgment of one's ignorance—by an acknowledgment of the finality of a reason which is always already informed by prejudices that have not (yet) been subject to critical reflection. As Gadamer puts it,

Plato's philosophy is a dialectic not only because in conceiving and comprehending [*im Begreifen*] it keeps itself on the way to the concept [*zum Begriff*] but also because, as a philosophy that conceives and comprehends in that way, it knows man as a creature that is thus “on the way” and “in between.” . . . This is not *sophia*—the knowledge that gives one disposition over something—but a striving for that.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>To take someone's point of view as rational is not the same as to engage with his or her individual subjectivity. For although Gadamer claims that “in speaking of something, *Dasein* always expresses *itself* at the same time [*spricht sich das Dasein stets selbst mit aus*],” he regards the focus on the individuality of the other (which is, on Gadamer's account, the focus of romantic hermeneutics) as a degenerated form of dialogue. A focus on the individuality of the other—or, for that sake, on one's own—is, Gadamer argues, an attitude that “pushes the other person away.” A genuine dialogue, on the other hand, represents a distinct way of being with another (*Miteinandersein*) (Gadamer, *Plato's Dialectical Ethics*, trans. Robert W. Wallace [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991], 37; *Platos dialektische Ethik, Gesammelte Werke [Platos dialektische Ethik]* [Tübingen: J. B. C. Mohr, 1985], vol. 5, 28).

<sup>50</sup>*Plato's Dialectical Ethics*, 39; *Platos dialektische Ethik*, 30.

<sup>51</sup>*Plato's Dialectical Ethics*, 40; *Platos dialektische Ethik*, 31.

<sup>52</sup>*Plato's Dialectical Ethics*, 41; *Platos dialektische Ethik*, 31.

<sup>53</sup>*Plato's Dialectical Ethics*, 4; *Platos dialektische Ethik*, 6–7.

The essence of genuine dialogue is humility before *die Sache selbst*.

Knowledge that is sought in this intersubjective and dialogical way is an aim in itself. It is, as Gadamer puts it, “not sought for the sake of anything else at all, but purely for the sake of its ownmost accomplishment of discovery [*Entdecken*] and knowledge [*Wissen*].”<sup>54</sup> By virtue of its ability to give reasons or causes, the commitment to dialogue is distinguished from merely “pre-scientific assertions” (*vorwissenschaftlichen Aussage*).<sup>55</sup> Understood in light of dialogue, reason is not characterized by its references to an abstract, methodological procedure, but by the ability to transcend an individual position or point of view through the encounter with another, that is, with a progressive and systematic exploration of a given subject matter.<sup>56</sup>

This notion of dialogue, as it is developed in Gadamer’s first philosophical work and later fleshed out in *Truth and Method*,<sup>57</sup> is not conceived in opposition to the Enlightenment notion of reflective reason. At stake, rather, is an attempt to rethink the very nature of this reason itself; to move from a paradigm in which reason is seen as monological and subjective to a paradigm in which it is taken to be dialogical and intersubjective. Even if prejudices, on Gadamer’s understanding, cannot be left *in toto*, even if reason is not abstract and independent of its situatedness in tradition, the to-and-fro movement of dialogue helps us assess and evaluate the prejudices by which our thinking is constrained. The fact that we cannot, in one grand, methodological leap, leave behind the entire body of prejudices, does not mean that we cannot, through the progressive work of dialogue, replace bad or illegitimate prejudices with better or more legitimate ones—thus leaving behind the “self-incurred tutelage” of uncritically following others.

## 7. DIALOGUE AND TRADITION

When, in his early work on Plato, Gadamer explores the dialogical aspect of knowledge, the concepts of tradition and historically effected consciousness play virtually no role. This, however, changes in the period when Gadamer starts working on *Truth and Method*. In this work, the structure of dialogue is thought to be paradigmatic for our relation to history and tradition as such. The question I want to address in this context is how the concept of dialogue, with its enlightenment aspirations, can be transposed from the level of an interpersonal communication to that of our encounter with historical texts. Does this move simply involve an expansion of the realm of dialogical reason? Or does it also indicate a reinterpretation of the notion of dialogue that we know from Gadamer’s earlier work? And, if so, how does this affect his wish, while criticizing the idea of a complete enlightenment, to nonetheless continue the Enlightenment legacy?

<sup>54</sup>Plato’s *Dialectical Ethics*, 26–27; *Platos dialektische Ethik*, 21.

<sup>55</sup>Plato’s *Dialectical Ethics*, 28; *Platos dialektische Ethik*, 23.

<sup>56</sup>Plato’s *Dialectical Ethics*, 4; *Platos dialektische Ethik*, 6–7.

<sup>57</sup>In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer claims that to question something means “to lay open, to place in the open” (*TM*, 367; *WM*, 373). A good question is one that makes our beliefs and presuppositions linger in the undetermined. Opening the possibility of both an affirmative and a negative answer—what Gadamer calls “the [dialectical] antithesis of yes and no” (*TM*, 365; *WM*, 371)—a question must be given “priority [*Vorrang*] over the answer” (*ibid.*). Responding to a genuine question means to consider objections, to see the subject matter in a different light. As such, dialogical knowledge is “dialectical from the ground up” (*ibid.*).

According to Gadamer, historically effective consciousness is “more being than consciousness” (*mehr Sein als Bewußtsein*).<sup>58</sup> At stake is the tradition, the practices and ideas that are handed over to us by history, and in light of which we understand ourselves as members of a particular life-world. But if we, when engaging with the texts or works of the past, also encounter a concrete expression or manifestation of the “being” by which we are determined, then the balance of the dialogical dialectics seems all of a sudden to have been shifted.

While rehearsing the basic impulse of (Socratic) dialogue, Gadamer focuses on the co-dependency of knowing and acknowledgment. Knowledge, on Gadamer’s account, presupposes acknowledgment: an acknowledgment of the finality of reason through the acknowledgment of the potential rationality of the other. Dialogue is constituted by its being “a speech that lets the other person speak too” (*ein Sprechen, das den Anderen mitsprechen läßt*).<sup>59</sup> What keeps the rationality of the conversation going is the willingness of both (all) parties to allow their own opinions and presumptions to stand trial against the other person’s perception of the subject matter that is being discussed.<sup>60</sup> What matters is the capacity to “lay one’s assertion open to the other person’s response” (*wenn man das Behauptete der Entgegnung des Anderen freigibt*).<sup>61</sup> The truth of the dialogue consists in the achievement of a standpoint, however provisional it may be, that is more universal than the claims that were previously defended. It is a fusion of two horizons, a sublation of conflicting or diverging views into a common third. This truth is not cashed in when the dialogue reaches its end; rather, it is indistinguishable from the movement of the dialogue itself. The freedom of this movement is expressed in the possibility of responding to every question or claim with a ‘no’ or a ‘yes’, with disagreement as well as agreement, as Gadamer put it in 1931.

It is this freedom to respond either affirmatively or negatively—the dialectical antithesis of yes and no—that is at risk when the notion of dialogue is expanded from an interpersonal level to our relationship with tradition. For if we are, as Gadamer claims, always already pre-determined by tradition, then we are at the same time deprived of the adequate resources to question the truths and assumptions that are historically handed down to us. The process of searching out a dialogical interlocutor whose arguments may possibly go against our own points of view, is replaced by a process of recognition (*Wiedererkennen*)—the recognition of ourselves in the other.<sup>62</sup>

When this concept of recognition is applied to our “dialogical” relation to tradition, the critical impulse of Gadamer’s notion of dialogue seems substantially

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<sup>58</sup>“Scope and Function of Reflection” (1967), *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 38; “Rhetorik, Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik,” *Wahrheit und Methode, Gesammelte Werke* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1986), vol. 2, 247.

<sup>59</sup>*Plato’s Dialectical Ethics*, 29; *Platos dialektische Ethik*, 23.

<sup>60</sup>This is contrasted with a kind of speech in which the speaker merely expresses himself, pushing the other away, and hence preventing “a purely substantive shared understanding” (*Plato’s Dialectical Ethics*, 38; *Platos dialektische Ethik*, 28). Genuine dialogue is a “reciprocal process of coming to an understanding about the facts of the matter [*gegenseitigen sachlichen Verständigung*]” (*Plato’s Dialectical Ethics*, 43; *Platos dialektische Ethik*, 6–7).

<sup>61</sup>*Plato’s Dialectical Ethics*, 39; *Platos dialektische Ethik*, 30.

<sup>62</sup>In recognition, the phenomenon presents itself as liberated from all contingency: “what we know emerges, as if illuminated, from all the contingent and variable circumstances that condition it; it is grasped in its essence [*in seinem Wesen erfaßt*]” (*TM*, 114; *WM*, 119).

weakened. The dialogical encounter with tradition is not an open questioning that results in a critically reflected ‘yes’ or ‘no’, but a recognition of our own historical essence, the determination of our own being. Although this might, allegedly, create a deeper understanding of who we are, it does not allow us to question whether it is right that we are who we are, or whether it is right that our lives are oriented by and achieve significance from these or those particular norms or values. Recognizing ourselves in the tradition, we do not question the validity of its claims. To recognize oneself in the tradition is to retrieve the historical roots of one’s thinking; it implies an effort to realize the historicity of human existence in a more profound way than was previously the case. Just as Heidegger, from the early 1920s, had emphasized the difference between *Historizität* and *Geschichtlichkeit*,<sup>63</sup> so Gadamer’s idea of a dialogical relation to history does not call for an increased concern with the validity of the truths that are handed over by history, but for an increased attention to the authenticity of our own historical being.

#### 8. UNDERSTANDING, ART, AND SELF-FORGETFULNESS

At this point, Gadamer’s concept of tradition moves close to his understanding of the truth of art. If one keeps in mind that Gadamer’s aim is not only to regain the truth of art, but also to deploy this truth as a basis for the development of a more comprehensive notion of knowledge and rationality, this hardly comes as a surprise.

On Gadamer’s account, our experience of art is that of an “ecstatic self-forgetfulness” (*ekstatische Selbstvergessenheit*) (*TM*, 128; *WM*, 133). In order to relate fully to the work one must be willing, like a player in a play,<sup>64</sup> to be completely “carried away” (*hingerissen*) (*TM*, 125; *WM*, 130). One must be ready to forget oneself and be totally absorbed by the truth of the work. There is, in Gadamer’s

<sup>63</sup>See for example Martin Heidegger, “Wilhelm Dilthey’s Research and the Struggle for a Historical Worldview” (1925), in *Supplements*, ed. John van Buren (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002), 147–76. See also John Sallis, “Another Time,” in *Appropriating Heidegger*, ed. James E. Faulconer and Mark A. Wrathall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 184.

<sup>64</sup>As an activity in which we participate by making its goals our own, the play transcends any reflective self-determination on behalf of the individual players. In playing, we submit to a totality of meaning that overpowers the scope and resources of reflective subjectivity. The play fulfills its purpose if, and only if, the player lets go of her claim to autonomous self-determination. Like the religious ceremony, play proper presupposes that “the player loses himself in play” (*der Spielende in Spielen aufgeht*) (*TM*, 105; *WM*, 110). The play takes place without the full control of the players; the “to and fro movement” of the game “follows of itself” (*TM*, 104; *WM*, 110). It thus absorbs the player into its movement; it “draws him into its domination and fills him with its spirit” (*TM*, 109; *WM*, 115). In the act of playing, the spontaneity and freedom of the play—that is, the classical features of reflective subjectivity—are not understood in terms of the playing individual. Neither the individual players nor the sum of them are, strictly speaking, playing an active part. Rather, “the actual subject of the play is . . . *the play itself* [das Spiel selbst]” (*TM*, 104; *WM*, 110; emphasis added). It is the play, and not the players, that must be accorded originality. In Gadamer’s view, it is this aspect of play that makes it a particularly promising starting-point for an account of our relation to art. The work of art, Gadamer argues, is “not an object that stands over against a subject” (*das Kunstwerk [ist] kein Gegenstand . . . der dem für sich seienden Subjekt gegenübersteht*) (*TM*, 102; *WM*, 108, emphasis added). Understood along the structural horizon of the play, the work of art is “original” in the sense that it is granted a fundamental (ontological) priority over the individual recipient. “The ‘subject’ of the experience of art, that which remains and endures, is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it, but the work itself” (*Das ‘Subjekt’ der Erfahrung der Kunst, das was bleibt und beharrt, ist nicht die Subjektivität dessen, der sie erfährt, sondern das Kunstwerk selbst*) (*ibid.*). The truth of the work of art is more original than the artist as well as the recipient.

view, no absolute distinction between religious and aesthetic experience. Rather, the work of art “always has something sacred about it” (*TM*, 150; *WM*, 155). The experience of art resembles religious experience in that it offers the pleasure of being “freed from the burden of taking initiative” (*TM*, 105; *WM*, 110). It is a movement in which the subject participates only by losing itself, the experience of a truth that is not critically reflected on or assessed by the subject, but one to which the subject is subjected.

Our relation to tradition resembles this movement of subjection. In the same manner as we are, on Gadamer’s view, “drawn into [the artwork’s] domination” (*TM*, 109; *WM*, 115), the recognition of ourselves in tradition calls for “participation” and not evaluation. This, however, is not a relation that is characterized by a mutual, dialogical acknowledgment. Rather, we here encounter the idea of a standard to which we are responsive but whose legitimacy cannot be a function of our rational acceptance. If the dialogical encounter, as expounded in Gadamer’s early work on Plato, leads both parties to question their pre-conceptions of the subject matter at stake, then such mutuality can hardly be found when encountering the tradition by which the interpreter is determined. This aspect of Gadamer’s hermeneutics is made even clearer when taking into account his rehabilitation of the classical.

In modernity, Gadamer argues, the term ‘classical’ is “reduced to a mere stylistic concept” (*TM*, 285; *WM*, 290). Partly due to Hegel, who saw in classical art the work of a bygone level of spirit, the idea of the classical has lost its historical and normative force. It is reduced to a concept of a period. As such it is defined by that which comes before it as well as that which comes after. Yet, in this case, Gadamer claims, “the historical consciousness includes more than it admits of itself [*noch immer anderes einschließt, als es von sich aus eingesteht*]” (*TM*, 287; *WM*, 292). For the very notion of a humanistic education embodies the idea of the classical as a normative, and not only a period-specific and stylistic, concept. Here, the classical is, as he puts it, “more than a concept of a period or of a historical style, and yet it nevertheless does not try to be a suprahistorical value [*übergeschichtlicher Wertgedanke*]” (*ibid.*). As part of a liberal education, the classical refers to a distinctive mode of being historical (*ibid.*); the idea that something is preserved because it perpetually “allows something true to come into being” (*ibid.*). Hence, the aspect of the classical that interests Gadamer is primarily the idea of an authority that is preserved and handed down prior to all historical reflection (*TM*, 286).<sup>65</sup> Recognizing the classical, we apprehend it as a text whose authority does not depend on our own (individual) acceptance. Instead, the classical opens a historical reality to which consciousness belongs (*zugehört*) and is subordinate (*untersteht*) (*TM*, 288; *WM*, 292–93).

The idea of such subordination—no longer characteristic only of our encounter with the sublime artwork, but also with, say, classical works of philosophy—shatters the concept of a dialogical mutuality. Whereas the interpersonal dialogue was understood by Gadamer in terms of the parties’ mutual right, or rather obligation,

<sup>65</sup>*Klassisch ist, was der historischen Kritik gegenüber standhält, weil seine geschichtliche Herrschaft, die verpflichtende Macht seiner sich überliefernden und bewahrenden Geltung, aller historischen Reflexion schon vorausliegt und sich in ihr durchhält* (*WM*, 292).

to question a given conception of a subject matter, such an emphasis on mutuality can hardly be found in Gadamer's understanding of art or in his account of the classical. It is, so to speak, we who are interrogated by the eminent text.<sup>66</sup> The being of the artwork as well as the classical text in general is distinguished by the ability to erect a standard whose validity does not call for critical validation. Responding adequately to this standard, we simply "listen." The classical—and here, as in his conception of art, Gadamer alludes to religious experience—puts forth its claims with a self-evident obligatoriness (*Verbindlichkeit*).<sup>67</sup>

This is the point at which Gadamer fails to live up to his own Enlightenment aspirations, his effort to carve out a position that transcends the alternative of Enlightenment objectivism and romantic subjectivism without letting go of the Enlightenment commitment to a dialogical and reflective reason.

#### 9. CONCLUDING REMARKS

By moving the kind of experience that he has already uncovered in our encounter with the great work of art into the heart of our understanding of history and tradition, Gadamer adopts a problematic position. Whereas the initial development of a dialogical reason—in the early work on Plato's dialectics—is driven by Enlightenment aspirations, it is hard to see how his conception of the classical (or great) work can be granted such a status. This creates a deeper split in his conception of hermeneutic reason, between a "monological," almost authoritarian conception of tradition (embodied in the classical text or the great work of art) and the subscription to a set of Enlightenment ideals which he himself develops with regard to the fallible and non-conclusive structure of interpersonal dialogue.

Confronting the Gadamerian conception of reason, tradition, and critical reflection, the most fundamental problem is therefore not, as Apel, Habermas, and Tugendhat argue, that Gadamer's hermeneutics simply rejects the insights of the Enlightenment. Rather, the problem lies with the unresolved tension between Gadamer's own Enlightenment aspirations, on the one hand, and the desire to overcome aesthetic consciousness by appealing to the sovereign and authoritative world-disclosure of the artwork, on the other.

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<sup>66</sup>"Aesthetics and Hermeneutics" (1964), *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 104; "Ästhetik und Hermeneutik," *Gesammelte Werke*, (Tübingen: J. B. C. Mohr, 1999), vol. 8, 8.

<sup>67</sup>In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer speaks of the self-evident "obligatoriness" (*Verbindlichkeit*) of classical works (*TM*, 118; *WM*, 123). See also "The Relevance of the Beautiful," in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 19; "Die Aktualität der Schönen," *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 8, 110.