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*The Notion of Tradition in Gadamer's Hermeneutic Ontology*

*One of the aims of Gadamer's hermeneutic ontology is the definition of the specific character of the human sciences. Gadamer maintains that their method is based upon the acknowledgement of the authority of tradition. Hence the main problem that faces his theory is the question of what makes the investigation in the humanities scientific and innovative. In my paper I try to reconstruct Gadamer's solution of this problem. I consider his notion of tradition and its role in the definition of understanding as a cognition of truth. For Gadamer tradition is a precondition both of all possibility of understanding and of the historicity of the hermeneutic happening. This conception permits to define how the human sciences grasp the reality and what is studied by them.*

In his *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960) Gadamer intends, first, to define understanding and, second, to explain the difference between the human and other sciences and thus to resolve difficulties confronting hermeneutics in the 19th century. The notion of tradition is a means of the solution of both these problems.

1. Gadamer's definition of understanding is closely connected with his notion of truth. Understanding is a cognition of truth and should be correct. A standard of the correctness of understanding is tradition. Applying such a standard consists in reflection on the hermeneutic happening. If understanding is a universal feature of all cognition and tradition is characteristic of every particular form of human activity there should be a system of standards of correctness. Insofar as such a system results from acknowledging the priority of truth in knowledge, tradition, particularly the tradition in the human sciences must be itself defined by the norms of scientific thinking. That every tradition according to Gadamer involves definite concepts and defines their relations to each other seems to support this conclusion.

2. Gadamer regards understanding as an experience of truth. If all understanding is capable of being expressed in words<sup>1</sup> and such an expression refers

<sup>1</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1, J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen 1986, p. 405.

to experience, the knowledge gained through understanding could be considered as verifiable. The possibility of this treatment endows the humanities with the status of experimental sciences. Gadamer's notion of experience has to exclude this Millian conception of the humanities<sup>2</sup>. That's why Gadamer distinguishes true propositions obtained through understanding from propositions known with certainty and identifies as the main principle of the method of the human sciences the principle of historically effected consciousness<sup>3</sup>. This principle defines conditions of understanding. They involve the requirement of the acknowledgment of the authority of tradition as characteristic of the research method of the humanities. As one of the presuppositions of research tradition is not subject to doubt. But if tradition cannot be infirmed by experience, what makes the investigation in the humanities scientific and innovative?

I will try to reconstruct Gadamer's answer to this question. I will first sum up the main theses of Gadamer's hermeneutic ontology and try to determine what he means by tradition. Then I will attempt to analyse his concept of truth and to define the import of his theory with regard to the problem of the distinctive character of the human sciences.

## 1. Gadamer's hermeneutic ontology

Gadamer's hermeneutic ontology is based upon two assumptions. First, everything that can be understood is a text. Second, understanding is a happening.

1. Every text can be subdivided into constituent parts. They interrelate with each other in such a way that the text functions as a whole or a unity. Whether the parts of the text are theoretical propositions, arguments, theme and plot or something else, depends first of all upon the standards established by a particular tradition to which the text belongs. Without analysis the text cannot be recognized as a text. For example a work of art like a painting cannot be experienced as a picture if it is not "readable" or subdividable already in seeing<sup>4</sup>. The unity of the text is the unity of sense and the hermeneutic happening participates in its shaping and completing<sup>5</sup>.

2 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 9-10.

3 Historically effected consciousness is a kind of historical consciousness. The term "historically effected consciousness" stands first for a set of functions which define understanding as an ordered happening and include questioning and drafting the historical horizon of the text. Second, this term designates principles or norms that govern the realization of such functions and make understanding possible. For example questioning that leads to understanding presupposes the openness of what is in question. The requirement of such an openness can be treated as a principle of understanding.

4 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 97.

5 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 170.

2. Hermeneutic ontology is a study of the happening of understanding<sup>6</sup>. It does not investigate the activity of a cognizing subject<sup>7</sup>. Instead of dealing with the correlation between substances (the subject and the object of understanding) hermeneutics examines the correlation between two languages or two modes of the use of the language: the language of the text and the language of its particular interpretation<sup>8</sup>. Each correlate is defined by its role in the hermeneutic happening.

### 1.1. Gadamer's definition of a game

Gadamer compares the happening of understanding with a game. He defines a game as an ordered motion. Such a motion presupposes somebody (a player) or something (an object like a ball) that responds to particular moves which constitute the motion. The player is not the subject of a game: she does not use the game to attain some end. The game does not have any end other than the game motion itself and hence is not subject to actions of the player<sup>9</sup>. Rather it is the game that determines her actions. The player and other players or the object she or they play with constitute the matter in which the game motion realizes itself. Being a vehicle of the representation of the game players form a dimension of its world. That players play a game characterizes it in its being here and now (in its "*Dasein*"). This being character of the game is defined by its rules. They cause the finitude and recurrence of the game motion and determine its space and boundaries. The game is playing something – what is played is always a definite game. The game can produce a change.

### 1.2. The "game" of understanding

The happening of understanding is similar to a game. It is ordered insofar as it has the structure of the hermeneutic circle. The place of understanding (the hermeneutic place) is defined by a tradition and the historical situation that can be designated as the situation of the interpreter on the one hand and by the historically determined opinion of the text on the other hand<sup>10</sup>. The tradition shapes the preconceptions and fore-judgments of the interpreter. Her historical situation determines the particularity of the happening of understanding. Both tradition and situation constitute the content of the temporal distance that separates the interpreter from the opinion of the text. The term "interpreter" is used as a synonym of "historically effected consciousness". The main task of this kind of historical consciousness is discrimination between conceptions that belong to the interpreter and are familiar to her and the other that is unfamiliar. For the interpreter the

6 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 105-116, 141-142, 169, 300, 314.

7 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 295.

8 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 272.

9 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 108.

10 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 300.

tradition is her own as far as her preconceptions and fore-judgments belong to the tradition. At the same time the tradition is unfamiliar to her insofar as, first, she is not aware of her preconceptions as of something preconceived and, second, the text that should be understood also belongs to the tradition but nevertheless calls for understanding. The text's belongingness to the tradition means first of all that the text is devoted to the subject matter which defines the tradition and hence justifies the assumption that preconceptions of the interpreter could be applied to the text. Understanding uncovers in particular the otherness of the elements of the tradition that are possessed by the interpreter but are not recognized by her as such, and the tradition becomes definable. Hence all successful understanding implies a transformation; it generates change in judgments and prejudices of the interpreter or in her awareness of them.

### 1.3. The happening of understanding and tradition

Since the notion of a game provides a model for describing ontological properties of understanding there should be a correspondence between tradition and some element of the game. Tradition whose content in the humanities can be identified with an aggregate of traditionary texts and their interpretations must perform the part of a rule or a set of rules that govern understanding. First, each tradition concerns a particular subject matter ("*Sache*") and has its own history so that it defines the preconceptions and fore-judgments of the interpreter which delimit the place where understanding happens. Second, the tradition usually functions as an authority and is not subject to doubt. Third, the tradition is applied as a standard of the correctness of understanding. Also the development of the tradition may be explained as changing a rule. The basis of such a change is the cognitive power of understanding.

## 2. Tradition and truth

### 2.1. Gadamer's notion of truth

According to Gadamer understanding is a cognition of truth. Gadamer predicates correctness of understanding and truth of a text. Insofar as he attributes truth to the game<sup>11</sup> it seems to be possible to ascribe truth also to understanding. I will dwell on this possibility.

There are at least two difficulties that must be mastered by a theory of understanding a text if such a theory makes use of the notion of truth. The first problem is the definition of truthbearers. In general there is no fixed correlation between syntactical units of the text and the units of sense. That the units of sense are

11 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 494.

determinable is taken for granted in the formulation of the traditional criterion of correct understanding. Understanding is correct if all the details build a meaningful whole<sup>12</sup>. If this criterion is explicated from a logical point of view, understanding is correct if there is no contradiction between a detail fixed by the interpreter and the whole which is drafted by her in a fore-projection (“*Vorentwurf*”) of the sense of the text. Gadamer seems to believe that meaningful parts of the text are determined according to standards that are applicable to a text which, being for instance a scientific text or a poem, fulfils a certain “pragmatic” task. Gadamer maintains that understanding the statement made by the text consists in discovering the question that is answered by it. This question is itself defined by means of putting further questions that refer to the text and in particular to the concepts which occur in it. Questions may be true or false. A question is true if it allows different answers and consequently is open<sup>13</sup>. The openness of the question is limited by the hermeneutic place where understanding happens. Both the questions that refer to the text and the text itself in its wholeness can be regarded as Gadamer’s truthbearers.

The second problem concerns the relation between understanding and truth and hence the objectivity of understanding. If a text and its understanding are designated as true we can expect that there should be a reality that makes them true. Gadamer postulates the following relations between truth and understanding. All correct understanding is grasping the truth of the text<sup>14</sup>. The truth of the text can be grasped if the text transmits truth. The text that transmits truth is true and its truth is a constitutive moment of its being<sup>15</sup>, namely its being a text. I think it can be also asserted that all correct understanding is a true understanding, but not vice versa. So, what are the criteria of truth and correctness and what can confirm the hermeneutic truth?

## 2.2. Gadamer’s criteria of truth and correctness

If understanding is correct in the case of the harmony of all the details with the whole criteria of the unity and the wholeness of the sense of the text should be identified. Gadamer does not state such criteria and so leaves the definition of the correctness of understanding incomplete. But his *Wahrheit und Methode* contains hints of what can serve as further criteria of the correctness of understanding. First, understanding and therefore correct understanding is possible due to the fulfilment of the formal conditions of understanding. These conditions include the fore-projection of the sense of the text and the preconception of completeness (“*Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit*”) that amounts to the assumption that what the text says is the complete truth<sup>16</sup>. The fore-projection of the sense of the text becomes

12 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 296.

13 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 369.

14 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 493-494.

15 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 3.

16 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 299.

possible due to what the text and the interpreter share, that is, due to their belongingness to a tradition. The assumption that the text represents a complete unity of sense results from the interpreter's recognizing the subject matter of the text as something that she herself knows or is interested in as well as from the supposition that the text should have such-and-such a sense, i.e., from a particular fore-projection of such a sense. Only in the case that the first draft of the sense of the text cannot be confirmed the statement of the text is viewed as an opinion of the other. The fulfilment of these formal conditions and the harmony of the details with the whole are necessary conditions of correct understanding. In particular understanding fails (the interpretation is infirmed) in the case of the failure to achieve the harmony of the details with the whole. In addition, correct understanding must differ from other interpretations<sup>17</sup>. Gadamer formulates the idea of this difference as an expression of the mutual dependence of understanding and application. This interdependence is characteristic of understanding as a cognition of the specific and individual. The occurrence of this difference which can be treated as an alteration of some constituent of a tradition as a result of interpretation could be considered as a sufficient criterion of correct understanding<sup>18</sup>. Such an alteration could concern concepts or judgments belonging to the tradition.

That understanding also may be called true follows from Gadamer's treatment of understanding as an experience of truth. Essential features of all experience and in particular hermeneutic experience<sup>19</sup> are openness, negativity or productive power, and insight ("*Einsicht*") that is identified with self-understanding. The openness of understanding means that it proceeds like a conversation and presupposes questioning. That all experience is negative means that its results are due to negative instances like events or facts that falsify generalizations and produce changes in the knowledge possessed by the interpreter. Events and facts of the hermeneutic experience consist in a disagreement between the fore-projection drafted by the interpreter on the one hand and the text on the other hand. The alteration of the fore-projection is a self-understanding insofar as it implies recognizing fore-judgments as preconceived or as prejudices. Understanding can be defined as true if it commits<sup>20</sup> the interpreter to such a recognition and hence yields some change

17 Gadamer uses the term "angemessen" ("proper") in this connection. H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 314. I do not treat *proper* as a further characteristic of understanding which is different from *correct*.

18 This condition seems to be at the same time necessary. But it is questionable whether comprehending the fact that some judgment belongs to a tradition should be treated as being on a par with the alteration of such a judgment. In a case of the alteration of the former kind the interpreter becomes aware of the tradition as a source of some of her fore-judgments.

19 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 352, 363. The structure of experience is the structure of the consciousness of effective history.

20 There is similarity between the possibility to consider understanding from the point of view of its effects and the notion of the binding power of language ("*Verbindlichkeit der Sprache*") formulated by Lipps. Lipps ascribes the function of ordering the human experience to language, in particular to every expression of a thought. The words chosen by the speaker define

in her initial concepts and fore-judgments. In particular their subsequent rejection becomes possible. Since not all pre-conceptions and fore-judgments of the interpreter are defined by the tradition to which the text belongs, understanding may be true but not correct. In such a case the failure of understanding does not imply that the happening of understanding is untrue. Its truth can be denied in the case of the lack of any change.

Paradigmatic of Gadamer's conception of the truth of the text is his analysis of the cognitive function of a work of art. A work of art is a vehicle of truth which in its turn can be comprehended<sup>21</sup>. Speaking about truth we discern between appearance and reality and search for justification of this differentiation. Hence we may ask whether there is something that makes the work of art true and what is the relation between the work of art and the reality depicted by it. Let us take as an instance the portrait of Lord Nelson by Lemuel Francis Abbott. The portrait refers to Lord Nelson, so that one of the relations that hold between the portrait and Nelson is the relation of reference. This fact permits to define the painting as a picture of Nelson but is not sufficient to make it a work of art, that is, something more than a copy of the object. The copy becomes a picture if the object referred to by it obtains the reality of the original which is represented by the picture. This reality is a transformed one and contains an increase in being<sup>22</sup>: this increase permits to conceive the object in its essence. If the painting by Abbott represents Nelson as a thoughtful commander it makes these properties which as such have no visual embodiment picturable. "Word and image are not mere imitative illustrations, but allow what they present to be for the first time fully what it is."<sup>23</sup> That the object gains the reality of the original means that the work of art enables recognizing and cognizing its essence<sup>24</sup>. To be able to recognize it the interpreter must already possess the experience or knowledge of a property that can be predicated as essential of the object and makes it something. That she is not conscious of its essentiality constitutes the presupposition of the cognitive effect of understanding. Such a property must be an essential feature of the reality of human concerns or of being a human. Insofar as the characteristic which is attributed to this reality by the painting is essential to it such an attribution constitutes transmitting a truth. Gadamer applies this notion of truth to all kinds of texts considered by hermeneutics. Each text is a vehicle of truth which concerns some subject matter. Can this truth be confirmed?

her situation for her and her interlocutor. H. Lipps, *Die Verbindlichkeit der Sprache. Arbeiten zur Sprachphilosophie und Logik*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1958, pp. 108-109. They have the binding power for the speaker since applying them to her situation she commits herself to actions of a certain scope that can change this situation.

21 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 103.

22 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 145-148.

23 H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, Continuum, London-New York 2004, p. 137.

24 Cf. H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 119.

First, it cannot be confirmed by the reality referred to by the text. This reality cannot be reached by the interpreter who is separated from it by a temporal distance. A further problem is that of the separation of the reality which is represented by the text and could confirm its truth from the text itself<sup>25</sup>. In particular, the statement of the text cannot be completely isolated from its form (its elements and its structure) which Gadamer identifies first of all through concepts used in the text<sup>26</sup>.

It seems that the sole reality that can confirm the truth of the text consists in the occurrence of a preconception of its completeness. Only if the text is capable of putting a question to the interpreter it can be designated as true. Since this capability is defined by the formal conditions of understanding, the truth of the text could be confirmed by its belonging to some tradition. This consequence is undesirable for Gadamer who criticizes Schleiermacher's hermeneutics because of its interest only in texts whose authority is undisputed<sup>27</sup>. If we appeal to Gadamer's "postulates" and take into account that all correct understanding is understanding the truth of the text, we can claim that such a truth can be confirmed by a correct understanding of it. Insofar as the text functions as a language that should be understood, that is, as a realization of a definite use of language, its truth is confirmed by its effects. Correct understanding is such an effect since it implies change.

### 3. Tradition and the human sciences

In spite of the fact that Gadamer's definition of the criteria of correct understanding and truth can hardly be called unproblematic his theory has some important consequences for the definition of the specific character of the human sciences.

According to Gadamer the method of the humanities is a hermeneutic method. Its main instrument is the method of conversation or dialogue that permits to describe the structure of the hermeneutic circle.

Gadamer considers a conversation as an interplay of questions and answers. Every question expresses the knowledge possessed by the questioner. The question is open insofar as it allows alternative answers. This openness is in its turn an expression of the unknown. Gadamer identifies the unknown with the reality of one of two alternatives. Such an alternative is indeterminate only with respect to its truth or falsehood. But if further kinds of indeterminacy and of alternatives are supposed and the unknown is regarded as what is questioned the openness of the

25 I think that Gadamer's idea of the capability of a game to present itself as what is intended in it expresses his acknowledgement of the inseparability in question.

26 Cf. H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 272.

27 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 200.

hermeneutic experience could mean the multiplicity of the hypothetical definitions of the unknown which explains the possibility of different interpretations of the same text as well as the innovative character of the hermeneutic truth. Different hypotheses concerning the unknown are possible because of the interconnectedness of the concepts used to interpret a text. Due to this fact the same subject matter can be considered from different points of view<sup>28</sup>. If such differences are fixed in fore-judgments of the interpreter then it is the peculiarities of the hermeneutic place that do not permit of a conscious repeatability which is expected to be indispensable in the application of the scientific method. The characterization of this place which in contrast to the unified and idealized systems of consideration in the natural sciences is marked by its particularity becomes essential to the definition of the method of the humanities.

According to Gadamer's conception of the hermeneutic circle the fore-projection is a hypothesis that concerns the sense of the text. It is partly determined by tradition and in its turn determines the course of understanding. Understanding moves from the fore-projection to the text that should confirm the fore-projection and if the confirmation cannot be reached from the text to a new projection. Every step from one projection to another one involves an attempt to arrange parts defined by the concepts used in a projection into a whole<sup>29</sup>. If an attempt to construct a whole is not successful the concepts used in the projection must be revised and a new projection of the sense of the text must be drafted. The text functions as the subject of research in the humanities.

In one of his earlier papers (1957) Gadamer indicates that the ideal of the scientific method of verifiability is valid in the humanities too<sup>30</sup>. But this validity has its limits. Insofar as the research efforts in the human sciences do not aim at formulating general laws but are directed to the specific and particular, the truth obtained through their application should be innovative. The possibility of innovation is assured if understanding completes the sense of the text. Insofar as the historical situation that constitutes one of the dimensions of the hermeneutic place and in that way partakes in completing the sense is unique and limited it excludes some possibilities of interpretation<sup>31</sup>. That's why the truth which can be cognized through understanding is not unchangeable and involves the comprehension of some features of the situation itself as a result of self-understanding. The self-

28 For instance Aristotle's *Topics* may be considered as an inventory of rules of argumentation or as a methodological study of Plato's dialogues. According to a former treatment a commonplace is a rule. According to the latter point of view represented by Mikeladze it is a scheme of a constituent part of a dialogue which involves all elements that define a dialogue and are not limited to the rules of argumentation.

29 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 271-272.

30 H.-G. Gadamer, "Was ist Wahrheit?", Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2, J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen, 1986, pp. 44-56, 50.

31 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 307.

understanding in the humanities means also a reflection on a tradition which is recognized as a source of preconceptions and thus becomes subject to critical investigation. Therefore, if we assume that texts constitute the subject of research in the humanities we should maintain that the tradition in the form of the history of treating a particular subject matter as well as in the form of a system of concepts applied by a particular human science belongs to its subject.

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