
GADAMER, HANS-GEORG (1900–2002)

Hans-Georg Gadamer, strongly influenced by his revered teacher, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), argued that understanding cannot be instrumentalized, as René Descartes (1596–1650) famously claimed. Rather, it depends on the work of tradition (and its prejudices), which is never fully conscious, exceeds efforts to fix its meaning, and eludes method. Further, we belong to it more than it belongs to us, as shown by the fact that thought can only “incarnate” itself in preexisting language. Gadamer’s “philosophical hermeneutics,” at variance with Heidegger’s project in important respects, finds its best expression in *Wahrheit und Methode (Truth and Method)*, published in 1960. The book’s main argument is that there is more to truth than process or method can ever guarantee.

Understanding, apprehended as the ability to inhabit a world, has essentially to do with experience, something that, mysteriously, happens to the interpreter in the course of the interpretive encounter. The issue is not what one should be willing to do to understand, but what happens to one when engaged in understanding, irrespective of one’s willing and doing. Understanding relates more to the idea of “being” than to that of methodical knowledge.

Whenever there is understanding, there is also not-understanding. Thus, “what is wanted to be said” about a text is always at variance with “what is said” in

the text. When one understands at all, one understands differently: concurrence is divergence. This is because the interpreter is inevitably enmeshed in a horizon, always shaped by the work of history, which cannot fully merge with the horizon, to which the object of interpretation inevitably belongs, which is also historical, no matter how much this “fusion” is wanted. Undercutting the subject-object dichotomy, Gadamer argued that what is interpreted could not be reduced to the merely propositional: it is never self-sufficient and must ultimately be regarded as an answer to a question that works through it. For Gadamer, historicity is not an obstacle to true knowledge, but comes as a precondition to the grasping of truth.

Although meaning is not strictly dependent on authorial intention since the historical situation of the interpreter also matters, understanding occurs under the authority of its object. The best interpretation is that which succeeds in allowing its object to speak for itself. Like translation, interpretation aims to awaken the meaning concealed in its object and reach agreement with it (bearing in mind that only what can be put into language can be understood). Refuting relativism for an ontological approach to language (although each language carries an original worldview, the world’s “intelligibility” is ontologically constituted and does not depend on particular standpoints), Gadamer argued that understanding must not appropriate its object to undermine otherness. Reaching beyond commonality of meaning, interpretation is about recognizing that the other may be right.

Gadamer’s insights, criticized for their conservatism and tendency to fixate and totalize meaning, have had a profound impact on literary and social theory, where they have underwritten the “interpretive turn.”

—Pierre Legrand