

The Original Truth of Understanding and Taking Action: Gadamer on Plurality and Solidarity

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ABSTRACT. Starting from his conception of an original “extra-methodical” truth, of which one can gain experience through art, history, and philosophy, Gadamer enhances the fore-predicative dimension of knowledge. In his opinion, the awareness of our “pre-judices” – the voice of tradition –, reached through interpretation, opens up to the otherness of the other and increases friendship as well as solidarity. By defining hermeneutics as practical philosophy thanks to a re-working of Aristotle’s concept of *phrónesis*, Gadamer starts up a “rehabilitation of practical philosophy”. This “recovery” contributed to overcoming the world crisis in the mid-twentieth century and could still orient a “life together” within today’s ethical and political frameworks.

Keywords: hermeneutics, science, practical philosophy, friendship, solidarity

We must learn to live together as brothers or we will die together as fools
Martin Luther King

1. A “rehabilitation of practical philosophy” to overcome the traditional dualistic worldview

What is knowledge? Within the philosophical tradition, a definition of “knowledge” has gradually become predominant: knowledge consists in the correspondence between our judgements and reality. Inextricably linked to this

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conception is the definition of truth as the equation of thing and intellect ("*Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*")¹. It was thought that only by applying a strict method, articulated in precise rules, can one formulate judgements correctly and, consequently, reach the truth. The application of a universal method – it was believed – assures exact knowledge of the natural world as well as of the historical phenomena and the cultural production of human beings. A dualistic vision has taken shape especially in the new age: on the one hand theoretical knowledge and truth as correspondence; on the other hand action, praxis, which results from the application of knowledge.

From the industrial revolution onwards, the praxis *par excellence* was identified with technology, which was defined as the most effective application of scientific knowledge. This worldview was questioned from the ground up after the rise of totalitarianism and the explosion of the atomic bomb. In the mid-nineteenth century, the limits of technological reason were outlined and the various kinds of knowledge were scrutinized. It emerged that the original way of understanding inheres in praxis, on which even theoretical knowledge is dependent.

Problems connected to these experiences were discussed by the exponents of the cultural movement known as "rehabilitation of practical philosophy", which spread mostly in post-war Germany.² Thinkers who contributed to this movement went back to Aristotle and Kant with the aim of making their reflection on praxis fruitful for today's world. In the early twentieth century, many of these philosophers attended Heidegger's lectures on Aristotle. In their interpretation the ethical- political aspect of Aristotle's philosophy, which was overlooked by Heidegger in an effort to put the spotlight on the ontological aspect of the Aristotelian thinking, came to the fore.

The "rehabilitation of practical philosophy" began with Gadamer's book *Truth and Method* (1960), the title of which sums up Gadamer's aim: developing a hermeneutical philosophy that would become a kind of practical philosophy suitable for

¹ For this concept – the most famous wording of which is to be found in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 4: *Knowledge in God: 1a. 14-18*, ed. by T. Gornall, Cambridge University Press, 2006, Ques. XVI, Art. 1, 3, pp. 82-84 – see G. Schulz, *Veritas est adaequatio intellectus et rei: Untersuchungen zur Wahrheitslehre des Thomas von Aquin und zur Kritik Kants an einem überlieferten Wahre*, Brill, 1993. Despite considerable differences, Jean Grondin identifies some similarities between this traditional definition and Gadamer's concept of truth (see J. Grondin, "La fusion des horizons: La version gadamérienne de l'*adaequatio rei et intellectus*?", in *Archives de Philosophie*, vol. 68, 2005, Facultés Loyola Paris, pp. 401-418).

² For its topics and settings see M. Riedel (Hrsg.), *Rehabilitierung der praktischen Philosophie*, Rombach, Bd. 1: *Geschichte, Probleme, Aufgaben*, 1972; Bd. 2: *Rezeption, Argumentation, Diskussion*, 1974. For an overview see S. Toulmin, "The Recovery of Practical Philosophy", in *The American Scholar*, vol. 57, no. 3, 1988, Phi Beta Kappa Society, pp. 337-352.

our technological age. In order to fully grasp the train of thought followed by Gadamer, it is advisable to concisely remember the bottom line of *Truth and Method*. After that, the concept of “solidarity” is to be analysed because it exemplifies the link between knowledge, truth and action that is increasingly required in contemporary world. Finally, it should be stressed that revisiting our past is crucial to broaden that “horizon of expectation”, in which a “plural” humanity can grow.

2. Scientific and “extra-methodical” truth

Gadamer entitles his work *Truth and Method* because he wishes to draw attention on the oxymoron contained in this expression: in his book, Gadamer aims to show the limit of the scientific truth, reached by means of the application of a method. Gadamer does not aim to question the validity of the scientific method, but rather to promote reflection that challenges its presumed absoluteness. Scientific truth – the truth achieved through a method – is not the only one possible.³ It concerns only objects that can be defined by means of a rigorous demonstration by the subject in order to be dominated in a cognitive and practical way. The method has thus its own legitimacy in the field of natural sciences, but it does not provide an original truth, which can only be attained through experience. There are extra-methodical experiences of truth that hermeneutics aims to bring to light.

In the *Introduction* to *Truth and Method* Gadamer mentions the experiences of art, of history, and of philosophy.⁴ He intends to investigate their legitimacy in order to prove the originality of a kind of truth that he calls “hermeneutical” and puts over against the truth obtainable by a method. Yet what does “hermeneutical truth” mean? It deals with a kind of truth that pertains not to “knowledge”, but to “understanding”.⁵ Hermeneutics interrogates neither the conditions for the possibility of knowledge nor what kind of a method should be followed. Instead, it asks what happens when one understands, what is the event of truth. Understanding is

³ For Jean Grondin, it is a truth “before” method and not “against” a methodological procedure (see J. Grondin, *Hermeneutische Wahrheit? Zum Wahrheitsbegriff Hans-Georg Gadamer*, Beltz Athenäum Verlag, 1994², pp. 1, 4). Of another opinion is Ernst Tugendhat (of whom see *Philosophische Aufsätze*, Suhrkamp, 1992, p. 428). Gadamer clarifies the meaning of the title *Truth and Method* in H.-G. Gadamer/C. Dutt, *Hans-Georg Gadamer in Gespräch*, hrsg. von C. Dutt, Universitätsverlag Winter, 1995², pp. 15-17.

⁴ See H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, tr. by J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall, Continuum, 2004 (= TM), pp. XX-XXI, here p. XXVI; S. Marino, “‘Un altro sapere’: la verità extrametodica dell’ermeneutica”, in H.-G. Gadamer, *Che cos’è la verità. I compiti di un’ermeneutica filosofica*, S. Marino (ed.), Rubbettino, 2012, pp. 5-43, here pp. 7-8, 20-23.

⁵ See D. Di Cesare: *Gadamer. A philosophical portrait*, tr. by N. Kiane, Indiana University Press, 2007, pp. 37-38.

neither a process nor a cognitive procedure, and knowing is rather a modality derived from understanding as an event. Hermeneutics aims to describe the truth that pertains to understanding, that is, a truth that “happens”⁶. Gadamer scrutinizes it by examining art, history, and language. At the end of his analysis, he reaches the conclusion that each understanding proceeds from a “fore-understanding”, which contains the complex of one’s own “prejudices”.

3. “Prejudices”, that is, “fore-understanding”

Gadamer rehabilitates prejudices by criticizing the Enlightenment. If we look at the Latin word “*preiudicium*” and at its juridical use, then “prejudice” has neither a negative nor a positive meaning. It has acquired a negative connotation only since the Enlightenment, which it still has to this day, indicating an “unfounded judgment”. The Enlightenment distinguished between two sources of prejudices: “authority” and “overhastiness”. Gadamer writes: “The division of prejudices into those of ‘authority’ and those of ‘overhastiness’ is obviously based on the fundamental presupposition of the Enlightenment, namely that methodologically disciplined use of reason can safeguard us from all error. This was Descartes’ idea of method”. Gadamer notices that “the division is based on a mutually exclusive antithesis between authority and reason”⁷ because it sees authority inextricably linked with blind obedience, opposed to reason and freedom.

On the contrary, Gadamer connects authority with the acknowledgement “that the other is superior to oneself in judgment and insight and that for this reason his judgment takes precedence”⁸. Consequently, authority should be claimed and granted by a free and rational act. Gadamer writes: “Romanticism conceives of tradition as an antithesis to the freedom of reason and regards it as something historically given, like nature [...]. It seems to me, however, that there is no such unconditional antithesis between tradition and reason.” In fact, traditions do not form and develop automatically, but require “to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated”⁹ by those who are situated in them.

⁶ “*Vollzugswahrheit*” is the definition of the truth as unveiling of Being, which Gadamer gives in his conversation with Carsten Dutt (see H.-G. Gadamer/C. Dutt, *Hans-Georg Gadamer in Gespräch*, p. 63).

⁷ TM, p. 279.

⁸ TM, p. 281. See I.M. Fehér, “Prejudice and Pre-Understanding”, in N. Keane/C. Lawn (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, Chichester, 2016, pp. 280-288.

⁹ TM, p. 282. For this reason, the interpreter does not have any power over the sense and he is always involved in a hermeneutical event (see A. Noveanu, *Arta interpretării-Dialogurile hermeneutice ale lui Hans-Georg Gadamer*, Editura Grinta, 2010, pp. 10-14, 38-41, 170-173).

Tradition passes on to us the concepts that we use to understand and take action: our fore-understanding, our pre-judices originate from tradition. Consequently, "pre-judices" is a term to take literally: it means just the implicit understanding that precedes judgement and makes it possible. "Pre-judices" stem from the tradition which one belongs to. For this reason, Gadamer stated: "The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.*"¹⁰

For Gadamer, rehabilitating prejudices does not mean praising prejudices. We can and should become conscious of our own prejudices. However much consciousness is critically trained, it can never be perfected. One of the reasons for it is that we belong to our tradition, which is why our prejudices continually modify: prejudices are the form that tradition takes in the field of understanding. On the one hand, we hear the voice from the past. On the other hand, we can participate in the dialogue of tradition by articulating these voices again and again. In this way we concretize the past, which exists only "in the multifariousness of such voices"¹¹. It is within this dialogue that the production of meaning, explained by Gadamer with the aid of the concept of "effective history" (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), takes place.

4. "Effective history" and "fusion of horizons"

The expression "effective history" has not been invented by Gadamer. He inherits it from the literary criticism, which made use of it in the nineteenth century. "Effective history", in the literary field, refers to the auxiliary discipline that deals with the reception of a work. Every text, every event, takes on a new meaning and shows a new side, each time according to the expectations raised by the historical context, but also according to the previous interpretations. For Gadamer, "effective history" means not only the "history of effects" or reception of a work, because it has not only a passive sense, but also an active: history itself is acting, writing and inscribing the traces that make the past legible.¹² It is along this path that history

¹⁰ TM, p. 278.

¹¹ TM, p. 285.

¹² Because of this, Paul Ricoeur reads the history as if it were a text and attaches great importance to the concept of "trace". Nevertheless, he does not neglect the "passive" aspect of the historical condition by supplementing the notion of "historically effected consciousness" with the concept of "being-affected by the past" (see P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, tr. by K. Blamey and D. Pellauer, The University of Chicago Press, vol. 3: *Narrated Time*, 1988, pp. 216-240).

reaches us. The workings of history¹³ penetrate us far more deeply than our consciousness can absorb.

This is what “effect” means: that history works above and beyond the consciousness we can have of it. For this reason, there is never a transparent and pure consciousness, but an awareness of history that always remains opaque and contaminated. With the expression “historically effected consciousness” (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*), Gadamer means the awareness that we are produced, forged, and tormented by history.¹⁴ More than acting, it seems to be a suffering, dragged and drawn into that “interplay” which Gadamer has described as the hermeneutic circle.¹⁵ The most important effect produced by the working of history is to indicate the limit of modern consciousness, that is, the impossibility of self-consciousness. Therefore, instead of “being-conscious” (*bewusst-sein*), Gadamer chooses to speak of “being-vigilant” (*wachsam-sein*).¹⁶

With the concept of “vigilance” (or “alertness”) it becomes possible to clarify what Gadamer means by the expression “fusion of horizons” (*Horizontverschmelzung*) that points out the way in which understanding happens. Situatedness means being bound to a point in time and space, which limits our vision. Gadamer states:

“Horizon” characterizes the limit that moves with us when we move. Understanding can be seen as the encounter, inscribed into a particular historical constellation, between two horizons. One horizon fades into another and thus forms a movable horizon, which encompasses the depth of history out of which human life is lived and which can be defined as “heritage and tradition”.¹⁷

¹³ “*Travail de l’histoire*” is the translation of “*Wirkungsgeschichte*” by Jean Grondin (of whom see *L’universalité de l’herméneutique*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1993, p. 172). For it and for the related concept of “historically effected consciousness” see G. Gregorio, *Hans-Georg Gadamer e la declinazione ermeneutica della fenomenologia*, Rubbettino, 2008, pp. 225-227.

¹⁴ See TM, p. 302.

¹⁵ See TM, p. 293 and J. Grondin, “Entrare nel circolo ermeneutico significa anche volerne uscire”, in *Logoi.ph*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2017, Mimesis, pp. 7-15, here pp. 13-15.

¹⁶ Gadamer inherits from Heidegger the concept of “vigilance” (*Wachsamkeit*), which had been developed by means of an interpretation of this expression in *The first Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians*, 5, 6 (see M. Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life* [Collected Works 60], tr. by M. Fritsch and J.A. Gosetti-Ferencei, Indiana University Press, 2010, pp. 73-74, 89).

¹⁷ TM, p. 303. The concept of “fusion” has given rise to criticism because it may not sufficiently take into account the contrasts and difficulties inherent in any authentic confrontation. In this regard, Paul Ricœur notes that “against the *hubris* of total reflection” it is advisable to replace “the fusion of horizons” with “the receding” of them, “incompletion” (P. Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, tr. by K. Blamey and D. Pellauer, The University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 413). Jacques Derrida has perhaps been the most famous critic of Gadamer. For the debate between the two see D.P. Michelfelder/R.E. Palmer (eds.), *Dialogue and deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, SUNY, 1989.

In the fusion, both horizons (one's own and the other's) are changed. Gadamer writes: "Every finite present has its limitations. We define the concept of 'situation' by saying it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision". Gadamer inherits the concept of "hermeneutical situation", that is, the situation in which one lives and the conditions of each understanding, from Heidegger.¹⁸ Gadamer points out that a situation is always limited by its horizons. "Horizon" means a field that on the one hand limits vision, on the other allows one to see something from a certain point of view. Gadamer stated:

Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons, and so forth. Since Nietzsche and Husserl, the word has been used in philosophy to characterize the way in which thought is tied to its finite determinacy, and the way one's range of vision is gradually expanded [...]. In the sphere of historical understanding, too, we speak of horizons, especially when referring to the claim of historical consciousness to see the past in its own terms, not in terms of our contemporary criteria and prejudices but within its own historical horizon. The task of historical understanding also involves acquiring an appropriate historical horizon, so that what we are trying to understand can be seen in its true dimensions.¹⁹

Nevertheless, this does not imply that "we must place ourselves in the other's situation in order to understand it." This requirement belonged to the historical school, to Dilthey and Droysen. Gadamer criticizes the historical school by stating:

We think we understand when we see the past from a historical standpoint – i.e., transpose ourselves into the historical situation and try to reconstruct the historical horizon. In fact, however, we have given up the claim to find in the past any truth that is valid and intelligible for ourselves. Acknowledging the otherness of the other in this way, making him the object of objective knowledge, involves the fundamental suspension of his claim to truth. However, the question is whether this description really fits the hermeneutical phenomenon. Are there really two different horizons here – the horizon in which the person seeking to understand lives and the historical horizon within which he places himself?²⁰

¹⁸ See M. Heidegger, "Phenomenological Interpretations with Respect to Aristotle: Indication of the Hermeneutical Situation", tr. by M. Baur, in *Man and World*, vol. 25, no. 3-4, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992, pp. 355-393, here p. 358. Gadamer refers to Heidegger's "fore-structure of understanding", which corresponds to the "fore-structure of Dasein itself", in TM, pp. 268-269.

¹⁹ TM, pp. 301-302.

²⁰ TM, pp. 302-303.

The answer is negative.

The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us [...]. The surrounding horizon is not set in motion by historical consciousness. But in it this motion becomes aware of itself. [...]. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. *Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.*²¹

In this fusion, the false prejudices, which lead to misunderstanding, can be separated from the true prejudices, which are essential in understanding. The fusion of horizons turns the fore-understanding into the explicit understanding and converts it into interpretation. Moreover, the fusion applies what is understood to the specific situation of who understands. Gadamer depicts understanding, interpretation, and application not as separate but as constitutive moments of a unified process. Application does not simply come after, but is rather the cornerstone of understanding.²² Gadamer's return to the concept of *applicatio*, which was put aside by traditional hermeneutics, marks an important turning point in the history of this discipline, since it reverses the hierarchical relationship between the cognitive value and practical value of understanding: it is the latter that now becomes important. As a consequence of this, Gadamer's hermeneutics shows itself to be a new kind of practical philosophy, upon which philosophical ethics can be founded.

5. Kant's normative ethics *versus* Aristotle's situational ethics

In the essay *Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy* (1972) Gadamer emphasizes that understanding is all along acting, not only because it is inseparable from actions in the world and with others,²³ but also for the reason that it is a kind of act in itself. Consequently, the hermeneutic consciousness overcomes the limit of the subject to encounter the other in order to devote itself to ethical vigilance. Gadamer's path of thought was marked by ethics even prior to hermeneutics. Gadamer was confronted with Greek ethics as early as 1923, when he attended

²¹ TM, pp. 303-305.

²² See TM, pp. 306-310 and D. Liakos, "The Recovery of the Fundamental Hermeneutic Problem: Application and Normativity", in C.R. Nielsen/G. Lynch (eds.), *Gadamer's Truth and Method: A Polyphonic Commentary*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2022, pp. 165-185.

²³ See H.-G. Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, tr. by F. Lawrence, MIT Press, 1981, pp. 88-112.

Heidegger's famous seminar on the sixth book of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.²⁴ It was exactly Heidegger's interpretation of Aristotle that pushes the philosophical debate to focus on ethical issues and gave rise (primarily in Germany) to the "rehabilitation of practical philosophy".

In the essays entitled *On the possibility of a Philosophical Ethics* (1963) and *Aristotle and Imperative Ethics* (1989) Gadamer focuses on the "aporia" that appears when ethics, in order to become philosophical, reaches the level of a reflection on the universal. Philosophical ethics that aims to be unconditional and absolute is, however, ethics that is at a remove from life – as Kierkegaard showed – and separated from any concrete situation that would call for a decision.

The Kantian imperative ethics attests to this aporia. According to Kant's ethics, the rightness of moral action depends on an abstract norm. In fact, the categorical imperative states that one should always respect one's own duty. But this imperative does not specify what duty is in a particular situation. As part of this, Kant presumes that the moral law has already been recognized. In this way, moral action becomes an object, to which a method should be applied in order to reach objective knowledge. Gadamer criticizes that Kant's ethics neglects the particular situation of the person who has to take decisions before acting. This ethics remains empty and does not overcome the dualism theory/practice. On the contrary, Aristotle's ethics attempt to be another kind of knowledge, namely the knowledge that is at stake in life.

Gadamer reworks Aristotle's ethics in many writings, for instance in the 1930 essay *Practical Knowledge* and in the chapter on *The Hermeneutic Relevance of Aristotle* in *Truth and Method*.²⁵

This chapter develops four crucial themes: practical actions are autonomous and unrepeatable; *phrónesis* – which Gadamer translates with the word "reasonableness" – has a high moral value because it guides human behaviour; *êthos* should be taken into

²⁴ It was just reading the sketch of Heidegger's earliest interpretation of Aristotle (included in "Phenomenological Interpretations with Respect to Aristotle") that drove Gadamer to go to the young lecturer in Freiburg (see Gadamer's statement in "Heideggers theologische Jugendschrift", in M. Heidegger, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles [Anzeige der hermeneutischen Situation]*, hrsg. von G. Neumann, Klostermann, 2013, pp. 67–75, here p. 69). For Heidegger's influence on Gadamer regarding the "primacy" of practical knowledge see A. Noveanu, "The Sympathy of Experience with Life! – Understanding practical knowledge from Heidegger to Gadamer and back", in *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai – Philosophia*, vol. 66, no. 2 Supplement, Cluj University Press, 2021, pp. 165-179.

²⁵ See TM, pp. 310-321 and for its relevance in view of the "Rehabilitation of practical philosophy" T. Gutschke, *Aristotelische Diskurse: Aristoteles in der politischen Philosophie des 20. Jahrhunderts*, J.B. Metzler, 2002, pp. 190, 200, 226-227.

consideration because ethical and political relations are the framework of action; the search for good happens by confronting the other and it culminates in the realization of practical good.

The “hermeneutic relevance” of Aristotelian ethics lies for Gadamer in the new paradigm offered by *phrónesis*. In the sixth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines *phrónesis* as a practical wisdom. It is that dianoetic virtue which is concerned with how to act in particular situations in order to achieve the aim of living well overall.²⁶ *Phrónesis* builds upon the *èthos* of a community²⁷ embodied in the *phronímōs* (the moral exemplar) and contributes to modifying this *èthos*. There is a dialogical relation between *èthos* (convictions, values, habits we all hold in common) and *phronímōs*. On the basis of the ethical order of the *pólis*, everyone acts in accordance with their *phrónesis* by virtue of articulating the *èthos* in light of the individual situation. One can, by recognizing what is “doable”, what is both appropriate and right, take aim at the centre, actually finding the mean and achieving good, *práκton agathón*.

Gadamer stresses Aristotle’s reference to responsibility not only to oneself, but also to the other, a responsibility included in *phrónesis*. *Phrónesis* leads to a decision involving consultation with the self that is always consultation with others. *Phrónesis* is inseparable from *synesis*, or sympathetic understanding, which makes it possible for one to grasp the action of the other. *Phrónesis* also involves *gnóme*, *syngnóme*, and *epeikeîa* (the ability to have insight and patience, to discriminate correctly, to enter into the situation of the other and thus to judge correctly).²⁸

In *Truth and Method*, interpreting Aristotle’s *phronesis*, Gadamer focusses especially on *synesis*. It realizes a transposition into the concrete situation of the one who must act in order to judge him correctly.²⁹ Gadamer gives the example of advice in

²⁶ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. by R. Crisp, Cambridge University Press, 2004, VI, 1140 a 24-1140 b 30, 1143 b 18-1144 a 35, pp. 106-108, 115-116. For Gadamer’s rediscovery of this dianoetic virtue see R.M. Marafioti, *Heideggers und Gadamer Wiedorentdeckung der φρόνησις*, Alber, 2022, pp. 71-119.

²⁷ Gadamer focuses on this circular relationship in the essays “Praktisches Wissen” – in *Griechische Philosophie I (Gesammelte Werke 5)*, Mohr Siebeck, 1985, pp. 243-248, here pp. 246-247 – and “Ethos und Ethik” – in *Neuere Philosophie I. Hegel – Husserl – Heidegger (Gesammelte Werke 3)*, Mohr Siebeck, 1987, pp. 350-374, here p. 354. *Phrónesis* and ethical virtues are for Aristotle intrinsically linked (see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 1144 a 7-9, 1144 b 32-33, pp. 116, 118).

²⁸ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 1142 b 34-1143 b 17, pp. 113-115. Aristotle does not underline the importance of *synesis* for the interpersonal relationships, whereas Gadamer (and Ricoeur) attributes an important social role to it (see D.H. Fisher, “Is *Phronēsis* Deimon? Ricoeur on Tragedy and *Phronēsis*”, in F.J. Mootz III/G.H. Taylor [eds.], *Gadamer and Ricoeur*, Continuum, pp. 156-177, here p. 162).

²⁹ See TM, pp. 319-320.

“questions of conscience”. In this kind of advice, he writes, “we discover that the person who is understanding does not know and judge as one who stands apart and unaffected but, rather, thinks along with the other from the perspective of a specific bond of belonging, as if he too were affected”³⁰. The ability to have insight and patience, to discriminate correctly, to enter into the situation of the other and thus to judge correctly (*gnóme*, *syngnóme*, and *epeikeîa*), is possible only on the basis of that “belonging” which always already binds me to the other in the community.

6. Friendship and solidarity

The relevance of the relationship with others in philosophical hermeneutics has already emerged in the clarification of the fusion of horizons because this fusion culminates when a common language arises from dialogue. It is made clear by Gadamer (who takes inspiration from Aristotle) in several of his writings from the mid- 1980s onward, in which he defines the concept of “solidarity”. For Gadamer, solidarity is a sign of a civic life together with friends, but also with fellow citizens and non-citizens. Solidarity arises without taking awareness of similarities or differences. It bounds people who are “other” to each other. Exposing Gadamer’s concept of friendship before addressing his definition of solidarity could be helpful to understand it in depth.

In the essays *Friendship and Self-Knowledge: Reflection on the Role of Friendship in Greek Ethics* (1985) and *Friendship and Solidarity* (1999), Gadamer underlines that Greek thinkers have investigated friendship much more than modern philosophers.³¹ The reason is that modern thought deals with the rational subject and its self-consciousness: friendship could only pique its interest if it had identified with a value, a belief or an acquirable virtue.³² On the contrary, friendship is a good, although it cannot be bought or sold.³³

Gadamer writes:

So much is obvious; but it is just this which for Aristotle constitutes both ethics and politics together as practical philosophy. This was the first thing that needed to be worked out in opposition to the modern philosophy dominated by the primacy of self-consciousness. [...] Modern philosophy stated that the mind is at the core of society

³⁰ TM, p. 320. See H.-G. Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, p. 132 (*synesis* in connection with understanding and learning), p. 133 (“only friends [...] can give advice”).

³¹ See H.-G. Gadamer, “Friendship and Solidarity”, tr. by D. Vessey and C. Blauwkamp, in *Research in Phenomenology*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2009, Brill, pp. 3-12.

³² See H.-G. Gadamer, *Hermeneutics, Religion, and Ethics*, tr. by J. Weinsheimer, Yale University Press, 1999 (= HRE), p. 117.

³³ See HRE, p. 131.

and state. But what did the Greeks, who had no such concept of science and of “mind”, think about this? The fact that Plato could think of world, city, and soul all in one, and that Aristotle [...] avoided narrowing it to an ethics of disposition, and placed alongside, makes Greek practical philosophy in many respects a paradigm for the critique of subjectivity that still occupies our thought today.³⁴

Gadamer lingers on the free nature of friendship, which realizes itself by being shared and cannot be forced. Friendship, Gadamer asserts, is “bestowed on us”³⁵. In the essay *The Ethics of Value and Practical Philosophy* (1982), he states:

[F]riendship far surpasses the realm of moral responsibility for oneself – like all “goods”. [...] No more than love can friendship be summoned on demand. For these reasons, friendship reaches far beyond the pleasure experienced when an individual who gives himself to the other in *eros* and *philia* rises above the narrow sphere of self-concern.³⁶

Living together and overcoming a mere friendliness,³⁷ friends develop a “reciprocal co-perception”. In *Friendship and Self-Knowledge: Reflections on the Role of Friendship in Greek Ethics*, Gadamer writes: “The bond of love can be of such a kind that over the long term it turns into the bond of genuine friendship, and the same is true of business friends who form a lasting friendship, sometimes even for generations.”³⁸ As long as they have been sharing experiences, friends learn to appreciate their similarities and differences. They also discover key features of their personalities (character, interests, emotional attitudes, worldview): they acquire self-knowledge, since “one recognizes oneself in others and the other recognizes itself in us”³⁹.

³⁴ Ibid. In “Theory, Technology, Practice: The Task of the Science of Man”, tr. by H. Brotz, in *Social Research*, vol. 44, no. 3, 1977, Hopkins Press, pp. 529-561, Gadamer admits the usefulness of information theory and machine technology in clarifying how consciousness functions. Nevertheless, he warns about their pretention “to *control* scientifically the organic and conscious life of man” (p. 534). Compared to Heidegger, Gadamer gains a deeper understanding of technology and shows how also technical reason could be advantageous for men. He considers cultural criticism to be “insincere” and not radical enough (see H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, ed. by D. Misgeld and G. Nicholson, State University of New York Press, 1992 [= EPH], pp. 165-180).

³⁵ HRE, p. 117.

³⁶ Ibid. Gadamer has been interested in this topic since 1929. He remembers a few lines above his early essay “The Role of Friendship in Greek Ethics” (in HRE, pp. 128-141). For the Aristotelian conception see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII, 1155 a-1163 b, pp. 143-163.

³⁷ See HRE, p. 134.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ H.-G. Gadamer, “Friendship and Solidarity”, p. 9. See M. Hofer, “Verstehen und Anerkennen: Zum Stellenwert der Freundschaft bei Hans-Georg Gadamer”, in *Existentia*, vol. 12, no. 1-2, Societas Philosophia Classica, 2002, pp. 87-102.

The difference between friends is also important. The role of difference in philosophical hermeneutics leads to respecting those who are “others” than ourselves. Gadamer emphasizes that “the other is not my dominion and I am not sovereign”⁴⁰. The other remind me that my own knowledge is limited and make me able to confront the truth.

Friendship, like solidarity, needs society. In the essay on *The Limitations of the Expert* (1967), by addressing the problem of the expertise required in politics, Gadamer notices the lack of solidarity in modern society: on the one hand, society has been increasingly fragmented due to bureaucracy, technology, and specialization; on the other hand, traditional unifying forces like religion weaken. Instead of contrast divisive drifts, politics supports processes which divides citizens. Gadamer writes: “Our public life appears to me to be defective in so far as there is too much emphasis upon the different and the disputed, upon that which is contested or in doubt.” Therefore, “what we truly have in common and what unites us remains, so to speak without a voice”⁴¹. In the 1986 speech on *The Idea of the University – Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, dealing with forms of alienation peculiar to our world and with their manifestation, Gadamer further laments that it is “so unbelievably difficult just to discover an existing authentic solidarity” in the whole society.⁴²

Nevertheless, Gadamer believes that bonds of solidarity are possible and they should be strengthened by keeping the focus on them. Gadamer invites the audience of *The Idea of the University – Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, to bring its own experience of solidarity to focal awareness.⁴³ He mentions solidarity among family (“nobody who has been embraced by a family for an extended time should discount that he has once known solidarity”)⁴⁴ and between friends, colleagues, and people working at university. According to Gadamer, these forms of solidarity “anticipate” broader kinds of connection like fellow citizens and even “the grand universe of humanity, of all human beings”.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ EPH, 233. See A. Noveanu, “Abstand – eine Fußnote. Zur Erfahrung des Anderen bei Hans-Georg Gadamer”, in I. Copoeru/C. Bodea (eds.), *Time and Difference. In Honorem Virgil Ciomos on his 70th Anniversary*, Zeta Books, 2024, pp. 119-130.

⁴¹ EPH, p. 192. For the interplay between life together, solidarity and ethical life see S. Marino, *Gadamer and the Limit of the Modern Techno-Scientific Civilization*, Lang, 2011, pp. 224-225.

⁴² EPH, p. 59.

⁴³ See D. Walhof, *The democratic Theory of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

⁴⁴ EPH, p. 59.

⁴⁵ Ibid. In his later writings, despite his unconcern about the plurality of traditions in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer investigates the conditions of intercultural dialogue. The reason for the previous narrowness of his perspective is highlighted in C. Olay, “Die Überlieferung der Gegenwart und die Gegenwart der Überlieferung. Heidegger und Gadamer über Tradition”, in *International Yearbook for Hermeneutics*, vol. 12, Mohr Siebeck, 2013, pp. 196-219.

Gadamer trusts the power of education. He writes:

There is this chain of generations which pass through an institution, like the university, in which teachers and students meet and lose one another. Students become teachers and from the activity of the teachers grows a new teaching, a living universe [...]. I think this small academic universe still remains one of the few precursors of the grand universe of humanity, of all human beings, who must learn to create with one another new solidarities.⁴⁶

Gadamer stresses the importance of politicians being well educated because they should lead society. He further asserts that politicians should not exploit differences during election campaigns; they have to enhance what unites citizens instead.⁴⁷ In the essay *The Limitations of the Expert*, he writes:

[I]n the face of the loss of the unifying power of religion and of the churches, we must retrieve what has become a social task for us in the last centuries: to become aware of what unites us [...] in being responsible for our future and the future of our children and children's children. The actual consequence of the limitations of the expert is, it appears to me, that we recognize these limitations as our own. We need to acknowledge as our responsibility all that which is entailed by our decisions. This is a responsibility which cannot be shifted to the expert's shoulders.⁴⁸

Gadamer presupposes that solidarity arises from what people living in the same community have in common. He closely connects solidarity with practice in the conclusion of the 1976 essay on *What Is Practice? The Conditions of Social Reason*.⁴⁹ Gadamer underlines that practical reason is crucial for distinguishing good from evil. Assumed that the basis of any judgement are costumes, norms, and habits shared in a community (the *èthos*), solidarity plays a decisive role in choosing what is right and good. Insofar every decision has repercussions on what influenced it, that is pre-understanding, pre-judices, choices are means of revision and renewal of individual and collective identities.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ EPH, p. 60.

⁴⁷ See EPH, p. 192.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ See H.-G. Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, p. 87.

⁵⁰ Gadamer's notion of identity is used as hermeneutical key to interpret social phenomena in the "age of communication" by A.S. Davarpanah and M. Khanjarkhani in "A new narration of the concept 'identity' and method for teaching identification", in *Opción*, vol. 34, Especial no. 15, Universidad del Zulia, 2018, pp. 165-193.

7. Openness to the other: similarities and differences

Although solidarity could contribute to the satisfaction of public or shared interests, it cannot be reduced to a specific concern for the public good. Gadamer develops a conception of solidarity that does not imply any universal accounts. What binds people living in a specific community depends much more on factors related to a particular historical moment and a specific cultural and social framework than on a presumed universal human nature or reason. Under this point of view, Gadamer's concept of solidarity presents some similarities with that of Richard Rorty, which is briefly to be remembered.

For Rorty, solidarity cannot be founded on a "recognition of one another's common humanity"⁵¹. Rorty rejects such universal notions because they are abstract and insufficient for contrasting cruelty or pushing to charity. He claims that our concern for others strengthen when the other is considered "as 'one of us,' where 'us' means something smaller and more local than the human race". When in a particular historical context one is seen as part of me, then solidarity comes up.⁵² This kind of bond stems from recognizing a certain identity with the other, thus it might be called "solidarity as identification".

This kind of solidarity appears in the most evident way between people with the same origin, race, ethnicity, religion. Rorty admits that his own approach is "ethnocentric", but he gives a new meaning to this word. His version of ethnocentrism implies the following: "To be ethnocentric is to divide the human race into people to whom one must justify one's beliefs and the others. The first group – one's ethnos – comprises those who share enough of one's beliefs to make fruitful conversation possible."⁵³ Not only does solidarity involve national, ethnic, religious differences, it also sets them below similarities "with respect to pain and humiliation", which ultimately take root in the radical contingency of the Self.⁵⁴

Admitting my contingency is for Rorty the starting point for developing solidarity. Insofar as solidarity requires the capability of distancing from myself to make a step towards the other and to identify with him, solidarity need contingency: only if I recognize myself as "other" than the "others", can I seek to "be one" of the others. This "be one", that is, identification, is at the center of Rorty's theory, which

⁵¹ R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 189-191.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁵³ R. Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 30. See M. Janack, "Rorty on Ethnocentrism and Exclusion", in *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 12, no. 3, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998, pp. 204-216.

⁵⁴ See R. Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 192 and I.M. Fehér, "Irony and Solidary: Two Key Concepts of Richard Rorty", in *Philobiblion*, vol. 20, no. 1, Cluj University Press, 2015, pp. 175.

is why Gadamer cannot accept it without reservation. Gadamer criticizes Rorty's approach because it makes solidarity dependent on the recognition of similarities (and differences). For Rorty, solidarity arises from identification, and an awareness of similarities is needed to let it flourish. For Gadamer, in contrast, solidarity bounds through similarities and differences, which is why it underlies communities.

Therefore, Gadamer doesn't narrow down solidarity to a politics of recognition, unlike the most authors of the twenty-first century.⁵⁵

Identity arises from the confrontation with others and thus presupposes plurality. Hannah Arendt deepens the concept of plurality in the book *The Human Condition* (1958), published two years before *Truth and Method*.⁵⁶ Like Gadamer, Arendt thinks that plurality could play a decisive role against technocratic and bureaucratic politics thanks to the interaction between citizens by means of pacific actions and political speeches.⁵⁷ However, she focuses on a kind of confrontation that allows one to know and respect the other, without underlining the importance of self-knowledge for encountering the other. In contrast, Gadamer is convinced that knowing yourself is the precondition for recovering what bounds us to each other.

Gadamer takes for granted that a solidarity bond already exists and that it is all about becoming aware of it in order to let it spread. He entrusts with this task a philosophy which also should teach "us to see the justification for the other's point of view and which thus makes us doubt our own."⁵⁸ In the essay *The Diversity of Europe: Inheritance and Future* (1985), Gadamer writes: "It is not easy to acknowledge that the other could be right, that oneself and one's own interests could be wrong. There is a beautiful religious essay by Kierkegaard *The Edification implied in the Thought that as against God we are always in the Wrong*. This solace, which is encountered here in a religious form, is in truth a basic constant that shapes our whole human experience. We must learn to respect others and otherness. This implies that we

⁵⁵ For an overview see S. Thompson, *The Political Theory of Recognition: A Critical Introduction*, Polity, 2006. A wider sense of "recognition" is elaborated on the basis of the philosophical tradition in hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective by P. Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, tr. by D. Pellauer, Harvard University Press, 2005 (Ricœur mentions Gadamer on pp. 211-212).

⁵⁶ See H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, tr. by M. Canovan, University of Chicago Press, 1998², p. 7: "The human condition of plurality" consists in "the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world".

⁵⁷ See H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 320-325 – where Arendt describes "the victory of the *Animal Laborans*" in the modern society "of jobholders" that "demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning" (p. 322) – and Gadamer's "Notes on Planning for the Future" (in EPH, pp. 165-180), where Gadamer rejects the idea of "a universally regulated and rationally ordered world" (p. 166), in which politics has become administration. Such a global political order would favour only a political model to the detriment of the others. It would also oppose the occidental civilisation to alien traditions (see pp. 167-168).

⁵⁸ EPH, p. 152.

must learn that we could be wrong.”⁵⁹ Understanding it lets us become able to increasingly widen our horizons and to pave the way for a kind of knowledge that is feeling and taking action at once. Gadamer arrives at this conclusion by making our past fruitful in today’s world.

Indeed, in its path of thought, the concept of solidarity appears for the first time in *Truth and Method* amongst the leading humanist concepts, which are to be re-evaluated in view of defining the kind of knowledge proper to human life. By analysing the *sensus communis*, Gadamer writes: “The *sensus communis* is an element of social and moral being”⁶⁰, it is the sense that makes a community. *Sensus communis*, for Shaftesbury, is a “social virtue”, and “ancient Roman concepts [...] include in *humanitas* a refined savoir vivre, the attitude of the man who understands a joke and tells one because he is aware of a deeper union with his interlocutor.”⁶¹ Solidarity is later connected to community feeling, which appears to be a “genuine moral and civic solidarity”⁶². Gadamer states:

Judgment is not so much a faculty as a demand that has to be made of all. Everyone has enough “sense of the common” (*gemeinen Sinn*) – i.e., judgment – that he can be expected to show a “sense of the community” (*Gemeinsinn*), genuine moral and civic solidarity, but that means judgment of right and wrong, and a concern for the “common good”.⁶³

In one of his later essays, *From Word to Concept: The Task of Hermeneutics as Philosophy* (1995), Gadamer concludes that solidarity is needed for developing common convictions. Hence, understanding (which is led by solidarity) has a “world-political significance”⁶⁴ (*weltpolitische Bedeutung des Verstehens*). If “politics” is to be understood literally (it derives from Greek, from “*polis*”, the wider sense of which means human interactions), the message that Gadamer conveys to us consists in the appeal to enhance our understanding by acting together and, conversely, to intensify our actions by understanding each other. Only in this way can we enrich ourselves and let truth happen.

⁵⁹ EPH, p. 233.

⁶⁰ TM, p. 29.

⁶¹ TM, p. 22.

⁶² TM, p. 29.

⁶³ TM, pp. 28-29.

⁶⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, “From Word to Concept: The Task of Hermeneutics as Philosophy”, in R.E. Palmer (ed. by), *The Gadamer Reader. A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, Northwestern University Press, 2007, pp. 108-120, here p. 118. See I.M. Fehér, “Verstehen bei Heidegger und Gadamer”, in G. Figal/H.-H. Gander (Hrsg.), *Dimensionen des Hermeneutischen. Heidegger und Gadamer*, Klostermann, 2005, pp. 89-115, here pp. 113-115.

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