HANS – GEORG GADAMER

TRUTH AND METHOD

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Catch only what you've thrown yourself, all is
mere skill and little gain;
but when you're suddenly the catcher of a ball
thrown by an eternal partner
with accurate and measured swing
towards you, to your centre, in an arch
from the great bridgebuilding of God:
why catching then becomes a power—
not yours, a world's.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Introduction

These studies are concerned with the problem of hermeneutics. The phenomenon of understanding and of the correct interpretation of what has been understood is not just a problem proper to the methodology of the human sciences. For a long time, there has been a theological and a legal hermeneutics, which were not so much theoretical as related to, and an aid to, the practical activity of the judge or clergyman who had completed his theoretical training. From its historical origin, the problem of hermeneutics goes beyond the limits that the concept of method sets to modern science. The understanding and the interpretation of texts is not merely a concern of science, but is obviously part of the total human experience of the world. The hermeneutic phenomenon is basically not a problem of method at all. It is not concerned with a method of understanding, by means of which texts are subjected to scientific investigation like all other objects of experience. It is not concerned primarily with the amassing of ratified knowledge which satisfies the methodological ideal of science—yet it is concerned, here too, with knowledge and with truth. In understanding tradition not only are texts understood, but insights are gained and truths acknowledged. But what kind of insight and what kind of truth?

In the face of the dominant position of modern science in the philosophical clarification and justification of the concept of knowledge and the concept of truth, this question does not appear legitimate. Yet it is unavoidable, even within the sciences. The phenomenon of understanding not only pervades all human relations to the world. It also has an independent validity within

science and resists any attempt to change it into a method of science. The following investigation starts with the resistance within modern science against the universal claim of scientific method. It is concerned to seek that experience of truth that transcends the sphere of the control of scientific method wherever it is to be found, and to inquire into its legitimacy. Hence the human sciences are joined with modes of experience which lie outside science: with the experiences of philosophy, of art, and of history itself. These are all modes of experience in which a truth is communicated that cannot be verified by the methodological means proper to science.

Contemporary philosophy is well aware of this. But it is quite a different question how far the claim to truth of these modes of experience outside science can be philosophically legitimated. The current interest in the hermeneutic phenomenon rests, I think, on the fact that only a more profound investigation of the phenomenon of understanding can provide this legitimation. This conviction is strongly supported by the importance attached in contemporary philosophical work to the history of philosophy. In regard to the historical tradition of philosophy, we encounter understanding as a superior experience enabling us easily to see through the appearance of historical method characteristic of philosophico-historical research. It is part of the elementary experience of philosophy that when we try to understand the classics of philosophical thought, they posit, of themselves, a claim to truth that the contemporary consciousness can neither reject nor transcend. The naive self-respect of the present moment may rebel against the idea that the philosophical awareness admits the possibility that one's own philosophical insight may be inferior to that of Plato or Aristotle, Leibniz, Kant or Hegel. One might think it a weakness in contemporary philosophy that it seeks to interpret and assimilate its classical heritage with this acknowledgment of its own weakness. But it is undoubtedly a far greater weakness of philosophical thinking not to face this kind of investigation into oneself, but foolishly to play at being Faustus. It is clear that in the understanding of the texts of these great thinkers, a truth is recognised that could not be attained in any other way, even if this contradicts the yardstick of research and progress by which science measures itself.

The same thing is true of the experience of art. Here the scientific research pursued by the 'science of art' is aware from the start that it can neither replace nor surpass the experience of art. That truth is experienced through a work of art that we cannot attain in any other way constitutes the philosophic im-

portance of art, which asserts itself against all reasoning. Hence together with the experience of philosophy, the experience of art issues the most pressing challenge to the scientific consciousness to acknowledge its own limits.

Hence the following investigation starts with a critique of aesthetic consciousness, in order to defend that experience of truth that comes to us through the work of art against the aesthetic theory that lets itself be restricted to a scientific concept of truth. But the book does not stop at the justification of the truth of art; instead it tries to develop from this starting-point a concept of knowledge and of truth which corresponds to the whole of our hermeneutic experience. Just as in the experience of art we are concerned with truths that go essentially beyond the range of methodical knowledge, so the same thing is true of the whole of the human sciences, in which our historical tradition in all its forms is certainly made the object of investigation, but at the same time in it truth comes to speech. The experience of historical tradition goes quite beyond that in it which can be investigated. It is true or untrue not only in the sense concerning which historical criticism decides, but always mediates truth, in which one must try to share.

Hence these studies on hermeneutics, which start from the experience of art and of historical tradition, seek to present the hermeneutic phenomenon in its full extent. It is a question of recognising in it an experience of truth that must not only be justified philosophically, but which is itself a mode of philosophising. The hermeneutics developed here is not, therefore, a methodology of the human sciences, but an attempt to understand what the human sciences truly are, beyond their methodological self-consciousness, and what connects them with the totality of our experience of world. If we make understanding the object of our reflection, the aim is not an art or technique of understanding, as traditional literary and theological hermeneutics sought to be. Such an art or technique would fail to recognise that, in view of the truth that speaks to us out of tradition, the formalism of artistic ability would arrogate to itself a false superiority. Even though in the following I shall demonstrate how much there is of event in all understanding, and how little the traditions in which we stand are weakened by modern historical consciousness, it is not my intention to make prescriptions for the sciences or the conduct of life, but to try to correct false thinking about what they are.

I hope in this way to reinforce an insight that is threatened with oblivion in our swiftly changing age. What changes forces

itself far more on the attention than what remains the same. That is a general law of our intellectual life. Hence the perspectives which come from the experience of historical change are always in danger of distortion because they forget the hidden constants. I feel that we are living in a state of constant overstimulation of our historical consciousness. It is a consequence of this overstimulation and, as I hope to show, a bad short-circuit if one reacts to this over-estimation of historical change by invoking the eternal orders of nature and summoning the naturalness of man to legitimate the idea of natural law. It is not only that historical tradition and the natural order of life constitute the unity of the world in which we live as men; the way that we experience one another, the way that we experience historical traditions, the way that we experience the natural givenness of our existence and of our world, constitutes a truly hermeneutic universe, in which we are not imprisoned, as if behind insurmountable barriers, but to which we are opened.

A reflection on what truth is in the human sciences must not seek to derive itself from the tradition, the validity of which it has recognised. Hence it must, for its own method of working, endeavour to acquire as much historical self-transparency as possible. In its concern to understand the universe of understanding better than seems possible under the modern scientific notion of cognition, it has to try to establish a new relation to the concepts which it uses. It must be aware of the fact that its own understanding and interpretation is not a construction out of principles, but the development of an event which goes back a long way. Hence it will not be able to use its concepts unquestioningly, but will have to take over whatever features of the original meaning of its concepts have come down to it.

The philosophical endeavour of our day differs from the classical tradition of philosophy in that it is not a direct and unbroken continuation of it. In spite of all its connections with its historical origin, philosophy today is well aware of the historical distance between it and its classical models. This is found, above all, in its changed attitude to the concept. However important and fundamental were the transformations which took place with the Latinisation of the Greek concepts and with the translation of Latin conceptual language into the modern languages, the emergence of historical consciousness over the last few centuries is a much more radical development. Since then, the continuity of the Western philosophical tradition has been effective only in a fragmentary way. We have lost that naïve innocence with which traditional concepts were made to support

one's own thinking. Since that time, the attitude of science towards these concepts has become strangely detached, whether its concern with them is a scholarly, not to say self-consciously archaic, recording process, or a technical handling which makes its own use of concepts as tools. Neither of these truly satisfies the hermeneutic experience. The conceptual world in which philosophising develops has already influenced us in the same way that the language in which we live conditions us. If thought is to be conscientious, it must become aware of these anterior influences. It is a new critical consciousness that now has to accompany all responsible philosophising and which takes the linguistic and thinking habits built up in the individual in his communication with his environment and places them before the forum of the historical tradition to which we all belong.

The following investigation tries to satisfy this demand by combining as closely as possible an inquiry into the history of concepts with a factual exposition of its theme. That conscientiousness of phenomenological description which Husserl has made a duty for us all; the breadth of the historical horizon in which Dilthey has placed all philosophising; and, not least, the penetration of both these influences by the impulse received from Heidegger, indicate the yardstick by which the writer desires to be measured, and which, despite all imperfection in the execution, he would like to see applied without reservation.

Foreword to the Second Edition

The second edition of *Truth and Method* is virtually unaltered. Its readers include its critics, and the attention that it has received undoubtedly obliges the author to improve the whole by drawing on all the really valuable suggestions they have offered.[1] And yet a line of thought that has matured over many years has its own stability. However much one tries to see through the critic's eyes, one's own generally pervasive viewpoint prevails.

The three years that have passed since the publication of the first edition have proved too short a time for the author to put the whole again in question, and to use effectively all that he has learned from criticism and from his own more recent work.[2]

Perhaps I may briefly outline the intention and claim of the work. My revival of the expression 'hermeneutics', with its long tradition, has apparently led to some misunderstandings.[3] I did not intend to produce an art or technique of understanding, in the manner of the earlier hermeneutics. I did not wish to elaborate a system of rules to describe, let alone direct, the methodical procedure of the human sciences. Nor was it my aim to investigate the theoretical foundation of work in these fields in order to put my findings to practical ends. If there is any practical consequence of the present investigation, it certainly has nothing to do with an unscientific 'commitment'; instead, it is concerned with the 'scientific' integrity of acknowledging the commitment involved in all understanding. My real concern was and is philosophic: not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing.

Hence the methods of the human sciences are not at issue here. My starting point is that the historic human sciences, as they emerged from German romanticism and became imbued with the spirit of modern science, maintained a humanistic heritage which distinguishes them from all other kinds of modern research and brings them close to other, quite different, extra-scientific experiences, and especially those proper to art. In Germany (which has always been pre-revolutionary) the tradition of aesthetic humanism remained vitally influential in the development of the modern conception of science. In other countries more political consciousness may have entered into 'the humanities', lettres: in short, everything formerly known as the humaniora.

This does not prevent the methods of modern natural science from having an application to the social world. Possibly the growing rationalisation of society and the scientific techniques of its administration are more characteristic of our age than the vast progress of modern science. The methodical spirit of science permeates everywhere. Therefore I did not remotely intend to deny the necessity of methodical work within the human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften). Nor did I propose to revive the ancient dispute on method between the natural and the human sciences. It is hardly a question of a contrast of methods. To this extent, Windelband and Rickert's question concerning the limits of concept-formation in the natural sciences seems to me misconceived. The difference that confronts us is not in the method, but in the objectives of knowledge. The question I have asked seeks to discover and bring into consciousness something that methodological dispute serves only to conceal and neglect, something that does not so much confine or limit modern science as precede it and make it possible. This does not make its own immanent law of advance any less decisive. It would be vain to appeal to the human desire for knowledge and the human capacity for achievement to be more considerate in their treatment of the natural and social orders of our world. Moral preaching in the guise of science seems rather absurd, as does the presumption of a philosopher who deduces from principles the way in which 'science' must change in order to become philosophically legitimate.

Therefore it seems quite erroneous in this connection to invoke the famous Kantian distinction between quaestio juris and quaestio facti. Kant certainly did not wish to lay down for modern science what it must do in order to stand honourably before the judgment-seat of reason. He asked a philosophic question:

What are the conditions of our knowledge, by virtue of which modern science is possible, and how far does it extend? Thus the following investigation also asks a philosophic question. But it does not ask it only of the so-called human sciences (among which precedence would then be accorded to certain traditional disciplines). It does not ask it only of science and its modes of experience, but of all human experience of the world and human living. It asks (to put it in Kantian terms): How is understanding possible? This is a question which precedes any action of understanding on the part of subjectivity, including the methodical activity of the 'understanding sciences' (verstehende Geisteswissenschaften) and their norms and rules. Heidegger's temporal analytics of human existence (Dasein) has, I think, shown convincingly that understanding is not just one of the various possible behaviours of the subject, but the mode of being of There-being itself. This is the sense in which the term 'hermeneutics' has been used here. It denotes the basic being-in-motion of There-being which constitutes its finiteness and historicity, and hence includes the whole of its experience of the world. Not caprice, or even an elaboration of a single aspect, but the nature of the thing itself makes the movement of understanding comprehensive and universal.

I cannot agree with those who maintain that the limits of the hermeneutical aspect are revealed in confrontation with extra-historical modes of being, such as the mathematical or aesthetic.[4] Admittedly it is true that, say, the aesthetic quality of a work of art depends on structural laws and a level of embodied form and shape which ultimately transcend all the limitations of its historical origin or cultural context. I shall not discuss how far, in relation to a work of art, the 'sense of quality' represents an independent possibility of knowledge, or whether, like all taste, it is not only formally developed, but also shaped and fashioned.[5] At any rate, taste is necessarily formed by something that does not indicate for what that taste is formed. To that extent, it may always include particular, preferred types of content and exclude others. But in any case it is true that everyone who experiences a work of art gathers this experience wholly within himself: namely, into the totality of his self-understanding, within which it means something to him. I go so far as to assert that the achievement of understanding, which in this way embraces the experience of the work of art, surpasses all historicism in the sphere of aesthetic experience. Of course there appears to be an obvious distinction between the original world structure established by a work of art, and its continued

existence in the changed circumstances of the world thereafter.[6] But where exactly does the dividing line lie between the present world and the world that comes to be? How is the original life-significance transformed into the reflected experience that is cultural significance? It seems to me that the concept of aesthetic non-differentiation, which I have coined in this connection, is wholly valid; that here there are no clear divisions, and the movement of understanding cannot be restricted to the reflective pleasure prescribed by aesthetic differentiation. It should be admitted that, say, an ancient image of the gods that was not displayed in a temple as a work of art in order to give aesthetic, reflective pleasure, and is now on show in a museum, contains, in the way it stands before us today, the world of religious experience from which it came; the important consequence is that its world is still part of ours. It is the hermeneutic universe that embraces both.[7]

There are other respects in which the universality of the hermeneutical aspect cannot be arbitrarily restricted or curtailed. No mere artifice of composition persuaded me to begin with the experience of art in order to assure the phenomenon of understanding that breadth which is proper to it. Here the aesthetics of genius has done important preparatory work in showing that the experience of the work of art always fundamentally surpasses any subjective horizon of interpretation, whether that of the artist or that of the recipient. The mens auctoris is not admissible as a yardstick for the meaning of a work of art. Even the idea of a work-in-itself, divorced from its constantly renewed reality of being experienced, always has something abstract about it. I think I have already shown why this idea only describes an intention, but does not permit a dogmatic solution. At any rate, the purpose of my investigation is not to offer a general theory of interpretation and a differential account of its methods (which E. Betti has done so well) but to discover what is common to all modes of understanding and to show that understanding is never subjective behaviour toward a given 'object', but towards its effective history—the history of its influence; in other words, understanding belongs to the being of that which is understood.

Therefore I do not find convincing the objection that the reproduction of a musical work of art is interpretation in a different sense from, say, the process of understanding when reading a poem or looking at a painting. All reproduction is primarily interpretation and seeks, as such, to be correct. In this sense it, too, is 'understanding'.[8]

I believe that the universality of the hermeneutical viewpoint

cannot be restricted even where it is a question of the multitude of historical concerns and interests subsumed under the science of history. Certainly there are many modes of historical writing and research. There is no question of every historical observation being based on a conscious act of reflection on effective-history. The history of the North American Eskimo tribes is certainly quite independent of whether and when these tribes influenced the 'universal history of Europe'. Yet one cannot seriously deny that reflection on effective-history will prove to be important even in relation to this historical task. Whoever reads, in fifty or a hundred years, the history of these tribes as it is written today will not only find it old-fashioned (for in the meantime he will know more or interpret the sources more correctly) he will also be able to see that in the 1960s people read the sources differently because they were moved by different questions, prejudices and interests. Ultimately historical writing and research would be reduced to nullity if withdrawn from the sphere of the study of effective-history. The very universality of the hermeneutical problem precedes every kind of interest in history, because it is concerned with what is always fundamental to the historical question.[9] And what is historical research without the historical question? In the language that I use, justified by investigation into semantic history, this means: application is an element of understanding itself. If, in this connection, I put the legal historian and the practising lawyer on the same level, I do not deny that the former has exclusively a 'contemplative', and the other a practical, task. Yet application is involved in the activities of both. How could the legal meaning of a law be different for either? It is true that, for example, the judge has the practical task of passing judgment, and many considerations of legal politics may enter in, which the legal historian (with the same law before him) does not consider. But does that make their legal understanding of the law any different? The judge's decision, which has a practical effect on life, aims at being a correct and never an arbitrary application of the law; hence it must rely on a 'correct' interpretation, which necessarily includes the mediation between history and the present in the act of understanding itself.

The legal historian, of course, will also have to evaluate 'historically' a law correctly understood in this way, and this always means that he must assess its historical importance; since he will always be guided by his own historical fore-understanding and prejudices, he may do this 'wrongly'. That means that again there is mediation between the past and the present: that is,

application. The course of history, to which the history of research belongs, generally teaches us this. But it obviously does not mean that the historian has done something which he should not have done, and which he should or could have been prevented from doing by some hermeneutical canon. I am not speaking of the errors of legal history, but of accurate findings. The legal historian—like the judge—has his 'methods' of avoiding mistakes, in which I agree entirely with the legal historian.[10] But the hermeneutical interest of the philosopher begins only when error has been successfully avoided. Then both historians and dogmaticians testify to a truth that extends beyond what they know, insofar as their own transient present is discernible in what they do.

From the viewpoint of philosophical hermeneutics, the contrast between historical and dogmatic method has no absolute validity. This raises the question of the extent to which the hermeneutical viewpoint itself enjoys historical or dogmatic validity.[11] If the principle of effective-history is made into a general structural element in understanding, then this thesis undoubtedly includes no historical relativity, but seeks absolute validity—and yet a hermeneutical consciousness exists only under specific historical conditions. Tradition, part of whose nature is the handing-on of traditional material, must have become questionable for an explicit consciousness of the hermeneutic task of appropriating tradition to have been formed. Hence we find in Augustine such a consciousness in regard to the old testament; and, during the reformation, Protestant hermeneutics developed from an insistence on understanding scripture solely on its own basis (sola scriptura) as against the principle of tradition held by the Roman church. But certainly since the birth of historical consciousness, which involves a fundamental distance between the present and all historical transmission, understanding has been a task requiring methodical direction. My thesis is that the element of effective-history is operative in all understanding of tradition, even where the methodology of the modern historical sciences has been largely adopted, which makes what has grown historically and has been transmitted historically an object to be established like an experimental finding—as if tradition were as alien and, from the human point of view, as unintelligible, as an object of physics.

Hence there is a certain legitimate ambiguity in the concept of the consciousness of history, as I have used it. This ambiguity is that it is used to mean at once the consciousness obtained in the course of history and determined by history, and the very con-

sciousness of this gaining and determining. Obviously the burden of my argument is that this quality of being determined by effective-history still dominates the modern, historical and scientific consciousness and that beyond any possible knowledge of this domination. The effective-historical consciousness is so radically finite that our whole being, achieved in the totality of our destiny, inevitably transcends its knowledge of itself. But that is a fundamental insight which ought not to be limited to any specific historical situation; an insight which, however, in the face of modern historical research and of the methodological ideal of the objectivity of science, meets with particular resistance in the self-understanding of science.

We are certainly entitled to ask the reflective historical question: Why, just now, at this precise moment in history, has this fundamental insight into the element of effective-history in all understanding become possible? My investigations offer an indirect answer to this question. Only after the failure of the naïve historicism of the very century of historicism does it become clear that the contrast between unhistorical-dogmatic and historical, between tradition and historical science, between ancient and modern, is not absolute. The famous querelle des anciens et des modernes ceases to be a real alternative.

Hence what is here asserted, the universality of the hermeneutic aspect and especially what is elicited about language as the form in which understanding is achieved, embraces the 'pre-hermeneutic' consciousness as well as all modes of hermeneutic consciousness. Even the naïve appropriation of tradition is a 'retelling', although it ought not to be described as a 'fusion of horizon' (see p 486 below).

And now to the basic question: How far does the aspect of understanding itself and its linguisticity reach? Can it support the general philosophical inference in the proposition, 'Being that can be understood is language'? Surely the universality of language requires the untenable metaphysical conclusion that 'everything' is only language and language event? True, the obvious reference to the ineffable does not necessarily affect the universality of language. The infinity of the dialogue in which understanding is achieved makes any reference to the ineffable itself relative. But is understanding the sole and sufficient access to the reality of history? Obviously there is a danger that the actual reality of the event, especially its absurdity and contingency, will be weakened and seen falsely in terms of sense-experience.

Hence it was my purpose to show that the historicism of