

# A Century of Philosophy

Hans-Georg Gadamer  
in Conversation with Riccardo Dottori

Translated by Rod Coltman  
with Sigrid Koepke

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ὁ φιλόσοφος αὐτός

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The painting hangs in the Klaus-Tschira-Stiftung, Heidelberg

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ROD COLTMAN

## Introduction

*These conversations with Hans-Georg Gadamer, which took place in 1999–2000, cannot be understood without a brief overview of the thirty years that I have known Hans-Georg Gadamer. I want to take the liberty, therefore, of beginning this book with an autobiographical prologue that will serve as a lead-in to the theme of the interviews. At the end of these philosophical conversations, the reader will find an epilogue inspired by the portrait of Hans-Georg Gadamer by the artist Dora Mittenzwei, which appears on the cover of this book.*

My first encounter with Hans-Georg Gadamer took place in the winter of 1969 when I relocated from Tübingen to Heidelberg. Back then, I had a research stipend and I was working in the field of modern philosophy, specifically on the philosophy of Hegel and on the revolutionary rupture in the philosophical thought of the nineteenth century as it is discussed in the works of Feuerbach, Kierkegaard, and Marx. While Gadamer, at that point, had become well known, he still was not as famous as Heidegger, Jaspers, Sartre, or the other writers who worked on questions of phenomenology, existentialism, and neo-Marxism. My decision to move to Heidelberg was influenced by the fact that the course listings for the following semester at the University of Heidelberg offered a seminar by Gadamer on the second book of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, the so-called "Logic of Essence." Not only does the authentic basis of the Hegelian system show itself in this work, but it was also precisely what I was working at the time. Moreover, Ernst Tugendhat, an assistant of Karl Tugendhat, the professor under whom I had studied previously, had also gone to Heidelberg just recently. Tugendhat, having been called to Heidelberg as a full professor, had announced that he would be giving a very interesting seminar on the concept of time that was to pay special attention to the writings of Augustine. I had met with Tugendhat shortly before my planned departure from Tübingen, when he was visiting old friends in that city. Being a very sociable and generous



man who knew me quite well, Tugendhat informed me that neither he nor Gadamer (who at this point had already retired) would be conducting the seminars that had been announced in the course listings. "What should I do now?" I thought. "Should I reverse my decision and not go to Heidelberg?" "Calm down," said Tugendhat. "Even if Gadamer doesn't lecture on Hegel's *Logic* this year, he certainly will do so in the future. He's a dedicated pedagogue, and he won't stop conducting lectures and seminars so quickly." Indeed, in the following years this turned out to be prophetic; Gadamer gave his last lecture in 1985 — that is to say, seventeen years later. And when he ended his teaching duties — at the age of eighty-five — he did so in order to dedicate his time to the publication of his works, a task that he finished ten years later.

With Tugendhat's advice in mind, I decided to move to Heidelberg after all. I was drawn by the expectation of working with Tugendhat again and was hoping that, eventually, he would offer a lecture or seminar on the concept of time in Augustine. However, in Tugendhat's case, things changed. He completely abandoned his plans and, instead, dove headlong into the study of analytical philosophy in order to confront and compare the metaphysical problematic that he had encountered in Aristotle with analytical philosophy and develop it further. This huge undertaking eventually culminated in the publication of the lectures that he gave in Heidelberg under the title "Introduction to Analytical Philosophy." As far as Gadamer was concerned, things developed differently and, I must say, in a most advantageous manner for me. Instead of the seminar on Hegelian logic, Gadamer read Kant's "Third Critique," *The Critique of Judgment*, which constitutes the starting point for Gadamer's hermeneutical philosophy and, specifically, his foundational work, *Truth and Method*.

At the time, I was not thoroughly familiar with *Truth and Method*. While the work was already perceived as an interesting and important book, I had merely scanned it without making an effort to work through it meticulously. Compared to many others, however, this book was an easy read because it was written in a fluid, concise, and elegant style — the very style that, even apart from its content, eventually made *Truth and Method* a classic of the twentieth century. Gadamer's seminar allowed me to engage deeply in a reading of the text and, at the same time, presented an entirely different way of thinking. Truly new ways of thinking opened up for me in this

seminar — not only in view of a new conception of the aesthetic but of metaphysical and existential experience as well. Few other lectures I had attended during my studies and research work had such a fundamental impact on me. I can recall only two other seminars that might measure up: One was the very first lecture I attended at the University of Rome where Guido Calogero had invited Raymond Klibansky, the famous expert on neo-Platonism and, in particular, the "Plato latinus" (the medieval translation of the *Theologia platonica*) and the commentaries on Proclus and Parmenides. The discussions between Calogero and Klibansky left me with impressions similar to those I came away with from the seminar in Heidelberg. Then, four years later, I attended Derrida's lectures on Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in Paris at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes*. While these were also very interesting, they nevertheless did not reach the same level as the seminar in Heidelberg. We must consider, of course, that this was Gadamer's own fundamental theme, and (as we are dealing with Kant here) we should also remember that Gadamer and his entire school of thought stood squarely within the tradition of German philosophy, which was not the case with Derrida.

Indeed, I was surprised by the remarkably high level of the discussions in Gadamer's seminar. I should mention that all of the participants in the seminar would, in later years, hold the most important chairs of philosophy in Germany. But I was most impressed by the figure of Gadamer himself, by his friendliness and his attentiveness in the discussions, by the seriousness with which he entertained every opinion that was expressed, by his ability to follow other people's ideas as if he were always ready to learn something from them, and his constant willingness to question himself and his own opinions — even when the discussion had already made considerable headway. Whenever Gadamer was convinced of his position, however, then it was very difficult to dissuade him from his line of reasoning. I must say that my small contributions to the discussions in this and subsequent seminars were often adopted. And this is how the commonality of thinking developed between us, a commonality that bound me to him for decades to come.

Of course, the important thing is not to be convinced of one's own ideas and defend them to the death, but, instead, one has to keep on questioning them without insisting on having the last word. "It is a poor hermeneut who needs to have the last word," Gadamer resolutely asserts in his demanding autobiography. Gadamer held himself to this

self-interpretation by always giving the other a chance to have his say. This is why whenever one visited Gadamer the discussions would last the entire afternoon and on into the evening, or deep into the night if they began in the evening. I remember one story that was related to me by my Chilean friend, Alfonso Gómez-Lobo, an expert on Plato who is now teaching at Georgetown University in Washington. When Gomez-Lobo visited Gadamer's house for the first time, he engaged Gadamer in a discussion that lasted until the late evening. As my friend was leaving, he tried to apologize for the long conversation, and Gadamer replied, "Nonsense. You know perfectly well that one Platonist can never inconvenience another Platonist." Indeed, for a Platonist there is no other path to the knowledge of truth than the dialogue.

Truth is a concept that had become deeply compromised in the twentieth century, especially when we consider its history. And it is this history that will occupy us in the interview below as a testament to the second half of that century — a half-century that saw fundamental changes in European culture and is worthy of our ruminations.

If my arrival in Heidelberg — that city on the Neckar with its castle and its old bridge, the city that shaped the heart of German Romanticism — evoked in me the semblance of a deep immersion into the past of German culture, then the present exerted no less powerful an attraction on me. These were the years of the student protests, and I found myself smack in the middle of them there. As a holder of a research stipend, I had one foot in the camp of the students and the other in that of those who were teaching them. Many of these were on the side of the students — among them, in Heidelberg, the above-mentioned Tugendhat. Thirty years later, despite the most disparate possible appraisals, we cannot escape the impression of a collective insanity that affected both sides — an insanity that always occurs among those who are fighting for their myths, as was the case here. Every opportunity was ripe for organizing a protest, a demonstration, or an uprising and for provoking a corresponding counter-reaction from the other side. In Heidelberg once, it so happened that, after a student demonstration in front of the America-house and an organized protest there, the police themselves made an "attack" on the university. They beat up any student who happened to be there — even those unsuspecting students who just wanted to go home peacefully from the events after a class.

In reality, despite the ideological motive of putting on a show of class struggle and the revolution of the proletariat, this protest was

the product of an affluent and consumer-driven society. It was no accident that the principal activists were students who came mainly from the bourgeoisie and not the working classes. In point of fact, one should not confuse this protest at the end of the 1960s in Europe with the labor union struggle that flared up across the whole decade and that, on the wave of the development of the postwar economy and the subsequent demand for work, had fundamentally altered the situation of the working classes. What the student protest changed was primarily habits and customs within the society and the family, so-called general morality, attitudes, that is, toward sexuality and every form of authority. More than anything else, it was a protest of the youth against any kind of authority — a protest that entailed a radical change in our habitual way life. But, as a consequence, it also brought with it the depressing spread of drugs, illegal abortions, and a great psychic instability that stimulated an enormous surge in psychoanalysis.

In February of 1969, in this combustible political climate, it happened that Heidegger came to visit Gadamer on the occasion of his birthday. Consequently, all the seminar participants received a written invitation to take part in an evening seminar with Heidegger at Gadamer's home. The seminar (on the topic "Art and Space") began at eight o'clock in the evening. The topic was a reference to the lecture of the same name that Heidegger had held in a gallery in Neuchâtel on the occasion of an exhibition by the sculptor Chillida. Prior to this seminar, however, Heidegger had been invited to hold a public lecture, which was held in the afternoon in a lecture hall of the university. The hall (the Heuscheuer) was overflowing with students, while the professors from the faculty sat in the front row, Gadamer and Löwith among them. The latter had already become emeritus some years ago and was now the dominant figure of the philosophy department. He also delivered the birthday address to Gadamer and made a few introductory remarks about Heidegger's lecture. Unfortunately, the speech turned out not to be very exciting for the students. Even though, being a Jew, Löwith had to go into the exile during the Third Reich, he represented a rather conservative attitude. He spoke about how the essence of the university found itself, as did the culture at large, in decline because of mass production and industry. I was impressed by the fact that, while the other professors applauded everything he said, Tugendhat, dismayed by the speech, noticeably abstained from applause, even though he was standing very close to Löwith.



After a brief word of thanks by Gadamer in which he underscored the limitations of education ("the calcification of the human being") but also his dedication to it ("should one not be what one has become?"), he finally allowed Heidegger to speak. His voice was low and a little hoarse or perhaps intentionally hoarse so as to lend expression, so to speak, to the strain of old age and the fact of having to speak at such an occasion. The fascination that his words radiated was still quite strong, even if it differed fundamentally from that speculative vehemence of his famous Marburg lectures, which Gadamer so often described. This was not because he could not follow current events, nor was it the onset of absent-mindedness. Rather, his entire speech was a defense of contemporary philosophy, especially phenomenology. There is always phenomenology in every true philosophy, he claimed, whenever it wants to make genuine contact with and have a serious confrontation with things. He then ended his talk with the following words: "In our contemporary history, the words of Marx have never been more relevant; he tells us that the task of philosophy can no longer be to explain the world but to change it. If we wish to change the world, however, we must know to what end we would change it, and that, in turn, only philosophy can tell us." At this point everyone applauded — students and professors alike. Also among them was Leoluca Orlando, who is now mayor of Palermo and is known for his campaign against the Mafia. He studied and did research in Heidelberg just as I did. Together, we applauded enthusiastically, and he even recalls this event in his book about Palermo and describes it as particularly formative for his life.

With all the attention paid to Marx, it was only natural that one should develop just as strong an interest in Hegel as his antithesis. It was not just that Marx was his student, but Lenin had also drawn his basic reflections in equal parts from Marx's *Capital* and Hegel's *Logic*. What Hegel proposed was essentially a contemplation of history from the viewpoint of reason and the self-knowledge of the human being, a justification of reason in history, or, in any case, a justification of reason in all its shadings and its dialectic — the dialectic of power and servitude, of enlightenment and superstitions, of rebellion and consensus. It really had less to do with a justification of reason in history — or, more precisely, God in history — than it did a pure justification of history itself, understood as a progressive realization of human freedom. This was the meaning of his concluding reflection on reality, the ontological reflection. Was all of

this just a legitimization of the status quo, of the Prussian state and its constitutional monarchy? Or, even worse, was it (as Marx thought) a legitimization of the oppression of the working classes in the early days of industrial society? This was the debate that Kierkegaard and Marx took up again in their basic critiques of Hegelian philosophy and its will to systematization. This was also the motive around which my work revolved, and it was decisive for my interest in Hegel. It also stirred the general interest of the students and intellectuals of the time. All of this reached its high point in the following year, in the Winter semester of which Gadamer finally lectured on the second book of the Hegel's *Logic*, and which was to end for me in surprising way.

Toward the end of the seminar, we were discussing the fundamental concept of Hegelian metaphysics, the concept of ontological reflection, which had its origins in Hegel's youthful writings and culminated in Kant's concept of reflective and determinative judgment, which we had discussed earlier in the seminar. I presented a *Referat* on this topic toward the end of the semester. During the last session, we expected a retrospective review of the entire seminar from Gadamer. But it was precisely in this last session — which fell, of all days, on the eleventh of February, Gadamer's birthday — that Heidegger entered the room with him and took a seat beside him. Gadamer took the floor, and after he had summarized the conclusions of the entire seminar and the *Referat* that I had presented, he closed with a quotation from Heidegger's book on Nietzsche. In the quoted passage, Heidegger rightly portrayed the Hegelian concept of ontological reflection as the quintessence of modern philosophy. But this metaphysics of subjectivity, which leads into a metaphysics of history from the perspective of the self-realization of human freedom, subsequently finds its end in Nietzsche's own metaphysics of the absolute will to power. In all of this, however, one unambiguously recognizes the total appropriation of the real on the part of technology and, with it, the most absolute nihilism, the absence and devaluation of all values.

The question was then passed on to Heidegger, who took it upon himself to defend this quotation and its theses and to come to a conclusion. I took note of all of this and later published it.<sup>1</sup> The most

1. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *La dialettica di Hegel, con due lettere di M. Heidegger ad H.-G. Gadamer*, trans. and commentary by Riccardo Dottori (Turin: Marietti, 1973; 2d corrected and rev. ed., Genua: Marietti 1996), 189–202. German edition: "Über das Verhältnis Hegel, Heidegger, Gadamer: Die Begegnung in Heidelberg" in *Bijdragen* 6 (1977).

interesting thesis that Heidegger put forward on this occasion was that he never understood why, for the Greeks, being [or essence, *das Wesen*], the *on*, developed into the *hen*, the one, in exactly the same way that, in Kant, being [*das Sein*] developed into the one on the basis of the synthetic unity of apperception. Ultimately, this is what the whole of philosophical reflection (understood as a transcendental reflection) aims at, and, according to Heidegger, this is the reason that even the logical application of reason is tied to the concept of unity. This is why transcendental reflection becomes the basis of Hegel's ontology — all of what is real is consequently grounded in this ultimate unity of reason, and this is not only why the real appears to us, it is even why history itself is legitimized. This is also the basis of the fundamental concept in Marx's *Capital*, the concept of *value* (which ensues from *being* [*das Wesen*]). And all of this culminates in Nietzsche's concept of the will to power.

I went away from this session agitated, and it took a long time for the meaning of this encounter with Heidegger to become clear to me — only later did I also understand Gadamer's original intention. It was not just a matter of rehabilitating Heidegger's stature or an attempt to retrieve him from the isolation into which he had been advised to go after his dismissal from the University of Freiburg. It was rather about the revival of his thinking, about going back to the path he had walked in his long dialogue with the ideas of the Greeks and the moderns. This path led directly into that tremendous provocation that expressed itself in Nietzsche's thinking. He came upon it precisely in the years of National Socialism, and this plunged him into that deep crisis from which he sought to escape through the ideas of Hölderlin.

Nevertheless, on the basis of all of this, one question arises spontaneously: Does this discourse actually succeed in comprehending the meaning of history, or is it merely about a new philosophical structure? Does all of this find a parallel in the actual history of society, and is there any real meaning in the history of the philosophers (either the good ones or the bad ones)? Maybe the prominence they attained is a consequence of how much they actually knew about what happens before their very eyes, that is, how much they knew about real historical processes. Maybe that is what Heidegger meant by saying that phenomenology forms the kernel of every authentic philosophy. Perhaps he himself comprehended how much he was responsible for (*vis-à-vis* real historical processes) in his original restriction of

phenomenology to the structural analyses of existence or the existence of the human being in the world. Maybe the fact that he had not considered this in advance was also a reason for his succumbing to a completely mistaken understanding of National Socialism. This is possibly how that reorientation in his thinking began, the one that brought him back again to a different kind of phenomenology that no longer posed the question of being (in Husserl's wake) from the viewpoint of internal time consciousness but from the much more broadly construed perspective of the history of being, which is tantamount to the history of Western culture. He tried, as Hegel had done before him, to completely disclose the actual developmental stages of history. These considerations brought Hegel to his main thesis of recognizing reason within history and thereby demonstrating the justification or legitimation of God in history — whereas contemplating history led Nietzsche and Heidegger to their visions of a decadent nihilism. All of this is irrelevant, of course, if one takes into account the fact that after the experiences of the twentieth century we can no longer pursue philosophy without worrying about what actually happens to us instead of simply posing the question of being as such, as metaphysics has always done. This is perhaps what Gadamer, in contrast to Heidegger, has always understood. To know how to pull on the threads of everything that surrounds us so as to discover the web from which reality is made, this spider's web in which we are caught — this was Max Scheler's advice (on a visit to Marburg) to the young student, Gadamer, who was very impressed by it.

Nevertheless, the respective roles that Heidegger and Jaspers have played in the history of our century — each in his own way and with differing results — are not without significance. After a period of friendship and cooperation, the two found themselves in opposing situations once again as the storm of National Socialism lifted. Heidegger now saw a chance for a renaissance of pure German culture, and he remained rooted in this idea, even without being able to imagine what was to come. Jaspers had a Jewish wife and therefore did not share Heidegger's views, even as they kept working together on the idea of university reform. And it was this same idea that Heidegger advocated as rector in his 1933 inaugural speech. But Jaspers' cultured and refined intellect warned him against what was brewing. Heidegger was also very cultured, but he was essentially a farmer and a mystic of a mysticism without God, whom he had lost and for whom he found himself constantly searching.

He noticed for the first time that he had succumbed to an error when he was called to Berlin. Jaspers, who had already been hoping for such an appointment, encouraged him to it accept it. So he went to Berlin in the hope of meeting Hitler and building a relationship with him similar to the one that existed between Giovanni Gentile and Mussolini. He did not even succeed in meeting the appropriate minister, however, and so he came back to his birthplace in Meßkirch to ponder this disappointment. Thus he wrote to his half-Jewish friend, Elisabeth Blochmann, "The whole thing would have been abysmal anyway." The fact that he then still took up the rectorate and subsequently set in motion that discourse that Croce characterized as "stupid and, above all, servile," should indicate, however, that his delusion persisted, at least in a small way. This was certainly not a good example of intelligence or political vision, but one should not attribute it to a deplorable careerism or anti-Semitic conviction. His love of Hannah Arendt and his friendship with Elisabeth Blochmann and his Jewish assistants and colleagues who stayed on during the war demonstrate this eloquently — as does his resignation from the rectorate after only a nine-month term in office. Neither can one say that either his life or his philosophy served or influenced the history of National Socialism in any way.

Jaspers stayed in Germany, although he was released from his teaching duties and sent into retirement. He did not want to be separated from his wife; he preferred to weather the dangers with her, and this is why he seems an entirely different figure to us compared to Heidegger and more discerning as well. But he also found himself in a different situation, even if it was by no means a more enviable one. Nevertheless, his behavior toward Heidegger was not exactly praiseworthy during the period of the French occupation when he wrote to the de-Nazification commission at the University of Freiburg saying that, even though Heidegger may be the greatest philosophical mind in Germany, a few years' hiatus from teaching would do him some good. And the illusions that he created for himself during the initial phase of the Federal Republic of Germany were not so discerning either. To hear Gadamer tell it, his judgment of Heidegger and his decision to begin a self-imposed exile in Switzerland were politically naive and even moralistic. Nevertheless, the two were finally reconciled, and Hegel's expression, "The wounds of the spirit heal without leaving scars," was borne out. The roles of the preeminent philosophical protagonists to romp about on the German stage of the

twentieth century should not be considered on the basis of their individual histories or their political roles but exclusively on the basis of their roles as thinkers. Like so many others, both of them were victims of National Socialism.

The role of the philosophical protagonist has been expanded upon by Gadamer in the second half of the century. Gadamer only brought out his fundamental work, *Truth and Method*, at the age of sixty. Not only was he already well known by this time (through his writings on Platonic philosophy and his other philosophical essays on modern poetry), but he had also matured, especially through his teaching duties as a *Privatdozent* in Marburg and, above all, in Leipzig. He arrived there in 1935 and taught there until after the war. He became rector at the beginning of the Russian occupation, and he even stayed on during the first years of the German Democratic Republic. His inaugural speech as rector, an office that he occupied with conviction and passion, did not please Jaspers ("now he is a Communist," Jaspers is supposed to have commented), and it occasioned the cold shoulder with which Gadamer was received in Heidelberg and Jaspers' break with him, which he describes in the interview. But in 1995, when Gadamer was made an honorary citizen of the city of Leipzig, a former student wrote about the enthusiasm with which Gadamer's speech had been received in 1945. The speech had been delivered in front of the university to representatives of the political authority, the city administrators, and a large number of citizens while Russian soldiers on horseback surrounded the square. The student told me, "Only Gadamer could give such a speech. We had the feeling that he was defending us."

In this speech, Gadamer claimed (as he never did again) that, since the power of the cultural tradition had proven too weak to save the country from the barbarism and murderous insanity of National Socialism, one should no longer look to the old, but rather to the new. Then, however, he referred to what had always been and would remain the key point of his hermeneutic practice — the factuality of work, the uncertainty that feeds off of itself, the prudence of the scholar (*phronesis*) that results in unconditional confidence in what one has discovered, and, lastly, the simplicity of one's conduct, which leads to tolerance and true solidarity. We can summarize these in a single concept — wisdom.

In the era of post-historicism, the seriousness with which one conducts scholarly work and confronts a text has to be fundamentally

guided by and understood through a personal engagement with it. There are no rules for interpretation other than the seriousness of an interpretation that continuously questions itself to the point of conviction that one has reached something essential. However, one should never think that one has reached any kind of objective interpretation in which the text, the subject, and the historical period resolve themselves completely. The only guarantee against the dangers of historical relativism is being aware of the ineluctable historicity of all our interpretations. And, according to Gadamer, this is basically what he learned from Heidegger: If we are directly conscious of the historicity of our being, then we are just as far beyond any real historical ontology as we are any relativism. This certainly holds true for all interpretations of the world and, therefore, for the decisive liquidation of all previous ontology and metaphysics, without thereby losing the fundamental claim or the truth of the determining historical horizon, which legitimates itself by means of a fusion of horizons. Reading a text becomes the model for reading the world, and philosophical hermeneutics becomes philosophy or hermeneutic philosophy.

Gadamer's realistic, skeptical, and tolerant demeanor, and his natural gift for diplomacy allowed him to survive three revolutions unharmed — namely, those of the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich, and communism — "... three revolutions that changed nothing," Gadamer tells us in his autobiography. Psychologically speaking, he remained undamaged due to his self-confidence; physically speaking, he was saved by polio, the disease he acquired as an adult before the war began. The small concessions that he was forced to make never touched the core of his personality. He never succumbed to flattery or careerism, and he never had to pay the high price of self-denial for the career that he nevertheless forged for himself in those years. As Hegel warned, "a mended sock is better than no sock at all — but, this is not true in the case of self-confidence." This is how Gadamer honorably maintained all of his contacts with Jaspers, his Jewish friends in Marburg, with Jakob Klein, Leo Strauss, and Karl Löwith. After everything had blown over, he even tried to get Löwith to come to Heidelberg with him. And, in the same vein, as soon as the horrors of National Socialism had passed he immediately tried to contact his first teacher, Heidegger, again.

In spite of his apparent conservatism (of which Habermas had accused him from early on) and in spite of his confrontation with

Habermas on the subject of "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," thanks to his disposition, Gadamer never erred in those fundamental questions such as the relationship between authority and critique (which had been the starting point of the debate), or the concept of social consensus (which depends entirely on the acknowledgment of authority), or the relationship between tradition and emancipation. With the winding down of the ideological struggles and the concomitant demise of the Eastern European regimes, Gadamer was proven right with respect to a question that is fundamental for hermeneutic philosophy — the truth that remains is the truth of our cultural and civil tradition and not that which manifests itself in the results of the scientific method. Any authority that truly is an authority and is acknowledged as such is based upon this truth; and only if the authority is acknowledged will it be an authentic one. Otherwise, as Gadamer maintains as early as 1972, and as the experience of history has shown, that authority will deteriorate; and the recent demise of the Eastern European states has proven Gadamer right once again. Despite all the criticisms that one might levy against it, the authority of our tradition, as the basis of all established or political authority, is essentially the supporting ground of social consensus. Its strength does not lie so much in standing up to those criticisms as in making any critique possible; for every critique and every discussion presupposes the supporting consensus that makes possible every civil discussion, every dialogue, be it among various social or political groups or among various belief systems, religions, or ideologies.

This was the lesson that Gadamer taught to us all, including the students in 1968 and especially Habermas; for their confrontation hinged mainly upon their respective conceptions of authority and tradition. Habermas, by the way, was the first to understand this lesson, even in relation to the upheaval that the student movements had created in Frankfurt. He eventually left the university and the heated atmosphere of Frankfurt in the turbulent years between 1972 and 1975 in order to withdraw to an institution that he co-founded with Tugendhat called the "Institute for the Study of Living Conditions in the Technical Scientific World" at Lake Starnberg near Munich. In reality, his stay there did not last very long, and Tugendhat went to Berlin at the same time that Habermas was returning to Frankfurt. By that time, things had changed again at the universities — peace had returned, and all those bewildered souls once again needed a

certain security. Richard Rorty, who had just published *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, was invited to teach in Heidelberg. Neo-pragmatism, which Richard Bernstein even saw latent in Gadamer, had come from the American scene and had begun to find adherents in Germany.

Gadamer's student Michael Theunissen, who had openly sympathized with the leftist scene, moved from Heidelberg to Berlin. But the intellectual atmosphere had changed even in Berlin. After various attempts at a new metaphysics had run aground, the critique of metaphysics disappeared not so much from enlightened philosophical consciousness as from the pages of existentialism and analytic philosophy. Everyone in America and in Europe was now preoccupied with ethics. In Tübingen, Tugendhat already had been interested in the existential problematic, and, to keep up with the times, he returned partially to his original topic in his new book, *Selbstbesinnung und Selbstbestimmung*, in which he still retained an echo of Kierkegaard's anti-Hegelian polemic.

When the fires of the ideological struggles that had drenched the century in blood and had found their final echo in the student protests had been extinguished, and when everyone had now become preoccupied with ethics, people were also discovering Gadamer's first book, *Plato's Dialectical Ethics*. The book was Gadamer's habilitation thesis under Heidegger and had essentially been conceived either as an introduction to Aristotle's ethics or as a disclosure of the commonalities between Aristotle and Plato. Eventually, it initiated the so-called "rehabilitation of practical philosophy," which began in Germany in the 1980s. This was a rediscovery of practical knowing as a special type of knowing that differed from the theoretical; it is a knowing that exists for its own sake and is, essentially, the only knowledge that can assist us in understanding and in making decisions regarding our private as well as our public or social lives. The concept of *phronesis*, wisdom, played a fundamental role here and found its genuine and real verification in the disastrous consequences of the ideological struggles.

It was Habermas himself who undertook the task of bringing this verification to its conclusion. The conception of truth that he attempted to reclaim was, in any case, not that of our cultural tradition, but rather that of a universal pragmatism, which he gradually developed toward a concept of communicative action. This concept also influenced the theory of the community of communication or communicative ethics developed by Habermas's colleague in Frankfurt,

Karl-Otto Apel. Gadamer has pointed out to us that every ethical principle of understanding can be traced back to the dialectical principle of Platonic philosophy. Ultimately, every ethics of discourse is grounded more on the desire for unity than on a supposed *a priori* of the community of communication. If, however, this orientation toward an ethics of discourse follows Gadamer's thinking, even to a small extent, then a total rapprochement with Gadamer — in part with the idea of a consensus grounded on authority, and in part with the sustaining value of tradition — can no longer be far off. It was his confrontation with American philosophy, with John Rawls's theory of justice, and with the turbulent discussions about the fundamental legal situation and the basic concepts of German and American democracy, that led Habermas to rediscover the value of tradition and historical context in relation to a purely rational mode of argumentation. In the debate about the legitimation of justice and, especially, the legitimation of norms, he realized that this was not established on the basis of *rational* argumentation alone, but also on the basis of the historical existence of the society and its norms as well as on the creative act of interpretation.

However, a renewed critique of Gadamer came from Habermas on the basis of an article written on the occasion of Gadamer's one-hundredth birthday. Gadamer supposedly loses the authentic claim to truth for philosophical assertions when they cannot be contradicted by facts, and he supposedly ignores the "instructive renunciation of the world."<sup>2</sup> According to Habermas, he simply holds fast to the heritage of our cultural tradition, which finds its model in the ideal of classical works of art or in works of literature and poetry, which are always self-referential and can never stand in contradiction to reality. In the aftermath of historicism, we have nothing left but the new "mysticism" of poetry. Moreover, because Gadamer relies, above all, on the persuasive power of words and therefore on rhetorical modes of argumentation, he positions himself between neo-pragmatism and deconstruction.

Needless to say, Gadamer offered no objection to this first accusation. Always citing the famous passage from Aristotle's *Poetics*, he never tired of repeating that history can only tell us how events occur, while poetry is more philosophical than history because it tells us how events could or should occurred. This is also the basis upon which he

2. [der "belehrenden Widerruf der Welt"]

grounds his defense of Hegel — reason cannot stand in contradiction to individual historical events. And however things might have happened or might still happen, the ultimate truth, which we can accept as the sole truth, is that which philosophy offers us, the truth that presents the progressive realization of human freedom through history. This, however, does not mean that how events occur is of little interest to us; on the contrary, it is highly important to us, because we have nothing else on which we can base the truth of our actions than on a renunciation of the facts.

Finally, the second objection is the one for which I will attempt to provide answers in our interview. Is a new mysticism possible in the aftermath of historicism? Is it this toward which our will to understand and our will to persuade are directed — if, that is, one ultimately understands the two as one and the same will toward a consensus? Is it perhaps this concrete consensus that humanity needs and that we need to acknowledge at the end of the twentieth century of the Christian era — a century that, on the one hand, has been marked by new experiences of art and scientific progress and that, on the other hand, has been marked even more by a terrible will to destruction and death? The last god, the god whose absence Heidegger so painfully perceived upon losing him — is this the hope that such a consensus could still be possible? Is this last god the last hope that remains, the final inheritance of a bygone metaphysics and the thing that will survive its destruction?

A consensus among all the forms of faith and all the great religions about what they all have in common seems to be, for Gadamer, the last possibility for saving humanity after a century that lived on myths and, in its struggles for these myths and these ideologies, stained itself with blood. This consensus is certainly not the fruit of philosophical deliberations — even if these deliberations point to such a possibility. But neither is it a question of the consensus that results from persuasion and from individual dialogue. It is indeed a question of a dialogue, but one between the great religions, one that throws into relief what they all have in common — that sense for the divine that is the basis of them all — and which springs from the knowledge of our own finitude, our awe in the face of the origin of life and our disquieting perception of the extreme limit of death. These two basic instincts of our soul are also the basis for any metaphysics, any question of being and non-being, our feeling of awe in the face of life or, in the case of Aristotle, our astonishment. In Heidegger's case, this

would be our angst in the face of non-being or in the face of death — an angst that goes even deeper because, as Gadamer says, after Europe had opened the way to peaceful coexistence following the tragic experiences of the past century the whole of humanity seems to have found itself threatened.

The twentieth century has just ended. Gadamer, who lived through the whole of it, with all its horrors and all its mistakes, apparently puts no hope in anything new other than the last god. His hermeneutical philosophy, as a philosophy that reflects human finitude, with an eye fixed upon all that we have constructed and that we still bring to our cultural tradition, maintains a view that is confident and open to what is. His life blessed him with one hundred years of experience, unique for a philosopher, especially if we consider which century it was. His cup is well filled, not only with lived experiences, but also with ripened wisdom. If we really want to find a key term in his philosophy, then we should not simply say “hermeneutics” or “interpretation,” but rather, as he himself said over and over again, *phronesis*, “wisdom.” With this interview, we are trying to benefit from his wisdom in the hope that it will infect us all and also in the hope that one of Hegel's dictum's will prove to be true — that the wounds of the spirit heal without leaving scars.<sup>3</sup>

It pleases me that the artist, Dora Mittenzwei (Heidelberg), has given us permission to use her Gadamer portrait, which was unveiled in March of 2001. I will follow this personal homage with some of my thoughts. I want to express my sincere thanks to Hans-Georg Gadamer for his openness, the artist for her willingness, numerous helpers in Heidelberg, Rome, and, last but not least, the LIT publishing house.

RICCARDO DOTTORI  
Rome

3. Translated from the Italian into German by Tobias Güthner, Britta Hentschel, and Daniela Wolf. [Translated from the German into English by Sigrid Koepeke and Rod Coltman.]



# 1

## Phronesis: *A Philosophy of Finitude*

**D.:** The twentieth century seems to have closed with a negative balance with respect to the question of being, and it seems to have pulled all the questions that Western thinking deemed worthy of asking along with it — particularly the questions of the meaning of life and the mystery of death. The first question that we would like to pose, therefore, is: What remains valid within the philosophical and cultural tradition, or what is still to be salvaged from its highest invention — metaphysics — after the two attempts at dismantling it emanating from Heidegger and analytical philosophy?

**G.:** Perhaps we can attempt an answer by starting from the ideas that Heidegger and I developed. At the outset, the young Heidegger received his metaphysics from a Scholastic or Catholic position and developed it further from there. When I first encountered Heidegger, this development was already in full swing. When he later went to Marburg, it was falling back a little more in line with the expectations of a Protestant — I should say, in line with the figure of a Luther or a Melanchthon. From the perspective of Protestantism, a metaphysics is clearly unnecessary. I remember quite well that what captivated me about Heidegger was not the resuscitation but the rethinking of metaphysics, and indeed in such a way that the question of existence became his theme and the questions of time and finitude along with it. Thus we have a philosophy of finitude, if you will, and a philosophy of temporality at the same time. What I had previously learned from Heidegger was his critique of Neo-Kantianism, and the figure standing behind this was Max Scheler. There was a congress with Scheler in Marburg in 1913, and the lecture he gave was a critique of Neo-Kantian idealism. This had the effect on Nicolai Hartmann (and

consequently upon the Marburg school) of a kind of unintentional approximation to an ontological realism. This didn't convince me at all, for the critique of idealism then led into a metaphysical — even Thomistic — ontology of values.

Things were different in Heidegger's case, where, at the center of his book (along with his general impact and the thrust of his thinking) stood the questions of death, being toward death, and so on. Heidegger's book was no great event for us in Marburg. During five years of his lectures, we had already had a chance to follow the evolution of the book, which depended upon the analyses of temporality. I was trying to do something different at the time, something that Heidegger couldn't do at all, and this came out of my book, *Plato's Dialectical Ethics*, which served as my habilitation thesis. I was trying to come to philosophy along different paths, specifically, along the path of practical knowledge. What I later developed in the form of *phronesis* was already taking shape here. These essays (like, for example, the essay on practical knowing) show both what I was later to develop into that concept and what I didn't do at the time. But the decisive step was already taken in that, from that point on, even if I had wanted to follow Heidegger, I could no longer have accommodated him. I very clearly remember a draft of Heidegger's that hadn't been published and that I received from Natorp. It went missing, and one day it turned up again. I was very deeply impressed that this early piece was subsequently published in *Dilthey Studien* under the title "Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle: Indications of the Hermeneutic Situation." But, having read it again, I see that I could actually have established quite clearly that Heidegger wasn't really interested in practical knowledge or *phronesis* at all.

**D.:** But rather . . . ?

**G.:** But rather, being.

**D.:** So, you think that the question of being was removed from its usual Scholastic/ontological context, that is, from the question of the science of being as such, and from its respective regional ontologies, like psychology, cosmology, theology, so as to be put on a completely new basis, namely, on the basis of his own conception of human *Dasein*, which, along with Jaspers, he calls *existence*, the basic structure of which makes a disinterested and objectified view of being in the sense of the old metaphysics impossible for us. But, in his analysis

of *Dasein*, didn't Heidegger proceed from his reading of Aristotle? Wasn't he essentially preoccupied with the *Nicomachean Ethics*?

**G.:** No, not all that much; no. If you look at it closely, he isn't really all that preoccupied with Aristotle. Obviously, he had been at one time. I even became initially aware of *phronesis*, the reasonableness of practical knowing, through Heidegger. But I subsequently found a better basis for *phronesis*, which I developed, not in terms of a virtue, but rather in terms of the dialogue.

**D.:** You were certainly very insistent on the concept of *phronesis*, which later became a key concept of your own philosophy, and you were especially insistent on that experience that you call hermeneutic experience. This central concept of the text of the *Nicomachean Ethics* was originally translated into Latin by the word *prudentia*, and you pointed out that the term *jurisprudentia* draws its origin from the judge constantly being confronted with the problem of applying the general law to the individual case, which always deviates from the general law and poses the problem of correct application. This correct application of the law is supposed to be guided precisely by *prudentia*, which is supposed to determine the appropriateness of the law to the specific case in a just manner so that the subsequent judgment corresponds to the criterion of *equitas* (Aristotelean *epieikeia*), balance. This well-balanced judicial decision then becomes the basis of future judgments — this is how the Latin *jurisprudentia*, jurisprudence, would have originated. Proceeding from this conception of *phronesis* as an application of the general law to the specific case, then, you invested the concept with a much broader meaning. Specifically, you pointed out that this just application of the law presupposes not only a knowledge of the means by which virtue and justice are to be effected but also a knowledge of the end. Above all, however, in this correct application of the general law to the specific case, you saw the universal problem of *interpretation*, which in turn becomes the general problem of hermeneutic philosophy. Thus you arrived at a concept that is meant to dissolve the concept of reason without its essential content getting lost. After this, *reasonableness* would be the more appropriate translation of *phronesis*. This is how you elevated *phronesis* to the level of the dialogue. Do you mean to say that, if we were to turn from Aristotle back toward Plato, then the Platonic viewpoint would not essentially have changed, or do you believe that both philosophers stand on a common basis?

G.: Of course! The meaning of all my work — the meaning that runs throughout my subsequent studies as well — was to show that, in spite of all the criticism of Aristotle, a flat opposition between Plato and Aristotle is not at all correct. In those days I was already beginning to see that, no, there is a much more intimate connection here, a connection that I was later able to substantiate quite well — even with *phronesis*, which is really a Platonic concept. So, more and more I found that Heidegger's inability to acknowledge the other was a point of weakness in him, and even by then I had already been talking out about this. It thus seemed clear to me how, through his analysis of existence, through his search for God, he hoped to come to a better philosophical justification of human existence in the sense of a Christian experience. Today, this initial insight of mine seems to be simply a fact; but it is also clear that this kind analysis and this conception of human existence leave the problem of the other unthought.

D.: But didn't Heidegger speak of *being-with* [*Mit-sein*], that is, being-there-with-the-other [*Mit-den-anderen-da-zu-sein*], and the *conscience* as excellent modes of human *Dasein* or structures of existence? Didn't these structures or these phenomena have something to do with a fundamental experience of the Thou?

G.: Yes, yes — we probably do read it rather one-sidedly; although, in the beginning, that business with the conscience alarmed me. Moreover, there is still the problem of the correspondence between *phronesis* and the Latin *prudentia* and the German word *Gewissen* [conscience]. Is *Gewissen* really the right translation? Bringing *phronesis* together with conscience or carrying the meaning of the first concept or phenomenon over into the second has never particularly convinced me. I was one of the first to follow Heidegger, and I was fascinated by his thinking; the course of my own thinking was actually established after my first encounter with Heidegger. Naturally, I was bowled over at first, and what the essay on the concept of being had to say was enormously liberating. I was twenty-two years old. In fact, this was carried so far that later commentators ascribed to me a certain primacy with respect to Heidegger, which, of course, was pure nonsense. It was, however, a very quick reception on my part. On the other hand, I have to say that Hartmann's, so to speak, objectivizing treatment of being was an absolutely untenable position for me.

D.: So you think it would be wrong to bring conscience into a close relationship with *phronesis*?

G.: Well, for Heidegger, the conscience is undoubtedly *not* the other, but is, rather, the puzzle of this "coming-to-find-oneself" [*Zu-sich-selbst-findens*].

D.: And *Mit-sein* . . . ?

G.: *Mit-sein* becomes really tenable only with an other. In any case, what I have gradually developed is not *Mit-sein* but *Miteinander* ["with-one-another"]. *Mit-sein*, for Heidegger, was a concession that he had to make, but one that he never really got behind. Indeed, even as he was developing the idea, his wasn't really talking about the other at all. *Mit-sein* is, as it were, an assertion about *Dasein*, which must naturally take *Mit-sein* for granted. I must say that conscience — having a conscience — no, that wasn't terribly convincing. "Care" [*die Sorge*] is always a concernfulness [*ein Besorgtsein*] about one's own being, and *Mit-sein* is, in truth, a very weak idea of the other, more a "letting the other be" than an authentic "being-interested-in-him."

D.: In your *Philosophical Apprenticeships* you report that had you already expressed this criticism to Heidegger in your Lisbon lecture (in 1943). You have also attempted to show that authentic *thrownness* [*Geworfenheit*], which, according to Heidegger, refers to the basic structure of human finitude, shows itself precisely in the phenomenon of the other.

G.: That was later, much later.

D.: Yes, you later lectured on it publicly; but that was a recollection of this original critique. When did you speak out about this to Heidegger for the first time?

G.: It was during my first encounter with Heidegger in Marburg, during the first discussions we had during the period in which he wrote *Being and Time*. The idea became completely clear to me at that time, and that's when I expressed my first criticisms.

D.: And what did Heidegger think of that? What was his reaction?

G.: Heidegger recognized (one had put it like this — he was far superior to me, after all), he recognized that I encompassed more with