

# Rudiments of a *Pros Hen* Hermeneutics

By Justin Cancelliere

One of the chief challenges faced by thinkers living and working in a pluralistic environment is that of steering a safe course between the twin pitfalls of a rigidly insular dogmatism and a ruinously glib relativism. On the one hand, contemporary multiculturalism in its manifold guises—and wherever it takes root—renders dogmatic<sup>1</sup> and fideistic modes of belief particularly problematic insofar as these tendencies can thwart the development of the mutual understanding and respect essential to the health and survival of ethnically and culturally diverse societies. On the other hand, seeking relief in relativism from the pressures, tensions, and conundrums of globalization results in the reduction of morality to mere consensualism and contractualism on the theoretical and practical planes, respectively, and thus in the preclusion of any genuinely normative foundations for the moral dimension of human existence, to say nothing of the numerous other problems stemming from what one might call the dereliction of objectivity.

Needless to say, many have tried their hand at resolving the dilemma adumbrated above, but few have attained to the level of influence enjoyed by the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer in this respect. Associated above all with hermeneutics, or the science of interpretation,<sup>2</sup> he embraced the historicism of his teacher Heidegger without following other of this thinker's intellectual heirs (most notably Jacques Derrida) into outright relativism. Although the general thrust of Gadamer's project is therefore salutary inasmuch as it seeks a middle course between the two abovementioned extremes, the various attempts in his magnum opus *Truth and Method* to immunize its proffered conception of human

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<sup>1</sup> In the pejorative and not literal sense of the word.

<sup>2</sup> Here in the broad sense (i.e., the interpretation not only of texts but of anything at all).

understanding as “historically effected”<sup>3</sup> against charges of relativism and a self-defeating violation of the principle of non-contradiction fail to convince. In what follows, I will point out a number of inadequacies plaguing Gadamer’s project before outlining an alternative approach to hermeneutics—one both based on the Absolute and sensitive to the kaleidoscopic nature of Its cosmic self-disclosure.

First, however, it is important to highlight that which is useful and beneficial in Gadamer’s thought. First and foremost, his perspicacious treatment of the flaws that came to undermine Enlightenment conceptions of objectivity is very welcome, since he deals with this issue in an admirably sober manner that avoids the excesses of various postmodern authors, who make essentially the same point but with a flippancy that tends to vitiate their analyses, at least for those readers who find themselves hesitant to play fast and loose with the intellectual heritage of an entire civilization. According to Gadamer, the eagerness of Enlightenment theoreticians to substitute the objectivity claimed by Christian dogma with the sure foundations thought to be uncoverable through purifying reason of all impediments to its normative and thus—according to the way of thinking under consideration—objective operation proved shortsighted, since not only are such “impediments” in the form of what he calls prejudgments or prejudices ineradicable (and rather only subject to constant revision), but they also, and more importantly, comprise one of the conditions of understanding itself.<sup>4</sup> For Gadamer, the idea that “one can become transparent to oneself, that one can become sovereign in one’s thinking and action ... is mistaken,” for “we always already have a certain character; no one is a blank sheet of paper.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, far from advocating “the subjection

<sup>3</sup> In the foreword to the second edition of this work, Gadamer characterizes what he calls historically effected consciousness as “at once the consciousness effected in the course of history and determined by history, and the very consciousness of being thus effected and determined.” As for the relationship between consciousness and understanding, “historically effected consciousness ... is an element in the act of understanding itself and ... is already effectual in *finding the right questions to ask*.” Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), xxx, 301 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>4</sup> The concept of prejudice as employed by Gadamer is essentially neutral and thus admits of both positive and negative senses. His use of the word “understanding” is also idiosyncratic, though idiosyncrasy admittedly becomes something of a de facto norm in situations of widespread intellectual fragmentation.

<sup>5</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gadamer in Conversation: Reflections and Commentary*, ed. and trans. Richard E. Palmer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 43.

of all authority to reason” in the manner of Enlightenment rationality, Gadamer asserts not only that authority can serve as a “source of truth” but also that “belonging to a tradition is a condition of hermeneutics” itself.<sup>6</sup> The goal is therefore not to try to undo all of one’s conditioning in pursuit of some abstract ideal of objectivity, but rather to become conscious of deleterious prejudices in the hope of attenuating their distortive effect on one’s “range of vision” or “horizon”<sup>7</sup> such that one develops an openness to the horizons of others, thereby rendering understanding—the goal of hermeneutics—possible.<sup>8</sup> If Gadamer has taken steps in the right direction relative to even the most sophisticated forms of rationalism (viz., its post-Kantian varieties), it is because his “non-naïve” rehabilitation of concepts like tradition and authority can help mitigate the internecine tension driving what has shown itself to be an especially unpredictable and often destructive dialectic (i.e., the one governing the relationship between modern and pre-modern forms of thought and life).

As for the shortcomings of Gadamer’s hermeneutical vision, one might reflect upon the uneasy compromise it attempts to strike between the special sort of historicism for which it advocates and what Gadamer does not hesitate to call common sense—a notion that, by its very nature, rules out the relativism that some interpreters take to be a necessary correlate of this form of historicism. According to Gadamer, while fledgling historicism was understandably circumscribed by the blind spots of the *weltanschauung* in which it emerged (namely those symptomatic of a certain overzealousness vis-à-vis the promise of a “truly scientific” objectivity), a historicism having attained to hermeneutical maturity, by contrast, acknowledges its *own* historicity alongside that

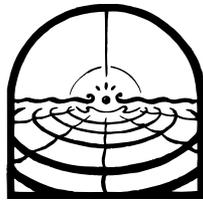
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<sup>6</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 279-80, 291.

<sup>7</sup> “The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. ... A person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence over-values what is nearest to him. On the other hand, ‘to have a horizon’ means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it” (ibid., 301).

<sup>8</sup> “A person who is trying to understand is exposed to distraction from fore-meanings that are not borne out by the things themselves. Working out appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed ‘by the things’ themselves, is the constant task of understanding” (ibid., 270). Also: “Methodologically conscious understanding will be concerned not merely to form anticipatory ideas, but to make them conscious, so as to check them and thus acquire right understanding from the things themselves” (ibid., 272). Is it coherent to speak of “the things themselves” when basing oneself on historicist premises?

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