

## Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1900–2002

**T**he German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer died on 13 March 2002 in Heidelberg, where he had lived since 1949, having succeeded Karl Jaspers there as Professor of Philosophy. Gadamer was born in Marburg in 1900, the son of a pharmaceutical chemist. The family moved to Wroclaw (Breslau) in 1902, where Gadamer went to school and where he began studying at the University of Breslau; in 1919 they moved back to Germany. Gadamer wrote his Ph.D. on Plato under Paul Natorp and Nicolai Hartmann in 1922, and in 1923 attended lectures by Husserl and Heidegger in Freiburg. He was invited to the latter's hut that summer, which was the beginning of a lifelong association. Gadamer also studied classical philology in the 1920s and completed his *Habilitation* thesis on Plato's ethics under Heidegger and Paul Friedländer in 1929 (published 1931). He was appointed to the chair of Philosophy at Leipzig University in 1939, where he was Rector 1946–47. In 1949 he took up the chair in Heidelberg, and co-founded the *Philosophische Rundschau* with Helmut Kuhn in 1953. The major intellectual event in Gadamer's life was the publication of *Truth and Method* in 1960, which secured his fame and led to numerous honours and awards, and which changed the philosophical landscape of Germany (and elsewhere) in significant ways. The rest of his published work was in some respects a series of footnotes to this text, though some of his writings on Plato and Aristotle have their own value which is independent of *Truth and Method*.



The facts of Gadamer's life make it clear that he was in full employment in Germany throughout the Nazi period, and recently attention has been focused on just how questionable the role he played in the events of the period might have been. Although his role could hardly be termed heroic, it did not involve the kind of support of the Nazis that irredeemably sullied Heidegger's reputation. Like many basically liberal middle-class Germans he managed to get through quite successfully, concentrating on academic work whose relation to the politics of the day was never very direct. The attempt by Tereza Orozco (*RP* 78) to take a few aspects of some work on Plato and the state written in the Nazi period to construct an image of Gadamer as actually more effective in support of the Nazis than Heidegger is, to my mind, frankly absurd. Orozco's argument culminates in the claim that in *Truth and Method* 'the hermeneutic employment of the experience of Gadamer which was ripened in the Nazi period attains the status of a theory of interpretation with a claim to universality'. Strange that nobody seems to have noticed the important Nazi elements of *Truth and Method* before the link to the Plato essays was established.

A thinker who outlasts the century whose beginning coincided with his birth, and who remains influential to the very end of his life, is clearly exceptional. It is notice-

able, though, that the book which made Gadamer philosophically significant did not appear until his sixtieth year, and that much of the rest of his output is either preparation for, or reflection on, that work. Moreover, *Truth and Method* is hardly a precisely argued, impeccable piece of scholarship. Its philological flaws have been highlighted by Manfred Frank and others, and its arguments are hard to pin down, often seeming vague. One reason the book had such an effect, especially in Germany, was the sheer force of personality of its author, who enacted much of what was best about the book in his teaching and communication with the rest of the academic world. Like many theorists of dialogue, Gadamer admittedly could at times be rather better at the theory than the actual practice of a person-to-person exchange not based on the assumption of prior authority. However, he did manage to help establish a more open-ended mode of philosophical communication that still has much to teach those analytical philosophers who think that point-scoring is the path to philosophical insight. Gadamer's approach also sometimes seems to lead in the direction of an overly 'liberal' failure to argue rigorously, creating an illusion of a deeper consensus where there was none. It could, though, often at the same time, serve as a reminder that in many situations the detail of philosophical disagreement is less important than the preparedness to see that the other may well have a point one has failed to grasp, and that the disagreement may be less important than what is shared by the interlocutors.

Remarks like this would, though, seem to confirm the view that Gadamer was merely an essentially conservative thinker, who could be complacent because he was arguing from a position of power, even though he preached tolerance and understanding of the other. One important focus of philosophy over the last thirty years or so in the European tradition has been on the extent to which a supposed liberal openness to the other was in fact the source of potential repression. Hegel's dialectic of reciprocity is, for example, sometimes seen as excluding the irreducibility of the other. Gadamer's conception does often come very close to that of Hegel. This is, though, hardly an area for making snap judgements. Hegel's philosophy can be read as the swallowing of being by *Geist*, but it can also be read as a reminder that we cannot invoke external, 'immediate' perspectives to establish the validity of our thinking. Gadamer's notion of tradition can be read as a notion intended to shore up the status quo. It can, however, also be read as a necessary reminder that what we are is always more than we can reflectively know, because there is no final perspective on ourselves that is not also reliant on a language which we did not invent, and on background understandings which cannot all be questioned at once. Gadamer's influence on Habermas lay not least in persuading him that any attempt at a critical theory which relies on the assumed superiority of an external perspective on the practices and ideas of others runs the risk of involving an untenable metaphysical claim to authority. The alternative must therefore be based on dialogue and negotiation which cannot rely on any ultimate philosophical support. The monolithic idea of Tradition sometimes imputed to Gadamer may find some support in aspects of his texts, but there is more support for the idea that traditions are active in anything one does, because one is never fully transparent to oneself. This latter point can, of course, be shared by psychoanalysts, Marxists, literary theorists, and many others.

Gadamer's major achievement is generally regarded as the establishing of philosophical hermeneutics as a means of questioning the role of the sciences in modern culture. The aim of his hermeneutic enterprise is to 'seek out the experience of truth which exceeds (*übersteigt*) the realm of control of scientific method ... and to inter-rogate it as to its own legitimation'. Its essential tenet is that, unlike the relationship of the sciences to what they investigate, 'understanding is never a subjective relationship

towards a given “object”, but belongs rather to the effective history, and that means: to the being of that which is understood’. The point is to get away from the supposed subjectivism of Romantic hermeneutics, a subjectivism which has, though, turned out in the light of recent scholarship to be something of a myth. Gadamer comes much closer to Schleiermacher than he thinks, as Gadamer himself came to acknowledge. A key question posed by Gadamer’s version of hermeneutics has to do with the extent to which ‘effective historical consciousness’ is ‘more being (*Sein*) than consciousness (*Bewusstsein*), i.e. more historically effected and determined than conscious in its being effected and determined’. Gadamer’s elaboration of this conception in relation to the historical understanding of works of art is often highly plausible. Rather than see the history of different understandings of works of art and texts as an ongoing history of error and distortion by the concerns of the present, these understandings are regarded as what a work of art is, namely not an object, but something which happens in time in real cultures.

This conception becomes questionable, however, when Gadamer says things like the following: ‘The “subject” of the experience of art, that which remains and persists, is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it, but the work of art itself.’ Instead of a real interaction between the recipient of the work and the work, the work is here reified into something which essentially dominates the individual subject, in the manner of the interpretation of Hegel’s *Geist* which sees it as constituting the truth of individual subjectivity. Equally problematically, Gadamer refuses to accept that we can use a notion of ‘better understanding’ and thinks ‘it is enough to say that one understands *differently, if one understands at all*’. What Gadamer, here too influenced by Heidegger, fails to see is that the world-disclosure present in all understanding and the claims to intersubjective validity necessary to social existence are not wholly separate domains. The point is to understand their interaction in a non-rigid manner, which Gadamer sometimes fails to do.

Like the work of most major thinkers, Gadamer’s is sometimes made into a set of platitudes by some of his adherents. Looked at purely as a set of philosophical texts, his work may look likely to diminish in importance for lack of clear argumentative substance. However, Gadamer’s wider contribution to reestablishing the German philosophical tradition after the Nazi period should not be underestimated: philosophy is a practice that is carried out through more than written texts. Conservative Gadamer may have been, but a radicalism which fails to appreciate the resources in the best conservative thinking will always be prone to self-delusion. The resources in Gadamer’s work for a critique of contemporary audit- and outcomes-driven attitudes in education, for example, are as radical as anything at present being suggested by much of the Left.

A final anecdote about Gadamer the man. An earnest, rather puritanical American researcher wished to meet the great man not very long ago. He was told that Gadamer was rather weary of such visits, but that he could try, and should be sure to take a very good bottle of wine. Gadamer arranged to meet him at nine in the morning. The researcher arrived with the bottle of wine, thinking it would be cherished and reserved for a special occasion. Gadamer’s eyes lit up as he saw the bottle, and he immediately opened it and drank it during the conversation. As the jazz pianist Eubie Blake put it on reaching one hundred on a diet consisting mainly of sweets and beer: ‘If I’d known I was going to live this long, I’d have looked after myself.’ Gadamer knew what he meant.

**Andrew Bowie**