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*Truth and Method as a Classic*

*Abstract:*

This article reflects on *Truth and Method*, the seminal work of Hans Georg Gadamer. The main argument developed here justifies why the work has become a classic in the philosophical literature. Further arguments survey the thematic aspects that make up the book and the importance that *Truth and Method* grants to humanism as a horizon from which the status of the humanities and humanistic knowledge is justified. The article also presents a smooth approach to the main categories of Gadamer's hermeneutics and is an open invitation to re-read this classic.

*Keywords*: "Truth and Method", Hermeneutics, Classic, Consciousness, Anti-realism.

*Verdad y método como un clásico*

*Resumen*

En este artículo se reflexiona sobre "*Verdad y Método*", la obra fundamental de Hans Georg Gadamer. El argumento principal desarrollado justifica por qué la obra ha llegado a ser un clásico de la literatura filosófica. Los argumentos secundarios se detienen en los aspectos temáticos que componen el libro y en la importancia que "*Verdad y Método*" concede al humanismo como horizonte desde el cual se justifica el status de las humanidades y los saberes humanísticos. El artículo presenta también una fluida aproximación a las principales categorías de la hermenéutica gadameriana y es una invitación abierta a la relectura de este clásico.

*Palabras Clave:* "Verdad y Método", Hermenéutica, clásico, conciencia, anti-realismo.

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Fifty years after the publication of *Truth and Method* (1960) there is little doubt that the book has turned into a "classic" of the philosophical literature. This is all the more becoming since *Truth and Method* developed an impressive theory of the classical, certainly unaware that it could one day be applied to itself. In what follows, I would thus like to reflect on the ground-breaking intuitions that make Gadamer's book a classic worth reading and rereading, well aware that every epoch has to sort that out for itself. I will not talk about the possible shortcomings or *zeitbedingte* limitations of the book – Gadamer himself offered a self-criticism on its 25th anniversary, which opens the second volume of his Complete Works edition, tellingly entitled "Truth and Method II"[1] –, since anniversaries are no occasion for nitpicking. It is easier to find faults than to produce a classic.

The first thing that strikes one about the book is that it requires a fair amount of patience, which is in this case the *patior* of the *pathei mathos* (suffering makes wise). It is a thick and rather scholarly book that shuns away from revealing its most important insights in the form of arguments which could be presented in snappy nugget form in short papers or in an abstract, as has become prevalent in the philosophical outpouring of our day. The book needed patience to be brought about in the first place, since Gadamer only published it when he was sixty and after working towards it for decades, the way great books used to be written and perhaps the only way they still can. Endurance is also required from the reader since it is only at the end of the 500page book that one can start to understand what was said at the beginning of the book. It is the "hermeneutical circle" of the volume: it is only at the end, as in many a suspense novel, that one begins to grasp the intent that launched Gadamer's enquiry into the humanities, the experience of art, history and language. It is indeed one of the main lessons of the book that wisdom requires patience, application, temporal distance and the work of history. It is in books such as these that our meaningful experience of the world is put into work (*mise en oeuvre*) and elevated to consciousness. Those books of philosophy and literature are called classics.

[1] H.-G. GADAMER, « Zwischen Phänomenologie und Dialektik – Versuch einer Selbstkritik », in *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 2, Tübingen : Mohr Siebeck, 1986, p. 3-23.

One of the secrets of the book's success lies in this patient conception of education, which *Truth and Method* puts into practice and with which it begins[2]. The book starts off with a powerful defense of humanism in a climate where it was increasingly challenged, including by Gadamer's own master, Martin Heidegger. The basic tenet of humanism is that knowledge isn't only a matter of methodical mastery and that it doesn't only depend on objective distance, technology and mathematical accuracy. All of this scientific know-how is fine and good and has been rightly celebrated in our avid scientific culture. But it certainly isn't the only form of knowledge, nor does it really offer all that much wisdom, especially when it is applied to questions where mathematical certainty is impossible. We also learn, indeed we learn perhaps even more when we strive to acquire a general education or *Bildung*, thus partaking into the discussion about the ends of human life that has gone on well before us and to which there are a host of answers, making up our open-ended cultural traditions. This is the type of education, Gadamer argues, that is achieved through the human sciences, the *humaniora*, literally the "more human" disciplines. Gadamer doesn't shy away from revealing his favorite disciplines: philosophy, to be sure, since it is always philosophical insight one gains from education or *Bildung*, literature, classical philology, history and art history, and he even alludes to the fields of jurisprudence and theology as models of an understanding rooted in practical concerns. One could argue, or bemoan, that this scope is limited, that it doesn't take into account the social sciences, ideology critique, and the like. But aren't these also *human* sciences in the best sense of the word? Don't they *also* belong to the vast realm of philosophy, literature and history? Doesn't everything? Why is it that the *humaniora* fail to acknowledge the evidence that they were nurtured in the cradle of humanism? It is, Gadamer rightly and profoundly diagnoses, because our scientific day and age has afflicted them with a nagging bad conscience when it confronted them with the question: what concrete mathematical and objective results can those chattering sciences really deliver? Hence the rush toward the use and overuse of ever refined objectifying methods in the humanities, where statistics play an important role, for instance, since they sound scientific. But are the humanities only scientific to the extent that they provide stats, conduct field work and surveys yielding

[2] See my recent piece on « Gadamer's Theory and Experience of Education : Learning that the Other May Be Right », in P. FAIRFIELD (dir), *Education, Dialogue and Hermeneutics*, London/New York : Continuum Press, 2011, 5-20.

mathematical knowledge? Here Gadamer simply says: come on! Is this why we read books, learn languages and study history? The inferiority complex of the humanities is understandable, given that there is indeed a lot of mindless blabber in them (as if, lest we forget, "science" itself were immune against that), but it is on the whole unjustified. By their mimicry of their exact sciences, they misunderstand themselves and their singular contribution to knowledge. Gadamer's analysis is here most subtle: by claiming to escape their own historical nature and espousing the conquering ethos of exact science, the humanities that have "gone methodological" actually fall prey to the scientism of our time, thus confirming Gadamer's judgment about the indebtedness of all knowledge to history.

The idea that it is something else that we learn from history, from tradition and the classics viewed as models, was for Gadamer the basic conviction of humanism. Isn't it odd, Gadamer asks, with an ounce of mischief, that the *humaniora* have forgotten all about humanism? It is their tragic self-misunderstanding and Gadamer's book masterfully succeeds in reminding all the practitioners of the humanities what it is they are doing. The aim of the humanities is not to produce methodically assured results, comparable to the ones we can garner in the exact sciences; it is to bring about *Bildung*, i.e. the formation of the individual. Limited as we are, we are beings in need of education, learning and forming. This occurs through the encounter with the tradition and the learning of languages, most specifically with the founding languages of our culture and thinking. This encounter broadens our limited horizon. By reading the classics, be they ancient, modern or contemporary, just as *Truth and Method* is a classic, i.e. a major reference for our self-understanding, one acquires more horizons, more "perspective" on things, and in so doing, we come to realize how little we know. The cultivated individual for Gadamer is not the pedant who can proudly display a vast array of cultural tidbits, it is the one who, thanks to the encounter with tradition, is aware of his own limits and thus remains open to other, more encompassing perspectives. By this, says Gadamer, with the help of Hegel and all of humanism, we elevate ourselves a little above our particularity. Through this effort we reach a universality that is not that of the law of nature, but the scope we gain by overcoming our particularity: we learn to put things in perspective, starting with our own very limited one. Out of this we come to develop better judgment and a more distanced sense of things. This is what we hope to achieve in the humanities.

An analogous type of knowledge takes place in the art experience, Gadamer compellingly shows. After his tremendous defense of humanism, Gadamer's reflection on the art experience constitutes another high point of *Truth and Method*, which one can only recommend to anyone wanting to know what the enigmatic art experience is all about. It is the work of a true art lover but who isn't too preoccupied with aesthetic theory. Gadamer's first insight is indeed that the art experience is mostly not an artistic affair, but primarily an encounter with reality and truth. He strongly deconstructs the notion that art is only about art, that works of art should be the object of a specific "aesthetic" feeling and criticism. Yes, there is artistic mastery and genius in works of art, but it disappears behind what the artwork has to say. *Ars latet arte sua*, art disappears in the art that enchants. With his provocative genius, Gadamer reinvests the notion of *Spiel* (play, game) to sort out what happens in the confrontation with a work of art: it is not we who are engaging in a mere playful exercise, it is the artwork itself which takes us into its play, eliciting an answer which we can call an interpretation, which is as much an understanding of the world as of ourselves. This understanding arises out of the dialogue with the artwork, where the initiative stems from the work itself. It "works" on us, as it were, bringing us up in its reality, which is actually our reality, but which is transformed (*verwandelt*) and revealed by the work of art. As in humanist knowledge, our reaction, or execution of the art piece in the performing arts, which function here as a model for Gadamer, is part and parcel of what happens in the work of art.

One cannot engage an artwork without being touched and in the best case scenario be transformed (*verwandelt* also) by it. Every artwork tells me, Gadamer says, after Rilke and Mozart: "you must change your life!" Art brings about a transforming experience of reality and thus of truth, yet of a truth in which we always partake. By changing and challenging us, art imparts us a wisdom that doesn't conform to the prevailing scientific model. With these insights, Gadamer helps us rediscover what art is, even if he goes against the grain of what many artists (to say nothing about philosophers of art) claim to say about their art. But, as Gadamer constantly reminds us, authors are not always their best interpreters. Art reaches much farther than philosophers of art and even artists think.

The same type of transforming knowledge can be found in the field of history, to which the centerpiece of *Truth and Method* is devoted. The theme of history has been

pressed upon the humanities, and indeed our civilization, ever since the emergence of the historical consciousness in the 18th, but mostly in the 19th century. It finds its epitome in Hegel's vision that the spirit is only at work in history, through which it gains a consciousness of itself. This vision reappears in a weaker version in Dilthey, but with a new twist: Hegel is right to say that the spirit only unfolds historically in its quest for itself, and it remains the purpose of the rightly named *Geisteswissenschaften* to study this journey, but how, asks Dilthey, can this historical knowledge be called a rigorous science? In spite of his romantic inspirations, Dilthey's question has a positivist ring to it since the idea of rigorous knowledge is urged upon him by the exact sciences. Dilthey would probably disagree, since his intent was to safeguard the uniqueness of the humanities, but his search for a methodological basis for the humanities, Gadamer argues, perhaps a bit harshly, would nevertheless betray the seduction of the scientific model. Here one can say that Gadamer is Dilthey without the methodological glasses.

What Gadamer challenges is the silent assumption that history would constitute an "impediment" of sorts for the human sciences. The question of the 19th and 20th century was always: how can we reach knowledge *in spite of* our history and the relative nature of our knowledge? Are there methods to do so? This is a distorting question for Gadamer. To strive to overcome history is to miss the point that human sciences only exist in the first place *because* there is history. Non historical being would not study the humanities or seek for understanding. To hope for methodological and thus for a kind of non-relative knowledge in the humanities is to misjudge not only the *raison d'être* of the humanities, but the nature of history and historical beings. This is why the aim of Gadamer is to emphasize historicity, to turn it into a hermeneutical principle instead of viewing it as a mere enemy.

Certainly, some have claimed that the emergence of a historical consciousness in and of itself would enable us to "overcome" or control our historical determination: to know ourselves as historically determined would enable us to know our historical determination and break out of it, as it were. The emergence of historical consciousness unquestionably marks a new phenomenon, but it doesn't interrupt or radically alter our belongingness to history since we remain finite and thus historical beings. Why is it that one desperately seeks to overpower or circumvent historicity, as if this were a fight we could win? This

pursuit is itself a reflection of its age and its idea that true knowledge cannot depend on historical presuppositions since this would lead to relativism. Gadamer thoroughly calls into question this identification of the historical nature of our knowledge with relativism. In this regard, Gadamer's classic gains relevance for the debates surrounding postmodernism and relativism which have sprung up after his opus appeared in 1960.

For Gadamer it is not true that everything becomes relative if one raises historicity to a hermeneutical principle. He finds the best confirmation of this in the evidence of classics in philosophy, literature, and all fields of knowledge. What are classics? They are works that stand out, literally that "have class" and provide orientation in our disciplines and our lives. No discipline, no education is without them, be it only by the selection of books and disciplines one deems worthy of study. But how do classical references come about? They certainly do not fall from the sky. They are themselves the fruits of history. It is the working of history, the *Wirkungsgeschichte*, the distance of time which slowly establishes works as classics, i.e. as milestones in the field of historical knowledge. But the canon of the classics does not remain rigid throughout the ages. On the contrary, every present has to redefine it, but it can only do so out of its own appreciation of history, i.e. of what its references, guideposts and classics are. Insight, Gadamer says in a splendid metaphor, happens as a "fusion of horizons" between the past and the present, between the knower and what one knows. The present and past are always at play in knowledge, but in such a manner that they become almost undistinguishable. To know this is to develop what Gadamer calls a hermeneutical consciousness: when we become aware of the working of history and of the present in our knowledge and Being, we can also become attuned to the misunderstandings that are possible. We thus become aware of our finitude. It is this acknowledgment of our finitude which leads, Gadamer hopes, to more openness.

The dialogue with tradition that we are finds its expression in language, which forms the focus of the third and final part of *Truth and Method*. Gadamer's views on language are incredibly subtle, so much so that they have been perhaps less understood than his ideas on the work of history in the second part (but they too have been widely misunderstood[3]). In the same manner he fought against the negative understanding of history and historicity in

[3] See for instance my « Nihilistic or Metaphysical Consequences of Hermeneutics? », in J. MALPAS and S. ZABALA (dir.), *Consequences of Hermeneutics*, Evanston, Il.: Northwestern University Press, 2010, 190-201.

the second part, he takes aim at the view that sees in the linguistic expression of our understanding a "limitation". Yes, many philosophers and social scientists argue, our understanding is framed by language, i.e. by linguistic schemes and frameworks, but they tend to view this as a barrier of sorts, as if language would impress its schemes on the things themselves, which would remain unknowable. This has given rise to two opposite views of our belongingness to language, which are predominant today: realism and antirealism. Antirealism claims that reality is not knowable as it is in itself, because our linguistic schemes are stamped upon it. Pragmatism and postmodernism draw this hasty conclusion. Realism, for its part, argues that there is a reality "beyond language" which we can understand. Most have seen Gadamer, erroneously I believe, as an antirealist, including many Gadamer scholars. Fewer have claimed he was a realist[4], but mostly did so by arguing that language did indeed provide a reliable "view" of reality[5]. Those are interesting and to a large extent ongoing debates, which have been sparked by the classic that is *Truth and Method*. But according to Gadamer, they share a common premise inherited from nominalism: namely that language amounts to a "view" of things and an intellectual grasp of reality. In this perspective, it is easy to understand why the "antirealists" would tend to view language as a prism "impeding" (or framing) access to reality as it is in itself.

Gadamer sees in this a most stifling view of language, since it only considers it as an instrument to express thoughts that would have been developed without language. Not only is thought without language unconceivable, language is much more than an instrument for the ventilation of our thoughts. It is less our language, Gadamer sometimes writes, than the language of the things themselves, who offer themselves in language. It is less about us than about the things that become present thanks to language. Language is thus not a confinement which would make it impossible for us to speak of the world of objects "out there". It is only through language that things are there in the first place.

Far from being a restriction on understanding, language, he refreshingly contends, is open to everything that can be understood. Finite beings as we are, there are limits to our understanding, no doubt, but they can be extended: language can always find new ways to

[4] See B. WACHTERHAUSER, « Gadamers's Realism : The 'Belongingness of Word and Reality », in B. WACHTERHAUSER (ed.), Hermeneutics and Truth, Evanston : Northwestern University Press, 1994, 148-171.
[5] *Ibid*., p. 156.

express things, even for that which appears to resist understanding. For it is in language that we try to say what is and why it is that something withstands understanding and thus linguisticality. Language happily refutes the claim that it is limited by the mere fact that this claim can itself only be uttered in language. The limits of language, on which the later Gadamer insisted perhaps more than the author of *Truth and Method*, are boundaries which language can reflect and attempt to overcome.

This is the grandiose thesis about the universality of language in *Truth and Method*: everything there is can only be understood to the extent that it can be put into language. Language is open to everything which can be understood. Language, in sum, is not a limitation; it is the light of our understanding. This generous view entails the universal possibility of translation: every foreign meaning can, to a certain degree, be translated into our language[6], just as our stammering language can be rendered in other ways. This implies, refreshingly also, that cultures can understand one another and open themselves to what is considered foreign thanks to language. In this age of globalization and intercultural dialogue this is one of the precious insights of the class act that is *Truth and Method*.

[6] This insight can also be found in the early work of Paul Ricœur, most notably in the second volume of his *Philosophy of the Will* (*Finitude et culpabilité*, nouvelle édition, Paris, Aubier, 1988, p. 77) published in 1960, the same as *Truth and Method* : « il n'est point de signe de l'homme radicalement incompréhensible, point de langue radicalement intraduisible, pas d'œuvre d'art à quoi mon goût ne puisse s'étendre »