

# University of Dayton Review

---

Volume 17  
Number 1 *Proceedings of the 11th Annual  
Philosophy Colloquium: Philosophical  
Hermeneutics*

---

Article 5

5-1-1984

## Between Truth and Method: Gadamer and the Problem of Justification in Interpretative Practices

Stephen Watson  
*California State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr>

---

### Recommended Citation

Watson, Stephen (1984) "Between Truth and Method: Gadamer and the Problem of Justification in Interpretative Practices," *University of Dayton Review*: Vol. 17: No. 1, Article 5.  
Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol17/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Dayton Review by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact [mschlange1@udayton.edu](mailto:mschlange1@udayton.edu), [ecommons@udayton.edu](mailto:ecommons@udayton.edu).

# BETWEEN TRUTH AND METHOD: GADAMER AND THE PROBLEM OF JUSTIFICATION IN INTERPRETATIVE PRACTICES

Stephen Watson

Within the hermeneutic tradition, and what remains left now as its trace, there has always been what may now be called a certain classical dissonance — classical, because it is a certain delay of an epistemological research program whose grids shaped the rise of modern thought. And yet, the practice of hermeneutics, of textual *interpretation* has always left those grids perpetually undone.

In the Compendium of 1819 Schleiermacher gives two variations of the goal of hermeneutics, two heuristic goals for hermeneutic practices. A good deal of attention (by Gadamer, among others) has been paid to what Schleiermacher called the “negative formula,” (to avoid misunderstanding) which universalizes the hermeneutical problem. As a result of it hermeneutics is no longer seen as the narrow organon for deciphering obscure texts, but a general investigation of *Verstehen* itself, one which sees the problem of understanding, now, as essentially one of interpretation. On the other hand, little enough attention is paid to Schleiermacher’s *positive* formulation of its task:

- IX. The rules for the art of interpretation must be developed from a positive formula, and this is: “the historical and divinatory, objective and subjective reconstruction of a given statement.”<sup>1</sup>

In this Schleiermacher returns to the grids of classical thought to found his project. Interpretation is a reconstruction; it is the re-presentation of the text’s appearance — in reverse order. The interpretation *fuses* with the text, ‘objectively’ grasping the nature of the linguistic heritage it represents and subjectively grasping the statement “as a fact in the person’s mind.” The interpretation is to return to the immediacy of the creative act, just as Descartes was to return to immediate “simple and distinct” truths. And, ultimately this was to be achieved by a divination moving beyond the expressed sign, just as Descartes would have us by the *Via intuiti* found reason in the immediate, or Bacon, who introduced the philosopheme of foundations into the theater of the Enlightenment, hoped to “lead men to the particulars themselves.” In either case we have what Sellars has called the myth of the given,<sup>2</sup> or Derrida, the metaphysics of simple presence:<sup>3</sup> either the immediacy of the truths of reason (of mental meanings) is invoked or that of the world, of sense particulars. By this same myth, by an essential divination of the author’s meaning, Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics claims that there is ultimately no conflict between our practices, idioms, theories, grammars, genres etc. and those of the author; no difference between my idiolect and his. Reason and truth remain everywhere one and the same. What started out conditioning meaning with interpretation ends by appealing to a myth that would, through an objective and subjective reconstruction, make interpretation unconditional.

Opposing this strain of hermeneutics which would lead us directly to the *science* of interpretation, one turns now almost as directly to the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, who belongs to that other movement of the nineteenth century that had seen history as a proliferation of difference: the demise of man, classically understood, the demise of Reason, and the demise of the con-

ceptual bases which had assured stability in Western thought.

The biggest fable of all is the fable of knowledge. One would like to know what things-in-themselves are; but behold there are no things-in-themselves! But even supposing there were an in-itself, an unconditioned thing, it would for that very reason be unknowable! Something unconditioned cannot be known; otherwise it would not be unconditioned.<sup>4</sup>

One can believe the fable of the world of unconditioned truth and determinacy only by a peculiar form of 'forgetfulness.' The world of the true is a fable in which "a group of phenomena (are) selected and united by an interpreting being."<sup>5</sup> There are no unequivocal 'facts,' no simple 'truths,' but only the chaos of an infinite play of interpretations — never undone or reduced.

We would not be wrong, I think, in claiming the site of this conflict between meaning and interpretation, truth and context, observation and theory, objective and subjective, etc. as the site of post-classical hermeneutics. In fact, I think it is the site of a much more general phenomenon that is post-classical or post-modern. And, whether it is played out under the guise of hermeneutics or not may be insignificant. But it is interesting that a variety of figures in fields originally alien to this think it may be important now to play out their questions in relation to it: e.g. Barthes, Derrida, Rorty, Hacking, Fish, Hartman, or Kuhn.

This does not mean that hermeneutics has made an easy peace with this conflict, if it has made what can justifiably be called advances towards solving it. To bring both those advances and their hesitancy to light I would like to examine here briefly the relationship between interpretation, truth, and justification in what has become the *locus classicus* of twentieth century hermeneutic theory, Hans-George Gadamer's *Truth and Method*.<sup>6</sup>

But to begin with, such a reading should itself be legitimated, since it is all too rarely read this way. Indeed Gadamer himself seems almost to charge Emilio Betti with *eisegesis* for asking whether he has not raised the *questio juris* in this work on truth and method. But, that it is no small matter to Gadamer can be gleaned from his opening statement to one of the central sections of this work:

Thus, we are able to formulate the central question of a truly historical hermeneutics, epistemologically its fundamental question, namely: where is the ground of the legitimacy of prejudices? What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from all the countless ones which it is the undeniable task of the critical reason to overcome?<sup>7</sup>

Unpacked, this passage tells a lot. First of all, it manifests not only a concern for the question of justification, but it does so in a way that is embedded in the language of the Enlightenment. Gadamer is here concerned with the *foundational* questions for a hermeneutics, ones which involve the *grounds* for the legitimacy of interpretations. Moreover, even these are couched in the language of the Enlightenment which both Descartes and Bacon, again, share. We are involved with an investigation of our own *prejudices*. However, the notion of prejudice itself has undergone a transformation, one which marks for Gadamer a fundamental advance in hermeneutics. Against the Enlightenment not all prejudices are to be exorcised from a legitimate (i.e. justified) hermeneutic practice.

Rather, there is an attempt on Gadamer's part to take the Nietzsche/Schleiermacher dilemma by the horns. Gadamer has given up the attempt to found hermeneutics in a psychologistic fusion between the intentions of reader and writer by means of a 'divination,' as had Schleiermacher, or through empathy, as had Dilthey. Rather, what occurs in the hermeneutic event is a

## Watson: Between Truth and Method: Gadamer and the Problem of Justification

fusion in the discursive horizons of reader and writer and in particular what those horizons disclose — and thereby the interpretative practice is committed to the contingency which arises in their differences.

This means, however, that in the end no interpretation ever reaches an epistemic or justificatory zero point, one never arrives at the null context, since what gets disclosed depends upon the conditions of its disclosure (the interpreter's context). There are, in short, no presupposition-less assertions. Neither the interpreter nor the interpreted ever completely surpass the realm of their conditions, their facticity. It is just this that forces, Gadamer claims, a reformation in the Enlightenment's position on truth and method.

Presupposition, pre-judices (*Vor-urteilen*) are not something best dissolved, but the *conditio sine-qua-non* of assertion. Unlike Descartes, we cannot return to an immediate foundation. We are not in a position that we can hope to "set aside all the opinions which (we) had previously accepted among (our) beliefs and start from the very beginning (*commencer tout de nouveau des les fondements*)."<sup>8</sup> Without Descartes' rational archimedean point, prejudice cannot be easily identified as reason's contrary, simply as an idol which is the source of error. In fact the possibilities which any given tradition opens up are not just those for falsity, but those for 'truth' as well. Part of making an interpretation is to bring one's roots along with it — context, presuppositions, paradigms, background assumptions, methods, conceptual frameworks, etc.

To all this, Emilio Betti has sounded a familiar 'Western' refrain (one which extends all the way back at least to Aristotle's distinction between fact and reasoned fact, but also occurs more recently in the distinction between the *quid juris* and *quid facti* which structures Kant's *Transcendental Deduction*). In tying reason and tradition together, in tying *Urteil* to *Vorurteil*, in refusing to allow — at least in principle — the ideal of presuppositionless truth, it appears that Gadamer's *Truth and Method* destroys both the substantives that are connected in its title. The search for objectivity becomes lost in an irrationalism which relativizes truth and delivers the question of method in a Hegelian fashion to a process which essentially takes place behind the back of consciousness; the process by which it is tied to a context.<sup>9</sup>

What is Gadamer's response here? In a letter written directly to Betti (parts of which appear in *Truth and Method*), Gadamer has presented a response which related directly to the ambiguity at hand:

Fundamentally, I am *not proposing a method*, but I am describing *what is the case*. That it is as I describe it cannot, I think, be seriously questioned . . . . In other words, I consider the only scientific thing is to *recognize what is*, instead of starting from what ought to be or could be. Hence I am trying to go beyond the concept of method held by modern science (which retains its limited justification) and to envisage in a fundamentally universal way what *always* happens.<sup>10</sup>

Read within the classical metanarrative on rationality this is doubtless a curious response. In a sense it starts out *not* refuting the claim that the analyses of *Truth and Method* reside on the level of the *qaestio facti*, on what is held, but affirming it. Gadamer has from the beginning been interested in the description of *what happens* in the hermeneutic event, in "what is the case." Still, a new qualifier is added at the end of the passage; Gadamer moves from "what is the case" to "what always is the case," to "what always happens." And, Gadamer's careful voyage between the Scylla of the Enlightenment's search for *les fondements* and the Charybdis of relativism must be sought here.

In this regard what follows in Gadamer's response should not be left out either, since it pro-

jects an even more forceful irony upon the classical text.

But what does Betti say to this? That I am, then, limiting the hermeneutical problem to the *questio facti* ('phenomenologically,' 'descriptively', and do not at all pose the *questio juris*. As if Kant's raising of the *questio facti* was intended to prescribe to the pure natural sciences what they ought to be, rather than to seek to justify their transcendental possibility as they already were.<sup>11</sup>

What in effect happens here is a citation of Kant made while Gadamer is wholly involved in 'overcoming,' in 'rehabilitating' Kant's distinction. The natural sciences "as they already were" contained an Enlightenment-based view of justification that could be wholly accommodated within the *questio facti/questio juris* distinction — precisely the one that Gadamer's 'concretization' has put into question. That is, Kant's view of rationality and the fact/reason distinction was not prescriptive of the natural sciences precisely because it was imported from a myth already operative in them — one for which now Gadamer tells Betti he is willing only to allow "limited justification." Kant did not face Gadamer's question. Normative and descriptive simply coincided. Reason and Science really ought to be just as Descartes and Newton said, who believed objectivity in the end could be easily had without the interference of their own presuppositions or practices. They knew, in effect, more than any interpretation could provide.

And yet Betti's (and Kant's, and Aristotle's) question remains. If Gadamer has enlarged the classical, transcendental account by embedding it within its context and tradition, thereby forcing a certain contingency upon it, what right does its claim to truth contain? If truth and method are mutually limiting, do they in the end cancel one another out? Is relativism the final word?

What is Gadamer's response? As has been seen, if he does not give up doing philosophy in the modern mode and its search for foundations, he will not rest with its a-historical, de-prejudiced myth of the return to origins, to immediacy. Reason and authority, tradition, and context cannot be simply opposed. The intrinsic involvement of reason in history, its character as a finite interpretation, mitigates against this simple abstract opposition. We can neither, therefore, escape the ties of 'traditionality' nor simply hand rationality over to it.

It seems to me, however, that there is no such unconditioned antithesis between tradition and reason. However problematical the conscious restoration of traditions or the conscious creation of new traditions may be, the romantic faith in the 'growth of tradition,' before which all reason must remain silent, is just as prejudiced as and is fundamentally like the Enlightenment. The fact is that tradition is constantly an element of freedom and history itself.<sup>12</sup>

Gadamer refuses to abandon the failures of the Enlightenment for those of Romanticism. He refuses, that is, having recognized the impossibility of escaping history to simply submit rationality to destiny, to fate, to 'progress,' to an overriding *Telos*. But then what is the relation between reason and historical practices?

Reason must be seen as linked with a tradition — *essentially*. As Heidegger said before Gadamer, if we see this simply as a limitation on a faculty, we have misunderstood it from the ground up.<sup>13</sup> Traditions are now the *conditio sine qua non* of whatever it is that we are to call 'knowledge.' Still, what is disclosed on the basis of a tradition is *not* simply a *function* of the latter. It is not a simple processing of information through a unique table of categories — if this were the case, the diachronics of categorical transformation would become incomprehensible, a

makes us ready to choose between them and eager to think that together they might express a single truth. That truth, roughly put, would be that what Gadamer and Habermas have jointly said brings into focus the inherently ambiguous position we are really in, a position in which our culture always appears to be coming out of a world into which it is always falling back. The utter paradox of this assertion may be relieved when we consider that reflections at this level of horizontal orientation do not as readily come into straightforward contradiction as do conflicting assertions about simple matters of fact. Indeed, it would seem that Hegel's own deepest intuitions, expressed at the very outset of our era, center on this same ambiguity. The artificial medium of his ontology was designed to relieve us of that uncertainty. Its collapse, therefore, leaves us with ambiguity once more, and perhaps all the more ready to acknowledge that, if anything does, that ambiguity itself forms the constitutive horizon of our experience.<sup>29</sup>

**California State University  
Fullerton**

1 An expanded and revised version of this paper appears in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (1982).

2 The give and take of the Gadamer-Habermas debate is summarized, from a position sympathetic to Gadamer, in David C. Hoy, *The Critical Circle* (Berkeley: University of California, 1978), pp. 117 ff. The German sources are adequately given there.

3 Gadamer's linkage to Hegel centers on his conviction that Heidegger properly articulates Dilthey's just criticisms of Hegel's absolutism and thus saves Hegel's best insights. Cf. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1972), pp. 205-217 for the Dilthey-Hegel relation; for the Heidegger-Hegel relation over and through Dilthey, cf. "Hegel und Heidegger" in Gadamer, *Hegels Dialektik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1971), pp. 83-96. Habermas' connection to Hegel is the outcome of the Frankfurt School's resumption of Young Hegelian "critical theory." Stress is laid on the "negative dialectic" of the *Phenomenology* on the ground that Hegel's claim to make philosophical critique into science is misplaced. The arms length at which Habermas holds Marx derives from his view that Marx inherits Hegel's illusions about science. Cf. Habermas, J., *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon, 1968), pp. 7-24 for Hegel; 25-42 for Marx.

4 Marx puts this point accurately and eloquently when he writes at the beginning of the *Grundrisse*: "The human being is in the most literal sense a *zoon politikon* — not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society."

5 The systematic role of the French Revolution in Hegel's thought is sensitively considered by Ritter, J., *Hegel und die Französische Revolution* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1965) and Riedel, M., *Bürgerliche Gesellschaft und Staat bei Hegel* (Neuwied und Berlin: Luchterhand, 1970). Habermas' suspicion that Hegel's approach to the French Revolution is sophistically weighted toward conservatism is argued in "Hegel's Critique of the French Revolution," in Habermas, J., *Theory and Practice*, translated by J. Viertel from the German fourth edition (Boston: Beacon, 1973), pp. 121-141.

6 Hegel, G.W.F., Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*.

7 In the Introduction to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel takes pains to defend his philosophy of history as a rational successor to the fideistic vision of Augustine. We can know what the latter thought was hidden forever in the mind of God. Hegel believed he could thus produce a real theodicy, a justification of the ways of God to man.

8 This transformation is explained in Gadamer, "Hegel und Heidegger," *op. cit.*

9 Recent interpretations of Heidegger have been clear on this point. Earlier readings tended to take Heidegger more individualistically and existentially in the conventional sense. Cf. Haugeland, J., and Dreyfus, H., "Husserl and Heidegger: Philosophy's Last Stand," in Murray, M., *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale, 1978), pp. 222-239.

10 Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, *op. cit.*, pp. 250-269.

11 Gadamer, "Replik," [to his critics] in *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik*, ed. Apel, K-O. *et al.*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971), p. 307.

12 Cf. Gadamer's "Nachwort" to the third edition of *Wahrheit und Methode*, *op. cit.*, p. 518. Gadamer and his followers have thought that the functions which Habermas wants a theory/practice unity to perform can be achieved by reappropriating the Aristotelian idea of *phronesis* or practical wisdom. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 519-20; Hoy, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-61; Bubner, R., "Theorie und Praxis — eine nachhegelsche Abstraktion" (Frankfurt: Klosterman, 1972).

13 The *locus classicus* is Hegel's chapter on master and slave in the *Phenomenology*, together with Marx's 1844 *Manuscript* on "Hegel's Dialectic."

14 Habermas, J., "Der Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik," in Bubner, R., *et al.*, eds., *Hermeneutik und Dialektik I* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1970), p. 80-81. The apparent contrast between a social world admittedly constituted by speech, and the natural world constituted by labor has suggested to Gadamer that Habermas falls into a naturalistic realism which has plagued Marxism from the beginning. For it seems to imply that we can "constitute" the natural world without speech. Habermas' later formulation of critical theory as theory of comprehensive speech competence has, therefore, given Gadamer and his adherents the impression that Habermas is backpedalling. Cf. Hoy, *op. cit.*, p. 124. In fairness to Habermas it should be noted that he claims only that Gadamer's model of dialogal speech cannot do justice to the need for precise (monological) speech in eliciting the intelligible structure of nature. Seen from this perspective the dispute turns on whether such precise languages are manipulative, regulative and technical, as Gadamer, following Heidegger, would hold; or constitutive, as Habermas argues. If the latter, then Gadamer's universalization of hermeneutics, which is based on the dialogal structure of natural language, fails; if the former, then Habermas' contrast between the two spheres, which I take to be the very center of his argument, collapses.

15 On positivism as an illusory fulfillment of classical ideal of *theoria* the most important text is Habermas' inaugural lecture "Knowledge and Human Interests," printed as the appendix to *Knowledge and Human Interests*, *op. cit.*, pp. 301-317. On the connection of these illusions with late capitalism, cf. Habermas, J., *Legitimation Crisis*, translated from the 1973 German edition by McCarthy, T. (London: Heineman, 1976); "Legitimation Problems in Late Capitalism," *Social Research*, Vol. 40, 1973; "Between Philosophy and Science: Marxism as Critique," in *Theory and Practice*, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-252.

16 Habermas, J., "Some Difficulties in the Attempt to Link Theory and Practice," in Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

17 Habermas comes to acknowledge only a use of "quasi-transcendental argument," an admission of great importance but one which I cannot go into here. Cf. "Some Difficulties in the Attempt to Link Theory and Practice," *op. cit.*, p. 14.

18 Habermas, "Knowledge and Human Interests," *op. cit.*, pp. 308-311.

19 Habermas, *Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976); "Toward a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism," in *Theory and Society*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1975).

20 "Knowledge and Human Interests," *op. cit.*, pp. 309-10.

21 "Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften," (Tübingen, 1967) pp. 174-176; "Knowledge and Human Interests," *op. cit.*, pp. 310-311; "Der Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik," *op. cit.*, pp. 101-103.

22 "Some Difficulties in the Attempt to Link Theory and Practice," *op. cit.*, p. 17. The reference to Kant is to the essay "What is Enlightenment?" Cf. "Knowledge and Human Interests," *op. cit.*, p. 310-311.

23 "Nachwort" to *Wahrheit und Methode*, 3rd ed., pp. 529-30; 533-34; *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.

24 The reference to Robespierre is in *Wahrheit und Methode*, 3rd ed., p. 534. It should be recognized that in "Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften," *op. cit.*, p. 174, Habermas had already called Gadamer a new Burke.

25 For Habermas' "subjectivism," cf. Gadamer, "The Scope and Power of Reflection," *op. cit.*, where it is linked with the "dogmatic" (= arbitrary) conviction that one has understood the world, whereas others haven't.

26 Habermas takes up the subject of psychoanalysis and liberation in the later chapters of *Knowledge and Human Interests*, and rearticulates his views in terms of his emerging theory of undistorted communication in "Der Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik." Gadamer expresses his reservations in his "Replik" and in "The Scope and Power of Reflection," *op. cit.*, pp. 40-42.

27 In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, *op. cit.*, in a footnote to p. 295, Habermas associates Gadamer with Nietzsche in this defect. Ground for this charge is prepared in *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*, *op. cit.*, pp. 171ff.

28 Habermas raised this sort of argument against Gadamer in *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*, p. 176. Surrounding this is a deeper suspicion that Gadamer cannot argue his hermeneutical theory except by way of a disguised transcendental argument. The argument, fully expressed, would then force Gadamer to acknowledge possibilities of reflective awareness that his substantive views preclude. If, on the other hand, Gadamer rejects this horn of the dilemma and grounds his own discourse as a contribution to the shifting adjustment of tradition, he would seem to open himself to the charge of relativism that Habermas is waiting to raise. This is perhaps Habermas' strongest argument against Gadamer, just as Gadamer's lies in the charge of latent naturalistic realism in Habermas. Cf. note 13, above.

29 I am grateful for helpful comments from Frank Verges, John Moraldo, John Caputo, David Ingraham, and William Maker.