

Лексия 5 Hermeneutics and the Experience

A.

B. Hermeneutics and the Experience of Belonging: Hans-Georg Gadamer

As a student of Heidegger, Gadamer has extended and elaborated on existential ontological hermeneutics. While recognizing the contribution of Heidegger to the development of hermeneutic philosophy, he also saw a possible deep abyss into which Heideggerian ontology would lead. This is the possibility of a total annihilation of any effort to search for the foundation in the human sciences, going beyond the Kantian methodological ideal, the Diltheyan concept of spirit, and the Husserlian formulation of transcendental consciousness purified by phenomenological reduction (Gadamer, 1982). This implies the character of Gadamer's hermeneutic enterprise as an effort to formulate a new foundation of the human sciences and human experience of the world without falling into historical regression. This character in his enterprise seems to make his task difficult but significant.

A fundamental and thus decisive presupposition of modern sciences, especially the human sciences, for Gadamer is an "alienating distancing" (*Verfremdung*) which has contributed to the destruction of our primordial relation to "belonging" (*Zugehörigkeit*). Thus in Gadamer's eyes, the important task of hermeneutics was to overcome this alienating distancing in human sciences through rehabilitation of our experience of belonging. Throughout his major work *Truth and Method*, he basically pursued this task in the three spheres of our experience: aesthetics, history, and language. In the introduction of *Truth and Method*, he expressed this character in his hermeneutic enterprise as follows:

Hermeneutics developed here is not ... a methodology of human sciences, but an attempt to understand what the human sciences truly are, beyond their methodological self-consciousness, and what connects them with the totality of our experience of the world. (Gadamer, 1982, p. xiii)

Gadamer's effort to unfold the meaning of prejudice as the inescapable condition of understanding seems to have a central significance in this task not only for the rehabilitation of the experiences of belonging but also for overcoming the alienating distancing in the human sciences. He brought into question the

fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment in terms of “the prejudice against prejudices” (Gadamer, 1982, p. 239-240). Addressing the current pejorative status of prejudice, as “unfounded judgment,” he reminded us of the Latin etymology of prejudice, not as false judgment, but as “the idea that it can have a positive and a negative value” (p. 240). Gadamer showed the positive side of prejudice in understanding through Heidegger’s forestructure of understanding and its circularity. According to Heidegger, the circularity of understanding, not merely that between parts and whole in Schleiermacher’s sense, but also that between foremeaning and new meaning, underlies all human understanding. Heidegger warned us not to see this circularity merely as a vicious one, for if we do so, every understanding would be misunderstood from the ground up. Instead of getting out of this circle, for Heidegger, we need to come into it in a right way, that is, in the way sensitive and open to the “things themselves” rather than staying in “fancies or popular conceptions,” because there is “a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing” in this circle

(1962, p. 195). Gadamer described this structure as follows:

A person who tries to understand a text is always performing an art of projecting. He projects before himself a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the latter emerges merely because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. The working-out of this foreproject, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there. (1982, p. 236)

In this ontological structure of circularity in our understanding, the methodological ideal or scientific objectivism can be captured as a derivative of this circular structure of understanding, one among other prejudices. And this “prejudice against prejudices” also can be viewed as a prejudice which delegitimizes other prejudices by means of one dominant prejudice.

However, this does not mean that all prejudices, including the prejudice against prejudices, have to be preserved in our understanding as they are. Instead they can be regarded as a kind of foreground for understanding in its full sense, through which we can develop a better understanding. According to him, we need to be aware of our own prejudices so as to allow the text to present its own truth against our own foremeanings. Gadamer put this as follows:

Conscious understanding will be concerned not merely to form anticipatory ideas, but make them conscious so as to check them and thus acquire right understanding from the thing themselves. (1982, p. 239)

With this insight on the inevitable location of prejudice in understanding and the right way of dealing with them for better understanding, Gadamer tried to rehabilitate tradition and authority. But this must not be confused with the blind obedience to them, because, for Gadamer, the true meaning of the authority of a person, as well as tradition, does not come into being because of the superiority of a person or tradition, but because “he [or it] has a wider view of things” or “superior knowledge” (p. 248).

This insight into the location of prejudice in understanding takes a significant role in Gadamer’s reflective disclosure of historical consciousness, the highest form of which is characterized “effective historical consciousness” (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*). His analysis of the three kinds of relationships between T and ‘Thou’ shows the operation of prejudice in historical consciousness (1982, pp. 321-325). In the first kind of ‘I-Thou’ relations, “we understand the other person in the same way that we understand any other typical event in our experiential field, i.e., he is predictable.” In this relation, I understand others in terms of my own prejudice and the prejudice of the other is negated. If we apply this to the hermeneutic problem, “the naive faith in method and in the objectivity” or “the prejudice against prejudices” in general belongs to this category. In the second mode of I-Thou relation, the Thou is acknowledged as a person, but the understanding of Thou is still a form of self-relatedness. To put this another way, both my and others’ prejudices are acknowledged, but each prejudice is separated and isolated. Hence “there is a constant struggle for mutual recognition,” for domination of one person by the other. In the hermeneutic sphere, Gadamer saw this example in historical consciousness as generally called, which “knows about the otherness of the other.” One might add the ‘reception theory’ in the sphere of literary theory to this example (Eagleton, 1983, pp. 74-84). The third mode of relationship, which Gadamer regarded as the highest type of hermeneutical experience, is characterized by the openness to the other. In this relation, we understand the Thou truly as a Thou, that is, we do not overlook the

other's claim but listen to what he or she has to say to us. To relate this relationship to prejudice, we are aware both of our own and others' prejudices, but we are open to hear from others in order to go beyond our own prejudices and thus reach a better understanding. In relation to the hermeneutic experience, Gadamer called this highest type of hermeneutic experience as the "effective historical consciousness," and its realization as the "fusion of horizons" (*Horizontverschmelzung*).

Gadamer's ideas of "the effective historical consciousness" and of the "fusion of horizons" have remarkable significance in text interpretation. According to Gadamer, we understand the text through the question that lies behind what is said. This takes place by our achieving the "horizon of the question" within which the sense of it is determined. This is not an arbitrary procedure but is related to the answer that is expected in the text, because a person asking is part of the tradition and regards himself as addressed by it. However, because a text does not speak to us in the same way as a person does, we have to make it speak through the opening to the experience of history, that is, the "effective historical consciousness," which leads us to the "fusion of horizons" in our understanding of the text. Gadamer described this operation in text interpretation in a summarized form.

We, who are attempting to understand, must ourselves make it [a text] speak. But we found that this kind of understanding, 'making' the text speak, is not an arbitrary procedure that we undertake on our initiative but that, as a question, it is related to the answer that is expected in the text. The anticipation of answer itself presumes that the person asking is part of the tradition and regards himself as addressed by it. This is the truth of the effective historical consciousness ... we described its realization as the fusion of horizons of understanding, which is what mediates between the text and its interpretation. (1982, p. 340)