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THE HERMENEUTICS READER

Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present

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The Historicity of Understanding

Hans-Georg Gadamer

HANS-GEORG GADAMER (b. 1900) was born in Marburg, where he also studied philosophy and classics. He received his doctorate in 1922 and began teaching at Marburg as an instructor (Privatdozent) in 1929, where he became a professor extraordinary in 1937. From 1938 to 1947 he taught at Leipzig, and from 1947 to 1949 at Frankfurt. In 1949 he moved to the University of Heidelberg where he taught until his retirement in 1968. Gadamer, a personal student of Heidegger’s, combines in his work a vital interest in Greek thought and culture with a strong inclination toward the German idealist tradition in its different facets. His work in hermeneutics grew out of his historical and philosophical studies and his abiding interest in literature and poetry, both ancient and modern. In Truth and Method Gadamer developed an extensive and profound analysis and critique of classical hermeneutic thought in its various manifestations. The concept of the historicity of understanding—which he derived from Heidegger’s Being and Time—is at the center of his argument. But he is also indebted to Dilthey’s methodological studies and interests in the nature and history of the humanities and human sciences. In contrast to Dilthey, however, Gadamer does not wish to secure a methodology for these sciences. Instead, he chose to concentrate his efforts on exposing and criticizing the hermeneutic principles which underlie the humanistic disciplines in their actual history and present-day manifestations. Our first two selections present sections from Truth and Method. The first one deals with the important notion of prejudice (Vorurteil) without which understanding is not possible, according to Gadamer. Because of the attitude of Enlightenment philosophers against prejudice and bias, he believes that we have until now overlooked the positive, or, better, the constitutive character of prejudice in our culture. The concept of effective history (Wirkungsgeschichte) is one of equal importance for Gadamer. What he means, in a nutshell, is that so understanding would be possible if the interpreter were not also part of the historical continuum which he and the phenomenon he studies must share.

One of the criticisms leveled against Truth and Method by Habermas and the followers of the Frankfurt School concentrated on Gadamer’s alleged narrow transcendental interest in hermeneutics and the human sciences. Habermas expressed this criticism in his study On the Logic of the Social Sciences (1967). Gadamer replied almost immediately and at length in an essay which constitutes our third selection, Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and the Critique of Ideology (1967). Points of affinity, as well as differences, between the positions
of Gadamer and Habermas are brought out in this essay, and the indebtedness of both thinkers to the hermeneutic tradition becomes quite apparent. Habermas’s reply to this essay is reprinted below in chapter 10.

The Discrediting of Prejudice by the Enlightenment

If we pursue the view that the enlightenment developed in regard to prejudices we find it makes the following fundamental division: a distinction must be made between the prejudice due to human authority and that due to over-hastiness. The basis of this distinction is the origin of prejudices in regard to the persons who have them. It is either the respect in which we hold others and their authority, that leads us into error, or else it is an over-hastiness in ourselves. That authority is a source of prejudices according with the well-known principle of the enlightenment that Kant formulated: have the courage to make use of your own understanding. Although this distinction is certainly not limited to the role that prejudices play in the understanding of texts, its chief application is still in the sphere of hermeneutics. For the critique of the enlightenment is directed primarily against the religious tradition of Christianity, i.e. the bible. By treating the latter as an historical document, biblical criticism endangers its own dogmatic claims. This is the real radicality of the modern enlightenment as against all other movements of enlightenment: it must assert itself against the bible and its dogmatic interpretation. It is, therefore, particularly concerned with the hermeneutical problem. It desires to understand tradition correctly, i.e. reasonably and without prejudice. But there is a special difficulty about this, in that the sheer fact of something being written down confers on it an authority of particular weight. It is not altogether easy to realise that what is written down can be untrue. The written word has the tangible quality of something that can be demonstrated and is like a proof. It needs a special critical effort to free oneself from the prejudice in favour of what is written down and to distinguish here also, as with all oral assertions, between opinion and truth.

It is the general tendency of the enlightenment not to accept any authority and to decide everything before the judgment seat of reason. Thus the written tradition of scripture, like any other historical document, cannot claim any absolute validity, but the possible truth of the tradition depends on the credibility that is assigned to it by reason. It is not tradition, but reason that constitutes the ultimate source of all authority. What is written down is not necessarily true. We may have superior
knowledge: this is the maxim with which the modern enlightenment approaches tradition and which ultimately leads it to undertake historical research. It makes the tradition as much an object of criticism as do the natural sciences the evidence of the senses. This does not necessarily mean that the “prejudice against prejudices” was everywhere taken to the extreme consequences of free thinking and atheism, as in England and France. On the contrary, the German enlightenment recognised the “true prejudices” of the Christian religion. Since the human intellect is too weak to manage without prejudices it is at least fortunate to have been educated with true prejudices.

It would be of value to investigate to what extent this kind of modification and moderation of the enlightenment prepared the way for the rise of the romantic movement in Germany, as undoubtedly did the critique of the enlightenment and the revolution by Edmund Burke. But none of this alters the fundamental facts. True prejudices must still finally be justified by rational knowledge, even though the task may never be able to be fully completed.

Thus the criteria of the modern enlightenment still determine the self-understanding of historicism. This does not happen directly, but in a curious refraction caused by romanticism. This can be seen with particular clarity in the fundamental schema of the philosophy of history that romanticism shares with the enlightenment and that precisely the romantic reaction to the enlightenment made into an unshakeable premise: the schema of the conquest of mythos by logos. It is the presupposition of the progressive retreat of magic in the world that gives this schema its validity. It is supposed to represent the progressive law of the history of the mind, and precisely because romanticism has a negative attitude to this development, it takes over the schema itself as an obvious truth. It shares the presupposition of the enlightenment and only reverses the evaluation of it, seeking to establish the validity of what is old, simply because it is old: the “gothic” middle ages, the Christian European community of states, the feudal structure of society, but also the simplicity of peasant life and closeness to nature.

In contrast to the enlightenment’s belief in perfection, which thinks in terms of the freedom from “superstition” and the prejudices of the past, we now find that olden times, the world of myth, unreflective life, not yet analysed away by consciousness, in a “society close to nature,” the world of Christian chivalry, all these acquire a romantic magic, even a priority of truth. The reversal of the enlightenment’s presupposition results in the paradoxical tendency to restoration, i.e. the tendency to reconstruct the old because it is old, the conscious return to the unconscious, culminating in the recognition of the superior wisdom of the primeval age of myth. But the romantic reversal of this criterion of the enlightenment actually perpetuates the abstract contrast between myth and reason. All criticism of the enlightenment now proceeds via this romantic mirror image of the enlightenment. Belief in the perfectibility of reason suddenly changes into the perfection of the “mythical” consciousness and finds itself reflected in a paradisco
primal state before the "fall" of thought.

In fact the presupposition of a mysterious darkness in which there was a mythical collective consciousness that preceded all thought is just as dogmatic and abstract as that of a state of perfection achieved by a total enlightenment or that of absolute knowledge. Primaeval wisdom is only the counter-image of "primaeval stupidity." All mythical consciousness is still knowledge, and if it knows about divine powers, then it has progressed beyond mere trembling before power (if this is to be regarded as the primaeval state), but also beyond a collective life contained in magic rituals (as we find in the early Orient). It knows about itself, and in this knowledge it is no longer simply "outside itself.""

There is the related point that even the contrast between genuine mythical thinking and pseudo-mythical poetic thinking is a romantic illusion which is based on a prejudice of the enlightenment: namely, that the poetic act, because it is a creation of the free imagination, is no longer in any way bound within the religious quality of the myth. It is the old quarrel between the poets and the philosophers in the modern garb appropriate to the age of belief in science. It is now said, not that poets tell lies, but that they are incapable of saying anything true, since they have an aesthetic effect only and merely seek to rouse through their imaginative creations the imagination and the emotions of their hearers or readers.

The concept of the "society close to nature" is probably another case of a romantic mirror-image, whose origin ought to be investigated. In Karl Marx it appears as a kind of relic of natural law that limits the validity of his socio-economic theory of the class struggle. Does the idea go back to Rousseau's description of society before the division of labour and the introduction of property? At any rate, Plato has already demonstrated the illusory nature of this political theory in the ironical account he gives of a "state of nature" in the third book of the Republic.

These romantic revaluations give rise to the attitude of the historical science of the nineteenth century. It no longer measures the past by the yardsticks of the present, as if they represented an absolute, but it ascribes their own value to past ages and can even acknowledge their superiority in one or the other respect. The great achievements of romanticism—the revival of the past, the discovery of the voices of the peoples in their songs, the collecting of fairy-tales and legends, the cultivation of ancient customs, the discovery of the world views implicit in languages, the study of the "religion and wisdom of India"—have all motivated the historical research that has slowly, step by step, transformed the intuitive revival into historical knowledge proper. The fact that it was romanticism that gave birth to the historical school confirms that the romantic retrieval of origins is itself based on the enlightenment. The historical science of the nineteenth century is its proudest fruit and sees itself precisely as the fulfilment of the enlightenment, as the last step in the liberation of the mind from the trammels of
dogma, the step to the objective knowledge of the historical world, which stands as an equal besides the knowledge of nature achieved by modern science.

The fact that the restorative tendency of romanticism was able to combine with the fundamental concern of the enlightenment to constitute the unity of the historical sciences simply indicates that it is the same break with the continuity of meaning in tradition that lies behind both. If it is an established fact for the enlightenment that all tradition that reason shows to be impossible, i.e. nonsense, can only be understood historically, i.e. by going back to the past's way of looking at things, then the historical consciousness that emerges in romanticism involves a radicalisation of the enlightenment. For the exceptional case of nonsensical tradition has become the general rule for historical consciousness. Meaning that is generally accessible through reason is so little believed that the whole of the past, even, ultimately, all the thinking of one's contemporaries, is seen only "historically." Thus the romantic critique of the enlightenment ends itself in enlightenment, in that it evolves as historical science and draws everything into the orbit of historicism. The basic discrediting of all prejudices, which unites the experiential emphasis of the new natural sciences with the enlightenment, becomes, in the historical enlightenment, universal and radical.

This is the point at which the attempt to arrive at an historical hermeneutics has to start its critique. The overcoming of all prejudices, this global demand of the enlightenment, will prove to be itself a prejudice, the removal of which opens the way to an appropriate understanding of our finitude, which dominates not only our humanity, but also our historical consciousness.

Does the fact that one is set within various traditions mean really and primarily that one is subject to prejudices and limited in one's freedom? Is not, rather, all human existence, even the freest, limited and qualified in various ways? If this is true, then the idea of an absolute reason is impossible for historical humanity. Reason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms, i.e. it is not its own master, but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates. This is true not only in the sense in which Kant limited the claims of rationalism, under the influence of the sceptical critique of Hume, to the a priori element in the knowledge of nature; it is still truer of historical consciousness and the possibility of historical knowledge. For that man is concerned here with himself and his own creations (Vico) is only an apparent solution of the problem set by historical knowledge. Man is alien to himself and his historical fate in a quite different way from that in which nature, that knows nothing of him, is alien to him.

The epistemological question must be asked here in a fundamentally different way. We have shown above that Dilthey probably saw this, but he was not able to overcome the influence over him of traditional epistemology. His starting-point, the awareness of "experience," was not able to build the bridge to the historical realities, because the great historical realities of society and state always have a predeterminant influence on any "experience." Self-reflection and
autobiography—Dilthey's starting-points—are not primary and are not an adequate basis for the hermeneutical problem, because through them history is made private once more. In fact history does not belong to us, but we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.

**THE REHABILITATION OF AUTHORITY AND TRADITION**

This is where the hermeneutical problem comes in. This is why we examined the discrediting of the concept of prejudice by the enlightenment. That which presents itself, under the aegis of an absolute self-construction by reason, as a limiting prejudice belongs, in fact, to historical reality itself. What is necessary is a fundamental rehabilitation of the concept of prejudice and a recognition of the fact that there are legitimate prejudices, if we want to do justice to man's finite, historical mode of being. 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?

We can approach this question by taking the view of prejudices that the enlightenment developed with a critical intention, as set out above, and giving it a positive value. As for the division of prejudices into those of "authority" and those of "over-hastiness," it is obviously based on the fundamental presupposition of the enlightenment, according to which a methodologically disciplined use of reason can safeguard us from all error. This was Descartes' idea of method. Over-hastiness is the actual source of error in the use of one's own reason. Authority, however, is responsible for one's not using one's own reason at all. There lies, then, at the base of the division a mutually exclusive antithesis between authority and reason. The false prejudice for what is old, for authorities, is what has to be fought. Thus the enlightenment regards it as the reforming action of Luther that "the prejudice of human prestige, especially that of the philosophical (he means Aristotle) and the Roman pope was greatly weakened."\textsuperscript{12} The reformation, then,