

**Gadamer's Truth
and Method**
A Polyphonic Commentary

Edited by
Greg Lynch and Cynthia Nielsen

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Contents

Introduction <i>Cynthia Nielsen and Greg Lynch</i>	vii
The Basic Structure and Argument of <i>Truth and Method</i> <i>Jean Grondin</i>	1
PART I	
1 <i>TM</i> I.1.1: Gadamer on the Significance of the Humanist Tradition for the Human Sciences, or Truth and Edification <i>Theodore George</i>	23
2 <i>TM</i> I.1.2: Gadamer's Astonishing Question: Engaging with Gadamer's Critique of Kant's Aesthetics <i>Nicholas Davey</i>	39
3 <i>TM</i> I.1.3: Re-claiming Art's Claim to Truth <i>Daniel L. Tate</i>	59
4 <i>TM</i> I.2.1: Gadamer on Play as Ontological Explanation <i>Jessica Frazier</i>	79
5 <i>TM</i> I.2.2: Gadamer and the Plastic Arts <i>Cynthia R. Nielsen</i>	99
PART II	
6 <i>TM</i> II.1: Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics and Historical Meaning <i>Kevin M. Vander Schel</i>	123

7	<i>TM</i> II.1.2-3: Phenomenology's Essential Role in the Hermeneutic Tradition <i>David Vessey</i>	145
8	<i>TM</i> II.2.1: The Historical Situation of Thought as a Hermeneutic Principle <i>Carolyn Culbertson</i>	163
9	<i>TM</i> II.2.2: "The Recovery of the Fundamental Hermeneutic Problem": Application and Normativity <i>David Liakos</i>	185
10	<i>TM</i> II.2.3: The Finitude of Reflection <i>Greg Lynch</i>	207
PART III		
11	<i>TM</i> III.1: Language as Medium of Hermeneutic Experience <i>Carlo Da Via</i>	229
12	<i>TM</i> III.2: Gadamer and the Concept of Language <i>Gert-Jan van der Heiden</i>	247
13	<i>TM</i> III.3: On Language and the Universality of Hermeneutics <i>James Risser</i>	265
	Index	283

Introduction

Cynthia Nielsen and Greg Lynch

Hans-Georg Gadamer's *magnum opus*, *Truth and Method*, was first published in German in 1960, translated into English in 1975, and is widely recognized as a ground-breaking text of philosophical hermeneutics. Unsurprisingly, this text has generated an extensive secondary literature, including a number of excellent studies and commentaries. This volume brings to bear on this familiar text what might be thought of as an experimental interpretive approach: that of a *polyphonic* commentary. The term *polyphonic* means many-voiced, and it is first and foremost a musical term. In choral polyphony, for example, multiple voices sound together in a complex, back-and-forth musical dialogue. Similarly, the commentary presented in this volume consists of the voices of multiple authors, each of whom covers a portion of *Truth and Method* following the order of the text itself. Some of these voices are those of established writers who are familiar staples of the literature on Gadamer, others belong to the rising younger generation of Gadamer scholars. In organizing the text in this way, our aim was to simultaneously pursue two interpretive goals. First, in adopting a commentary format, the volume aims to shed light on *Truth and Method* as a whole. It ensures both that the discussion covers the entire text (including those parts that have tended to receive scant attention) and also that it discusses the major themes of the work in the logical sequence in which Gadamer himself developed them. Second, in making the commentary polyphonic, we aim to highlight the wide range of ways in which the text has been understood and to give the reader a sense of where there are debates and conversations yet to be had. The result, we hope, is a volume that meshes unity and diversity in a distinctive way: the many voices are united in the common focus of allowing the text to speak in a way that is meaningful today.

The approach of polyphonic commentary could, of course, be applied to any text, but we think it is particularly appropriate to *Truth and Method*. For

Gadamer, reading a text is *always* a polyphonic endeavor because it inevitably includes the voices of others who have read the text before and alongside us. As he puts it,

Our historical consciousness is always filled with a variety of voices in which the echo of the past is heard. Only in the multifariousness of such voices does it exist: this constitutes the nature of the tradition in which we want to share and have a part.¹

The present approach, then, can be seen as an attempt to make structurally explicit what, on Gadamer's view, is implicitly true of all hermeneutical engagement: that it is necessarily communal and dialogical.

Another aspect of a polyphonic commentary that reverberates with Gadamer's hermeneutics is the idea that significant texts and works of art will necessarily yield multiple valid interpretations. As Gadamer observes, there is no "single interpretation that is correct 'in itself,' precisely because every interpretation is concerned with the text itself. The historical life of a tradition depends on being constantly assimilated and interpreted. An interpretation that was correct in itself would be a foolish ideal that mistook the nature of tradition. Every interpretation has to adapt itself to the hermeneutical situation to which it belongs" (*TM*, 415). Though there is, of course, considerable overlap, each contributor to the volume occupies a unique hermeneutic situation and is motivated by distinctive questions and concerns; and as a result, each interprets the text differently. In some cases, these differences are complimentary, like voices singing different parts of a harmony; in others, there is genuine disagreement, and dissonance is the more appropriate musical metaphor. But in each case, the differences bring out the always-ongoing inner *movement* that, on Gadamer's account, belongs essentially to the meaning of any text. Every jazz quartet, for example, will perform its own version of "Stella by Starlight," and not even two consecutive performances by the same ensemble will ever be exactly alike. Yet in each successful performance—and only there—we recognize what we are hearing *as* "Stella by Starlight." In the same way, as Gadamer famously puts it, we always "understand in a *different* way, *if we understand at all*" (*TM*, 307)—not because understanding always falls short of the one true meaning-in-itself, but because the meaning exists nowhere else than in the variety of interpretive voices in which it comes to presentation. The structure of a polyphonic commentary creates a communal interpretive space in which, we hope, the inner diversity of Gadamer's masterpiece—and of the *Sache* it discusses—can come to the fore.

One potential pitfall of polyphonic commentary is the loss of the forest for the trees. If each contributor offers their distinctive take on a specific section of the text, the reader might lack a sense of how the text hangs together. To

help counter this, Jean Grondin's introductory chapter, "The Basic Structure and Argument of *Truth and Method*," aims to provide an overview of the text as a whole. As Grondin presents it, *Truth and Method* is a text that, as it were, overflows its own bounds. The text was originally envisioned to be (and initially presents itself as) a defense of the humanities' claim to provide us with genuine knowledge. Yet as the text develops, it becomes clear that something broader is at stake. Gadamer's reflections concern not just the nature of the understanding that operates in academic disciplines like history and philology; rather, they concern the nature of understanding in general and as such. The three main sections of *Truth and Method* can thus be seen as a series of three concentric circles, each spilling over into the next. Gadamer begins in Part I by arguing that in the experience of art, we encounter a kind of truth that cannot be captured by or reduced to the objectifying grasp of things that characterizes modern science. The discussion then broadens out in Part II to show that this sort of truth is characteristic not just of art but of the whole of the human sciences. Lastly, in part III, Gadamer contends that this truth that is otherwise than method is ultimately rooted in the linguisticity that characterizes human experience in general.

Theodore George begins the section-by-section exposition of *Truth and Method* with a consideration of Gadamer's discussion of the humanist tradition in TM I.1.1. Gadamer's main contention in this section, George argues, is that the humanist tradition articulates a (largely forgotten) *normative ideal* for theorizing—that is, an account of the goal toward which inquiry is directed and in terms of which it is to be evaluated. In contrast to the Enlightenment's ideal of *method*, for the humanists inquiry aims at *edification*. Gadamer argues that the latter, non-methodological ideal is the one the human sciences properly pursue. As George points out, in making this move, Gadamer is not only distancing himself from thinkers like Dilthey (who sought to discover a method appropriate to the human sciences), he is also subtly challenging Heidegger's famous dismissal of humanism as inextricably tied to a problematic essentialism. While perhaps an apt critique of forms of humanism centered around *formatio*, George argues, this objection does not apply to humanism as such. Specifically, the notion of *Bildung* (edification or cultivation) escapes this charge and thus opens the way for the anti-essentialist humanism that Gadamer will develop over the course of *Truth and Method*.

In chapter 2, Nicholas Davey examines the "astonishing question" that Gadamer poses in his interaction with Kant—whether aesthetics itself serves to conceal the true nature of art. Gadamer, Davey argues, answers this question in the affirmative. Insofar as aesthetics focuses merely on the perceivable features of art and the feelings these features generate in us when we represent them, it overlooks what Gadamer takes to be art's defining characteristic: the fact that it *says something* to us. In this way, the aesthetic tradition not

only misunderstands the nature of art, it misunderstands our relationship to it. In conceiving of our encounters with art in terms of *Erlebnisse* (lived experiences), aesthetics alienates us from our basic experience of art as meaning. Gadamer aims to correct this by replacing traditional aesthetics with what Davey calls an *Erfahrungs-Ästhetik*, an account of art organized around the de-centering experience of being addressed.

In the third chapter, Daniel Tate articulates Gadamer's positive program for moving beyond "aesthetic consciousness" and restoring the connection of art and truth. Central to this program, Tate observes, is the idea that the truth of art is a "happening" that befalls us when we encounter it and not a matter of a subject accurately representing some pre-given object. Looking forward to the next section of the text, Tate unpacks Gadamer's phenomenological analysis of this happening in terms of the notion of play. For Gadamer, *play* designates a back-and-forth movement and, as Tate shows, this movement appears in different forms in Gadamer's analysis of truth in art. First, play characterizes the artwork itself, in which the various parts of the work dynamically interact with one another. Second, it characterizes the relationship of the artwork to the audience who questions and is questioned by it. Third and most centrally, through these movements, the subject matter of the work itself emerges from hiddenness into presence, that is, into truth. The result, as Tate explains, is not only that we come to better understand the artwork's subject matter but also that what presents itself becomes "more truly what it is."

The theme of play is also the central focus of chapter 4, in which Jessica Frazier explores the ontological implications of Gadamer's account of art. In the movement of play, Frazier argues, one is caught up in a "constantly transforming medial structure" that encompasses and reshapes both oneself and the item one is experiencing. This structure is thus phenomenologically prior to the division of subject and object. While Gadamer first identifies this structure in his analysis of art, Frazier argues that it is of far wider significance for his project. As the argument of *Truth and Method* develops play is revealed also to be the basic structure of history, and, eventually, of phenomenality as such. In fact, Frazier argues, the centrality of play stretches beyond *Truth and Method* into Gadamer's later work, as well, particularly his work on the nature of health.

As developed to this point, Gadamer's analysis of artworks as events faces a fairly obvious objection. However well it might fit the phenomena of the performing arts, the idea of art as an ontological "happening" does not seem to apply to the plastic arts and so does not seem to hold for art in general. In chapter 5, Cynthia Nielsen articulates Gadamer's response to this objection. While works of painting, sculpture, and architecture are obviously not 'performed' in the same sense that a drama or concerto is, neither, Gadamer contends, are they to be understood as mere inert objects for aesthetic

contemplation. What makes something a portrait, for example, is the fact that it *presents* its subject matter to the viewer, and this presentation is fundamentally different from the sort of reference we find in copies, signs, and even symbols. Works of plastic art do not point away from themselves toward an independent signified; they draw their subject matter into themselves and effect an “increase” in its being. Just like the performances of a symphony, these increases are different each time they occur, and yet the plastic artwork *qua* artwork has no being apart from them.

A genuinely *polyphonic* commentary ought to be more than just a chorus singing Gadamer’s praises, and in chapter 6, Kevin Vander Schel voices a critical note. Vander Schel takes up Gadamer’s interpretation of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics and its subsequent impact on the history of hermeneutics, and, like a number of other recent scholars, Vander Schel finds this interpretation to be deeply flawed. He argues that Gadamer’s reading of Schleiermacher distorts the latter’s views in two fundamental ways. First, it focuses almost exclusively on Schleiermacher’s account of “psychological” (or “technical”) interpretation and largely ignores the “grammatical” dimension of interpretation that, for Schleiermacher, is equally important. As Vander Schel demonstrates, for Schleiermacher, interpretation is not a mere matter of diving into an individual author’s mind but of grasping the author’s views in their wider historical and linguistic context. Second, Gadamer errs in presenting Schleiermacher’s views as an anticipation of Dilthey’s project of centering the human sciences on hermeneutics. Though his contributions to the discipline were important, hermeneutics was never the primary focus of Schleiermacher’s work. Rather, his hermeneutics grows out of his more fundamental concerns with ethics and dialectics. Despite Gadamer’s misrepresentations, Vander Schel argues, Schleiermacher’s work represents a promising approach to hermeneutical questions, one that differs from Gadamer’s, but perhaps not quite so sharply as Gadamer himself supposed.

After his account of Schleiermacher, Gadamer’s critical history of hermeneutics turns to Dilthey’s work, and this is the focus of David Vessey’s chapter. Though Gadamer sees Dilthey as taking an important step beyond Schleiermacher in his emphasis on the historicity of human life and understanding, his account remains “entangled” in the “aporias of historicism.” As Vessey explains, Gadamer has two related difficulties in mind here. First, historicism’s claim that all understanding is bound to a specific historical context seems to undermine itself insofar as it purports to state something universally and transhistorically true. Second, the claim seems to be incompatible with the further historicist thesis that an objective, scientific understanding of history is possible. Gadamer, as Vessey explains, argues that first Husserl and then Count Yorck make important headway in resolving these issues, but ~~it~~ ~~is~~ ~~ultimately~~ not until Heidegger that the genuine solution becomes apparent:

the transcendental insight that historicity is itself a condition of the possibility of understanding.

In chapter 8, Carolyn Culbertson articulates two opposed and highly influential contemporary attitudes toward the nature of knowledge. On one hand, proponents of the “transcendence argument” hold that genuine knowledge requires the knower to break free from the constraints of history and tradition and rely wholly on her own reason. On the other hand, proponents of the “immanence argument” contend that this sort of transcendence is impossible and that genuine knowledge is instead a matter of immersing oneself in and submitting oneself to the wisdom of the past. Culbertson argues that Gadamer’s account of the historicity of understanding breaks with both of these influential attitudes. On Gadamer’s view, both the Enlightenment disdain for tradition and the Romantic idolization of it stem from a common underlying assumption: that reason and tradition are “abstract opposites” of one another. Gadamer argues that this is a mistake. Because critical thinking can never occur apart from preconceptions that we inherit from history, there can be no reason without tradition. At the same time, however, inheriting tradition is never mere passive reception; it is a matter of creatively and critically appropriating what has been handed down. Thus, there can be no tradition without reason. For Gadamer, genuine knowledge is a matter neither of escaping our prejudices nor of uncritically embracing them but of putting them in play and at risk in the course of experience.

Gadamer describes the “putting in play” of our prejudices in hermeneutic experience in terms of the *application* of what is understood to the interpreter’s own situation, and he argues that understanding is possible only on the basis of this application. As David Liakos observes in chapter 9, this claim has been the target of a perennial and influential critique of Gadamer’s hermeneutics: the charge that Gadamer is unable to account for the *normativity* of interpretation. This is mobilized on two fronts. First, critics argue that Gadamer’s hermeneutics precludes us from identifying any criterion by which to evaluate whether a given interpretation of a text is correct or incorrect. Second, they argue that Gadamer’s insistence on the need for “openness” to the text leaves interpreters without a standard by which to evaluate the truth or falsity of what tradition says. Liakos argues that these criticisms rest on a misunderstanding of Gadamer’s position—specifically, a misunderstanding of the dynamic interplay between the first-person and third-person dimensions of application. To apply a text to one’s own situation is not simply to take it to mean whatever one wants to. Application, rather, is about holding oneself accountable to two different but complimentary sets of norms: those that stem from the hermeneutic situation in which one finds oneself and those that stem from the claim to meaning embodied in the text itself. While it is true that, on Gadamer’s view, there is no pre-given formula or decision procedure that can tell us how to navigate these considerations,

that does not mean that “anything goes.” Rather, it means that interpreting correctly, like living well, is a matter of judgment, discernment, and wisdom that cannot be formalized.

In TM II.2.3, Gadamer responds to an objection to his central notion of “historically effected consciousness,” and Greg Lynch presents a reconstruction of this argument in chapter 10. It is part of the nature of consciousness that it can rise above its objects, recognizing and endorsing the conditions that make those objects possible. For Hegel and the tradition of “reflective philosophy,” this entails that consciousness cannot be *necessarily* limited in the way it would be if it were, as Gadamer claims, historically effected. As Lynch interprets it, Gadamer’s response is to claim that the reflective philosophers have misunderstood the nature of reflection itself. Reflection is possible only on the basis of questions that arise from specific contexts of motivation. Since these contexts are ever-changing, the task of reflection must constantly begin anew. Thus, while Hegel is right that reflection is a necessary component of any experience, he is wrong to think that this entails that experience is teleologically directed toward a state of total self-transparency. Instead, Gadamer contends, it leads toward an attitude of *openness* that recognizes the inexhaustibility of what experience has to teach us.

In Part III of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer makes explicit a theme that has been operating below the surface throughout the text: the *linguisticity* of human understanding. Gadamer begins this part of the text by defending the theses that language determines the hermeneutic *object* and that it determines the hermeneutic *act*. These claims appear to be, if not simply obvious, at least unoriginal, as a number of earlier hermeneutical thinkers—most notably Schleiermacher—make seemingly identical claims. As Carlo Davia argues in chapter 11, however, properly understanding Gadamer’s theses reveals them to be anything but platitudinous. This is because, unlike most of his hermeneutic predecessors, for Gadamer the essence of language is its ability to disclose the world, not its ability to express the attitudes of speakers and authors. To say that language determines the hermeneutic act and object, then, is not merely to say that it is only through words that past meanings are preserved for us. The claim, rather, is that the meaning we encounter in tradition is never exclusively *past* in the first place. The paradigmatic objects of hermeneutics are always “contemporaneous” with us; they speak to us in the present just as directly as they did to their original readers. Accordingly, for Gadamer, understanding tradition is not a matter of seeking the original meaning that is encoded in the text but of participating in a present “hermeneutical conversation” with it.

In chapter 12, Gert-Jan van der Heiden walks us through Gadamer’s reading of the history of the concept of language in Western philosophy. In contrast to Heidegger’s narrative of philosophical decline, for Gadamer this history is one of both forgetting and rediscovering the “proper being of language.” As van

der Heiden brings out, Gadamer diagnoses how the now predominant conception of language as a mere system of instrumental signs can be traced back to Plato's attempt, in the *Cratylus*, to combat the sophists' deceptive abuse of language. At the same time, however, Gadamer identifies in Plato himself, in the medieval doctrine of the inner word, and in Renaissance humanism resources for resisting instrumentalism and recovering a more authentic understanding of language as the medium in which the world manifests itself.

In our last chapter, James Risser examines the final section of *Truth and Method*, "Language as Horizon of a Hermeneutic Ontology." Here we encounter some of Gadamer's most famous and most difficult claims, most notably the thesis that "being that can be understood is language" (*TM*, 490). Risser argues that the ontology voiced here should not be understood as a kind of linguistic idealism or even as a claim that all experience unfolds in words. Rather, what is at stake in this chapter—and, indeed, throughout the text of *Truth and Method*—is the *self-presentation* of what is. This self-presentation is linguistic in two primary respects. First, being shows itself to us as an objective (*sachlich*) world with an "independent otherness" that transcends our subjective opinions about it. On Gadamer's view, it is precisely language that creates the "open space" in which this independence can appear as such. Second, the self-presentation of being always emerges from the "middle" of a wider, linguistically constituted horizon of meaning. This, Risser notes, marks the finitude of self-presentation, in that this wider horizon on which self-presentation depends is never itself brought to full presence. The fact that language characterizes self-presentation as such is what underwrites Gadamer's claim to the "universality" of hermeneutics. In taking language as its subject matter, hermeneutics necessarily concerns itself with more than just the human sciences; its questions embrace the nature of appearance and intelligibility in general.

These studies, we hope, will be beneficial both to readers who are new to Gadamer and those long familiar with his work. To the former, they can offer helpful guides through the often circuitous paths of Gadamer's thinking in *Truth and Method*. To the latter, they offer a diverse set of new contributions to the ongoing conversation about the significance of this seminal text. In either case, we hope this polyphonic commentary will convey a sense of the richness and complexity of Gadamer's own philosophical voice and its continued relevance to the conversation that we are.

NOTE

1. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 296. Hereafter cited in text as *TM*.