

# Theodore George, Gert-Jan van der Heiden (Eds.): *The Gadamerian Mind*

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## Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed a current of uncertainty surrounding the afterlife of Gadamer's philosophy. The critical challenges posed by poststructuralism, postmodernism, and deconstruction certainly had the potential to relegate philosophical hermeneutics to the role of a precursor or, worse, a vanquished adversary. What is more, a similar sentiment had troubled Gadamer himself, even before publishing his *magnum opus*. Finishing work on *Truth and Method* in 1959, he wondered whether it had not already come 'too late'. By then, the kind of reflection he was advocating would have been deemed superfluous, as other philosophical movements and reforms in the social sciences already appeared to have left the romantic conception of the *Geisteswissenschaften* in their wake (Gadamer 1972, 449; 2004, 555).

As is well known, *Truth and Method* stood the test of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and indeed became one of the most important works of its time. This year marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Gadamer's death, and it prompts an unavoidable question: does Gadamer's thought remain 'of its time', or is it equipped for the challenges of our own? The ambition of the volume under review is to show that the reception and scholarship of Gadamer's philosophy has been flourishing and that his influence remains felt within and beyond philosophy.

## Aims

*The Gadamerian Mind*, edited by Theodore George and Gert-Jan van der Heiden, is the 8<sup>th</sup> volume in the *Routledge Philosophical Minds*. This series, currently encompassing 12 published titles and three forthcoming, aims to present a 'comprehensive survey of all aspects of a major philosopher's work, from analysis and criticism [...] to the way their ideas are taken up in contemporary philosophy and beyond' (ii). True to the series' objectives, this volume promises to be a 'comprehensive scholarly companion' (4) and a 'major survey of the fundamental aspects of Gadamer's thought' (i). It therefore focuses on the dominant themes of Gadamer's main body of work, philosophical hermeneutics. On the other hand, the purpose of this collection is to also show that the scholarly reception of Gadamer's philosophy has developed and increased in the decades since his death. Accordingly, in addition to tracing the diverse influence of his views in different areas of philosophy and other disciplines, the editors aim to chart new and emerging perspectives on his thinking in this 'new and comprehensive survey of Gadamer's thought and its significance' (1).

Consequently, this collection promises to put forth a ‘portrait of the Gadamerian mind’<sup>1</sup> that comprises what they call an *increase in being*. The term is borrowed from Gadamer’s discussion of images: according to him, an image is more than a mimetic replica of the original, but involves a presentation of what is essential, unique or merely possible in it, hence an increase in being. The editors thus aim to offer much more than a mere replication and exposition of Gadamerian themes. However, at a cursory glance, these different aims might in fact seem divergent. On the one hand, the volume aspires to be comprehensive, therefore self-contained. As such, it will necessarily repeat the structure and at least some of the content of previous volumes with similar goals. Companion volumes, as is well known, tend to be rather conventional, both in format and subject matter. On the other hand, this volume aims to not only distinguish itself from existing scholarship, but also forward and develop Gadamer’s own thinking. Hence, there is a danger, given these objectives, for it to splinter off in different directions and lose coherence. It will soon become clear that this danger is only apparent.

## Structure

*The Gadamerian Mind* is composed of 38 chapters divided into six sections and enclosed by a brief introduction at the start and a comprehensive index at the end. The sections closely follow the stated aims. Roughly speaking, the first two sections review the main concepts and themes that return throughout Gadamer’s work, predominantly – but not exclusively – in his philosophical hermeneutics. Sections three and four canvass the philosophical background, both contemporary and historical, of Gadamer’s work, providing readers with contextual information about the diverse influences on his thought and its contemporary audience and critics. Finally, the concluding two sections focus on the second goal of this collection, that of assessing the importance of Gadamer’s work in recent philosophy and beyond.

The volume opens with *Overviews*, a section surveying the intellectual background of Gadamer’s life and philosophy as well as showcasing the chief focal points of his work. The contributions in this first section explore aspects of Gadamer’s intellectual biography and life, as well as sketching out the main outline of his philosophical legacy. His commitment to humanism and its significance, the importance of poetry and art in general for his thinking, the ongoing theme of dialogue and conversation are all touched on in this section. A stand-out essay, which highlights an important and often overlooked subject is Georgia Warnke’s ‘Gadamer on solidarity’. In this remarkably detailed and illuminating article, Warnke collects the threads of Gadamer’s scattered remarks on solidarity and friendship into a general account. In dialogue with previous scholarship, she identifies the cardinal dimensions which articulate Gadamer’s conception of solidarity. What emerges is brought into sharper focus through comparisons with relevant recent and contemporary accounts.

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, there is an ambivalence throughout this volume as to the precise meaning of the *Gadamerian mind*. For some, it is a placeholder for Gadamer himself, as an aggregate of ideas, interests, and commitments, for others it stands for ‘Gadamer’s theory of the mind’. So, it is unclear whether such a portrait would be of the former or the latter. Given the nature of the *Philosophical Minds* series, the editors’ intention is certainly for it to be of the former. But I believe a more thorough exploration of the latter would have been highly valuable and as such remains a missed opportunity of this collection.

According to Warnke's reconstruction, Gadamer's understanding of solidarity is that of a substantive bond with others that does not depend on affinities or similarities, and neither on subjective intentions or attitudes. She finds here a stark contrast with some recent approaches, such as Banting and Wymlicka's, for whom solidarity is 'a set of attitudes and motivations' (2017, 3). In line with this definition, these authors look to various political institutions and policies which can reinforce the attitudes underlying democratic solidarity. As Warnke explains, from a Gadamerian perspective this project would have to seem futile. Given that he does not think solidarity is a matter of attitudes, he would contest that cultivating the relevant ones can foster it. Warnke proceeds to compare Gadamer's account to Rorty (1989), Shelby (2005), Jaeggi (2001), and Habermas (2001, 2008) in a highly persuasive and concise chapter on Gadamer's continued relevance and significance for contemporary debates in the philosophy of solidarity, identity, race, and public policy.

*Overviews* is followed by *Key Concepts*, a section devoted to a critical examination and assessment of the primary conceptual makeup of Gadamer's acclaimed philosophical hermeneutics. The chapters contained here track the notions of truth, experience, tradition, language, play, translation, image (picture) and health. These are well-written by well-known scholars and provide an approachable and comprehensive introduction to these concepts. A particularly notable essay, and indeed relevant in the global circumstances of today, is Kevin Aho's 'Gadamer and health'.

In his contribution, Aho details the enormous impact Gadamer's *The Enigma of Health* had within philosophy and explores the way Gadamer's pronouncements reflect the views of medical practitioners. According to Aho, the core aim of Gadamer's book is to liberate medicine from the scientific method that governs it in order to arrive at patients' own experiences of their illnesses and bodies. For Gadamer, health is *hidden*, enigmatic, it is 'the condition of not noticing, of being unhindered' (1996, 73). Further, he claims that it does not consist in 'an increasing concern for every fluctuation in one's general physical condition or the eager consumption of prophylactic medicines' (Gadamer 1996, 112). This, for Aho, reflects the transparency of our own bodies. What is especially noteworthy in Aho's contribution is the detailed account of exactly how and to what extent physicians and medical professionals are echoing Gadamer's views. There is ample evidence here, for Aho, that Gadamer can help lay the conceptual groundwork for reforming our understanding of health and care. Although this connection is not explored in the text, this article is especially important at a time where health is no longer defined along these lines, where sick bodies are asymptomatic, and a 'condition of not noticing' can characterize both illness and health.

Unfortunately, there is also a notable absence from *Key Concepts*. Certainly, there are several important concepts not treated in this section and one could make a case for their inclusion. For instance, the concepts of *pluralism*, *phronesis* or *scientific method* are also key to Gadamer's philosophy and are absent here. But, in the editors' defence, a collective volume is finite, and their selection can certainly be justified with respect to these and perhaps other notions.

There is, however, an omission for which this cannot be said. In their introduction, the editors state that Gadamer's name has become synonymous with philosophical hermeneutics, a field 'concerned with theories of understanding and interpretation' (1). A chapter dedicated to the concepts of understanding and interpretation, therefore, both undoubtedly key concepts

in Gadamer's philosophy, should not be missing in a comprehensive scholarly companion, more so since Gadamer's use of these concepts is known to cause confusion and controversy among scholars and critics alike. This is a regrettable omission for which the other chapters, for all their merits, cannot make up.

The third section is entitled *Historical Influences* and is devoted to outlining the most important philosophers who left their mark on Gadamer's thought and to evaluating his own account of their views. The papers composing this part examine the importance of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Dilthey, and Heidegger for Gadamer's thinking, undoubtedly the chief influences on his thought.

Francisco J. Gonzalez opens this section with 'Gadamer and Plato: an unending dialogue', a veritable *tour de force* of erudition. Not only is this paper a brilliant survey of Gadamer's Plato studies and his significance for Gadamer's own thought, but this article also details the extent to which the study of Plato's dialogues played a key role in the development of Gadamer's own philosophy. Gonzalez identifies the chief contributions of Gadamer's commentaries and interpretations of Plato and investigates how his reading changed throughout his career. By subdividing Gadamer's engagement with Plato in five distinct periods and analysing his hermeneutical approach to the study of the dialogues, Gonzales brings this 'unending dialogue' of the two philosophers into clear view. This paper's discussion of the differences between these periods, the internal inconsistencies within them and the accounts of the parallel developments in Gadamer's own philosophy in these periods are highly valuable to scholars of Plato and Gadamer alike.

The subsequent section, *Contemporary Encounters*, canvasses important conversations and debates between Gadamer and his critics about the possibility, nature, and limits of philosophical hermeneutics. The reader finds here all the usual suspects (Habermas, Derrida, Ricoeur, Vattimo) but will certainly be pleasantly surprised to see Paul Celan's name mentioned among them. In his 'Poem, dialogue and witness: Gadamer's reading of Paul Celan', Gert-Jan van der Heiden analyses a very important concern in Gadamer's later philosophy, namely poetry. He specifically centres on the relation between dialogue and poem. According to Gadamer, they are two distinct modes of language, each with their own specific modality of disclosing meaning. What follows is a compelling discussion of this difference and a welcome addition to Gadamer scholarship. The focus on Gadamer's interest in poetry is in general an important innovation to existing literature and can be seen throughout this volume.

A noticeable omission from this section, however, is a chapter on the Italian philosopher and jurist Emilio Betti. He and Gadamer had a private, epistolary debate and a lengthy public controversy, yet news of their engagement has not yet fully reached English-language scholarship. This is especially unfortunate as part of their disagreement revolves around central issues in hermeneutics. One such point of contention is the conceptual relation between understanding and interpretation, an issue concerning which these authors had opposing views and were sternly critical of one another. Another source of disagreement was the issue of validity and correctness in interpretation as well as the question of the diversity of interpretative criteria required by the variety of available hermeneutic objects. On the latter point, Betti criticized Gadamer for his undifferentiated view of objects of interpretation and argued that different items demand different hermeneutic approaches. But the deeper differences between these thinkers are yet to be thoroughly examined in Anglo-American academia and Betti's

unique voice is yet to be heard. I consider his omission from this collection regrettable for that reason.

In the penultimate section of this volume, *Beyond Philosophy*, the editors have compiled essays detailing the impact and significance of Gadamer's work in areas and disciplines outside philosophy. From theology to jurisprudence, from medicine and healthcare to history and political science, Gadamer's influence is thoroughly discussed here and, for many working within philosophy, brought into the open for the very first time. This entire section is undoubtedly a vital addition to existing scholarship and one of the areas where this volume more clearly innovates.

The collection concludes with *Legacies and Questions*, a section addressing significant philosophical currents that draw on Gadamer's work, whether positively through further development, or negatively through critical engagement. The papers collected here deal with the encounter of Gadamer's philosophy with postmodernism, analytic philosophy, race theory, metaphysics, and philosophy of culture. Particularly engaging and an excellent supplement to a growing literature is Catherine Homan's article on Gadamer's position within feminist philosophy.

In her 'Gadamer and feminism', Homan surveys Gadamer's ambivalent reception by feminist philosophers. While many have criticized his position, others have viewed hermeneutics as fruitful for feminist purposes, adopting or adapting some of its cardinal tenets. In order to make sense of this varied reception, Homan enlists the help of Gadamerian hermeneutics itself. In particular, she claims that it is Gadamer's insight into tradition that helps us understand feminist replies to his philosophy as well as what she provocatively calls the 'tradition of feminism'. In her extensive treatment of the literature, Homan criticizes dominant strands of Gadamer reception in feminist philosophy by arguing that attending to tradition, rather than dismissing it, makes us better able to preserve valuable differences. Drawing hermeneutics and feminism together, she claims, invites more comprehensive interpretations and reinterpretations of both.

A regrettable lacuna of *Legacies and Questions* has to do with Gadamer's reception in Anglo-America. Unfortunately, Greg Lynch's 'Gadamer in Anglo-America' is not primarily concerned with the full range of this phenomenon. At first, this essay details Gadamer's philosophical proximity to a well-known movement in the analytic philosophy of language, namely the so-called 'ordinary language philosophy'. Lynch considers this starting point to be 'the most natural spot in the analytic landscape' in relation to which Gadamer's philosophy ought to be discussed. After this initial section, which explores and assesses both significant commonalities and differences, Lynch proceeds to discuss the adoption of a Gadamerian-inspired perspective by two prominent analytic philosophers, Richard Rorty (1979) and John McDowell (1994). While Lynch's treatment of this encounter and his critique of the adequacy of Rorty and McDowell's reading of Gadamer are highly informative and valuable, what unfortunately does not emerge from this paper is the extent to which Gadamer's reception in the 'Anglo-American' tradition of philosophy is still an ongoing process which continues to be relevant.

This is most visible when it comes to Gadamer's proximity to Davidson and the ongoing exploration of their affinities in the philosophy of interpretation. *Dialogues with Davidson* (2011, ed. Jeff Malpas), an excellent volume on Davidson's work in areas of philosophy of

action, interpretation, and understanding, provides a good example of the fruitfulness and proportion of this endeavour. Nine out of the 21 chapters of this collection critically examine and assess this proximity, not to mention the Foreword, where Dagfinn Føllesdal states that Gadamer is a ‘natural point of contact’ with Davidson’s own views. In fact, Davidson himself claimed to have arrived ‘in Gadamer’s intellectual neighborhood’ (1997, 421). *Dialogues with Davidson* is a small sample of a new and growing debate in contemporary scholarship which focuses on drawing Gadamer and Davidson’s respective philosophies together and reaping the benefits of this comparison, thus bridging the unfortunate gap between the two major Western philosophical traditions. Gadamer is therefore very much part of an ongoing debate within analytic philosophy in recent decades and it is an oversight not to have included it in this collection.

The volume closes with a very detailed and useful index.

### The unity of the collection

As mentioned at the outset, this collection might at first seem controlled by two sets of strings, comprehensiveness on one hand, innovation on the other. And the task of coordination appeared daunting. But has this volume nonetheless been able to strike a balance? Has it delivered a ‘portrait of the Gadamerian mind’ that is at once comprehensive and tracks the state of the art? In my view, it has, and the articles cited are some excellent examples of the fruits that can be borne of this twofold ambition. These and many other papers in this collection show that the two directions can be harmonized into a cohesive volume. Moreover, this collection is not only held together by the skeleton of its primary goals. The connecting tissues stretching out between the chapters are just as vital to the unity of the work.

A pertinent example of such a link, running through the various contributions, is the theme of conceptual innovation. Several of the articles undertake novel deconstructions of Gadamerian concepts, some authors opting at times for a reconstruction and retranslation instead. For instance, there is the increased and usefully articulated emphasis on the presentational, as opposed to the representational in Gadamer, not only as it relates to aesthetics (see James Risser, Cynthia R. Nielsen and Günter Figal’s chapters), but also to language, where, for Gadamer, it is *being* that comes to *presentation* (see Nicholas Davey and Carolyn Culbertson’s contributions). The careful articulation of the differences between these concepts is a highly valuable, if unintended, sub-debate in this volume.

Another instance of this new interest in conceptual analysis in Gadamer scholarship is David Vessey’s ‘Tradition’. In this extensive and comprehensive contribution, the author distinguishes between Gadamer’s *Tradition* and *Überlieferung*, two concepts identically translated, and usually indistinctly understood. Through his careful analysis, Vessey has not only disambiguated some interpretations of Gadamer, but contributed positively to the philosophical study of tradition in English-speaking scholarship.

On the other hand, some authors have proposed and explored renewed translations of Gadamerian concepts. One such instance is the concept of *linguality* (and *lingual* as an adjective), here presented as a translation of the Gadamerian *Sprachlichkeit* (for which *linguisticity* is the norm) but extending in use beyond the scope of Gadamer’s own

philosophy. *Linguality*, with its overtones of *orality*, might indeed be better fitted for a philosophy which sees the essence of language in its fluid, spoken form of *Gespräch*, as opposed to *linguisticity*, which evokes fixed structures and stable grammars. *Bildung* as *enculturation*, as opposed to the more common *cultivation*, might again figure as such an example. I, for one, salute these conceptual innovations and look forward to the fruits they might bear in the future.

The way I see it, these ‘connecting tissues’, as I called them, constitute part of that *increase in being* promised at the outset. For it is not a simple terminological update. A philosopher’s words are the body, and not only the dress of his thought. As such, the examples mentioned contribute to uncovering – for an English-speaking audience – the full texture of Gadamer’s conceptual apparatus and the different layers of inferential relations present between concepts in the original. At the same time, they provide, as already mentioned, precise instruments for novel philosophical reflection. One could say, with Gadamer on one’s side, that this represents a positive appropriation and integration of his philosophy into a new idiom, filled with possibilities for future application and potential insights into issues Gadamer himself didn’t grapple with. In my view, this is an excellent way of keeping Gadamer and his philosophy alive through translation and appropriation, and of demonstrating their relevance.

On the topic of translation, we can also applaud the inclusion of a chapter on this issue as one of Gadamer’s *key concepts*. While one can argue whether the concept is key, this is certainly an area of research that has been growing backstage for a while. Although the author, Theodore George, does not mention this debate in his ‘Translation’, as that was not necessarily his purpose, his chapter will nevertheless bring this area of research into the mainstream, attracting new and significant contributions to this promising and burgeoning field. After all, a collection of this scholarly calibre does not, in spite of its goals, merely canvass the state of the art: it also establishes it. For this reason too it deserves praise.

*The Gadamerian Mind* and the chapters it contains are more than likely to act as signposts marking the relevance and significance of a given topic. This is exactly why I have said that the absence of certain topics is regrettable. But it is also why the presence of others is praiseworthy, such as those explored in Kevin Aho, Georgia Warnke, Theodore George, or Catherine Homan’s contributions.

## Concluding remarks

Undoubtedly, the *Gadamerian Mind* is of the highest scholarly value as a comprehensive companion to Gadamer’s thought and its significance. That his philosophy remains relevant is both successfully argued for and evident from the quality of the contributions collected here. But I have also been suggesting in the previous section that part of the value of this volume lies in its potential for impact, and it’s important, in my submission, not to underestimate its possible repercussions for future research. In other words, this collection both provides an *increase in being* in Gadamer scholarship, as I’ve argued above, and promotes and forwards it through its selection of treated topics and its academic stature. *The Gadamerian Mind* stands as an open invitation for scholars to explore and actualize the latent possibilities of Gadamer’s philosophy themselves.

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