

# Tasks of Philosophy in the Present Age: RIAS-Lecture, June 9, 1952

HANS-GEORG GADAMER

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**TRANSLATORS' ABSTRACT:** This is a translation of Hans-Georg Gadamer's recently discovered 1952 Berlin speech. The speech includes several themes that reappear in *Truth and Method*, as well as in Gadamer's later writings such as *Reason in the Age of Science*. For example, Gadamer criticizes positivism, modern philosophy's orientation toward positivism, and Enlightenment narratives of progress, while presenting his view of philosophy's tasks in an age of crisis. In addition, he discusses structural power, instrumental reason, the objectification of nature and human beings, the reduction of both to mere means, and the colonization of scientific-technological ways of knowing and being—all of which continue to impact our social and political lives together and threaten the very existence of every living being. This speech is essential reading for Gadamer scholars interested in the social, political, and ethical dimensions of his thought and for those interested in bringing Gadamer into conversation with critical theory.

**TRANSLATORS' KEY WORDS:** Gadamer, 1952 Berlin Speech, positivism, instrumental reason, corruptibility of reason, Enlightenment narratives, structural power, objectification of nature, autonomy of reason, tasks of philosophy

## TRANSLATORS' INTRODUCTION

**T**ill Greite, a lecturer and Ph.D. candidate at Humboldt University in Berlin, recently discovered a previously unknown speech by Gadamer in the archives of the Free University and the Berlin Broadcasting Station, formerly known as RIAS (*Rundfunk im amerikanischen Sektor*), a radio station that the US occupation founded in 1946 to provide news to people in and around Berlin. Gadamer delivered this speech, titled "Tasks of Philosophy

in the Present Age” (*Aufgaben der Philosophie in der Gegenwart*), as part of the radio station’s series on “Culture and Art as Objects of Science.” Other prominent speakers included Paul Tillich, Theodor Adorno, and Bertrand Russell. The reader will find Gadamer’s speech translated into English for the first time below.

Gadamer’s Berlin speech was given seven years after the close of World War II and eight years prior to the publication of his magnum opus, *Truth and Method* (1960). One finds several themes in the speech that reappear in *Truth and Method*, as well as in his later writings such as *Reason in the Age of Science*, a collection of essays that was published in English in 1981. For example, in his Berlin speech Gadamer is critical of positivism and modern philosophy’s orientation toward positivism, noting that philosophy of this sort fails to “satisfy the need of philosophizing human beings” (5). We likewise find critical remarks directed at a certain Enlightenment narrative extolling reason’s ability to move humanity forward with respect to both knowledge and alleged “civilizing competences” (5), having thrown off, as Kant would say, the fetters of its self-incurred immaturity. Contra these narratives of progress, Gadamer introduces what he calls the “corruptibility of human reason” (5), which had become glaringly evident in light of two world wars and the horrors of Nazi Germany. This notion of reason’s corruptibility, as well as Gadamer’s awareness of how philosophy is often deployed by various ideologies fueled by particular power interests, and of how these power interests “combine into large power structures and establish the true world order according to their convictions” (4), will shed valuable light on discussions related to the Gadamer-Habermas debate.

In addition to the themes mentioned above, Gadamer discusses structural power, instrumental reason, the objectification of nature and human beings, the reduction of both to mere means or resources, and the colonization of scientific-technological ways of knowing and being—all of which continue to impact our social and political lives together and threaten the very existence of every living being. In light of the failures of triumphal Reason and its narrow conception of knowledge that excludes essential human truths—truths unattainable via objectifying methods—contemporary philosophy must take a new, humbler, but no less important path. That is, among the tasks of today’s philosophy is the need to recognize and respond to those essential human truths (such as the truth of art and religion), not as lesser truths compared to the truths of natural science, but as crucial to our individual and collective well-being. Rather than a romantic retreat to a nostalgic premodern past or a denial of the contributions of modern science, philosophy’s task is “to unite the necessity of our modern law of development with the insight into its limits” (8) and “to foster a higher knowing, a higher awareness of the limits of this will to knowledge in Western humanity and thereby especially to ward off the magic of this progress, the disastrous spell of a continually more disquieted, more ravaged development of modern humanity, by reflecting on

the origins to which this modern life in its early times and in its distant forms of human life remains continually bound” (8). This speech is essential reading for Gadamer scholars interested in the social, political, and ethical dimensions of his thought and for those interested in bringing Gadamer into conversation with critical theory, especially with critical theory in its Frankfurt school instantiation.

Gadamer’s speech, along with Mr. Greite’s accompanying essay, “Gadamer’s Berliner Vortrag: Von der Korruptibilität des Menschen,” was published in *Philosophische Rundschau: Eine Zeitschrift für philosophische Kritik* 66(1) (2019): 3–24 (<https://doi.org/10.1628/phr-2019-0003>). Our only deviation from the German text was to divide Gadamer’s speech into additional paragraphs. We are grateful to Mohr Siebeck Tübingen for permission to translate and publish Gadamer’s text in *Philosophy Today*, and to Carlo DaVia, Ivan Eidt, Jean Grondin, and Tim Steinebach for their helpful comments on the translation.

## TEXT

It is not easy for a philosophy professor to satisfy the demands of a broader audience and to explain his view concerning the tasks of philosophy in the present age, for anything he can do initially will only disappoint his listeners. Anyone who hears this topic announced has a certain expectation, and this expectation is brought about by the fact that public consciousness considers the significance of philosophy in contemporary life to lie in its decisive disputes over the right form of political state, over the right way to cope with the tasks of civilization on our planet—thus, by the fact that, in relation to all of these tasks, the philosopher is supposed to speak an important, beneficial word. In other words, public consciousness expects philosophy to accommodate the ideological [*weltanschaulichen*] debates of our time and to assist them, so to speak, by means of new, more incisive, and more favorable arguments, for example.

And this is the first disappointment for which I must prepare my listeners. I do not believe that the task of philosophy consists in conforming to the struggle of the modern worldview [*Weltanschauung*] to determine the mindset and decision-making [*Willensbildung*, literally ‘volitional formation’] of the masses. This struggle of the modern worldview is represented, for example, by the great formation [*Gebilde*] of a worldview influenced by Christianity on the one hand, and an atheistic, communistic worldview on the other. These major ideological powers of the present day are characterized by the fact that they attempt, in principle, to draw science and even the voice of scientific philosophy into the service of their own way of seeing things and by the fact that they, as it were, have determined the goals in advance before any work of science is carried out. The so-called *philosophia perennis*, the eternal character of philosophy—as it is maintained today with particular conviction by the Catholic church’s teaching and by the philosophy

the church sanctions—makes as little an exception to this as any other scientific or philosophical achievement of the present day. Philosophy is claimed by these present power interests, by these interests of modern society that wish to combine into large power structures [*Machtgebilden*] and establish the true world order according to their convictions.

In view of this situation, it is understandable that philosophy, as it is practiced in the world today—and, despite certain differences in orientation, it is in principle practiced everywhere on the same basis of a scientific mindset—in this state of affairs, I say, it is understandable that philosophy does not fulfill the demands placed on it. Especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries, there is a way of philosophizing almost entirely dominated by academic teaching. With respect to the deliberative decisions at the preliminary stage of such ideological decisions, such philosophizing consciously limits itself to promoting science and the possibilities of scientific knowledge through the elaboration of a logical tool, an organon. One calls this orientation in modern philosophy, “positivism,” for under positivism one understands the conviction that all metaphysical, all ideological questions are unscientific and that only what has been posited—the given—and the controllable operation on the given realities [*Gegebenheiten*] of experience can lead to genuine wisdom, knowledge. As part of positivism’s scientific, logical mindset, a mathematico-logical discipline has evolved, which, by means of mathematical algebra, undertook to work out the logical structure of all statements. It is so-called logistics or the so-called propositional calculus. This is a very understandable ideal if one bears in mind that the only language which even an ideal inhabitant of an alien planet would know to speak with us earthlings would be mathematics, thus a language that would not have formed itself artificially, i.e., conventionally, but rather as an expression of natural reason and the truths lying in it. Such a language would know how to formulate its statements with the exactitude of numbers and algebra; it would be in the position to solve at a, so-to-speak, higher, neutral level the entire fissured national struggle of contemporary life—a struggle that is linguistically differentiated and continually clouded by misunderstandings of one another and against one another.

Now it is interesting for an observer to see that even the mindset of logical positivism today no longer confines itself to the mathematization of scientific truths with such matter-of-factness as was still the case only a few decades ago. Rather, with increasing interest this modern positivistic logic is also concerned with the concrete life of everyday language and the way of experience invested in it. It undertakes, so to speak, an extension of what it subjects to logical analysis by turning away from the methods of knowledge of the sciences to the concrete experience of life and its linguistic expressions. Without a doubt, the intention remains dominant to recognize [*erkennen*] the truth in a verifiable and identifiable manner independent of subjective interests or political tendencies of the

will. And likewise, other diverse forms of philosophizing are determined by this attempt to push back the genuine decisions of an ideological type from the field of scientific philosophical knowledge by making their own conditions the object of scientific research.

I wish only to point out briefly that all these ways to study today's philosophy and its ideological manifestations in an objectively scientific manner no longer strengthen the real question of philosophy—namely, what the truths are that it must know. Rather, it is exclusively the social-functional value of philosophy, what it means as an expression of a humanity that has become historical, what can be recognized scientifically in this way—a kind of philosophy of philosophy, as it were, which no longer questions itself about what philosophy must know as the genuine object of its knowing, as the highest truths prior to everything else. However, such an attempt to bypass the decisive questions [*Entscheidungsfragen*] of modern ideological thinking by the neutrality of knowledge cannot, in truth, satisfy the need of philosophizing human beings.

And so the question remains that we must pose to ourselves again and again: what type of truth is it that philosophy itself and only it is able to know? If we should formulate one of the decisive experiences that the modern presence [*Dasein*] of our century has had concerning human existence [*Existenz*], I would call it the experience of the corruptibility [*Korruptibilität*] of human reason. Corruptibility [*Bestechlichkeit*] of reason means, in effect, according to the experiences that were assigned to us to have, certainly not only nor primarily that the rational person is unable to escape from the authority of greater powers—whether the interests of a dominant society or religious groups of power, or whatever other effects of power are exerted upon him. Rather, the real corruptibility of reason, its own inner susceptibility [*Anfälligkeit*]<sup>1</sup>—that is, the experience that we have had—is precisely that reason conceals within itself such dependence upon powers and thinks and claims that it is engaged in a free quest for truth when it is in fact dependent; it tells itself that it is free, whereas, in truth, it serves. The century of Enlightenment, whose inalienable effect on the whole of modern life cannot be overestimated, did not yet know anything about this kind of corruptibility of human reason. Here it seemed to suffice that if human reason, through severing its ties to the church and to an authoritarian state, had been freed up to exercise itself to such an extent that it followed its own laws, then the progress of increasing knowledge, increasing civilizing competences, and increasing humanity would certainly follow.

Now this belief in the autonomy [*Selbstmächtigkeit*] of reason, in its abilities to shape humanely the conditions of human life in accordance with its laws—this belief has been shaken by the experiences of the past few decades. Looking at the whole of political life, we have learned to see through the illusion of liberalism. We have seen that it is not enough to have freedom and reason by clearing away all the constraints that up to now have impinged on the exercise of freedom and

reason in what has become the history of Western humanity; we have seen with horror that the trend of modern society in all countries and under the most diverse ideological auspices is not a sign of increasing freedom, but rather is due, despite all the slogans concerning freedom and humanity, to increasing unfreedom. On what is this based, and what sort of positive task remains for the philosophy that recognizes [*erkennt*] this, in a world that has been thus characterized?

There is no doubt that it is a basic feature of the shape of Western civilization in general that it expresses itself in [the language of] modern science and in the scientifically determined way of shaping modern life, a feature that we can, generally speaking, call objectification. It is a tendency that has come to a sweeping victory through the modern Enlightenment, through planning, through calculation, and through shaping in accord with a plan and calculation to take hold not only of nature, but also of human commercial affairs. Undoubtedly, this is a natural ideal for human nature, and undoubtedly the successes that have been achieved on the way to this ideal formation and its exercise have brought about such a total and great transformation of the living conditions of modern humanity that it almost seems like a kind of suicidal skepticism if one does not likewise recognize this ideal as simultaneously an ideal of humanity and freedom. And yet we are forced to draw this decided consequence from our experiences of thinking about and observing modern life. The possibility of making everything into an object—an object of rational planning—seems virtually to be the diabolical mystery in which irrationality in this world increasingly gains dominion. I am not speaking of how modern civilizing technology [*Technik*] is at the point of disintegrating the natural, joyful manner of a life with close ties to nature. Nor am I speaking about what kind of psychological change unavoidably is happening with the modern human metropolis, and what kind of consequences follow for the cooperation and coexistence of humanity on this planet from this feverish tempo of technico-civilizing progress and the organization of political power. In light of all these phenomena, it seems to me, the task of the philosopher is to seek out the fundamental import of what underlies them.

We know, and it was Immanuel Kant who himself formulated this so remarkably in the ideal of the revolutionary age and of the liberation of the bourgeois classes from feudalistic societal forms, we know that it must be referred to as an essential principal of humanity on this planet that the human being ought never to use another human being exclusively as a means, but rather must always dignify him as an end-in-himself. That is a formulation which no one today, in principle, disputes. However, who will deny that the course things are taking—which is more powerful than the good will of any individual—makes it increasingly difficult to adhere to this principle? And this is equally the case with the question, to what extent can there be a real knowledge of the being [*des Seienden*] of all things, which are essential for us to know, through such an increasing objectification of

our methods of knowledge? Undoubtedly, the ideal of modern science is to strip away the contingency of the individual observer's standpoint in order to arrive at lastingly valid, objective outcomes and thereby to generate predictions and forms of control. Undoubtedly, this ideal of modern science is grand and is not to be casually relinquished. But one can no longer ignore the fact that we pay for this ideal dearly with a powerful resignation—namely, by forcing out, in the interest of the will to knowledge in general, everything that does not subject itself to this form of the knowledge of truth.

This is perhaps already the problem-horizon in which Kantian philosophy set the concept of knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] within narrow limits by undertaking to establish philosophical knowledge only where science in the style of the modern natural sciences is possible—namely, in accord with the principles of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Conversely, in other realms of culture, especially in the realm of art, the concept of knowledge is supposed to have no actual application, no more than the concept of truth. Now, it seems to me no accident that contemporary philosophy can no longer simply hold on to this narrow concept of knowledge, that it accepts that the truths that are essential to human life are not exclusively knowable through the objectifying methods of science and as such are not able to claim the grand reliability of this way of knowing for themselves. It sees that, above and beyond this, there are many essential truths whose ability to be known is not comprehensible or controllable through a learnable method for everyone. That there is truth, which is not immediately accessible to everyone, which, as it were, includes existential demands—that is, demands on those who are called upon and in the position to recognize them—this view, of course, supersedes [*aufhebt*] the old ideal of an objectivity of knowledge within certain limits.

And yet today's philosophizing can no longer hide from itself the fact that these truths likewise have become recognizable as such and are significant truths for human life and what is essential to it. Such truths do not lag behind the significance which the advances of natural science have for human life on this earth. It seems to me characteristic from this standpoint and point of view that the problem of language, in particular, receives excellent treatment in today's philosophy. For language belongs to those bearers of a truth that goes beyond the international sphere of science. What is laid out in the articulations of the understandings of the world in the various languages of peoples, what is possible for and constantly at work in forms of communication between the members of various languages and language families—all this is obviously increasingly gaining in importance the more the boundaries between the individual nation-states and the individual world-cultures blur, the more our entire civilization is uniformly homogenized out of the various cultural spheres that have formed on our earth. No expert on these matters can deny that ways of thinking other than Western ways of thinking and categories different from our world-understanding—an understanding which has

been formed through the Western languages—can become significant for us, and it is likewise premature to think that philosophy would be ready to actually take up the languages of East-Asian families of nations, for example, into our thinking.

The example of language as an essential problem of today's philosophizing may at the same time, however, teach us how today's philosophizing poses its own tasks and how it is in the position to evaluate its own activity. The issue is not that some path of modern knowledge, precisely that path of the grand expansion of modern knowledge, could ever again be reversed. Likewise, the issue is not that philosophy now, for example, pursues something like a sort of natural conservation in order to preserve a space of unorganized, still aimlessly vital freedom against this relentless law of progress in these civilizing and scientific methods. Such romantic retreats will always be pursued the more acutely the modern cultural crisis intensifies; however, the task of philosophy seems to me rather to unite the necessity of our modern law of development with the insight into its limits. [The task is] to foster a higher knowing, a higher awareness of the limits of this will to knowledge in Western humanity and thereby especially to ward off the magic of this progress, the disastrous spell of a continually more disquieted, more ravaged development of modern humanity, by reflecting on the origins to which this modern life in its early times and in its distant forms of human life remains continually bound. The self-knowledge of the philosopher will be allowed to say that philosophy is not called to make decisions and to supply arguments for the decisions of the modern worldview. Rather, it is called to heighten the reflection that is so necessary for all human beings who have their practical place in this modern life.

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