

HANS-GEORG GADAMER EXCERPTS FROM TRUTH AND METHOD (1960)

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ii) The Discrediting of Prejudice by the Enlightenment

Enlightenment thought drew a distinction between “prejudice due to human authority and that due to overhastiness” (271). That is, either the “respect we have for others and their authority leads us into error, or else an overhastiness in ourselves” (271). Kant, for example, extolled the use of our own understanding, rather than a reliance on tradition. In this regard, this critique is “primarily directed against the religious tradition of Christianity – i.e. the Bible” (272). For this reason, the prejudice against prejudice is not limited to the interpretation of texts but its “chief application is still in the sphere of hermeneutics” (271). The Enlightenment asserted itself “against the Bible and dogmatic interpretations of it” (272). It is “therefore particularly concerned with the hermeneutical problem. It wants to understand tradition correctly – i.e. rationally and without prejudice. But there is a special difficulty about this, since the sheer fact that something is written down gives it special authority” (272). The “written words has the tangible quality of something that can be demonstrated and is like a proof. It requires a special critical effort to free oneself from the prejudice in favour of what is written down and to distinguish here also . . . between opinion and truth” (272). In general, Gadamer reminds us, the Enlightenment tended to “accept no authority and to decide everything before the judgment seat of reason” (272). For this reason, the

written tradition of Scripture, like any other historical document, can claim no absolute validity; the possible truth of the tradition depends on the credibility that reason accords it. It is not tradition but reason that constitutes the ultimate source of all authority. What is written down is not necessarily true. We can know better. (272)

It takes “tradition as an object of critique, just as the natural sciences do with the evidence of the senses” (272). Some Enlightenment thinkers acknowledged the existence of “true prejudices” (272) ushered in a “modification and moderation” (273) of the Enlightenment and “paved the way for the rise of the romantic movement in Germany, as undoubtedly did the critique of the Enlightenment and revolution by Edmund Burke” (273). However, it still remains accepted as true that even true prejudices “must still finally be justified by rational knowledge” (273).

For this reason, Gadamer argues, the “self-understanding of historicism” (273) continues to be determined by such Enlightenment criteria, albeit via a “curious refraction caused by romanticism” (273). Romanticism and the Enlightenment share with each other an “unshakable premiss: the schema of the conquest of mythos by logos” (273), the “presupposition of the progressive retreat of magic in the world” (273) and concomitant “progress in the history of the mind” (273). It is precisely because romanticism “disparages this development” (273) that it “takes over this schema itself as a self-evident truth” (273) and “only reverses its values, seeking to establish the validity of what is old simply on the fact that it is old: the ‘gothic’ Middle Ages, the Christian European community of states, the permanent structure of society, but also the simplicity of peasant life and closeness to nature” (273). By contrast to the Enlightenment’s “faith in perfection, which thinks in terms of complete freedom from ‘superstition’ and the prejudices of the past” (273), romanticism emphasises “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 over truth" (273). There is a tendency towards "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" (273). In so doing, though, such a reversal of Enlightenment values merely "perpetuates the abstract contrast between myth and reason" (273). 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 the paradisiacal primal state before the 'fall' of thought" (274). The "presupposition of a mysterious darkness in which there was a mythical collective consciousness that preceded all thought" (274) is the equivalent of a "state of perfect enlightenment or of absolute knowledge" (274).

Romanticism, Gadamer argues, gave rise to "historical science in the nineteenth century" (275) because the former "no longer measures the past by the standards of the present . . . but . . . ascribes to past ages a value of their own and can even acknowledge their superiority in one respect or another" (275). All the "great achievements of romanticism – the revival of the past, the discovery of the voices of the people in their songs, the collecting of fairy tales and legends, the cultivation of ancient customs, the discovery of the worldviews implicit in languages, . . . – all contributed to the rise of historical research, which was slowly . . . transformed from intuitive revival into detached historical knowledge" (275). This was in turn the "fulfilment of the Enlightenment, . . . the last step in the liberation of the mind from the trammels of dogma, the step to objective knowledge of the historical world, which stands on par with the knowledge of nature achieved by modern science" (275). The "same break with the continuity of meaning in tradition lies behind both" (275). The Enlightenment "considers it an established fact that all tradition that reason shows to be impossible . . . can only be understood historically – i.e. by going back to the past's way of looking at things" (275), while the "historical consciousness that emerges in romanticism involves a radicalisation of the Enlightenment" (275) in that "nonsensical tradition, which had been the exception, has become the general rule for historical consciousness" (275). "Meaning that is generally accessible through reason is so little believed that the whole of the past . . . is understood only 'historically'" (275). In this way, the "romantic critique of the Enlightenment itself ends in Enlightenment, for it evolves as a historical science and draws everything into the orbit of historicism" (275-276). The result is that the "basic discreditation of all prejudices, which unites the experimental fervour of the new natural sciences during the Enlightenment, is universalised and radicalised in the historical Enlightenment" (276).

Gadamer's point is that the "overcoming of all prejudices, this global demand of the Enlightenment" (276) is itself a prejudice: "removing it opens the way to an appropriate understanding of the finitude which dominates not only our humanity but also our historical consciousness" (276). This realisation is the point at which Gadamer would like to commence "to critique historical hermeneutics" (276). He asks: "Does being situated within traditions really mean being subject to prejudices and limited in one's freedom? Is not, rather, all human existence, even the freest, limited and qualified in various ways?" (276). He contends: the

idea of an absolute reason is not a possibility 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 to the a priori element in the knowledge of nature; 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 posed by historical knowledge. Man is alien to himself and his historical fate in a way quite different from the way nature, which knows nothing of him, is alien to him. (276)

We need to rephrase the epistemological question differently from the way in which Dilthey put it, Gadamer argues. Dilthey had contended that the natural and the human sciences were directed at different objects and thus necessitated differing methodologies. Dilthey, though, could not "escape his entanglement in traditional epistemology" (276) and for this reason was "unable to build a bridge to the historical realities" (276) by means of "[s]elf-reflection and autobiography" (276). Society and history, for Gadamer, is not the object of attention but the determinant of our conscious experience in that the "great historical realities of society and state always have a predeterminate influence on any 'experience'" (276) we may have:

history does not belong to us; 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.* (276-277)

B) Prejudices as Conditions of Understanding

i) The Rehabilitation of Authority and Tradition

Gadamer contends that what "appears to be a limiting prejudice from the viewpoint of the absolute self-construction of reason in fact belongs to historical reality itself" (276). To do "justice to man's finite, historical mode of being, it is necessary to fundamentally rehabilitate the concept of prejudice and acknowledge the fact that there are legitimate prejudices" (277). The "fundamental epistemological question for a truly historical hermeneutics" (277) may be reformulated thus: "what is the ground of the legitimacy of prejudices? What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from the countless others which it is the undeniable task of critical reason to overcome?" (277). The division of prejudices into those derived from 'authority' and those to do with 'overhastiness' is based on the supposition that the "methodologically disciplined use of reason can safeguard us from all error" (277). Overhastiness is "the source of errors that arise in the use of one's own reason" (277) while authority is "responsible for not using one's own reason at all" (277). A "mutually exclusive antithesis between authority and reason" (277) is set up: the "false prepossession in favour of what is old, in favour of authorities, is what has to be fought" (277). The Reformation, epitomised by Luther, gave rise to a "flourishing hermeneutics which teaches the right use of reason in understanding traditional texts" (277) without appeal to either the "doctrinal authority of the Pope" (277) or tradition, hermeneutics safeguarding the "reasonable meaning of a text against all imposition" (277). The result is the "subjection of all authority to reason" (278). For this reason, overhastiness comes to be considered the "source of all error in the use of reason" (278). The old division between authority and overhastiness returns, however, "in a new guise" (278), in the division posited by Schleiermacher between "partiality and overhastiness" (278), the former kind of prejudice being "lasting" (278) in nature and the latter "momentary" (278). Those "concerned with scientific method" (278) are interested

only in the former, lasting prejudices derived from allegiance to authority. Partiality becomes an "individual limitation of understanding: 'The one-sided preference for what is close to ones own sphere of ideas'" (278).

Gadamer accepts that the Enlightenment's "distinction between faith in authority and using one's own reason is, itself, legitimate" (279). In other words, when the "prestige of authority displaces one's own judgment, then authority is in fact a source of prejudices" (279). However, this "does not preclude its being a source of truth" (279) and this is something to which the Enlightenment is blind. It is wrong, Gadamer asserts, to equate authority with "blind obedience" (279) to the view of other people. The "essence of authority" (279) is not based on the "subjection and abdication of reason but on an act of acknowledgement and knowledge – the knowledge, namely, that the other is superior to oneself in judgment and insight and that for this reason his judgment takes precedence – i.e. has precedence over one's own" (279). Authority is not "bestowed but . . . earned if someone is to lay claim to it" (279). It is predicated on "acknowledgement and hence on an act of reason itself which, aware of its own limitations, trusts to the better insight of others" (279). Its "true basis is an act of freedom and reason that grants the authority of a superior fundamentally because he has a wider view of things or is better informed – i.e. once again, because he knows more" (280). Acknowledging authority is "always connected with the idea that what the authority says is not irrational and arbitrary but can, in principle, be discovered to be true" (280). The "prejudices they implant are legitimised by the person who presents them" (280) – the "teacher, the superior, the expert" (280), and so on. They are prejudices "not just in favour of a person but a content, since they effect the same disposition to believe something that can be brought about in other ways – e.g. by good reasons" (280).

One "form of authority particularly defended by romanticism" (280) is that of "tradition" (280). "That which has been sanctioned by tradition and custom has an authority that is nameless, and our finite historical being is marked by the fact that the authority of what has been handed down to us . . . always has power over our attitudes and behaviour" (280). This is the basis of all education and even when the student "comes of age" (280), this does not mean that he "becomes his own master in the sense that he is freed of all tradition" (280). The "real force of morals" (280), he argues, is "based on tradition" (280) because morals are "freely taken over but by no means created by free insight or grounded on reasons" (280). The romantics believed that "tradition has a justification that lies beyond rational grounding and in large measure determines our institutions and attitudes" (281). This is the secret of the success of Aristotle's conception of ethics, advanced in his Nicomachean Ethics, which "grounds the transition from ethics to 'politics' . . . on the indispensability of tradition" (281). Again, though, Gadamer argues, the romantic attitude to tradition is merely a reversal of Enlightenment emphases:

Romanticism conceives of tradition as an antithesis to the freedom of reason and regards it as something historically given, like nature. And whether one wants to be revolutionary and oppose it or preserve it, tradition is still viewed as the abstract opposite of free self-determination, since its validity does not require any reasons but conditions us without our questioning it. (281)

Gadamer is of the view, however, that there is "no such unconditional antithesis between tradition and reason" (281). The "romantic faith in the 'growth of tradition,' before which all reason must remain silent, is fundamentally like the Enlightenment, and just as prejudiced" (281). The

fact is that in tradition there is always an element of freedom and of history itself. Even the most genuine and pure tradition does not persist because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated. It

is, essentially, preservation, and it is active in all historical change. But preservation is an act of reason, though an inconspicuous one. For this reason, only innovation and planning appear to be the result of reason. But this is an illusion. Even where life changes violently, as in ages of revolution, far more of the old is preserved in the supposed transformation of everything than anyone knows, and it combines with the new to create a new value. At any rate, preservation is as much a freely chosen action as are revolution and renewal. (281-282)

That is "why both the Enlightenment's critique of tradition and the romantic rehabilitation of it lag behind their true historical being" (282).

Gadamer suggests that for this reason the hermeneutical element in the human sciences should be given its due. "Research in the human sciences cannot regard itself as in an absolute antithesis to the way in which we, as historical beings, relate to the past" (282). Our

usual relationship to the past is not characterised by distancing and freeing ourselves from tradition. Rather, we are always situated within traditions, and this is no objectifying process – i.e. we do not conceive of what tradition says as something other, something alien. It is always part of us, a model or exemplar, a kind of cognizance that our later historical judgment would hardly regard as a kind of knowledge but as the most ingenious affinity with tradition. (282)

Hence, Gadamer argues, the inadequacy of the "dominant epistemological methodology" (282) and the following questions"

Has the rise of historical consciousness really divorced our scholarship from this natural relation to the past? Does understanding in the human sciences understand itself correctly when it relegates the whole of its own historicity to the position of prejudices from which we must free ourselves? Or does 'unprejudiced scholarship' share more than it realises with that naive openness and reflection in which traditions live and the past is present? (282)

"[U]nderstanding in the human sciences shares one fundamental condition with the life of tradition: it lets itself be *addressed* by tradition" (282). It is true of both the "objects that the human sciences investigate" (282) and the "contents of tradition" (282) that "what they are really about can be experienced only when one is addressed by them" (282). This Even in so-called "'objective' historical research" (282), the goal of which is to "determine anew the significance of what is examined" (282), the truth is that this "significance exists at the beginning of any such research as well as at the end: in choosing the theme to be investigated, awakening the desire to investigate, gaining a new problematic" (282).

Gadamer asserts that the

abstract antithesis between tradition and historical research, between history and the knowledge of it, must be discarded. The effect (Wirkung) of a living tradition and the effect of historical study must constitute a unity of effect, the analysis of which would reveal only a texture of reciprocal effects. Hence, we would do well not to regard historical consciousness as something radically new – as it seems at first – but as a new element in what has always constituted the human relation to the past. In other words, we have to recognise the element of tradition in historical research and inquire into its hermeneutic productivity. (282-283)

An "element of tradition affects the human sciences despite the methodological purity of their procedures" (283). There is a marked "difference between the human and natural sciences

with regard to their history" (283). It is true that "none of man's finite historical endeavours can completely erase the traces of this finitude" (283) for the "history of mathematics or of the natural sciences is also a part of the history of the human spirit" (283). However, it is not just historical naivete when the natural scientist writes the history of his subject in terms of the present state of knowledge. For him errors and wrong turnings are of historical interest only, because the progress of research is the self-evident standard of examination. Thus it is only of secondary interest to see how advances in the natural sciences or in mathematics belong to the moment in history at which they took place. This interest does not affect the epistemic value of the discoveries in those fields. (283)

Tradition also affects the natural sciences, in sum, determining, for example, how "particular lines of research are preferred at particular places" (283), but research in such fields "derives the law of its development not from these circumstances but from the law of the object it is investigating, which conceals its methodical efforts" (283). (Gadamer admits, in a footnote, that the foregoing comments have been problematised by the publication of Thomas Kuhn's groundbreaking The Structure of Scientific Revolutions in 1963, that is, three years after the publication of Truth and Method.)

The foregoing, however, is not applicable to the human sciences even though these have borrowed their methods from the natural sciences. The proof of this is that the "great achievements in the human sciences almost never become outdated" (284), notwithstanding the fact that sometimes knowledge subsequently arises which was not available to the earlier thinker. The

value and criterion of research cannot be measured by a criterion based in the subject matter. Rather the subject matter appears truly significant only when it is properly portrayed for us. Thus we are certainly interested in the subject matter, but it acquires life for us only from the light in which it is presented to us. We accept the fact that the subject presents different aspects of itself at different times or from different standpoints. We accept that these aspects do not simply cancel one another out as research proceeds, but are like mutually exclusive conditions that exist by themselves and combine only in us. 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. Modern historical research is not only research, but the handing down of tradition. We do not see it only in terms of progress and verified results; in it we have, as it were, a new experience of history whenever the past resounds in a new voice. (284)

Where research in the natural sciences "penetrates more and more deeply into nature" (284), research in the human sciences is "motivated in a special way by the present and its interests. The theme and object of research are actually constituted by the motivation of the inquiry" (284). Historical research is "carried along by the historical movement of life itself and cannot be understood teleologically in terms of the object into which it is inquiring" (284-285). "Such an 'object in itself' clearly does not exist at all" (285) and it is this which "distinguishes the human sciences from the natural sciences" (285) the object of which "can be described idealiter as what would be known in the perfect knowledge of nature" (285). It is senseless to speak of such 'perfect knowledge,' however, in the case of the human sciences.