

THE UNIVERSAL IN HANS-GEORG GADAMER'S HERMENEUTIC PHILOSOPHY

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One of the leading figures in contemporary philosophy is Hans-Georg Gadamer. He is respected not only among philosophers, but by philologists, historians, and theologians as well. This is rather remarkable since his major work, *Wahrheit and Methode* (in English: *Truth and Method*), is anything but easy reading for the uninitiated.² Indeed, a spate of publications is currently being marketed which would make Gadamer's writings more approachable. The content of these publications is diverse. Some address themselves to the theme presented by Gadamer as 'fusion of horizons' (*Horizontverschmelzung*), i.e., the view that not only the phenomenon under interpretation, but also the interpreting subject carry their own experiential horizon, and that the blending together of both horizons makes for the core moment of the hermeneutic experience. Others concentrate on that which Gadamer calls 'effective-historical consciousness' (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*), which is the recognition that all processes of understanding take place only in and from a comprehensive, cultural tradition, a tradition in which the interpreter, too, is unavoidably situated. Again, there are those who approach Gadamer primarily in terms of the prominence he gives to 'dialogue' (*Gespräch*); according to Gadamer, philosophies claiming sure knowledge are out of date: every insight into truth is 'mediated' in continual dialogue, by a logic of question and answer. [120]

¹ This article has been translated by Drs. J. N. Kraay. The occasion for this article is the publication of L.D. Derksen, *On Universal Hermeneutics: A Study in the Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*. Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1983, doct. diss., 316 pp. A number of major points of this study were presented by L.D. Derksen, 'Language and the Transformation of Philosophy' in: *Philosophia Reformata* 49 (1984), pp. 134-149.

² *Wahrheit and Methode*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1979, 553 pp. *Truth and Method*, transl. Garrett Barden and John Cumming. New York; Seabury Press, 1975, 551 pp.

A recent publication on Gadamer is by Dr. L. D. Derksen, *On Universal Hermeneutics: A Study in the Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*. Ms. Derksen defended this thesis in September 1983 at the Free University, Amsterdam. Prof. Dr. J. van der Hoeven was 'promotor'. I take this opportunity to congratulate both. Derksen's doctoral thesis guides us into Gadamer's philosophy in an excellent way. It also distinguishes itself in its specific approach.

Gadamer and the Ambiguity of the Universal

Dr. Derksen is, of course, aware of the multiple Gadamer-interpretations available today, but she elects to follow her own track. Very consciously she would understand Gadamer in terms of the third part of *Wahrheit und Methode*, that is, in terms of language as the universal medium of all experience of being. I readily agree with the author that, for Gadamer, language is the properly hermeneutic universe and, thus, the heart of philosophy. In emphasizing this Dr. Derksen's book really means a profound contact with Gadamer, down to the 'foundation' of his hermeneutics.

Following Ricoeur and others, the author's exposition makes clear that in Gadamer the universal is presented in a number of ways. First, the mode of knowing characteristic of the hermeneutic experience is called universal. Next, the historical conditions basic to such interhuman understanding are universal. And finally, universal is also the space within which all human experiences of being take place, the space which – and this brings us back to the main point – Gadamer prefers to indicate as the universe of language.

These distinctions simultaneously present us with the major divisions in Dr. Derksen's book. She begins with an introductory survey focussed on Gadamer's place in hermeneutic philosophy as a whole (especially Dilthey and Heidegger). One notes that in doing so she follows closely Gadamer's own analyses, particularly when the relationship between historicism and hermeneutics is at issue (Ch. 1). Next, following the three parts of *Wahrheit und Methode*, the mode of knowledge of hermeneutic experience (II), its historical basis (III), and its linguistic operative space (IV) are explored. In each case comes to the surface this question: Why does Gadamer speak of universality here, and how can such talk be justified? As mentioned above, the

emphasis is on the assumed universality of language. And this is where Gadamer encounters the greatest difficulties. Derksen's study becomes decidedly fascinating when she shows how Gadamer is forced, in part under pressure of his critics, to gradually weaken and amend his claim that language is the universal medium of our understanding of reality: silence can be eloquent; speech can cover motives and actions; language can lie about the real. In brief, already at the close of *Wahrheit und Methode*, but more extensively in subsequent discussions with Habermas and others, Gadamer is driven to enter the complexities of the problems regarding language and reality (V), language and reason (VI), language and praxis (VII). That is to say, in the later chapters of *On Universal Hermeneutics* the author guides us toward the high-level dialogue Gadamer is wont to engage in with his opponents. We ourselves are, as it were, drawn into the process of hermeneutic understanding. We ourselves are encouraged to understand [121] both Gadamer and the issue that is at stake. This is why the book is eminently suited as entrance into Gadamer's writings.

Since I recommend Dr. Derksen's book, I should also note a number of limitations. These limitations are revealed especially when her analysis moves toward criticism. I do not regard criticism as being of marginal value. If true understanding is critical understanding – a thesis Gadamer would undoubtedly applaud – then analysis and critique are inseparable. At any rate it is worthwhile to take cognizance of Ms. Derksen's criticism of Gadamer's claimed universality of hermeneutic philosophy in the threefold direction she enumerates: its method, its basis, and its scope. Is her critique adequate? In the sequel I will try stimulated by Dr. Derksen's critique, to reflect more extensively on the import of Gadamer's thesis of universality.

The Universality of the Hermeneutic Experience

As noted above, Gadamer calls his hermeneutic philosophy universal because hermeneutic understanding itself is supposedly a universal way of knowing. I consider this a provocative thesis. At any rate it is a challenge to those who, with the Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd, hold that the being of all created being is properly called 'meaning', and therefore requires understanding at every level of human

existence.³ On this relevant point Ms. Derksen would distantiate herself from Gadamer. Gadamer cannot make good his claim, she objects, because the hermeneutic model is ultimately, so Gadamer holds, limited by an opposed model of knowing, that of scientific method.

I disagree. I have the impression that the author comes to *Wahrheit and Methode* too much in terms of the well known English translation by Barden and Cumming. Gadamer himself warns us: '*Keine Uebersetzung kann das Original ersetzen*'; it is the motto even of Derksen's book but, know ironic, quoted in translation.⁴ This leads to an easy use of the word 'model', a word seldom used by Gadamer in German, and explicitly treated only in connection with portrait art (TM: 128; WM: 138). A model is there spoken of as akin to a painter's model, a temporary, visual aid, a schematic construction which must help make the imperceptible visible. In passing Gadamer also mentions a model of a house and an atomic model.

Led by the translation mentioned above, Ms. Derksen uses the term also in contexts in which Gadamer, I think, would rather not to do so. I can imagine that the author would call engagement in play or the experience of art or involvement in conversation a model of how we are to see the hermeneutic experience of understanding (cf. TM: 341; WM: 360) –although even in such cases Gadamer prefers other words: '*Worbild*', '*Urbild*', '*Leitfaden*' – but one should surely object to use of the term 'model' when the hermeneutic circle, and even the hermeneutic experience itself are at issue. What does dr. Derksen do with this? The scientific and the hermeneutic modes of knowing are placed over against each other as 'two [122] opposing models of experience' (p. 105). In accordance with this, the title of Ch. II is none other than 'Models of Knowledge'. Thus, Derksen's criticism becomes unavoidable: whatever Gadamer claims, the hermeneutic experience cannot possibly be universal; after all, it is limited by the opposed model of knowledge, that of science. (pp. 104, 250)

The semantic inadequacy of the concept of 'model' is evident here. To Gadamer the hermeneutic experience is decidedly no visual or artificial aid, no scheme of thought made graphically visible, no preliminary approximation of that which cannot be

³ H. Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, transl. David H. Freeman and William S. Young. Amsterdam: H. J. Paris; Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1953-1958, vol. I, p. 4: 'Meaning is the being of all that has been created.'

⁴ H-G. Gadamer, *Kleine Schriften* I. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1967, p. 100.

perceived. On the contrary, at stake in the hermeneutic experience of reality is precisely the fundamental self-understanding of man in the world. The hermeneutic experience is no 'model of knowledge'; it is, rather, the original 'mode of being' of man in the world in the style of Heidegger. And as concerns the model 'opposed' to it: for Gadamer scientific method (however broadly or narrowly conceived) is highly relevant to the self-understanding of man in the world, but in a way which threatens to be disruptive, a way which Heidegger would characterize as the mode of 'Fallenness' (*Verfallenheit*).⁵ If we grant that derailment threatens western science the question arises whether a theory of models can clarify anything. Should we not rather say that such eventual derailment can only be clarified in terms of (the mode of) authentic human self-understanding? As to the precise implications of such selfknowledge I should like to cross swords with both Heidegger and Gadamer (see the section below). At any rate, the presentation of two competing models of knowledge offers no insight. It opens no perspective either, for, if a competition between them really ensued it is anybody's guess who would be the victor. This much is sure: to Gadamer modern science, whichever course it takes, remains bound to its 'hermeneutic preconditions', as he calls them.⁶ And I agree.⁷

History as the Universal Continuum of Meaning

It is of interest to trace the author's critique of Gadamer's idea of universality in the second meaning of the word, that is, as it concerns the basic conditions of hermeneutic understanding. Gadamer's inquiry here turns transcendental. The basic conditions of all hermeneutic experience are said to repose in history. And history is called an all-embracing 'effective coherence' (*Wirkungszusammenhang*), in which both the reality to be interpreted and the interpreter are involved. This means that Gadamer, unlike the *geisteswissenschaftliche* hermeneutics in the nineteenth century (W. Dilthey), would not have reality viewed as objectified expression of life, nor the human subject (the historian) as in a position to gain objective knowledge of it through empathy and intuition. Gadamer rejects that kind of objectivity, just as he does away with the entire

⁵ M. Heidegger, *Sein and Zeit*. Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, 1960⁹, pp. 175-180. One should read: 'Das Dasein kann [!] nur verfallen, weil es ihm um das verstehend-befindliche in-der-Welt-sein geht.' (p. 179)

⁶ *Kleine Schriften* I, p. 109. Cf. 'Die hermeneutische Dimension [umfasst] das gesamte Verfahren der Wissenschaft.' (p. 107)

⁷ Compare J. Klapwijk, 'Methoden-strijd in de geschiedeniswetenschap' in: *Alg. Ned. Tijdschr. v. Wijsb.* 66 (1974), pp. 204-209.

subject-object scheme as starting-point for the theory of knowledge. [123]

As in Heidegger, human existence (*Dasein*) is temporality; in other words, as hermeneutic being man is, from head to toe, involved in the temporal continuum of history by interpreting and shaping its meaning. His understanding is reference to and disclosure of the given, always questioned anew; it is a dialogue with the past also, filled with resonances of all the references that went before. In sum, 'historicity' is the foundation of the hermeneutic experience. In Gadamer it is the source also for the surprising thought – christian philosophers, too, should find this striking – that human reason is shaped by prejudice more than by judgment, determined more by authority than by autonomy. Understanding always occurs in and begins from the 'hermeneutic situation' (Heidegger), replete with all the presuppositions inherent in it.⁸

Dr. Derksen appears to appreciate this transcendental-phenomenological turn in Gadamer's philosophy. But she also points to a basically dialectical tension thus arising in his thought. On the one hand Gadamer assumes this process of understanding to be historically contingent, determined by an on-going logic of question and answer. That is to say, he emphatically opposes Hegel's notion of history as culminating in absolute knowledge, and puts great stress on the historical changeability and the openness of all our knowledge. On the other hand, however, Gadamer also claims history as the universal ground of hermeneutic understanding. He turns to history as the general and supertemporal basic condition for all human understanding (pp. 110, 127, ff.). Can these notions co-exist? Derksen tries to put the squeeze on Gadamer by rightaway identifying his idea of the continuum of historical meaning as the 'contingent-absolute.' (p. 11, ff.)

This criticism seems to inflict a mortal wound, at least to the mind of those who would reject dialectics. But Gadamer's dialogical-dialectical way of thinking, in which history makes for one great 'communication community' (*Gesprächsgemeinschaft*), would allow him to say that '*du conflit des opinions jaillit la vérité.*' It is through the dialectic of a great diversity of interpretations that the universally valid emerges and the thing itself (*die Sache*) presents itself. I think,

⁸ *Wahrheit and Methode*, pp. 250-269 (*Truth and Method*, pp. 235-253); *Sein and Zeit*, pp. 232, 311.

therefore, that this critique of the 'dialectical tendencies and tensions' in Gadamer's view of universality pass him by altogether.

It is fitting in this connection to recall that in the entire history of historicism – and why should we in the case of Gadamer, who calls history the universal ground for the understanding of man in the world, suddenly speak of 'post-historicism' (p. 127)? – attempts have been made to save the universal and the generally valid in and from the historically unique. Hegel and Marx are probably the most outstanding examples of this. In a word, in a dialectic perspective history is readily understood as 'mediation' between the individual and the universal. Where Derksen speaks of philosophical tensions the dialectical thinker would think of historical possibilities to attain to the universal from out of the individual.⁹ [124]

Would this not mean that dialectical thought as such should be questioned? It seems to me that Derksen's critique would have been more penetrating if she had indeed raised the question as to whether Gadamer's historical-hermeneutic universe, in spite of his stress on the openness and finitude of history, is not, in the final analysis, a *closed* universe. The question can be formulated in another way: does the historical-dialectical view not rest, per definition, on an immanentist view of the world? If this should prove to be the case, at least to a significant degree (cf. below, toward the end of this paper), one could very well speak of openness still, of openness toward the future. But truly transcendental openness to that which makes the hermeneutic universe of knowing and understanding, of interpretation and communication possible is, in that case or to that degree, blocked.¹⁰

In some places it appears that Ms. Derksen, too, holds that Gadamer's critical reflection evinces 'a lack of radicality' (p. 255), and that he should have pressed on in his questioning to 'that which grounds us.' (p. 291) But the lack of radicality and the insufficiently foundational in Gadamer's thought is pursued in a way which, it seems to me, will make it

⁹ J. Klapwijk, *Tussen historicisme en relativisme: Een studie over de dynamiek van het historicisme en de wijsgerige ontwikkelingsgang van Ernst Troeltsch*. Assen: Van Gorcum, 1970, pp. 41, 248. Derksen's position to the effect that in the history of philosophy 'two diverging traditions' announce themselves, the one being metaphysical philosophy and the other deriving from historicism (with Gadamer, thanks to language, bridging them), is certainly not mine. Cf. L. D. Derksen, 'Language and the Transformation of Philosophy,' pp. 149, 144. Historicism, which should not be identified with historical relativism without qualification, has its roots, *nota bene*, in the metaphysics of German, post-Kantian idealism. Compare *Tussen historicisme en relativisme*, pp. 38 ff.

¹⁰ See J. v.d. Hoeven on Heidegger: 'Critically speaking, I am inclined to defend the thesis that historicism is to be opposed not primarily for its relativistic tendencies, but rather for its closedness.' 'History and Truth in Nietzsche and Heidegger' in: *Life is Religion: Essays in Honor of H. Evan Runner*, ed. H. Vander Goot. St. Catharines: Paideia Press, 1981, pp. 72-73. Concerning this immanentism see also J. Klapwijk, *Tussen historicisme en relativisme*, p. 9.

difficult to break open his hermeneutic universe. Actually, the author only pleads for an expansion of it. The lack of radicality turns out to be a lack of 'integrality'. (p. 255) Gadamer – she says – should have entered into dialogue not only with the philosophical tradition of Plato, Aristotle, Hegel and Heidegger, but also with the great christian thinkers of the western tradition, 'such as Kierkegaard'. (p. 255; cf. p. 127)

At this point, surely, a number of questions arise. To what extent was Kierkegaard a 'christian thinker', and to what extent did he actually wish to be one? Was he more of a 'christian thinker' than Hegel, who saw himself as the Luther of philosophy? Is it true that Kierkegaard, as compared to Hegel, stood in a different philosophical tradition? Does not Gadamer repeatedly, at crucial points, refer to Kierkegaard?¹¹ If Gadamer is to be criticized for his 'dialectical tendencies and tensions', why not Kierkegaard as well? Would an appeal to Kierkegaard not saddle the christian faith with an anti-rationalism to which almost all contemporary christian theology and (as I hope) all christian philosophy is squarely apposed?

This last question can be focussed on this: is it not true that in the reference to Kierkegaard and his leap of faith the radical questioning regarding the preconditions of human understanding by way of a transcendental-philosophical critique is cut short and the dialogue cut off? To be sure, one has the right to bring forward against Gadamer an insight of faith or (in re-^[125]flected form) a theological argument. One can try to break open Gadamer's hermeneutic universe by way of transcendent criticism (i.e., criticism formulated from without the philosophical discourse), rather than by way of transcendental critique (i.e., critique formed from within the philosophical discourse itself). But the question which immediately comes up is whether, and to what extent, such criticism has *philosophical* relevance. At any rate, if I were to go that way at all I would refer the (Lutheran) Gadamer to Luther rather than to Kierkegaard.¹²

Language as Transcendental Universe

¹¹ For instance in 'Was ist Wahrheit?' and in 'Die Kontinuität der Geschichte und der Augenblick der Existenz' in: *Kleine Schriften* I, pp. 57, 157.

¹² Remarkable also is Derksen's appeal to Kierkegaard in 'Language and the Transformation of Philosophy.' There she speaks of 'an immediate revelation which comes from beyond history and human reality, *which breaks into it . . .*' (italics mine); p. 148. How one can from here still evaluate Gadamer's solution as 'mainly positive' escapes me (unless one has a dialectical trick up one's sleeve).

Before I add a few remarks about this last point at the close of this article I should like to consider the problem-complex of universality as understood in the third sense of the word. The historical-hermeneutic universe is the universe of the logos, of word and language. According to Gadamer language has a most outstanding function for man. Language is not a mere system of signals. It is not merely an instrument of which man may or may not make autonomous use. Language is pre-given. It is the originally and primordially given universal space within which the hermeneutic experience necessarily takes place. To Gadamer understanding reality is a matter of interpretation (*Auslegung*), for oneself or for another, and interpretation depends on language (TM: 350; WM: 366). This is why Gadamer pictures language as the universal, ontological medium of understanding. No apparatus at man's disposal, language is the home into which he is born and in which he will remain throughout his life. Being in the world is being in language: 'Being that can be understood is language.' (*Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache*) (TM: 432; WM: 450).

I, for one, would not object to assuming the universality of language, in this sense that reality presents itself to man within the intriguing relations of human language and symbolic expression. The question is: how exclusive and how self-contained is this universe? Should it be designated as *the* ontological medium of understanding? Or is it possible for man to experience (or to understand) reality in other ways as well, by way of emotional feeling, for instance, or esthetic judgment, economic interest, or religious experience? Is there, perhaps, a '*pluralité des mondes*,' a multiplicity of universes? Somewhere Gadamer writes: 'In language the world itself presents itself. The experience of the world in language is "absolute".' (*In der Sprache stellt sich die Welt selbst dar. Die sprachliche Welterfahrung ist 'absolut'*) (TM: 408; WM: 426). Granted the first thesis, does this make for the truth of the second? Or is it that Gadamer allows himself a leap of logic; I mean, does he absolutize the universality of language?¹³ [126]

¹³ It is true that Gadamer places 'absolute' in quotation marks, but it seems to me that this is only because of the contingency of language. He continues: 'It transcends all the relativity of the positing of being, because it embraces all being-in-itself, in whatever relationships (relativities) it appears.' (Sie übersteigt alle Relativitäten von Seinssetzung, weil sie alles Ansichsein umfasst, in welchen Beziehungen (Relativitäten) immer es sich zeigt) (TM: 408; WM: 426).

In the discussions between Gadamer and his opponents, for instance in the well known collection *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik* (1971), is brought forward a number of times that the universe of language is not truly all-encompassing, that language can be disrupted, that it can be medium of understanding but also of misunderstanding, of misrepresentation and distorted communication. Language can give expression to rationality and to insight, to be sure, but it can also be a cloak to cover interests and power-plays. Thus language is susceptible to critique of ideology. Now, the possibility of such critique is based on the fundamental possibility of distinguishing the universe of language from other universes and to shed light on it in terms of them – in terms of, say, economic interest or political relations of power.¹⁴ Let me formulate as follows: I agree with Gadamer's reply to the effect that the concrete factors of labor and power are not outside of the boundaries of the hermeneutic problem. But if critique of ideology is to make any sense it is necessary, on the one hand, that such factors can be rendered amenable to discourse within the universe of language and, on the other hand, that as such these factors simultaneously exist outside of the universe of language.¹⁵

This brings me to a difficult issue. Language is not only expressive of human understanding in the world, but also of human self-alienation. Language is burdened with interferences in communication. Within the relationships of language, which involve him throughout his life, man is continually at work to distinguish truth from falsehood, at least to the measure that he is not overcome by the violence of the lie. And so the world of human language refers to the seriousness of life beyond the play of language, not only via critique of ideology, but also through the phenomenon of psychoanalysis or through the claim of a prophetic word or even through men's anguished cry. In fact, Ms. Derksen shows the great difficulties that gradually beset Gadamer in his attempt to maintain language as the sole universal mode of being in the world.

The very nature of language is such that it points beyond itself. Language is not used indiscriminately nor listened to that way. Discourse is per definition other than a string

¹⁴ J. Habermas, 'Zu Gadamer's "Wahrheit und Methode",' in: *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik*, Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, (1971) 1980, pp. 52-53. Cf. also Habermas, 'Die Verschlingung von Mythos und Aufklärung' in: *Mythos und Moderne: Begriff und Bild einer Rekonstruktion*, Hg. K. H. Bohrer. Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1983, pp. 414, 415.

¹⁵ Cf. H-G. Gadamer, 'Rhetorik, Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik' in: *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik*, p. 71.

of nonsense-syllables. Within the many concrete relations of linguistic usage language is applied critically and interpreted critically in accordance with semantic criteria considered valid for its use. This holds, for example, also for the language used in critique of ideology. In connection with this Karl-Otto Apel and, following him, Jürgen Habermas came to speak of transcendental rules or principles which as a kind of apriori structures lie at the basis of the human use of language. If such speaking contains any truth, it is again an indication that language refers beyond itself.

In short, Gadamer's hermeneutic question as to the possibility of understanding may not deteriorate into the explicitation of language as play in which everyone participates in his own way, as if truth could be derived [127] from our concept of play. (TM: 446; WM: 464) These are unsavoury words when one reflects that not only the Son of man but, every day, people suffer lies and die for truth. How can anyone, after the Holocaust, still unreservedly maintain: 'In understanding we are drawn into an event of truth.' (*wir Sind als Verstehende in ein Wahrheitsgeschehen einbezogen*) (TM: 446; WM: 465)? The manner in which people comport themselves with language in critical discrimination, acceptance and rejection of one another's words, needs to be reflected on existentially and illuminated transcendently. The truth-question can only be answered relevantly and adequately in a normative sense. In this Apel and Habermas are right.¹⁶

Meanwhile, their idea that such an apriori structure of language refers to, even anticipates an apriori and ideal speech community, as Apel *cum suis* posit,¹⁷ seems a religious postulate, however diluted. My objection to this is not regarding its religious character (Apel himself seems not to be aware of this)¹⁸; it concerns the idea of an ideal community as such. A human community is ideal only when it in turn responds to a normativity which is not itself grounded in any actual or ideal society, a normativity that can only be believed.¹⁹ Within the community of mankind there is a struggle for truth which indeed imposes the duty to believe on something announced in language but not simply given with it. With this I oppose Gadamer who says 'that the truth of what presents itself in play is properly neither "believed" nor "not

¹⁶ K-O. Apel, *Transformation der Philosophie*. Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, (1964) 1973, I, p. 71; J. Habermas, 'Der Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik' in: *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik*, p. 154.

¹⁷ *Transformation der Philosophie*, I, p. 60.

¹⁸ *Transformation der Philosophie*, I, p. 61.

¹⁹ Compare J. van der Hoeven, *Peilingen: Korte exploraties in wijsgerig stroomgebied*. Amsterdam: Buijten en Schipperheijn, 1980, p. 121.

believed" outside the play situation.' (*dass die Wahrheit dessen, was sich im Spiel darstellt, nicht eigentlich über die Teilhabe am Spielgeschehen hinaus 'geglaubt' oder 'nichtgeglaubt' wird*) (TM: 444; WM 462).

Language and the Word of God

Philosophically speaking I consider it necessary to think through from the inside Gadamer's hermeneutic theory, in order to uncover its immanentism and to arrive, with Habermas, at the statement that 'Hermeneutics, so to speak, beats from within against the walls of the coherence of tradition.' (*die Hermeneutik stösst gleichsam von innen an Wände des Traditionszusammenhangs.*)²⁰ We noted that in such transcendental reflection even the 'walls' of the critique of ideology aimed at by Habermas become visible. If anyone would, with Dr. Derksen, introduce the significance of the christian message, such a one should remember that an appeal to Kierkegaard and his doctrine of the absolute paradox is misleading to the extent that, and because, this appeal provides fuel for thinking of a closed universe from which man can escape by means of an irrational leap only. Without wishing to appear to foster even a vestige of a *theologia naturalis* as gateway to the truth of the christian faith, I would stress that christians should find it important to battle for the transcendental [128] transparency of reality against all immanentism, and thus to claim room for the christian message that God manifests himself in our world, in the world of language also even today, even if the how of this revelation transcends our understanding.

Gadamer, too, at times follows this path. It is remarkable that in *Wahrheit und Methode* he is profoundly preoccupied with the history of christian dogma, particularly with the significance of the christian *Logos*-doctrine of the *Patres* and of the Scholastics. This need not surprise us. Especially in its speculative elaboration this dogma seems to accord with his own view of the *logos* and language character of reality. But it is equally remarkable that in the main he passes by in silence the meaning of the Reformation for the development of hermeneutics. This should surprise us, since in the reformational basic principle of *sola Scriptura* and in the rejection of the doctrinal tradition of the church as parallel authoritative source,

²⁰ J. Habermas, 'Zu Gadamer's "Wahrheit und Methode",' p. 52. For Gadamer's reply see 'Rhetorik, Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik,' p. 71

furthermore in the acceptance of the *perspicuitas* of the Bible and in Luther's well known dictum *sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres*, a number of very specific hermeneutic issues have come forward that demand reflection when the religious depth-structure of the linguistic universe is at stake. A measure of such reflection one already finds in the reformational work of Matthias Flacius, *Clavis scripturae sacrae* (1567)²¹, which must count as a mile-stone in the history of hermeneutics.

The reformational position is challenging. Given the great diversity of biblical writings, shaped throughout the ages on the basis of many oral traditions, one can only understand the Reformers' speaking of the unity, the clarity and the sufficiency of the Bible in terms of their unreserved faith in Scripture as *verbum Dei*. This position is the more provocative if one takes into account the hermeneutic basic principle laid down in Calvin's *Institutes*, i.e., that the true selfknowledge of man in the world is dependent on the knowledge of God. And for this knowledge of God, Calvin holds, we depend on the Word of God, incarnate in Christ, inscripturated in the Bible.

Such speaking of God means – one need but think of Luther – a profound restlessness in human language, unmasking of the final masquerade, call to choice. This speaking is no surprise attack, no unexpected break-in into the hermeneutic universe of man. It is, rather, the condition for the possibility of true selfunderstanding, source of light in a culture filled with lies. I realize that these last sentences should count as a religious confession rather than as a philosophical argument. But in this connection I would bring forward at least this philosophical argument that whoever apriorily excludes the possibility of divine revelation or shuts himself off from divine speech passes by the depth-structure of language, and remains forever perplexed by the pressing question as to why and how understanding must time and time again be won from misunderstanding, and how it is that man seems so little able to comprehend himself.

I might mention that on this point Gadamer, too, has uttered some worthwhile statements. For instance, that all understanding, including un-
[129]derstanding the Bible, is on the way (*unterwegs*). (KS 1:92) Also: in understanding

²¹ In *Wahrheit und Methode* Luther and Flacius are mentioned once or twice, Calvin not at all. In *Seminar: Philosophische Hermeneutik*, Hgs. Gadamer, G. Boehm; Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1974, Flacius functions — *mirabile dictu* — in the context of 'die Vorgeschichte der romantischen Hermeneutik.'

the New Testament there is more at issue than the self-understanding of believing man. The faith of the individual is overruled (*überspielt*) and mediated (*ermittelt*) by the christian community as a whole, even by an embracing ecclesiastical tradition of faith. (KS I: 70, 80) The proclaimed Word, furthermore, is a Word that invites to conversion (*zur Umkehr ruft*) and thus presents the promise of a better understanding of our selbst. (*ein besseres Verständnis unserer selbst*) (KS I: 81) A better self-understanding? Gadamer even goes so far as to say that originally the concept of selfunderstanding bears a theological mark: It is related to the fact that we do not understand ourselves, other than before God. (*Er ist bezogen auf die Tatsache, dass wir uns selbst nicht verstehen, es sei denn vor Gott*) (KS I: 18).

On the other hand must be said that Gadamer tends to locate the New Testament writings within the general type called originary literature. (*Urliteratur*) It is likely that for this reason he speaks of an untestable theory of inspiration (*unkontrollierbare Inspirationstheorie*) with regard to the Bible. (KS I: 91, 92) On the whole he gives the impression that what the Bible or theology claim, '*die Sache nach*' agrees with or leads in the direction of his own philosophical hermeneutics. (KS I: 57) The significance of the christian message is mentioned especially when he is dealing with the crucial problem of the never-ending process of understanding; christology (trinity, incarnation) 'prepares the way' (*wird zum Wegbereiter*) for a new anthropology which mediates between human finitude and divine infinity as ground of the hermeneutic experience. (TM: 388; WM: 405) Very much to the point here is Dr. Derksen's remark that Gadamer reinterprets the religious message of Christ as mediator in an intellectualistic way. (pp. 218, 85) I should understand these words such, that in Gadamer's work the logical-ontological dialectic of finituds and infinitude tends to take the place of the religious opposition between human culpability, which stifles and alienates, and divine grace which reconciles and renews even in the case of depleted language and deranged communication.

It will be clear that there is abundant reason to continue the critical discussion with a thinker as respectable as Hans-Georg Gadamer. In such discussion profitable use indeed can be made of Ms. Derksen's book.