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Gadamer's Century

Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer

edited by Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnswald, and Jens Kertscher

The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

Contents

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This book was set in Baskerville by Achorn Graphic Services, Inc., and was printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gadamer's century : essays in honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer / edited by Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnsward, and Jens Kertscher.

p. cm. — (Studies in contemporary German social thought)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-262-13403-9 (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-262-63247-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Gadamer, Hans Georg, 1900– 2. Philosophy. 3. Hermeneutics. I. Gadamer, Hans Georg, 1900– II. Malpas, J. E. III. Arnsward, Ulrich von, 1940– IV. Kertscher, Jens. V. Series.

B3248.G34 G36 2002

193—dc21

2001044170

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Acknowledgments

The editors would like to give special thanks to Lawrence Kennedy Schmidt for his invaluable assistance during the preparation of this volume.

The idea for this collection of essays in honor of Gadamer's one-hundredth birthday emerged during Jeff Malpas's time as a Humboldt Research Fellow in the Philosophisches Seminar of the University of Heidelberg during 1998–1999. The volume itself came together under the auspices of the University of Heidelberg, the University of Tasmania, and the European Institute for International Affairs, Heidelberg. We would like to thank each of these institutions, including the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, for their assistance and support. Our gratitude also extends, of course, to all the contributors to this volume for having accepted the invitation to philosophize with Gadamer and to Larry Cohen at MIT Press for giving his support to the project at an early stage in its development. In addition, we would like to thank Bert Peeters, Stefano Franchi, and Michael Isenberg (for their translations of the essays by Ricoeur, Albert, Kertscher, and Vattimo) and Cynthia Townley (for editorial assistance). Special thanks are due to Eilidh St. John for her work in proofing and compilation of the index.

This volume is a project of the European Institute for International Affairs, Heidelberg. The European Institute for International Affairs is an independent, nonprofit and nonpartisan scientific organization whose main task is to encourage the exchange of ideas and research results in the domains of the social sciences and the humanities.

Introduction

Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnswald, and Jens Kertscher

When reviewing his life as an old man, Johann-Wolfgang Goethe wrote: "Es wäre nicht der Mühe wert, siebenzig Jahre alt zu werden, wenn alle Weisheit der Welt Torheit wäre vor Gott."¹ ("It would not be worth the trouble to live to seventy years of age were all the wisdom of the world but foolishness before God.") Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose life work is honored in this collection of essays, has long surpassed Goethe's "seventy years," but there seems little doubt, whatever perspective is adopted, that the wisdom that has been accrued and articulated in the course of that life amounts to a great deal more than "foolishness."

Few, if any, philosophers now living have had an involvement and influence in philosophy over the last century to compare with that of Hans-Georg Gadamer. He has been responsible for major contributions to aesthetic theory, to the study of Plato and Hegel, to humanistic studies, and to the philosophy of history and the *Geisteswissenschaften*. As a one-time student of Martin Heidegger, Gadamer has taken up and developed a number of central Heideggerian insights in new and important ways, while his engagement with his contemporaries such as Habermas, Betti, and others have been memorable events in themselves. Moreover, as Gianni Vattimo points out in his essay here, the shape of contemporary hermeneutics is itself almost entirely due to Gadamer's influence, while his magnum opus, *Truth and Method*, has attained the status of one of the great philosophical works of the last century.²

Yet how to honor a philosopher who has already become a classic in his own lifetime? An answer to this question may be found in Gadamer's own work. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer comments on the classical as something that has an ongoing significance and meaning that preserves itself even in the face of the eroding and decaying influence of time.³ As Gadamer writes: "What we call 'classical' does not first require the overcoming of historical distance, for in its own constant mediation it overcomes this distance by itself. The classical, then, is certainly 'timeless,' but this timelessness is a mode of historical being. . . . This is just what the word 'classical' means: that the duration of a work's power to speak directly is fundamentally unlimited."⁴ The surest testament to the status of Gadamer's work as indeed "classical" in this way must be its continuing ability to speak to us—and not just to a select few. An ability to speak that is itself given testament by our own capacity to respond to the work, to take up the ideas it presents to us, and to find in it a source of insight, inspiration, and challenge. The aim of this collection is not merely to provide a marker of Gadamer's one-hundredth birthday (in 2001, his one hundred and first) but to provide a measure of the truly classical character of Gadamer's work through exhibiting something of the breadth of engagement that his work has provoked and the extent to which that work does indeed speak to us even across differences of culture, style, and philosophical tradition.

In pursuit of this aim, the essays assembled here range across a number of topics and approaches, including contributions from those who have direct and well-acknowledged interest in Gadamer and Gadamerian hermeneutics as well as those for whom Gadamer might otherwise be thought to be a less central influence. Moreover, while all of these essays, in one way or another, take Gadamer's work as an important point of departure, none of them are concerned merely with issues of Gadamerian scholarship or exegesis. The emphasis is thus on the moment of *applicatio* rather than *explicatio* as it might apply in the encounter with Gadamer's own work.

Of course, not only is this emphasis on "application" in keeping with the idea of the "classical" as it has been spelled out here, but it also reflects what might be termed the "classical" temper of Gadamer's style of philosophizing—"classical" in just the sense that it

has always exhibited a commitment to ongoing engagement with others and to the openness that is a necessary part of such engagement. As Gadamer writes: "In human relations the important thing is . . . not to overlook his [i.e., the other's] claim but to let him really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs. But ultimately this openness does not exist only for the person who speaks; rather anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without such openness to one another there is no genuine human bond."⁵ Although Gadamer has had an enormous personal effect on twentieth-century thought, he has never been a solitary or self-obsessed thinker. Indeed, not only have the ideas of dialogue and conversation been central themes in Gadamer's philosophical writings, but they also have been central features of his philosophical practice. In this respect, it is only fitting that Lawrence Schmidt's sketch of Gadamer's life, with which this collection properly begins, should itself begin with the account of a conversation in a Freiburg Weinstube in 1974.

No less than in Gadamer's own life and work, dialogue and "conversation" figure as important themes in almost all of the essays contained in this collection. In some cases the focus is explicitly on some aspect of the dialogic structure of understanding or on issues that arise directly from it. Charles Taylor and Jay Garfield both address issues of understanding as they apply across cultures and traditions—and in Garfield's case, as they arise in relation to contemporary philosophical practice itself; Ulrich Arnsperg examines similar issues from the perspective of the ideas of forms of life and language games; Gerald Bruns considers the way in which rationality is itself always worked out within the realm of everyday practical engagement—within a dialogue that is always socially and linguistically mediated; John Connolly examines the exegetical practice of Meister Eckhart and the possibility that it might be grounded in something like a Gadamerian account of the necessary connection between *explicatio* and *applicatio*; Alasdair MacIntyre explores the working out of that dialogue in relation to the reading of philosophical texts; Jeff Malpas looks to dialogue or "play" as indicative, not merely of the character of understanding, but also of its essential ground. Elsewhere the focus is less on the dialogue of understanding as such and more on the way in which that dialogue plays itself out in

particular cases or with respect to particular issues: issues of relativism; of race, gender, and social identity; of historical distance and historical engagement; of philosophical interpretation and scientific inquiry.

Many of the essays that make up this volume are, of course, themselves continuations of conversations that have already been long underway—conversations that represent a continuation of the authors' own engagement with Gadamer's thought and, in the case with Ulrich Arnsward's, Robert Holub's, and Robert Pippin's contributions in particular, a continuation of an ongoing dialogue with the philosophical names of the past, in these cases, Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, and Hegel. Moreover, in keeping with Gadamer's own breadth of philosophical erudition and interest, it is not only modern thought that figures in these pages, but also that of the ancients and medievals. In Stanley Rosen's essay, for instance, it is the age-old quarrel between poetry and philosophy, or as one might also put it, between the humanistic and scientific impulses within philosophy itself, that takes center stage. Although Rosen presents Gadamer as adopting a mediating role in this quarrel, Hans Albert's contribution suggests a different view with Gadamer's hermeneutics counterposed to the "critical rationalism" of Karl Popper. In Albert's essay, it is the ongoing engagement between himself and Gadamer that is the main focus of discussion, and the dialogue between Gadamer and other recent and contemporary figures, including Derrida, Habermas, and Heidegger, also figures as an important element in many of the contributions. But new conversations, or conversations that have a relatively short history to them, are also opened up here.

In this latter respect, John McDowell's essay is particularly important, inasmuch as it develops further the connection between McDowell and Gadamer that was already evident in McDowell's *Mind and World*. Moreover, McDowell also brings the work of Davidson into the picture, and the question of the relation (or, indeed, the contrast) between Davidson's work and that of Gadamer is not only a feature of McDowell's contribution, but also figures in a number of other essays, most notably in those of Taylor and Malpas. Here it is not merely a dialogue between individuals that comes to the

fore, but a dialogue between different philosophical traditions—although just how different remains a point deserving further exploration.

The space that is opened up in the encounter with another is one that is always animated by language—the importance of conversation in Gadamer's life and work is thus a reflection, not only of the dialogue that lies at the heart of understanding, but of the way in which that dialogue stands in an essential relation to the linguistic, even though it encompasses more than merely that which can be spoken. Just as dialogue and conversation take a central role in many of the discussions here, so too is it a role that is for the most part shared with language as well as with the temporal and sociohistorical dimension in which language itself moves. For Jens Kertscher in particular, the role of language in understanding—and the famous Gadamerian pronouncement that "Being that can be understood is language"⁶—is his main concern, while for Paul Ricoeur and Alasdair MacIntyre it is the medium of history and tradition, and, in Ricoeur's case, the role played there by temporal distance, and so also by death.

Yet inasmuch as the essays contained here do indeed encompass a remarkable diversity of philosophical perspectives, interests, and styles, so they are also indicative of the ever-present possibility of dialogue not only within, but also across language and tradition, and of the formation of new modes of discourse, new traditions, new modes of philosophizing. If one of the aims of this collection is to provide testimony to Gadamer's own remarkable capacity to engender philosophical and human engagement, then another aim is to hold open the possibility of a mode of philosophical thinking that would be adequate to the challenge that Gadamer's own energy, insight, and openness presents to us—a mode of thinking that would not remain enclosed within the narrow confines of its own specialized vocabulary and canon, but one that would indeed be capable of encompassing more of that broad range of problems and approaches that is characteristic of contemporary philosophy. It is perhaps the pursuit of just such an ambition that is the most fitting way of honoring and celebrating the one hundred years of Hans-Georg Gadamer.

Notes

1. Johann-Wolfgang Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen*, in *Goethes Werke, Hamburger Ausgabe in 14 Bänden*, Band 12 (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982), 515.
2. In his own contribution to this volume, Alasdair MacIntyre asserts his confident expectation that both *Truth and Method* (*Wahrheit und Methode*, first published, 1960) and *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* (*Die Idee des Guten zwischen Platon und Aristoteles*, first published 1978) will be counted as classics of twentieth-century thought.
3. The classical, writes Gadamer, "epitomizes a general characteristic of historical being: preservation amid the ruins of time" (*Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall [New York: Continuum, 2nd rev. ed., 1989], 289).
4. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 290.
5. *Ibid.*, 361.
6. *Ibid.*, 475.

Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biographical Sketch

Lawrence Schmidt

At the end of the 1974 summer semester, Professor Hans-Georg Gadamer traveled the short distance from his home in Heidelberg to the University of Freiburg to entertain questions concerning hermeneutics from students in Professor Werner Marx's seminar. I attended that seminar, where we had studied *Wahrheit und Methode*. Professor Marx had collected questions and forwarded them to Gadamer. To read an important work in philosophy and then have the opportunity to converse with the philosopher is a rare and invigorating experience. The intensity of the conversation grew when we retired to a cozy *Weinstube* in the old town. Although he walked with a slight limp, Gadamer struck me as a man in his prime: his power of concentration, the sparkling eyes as another interjected a further question, his willingness to graciously entertain and even improve upon a critical comment before delving into an answer, his enthusiasm to pursue the subject matter, and his stamina, which outlasted most of us. This is but one of innumerable encounters that attest to Gadamer's humanity and delight in conversation, which continue today, even at one hundred.

Hans-Georg Gadamer was born on February 11, 1900, in Marburg, Germany.¹ His immediate roots were Silesian; his mother, Emma Gewiese, and father, Johannes Gadamer, were born in Waldenburg near Breslau. In 1891 Johannes Gadamer moved to Marburg where he studied pharmacology and began his academic teaching career at the university. In 1902 Johannes Gadamer followed a call to become