

Introduction

What, if any, role do historical traditions play in the process by which we arrive at understanding? Contemporary attitudes on the matter vary greatly. On the one hand, we believe that real understanding requires that we examine the world unhindered by historical traditions so as to achieve as objective an understanding as possible. This attitude is preserved in a certain ideal of science and technology to which appeals are still regularly made in the twenty-first century. According to this ideal, part of what makes science and technology so trustworthy as processes for arriving at understanding is their indifference to particular historical traditions. In the scientific process, one need not consult history at all but can arrive at knowledge simply by collecting data and making sound inferences. While this attitude remains pervasive, it is by no means the only one common in the twenty-first century. Alongside appeals to the idea that the scientific process will free thinking from the confines of historical tradition, we find appeals to the idea that thought must remain absolutely grounded in a given tradition. On this view, historical tradition provides a template to which posterity must continually adhere. The opposition between these two common attitudes is reflected in opposing attitudes toward historical texts. When historical tradition is assigned no proper role in the process of understanding, the study of historical texts plays no significant role in the process. On the other hand, when historical tradition is regarded as providing a template from which later thinking cannot legitimately stray, historical texts come to be seen as the sources of those templates and the “literal” meaning of these texts is anxiously sought. Alongside these two attitudes toward the role of historical tradition in the process of understanding is a third—one that is less common but increasingly familiar in our contemporary world. This orientation is

one that looks out for the hidden, typically unacknowledged influence of historical traditions on thought, including their influence on those scientific processes that many imagine to proceed indifferently to history. On this view, the inertia of historical traditions is indeed the cause of many social problems, but simply proceeding with the intention of being free of them provides no guarantee that one has actually accomplished such independence of thought. Instead, one must be constantly vigilant in recognizing and neutralizing these hidden biases.

Philosophers too express this same divergence of attitudes toward the role of historical tradition in the process of knowing. Some engage very little with the history of philosophy and see the essential activity of the discipline as reasoning set free from the preconceptions of the past. For others, engaging with the history of philosophy is essential. Yet there are diverging ideas about how and why it is essential. Do we read the history of philosophy in order to be able to better recognize the historical baggage that we as a society bring with us as we deliberate about issues in the present day? Or do we turn to certain texts in the history of philosophy because they set forth the parameters within which our own thought in the present day must proceed? Research in philosophy looks incredibly different depending on a given philosopher's approach. One philosopher may produce philosophical research on the ethics of leadership, for example, by spending years examining the behavior of those generally believed to be leaders in contemporary society, carefully identifying implicit points of disagreement among their leadership styles, and using principles of sound reasoning to argue for one of these styles or for an alternative. Another philosopher may produce research on the same topic by spending years working through Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and carefully identifying ancient arguments about the ethics of leadership that would, after the influence of social contract theory, become largely forgotten in the modern context. As this example suggests, then, philosophers differ nearly as much as the rest of the general population when it comes to thinking about this issue.

This confusing assortment of attitudes suggests a deep ambiguity today in the way that we think about the relevance of historical consciousness and historical texts for the process of understanding. It suggests a difficulty reconciling two insights that, although each quite convincing on its own, stand in tension with one another. On the one hand, there is the insight that, when we go to try to understand something, we do not do so as a blank slate. Our attempt is conditioned by aspects of our

historical orientation whether we recognize it or not. For the most part, when we go to investigate a topic, whether it is the ethics of leadership or the social intelligence of cats, we draw from a set of questions and interests that prefigure our present investigation and from a history that has given rise to the very concepts we are investigating (e.g., intelligence, leadership, the ethical). What we seek to understand is rarely, if ever, something completely independent of the development of human consciousness. Indeed, we might even say that attempts at understanding the world can almost always be described as attempts to elaborate on and better understand ideas that are already familiar to us by virtue of our historical orientation. Yet we struggle to reconcile this insight with our observation that, in order for us to advance in our understanding of things, we cannot allow ourselves to be unduly influenced by the beliefs, questions, and habits of those who came before us. We find ourselves wishing to understand something, after all, when we experience it as new and unfamiliar. It is its unfamiliarity that would seem to demand from us that we put aside the templates that we have ready to hand.

Against this backdrop the third attitude described emerges as one possible path of reconciliation. If one cannot ever come to know the world except through a particular historical consciousness, a historical consciousness so fundamental to our cognition that it cannot ever be completely uprooted, then perhaps the best one can do in order to answer the demand of the unfamiliar is simply to acknowledge the role that one's historical biases play in one's attempt at understanding. This approach has the virtue of not taking for granted the ideal at which our attempts at understanding aim. Indeed, it radically reconceives the goal of understanding, highlighting above all the importance of self-awareness. Yet it is hard to imagine that self-awareness of one's historical biases is equivalent to understanding itself.

This book proposes that Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory of understanding in his major work, *Truth and Method*, constitutes an alternative and, in fact, a better way of thinking about the role of historical tradition in the process of understanding. Like many, Gadamer takes seriously the way that our historical context informs how we encounter, inquire into, and make sense of things. His theory of understanding has this in common with a number of other schools of thought that have gained traction over the last century—from social constructivism to communitarianism. Yet it is distinct from other treatments of the historicity of understanding on a couple of significant points.

First, most of those who highlight the role of historical traditions in understanding retain as an ideal what Lorraine Code describes as the “disinterested and dislocated view from nowhere.”¹ They argue that human understanding (e.g., of reality, of the good) is such that it can never achieve this ideal and thus that human inquirers must be content with understanding what is true and what is good *for us who share a particular historical tradition*. For the constructivist, for example, we can know things only insofar as they are organized or constructed according to the template provided by our very own historical horizon *but not as they are in themselves*. Gadamer’s theory of understanding, by contrast, does not preserve as an ideal the “view from nowhere” and thus does not look at historical consciousness as a defect in understanding. What he develops in *Truth and Method* is, instead, an account where the mediation of historical consciousness is essential to the event of understanding. It is the condition for its possibility rather than an indication that one has not fully understood. As Gadamer argues, “the important thing is to recognize temporal distance as a positive and productive condition enabling understanding.”²

Second, most who address the ways that one’s historical consciousness mediates their attempts at understanding conceive of this historical consciousness as something that one can, at most, become aware of but that, crucially, one cannot revise or expand. This is, in part, due to the perception of tradition as something that is relatively fixed and unchanging. It also seems to follow naturally from the observation of how very difficult, if not impossible, it is to step outside of a historical tradition that has long informed one’s mode of thought and self-understanding. On this basis, it would seem that, at best, one can learn to become aware of the influence of historical traditions upon one’s life but that one cannot hope to subject them to any kind of critical revision. Gadamer’s theory of understanding offers an explanation, however, of the way that, as they mediate new encounters, historical traditions can become expanded and revised. Traditions need not function as rigid, unresponsive frameworks, and the horizons that they impart need not remain unchanged over time. Even texts, which many anxiously look to for the origins of their traditions, are, for Gadamer, sources of meaning in development. Indeed, for Gadamer, while immersion in a historical tradition is a condition for any understanding whatsoever, it is often the problematization of one’s historical tradition that is required for genuine understanding.

Now, to present Gadamer's *Truth and Method* as offering a theory of understanding will, for some readers, seem to misconstrue the general character of the book, presenting the project as epistemological instead of ontological. *Truth and Method*, after all, addresses not just how we understand works of art but the ontology of art, not just language as a medium of understanding but the nature of things such that they come to presentation in language. In other words, it explores the nature of being and not just what we can know about it.³ Moreover, there are moments in *Truth and Method* where Gadamer seems to distinguish hermeneutics as he understands it from components of epistemology traditionally construed. For example, in part 2 of the book, he describes the progress made by Edmund Husserl's description of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) as a step in "overcoming of the epistemological problem through phenomenological research" (TM, 244), a formulation that suggests that epistemology is a limited framework for philosophical examination best replaced by a different set of problems and questions. In addition, Gadamer makes clear on a couple of different occasions, including in the opening paragraphs of the introduction, that it is not his intention to develop a method for how understanding *should* proceed and that his exploration of the hermeneutic phenomenon is not concerned with "amassing verified knowledge, such as would satisfy the methodological ideal of science" (TM, xx).⁴

The efforts that Gadamer makes to distinguish his project of philosophical hermeneutics from certain aspects of traditional epistemology have led many commentators to read Gadamer's work as a complete departure from questions about truth and justification that have long been essential to epistemology and, indeed, to the identity of the philosophical discipline. Some commentators regard this as a significant shortcoming in Gadamer's thought and argue that any serious philosophical examination of understanding has to provide an account of the phenomenon that has methodological normative relevance. In other words, it must provide a general method for arriving at legitimate knowledge or a set of general criteria for distinguishing between more justified and less justified claims. Shortly after the publication of *Truth and Method*, both Emilio Betti and Karl-Otto Apel offered criticisms of the project along these lines.⁵ More recently, Michael Forster has argued that Gadamer's account of understanding implies that the indebtedness of thought to historical traditions is "epistemically insurmountable, that it is impossible to abstract from one's own specific pre-understanding."⁶ Other commentators have

praised what they see as Gadamer's move away from certain metaphysical commitments that have traditionally grounded epistemological concerns. Richard Rorty, for example, praises Gadamer for offering a description of understanding that is no longer bound up with a metaphysics of truth and, on this basis, identifies Gadamer as a nominalist, one who holds that to understand something better does not mean to achieve better, more justified understanding but simply "to be able to tie together the various things previously said in a new and perspicuous way."⁷ Although these readings of Gadamer's work differ from one another in significant ways, all of them have in common the belief that Gadamerian hermeneutics is not an epistemology in the proper sense. In the chapters that follow, I refer to these interpretations collectively as *the anti-epistemological reading of Gadamer*.

There are a couple of reasons to resist the anti-epistemological reading of Gadamerian hermeneutics, though. First, Gadamer states explicitly throughout the book that, while not concerned with developing a general method for knowing, he is still very much concerned with questions about truth and knowledge. Consider the fuller context of the passage from the introduction quoted in part above:

The hermeneutic phenomenon is basically not a problem of method at all. It is not concerned with a method of understanding by means of which texts are subjected to scientific investigation like all other objects of experience. It is not concerned primarily with amassing verified knowledge, such as would satisfy the methodological ideal of science—*yet it too is concerned with knowledge [Erkenntnis] and with truth [Wahrheit]. . . .* But what kind of knowledge and what kind of truth? (TM, xx; emphasis added)

Gadamer goes on to argue that it is shortsighted to take the concepts of truth and knowledge implicit in the natural sciences as the only viable ways of thinking about these things. What he aims to do in *Truth and Method*, he explains, is to consider the nature of truth and knowing when examined through those forms of understanding that are formally articulated in the human sciences. What is the nature of understanding at play in those situations where one is trying to *understand* a historical event? What is the nature of the truth at issue when one claims that a given interpretation of a literary work is *true* or when one experiences an

actor's performance as a *true* portrayal of a particular character? While it may be tempting to think that what is sought in such situations is simply the objective historical event, the objective meaning of the literary work, and so on, and while there have certainly been attempts to develop such methodologies in the humanities disciplines,⁸ Gadamer argues that such experiences actually provide us with a model of truth and understanding that is strikingly different from that model from the natural sciences to which we are most accustomed. For example, while we are accustomed to thinking about the objects we want to understand as independent of and indifferent to the situations from which we inquire, Gadamer notes that what historical, textual, and aesthetic kinds of understanding seek is something different. What makes one curious about a historical event or a historical text is what it means for one's own present situation. The essence of what one wants to know is not simply some immediate being lodged in the past. Likewise, that which demands to be understood in a work of art is not simply the artist's original intention but something for which the spectator's historical consciousness is essential. Such experiences put us in touch with senses of truth and knowing that differ from the ideals associated with the natural sciences.

Some will object, however, that what engagements of this kind strive for is *understanding*, not *knowledge*. The former term typically refers to the way that one integrates a new experience, information, or skill into one's own already-existing set of beliefs and practical abilities. The latter refers, instead, to the possession of a belief that lines up with some objective reality, that is, how something is in itself. While it is true that we have begun to develop two distinct sets of vocabulary along these lines, one cannot conclude from this fact that interest in understanding is not interest in knowledge. We still sometimes use the term *know* to refer to an individual's integration of new information, as when in conversation one asks another: "Do you *know* what I am saying?" More importantly, even if this were not the case, it would still be valid to ask whether a frequent differentiation in usage is actually indicative of an unbridgeable rift between two domains. While it is true that Gadamer speaks more frequently of understanding (*Verstehen*) than knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) in the book, he consistently problematizes the basis upon which this distinction is typically made. He does this through two closely related arguments that problematize the distinction independently and in combination. First, drawing directly from Heidegger's discussion of "the fore-structure of the understanding," he argues that, whenever we set out to gain knowledge

about something, we inevitably bring with us anticipatory projections with which we must integrate the object we are attempting to know. Going through this process of understanding (i.e., integrating the object with one's own horizon of anticipatory projections) is the condition for the possibility of gaining any knowledge. What's more, he argues that, in many cases, the very things that we seek to know are not ontologically separate from the historical horizons that we bring with us and with which they must be integrated to understand them.⁹ In such cases, the understanding one achieves through the application of one's historical horizon does not simply mediate the meaning of the object for the subject but is also part of that object's meaning. It is this second argument that Gadamer presents when he writes: "Understanding must be conceived as a part of the event in which meaning occurs, the event in which the meaning of all statements—those of art and all other kinds of tradition—is formed and actualized" (TM, 164). It is not, then, that Gadamer is interested in the process by which new information is integrated through personal understanding but not in the way in which the real meaning or truth of something is made clear. What interests him in *Truth and Method* is the essential role that the former (understanding) plays in the latter.

This helps shed light on a second reason to question the anti-epistemological readings of Gadamer, namely, the fact that such readings tend to assume a rather narrow conception of epistemology. To say, for example, that Gadamerian hermeneutics does not provide a way of thinking about truth because it tracks how understanding proceeds for subjects situated in particular historical traditions is to accept that no theory that considers the historical situation of knowing subjects can qualify as a theory of knowledge. Yet this idea is increasingly contested by contemporary epistemologists. Since "the social epistemological turn" that transformed the field of epistemology toward the end of the twentieth century, more and more epistemologists accept the axiom that we cannot figure out what we ought to believe (i.e., what is true) independently of an examination of how people come to arrive at their beliefs (i.e., how understanding arises) and that the latter requires us to consider the role of social and historical factors in this process.¹⁰ Feminist epistemology, which has been at the forefront of this development, has had an especially strong impact in encouraging not only awareness of the way particular historical traditions (like androcentrism) can tacitly condition inquiry and research in the present day but also in probing how, in light of such conditioning, to distinguish justified from unjustified beliefs. In addition to the strength

of Gadamer's own arguments, which he frames on several occasions as contributing to a clarification of knowledge and truth, then, these recent developments in epistemology suggest that we should think twice before excluding Gadamerian hermeneutics from the field of epistemology. If he is problematizing some of the background assumptions of the field and attempting to reconceive what truth, justification, objectivity, and so on might mean when considered independently of these assumptions, this in no way distinguishes him from what a number of epistemologists today are doing. In fact, it suggests that mainstream epistemology has good reason to revisit Gadamer's major work and to see what light it might shed on questions still unresolved in the field.

When we consider the ways that contemporary epistemologists have been engaged in a renegotiation of the aims, scope, and basic questions of the field, we come to see Gadamer's remarks in *Truth and Method* where he seems to distance himself from epistemology in a new light. When he praises early phenomenologists for finding a way to "overcome the epistemological problem," we need not take this as evidence that Gadamer is not interested in contributing to theories of knowledge, justification, or truth. We can instead understand him to be problematizing some of the assumptions often made by epistemologists in the twentieth century and still influential in how we tend to think about the process of knowing today. We can read him, in other words, as problematizing aspects of the field in a way that is similar to the interventions made by social epistemologists and feminist epistemologists.¹¹

Finally, a third and especially important reason to highlight the contributions that Gadamerian hermeneutics makes to theories of truth, justification, and knowledge is the positive difference that they can make to the broader public discourse on these topics today. This is a public discourse in which, on the one hand, people continually fall prey to what Sandra Harding calls "objectivism," that idea that beliefs and theories are justified only if they arise out of a process that is neutral with regard to historical or cultural biases.¹² As we put more and more trust in the collection and analysis of data and, increasingly, in the technological instruments that perform these operations for us, it becomes harder for us to take their results as anything other than "the god's eye view." When we become less capable of recognizing the questions, interests, and historical orientations that condition a body of research, we become, in turn, less capable of reflecting on and critically evaluating these conditioning factors. The popular alternative to this objectivism leaves us in a situation

that is in no way better. What emerges in response to the dominance of technological rationality is an insistence that truth is entirely an effect of the historical and social traditions considered inessential to knowledge according to objectivism.¹³ Neither of these ways of thinking about truth and knowledge encourages us to engage in any kind of serious reflection on the historical horizons that are at play when we go to inquire into things. Gadamer's account in *Truth and Method*, however, encourages such reflection and, indeed, regards it as essential to understanding and to what it means to be an epistemically responsible subject.

In the chapters that follow, I offer a reading of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* that highlights the contributions it makes to the field of epistemology. Part 1 of the book, entitled "Gadamer's Hermeneutic Conception of Understanding," introduces readers to key elements of the theory of understanding that Gadamer develops, including his argument for the positive role that historical fore-conceptions play in inquiry (chapter 1), his description of how fore-conceptions come to be revised (chapter 2), his critique of the Enlightenment's "prejudice against prejudice" (chapter 2), and his hermeneutic conception of truth (chapter 3). While part 1 serves, in some sense, as an overview of these core parts of his theory, my treatment of the text focuses especially on how Gadamer's theory of understanding is helpful both for recognizing the way that understanding proceeds from particular historical and social situations and for thinking through the implications of this insight for normative epistemological questions. Readers who are new to Gadamer's philosophy will find part 1 of the book especially helpful in explaining some of the core questions, arguments, and contexts of *Truth and Method*. Readers already familiar with Gadamer's work are likely to be more interested in how I distinguish my reading from versions of the anti-epistemological reading of Gadamerian hermeneutics and the connections that I make toward the end of part 1 between my reading and "hermeneutic realism," a new current in Gadamerian hermeneutics.

In part 2, I look to other developments in recent epistemology to contextualize Gadamer's contributions to the field, exploring important points of agreement between Gadamer and arguments central to the emergence of social epistemology (chapter 4) and feminist epistemology (chapter 5). Like Gadamer, epistemologists following these currents in the field reject the idea that real knowing entails transcending one's immersion in a historical tradition or shared lifeworld. Indeed, feminist epistemology becomes nearly synonymous with what within its tradition is known as

the “situated knowledge doctrine.” Moreover, there is, I argue, a growing consensus among social and feminist epistemologists that situating epistemology in this way need not and should not entail a relativistic retreat from making normative claims and distinctions. There is less consensus, however, on how to avoid such a position. In chapter 6, I spell out how I think aspects of Gadamer’s hermeneutic epistemology, particularly the hermeneutic theory of truth, could offer helpful guidance on this point. While chapters 4 and 5 are intended primarily to introduce readers of Gadamer’s work who might be unfamiliar with social and feminist epistemology to relevant developments in these fields, chapter 6 describes how these developments shed light on and may be further enriched by the theory of understanding that Gadamer develops in *Truth and Method*.