



A Critique of Hans George Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics

Benedict Michael PhD,

Department of Philosophy

Benue State University, [Makurdi](#)

benmike3@gmail.com, bmichael@bsum.edu.ng

&

Emmanuel Terkula Or-Ongu

Department of Philosophy

Benue State University, Makurdi

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Abstract

Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics represents one of the most influential contributions to contemporary philosophy, emphasizing the universality of interpretation and the fusion of horizons in understanding. However, this framework has not been without its critiques, particularly regarding its epistemological, methodological, and ethical implications. This paper offers a critical examination of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, focusing on its core concepts, such as the fusion of horizon which underscores the dialogical nature of understanding. Data is sourced from both primary and secondary sources. Using an evaluative method of philosophical research, the paper interrogates whether Gadamer's approach adequately addresses power dynamics, cultural asymmetries, and the subjectivity inherent in interpretation. Furthermore, the paper assesses Gadamer's resistance to methodological rigidity in light of critiques from critical theorists and post-structuralists who argue for a more systematic and politically engaged hermeneutics. By situating Gadamer's philosophy within broader debates on interpretation, the paper concludes that while Gadamer's silence on the power dynamics that is at play in the unfolding of history and its interpretation leads to problems in contemporary discuss of hermeneutics, his philosophical hermeneutics provides an ethical imperative to seek social equality and struggle against marginalization.

Introduction

Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics stands as one of the most significant intellectual endeavors of the 20th century, fundamentally reshaping our understanding of interpretation and human understanding. Grounded in his magnum opus, *Truth and Method* (1960),

Gadamer's project critiques the dominance of Enlightenment rationality and the scientific method in the human sciences. Instead, he emphasizes the interpretive nature of human experience, asserting that understanding is not a neutral or purely objective process but is deeply shaped by history, tradition, and the linguistic medium through which we engage with the world. Gadamer's approach to hermeneutics extends beyond a technical method for interpreting texts to a universal philosophy of understanding, applicable to all dimensions of human interaction and inquiry.

Central to Gadamer's hermeneutics is the notion of the fusion of horizons, what he calls *Horizontverschmelzung*, which describes the dynamic and dialogical interplay between the perspectives of the interpreter and the historical or cultural traditions being interpreted. This process, mediated by language, leads to the development of new meanings and insights. Another cornerstone of his thought is the concept of effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), which highlights the inescapable influence of historical and cultural contexts on our interpretations, challenging the ideal of unconditioned objectivity. Gadamer's work thus asserts that understanding is always situated, dialogical, and fundamentally shaped by the traditions to which we belong.

This paper seeks to engage critically with Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics especially the grounded concepts highlighted above, examining its epistemological and methodological. It aims to provide a balanced assessment of his contributions while interrogating the limitations of his approach in addressing contemporary challenges, such as cultural pluralism, power asymmetries, and the need for systematic critique. By situating Gadamer's work within the broader intellectual debates of hermeneutics, critical theory, and post-structuralism, the study explores whether his philosophical insights can be reconciled with the demands of a more inclusive and critically engaged hermeneutics. In the discussions that follow, this paper will first outline the core principles of Gadamer's hermeneutics, followed by an exploration of its critiques from critical theory, post-structuralism, and feminist perspectives. It will then propose ways in which hermeneutics might evolve to better address the pressing issues of our time, aiming to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about the possibilities and limits of interpretive philosophy.

Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics

Truth and Method is a discussion of the intimate interplay between understanding and interpretation, a dialogue of horizons – the horizon of understanding and the horizon of interpretation. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics offers a resistance to unreflective accommodation of the primacy of the scientific method. He rebuffed the claim that paradigmatic efficiency can replace understanding and interpretation. Philosophical hermeneutics seeks to answer a question, not one that we have conjured up, but a question that has emerged from the historical moment that requires our attentiveness.

Philosophical hermeneutics begins with a question that has multiple answers. If we were to look at the Biafran Civil War, clearly the question of that moment shaped the Nigerian community. The multiplicity of responses to that question are evident. The near economic collapse nationally and the ongoing repercussions of war and defense clearly delineate that there is no one answer that emerges from our meeting the historical moment. Gadamer points to the historical question in this moment of meeting, as the way in which we try to make sense out of things is always with the hermeneutic circle of part and whole; the larger narrative or story impacts the particular and the part is always informed by the larger story. As we learn more about individual

parts, the larger story expands with clarity. As the larger story is enhanced, insight into individual parts emerges as well. The key to an understanding of historical consciousness begins with attentiveness to questions that emerge before us in a given historical moment, and the interplay of part and whole in our responses to given questions.

Gadamer revisits the importance of tradition and a caveat of questions about Enlightenment confidence and pristine reason (Gadamer 2007, p.112). It is tradition that brings forth a given prejudice or bias that informs our engagement with a given historical question. One cannot read Gadamer as an author proclaiming the return to one view of tradition; one must read Gadamer as an author demanding that we acknowledge the multiplicity of traditions that shape the human community. He understands the power of humanistic concepts such as *Bildung*, the cultivating of culture (Gadamer, 2007, p.115). It is the intellectual capability of bringing together one's response to a given historical moment that shapes the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of what it means to be human.

In a given tradition there emerges what Giambattista Vico called *sensus communis* or common sense, which gives human beings, groups, and communities a tradition in which the meaning of things are held in common (Giambattista, 1990, p.40). It is common sense or *sensus communis* that makes possible *phronesis*, or what Aristotle penned as “practical wisdom” (Aristotle, 1999, p. 8:12). *Sensus communis* gives us insight into the way in which *phronesis* happens, as well as an understanding of taste, for taste is not private, it is social.

With the stress on taste, Gadamer moves to critique Kant's transcendental analysis, which Gadamer contends disconnects truth from tradition. Gadamer's understanding of bias and particularity resists moving taste into the abstract; he keeps taste within the ongoing life of an interpretive community. The connection between taste and genius involves sensitivity to what is excellent in a given community (taste), and an aesthetic philosophy of art that permits one to actually produce something (genius); this artistic production, however, does not merely emerge out of a given person. Genius has roots in a given tradition, a given bias, a given *sensus communis*.

This connection of bias and genius to tradition and *sensus communis* is akin to the interplay of Husserl's “intentionality,” the “consciousness of,” the interplay between a given phenomenological event and human perception (Husserl, 1994, p. 98). Gadamer embraced the intentionality of Husserl's and Heidegger's later emphasis upon the existential bias of ground from which this intentional looking or consciousness of is nourished or given birth. For Gadamer, the notion of an aesthetic consciousness does not grow out of the individual; it grows out of the meeting of what one is conscious of, or what Husserl called intentionality and the ground upon which the looking is nourished. For Gadamer, traditions matter.

Gadamer's, the notion of taste “still obeys a criterion of content” (Gadamer, 2013, p.76). Taste is tied to the community life of a people. Artistic interests are simply not random. Taste suggests that there is such a thing as an aesthetic cultural consciousness. Even with the connection to a people and to taste that has roots within a given people there is an effort to package aesthetic consciousness, which ultimately, according to Gadamer, is doomed to fail. It is this reason that art is most frequently discredited when it is “commissioned art” (Gadamer, 2013, p.78). Technique cannot make an outstanding artist or poet. There is a difference between craft and the genius of genuine art that meets a given historical moment in that the latter is an encounter attentive

to the revelatory. It is this revelatory engagement that distinguishes craft from the genius of art and begins to frame what Gadamer understands as play. Play has a structure. There is a significant difference between play and pretense. There is a structure to a comedy; there is a structure to a tragedy. Play takes seriously the structure that is called forth in a given moment. In taking structure seriously there is a “self-forgetfulness” (Gadamer1, 2013,p11). Genuine play does not engage in “reproduction”(Gadamer,2013 p126); it invites an originaive, revelatory engagement.

Understanding Gadamer’s Fusion of Horizons

Gadamer’s concept of the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) is one of the most pivotal aspects of his philosophical hermeneutics, encapsulating his vision of how understanding occurs through the dynamic interplay between tradition, history, and dialogue. According to Jean Grondin, “the fusion of horizons represents Gadamer’s most original contribution to hermeneutics: it is not about recovering a past meaning as it was, but about participating in the ongoing dialogue that shapes meaning across historical distances” (Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*. 1994,p137). This notion of fusion emerges as a response to the traditional problem of interpretation, which has often been conceived in terms of either subjectivism, where meaning is dictated solely by the interpreter’s perspective, or objectivism, where meaning is presumed to be fixed and discoverable independent of the interpreter’s context. Gadamer rejects both extremes, arguing instead that interpretation is a dialogical process in which the perspectives of the interpreter and the historical or textual tradition being interpreted merge to produce new meaning. Little wonder that Gadamer argues that “Understanding is, essentially, a historically effected event. The horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices” (Gadamer, 2013,p 306).

At the heart of this idea is the notion of a horizon, which Gadamer borrows from phenomenology but reconfigures in a hermeneutical framework (Groundin,2003, p 22). A horizon, in Gadamer’s view, is not merely a boundary that limits our vision but rather the totality of our situated understanding – our historically and linguistically conditioned perspective on the world. Every individual exists within a horizon shaped by cultural traditions, historical experiences, and linguistic frameworks. This horizon is not static but constantly evolving, expanding as we encounter new perspectives and integrate them into our own understanding. For Gadamer, when we engage with a text, a historical tradition, or another person’s viewpoint, we are not merely applying pre-existing categories to understand something external to us. Rather, a true act of understanding requires a process of dialogue in which our own horizon and that of the other interact, challenge, and transform one another. It was premised on this that Gadamer contends that “A person who is trying to understand must be prepared for the fact that only the text and its subject matter can give him the right answer. Understanding does not occur when we try to intercept what someone wants to say by claiming we already know it” (Gadamer, 2013, p361). This fusion of horizons is not a simple merging or assimilation; it does not mean that differences disappear or that one perspective is absorbed into another. Instead, it signifies a productive encounter in which understanding is deepened through openness to the other. The interpreter’s horizon is expanded by integrating aspects of the other’s perspective without erasing its distinctiveness.

This process of fusion, according to Gadamer, is always historically situated and ongoing. Understanding is never achieved in a final or absolute sense but remains open to further revision as new horizons emerge. This is why Gadamer insists that prejudices (*Vorurteile*) – which he

defines not in the negative modern sense of biases, but in the older sense of pre-judgments – play an essential role in interpretation. Our pre-judgments are shaped by our historical and cultural background, and they provide the framework through which we initially approach any object of interpretation. However, through engagement with a different horizon, some of these pre-judgments may be challenged, refined, or transformed. Hence, for Gadamer, “In a successful conversation they do not talk past one another; instead, a common language and a common ground emerge” (Gadamer, 2013, p385). Consequently, one can argue that genuine understanding requires an openness to this possibility and a willingness to let our own horizon be altered by the encounter.

Language plays a crucial role in this fusion, as it is through linguistic mediation that different horizons engage with one another. For Gadamer, language is not a mere tool for communication but the very medium through which understanding itself takes place. Since every interpretation is necessarily linguistic, the fusion of horizons occurs within the space of linguistic dialogue, where meaning is negotiated and reshaped. This influenced the conclusions of Richard Bernstein that “Gadamer’s insistence on the fusion of horizons has an implicit ethical imperative: genuine understanding requires that we acknowledge the limitations of our own perspective and remain open to transformation through the perspectives of others” (Bernstein, 1983, p 158). This underscores the dialogical nature of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, which he develops in conversation with thinkers like Heidegger and Hegel. However, Georgia Warnke argues that “while Gadamer’s fusion of horizons provides a compelling model of dialogical understanding, it does not fully account for asymmetries of power, where one horizon may override or distort another rather than truly engaging with it” (Warnke, 1987, p 112).

One of the most significant implications of the fusion of horizons is its rejection of the idea that understanding can be purely objective or detached. Consequently, Nicholas Davey opines that “Rather than fixing meaning in a singular, authoritative way, the fusion of horizons establishes interpretation as a process of mutual engagement, one that resists dogmatism and embraces the productive tensions of dialogue” (Davey, 2013, p 92). Gadamer critiques the Enlightenment ideal that knowledge is best acquired through an impersonal, scientific method that eliminates subjective influence. Instead, he argues that all understanding is conditioned by history and tradition, and rather than seeking to eliminate this conditioning, we should recognize and engage with it critically. This stands in contrast to traditional hermeneutical theories that aimed to reconstruct the original meaning of a text or historical event as it was intended by its author. For Gadamer, understanding is not about recovering a fixed, original meaning but about engaging in a living process where meaning is co-created in the act of interpretation.

Subjectivity in Interpretation and Universality of Understanding

Gadamer’s hermeneutics challenges traditional conceptions of objectivity by asserting that all understanding is historically situated and shaped by the interpreter’s prejudices (*Vorurteile*), which he does not regard as negative biases but as pre-existing frameworks of meaning inherited through tradition. According to Warnke, “Gadamer’s claim that understanding is universal does not mean that meaning is the same for all; rather, it suggests that interpretation is an inevitable human activity. However, the extent to which different traditions can genuinely fuse their horizons remains an open question” (Warnke 1987, p127). Unlike the Enlightenment ideal that seeks to eliminate subjectivity for the sake of pure objectivity, Gadamer argues that interpretation is always mediated by the interpreter’s background, language, and historical position (Gadamer, 2013, p270).

This means that subjectivity is not an obstacle to understanding but a necessary condition for it. Every act of interpretation involves the fusion of horizons, where the interpreter's historical and cultural perspective engages with that of the text or tradition being interpreted.

However, Gadamer does not advocate for a radical subjectivism where meaning is entirely relative to the individual. He insists that understanding is not an arbitrary or solipsistic process but occurs within a shared linguistic and historical framework (Gadamer, 2013, p272). While no one can achieve a completely neutral standpoint, interpretation is guided by the internal logic of dialogue, where different perspectives engage with one another and where meaning emerges through mutual engagement rather than personal whim. This is why Gadamer emphasizes dialogue and openness as essential to interpretation. He opines that “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” (Gadamer, 2013, p278). One can argue, hence, that a responsible interpreter does not impose meaning based on subjective preferences but remains open to being transformed by the object of interpretation. The challenge, then, is not to remove subjectivity but to critically engage with one's own prejudices to allow for genuine understanding.

At the same time, Gadamer upholds the universality of understanding, a claim that has sparked significant debate. He argues that interpretation is a fundamental and universal feature of human experience, extending beyond textual analysis to all forms of human interaction. No wonder then that Grondin contends that “Gadamer shows that subjectivity does not stand in opposition to understanding but is constitutive of it. The fact that we approach texts and traditions with preconceptions does not hinder meaning but enables it, provided we engage with them openly” (Grondin 2003, p89). Understanding is not limited to specific disciplines or cultural contexts but is the mode through which humans engage with the world. This universality does not imply a single, fixed meaning that can be reached through interpretation but rather refers to the fact that interpretation itself is an unavoidable and ongoing process in human life. Every human interaction, whether with texts, historical events, or other people, involves an act of understanding, which is always mediated by language and tradition. To corroborate this, Gadamer argues that “The hermeneutic experience is a universal one, extending beyond texts to all human experience. Understanding is not a method but an ontological event, a way of being in the world” (Gadamer, 2013, p310).

Critique of Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics

Gadamer's hermeneutics emphasizes dialogue, openness, and the fusion of horizons as central to understanding. However, it is arguable that his framework does not sufficiently address the role of power in interpretive encounters. His model assumes that dialogue occurs in good faith and that different perspectives engage with one another on relatively equal terms. Yet, in real-world contexts, interpretive exchanges are often shaped by asymmetrical power relations – whether political, cultural, or institutional – which influence whose voice is heard, whose perspective dominates, and whose meaning is legitimized. Jürgen Habermas, argue that Gadamer's emphasis on tradition and historical continuity risks reinforcing dominant ideologies rather than enabling critique. According to Habermas, “Hermeneutical consciousness does not possess the power of self-reflection that would allow it to grasp the ideological forces at work in tradition. It lacks the means to distinguish between a tradition that carries a genuine claim to truth

and one that merely legitimates power” (Habermas, 1984, p 238). If interpretation is always embedded in tradition, there is a danger that oppressive structures – such as colonialism, patriarchy, or class hierarchy – become naturalized rather than questioned. Habermas insists that hermeneutics must incorporate a critical dimension that actively interrogates how power operates within traditions and interpretive acts (Habermas, 1984, p240).

Similarly, postcolonial and feminist theorists have pointed out that not all horizons fuse on equal footing. For instance, in colonial contexts, European interpretations of indigenous cultures were imposed as authoritative, while indigenous perspectives were marginalized or dismissed. Gayatri Spivak’s notion of the “subaltern” highlights how certain voices remain unheard in dominant interpretive frameworks. Gayatri argues that “The subaltern cannot speak. There is no space from which the subaltern subject can voice an interpretation that is not already mediated by dominant epistemologies” (Spivak, 1994, p. 104). Likewise, feminist scholars have criticized Gadamer for not sufficiently accounting for how gendered power dynamics shape interpretive authority, often privileging male-centered perspectives. Little wonder that Linda Alcoff purported that “Gadamer’s hermeneutics presupposes a level of reciprocity that does not always exist, particularly in gendered or racialized encounters where one horizon dominates another rather than engaging in mutual transformation” (Alcoff, 2006, p.82). The lack of the acknowledgement of these differences inherent in human society leaves a large dent on Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. According to Luce Irigaré, “Gadamer’s notion of tradition and understanding does not sufficiently account for how the very structures of language and discourse have been historically shaped by male perspectives, silencing the feminine as a legitimate horizon of meaning” (Irigaré, 1985, p.74).

Despite these critiques, Gadamer’s emphasis on openness to the other provides a potential avenue for addressing power imbalances. If taken seriously, the ethical imperative of hermeneutics demands that dominant perspectives remain open to critique and transformation through engagement with marginalized voices. However, for Gadamer’s hermeneutics to fully grapple with power dynamics, it must incorporate a more explicit awareness of how structures of dominance shape what is considered valid knowledge and whose interpretations are legitimized in discourse.

Conclusion

Sequel to our critique of Gadamer’s Philosophical hermeneutics, the fusion of horizons remains a powerful and influential concept in contemporary hermeneutics. It provides a framework for thinking about how understanding occurs across cultural and historical divides, emphasizing dialogue, openness, and the transformative nature of interpretation. In a world marked by increasing cultural interactions and ideological conflicts, Gadamer’s insight that understanding requires the fusion, rather than the domination, of perspectives remains profoundly relevant. His hermeneutics challenges us to approach the unfamiliar not as something to be conquered or assimilated but as an opportunity to expand our own horizon and participate in an ongoing process of meaning-making.

Moreover, Gadamer’s hermeneutics challenges rigid methodological approaches by emphasizing that understanding is never a purely objective process but is always historically and linguistically situated. This insight remains valuable in fields such as literary studies, philosophy, legal interpretation, and cross-cultural dialogue, where meaning is continually negotiated rather

than fixed. Even within critical theory, feminism, and postcolonial studies, scholars have adapted Gadamer's ideas to argue for more inclusive and self-reflective interpretive practices. For instance, his notion of "openness to the other" has been reinterpreted as an ethical imperative to listen to marginalized voices rather than simply asserting one's own perspective. While Gadamer may not have explicitly addressed the role of power in shaping interpretation, his work provides a foundation for interrogating these issues within hermeneutical practice. If supplemented with critical awareness, Gadamerian hermeneutics can be used not just to understand tradition but also to challenge and transform it in ways that foster more equitable and just dialogue across differences.

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