

MEMOIR

Man of a Century: Hans-Georg Gadamer

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IT IS 2:30 PM, ON EASTER MONDAY 1999, IN HEIDELBERG. We have had a vigorous, four-hour conversation. As we try to say goodbye in the front hallway, Gadamer says: "*Wissen Sie*, van Beeck, I now tend to think that I am really not so much a thinker as a speaker. Heidegger – he was a thinker; I am more of a speaker, a lecturer – a *Redner*." I think: the sheer modesty of this ninety-nine-year-old man, still reviewing his life and coming to conclusions. To celebrate his hundredth birthday this February 11, the whole world of philosophic thought has its superlatives at the ready, but he is still examining his life, quietly and in the main silently – that is, in thought. Outside, we shake hands a third time, and, precariously, I go down the steps, where Frau Gadamer waits to take me to the railway station. On to Nijmegen.

I had arrived at 10:30 in the morning by taxi. Frau Gadamer, a spry seventy-four-year-old, had answered the door and told me her husband had been looking forward to my visit for weeks. As I walk into the large living room, Gadamer is getting up from behind a big table by the window overlooking a beautiful valley formed by a tributary of the Neckar. He looks well – much better than he did three or four years ago. He says, with his intensely polite smile: "I notice we have both become richer by one cane", and we shake hands. *Kaffee und Kuchen* are not far behind, with the promise of lunch a little later. We are on our way.

I have enjoyed conversing with him ever since we first met, in the Roberts House Jesuit Community at Boston College, in the autumn of 1977. He lived with us Jesuits while teaching at the university. Like us, he made his own breakfast. Most of us were music lovers; so, obviously was he. He worried out loud to us when one of us went into deep withdrawal for a time. When, on weekdays at 5:15 pm, we and the unforgettable Sebastian Moore went down to our basement chapel to

celebrate the Eucharist, Gadamer would occasionally remark: "Time to go to my stony bench to contemplate."

Gadamer first swam into my ken in 1961, when I was an assistant to the editor of a journal, in charge of getting book reviewers to live up to their promises. Two books caught my eye: Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* and Lévinas' *Totalité et infinité: Essai sur l'extériorité*. I read them hastily, getting only the main drift of the two arguments, but aware that both had given me something important to ponder. Lévinas had re-awakened Buber's *Ich und Du* in me, save that both Hegel and the Holocaust had been added to the mix. Suspicions about grand schemes of understanding were revived, and memories of Jews raided, picked up, and kicked into a waiting truck returned; so did the sealed front door of Mr Samuel Schuijjer, my violin teacher, arrested and (as I found out much later) killed in Auschwitz on December 11, 1942.

Truth and Method took longer to enter into my bloodstream. I had long been fascinated by the eighteenth century's knack for *Sentiment* – feeling for feeling's sake. Such bits of Enlightenment thinking as I had found in excerpts from the *Encyclopédistes*, Locke, and Hume had struck me as lucid but curiously disturbing. As a boy I had also wondered how you could possibly get, in a matter of decades, from Bach's monumental geometry to Mozart's melancholic, sweet, often thin melodies, and as a twenty-year-young Jesuit seminarian I had discovered Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart, the eighteenth-century poet and music theorist. He had made things clearer by introducing me to Johann Stamitz, the Mannheim school, and the *empfindsamer Stil*. Later on, with my seminarian's knowledge of Kant and my passion for Max Scheler's passionate refutation of Kant, I had concluded that, intellectually speaking, there was less to be said for the Enlightenment than met the eye, and that Mozart was a grand exception. So, I figured, *Truth and Method* had to be right, even without my getting the details.

I joined the Roberts House community in early 1977, while completing at the time a sizable book on christology. One evening I found myself conversing with Gadamer about my interpretation of the Council of Chalcedon. He asked if he could see the pertinent chapter in its draft form. The next day I got it back, with a long note in English that included the sentence: "The interpretation and the use you make of the Chalcedon text is absolutely a masterpiece – really a step toward a new foundation of hermeneutics of religious texts!" I wondered what to make of the overstatement – Gadamer was not given to making them. What I did know was that he had a way of respecting knowledge any way he found it. I had noticed how he listened to Jesuits in our community: a biochemist, an economist, a clutch of philosophers, an English scholar, a theologian or two. I had never seen a person so ready to understand and so meek (if also decisive!) in turning his own know-

ledge to good use. What he did show was considerable acquaintanceship with scholars of every stripe (including Pope John Paul II), and with notable politicians and thinkers across the spectrum, whom he had either taught or met. His little book *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, a collection of thumbnail portraits of thinkers to whom Gadamer felt intellectually and personally indebted, published when he was eighty-five, turned out to be a portrait of the man himself. Not that Gadamer was nice in conversation. A fellow Jesuit, whose considerable thoughtfulness suffered under a burden of worry, once tried to end an argument saying, "Well, Professor Gadamer, I think I will simply stick with Saint Thomas Aquinas on this point." Gadamer did not miss a beat: "But, Father, surely you don't wish to imply that for me to listen to you is as good as for me to listen to Thomas Aquinas?"

Six years ago, I had indicated in a Christmas letter that I had been tired. In mid-June, 1995, a note from Gadamer arrived:

Your health is a matter of concern to yourself and all your friends. How are you, I wonder? Aging is a hard process, and even if one is so fortunate as to remain of sound mind, like you and like me, we are to allow Nature to make its claims, and defer till Infinity much of what we still wish to do and would be able to do as well. May you succeed in finding the discerning balance that is now being asked of you. I am with you, as I, too, look for this balance.

This tender note reminded me of an occasion on which he told me how important it was to live in tune with one's health and not to believe in specialists. It reminded me even more of a long autobiographical letter in January of 1989, in which, besides other things, he explained how he viewed his relationship to Christianity. "While Christianity", he wrote, "has never touched me more than peripherally, it has provided me all the same with the openness not to be completely enslaved by the delusions of the Enlightenment."

Openness. At that point I began to realise why my hermeneutics of Chalcedon had enthused him. Like so many other children of the German *Aufklärung*, he had been unaware that hermeneutics had long been part of Catholic philosophy and theology. He later told me that he had been led to believe that the Christian faith was based on axioms that were simply not a matter for debate, "justification by faith" being the principal, with Christ's divinity and salvation by substitutionary atonement not far behind. And the great Heidegger, who had never made a secret of the fact that he was a former Catholic, had not undeceived him.

But does this make Gadamer a "child of the *Aufklärung*"? Of course it does. When his father, a professor of chemistry at the university of Breslau and a scientist of the austere kind, sent him to the university in 1918, he told his son to study science, the only tolerable alternative being law. But the world young Gadamer had come to inhabit was populated

by the characters of Shakespeare and Dostoevsky. So imagine the relief when he noticed that a course in *psychologia rationalis* was being offered: *Psychologie* – that had to be it! He went, and found himself in a classroom full of black-robed Catholic seminarians taking the regular course in what used to be called rational psychology: Aristotle's *De anima* and what Aquinas and other Scholastics had made of it. But he had discovered what he wanted to learn: classics and philosophy, and especially Plato – the chief source of Christian humanism as we know it. In that environment Christians and former Christians were hard to overlook.

Years ago, on a previous visit, I had told him that I had always suspected, from *Truth and Method* and from his own stories about the happiness he had been blessed with in later life, that the book, published when he was sixty, had been his way to settle his accounts with his father – a personification of Enlightenment rationalism. His mother had died when he was a mere child. Not till much later, he told me, had he found out – much to his consolation – that she had come from a family of teachers and artists. I decided to bring up the subject again. He remembered the previous conversation, but this time, when I suggested that *Truth and Method* might have been cathartic, that it might have helped him settle his accounts with his father, or maybe even liberate himself from his father, it was Frau Gadamer who jumped in: "*Liberated is the word!*" That moment helped me understand. I am now even less surprised at a certain natural catholicity of taste I have always sensed in Gadamer. Once, at least twenty years ago, he returned to Roberts House on a rainy Sunday evening. The previous Thursday he had left for a brief lecture series at one of the universities in Salt Lake City. We welcomed him, took his luggage and raincoat, but he kept shaking his head. Asked for an explanation, he could only bring out: "*Terrible, no vinum no veritas!*"

There is a side to Gadamer not often discussed: he was an administrator with no small responsibilities. A professor at the university in Leipzig since 1939, he knew what it took to work with barbarians looking over his shoulder; in 1946–47, he told me, as rector of the university, he kept only one goal in mind: preserving the university. He did not give details. What he did do was strike an imperious pose – he must have been quite effective at acting the *Magnifizenz* part in the presence of communist authorities. In fact, one of Gadamer's lifelong commitments is to the Platonic and Aristotelian notion that it is judgement rather than knowledge that yields truth. I have often heard him say that truth is primarily objective: *alêthês chrysos, echtes Gold*, true gold. Only in dealing with objectivity does true knowledge start; dialogue, not transcendental reflection, is the road to truth. Not surprisingly, he was upset when Heidegger died while he himself was teaching at Boston

College. He regretted that he would not be there for the convocation of the *Akademie Pour Le Mérite* to commemorate his most important mentor. Now, he said, for the eulogy they would have to turn to Karl Rahner – the second most senior Heidegger disciple. “*Ach*, Rahner is of course a splendid thinker, but he does not think in dialogue. Heidegger did, always. Rahner prefers to paint stars up against the inner firmament in his head.” I agreed, though with a smile, and he apologised, also with a smile.

Dealing with objectivity. Having moved to West Germany in 1947, first to Frankfurt and two years later to Heidelberg, to the chair previously occupied by Karl Jaspers, Gadamer succeeded in getting a wealthy friend in Vienna, a patron of the arts and sciences, interested in providing a neutral venue where thinkers, politicians and social economists from East and West could meet regularly. The aim was to prevent the Iron Curtain and the Berlin wall hardening into permanent cultural divides. An estate in Croatia became the venue for this forum and it was there that Gadamer first met the young philosopher-bishop Karol Wojtyła, then teaching at the university of Lublin. I have never asked Gadamer if he had read Wojtyła’s *The Acting Person*. If he has, he will have understood. Only by taking on the world of objective fact, Wojtyła argues, does one’s understanding become trustworthy. Only by dint of understanding the unfamiliar other, Gadamer has consistently argued, can our own selves, familiar but always to some extent prejudiced, form reliable judgements. Being fundamentally a philosopher of culture, Gadamer has never shirked involvement in less-than-purely-intellectual pursuits, as anyone who has heard him debate Jürgen Habermas about the events of 1968 can testify.

In a set of essays pulled together and published in grand old age entitled *Über die Verborgenheit der Gesundheit*, now translated as *The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age*, Gadamer (who survived polio at the age of twenty-one) has sounded the same trumpet. Medical specialists know about illness and disease, but only ordinary, judicious persons know about health, and so do good physicians – that is, physicians with sound *judgement*. Health is a mystery of wholeness, of being-well; it is not definable by dint of expertise – something the experts had better understand. He looks out of the window: “Neither my wife nor I are taking any medicine these days.”

The end of the visit was as touching as its beginning. The first thing he had said after we had greeted was: “Van Beeck, is it not interesting that one can properly think only with a view to a future?” He had also mentioned the formidable Ernst Jünger, the controversial German adventurer, diarist, essayist and philosopher of the Right, who had died at the age of almost one hundred and three just over a year ago, a good two years after being quietly received into the Catholic church. “I think

I understand something about that", he added. Now, towards the end of the visit, I tell him that the journal *Gregorianum* has just accepted an essay of mine in fundamental theology entitled "What Can We Hope For, Really?" My answer, I explain, is: "What we can hope for, really, is what we do not know." He says: "We understand one another here, do we not?" I just nod and go down the steps. Frau Gadamer is waiting in the Volkswagen.