

GADAMER'S ONTOLOGICAL POSITION ON INTERPRETATION IN CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES

1. Author. **Sabas Mwangi Kimani**,
(Department of philosophy; The Catholic University of Eastern Africa)
2. Co-authors: **Rev. Dr. John Muhenda**, **3: Rev. Dr. Simon Njuguna Waitherero**
(Department of philosophy; The Catholic University of Eastern Africa)

IJASR 2020
VOLUME 3
ISSUE 3 MAY – JUNE

ISSN: 2581-7876

Abstract – A number of prominent contemporary philosophers, including Jurgen Habermas, John Caputo, and Robert Bernasconi, have at times painted a to some extent negative picture of Gadamer as not only an uncritical traditionalist but also as one whose ontological position on interpretation project failed to appreciate the difference. Against such claims, we argue that Gadamer's reflections on art exhibit a genuine appreciation for a state of being other, not unrelated to his hermeneutical approach to the other. Thus, by bringing Gadamer's position on contemporary practice we reflect on our experience of art into conversation with key aspects of his philosophical hermeneutics, we are able to better assess the viability of Gadamer's contributions to contemporary discussions of difference and in a state of being other.

Keywords: Contemporary, Hermeneutics, Ontology, interpretation

Introduction

In this paper we will try to examine Gadamer's ontological position on interpretation in contemporary practices. From particular word view, analyzing play in general as an indication to ontological explanation, we will try to look at implication of hermeneutic of Being through historicity; whether hermeneutic of Being can be verified through historicity. Finally, it will evaluate whether adequate ontological shift of hermeneutics guided by language are available for effectiveness of Gadamer's ontological position on interpretation in contemporary practices.

1.1 Play as the indication to ontological explanation

In considering the subjective and objective dimensions of art, Gadamer made a significant reversal that the subject of aesthetic understanding is not the person who understands it but the work itself. He adopted the word 'play' to describe the method of existence of a work of art. Play is a common concept in aesthetics, especially in Kant's concept of the free play of imagination and understanding. This though is a subjective understanding of play which Gadamer rejects in support of his definition in terms of ontology when he argues that:

When we speak of play in reference to the experience of art, this means neither the orientation nor even the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, nor the freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play, but the mode of being of the work of art itself. (Gadamer, 1975)

Gadamer suggests that play exists without players but only reaches presentation through the players. Play is about movement and the mode of being of play is similar to the mobile form of nature (Gadamer, 1975). This understanding of play might seem to be a little strained; it is hard to conceive of play, in its usual sense, without players in at least some stages of its existence. Play may exist within a tradition and community of players and may be said to have an independent existence once created but for it to exist without any players seems implausible. However, Gadamer did not use the word in its usual sense. For him play is about self-presentation and movement, about a mode of being. Gadamer while quoting Schlegel, argued that, all the sacred games of art are only remote imitations of the infinite play of the world, the eternally self-creating work of art.

If art can have an existence independent of players then perhaps so, but to describe the ontology of nature as play seems to assume the role of God as player: creation is somehow God's self-presentation. For Christians, this would be a reasonable assumption and with it Gadamer's logic certainly tracks. Many of Gadamer's insights at this point can be adopted without necessarily following his definition of 'play'. Gadamer's language of play seems to concur

with the language of 'being' and 'becoming' therefore art exists in itself but only comes to its true potential in the interaction with a viewer. For Gadamer, play is about interaction with other and about self-presentation, but all presentation is potentially a representation for someone meaning it exists in the event or interaction between the work and the audience. For Gadamer the main purpose of play is not to achieve a particular result or to solve a task, to a certain extent it is about ordering and shaping the movement of the game itself.

According to Gadamer he suggests that once play is realized it can take on the character of a work or a 'structure' (Gadamer, 1977). In the same way people can be transformed by their encounter with art. One can really only encounter a work of art when it is performed (Gadamer, 1977) and transformation occurs. It is the interplay and movement in art, in play and in becoming that brings about a change. Gadamer describes this as a transformation into the truth. Having reiterated the inevitable imbedded nature of aesthetics, Gadamer replicates his criticism of aesthetic differentiation and aesthetic consciousness as an isolated phenomenon. Through this process of presentation and transformation truth is mediated. However, this truth cannot be separated from the medium that is the work and truths are inextricably linked to the form of presentation. Aesthetic being depends on being presented.

1.2 Aesthetic and hermeneutic consequences

Gadamer's enquiry into aesthetics forms part of a larger enquiry into the human sciences and their claim to truth. He argues that their use of method, based on the natural sciences, is inappropriate. The alternative is to suggest that truth in the human sciences should be understood on a similar model to that of aesthetics. Gadamer's concern was that the existing understanding of aesthetics relegates it to the border of society, labeling it as subjective experience and denies it a role in mediating truth. Aesthetics detaches art from its situation that is by detaching all art from its connections with life and the particular conditions of our approach to it; we frame it like a picture and hang it up (Gadamer, 1977). The experience of art is, for Gadamer, an experience of truth but one in which the viewer knows that he is always involved. Truth is about participation in an event of meaning.

Historicism presupposes a distance between a work of art and the viewer, this distance disappears under Gadamer's notions of presentation and participation. We are not masters of our aesthetic experiences; they are about being (the being of the work of art and of the viewer) as much as about knowledge. We come across truth as we participate in the event (Sica, 1984). A work of art, understood in this sense, as an event of being, cannot properly be understood as an object of aesthetic consciousness. Gadamer characterizes the mode of being of art in terms of presentation which includes play and picture and representation.

The concept of art into mere framed pictures by the aesthetic consciousness cannot be primary for Gadamer but contains an indissoluble connection with its world. (Gadamer, 2007) The work of art in itself proves to be a pure abstraction. Gadamer criticizes the approach of the aesthetic consciousness to literary art in which it is only form and not content, which matters, arguing that our understanding is not concerned with the formal achievement of a work of art but with what it says to us (). He is critical of the hermeneutics implicit in the human sciences because interpretation is no longer about truth.

Upon encompassing reclaimed truth in art work, Gadamer has to retrieve truth for all of hermeneutics. He argues that his criticism of aesthetic consciousness has implications for the whole of hermeneutics for our understanding of understanding. Aesthetics must become part of hermeneutics and hermeneutics itself must become more comprehensive. Understanding must be conceived as part of the event of meaning which occurs, the event in which the meaning of all statements that is those of art and all other kinds of tradition is formed and actualized.

Gadamer examined that historical consciousness is largely responsible for the centrality of hermeneutics in the human sciences. He goes on to argue that the prevailing form of hermeneutics, which he attributes primarily to Wilhelm Dilthey, is simply not adequate for the task because of its exclusion of questions of truth (Dilthey, 1985). Gadamer continues with art as an example of understanding and asks what the approach of hermeneutics should be in relation to it. He considers the approaches of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Hegel, characterizing these as reconstruction and integration respectively. Consciousness of loss in relation to tradition motivates both, but they approach the hermeneutic task quite differently. Schleiermacher is concerned with reconstructing the work as originally constituted. Hence his emphasis on reconstructing the world to which the work belonged by establishing the situation, the intention of the author, performing in the original style (Schleiermacher, 1998).

According to Schleiermacher historical enquiry opens the possibility of recovering what has been lost. Gadamer concedes the importance of such approaches but questions whether what we obtain is the real meaning of the work and is skeptical of the suggestion that understanding involves a second creation of the work. He argues that it is in fact impossible accurately to reconstruct the original context of a work of art (Schleiermacher, 1998). All our attempts at reconstruction can never reproduce an original but only a derivative and cultural understanding.

Gadamer preferred the approach of Hegel who accepted the futility of restoration and sees all 'historical' approaches as external activities while the authentic response is an internal one that involves the viewer in a thinking relation with the past: it is the self-consciousness of spirit that comprehends the truth of art (Hegel, 1993). The implications of this lie in Gadamer's conclusion that we must undertake a critique not just of aesthetic consciousness but also of historical consciousness because we are concerned not with subjective experience, nor with reconstruction of the past but, rather, with 'the truth that manifests itself in art and history'. (Gadamer, 1977). This represents a further critique of abstraction and of the claims of scientific method to represent the only access to truth.

1.3 The questionableness of idealistic hermeneutics

Gadamer wishes to follow Hegel rather than Schleiermacher, suggesting that hermeneutics must take a new turn. He traces the historical development of hermeneutics along two paths, theological and philological. Considering the interpretation of scripture he observed that its literal meaning is not univocally intelligible in every place and at every moment (Gadamer, 1976). He then introduces the concept of the hermeneutic circle that is parts of a text that are understood in the light of the whole and the whole is understood in the light of the parts. Historicism suggests that the context of world history is itself a whole within which texts and other objects must find their meaning. Ultimately there arose the conception of a universal hermeneutics for which the special exemplariness of tradition is no longer a presupposition of the hermeneutical task (Gadamer, 1976).

Gadamer does not characterize Schleiermacher as rejecting all enlightenment ideas of a common human nature and so having to redefine our relationship with tradition neither Scripture nor reason could provide a foundation for textual understanding. He sees Schleiermacher as attempting to isolate the procedure of understanding, trying to make it an independent method (Gadamer, 1976). For Gadamer what is to be understood when we try to grasp a text or speech is not just a thought, seen as part of another's life or as an aesthetic creation, but rather a truth which involves both the author and the reader. Gadamer criticizes Schleiermacher's psychological approach where, what is to be understood is the mind of the author. Understanding is, for Schleiermacher, a reproduction of an original production as Gadamer argued that:

All speech and all texts are basically related to the art of understanding, hermeneutics, and this explains the connection between rhetoric and hermeneutics; every act of understanding is for Schleiermacher the inverse of an act of speech, the reconstruction of a construction. Thus hermeneutics is a kind of inversion of rhetoric and poetics. (Gadamer, 1976)

Schleiermacher applied the considerations of the hermeneutic circle to the psychology of the author and argues that an individual thought can only be properly understood as part of a whole life. Schleiermacher considers that barriers to understanding can be removed by the reader overcoming their prejudices and identifying with the author (Schleiermacher, 1998). But this act of putting oneself in the author's context is, for Schleiermacher, a precondition to the act of understanding and not an integral part of it. Schleiermacher's emphasis on psychology leads him to suggest that the task of understanding is to understand an author better than he understood himself. Gadamer suggests that Schleiermacher is far too optimistic about our ability to overcome our prejudices and fully to identify with an author and also that, even on the basis of Schleiermacher's own judgment this identification cannot be separated from the act of understanding. (Gadamer, 1985)

Gadamer is sharply critical of this psychological turn in hermeneutics where he argues that hermeneutics is no longer about the well-foundedness of truth and meaning but is now about the reconstruction of an unconscious process. Texts are purely meaningful phenomena that Schleiermacher detaches them from any dogmatic interest, and indeed from any claim to truth. This would clearly indicate the position of Schleiermacher and the romantics. In creating a universal hermeneutics they expel critique based on understanding the subject matter from the sphere of scholarly interpretation. (Gadamer, 1986)

To a certain extent this emphasis on reconstruction, Gadamer preferred the Hegelian concept of integration where truth emerges as text and contemporary consciousness combine in a fusion of horizons. Just as the truth of a work of art is only completed in a contemporary presentation, the truth of a text is only revealed in its interaction with contemporary understanding. We can only understand texts from the past, or from different traditions, in the light of our own worldview, our own categories and significantly our own language. Since the historian's familiarity with the moral world and the prior understanding of tradition they are integrated with their object in a way completely different from the way a natural scientist is bound to Gadamer's ideas. This was critiqued by Dilthey's historicism.

1.4 Dilthey's entanglement in the logical disjunction of historicism

Gadamer argues that Dilthey is torn between idealism and empiricism, between philosophy and experience. Dilthey in attempting to provide a philosophical foundation for the human sciences' constructed an epistemological basis between historical experience and the idealistic heritage of the historical school. (Dilthey, 1985). The historical school needed a philosophical basis for historical knowledge similar to that which Kant had provided for the natural sciences. However, while Kant's achievement provided the justification for science's claims it did so only by clearly delineating the sphere within which such claims could be made. He had defined the conditions of possibility and a methodology. The problem for the historical school is one of epistemology that is how can we know anything about history?

According to Hegel's rational construction of world history had been rejected and historical knowledge limited to experience. Dilthey was keen to demonstrate that historical experience could become a science and his approach was to provide the human sciences with a methodology. This emphasis on method was the target of Gadamer's sustained attack. Dilthey concluded that he could not simply transpose Kant's work on scientific knowledge to questions of historical knowledge because the first condition of possibility of a science of history according to Kant was that he himself was historical being and that the person studying history is the person making history (Dilthey, 1985). At the same time as Gadamer does not deny this he argues that this identification of the historical subject with historical object only serves to conceal the epistemological problem that is how does an individual's experience come to constitute 'history' which is not experienced by any individual but rather by generation or nation.

Gadamer observes that this is a crucial step for Dilthey's epistemological project. The problem, which Dilthey recognized, is making the transition from a psychological to a hermeneutical grounding of the human sciences, (Gadamer, 1960). Dilthey hopes that historical consciousness will provide a solution to the problem of historical knowledge. Our awareness allows us to shake off the effects of our historical situations and study history objectively. Gadamer argues that because we are such thoroughly historical beings there is no possibility of genuinely objective knowledge that transcends our historical condition and our prejudices (Grondin, 2002). For Gadamer 'historical consciousness' contains an internal contradiction. Dilthey attempted to legitimate the knowledge of what was historically conditioned as an achievement of objective science (Gadamer, 1976). A life could be understood through the hermeneutical approach to the whole and the parts. At the same time Dilthey accepted that an age should be understood on its own terms he believed that similar principles could be applied to increasingly large historical units resulting ultimately to an understanding of universal history.

Gadamer goes on to criticise Dilthey for his Cartesian foundationalism and emphasis on scientific method. Dilthey he argues follows romantic hermeneutics in seeing the historical world as a text to be deciphered: Dilthey ultimately conceives inquiring into the historical past as deciphering and not as historical experience (Gadamer, 1960). From this starting point he succeeds in harmonizing the human sciences with the methodological criteria of the natural sciences. For Gadamer, this merely demonstrates the huge pressure exerted by the methodology of modern science which is, however, ultimately inadequate to the task of providing an epistemological grounding to the human sciences. We cannot interpret the 'hermeneutic manifestations of life from the categories of modern science' (Grondin, 2002). Gadamer is determined to provide an account of the human sciences based on historical experience and to find a different grounding for the truth they disclose.

1.5 Overcoming the epistemological problem through phenomenological research

Gadamer's suggestion for overcoming the epistemological problem is to turn to phenomenology and in particular the work of Martin Heidegger, though he begins with a consideration of the work of Edmund Husserl (Husserl, 1980). Grondin suggests that Gadamer is drawing heavily on the early work of Heidegger on the hermeneutics of

facticity. Gadamer borrows from Husserl the important concept of horizon. By means of this concept Husserl evidently in quest to capture the way all limited intentionality of meaning merges into the fundamental continuity of the whole. A horizon is not a inflexible boundary but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further.

Husserl refers to an all-embracing world horizon as a 'world of life' which Gadamer describes as the world in which we are immersed in the natural attitude that never becomes an object as such for us, but that represents the pre-given basis of all experience. It is clear that the life-world is always at the same time a communal world that involves being with other people as well (Gadamer, 1960). This concept of horizon became the central to Gadamer's hermeneutics. The return to things in themselves in Husserl's phenomenology is the key to liberating philosophy from scientific methodology although Gadamer argues that Husserl does not go far enough and that it is Heidegger who really achieves this. Husserl argues that 'subjectivity' is not the opposite of 'objectivity' as this would imply an 'objective' concept of subjectivity. Instead he proposes 'correlation research' where the relation is primary and the poles, of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity', are contained within this relation.

For Gadamer this is what it really means for philosophy and hermeneutics to be grounded in life. Heidegger asserts the inescapable temporality of being and the impossibility of any ultimate foundation. Everything must be understood from the experience of temporality. Being and objectivity can only be understood in terms of the temporality and historicity of Dasein: temporality is ontologically definitive of subjectivity. The 'knower' and the 'known' both have the mode of being of 'historicity' (Gadamer, 1960). According to Gadamer understanding is not about method rather it is part of the 'being' of life itself. Since understanding is temporal it can only ever be provisional, we can never master a situation once and for all. However Hermeneutics is not the title of a philosophical project that aspires to complete understanding, but the name of vigilance in thought which rests on its absence (Grondin, 2002).

For Gadamer understanding is always an interaction between a historical subject and object but it also arises out of history as an addition to a tradition, hence it is a participative 'event' of meaning. Dasein always has a past as well as a future and always has the condition of finitude.

1.6 The rise of the historicity of understanding to the position of a hermeneutic theory

Gadamer considers how we properly acknowledge the historical dimension of all understanding. He begins by looking at Heidegger's accounts of the hermeneutic circle and of prejudices. For Heidegger the hermeneutic circle is not violent, rather it contains the positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing (Heidegger, 1960). The circle is not to be avoided rather; it must be entered into in the right way by becoming aware of our prejudices. In the vein of a text, life can only be understood in the relationship between the whole and the parts.

In any event of understanding we must remain open to the meaning of the other person or text we must be sensitive to the otherness of the person or text as Gadamer demonstrates that:

We cannot do this by attempting to adopt a posture of objective neutrality rather we should center our prejudices to be aware of our bias. We must remain open to the possibility that our prejudices will be challenged and may be changed by the event of meaning involved in understanding the other. According to Heidegger he, demonstrated that even our best efforts simply to read a text at face value already involve a significant fore-structure of understanding. Gadamer suggests that the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power' (Gadamer, 2004).

Gadamer argues that being situated within a tradition is not an unnecessary limitation rather we are entirely and unavoidably context-bound, including our reason. There is no such thing as absolute reason but to a certain extent our reason is continually dependent upon the context in which it operates. In reality history does not belong to us we belong to it. 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.

Gadamer next considers the implications for hermeneutics of being historical and belonging to a tradition he considers the effect on understanding of temporal distance. Gadamer embarks on noting Schleiermacher's description of the hermeneutic circle in both 'objective' and 'subjective' terms: according to him texts belong in the context of a writer's work and of all literature but at the same time they belong in the context of a writer's creative life (George, 2007).

Following Heidegger, Gadamer suggests that understanding is always determined by prejudices and that the hermeneutic circle can never completely disappear. The circle of whole and part is not dissolved in perfect understanding but on the contrary is most fully realized. The circle, then, is not formal in nature that is it is neither subjective nor objective, but describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter. The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition. Other than this cohesion is constantly being formed in our relation to tradition. Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition somewhat we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves. Thus the circle of understanding is not a 'methodological' circle but describes an element of the ontological structure of understanding.

Gadamer observes that hermeneutics always assumes that an interpreter has an interest in the subject matter of a traditional text and a connection to the tradition of which the text is also a part (Gadamer, 1960). However there is no guaranteed agreement that the work of hermeneutics is based on a disagreement of knowledge and inappropriateness. There are tensions between these aspects and also between a text's temporal distance and its belonging to a tradition. The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between. Hermeneutics must clarify the conditions for understanding to occur in this in-between. It is not possible to identify legitimate prejudices in advance but only in the process of understanding.

In relation to contemporary texts there were unavoidably different kinds of different traditions, different contexts and different prejudices that gave rise to cultural distance and what I have referred to as 'moral distance'. Gadamer observes that suspension of prejudices logically implies a questioning stance: approaching a text in this way opens up possibilities and keeps them open. We do not simply suspend our own prejudices in order to accept the text or other person without question. We must put our own prejudices 'at risk' in the encounter being prepared for them to be modified or discarded as a result of the 'conversation'.

After having considered the question of temporal distance, Gadamer considered "The principle of history of effect which Grondin, rightly, considers to be the 'speculative summit of the work' and the principle which the rest of *Truth and Method* develops (Grondin, 1994). In any act of understanding we must recognize that we are already conditioned by history in. Even when we believe we are approaching something from an objective and 'a historical' standpoint we cannot escape the effects of history. In this regard even science is conditioned by history. We must become aware of effective history historically effected consciousness is an element in the act of understanding itself and it is already effective in finding the right questions to ask. To be conscious of being affected by history is what constitutes an awareness of our hermeneutical situation the situation we find ourselves in with regard to a tradition we are trying to understand.

1.6.1 Exploration of historically effected consciousness

Gadamer consistently appeals to Hegel in his efforts to overcome historicism. Hegel appreciated that understanding is not simply an attempt to reconstruct past meaning but it inescapably involves contemporary application. Historically effected consciousness is not simply another form of 'objective' inquiry as a consciousness of a particular text it is always already involved in the history of the work. The usual concept of consciousness however, implies reflexivity, the ability to stand apart from the thing of which it is conscious. At this point, Gadamer is concerned to distance historically effected consciousness from Hegel's reflective philosophy. Romantic hermeneutics strives for perfect enlightenment the complete limitlessness of our historical horizon and the abolition of our finiteness in the infinity of knowledge (Hegel, 1977).

The problem for Gadamer is that the appeal to hermeneutic experience, like other appeals to closeness, may itself be self-refuting if 'it is not in itself an immediate relation, but a reflexive activity'. However, Gadamer's historically effected consciousness is never completely dissolved in reflection. At the same time this may give rise to charges of relativism, Gadamer, following Heidegger, is not unduly concerned but argues that one can only speak of 'relativism' if one accepts the possibility of absolute knowledge. For Gadamer, the division into absolute truth or relativism is a false dichotomy: Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity demonstrate that all absolute foundations depend upon a denial of our temporality. Hermeneutics does not seek absolute certainty. Historically effected consciousness makes no reflective claim to universal validity to a certain extent; Gadamer saw it as part of the essence of hermeneutic experience a condition of understanding.

In the same breadth Gadamer argues against the understanding of experience in the natural sciences suggesting that its meaning has become severely restricted and that it simply ignores the 'inner historicity of experience' results must be verifiable and repeatable, hence their historicity is denied. In a discussion of Husserl's attempts to address this problem, Gadamer observations that 'language is already present in any acquisition of experience' and that 'pure reason' is simply a fantasy as we are completely unable to free ourselves from the prejudices and predispositions of our language.

For Gadamer, experience is often a negative process. It is not simply about generating universal concepts but new experiences challenge our previous false generalizations. The structure of experience is ultimately dialectical. This negativity is seen in the development of wisdom, the experienced person is open to new experiences and willing to learn. The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself. Experience in this sense belongs to the historical nature of man. We need to learn by experience the limitations of our understanding.

For Gadamer the model of conversation, establishing understanding through spoken language, characterizes the task of hermeneutics in relation to written texts. Language and concepts here too communicate meaning as part of a conversation. Similarly to apply language is not consequent upon understanding rather it is a condition of understanding hence the interlocutors must find a common language if the subject matter is to be understood.

1.6.2 The ontological shift of hermeneutics guided by language

Gadamer's considerations of hermeneutics in terms of 'conversation' and the 'dialectic of question and answer' culminate in a consideration of the linguisticity of all understanding and the role of language in experience. In this Gadamer follows Heidegger's turn to language which together with the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, was to become a major feature of twentieth-century philosophy, paving the way for the work of Jurgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Paul Ricoeur and Richard Rorty among others.

It will not be possible in this dissertation to follow up all these lines of criticism and development. However we will consider the inescapable linguisticity of understanding, the metaphorical nature of language, and the processes of concept formation, which together have significant implications for our understanding of being and work of art.

Language is the horizon of being and even as we may lament the limitations of our language they are not something from which we can ever escape. Just as our historical position is both a source of limitations for our understanding but also a condition of our understanding, so is our linguistic situation. For Gadamer understanding a text or event is not about the scientific grasp of an object. Rather, it is a conversation in which the subject is always already involved in which both parties converse; in which the subject's prejudices are put at risk and which is to be seen as following a similar pattern to two people reaching an agreement.

Gadamer persist his deliberation of language by exploring further his notion of conversation, arguing that we become involved in it rather than conducting it, that a conversation has a life of its own and that truth can emerge from the interaction. The event of meaning which constitutes understanding is itself constituted linguistically. The text and the interpreter are always already surrounded in language for there to be any meaningful exchange or understanding there has to be a common language of discourse (Gadamer, 1976). In genuine conversation we consider an interlocutor's contribution in terms of how it addresses us, what it has to say to us rather than what it says about.

Gadamer formulated a crucial extension to his theory by arguing that understanding is best understood on the model of conversation, of two people coming to an understanding. The subject matter is given expression in the interpreter's participation in a conversation with the text. Language is not a tool to be used in the hermeneutical enterprise like interpretation and application; it is a constituent part of understanding itself. In the relationship between text and interpreter the subject matter is brought into language hence the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter are fused.

Traditions are verbally constituted according to some scholars. What is handed down to generation is in form of myths, legends and stories, in oral and written traditions are verbal in character. The bearer of tradition is a communal memory expressed in language. For Gadamer the approach to a text is quite distinct from Schleiermacher's insistence on understanding the mind of the author. The truth which emerges in the conversation with the text does not depend on our ability to make this psychological connection. The horizon of understanding

cannot be limited either by what the writer originally had in mind or by the horizon of the person to whom it was originally addressed. Language then has a universal significance everything intelligible that exists must be accessible to understanding and interpretation and this is achieved through the verbal forms of language. Hence Gadamer's famous slogan 'Being that can be understood is language.'

1.7 The concept of language in the Western thought

Gadamer considers two theories of language. He is critical of both the conventionalist theory (in which words are arbitrarily applied to objects with their only source of meaning in communal usage and convention) and the similarity theory ((Gadamer, 2004). Gadamer argues that customary usage sets limits to both theories. The meaning of words cannot be arbitrarily changed if communication is to be maintained and it is hardly fair to criticize words for inaccurately representing objects when language is a feature of human beings not of objects.

Gadamer suggests that both theories are guilty of too instrumentalist a conception of language, assuming that we can somehow know about objects before using language to describe them. Gadamer therefore suggests that both theories start too late. He is relentlessly critical of instrumentalist theories of language, arguing that both thought and experience are always already immersed completely in language and that truth does not reside in words but in dialogue.

Gadamer observes that using a technical term involves fixing the meaning of a word by limiting its variability and semantic range, limiting it to one particular concept. However, this process happens continually in language and not just in relation to technical terms. The 'death' of metaphors represents a communally agreed restriction of a word's meaning. Problems arise when we forget the heritage of our words and assume that they have literal meanings, offering access to absolute truth (Gadamer, 2004). We cannot stand outside language and understand things in themselves hence language goes all the way down. Everything we do and everything we are conscious of is mediated by language. Language dominates our conceptual schemes and worldviews. There simply is no realm of pure thought apart from language.

1.8 Language as horizon of a hermeneutic ontology

Following Heidegger, Gadamer argues that the essential character of our being-in-the-world is to be individuals who understand the happening of truth through language (Gadamer, 2004). Gadamer is seeking to keep his distance from the modern philosophy and science of language which concentrates on the form of languages and studies different human languages comparatively. He contends that the conception of language as form, separated from content, is an abstraction which must be reversed.

The proposition at this time seems to be that for human beings all our experience of the world is mediated through language. Language mediates the encounter between human being and world. Truth does not exist in language but in the interaction which language mediates as the world is brought into being in language. Gadamer is critical of the Cartesian foundations of science arguing that the understanding of hermeneutical experience which he has outlined demands that we go beyond the idea of the object, and the objectivity of understanding, toward the idea that subject and object belong together (Gadamer, 2004). Gadamer asserts that language has its true being only in dialogue, in coming to an understanding. He argues that all human communities are in fact linguistic communities, in which language is formed and evolves. Just as we can increase our understanding by correlating perspectives (horizons) within language, so also we can increase our understanding by entering into other language worlds, other traditions.

1.9 The objectifying language of scientific method

The universal claims of scientific method represent an illegitimate attempt to enlarge the scientific conception of understanding, which in truth is only a particular part of the wider hermeneutical experience in the medium of language. The concepts of art and history are modes of understanding that emerge from the universal mode of hermeneutical being as forms of hermeneutic experience.

Gadamer criticized Kant's conception of aesthetic experience as isolated and separate from the world and from the cultural and historical position both of the work of art and of the experiencing subject. Gadamer suggests that in performing such abstraction the true nature of the work of art is distorted and so decision about it do not relate to the real work of art at all. They relate to an artificial construct derived from the work of art. Gadamer is critical of

Kant for denying any truth value to aesthetic judgments (Kant, 1974). He suggests that this is a direct result of the abstraction of aesthetic experience from its context and from the lasting significance for the observer. Kant argued for a rigid separation of aesthetic judgment from other forms of judgment and in so doing abstracted the aesthetic experience from the context or tradition of the observer. For Gadamer, understanding can only exist as part of the hermeneutic continuity of human existence.

Finally, Gadamer, artistic work experience transcends 'method' and resists all attempts to reduce understanding to the subjectivity of either the artist or the viewer. Artistic experience is not simply subjective consciousness but is a form of ontological disclosure in which the 'being' of a work of art is communicated within a tradition and culture. The experience thus affects the life of the viewer and can communicate truth without the use of conceptual thought. In art and the beautiful we encounter a significance that transcends all conceptual thought (Gadamer, 1986).

Conclusion

In examining Gadamer's ontological position we pointed out a significant divergence of opinions about Gadamer's position. Gadamer stresses the ontological significance of hermeneutics for the problem of understanding and interpretation in the human and social sciences. Following the basic hermeneutic assumption that human understanding is contingent upon historical and cultural conditions, we realize that all knowledge of the universal is acquired historically. The historicity of human experience and the historicity of understanding belong to the ontological conditions of human existence and points toward the very inseparability of the hermeneutic truth from the interpretive process. Interpretations are dependent upon the historical conditions in which they take place and on the particular context within which interpretation is happening. Since there is no absolute interpretation, different interpretations can remain justifiable by providing conclusive arguments for justifying one interpretation over another. Human understanding is fundamentally lingual. By learning a language we become heir to a past that becomes our past, though it has not been temporally our past. In Gadamer's interpretation of Plato, the discourse must be written in the soul of the other. This discourse is a conversation that has a distinctly transformative character.

By being written in the soul of the other it not only transmits the information to the other but challenges the other to a radical transformation. The power of words does not only transform the other but also transform the person initiating the dialogue. We truthfully understand the other only when we accept the fact that this other makes a truth claim upon our very being.

There is an inseparable connection between the understanding subject and that which needs to be understood. Understanding is limited because it is conditioned by the historical situation of the human being: it is by nature temporal and finite. The principle of hermeneutics simply means that we should try to understand everything that can be understood. The process of disclosing new layers of meaning is truly unending.

Reference

1. Dilthey W. 1985. Poetry and Experience, selected works, Vol.5, Edited by R.A. Makkereel and F. Rodi (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press
2. Gadamer Hans-G. 1975. *Truth and Method (Wahrheit und Methode 1960)*, Trans. from the second German edition by Garrett Barden and John Cumming, London: Sheed and Ward
3. Gadamer Hans-G. 1977. *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Translated by David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press
4. Gadamer Hans-G. 2007. *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the later Writings*. Translated and edited by Richard E. Palmer (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press
5. Gadamer Hans-G. 2004. *Truth and Method*, Trans. by J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, London & New York: Continuum
6. Grondin J. 1994. *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Trans. By J. Weinsheimer, (New Haven, Connecticut & London: Yale University Press
7. Gadamer 1976. *Philosophical hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press .
8. Hegel, G.W.F. 1993. *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*. Trans. by B. Bosanquet, London: Penguin Books.
9. Hegel E. 1977. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A. V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
10. Husserl, E. 1980. *Phenomenology and the foundations of the sciences*, Boston: Martinus Hijhoff Publishers.

11. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (ed.) 1985. *The Hermeneutics Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell publishers).
12. Schleiermacher F. D. E. 1998. *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*, Ed. by Andrew Bowie (New York: Cambridge University Press).