A CONVERSATION WITH HANS-GEORG GADAMER

Conducted and translated by Michael Baur

Baur: In face of the problem of the historicity of human thought, several philosophers who have been influenced by Thomism have tried to steer a course out of what for them is relativism. Some of them claim the following: even if all our knowledge appears to be historically determined and therefore possibly revisable, there remains still a kind of non-objectifying "reflection" in our conscious acts on the basis of which it is possible to construct a phenomenologically-grounded and non-revisable metaphysics. Lonergan is one example of this kind of thinking. In your own work, you have also emphasized this form of non-objectifying reflection, for example in the Kleine Schriften. But you are not so optimistic about the possibility of such an unrevisable metaphysics. Why not?

Gadamer: Because it cannot be made into an "actus signatus," and that means "objectified." The philosophical development of the modern age has been determined by the fact of modern science. Since then, the old idea of a comprehensive science which one might call "philosophy" or "metaphysics" has been razed to the ground. In the modern age, we speak of "metaphysics" following upon an epoch -- the Greek and the Christian, that is, the medieval Christian -- in which there was no science other than the Aristotelian. Given the standpoint of modern science -- within which Descartes might be named as the leading theorist -- how can one still think one knows, that is, with the claim "It is real knowing?" In this sense, I share the question with the Socratic tradition. I also ask this. I have not said that it's no longer possible to ask in this way. But it is no longer possible to integrate science like Hegel tried to do.

I also say: no metaphysics which does not somehow recognize the different sorts of knowing apart from explanatory science can exist for me. The formulation which you have chosen in connection with Lonergan reminds me very much, all too much, of this huge divergence between what Popper calls "essentialism" and the experiential standpoint of the modern age. Here is the problem, and solving it remains the task of philosophy. But that is the reason why I cannot enter on the one side. I have to consider both sides: both this theory of non-objectified thought and the fact that a mediation, a crossing-over, an

effectiveness from the one side to the other must also be thought out. And what we in the modern age have experienced there, "philosophical metaphysics" so to speak, finds its extreme expression in Hegel. That was not very encouraging for a lasting mediation.

Baur: You have had some direct contact with Bernard Lonergan, haven't you?

Gadamer: Oh, yes. And I've read his work, especially his second book, in which he criticizes me a bit. But Lonergan was not someone who could discuss. He could talk; he was a fascinating talker. But he really couldn't discuss. But on a friendship-basis, we got along with one another very well. There was never any problem between us in that way.

Baur: In order to defend the unrevisability of a form of human knowledge, neo-Thomists appeal frequently to a certain distinction, namely the distinction between what is historically determined, and what for them is not historically determined, for example the unrestrictedness of our questioning.

Gadamer: I recognize that. But the unrestrictedness of our questioning is always the unrestrictedness of our specifically conditioned questioning, and that means specifically relative questioning.

Baur: Would you say that there is no "pure question" in Lonergan's sense?

Gadamer: Yes, so far as I follow the intention of your question.

Baur: What would you say about the Thomist interpretation of the Aristotelian doctrine of the "intellectus agens"?

Gadamer: I do not deny that in every thinkable world two times two is four. The question, however, remains: is that a knowledge of reality? I would say that reason moves within itself here. Thomism deals with the "intellectus agens" just as I recognize that two times two is four. That means that reflection moves within itself here.

Baur: But you would want to ask whether that is knowledge of reality.

Gadamer: Yes. Numbers are not realities. But still they are something. Take, for example, the prime numbers. It can be

proved in mathematics that the prime numbers will go on to infinity. And nevertheless, reason moves here within itself. That is the "intellectus agens." I cannot see how some other approach would suffice, unless one appeals to the Creator-like character of the "intellectus agens." But then one would be God.

Baur: Thomas suggests something about the creative character of the "intellectus agens."

Gadamer: That's something different. I'm speaking of creation itself, not about "a little bit" of this or that. Of course it is creative when I count out the prime numbers. But that is the notion of the "creative" in a mild form. My argumentation has tried to show that the "intellectus agens" naturally has its function within this truth-dimension of reason -- as I myself have learned from Aristotle. But please, is that reality? For that, we would need the Creator.

Baur: Over against neo-Thomism you have written (and I quote): "The attempt to contrast the realist Aristotle with the idealist Plato, an attempt motivated by the neo-Thomist critique of modern idealism, has fallen apart completely" [1].

Gadamer: Yes. It's pure nonsense to say that Aristotle was a realist and that Plato was an idealist.

Baur: I take it that you are referring in this quote primarily to the recent philological as well as philosophical research.

Gadamer: Yes. These concepts, "realism" and "idealism" in the modern sense, are not even to be found in Thomas himself. That's all part of the influence of the reception of Thomism in the nineteenth century. And how that was done is not so terribly inspiring. I can get along much better with St. Thomas himself. You know that there is a section on Thomas in my book Truth and Method.

Baur: Yes. Lonergan wrote a book on "verbum" in Thomas --

Gadamer: -- In order to show that I don't see things correctly? You know, I really haven't read Lonergan sufficiently. That book Insight is so comprehensive and has such small print, that with my old eyes I could just no longer manage.

Baur: In connection with the issue of the neo-thomist interpretation of Aristotle, I would like to turn now to the doctrine of matter or materiality. In your article "Gibt es die Ma-

terie?" you write (and I'm quoting selectively from the passage): "When Aristotle says that matter is the cause of deformities in nature or of the 'individuality' of the specimen of a 'kind,' I do not think of matter, but rather that there is always a determinate being there, an essence which through its determinate 'eidos' is clearly distinguished from lions or insects. I am also prepared to conceive of the fertilized egg from which the embryo and then the newborn infant develop. But to conceive of matter as becoming that -- that is not given to me" [2].

Gadamer: Yes. What I say there is good Aristotle. The idea that matter is the cause or principle of individuation is not an Aristotelian doctrine. Or can you show me where the concept of the principle of individuation is to be found in Aristotle?

Baur: I thought that it was there in the Metaphysics.

Gadamer: Yes, but what is that passage supposed to mean? The idea of matter as the cause of individuation is not an Aristotelian doctrine. Otherwise I might be able to find some sense in the distinction between idealism and realism. But I see no sense in that. When Aristotle speaks of individuation, he means a material being, and not matter as such. When he speaks about the matter as such, then he speaks quite differently. The "hyle" is the "dynameion" and nothing else. It is "that out of which."

I am not saying that Aristotle was an idealist. I am saying rather that it is a complete misunderstanding to speak of idealism and realism in this connection. That's modern epistemology, but neither Aristotle nor Thomas.

Baur: You have also written that the meaning of a text does not lie simply in the intention of the author. Why then should such an appropriation of Thomas, for example, be inappropriate and subject to criticism, namely the appropriation of the philosophy of Thomas in face of the epistemological problems of the modern age?

Gadamer: Because then one makes Thomas a dummy instead of a genius. He did not ask these questions; he saw the world differently.

Of course, when it comes to the question of a natural theology, then one might have some serious thoughts, even from

my point of view. But without revelation Thomas would not have wanted to be a Christian. He was not a gnostic.

Baur: A related question has to do with the issue of the "ground" of human finitude. According to the Thomist tradition, the ground of the finitude of human knowledge is connected with what is meant by materiality.

Gadamer: I don't understand what that's supposed to mean. Our finitude has something to do with death, in any case. Let's make it simpler for ourselves.

Baur: Maybe I can explain what I mean. The human "intellectus" is potentially all beings. But in actual fact it does not become all beings; it can become this or that being only, because of its essential dependence on materiality.

Gadamer: So you mean the Aristotelian concept of "hyle." I know now what you mean. You have referred to my article, "Gibt es die Materie?" In that article, I am not suggesting any kind of idealistic evaporation of reality. I am asking rather, "What did Aristotle really mean?" "To live in the 'logoi'": the expression in Greek philosophy from Socrates to Plato to Aristotle -- even in Aristotle -- implies as self-evident that it's a misunderstanding of philosophy itself if one believes that philosophy can deny the natural experience of reality. We attempt instead to think about what is experienced there, that is, what you're calling materiality. But if we accept that simply as such, then I don't think it's right since then we end up immediately with all the problems of modern relativism.

Baur: So what I have been calling matter or materiality --

Gadamer: Those are categories with which one cannot grasp what it is to be human. With those categories I can grasp what is objectifiable, for example through measuring, counting, and weighing.

Baur: Some neo-Thomist philosophers have tried to explain the phenomenon of being-in-the-world ("In-der-Welt-Sein") on the basis of the materiality of human existence. In terms of explanation, materiality is for them prior to the experienced phenomenon of being-in-the-world. It seems to me that the priority is the other way around for you and for Heidegger: for you, the phenomenon of being-in-the-world is prior, and our talk of materiality, etc. is really only an abstraction which is founded on our modes of being-in-the-world in the first place.

Would you say that these attempts to explain the phenomenon of being-in-the-world on the basis of materiality are senseless?

Gadamer: We can try to see things from the other side. The primary issue which we have before us is the following: "Why are we actually in such a critical world situation? What has modern science actually brought about?" Science has indeed brought something about when it looks down upon every form of thought which does not belong to the laws of methodical objectifiability. How has modern thought actually come to that? One can point to Calvinism as the actual determining world-power of our technical civilization. It's there in Max Weber. Even when I'm simplifying here, you know what I mean. And when one does that, then one must also ask oneself whether things had been inadequately thought out at the beginning.

I'm a Platonist. I am not a Thomist, and so rather an Augustinian, if you will. What I mean about finitude is already there in Plato in black and white. It's in the Symposium. Philosophy is not "sophia." It is a striving after the true. "The eternal reproduction of our knowledge," that's all in Plato. But it would be completely wrong if you interpret that as relativism, since then you would be taking the concepts from modern science as your measure.

Baur: You have said that you are familiar with Lonergan's book Method in Theology. What do you think of his appropriation of your work there? Would you say that this was not a real grappling with your own work?

Gadamer: No, I cannot say that. You see, we are all finite creatures. And so when Lonergan appropriates my work in his own way -- and in a very friendly manner, I would like to emphasize that -- then it is natural that within a completely different conceptual framework it should be so transformed. And then it's quite difficult to recognize it once again as my work. However, I am very far from saying that he did not understand me. It would be very presumptuous to express oneself in that way. I would say only this: the problem of relativism sits much deeper in all of us.

It is a life-long task to ask oneself: "Must it be so, that modern science can demand atheism of us?" I cannot believe that it has to be so. And thus I am a Platonist. And where do the mistakes lie, such that the modern world has become this way? Then I say: in the inadequacy of the appropriation of the Greek

philosophy through the Christian church. That was an inadequate appropriation.

Let me ask you: what is the Greek word for "will," for "voluntas"? There is none. It doesn't exist in Greek. It's a voluntarism to think everything in Latin. That's one of the points that Heidegger made. He had gotten to know a Thomistic Aristotle at first. Then he read Meister Eckhart and Luther, and then he read Aristotle. And there is no "voluntas" in Aristotle, as is so often claimed.

Baur: Given that background, one can understand a bit better why Heidegger so often equates the philosophy of subjectivity with late- and post- medieval philosophy.

Gadamer: What is meant here above all is modernity: subject is still substance, only under a different name.

In order to understand Heidegger, one has to go deeper into Plato and Aristotle. The finitude of human existence is not a Heideggerian invention. Heidegger certainly did not invent death!

Concerning the question to which Heidegger dedicated his entire life: he did not find an answer. Whoever thinks that Heidegger knew better has not understood Heidegger. Heidegger did not know it any better. But what he did see is that the Christian message, so interpreted through Aristotelianism, has brought about the modern world, along with everything for which it stands. These are some of the first things that I learned from Heidegger. He used to quote Adolf Harnack concerning the infiltration of Christianity by Greek philosophy, and so forth. That was Heidegger's question.

All in all, I would say: the basic fact of the modern world is modern science. We must deal with things in such a way, so that science does not become everything. But how are we to achieve that? Unfortunately, we cannot achieve that if we remain Thomists. For then we already share too many presuppositions out of which modern science itself has developed.

Baur: However, Thomists certainly share a sensibility for the problem which you pose.

Gadamer: But of course. Oh, thank God -- otherwise one could not even talk to them.

Baur: But what you have said is probably one of the strongest criticisms that one can make against the neo-Thomists.

Gadamer: Yes. The alliance with modern science within neo-Thomism was deadly. Give me classical Thomism instead.

Baur: This "alliance" with modern science is supposed to be one of the very strengths of Lonergan's philosophy, as it has been understood.

Gadamer: Yes, a bit like Hegel.

Baur: You mean that Hegel also shared too many presuppositions with modern science.

Gadamer: Yes. In this sense Hegel is still a Cartesian. I am not as great a thinker as Heidegger was, so I am a bit cautious when I say this: I'm not quite sure whether I perhaps might be able to admit that Hegel was in part right. But Heidegger knew for sure that he couldn't do that.

Then again, it would be a Thomism to try to think in the Greek way where one can no longer do so. That is to say, when one is Hegel, when one fuses Christianity into a concept. A conceptualized Christianity -- that is a gnosis for the real Christian. And indeed Christian Baur had already criticized Hegel for that. And one would probably be able to, and have to, criticize Lonergan in the same way. But that's not my area.

Of course, Thomas is not as unambiguous as one often teaches within Thomism. He had a strong Augustinian moment as well. But of course when you speak of Thomism as a form of thought in general, then that immediately falls apart once again. You saw at the beginning how I always tried to respond by asking whether you do not make yourselves gnostics, whether you do not elevate yourselves to the point of self-divinization, when you want to know so exactly that which you do not know exactly. Hegel as a gnostic, that's what Christian Baur claimed. He dealt with Hegel and Plotinus together. You know, Plotinus' "self-redemption of the soul through knowledge," and so forth. Christianity did not accept that, and of course Augustine did not accept that. But it remains a constant temptation, and such comes up once again with Hegel.

Baur: You mentioned that Thomism as a form of thought in general falls apart.

Gadamer: Yes, it collapses necessarily with the modern Enlightenment. Thomism fails to deal with something in the Enlightenment, and indeed cannot deal with it. No one, in fact, has found an answer. I can very well see that one can be a

believing Christian and that one can at the same time live in the world of modern science. But how one can do that is a mystery to me. For me, one must really learn to be able to do without having a theology.

On one level, I would see the cases of Hegel and Lonergan in a very parallel fashion: he attempts to deal conceptually with the Christian mysteries, yet without becoming gnostic. That is the task of the Christian theologian. And gnosis remains the danger in every theology. Now Plato is something that I can handle -- I know what that means: "to theion." That is something, and one cannot explain that away with some modern materialism or what not. But whether I know more, "ho theos," as Aristotle says, that seems to me to be a very suspicious adaptation. With Aristotle I am quite sceptical. Does he really mean that? Or isn't he just following a folk religion in this case? Aristotle was not an "anima naturaliter christiana." One could apply that term to Plato, if one needs to apply it.

Baur: You have said that the danger of the modern age lies in the possibility that the way of modern science should become the only way of thought at all.

Gadamer: Yes, and so I go back, even behind Thomas and behind Aristotle. In my eyes, it begins with Aristotle's Physics; that is a magnificent program. And one can always renew it in different romantic varieties, as was done in German Romanticism, and as is now being done with "anthroposophy" and such things. There's always the same need: we want to live once again in one world. I've written an essay called "Burger zweier Welten" ("Citizens of Two Worlds"). In that essay I insist that it won't work. If we do not have any other resources, we can only admit to ourselves that science is a unified body that is closed within itself and obeys only its own laws. The "self-limitation of science" cannot be derived from science itself; anyone who is a scientist is always more than just a scientist.

Baur: This whole issue of limitation returns us in a way to the question of the ground of human finitude. It's what has been called "hyle," the "always-not-yet" in human existence.

Gadamer: Yes, yes. That is the finitude of human existence. We are not Creators.

Baur: And what the neo-Thomists call "matter" or "materiality" is also a concept for that.

Gadamer: Oh yes. Good. Go on.

Baur: But why can't one also speak of matter or materiality -- as is done in neo-Thomism -- in connection with the individuation of different instances of the same form?

Gadamer: Do you know, for example, how one would then have to conceive of the congruence theorems? So there you have two congruent triangles. And where is the matter? The point here is that that's really an eidetic plurality. Aristotle found himself thus forced to speak of a "hyle noete." Just think of that: a non-sensible matter. And in modern science that's what is called extension. In modern science extension is the principle of individuation -- space and time. The source of that is in Aristotle, that is, in Aristotle's Physics. One cannot deny that the consequence of that starting point has become modern science. One can, of course, ask just why it has turned out that way.

Within the realm of Christian belief, for example, Heidegger was a thoughtful, doubting young man. He learned his neo-Thomism but he was not at ease with the modern world. And then he turned to Luther, and then to Gabriel Biel, and to Augustine. And then he finally tried to discern to what extent one could still believe. He recognized that it may very well go beyond what one can know for oneself. In this sense, the church would proclaim a truth. But it is very dangerous when one believes that one knows this truth. Then that's almost Calvinism: one is chosen.

I have lived now for a long time with the question: "What will become of this world if non-Christian religions should stop only imitating us, so to speak, with their 'European room'?" You know that the Japanese have a so-called "European room" in their houses. When they walk around in the streets, it's always "American tailor-made" and so forth. But when they come home, they change. Then they live in a Japanese house. The "European room" is only for guests. That's a symbol for this duplicity which is upheld there. It's the same thing with Shintuism and their ancestral religions. They have not been spoiled with theology.

Baur: And so one lives in two worlds.

Gadamer: Or to express it even better: the world of science is not a world at all. It is a field for our activities, for our struggle for survival against nature. And such alone is not

truly human being. The expression "citizens of two worlds" is a Kantian expression. On the one hand there is causality and modern science; and on the other hand, there is the moral law and freedom. Those are two worlds, and one cannot explain one on the basis of the other.

Baur: You said that the danger in the modern age has to do with the possibility that the way of modern science will become the only way of thinking at all.

Gadamer: Yes. That is the problem of our modern Enlightenment.

Baur: But you also consider it possible that such won't happen.

Gadamer: I take it for almost certain that humanity would much sooner destroy itself before modern science really dominates so completely. I find transcendence -- that is to say, the necessity, based on our own finitude, that we think this out -- so rooted in human nature. Now you can interpret that theologically; that is a bit more than I care to do. However, I do take it as completely certain that we can think this out.

By the way, Heidegger never doubted that. You know he had something of a Joachimistic theology. That's a spiritualistic theology of the mediators sent to mankind from the divine. That is to say, a Hölderlinistic theology. I prefer to call it Joachimistic, because that's where the source is. Joachimism: revelation is a succession of communications. The new book by Heidegger which has just appeared as part of his collected works -- it's called Beiträge zur Philosophie -- ends with a passage about "the God who passes by." But it's not as if God is being doubted here.

Baur: One often reads the famous quote from the Spiegel interview --

Gadamer: -- "Only a God can save us" --

Baur: -- as an expression of doubt.

Gadamer: In my view, Heidegger was always a bit high-flown in his manner of expression, and that applies to this case as well. "Only a God can save us." But then again, we really don't know that either. Maybe he meant the following: "We cannot save ourselves through the consummation of our scientific, technical civilization. The attempt to do so would only tighten the bottleneck in which we are now stuck."

That probably has a religious meaning; but, then again, not a theological meaning. It had meaning for him: "I don't know how we are to get beyond this modern world; I know only that we are finite creatures." I never really spoke with him about that quote. I simply tried to learn from him, given the limits within which I could. And now I try to carry on. My main support is the fact that I go back to the pre-modern world. If I had been educated within the Thomist tradition, I would probably discover as Heidegger did, that there's a completely different Aristotle, one quite different from the one that was taught for example in 1900, and is still being taught today. And I would go from neo-Thomism back to classical Thomism, just as I've already done a bit in my book with that section on "verbum." It has been accepted in the neo-Thomist tradition up to now. And similarly, I see that whole attempt at systematization in the Counter-Reformation as very suspect.

I read just the other day that Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker has recently won this huge prize for "progress in science and religion." Weizsäcker: he is an outstanding physicist and a Christian. And it's right that he won that prize, for he did not try to make it easy by constructing some kind of theology of reconciliation or mediation. No, there are still two worlds, one of which is not really a world at all. Science is a sector of the world, and it's pretty bad that we now regulate our social life as if science were the whole world. I mean, when everything is done with statistics, technology, and so on. For then where is genuinely human life?

Baur: But you still believe it to be unlikely that such scientific, technical thinking will become the only way of thinking.

Gadamer: That, I believe, is out of the question. We'll annihilate ourselves before that happens.

Baur: But why do you believe it's out of the question?

Gadamer: Science will never abolish death. If it were able to do that, then it could happen. You see, I have no actual solution. I am only saying that those who claim to have a solution also have none. Heidegger also knew that he hadn't achieved it, and so his later life was a bit darkened. That was his life-long task: he wanted to come to grips with Nietzsche. He wanted to say: "No, that's not all that there is, this 'will to power,' this fatalism, this 'eternal recurrence of the same,'

'the last man,' and so forth." And now you're asking me just why "the last man" is not in fact the only end of history.

Baur: You're referring to "the last man" in the "Preface" to Nietzsche's Zarathustra.

Gadamer: Yes. And you're asking me why I don't believe that that's the end of history.

Baur: Yes. And what's the reason for the hope, even when we know that science will never abolish death?

Gadamer: Yes, where does the reason for the hope lie? One would like to know that. One can know that as a believer, as a Christian. But one cannot mediate that intellectually.

Baur: Professor Gadamer, thank you very much for this opportunity to speak with you.

NOTES

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[1] Hans-Georg Gadamer, Gesammelte Werke, Bk. 6: Griechische Philosophie II, "Gibt es die Materie?" (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1985), p. 201.

[2] Ibid. p 206.